

JOHANNES PAUL II.

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LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER  
JOHN PAUL II  
*TO PRIESTS*  
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 2005

*Dear Priests!*

1. In this Year of the Eucharist, I particularly welcome our annual spiritual encounter for Holy Thursday, the day when Christ's love was manifested "to the end" (cf. *Jn* 13:1), the day of the Eucharist, the day of our priesthood.

My thoughts turn to you, dear priests, as I spend this time recuperating in hospital, a patient alongside other patients, uniting in the Eucharist my own sufferings with those of Christ. In this spirit I want to reflect with you on some aspects of our priestly spirituality.

I will take as my inspiration the words of Eucharistic consecration, which we say every day *in persona Christi* in order to make present on our altars the sacrifice made once and for all on Calvary. These words provide us with illuminating insights for priestly spirituality: if the whole Church draws life from the Eucharist, all the more then must the life of a priest be "shaped" by the Eucharist. So for us, the words of institution must be more than a formula of consecration: they must be a "formula of life".

*A life of profound "gratitude"*

2. "*Tibi gratias agens benedixit*". At every Mass we remember and relive the first sentiment expressed by Jesus as he broke the bread: that of *thanksgiving*. Gratitude is the disposition which lies at the root of the very word "Eucharist". This expression of thanksgiving contains the whole Biblical spirituality of praise for the *mirabilia Dei*. God loves us, he goes before us in his Providence, he accompanies us with his continuous saving acts.

In the Eucharist Jesus thanks the Father with us and for us. How could this thanksgiving of Jesus fail to shape the life of a priest? He knows that he must cultivate *a constant sense of gratitude* for the many gifts he has received in the course of his life: in particular, for the gift of faith, which it is his task to proclaim, and for the gift of the priesthood, which consecrates him totally to the service of the Kingdom of God. We have our crosses to bear — and we are certainly not the only ones! — but the gifts we have received are so great that we cannot fail to sing from the depths of our hearts our own *Magnificat*.

*A life that is "given"*

3. "*Accipite et manducate. Accipite et bibite*". Christ's self-giving, which has its origin in the Trinitarian life of the God who is Love, reaches its culmination in the sacrifice of the Cross, sacramentally anticipated in the Last Supper. It is impossible to repeat the words of consecration without *feeling oneself caught up in this spiritual movement*. In a certain sense, when he says the words: "take and eat", the priest must learn to apply them also to himself, and to speak them with truth and generosity. If he is able to offer himself as a gift, placing himself at the disposal of the community and at the service of anyone in need, his life takes on its true meaning.

This is exactly what Jesus expected of his apostles, as the Evangelist John emphasizes in his account of the washing of the feet. It is also what the People of God expect of a priest. If we think about it more fully, the priest's promise of *obedience*, which he made on the day of Ordination and is asked to renew at the Chrism Mass, is illuminated by this relationship with the Eucharist. Obeying out of love, sacrificing even a certain legitimate freedom when the authoritative discernment of the Bishop so requires, the priest lives out in his own flesh that "take and eat" with which Christ, in the Last Supper, gave himself to the Church.

*A life that is "saved" in order to save*

4. "*Hoc est enim corpus meum quod pro vobis tradetur.*" The body and the blood of Christ are given for the salvation of man, of the *whole* man and of *all* men. This salvation is *integral* and at the same time *universal*, because no one, unless he freely chooses, is excluded from the saving power of Christ's blood: "*qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur*". It is a sacrifice offered for "many", as the Biblical text says (*Mk 14:24; Mt 26:28; cf. Is 53:11-12*); this typical Semitic expression refers to the multitude who are saved by Christ, the one Redeemer, yet at the same time it implies *the totality of human beings* to whom salvation is offered: the Lord's blood is "*shed for you and for all*", as some translations legitimately make explicit. Christ's flesh is truly given "for the life of the world" (*Jn 6:51; cf. 1 Jn 2:2*).

Repeating Christ's venerable words in the recollected silence of the liturgical assembly, we priests become *privileged heralds* of this mystery of salvation. Yet unless we sense that we ourselves are saved, how can we be convincing heralds? We are the first to be touched inwardly by the grace which raises us from our frailty and makes us cry "Abba, Father" with the confidence of God's children (*cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15*). This in turn commits us to advance along the path of perfection. *Holiness*, in fact, is the full expression of *salvation*. Only if our lives manifest the fact that we are saved do we become credible heralds of salvation. Moreover, a constant awareness of Christ's will to offer salvation *to all* cannot fail to inspire us with fresh *missionary fervour*, spurring each of us on to become "all things to all men, in order to save at least some of them" (*1 Cor 9:22*).

*A life that "remembers"*

5. "*Hoc facite in meam commemorationem.*" These words of Jesus have been preserved for us not only by Luke (22:19) but also by Paul (*1 Cor 11:24*). We should keep in mind that they were spoken in the context of the Paschal meal, which for the Jews was indeed a "memorial" (in Hebrew, *zikkarôn*). On that occasion the Israelites relived the Exodus first and foremost, but also the other important events of their history: the call of Abraham, the sacrifice of Isaac, the Covenant of Sinai, the many acts of God in defence of his people. For Christians too, the Eucharist is a "memorial", but of a unique kind: it not only commemorates, but sacramentally makes present the death and resurrection of the Lord.

