



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME
FOR THEIR ANNUAL LENTEN MEETING**

Thursday, 6 March 2003

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Roman Priests,*

1. This year our regular meeting at the beginning of Lent takes place, as Cardinal Ruini, Vicar of Rome, has pointed out, during the 25th year of my pastoral service as Bishop of Rome. It is an observance that recalls the priestly ministry in which the Bishop and his priests are closely united in the consciousness of the gift that God has given them and in the obligation to "reciprocate", joyfully spending their lives in the service of Christ and their brethren.

I greet you, one and all with affection, and I thank you for your generous service to the Church of Rome. I thank you especially for the climate that we enjoy together today: a special climate, which I would describe as open. I greet and thank the Vicar, Cardinal Ruini, the Vicegerent, the Auxiliary Bishops and those who have had kind words for me.

2. *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20,21). "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me" (Mt 10,40).*

The two assertions of Jesus contain the *mystery of our priesthood*, that finds its truth and identity in being the derivation from and the continuation of Christ and of the mission he received from the Father.

Two other words spoken by Jesus help us enter more deeply into this mystery. The *first* concerns Him in person: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he

sees the Father doing" (Jn 5,19). The *second* is addressed to us and to all our brothers and sisters in the faith: "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15,5). *This repeated "nothing"* sends us back to Christ and from Christ to the Father. It is the sign of our total dependence, of the need for *detachment from ourselves*, but it is also the sign of *the greatness of the gift* that we have received. United with Christ and with the Father, we can indeed forgive sins and say the words over the bread and wine, "This is my Body ... this is my Blood". In the celebration of the Eucharist, we truly act "*in the person of Christ*". What Christ accomplished on the altar of the Cross and what earlier still He had instituted as a sacrament in the Upper Room, the priest now renews by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996, p. 93).

3. Dear brother priests of Rome, this requires us, in the exercise of our ministry and in our lives, to be truly *men of God*. Not only the faithful who are close to us, but those who are weak and uncertain in their faith and far from the practice of Christian life are not immune to the presence and witness of a priest who is truly "a man of God": on the contrary, to the extent that they know him, they respect him and tend to be open with him.

For this reason, it is very important that we priests be the first to respond sincerely and generously to the call to holiness that God addresses to all the baptized. *The royal and indispensable way* to advance on the path of holiness is *prayer*: being with the Lord, we become friends of the Lord, his attitude gradually becomes our attitude and his heart our heart. If we truly want our communities to be "schools of prayer" (cf. *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 33), we must first be men of prayer, then in the school of Jesus, Mary and the saints, *teachers of prayer*.

The heart of Christian prayer and the key to the mystery of our priesthood is certainly the *Eucharist*. For this reason, for each one of us the celebration of the Mass can only be the centre of our life and the most important moment of each day. Dear brothers, we really have no alternative! If we do not try humbly and confidently, *to make progress on the path of holiness*, we end up by being content with little compromises that gradually become more serious and can even result in the open or hidden betrayal of that special love which Christ has shown us by calling us to the priesthood.

4. The gift of the Spirit who unites us with Christ and the Father, binds us indissolubly to the Body and the Spouse of Christ, which is *the Church*. To be priests according to the heart of Christ, we must love the Church as he loved her by giving himself up for her (cf. Eph 5,25). We must not be afraid of being identified with the Church, giving ourselves for her. We must genuinely and generously be *men of the Church*.

The priest's bond with the Church develops *according to the formative Christological pattern of the Good Shepherd* who is both head and servant of the people of God. The priest is essentially *a man of communion*, who never tires of building the Christian community as "*a house and school of*

communion" (cf. *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 43). *The Synod* which we celebrated [for the diocese of Rome] from 1986 to 1993, was a great concrete school of communion for the entire Diocese of Rome, and now the task of the priest is to translate the message of the Synod into the daily life of the community. However, this requires that he should first know how *to give an example and a witness of communion in the presbyterate of diocese*, and in his relations with the priests who live and carry out their own ministry in the same parish or community. Pastoral experience confirms that priestly communion greatly contributes to the credibility and fruitfulness of the ministry, according to Christ's words: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13,35).

5. Dear Brothers, after the Synod we lived the *City Mission* and now our diocese is firmly involved in giving a *definite missionary orientation to pastoral activity*.

In the daily exercise of our ministry, we must form a truly missionary consciousness in the faithful close to us, so that our communities may gradually become genuine evangelizing communities and each believer may do his/her best to be a witness of Christ everywhere. It is in this way that we fulfil more fully and genuinely the "gift" and "mystery" of our priesthood.

Indeed, the ministerial priesthood of the New Testament by its nature is an *apostolic priesthood*, since it is handed on to the community through "apostolic succession", that is, the transmission of the ministry and charism of the Apostles to the bishops. Through the priesthood of the bishop, the priesthood of priests "is incorporated into the apostolic structure of the Church" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 16), thereby participating in her essentially missionary orientation.

6. Dear Brothers in the priesthood, let us never tire of being witnesses and heralds of Christ, let us never be discouraged by the difficulties and obstacles we find either within us, in our human frailty, or in the indifference or lack of understanding of those to whom we are sent, including sometimes the persons who are close to us.

Whenever difficulties and temptations weigh on our hearts, let us very much remember *the greatness of the gift we have received* to be able in our turn to "give with joy" (cf. II Cor 9,7). Indeed, in the confessional above all, but also in our whole ministry, we are *witnesses and instruments of divine mercy*, we are and should be men who know how to *instil hope* and perform a work of *peace and reconciliation*.

Dear Brothers, it is to this that God has called us with a special love of choice and God deserves our entire confidence: His will for salvation is greater and more powerful than all the sin of the world.

Thank you for this chance to be together. Thank you too for *the gift of the book*, fresh from the press, which brings together all the texts of my talks to you at the beginning of Lent, since 2 March

1979. I also hope that this initiative will serve to keep alive and fruitful the dialogue that has been taking place among us in the course of these years.

And it is already 25 years! This is the 25th year. My priestly life began in 1946, with the ordination that I received from the hands of my great predecessor in Kraków, Cardinal Adam Stefan Sapieha.

After 12 years I was called to the episcopate, in 1958. Since 1958, I have spent 45 years of episcopate: that is enough!... Of these 45 years, I spent 20 in Kraków, first as Auxiliary then as Vicar Capitular, then as Metropolitan Archbishop and Cardinal; but 25 years in Rome! With these figures you see that I have become more Roman than "Krakovian". But all this is Providence.

Today's meeting reminds me of all my meetings with the priests in my first Diocese of Kraków. I must say that there were many more meetings. Above all I was able to visit many parishes. But even in Rome I have visited 300 out of 340.... A few are still left! I can say that I am living with this capital that I accumulated more or less in Kraków; a capital of experiences, but not only, also of reflections, of all that my priestly and then episcopal ministry has given me.

I must confess to you parish priests that I have never been a parish priest. I have only been a parochial vicar! And then above all I was a professor in the seminary and university. My experience is more than that of a university chair. But even without a direct, first-hand experience as parish priest, I have always been in touch with many parish priests, and I can say that they have given me the experience that they had. Thus I have made before you, during my 25th year, a sort of examination of conscience of my priestly life. I am deeply grateful to you for the words you have spoken to me, for the affection you have shown me and, especially, for your prayers, which I always very much need! Thus we have begun our Roman Lent, my 25th Roman Lent. I wish you a blessed Lent and a happy Easter! Easter is the centre not just of our Christian life but also of our priestly life! I offer you my very best wishes.

I warmly bless you all and, with you, I bless the communities entrusted to your care.