



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL MEETING OF PRIESTS**

Dear Priests!

1. With deep affection and great joy I address you who are taking part, in the Holy Land, in your Fourth International Meeting in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. We are about to enter a new millennium, the third since the Incarnation of the Word. Many challenges are emerging on our horizon, but, as we can count on the One who overcame the world and assured us that he would be with us until the end of time (cf. Mt 28:19-20), we have no reason to fear the unpredictable events of the future. Rather, let us not be afraid of being the witnesses to Christ that the times and circumstances require. The only question that should concern us, therefore, is that of fidelity to our identity, a fidelity which should be renewed each day, because identity is truth: truth of being from which derives the truth of action, the truth of our pastoral ministry.

2. Jesus stands before us and asks, as he once did the Apostles: "Who do you say that I am?". Today much confusion surrounds this question. The answers often result in identifying Christ, at least in practice, with a luminary, a wise teacher of morality or a fascinating philanthropist. Jesus' identity is not one problem among many: it is the fundamental question because on its answer depends one's entire vision of man, society, history, life, death and what lies beyond. As for the Church, as well as for ourselves, whether everything stands firm or falls is related to our faith in Jesus of Nazareth. "But you", and Jesus is now questioning us, "who do you say that I am?". We know how Simon Peter answered him in the district of Caesarea Philippi on behalf of all the disciples: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!". This is how Peter replied and this is how he has continued to reply down the ages through his Successors. This is how he answers today, from Rome, also on behalf of you all: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"! This is Christ's identity, and this identity is behind our own.

3. Dear friends, you are ontologically configured to Christ the Priest, to him, Head and Shepherd, which is why we can say in all truth, with the whole of Tradition, that every priest is "alter Christus". On this *ontology* of yours the resulting *deontology* is based. Christ ardently longed to share his one priesthood with men. Therefore as he was seated

in the Upper Room for the Last Supper, he said to the Apostles: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer". Then he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying: "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:15-19). On the lips of our Lord these words mean that he gives the power, combined with the duty, to renew the event of the Upper Room and make it present in every historical age.

In this way, thanks to you priests Christ is always sacramentally present in his Church (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7). You act "in the name and person of Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 28). It is you who authoritatively proclaim the Gospel. Christ speaks through you: as a result "Christ proclaims Christ". Who offers the Eucharist? You, but not alone: through you it is Christ who acts: "He is the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the Cross" (Council of Trent, Sess. XXII, 17 September 1562, Doctr. *De ss. Missae sacrificio*, can. 2; cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7). Who imparts sacramental absolution for sins committed? You priests, but not alone: it is Christ who forgives them through you. You are the "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1)!

Through ordination, in an ontological sense, you are Christ's witnesses in the service of the Word and the sacraments; you are likewise the real testimony of Christ the one Priest. At the moment of ordination you received a new mode of being. You are marked by the priestly character, which is a real, indelible, spiritual sign. This character does not separate you from humanity; on the contrary, it places you in its midst, so that you can devote yourselves to its service. Indeed, the priestly character inserts you into the priesthood of Christ, who is "the key, the centre and the goal of all human history" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 10), "the alpha and the omega" (ibid., n. 45) of visible and invisible realities.

4. Dear friends, how could the saving waters of Redemption flow to all generations if it were not for you? The clarity and certainty of your identity give rise to an awareness of your absolute indispensability in the Church and in the world.

Through you the Good Shepherd continues to teach, to sanctify, to guide and to love all peoples of every culture, every continent and every age. For this reason you alone enjoy the title of pastor and, since there is no salvation except in Christ and since he must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, it is impossible to cross the threshold of the third millennium without making the pastoral care of vocations a priority. If the world cannot do without Christ, it also cannot do without his priests.

Dear priests, from the land of the Incarnation of the Word, from the land he traveled, immersed in the air he breathed, illumined by the sun which lit his footsteps, proclaim to everyone who Jesus of Nazareth is; tell them that in him we find total human fulfilment, in him alone true progress, in him alone the fullness of justice and peace, in him alone joy without darkness, in him alone the true and complete humanism whose crown is eternal salvation.

By your very presence you tell people who a priest is and what is his identity; you show your indispensability and the need to devote yourselves totally to your pastoral ministry within the presbyterate gathered closely round its Bishop. Try to make every person understand that if the place of the Eucharist is absolutely essential in the community, precisely in relation to it the priest is equally essential. Wherever priests are scarce, nothing can substitute for them, but rather the whole community should beg for them with greater insistence, by personal and community prayer, by repentance and with the specific holiness of priests.

5. Dear friends, in fulfilment of the Petrine "munus", I intend to strengthen your faith in the identity of Christ and in your own identity as "other Christs". Take holy pride in being "called", and be especially humble before so great a dignity, in the awareness of your human weakness.

Thanks be to you, priests, who like a lantern illumine those who come to you, and for whom, like salt, you give life its savour. Thank you for what you do and above all for what you are. With deep feeling, I would like to thank all those priests who, in fidelity to their own identity and mission, continue to suffer in the most varied situations. Thank you for your toil, thank you for your efforts, thank you for your strength, thank you for your tears, thank you for your smile. Thank God for your being there!

And thank you, priests of the past 2,000 years who, faithful to your identity and mission even unto martyrdom, like precious grains of incense were consumed in the burning fire of pastoral charity and are now our intercessors in the splendour of the heavenly Church without spot or blemish. Thank you for such an admirable example!

However, my thanks above all become a "*Te Deum*" for the gift of the priesthood and an exhortation to you to be more and more *in the world* but less and less *of the world*, so that you can always show yourselves for what you are to everyone, with humble pride and the proper external sign: it is the sign of an unceasing, ageless service, because it is inscribed in your "being".

With tender affection I entrust each of you to the Virgin, given to us in an extraordinary way as Mother of the Eternal Priest. For each of you I place in her clasped hands a humble request for perseverance and for the commitment to leave as a legacy to your brethren at least one who will continue that unique priesthood that lives and springs from love within us.

I bless you all, together with the souls that the Eternal High Priest has entrusted to your care and still places on your path!

From the Vatican, 19 June 1999.

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