



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO BANGLADESH, SINGAPORE, FIJI ISLANDS,
NEW ZEALAND, AUSTRALIA AND SEYCHELLES

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Melbourne (Australia), 28 November 1986

"I will sing for ever of the goodness of the Lord!"

Dear Brothers Priests,

Dear Seminarians,

1. This refrain which we have just sung expresses well my sentiments as I meet you, my brothers in Christ, the priests and seminarians of Australia. For my heart is filled with praise whenever I think of the priestly vocation which we share. This call from Christ truly reflects the goodness of the Lord. The mystery that has touched each of our lives is captured in the words of Saint Paul: "God . . . has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ".

I am grateful for this opportunity to be with you; this meeting is indeed a very significant part of my Pastoral Visit to your country. I come to support you in the faith, to encourage you in the hope that has been kindled in your hearts, and to remind you of the deep love of him who has called us to be his friends and co-workers. I come as the Successor of Peter, who was given the duty to confirm his brethren; and I also come as a brother priest, a fellow worker in the Lord, entrusted with the mysteries of God.

I am pleased that we are meeting here in this inspiring Cathedral dedicated to Saint Patrick, a priest and bishop whose apostolic work has had such an immense influence on the Church throughout the world. I pay tribute to the memory of the Archbishops of Melbourne buried here, particularly Cardinal Knox, the fifth Archbishop of this Archdiocese, whom I knew so well and who

served the Church so faithfully.

2. You all know that I am accustomed to write a letter to priests every year for Holy Thursday. I do so because, at that time of the liturgical year, I feel particularly close to all of you who share with me in the ministerial priesthood. The Liturgy of Holy Week and Easter sets before us Christ in his Paschal Mystery. We contemplate him offering himself to the Father for the Redemption of the human race. We see him at the Last Supper, saying: "This is my Body. This is my Blood". We hear him telling his disciples: "Do this in memory of me". It is here that all of us are united in the source of our vocation and mission. It is here that we realize how closely our priesthood is linked to the Cross. As Saint Paul says, "We carry with us in our body the death of Christ, so that the life of Christ may be seen in us".

Our vocation to the ministerial priesthood is an invitation to union with Christ on Calvary as both priest and victim. This is how we share in the work of Christ, the eternal High Priest; this is where we find the grace and inspiration to serve faithfully in the Church, so that the saving fruits of the Redemption may be brought to the people of every time and place.

3. To be a priest requires courageous faith and perseverance. "Since we have by an act of mercy been entrusted with this work of administration, there is no weakening on our part". We happen to live at a time that is extremely challenging. We need both creativity and fidelity in proclaiming the eternal message of salvation. We have a choice: either we can give in to discouragement or we can be men of firm hope. Our hope will be strong, and "there will be no weakening on our part", if we put all our trust in God whose providence is guiding the Church, even along ways that we do not always understand.

"We are only the earthenware vessels that hold his treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us". These words of the Apostles strike a responsive chord in our minds and hearts, do they not? The longer a man has the privilege of serving as a priest, the more aware he becomes of human limitations and failures, the more keenly he feels the burden of his own human weakness. Rather than discouraging us, however, this realization should remind us that when we are weak Christ is strong. It should "make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us". This realization of our human weakness should be a reminder to us of the need we have to receive Christ's mercy and pardon frequently in the Sacrament of Penance. In approaching this sacrament we acknowledge that Christ's grace is infinitely stronger than sin. Our confession is also an act of faith in God's will that mercy should reach us through the sacred humanity of his Son and the human instrumentality of those who share in the priesthood of his Son.

How important it is, therefore, to keep alive within us a keen sense of God, the mystery of Christ, his love, his compassion, his great mercy. How do we maintain this awareness in our daily lives? By spending time alone with the Lord, by praying and reflecting on God's word, by devotion to

Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. We must keep alive our own sense of God so that we can transmit it to others. It is from our faith that we draw our sense of mission.

