



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT TO CANADA

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CLERGY OF TORONTO**

*Nathan Philips Square
Friday, 14 September 1984*

Dear Brother Priests,

1. I am pleased that the first major meeting of my pastoral visit to the Church in Toronto finds me here with you. I want you to know the joy I experience and how much I appreciate all that you do for God's holy people. Happily our gathering occurs on the feast of the Triumph of the Cross. The significance of this celebration is outlined for us in today's liturgy. Here we find a rich source of inspiration for reflecting on the meaning which the Cross has for the Priesthood of Jesus and, consequently, the meaning that it has for our own priestly lives.

2. The Cross represents the culmination of Jesus' priestly service. On it he offers himself as the perfect sacrifice of reparation to the Father for the sins of humanity; thereby he establishes a new and lasting covenant between God and man. This wonderful covenant is renewed in every Eucharist that we celebrate; and in every Eucharist, the Church reaffirms her identity and her calling as the Body of Christ.

In turning to the Gospel passage from Saint John which we have just listened to, we find Jesus in discussion with Nicodemus, a ranking Jewish leader of his time, who "came by night", under the cover of darkness, to be enlightened by him who is "the light of the world". By his questions Nicodemus indicates that he is in search of the truth about God and that he desires to know the right direction that his life should take. Jesus does not disappoint him. His response is clear and direct. In answering Nicodemus, Jesus goes to the very core of the Gospel message: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not

perish, but may have eternal life" (*Jo.* 3, 16).

The lifting up of the Son of Man on the Cross is a sign of the Father's love. Jesus confirms this when he says: "The Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again" (*Ibid.* 10, 17). At the same time the Cross demonstrates Jesus' loving filial obedience to the Father's will: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work" (*Ibid.* 4, 34). The Cross is truly a sign of divine love - but a divine love that the Son shares with humanity.

This love symbolized by the Cross is profoundly pastoral, for by it everyone who believes in Christ gains eternal life. Upon the Cross the Good Shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep" (*Ibid.* 10, 11). Jesus' act of dying on the Cross is the supreme ministerium, the highest act of service to the community of believers. The Sacrifice of Jesus expresses more eloquently than human words the pastoral nature of the love that Christ has for his people.

The Cross represents the will of the Father to reconcile the world through his Son. Saint Paul summarizes for us the reconciling mission of Christ when he writes: "God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross" (*Col.* 1, 19-20).

The Cross not only stands over the ecclesial community that is gathered in faith, but its sphere of influence extends to "everything in heaven and on earth". The power of the Cross is the reconciling force that directs the destiny of the whole of creation. Our Lord reveals the centre of that reconciling power when he says, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself" (*Jo.* 12, 32). The reality of the Cross profoundly affects our contemporary society with all its technological skills and scientific achievements. It is through the Priesthood of Christ that this society will reach its ultimate destiny in God.

3. As the meaning of Christ's Priesthood is discovered in the mystery of the Cross, so too the life of the priest derives its sense and purpose from this same mystery. Since we share in the Priesthood of the Crucified Jesus, we must realize more and more each day that our service is marked by the sign of the Cross.

The Cross reminds us priests of God's great love for humanity and of God's personal love for us. The greatness of that love is communicated first of all in the gift of new life that each Christian receives through the saving waters of Baptism. This wonderful expression of divine love continually fills the believer with gratitude and joy.

And how marvellous is that gift which Jesus offers to certain men - for the benefit of all - of sharing in his ministerial priesthood. Which of us priests cannot but find in that call an expression of God's deep and personal love for him and for the whole Church that he is called to build up through a specific ministry of word and Sacrament?

Knowing that we have been called to join our lives to the redeeming mission of Jesus, each of us senses his own unworthiness in being ordained a "man of God" for others. This realization leads us to seek a greater dependence on God in prayer. In union with Christ in prayer, we find the strength to accept the Father's will, to respond joyfully to Christ's love and thereby to grow in holiness. In this process, the shadow of the Cross falls across our whole existence as priests, urging us to imitate Christ himself with ever greater generosity. Throughout this struggle, the words of Saint Paul constantly echo in our hearts: "Life to me, of course, is Christ" (*Phil.* 1, 21).

4. As priests we also see in the Cross a symbol of our own pastoral service to others. Like the High Priest in whose name we act, we are called "not to be served but to serve" (*Matth.* 20, 28). We are charged with shepherding the flock of Christ, to lead it "in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (*Psa.* 23, 3).

Our primary service as priests is to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. We communicate this message, however, not "in terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed", but through "the language of the cross", which is "God's power to save" (*1 Cor.* 1, 17-18). Effective preaching requires that we be imbued with the mystery of the Cross through study and through daily reflection on God's word.

Our priestly service finds its most sublime expression in the offering of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Indeed, the Eucharistic Sacrifice is the sacramental proclamation of the mystery of salvation. In this sacred action we make present, for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity and for the sanctification of the people, Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. The Eucharist brings the power of Christ's death on the Cross into the lives of the faithful: "Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup you are proclaiming his death" (*Ibid.* 11, 26).

The Eucharist is the very reason for the priesthood. The priest exists in order to celebrate the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we find meaning for everything else we do. We must, therefore, be attentive to this great gift entrusted to us for the good of our brothers and sisters. We must reflect deeply on what it is we do as we celebrate the Eucharist, and how this action affects our whole lives.