Jesus said: "Do this in memory *of me*". The Eucharist does not simply commemorate a fact; it commemorates Him! Through his daily repetition *in persona Christi* of the words of the "memorial", the priest is invited to develop a "spirituality of remembrance". At a time when rapid social and cultural changes are weakening the sense of tradition and leading the younger generation especially to risk losing touch with their roots, the priest is called to be, within the community entrusted to him, the *man who faithfully remembers* the entire mystery of Christ: prefigured in the Old Testament, fulfilled in the New, and understood ever more deeply, under the guidance of the Spirit, as Jesus explicitly promised: "He will teach you all things and *bring to your remembrance* all that I have said to you" (*Jn 14:26*).

*A "consecrated" life*

6. "*Mysterium fidei!*" Every time he proclaims these words after consecrating the bread and wine, the priest expresses his *ever-renewed amazement* at the extraordinary miracle worked at his hands. It is a miracle which only the eyes of faith can perceive. The natural elements do not lose their external characteristics, since the "species" remain those of bread and wine; but their "substance", through the power of Christ's word and the action of the Holy Spirit, is changed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. On the altar, then, Christ crucified and risen is "truly, really and substantially" present in the fullness of his humanity and divinity. What an *eminently sacred reality!* That is why the Church treats this mystery with such great reverence, and takes such care to ensure the observance of the liturgical norms intended to safeguard the sanctity of so great a sacrament.

We priests are the *celebrants*, but also the *guardians* of this most sacred mystery. It is our relationship to the Eucharist that most clearly challenges us to lead a "sacred" life. This must shine forth from our whole way of being, but above all from the way we celebrate. Let us sit at

the school of the saints! The Year of the Eucharist invites us to rediscover those saints who were vigorous proponents of Eucharistic devotion (cf. *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 31). Many beatified and canonized priests have given exemplary testimony in this regard, enkindling fervour among the faithful present at their celebrations of Mass. Many of them were known for their prolonged Eucharistic adoration. To place ourselves before Jesus in the Eucharist, to take advantage of our "moments of solitude" and to fill them with this Presence, is to enliven our consecration by our personal relationship with Christ, from whom our life derives its joy and its meaning.

#### *A life centred on Christ*

7. "*Mortem tuam annuntiamus, Domine, et tuam resurrectionem confitemur, donec venias.*" Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, the remembrance of Christ in his Paschal Mystery leads to the desire for a full and definitive encounter with Him. We live in *expectation of his coming!* In priestly spirituality, this expectation must be lived out *through pastoral charity*, which impels us to live in the midst of God's People, so as to direct their path and to nourish their hope. This task requires from the priest an interior attitude similar to that of the Apostle Paul: "*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal*" (Phil 3:13-14). The priest is someone who, despite the passing of years, continues to radiate youthfulness, spreading it almost "contagiously" among those he meets along the way. His secret lies in his "passion" for Christ. As Saint Paul said: "*For me, to live is Christ*" (Phil 1:21).

Particularly in the context of the new evangelization, the people have a right to turn to priests in the hope of "seeing" Christ in them (cf. Jn 12:21). The young feel the need for this especially; Christ continues to call them, to make them his friends and to challenge some to give themselves completely for the sake of the Kingdom. Vocations will certainly not be lacking if our manner of life is truly priestly, if we become more holy, more joyful, more impassioned in the exercise of our ministry. A priest "won" by Christ (cf. Phil 3:12) more easily "wins" others, so that they too decide to set out on the same adventure.

#### *A "Eucharistic" life at the school of Mary*

8. The relationship between the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Eucharist is a very close one, as I pointed out in the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (cf. Nos. 53-58). In its own sober liturgical language, every Eucharistic Prayer brings this out. Thus in the Roman Canon we say: "In union with the whole Church we honour Mary, the ever-virgin Mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God". In the other Eucharistic Prayers, honour leads to petition, as for example in Prayer II: "Make us worthy to share eternal life with Mary, the virgin Mother of God."

In recent years, I have warmly recommended the contemplation of the face of Christ, especially in my Letters *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (cf. Nos. 23ff.) and in *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (cf. Nos. 9ff.), and I have pointed to Mary as our great teacher. In the Encyclical on the Eucharist I then spoke of her as the "Woman of the Eucharist" (cf. No. 53). Who more than Mary can help us taste the greatness of the Eucharistic mystery? She more than anyone can teach us how to celebrate the sacred mysteries with due fervour and to commune with her Son, hidden in the Eucharist. I pray to her, then, for all of you, and I entrust to her especially the elderly, the sick, and those in difficulty. This Easter, in the Year of the Eucharist, I gladly repeat to each of you the gentle and consoling words of Jesus: "Behold your Mother" (Jn 19:27).

With these sentiments, I send you my heartfelt blessing, and I wish you the profound joy of Easter.

From Gemelli Hospital in Rome, on 13 March, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, in the year 2005, the twenty-seventh of my Pontificate.