



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO SEMINARIANS

Philadelphia

Wednesday, 3 October 1979

Beloved brothers and sons in Christ,

One of the things I wanted most to do during my visit to the United States has now arrived. I wanted to visit a seminary and meet the seminarians; and through you I would like to communicate to all seminarians how much you mean to me, and how much you mean for the future of the Church—for the future of the mission given to us by Christ.

You hold a special place in my thoughts and prayers. In your lives there is great promise for the future of evangelization. And you give us hope that the authentic renewal of the Church which was begun by the Second Vatican Council will be brought to fruition. But in order for this to happen, you must receive a solid and well-rounded preparation in the seminary. This personal conviction about the importance of seminaries prompted me to write these words in my Holy Thursday Letter to the Bishops of the Church: "The full reconstitution of the life of the seminaries throughout the Church will be the best proof of the achievement of the renewal to which the Council directed the Church".

1. If seminaries are to fulfill their mission in the Church two activities in the overall program of the seminary are crucially important: the teaching of God's word, and discipline.

The intellectual formation of the priest, which is so vital for the times in which we live, embraces a number of the human sciences as well as the various sacred sciences. These all have an important place in your preparation for the priesthood. But the first priority for seminaries today is

the teaching of God's word in all its purity and integrity, with all its demands and in all its power. This was clearly affirmed by my beloved predecessor Paul VI, when he stated that sacred scripture is "a perpetual source of spiritual life, the chief instrument for handing down Christian doctrine, and the center of all theological study" (*Apostolic Constitution Missale Romanum*, April 3, 1969). Therefore if you, the seminarians of this generation, are to be adequately prepared to take on the heritage and challenge of the Second Vatican Council, you will need to be well trained in the word of God.

Secondly, the seminary must provide a sound discipline to prepare for a life of consecrated service in the image of Christ. Its purpose was well defined by the Second Vatican Council: "The discipline required by seminary life should not be regarded merely as a strong support of community life and of charity. For it is a necessary part of the whole training program designed to provide self-mastery, to foster solid maturity of personality, and to develop other traits of character which are extremely serviceable for the ordered and productive activity of the Church" (*Optatam Totius*, 11).

When discipline is properly exercised, it can create an atmosphere of recollection which enables the seminarian to develop interiorly those attitudes which are so desirable in a priest, such as joyful obedience, generosity and self-sacrifice. In the different forms of community life that are appropriate for the seminary, you will learn the art of dialogue: the capacity to listen to others and to discover the richness of their personality, and the ability to give of yourself. Seminary discipline will reinforce, rather than diminish your freedom, for it will help develop in you those traits and attitudes of mind and heart which God has given you, and which enrich your humanity and help you to serve more effectively his people. Discipline will also assist you in ratifying day after day in your hearts the obedience you owe to Christ and his Church.

2. I want to remind you of the importance of fidelity. Before you can be ordained, you are called by Christ to make a free and irrevocable commitment to be faithful to him and to his Church. Human dignity requires that you maintain this commitment, that you keep your promise to Christ no matter what difficulties you may encounter, and no matter what temptations you may be exposed to. The seriousness of this irrevocable commitment places a special obligation upon the rector and faculty of the seminary—and in a particular way on the spiritual director—to help you to evaluate your own suitability for Ordination. It is then the responsibility of the Bishop to judge whether you should be called to the priesthood.

It is important that one's commitment be made with full awareness and personal freedom. And so during these years in the seminary, take time to reflect on the serious obligations and the difficulties which are part of the priest's life. Consider whether Christ is calling you to the celibate life. You can make a responsible decision for celibacy only after you have reached the firm conviction that Christ is indeed offering you this gift, which is intended for the good of the Church and for the service of others (cf. *Letter to Priests*, 9).

To understand what it means to be faithful we must look to Christ, the "faithful witness" (*Rev* 1:5), the Son who "learned to obey through what he suffered" (*Heb* 5:8); to Jesus who said: "My aim is to do not my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (*Jn* 5 :30). We look to Jesus, not only to see and contemplate his fidelity to the Father despite all opposition (cf. *Heb.* 23 :3), but also to learn from him the means he employed in order to be faithful : especially prayer and abandonment to God's will (cf. *Lk*, 22 :39 ff).

Remember that in the final analysis perseverance in fidelity is a proof, not of human strength and courage, but of the efficacy of Christ's grace. And so if we are going to persevere we shall have to be men of prayer who, through the Eucharist, the liturgy of the hours and our personal encounters with Christ, find the courage and grace to be faithful. Let us be confident then, remembering the words of Saint Paul: "There is nothing that I cannot master with the help of the one who gives me strength" (*Phil* 4 :13).

3. My brothers and sons in Christ, keep in mind the priorities of the priesthood to which you aspire: namely prayer and the ministry of the word (*Acts* 6 :4) : "It is prayer that shows the essential style of the priest; without prayer this style becomes deformed. Prayer helps us always to find the light that has led us since the beginning of our priestly vocation, and which never ceases to lead us ... Prayer enables us to be converted continually, to remain in a state of continuous reaching out to God, which is essential if we wish to lead others to him. Prayer helps us to believe, to hope and to love ..." (*Letter to Priests*, 10).

It is my hope that during your years in the seminary you will develop an ever greater hunger for the word of God (cf. *Amos* 8 :11). Meditate on this word daily and study it continually, so that your whole life may become a proclamation of Christ, the Word made flesh (cf. *Jn* 1 :14). In this word of God are the beginning and end of all ministry, the purpose of all pastoral activity, the rejuvenating source for faithful perseverance and the one thing which can give meaning and unity to the varied activities of a priest.

4. "Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you" (*Col* 3 :16). In the knowledge of Christ you have the key to the Gospel. In the knowledge of Christ you have an understanding of the needs of the world. Since he became one with us in all things but sin, your union with Jesus of Nazareth could never, and will never be an obstacle to understanding and responding to the needs of the world. And finally, in the knowledge of Christ, you will not only discover and come to understand the limitations of human wisdom and of human solutions to the needs of humanity, but you will also experience the power of Jesus, and the value of human reason and human endeavor when they are taken up in the strength of Jesus, when they are redeemed in Christ.

May our Blessed Mother Mary protect you today and always.

5. May I also take this opportunity to greet the laypeople who are present today at Saint Charles Seminary. Your presence here is a sign of your esteem for the ministerial priesthood, as well as being a reminder of that close cooperation between laity and priests which is needed if the mission of Christ is to be fulfilled in our time. I am happy that you are present and I am grateful for all that you do for the Church in Philadelphia. In particular I ask you to pray for these young men, and for all seminarians, that they may persevere in their calling. Please pray for all priests and for the success of their ministry among God's people. And please pray the Lord of the harvest to send more laborers into his vineyard, the Church.

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