For Holy Thursday 1980, I shared this thought with the Bishops of the Church in a letter addressed to them: "The priest fulfils his principal mission and is manifested in all his fullness when he celebrates the Eucharist, and this manifestation is more complete when he himself allows the depth of that mystery to become visible, so that it alone shines forth in people's hearts and minds through his ministry" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Dominicae Cenaes*, 2, die 24 febr. 1980: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, III, 1 (1980) 583).

Through his love for the Eucharist the priest inspires the laity to exercise their own distinctive and important role in liturgical worship. He also makes this possible by actuating the charism of his

own ordination. In his pastoral letter on the Priesthood, Cardinal Carter describes this aspect of the priest's role: "Its function is to summon the People of God to their own high responsibility . . . to offer that sacrifice of praise which should leaven their lives and through them the world. This the priest must do *in persona Christi*" (Card. Carter, *Epist. Past.*, V, 7).

In a word, priests lift up Christ in the midst of the assembly so that, under the sign of the Cross, the assembly may be built up in unity and in love and give witness to the world of Christ's redeeming love.

5. Under the sign of the Cross, we know that certain sacrifices will be demanded of us. This does not surprise us because Christ's way of performing pastoral service is the way of the Cross. At times we may encounter discouragement, loneliness, even rejection. We may be asked to give of ourselves to a point that we feel completely depleted of our energy. We are regularly asked to be understanding, patient and compassionate with those with whom we may disagree and with everyone we encounter. Yet we accept these demands, with whatever sacrifices they may involve, in order to be "all things to all men in order to save some at any cost" (1 Cor. 9, 23). And we accept what is demanded, not begrudgingly, but willingly, yes, joyfully.

Our priestly commitment to live a celibate life "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" is likewise embraced for the benefit of others. Allow me to repeat what I wrote to the priests of the world in my Holy Thursday letter of 1979: "Through his celibacy, the Priest becomes the 'man for others', in a different way from the man who, by binding himself in conjugal union with a woman, also becomes, as husband and father, a man 'for others' . . . The Priest, by renouncing this fatherhood proper to married men, seeks another fatherhood and, as it were, even another motherhood, recalling the words of the Apostle about the children whom he begets in suffering. These are children of his spirit, people entrusted to his solicitude by the Good Shepherd . . . The pastoral vocation of priests is great . . . The heart of the priest, in order that it may be available for this service, must be free. Celibacy is a sign of a freedom that exists for the sake of service" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Epistula ad universos Ecclesiae Sacerdotes, adveniente Feria V in Cena Domini*, 8, die 8 apr. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II (1979) 854 s.).

6. Et nous prêtres, nous reconnaissons aussi dans le mystère de la Croix la puissance de réconciliation que le Christ exerce sur toute la création. Nous croyons que la Croix du Christ présente à la société contemporaine - avec ses découvertes scientifiques et son progrès technologique, avec son aliénation et son désespoir - un message de réconciliation et d'espérance. Quand nous présidons l'assemblée eucharistique, qui est la source de la réconciliation et de l'espérance pour l'Eglise, nous portons la responsabilité d'aider les chrétiens à humaniser le monde grâce à la puissance du Seigneur crucifié et ressuscité.

Chers Frères dans le sacerdoce, le Christ nous appelle à proclamer son message de réconciliation et d'espérance d'une manière toute particulière, d'une manière que la Providence de

Dieu nous a réservée, à nous seuls. Proclamer la réconciliation et l'espérance, cela veut dire non seulement insister sur la grandeur du pardon de Dieu et de son amour bienveillant au regard du péché, mais aussi permettre aux fidèles de bénéficier de l'action du Christ qui pardonne par le Sacrement de Pénitence.

A mainte reprise j'ai demandé à mes frères dans le sacerdoce et aux évêques de donner une priorité particulière à ce Sacrement, afin que le Christ puisse rejoindre ses frères et ses sœurs dans cette rencontre personnelle d'amour. Notre ministère sacramentel, qui inscrit au cœur de la vie des fidèles le don de la Rédemption, est un acte d'étroite collaboration avec le Sauveur du monde. C'est par la conversion personnelle réalisée et scellée par le Sang de Jésus que le renouveau et la réconciliation pénétreront finalement toute la création.

A cette occasion, je voudrais rappeler ce que j'ai dit en septembre dernier à un groupe d'évêques canadiens à Rome. C'était un appel lancé dans le cadre de la préparation à ma visite pastorale. Espérant que désormais il servira de prolongement à ma visite, je vous adresse ce même appel "à inviter tous les fidèles du Canada à la conversion et à la confession personnelle. Pour certains, ce sera faire l'expérience de la joie du pardon sacramentel pour la première fois depuis bien des années; pour chacun, ce sera une expérience de la grâce . . . Appeler à la conversion, c'est aussi appeler à la générosité et à la paix. C'est un appel à accueillir la miséricorde et l'amour de Jésus-Christ" (23 septembre 1983). Chers Frères, proclamons au monde la réconciliation et l'espérance dont nous faisons nous-mêmes l'expérience par le Sacrement de Pénitence.

The vocation to which Christ has called us is truly a challenge to our love. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which was still in the future, he endured the Cross" (*Hebr.* 12, 2).

As we renew our priestly commitment today, let us offer ourselves to Christ along the way of the Cross. And let us do so in union with Mary, his Mother and ours.

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