4. For all of us, priests and seminarians, Saint Paul is an excellent example of a man of God with a clear sense of mission. He took up his apostolic task, convinced that he had been "captured by Christ", and that by an act of mercy he had been entrusted with his ministry. His task was to proclaim the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ. He preached this message fully and with courageous determination. He stated quite plainly: "We will have none of the reticence of those who are ashamed, no deceitfulness or watering down of the word of God; but the way we commend ourselves to every human being with a conscience is by stating the truth openly in the sight of God".

We need this same courageous spirit today in order to proclaim God's word, and to hand on, in its entirety, the authentic teaching of the Church.

The ministry of the word is closely linked with the priest's sacramental ministry: with the baptisms he administers, the confessions he hears, the marriages he witnesses, the anointings he performs, and in particular with the Eucharist. As the Second Vatican Council says: "The Eucharist shows itself to be the source and the summit of the whole work of evangelization".

We who celebrate the Eucharist each day are invited to draw closer to Christ in his Passion, Death and Resurrection. And throughout our day, the Liturgy of the Hours directs our attention to the Paschal Mystery as we join in the Church's great chorus of praise of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. From these rich sources of union with Jesus, we find the strength needed to renew our sense of mission and to serve God's people with joyful fidelity.

The priest must make it his constant aim to be a servant of unity and reconciliation, remembering that Christ came "to gather in unity the scattered children of God". In many different ways we build up the communion of the faithful: by personal kindness and charity, by having a sincere interest in all the various groups we serve, by generously providing ample time and opportunity for the Sacrament of Penance, by ecumenical concern and by cultivating a real love for the diocese and the universal Church, of which the local community is a living part.

5. Our sense of mission, which is always linked to our union with Jesus Christ, is also renewed through a regular habit of study and through a fraternal relationship with the bishop and our brother priests.

A regular habit of study is important for us because Christ has called us to be heralds of the Gospel. We must therefore continually deepen our understanding of the word of God and the way it applies to the concrete circumstances of life. In addition to our regular practice of reading and reflecting on the Bible, we should take time to read the great classics of the Church, especially the

Fathers, and try to keep abreast of the pronouncements of the Magisterium and of sound theological writings. Meetings and workshops organized in the local diocese or more extensive programmes of theological and spiritual enrichment can be a great help in this regard.

One of the many fruits of the Second Vatican Council has been a renewed emphasis on the spiritual and fraternal relationships which unite priests among themselves and with their bishops. The fact that we all share in the one priesthood of Christ is manifested in the concelebration of the Eucharist, in presbyteral councils, in the Liturgy of Holy Thursday's Chrism Mass and in many other ways.

Our sacramental brotherhood shines forth as an eloquent witness to the Gospel when it is truly lived, when younger priests and older priests encourage and help one another, when hospitality is offered and accepted, when each priest feels a responsibility for the whole diocese and for the Church throughout the world, when our lives conform to the exhortation of Saint Paul: "There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus".

6. Our commitment to celibacy, dear brothers, is a positive expression of a special capacity to love which frees us to be fully at the service of the Church. As the Second Vatican Council says: "It simultaneously signifies and stimulates pastoral charity and is a special fountain of spiritual fruitfulness on earth . . . Through celibacy observed for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven, priests are consecrated to Christ in a new and distinguished way. They more easily hold fast to him with undivided heart. They more freely devote themselves in him and through him to the service of God and people".

When we promise to be celibate, we do so freely and out of a conviction that God is offering us this gift a charismatic gift which he does not give to everyone, a gift which does not detract from the beauty or goodness of marriage but which highlights a love specifically directed to God and his people. At the same time, we priests know that we are not just receiving a gift; we are also giving a gift. We are offering the gift of our whole self to Christ and the Church, a gift freely and consciously and gratefully offered. And this gift, like Christ's gift of himself, requires sacrifice.

The promise of celibacy is permanently binding. We say that we will be faithful for ever in celibate love. But it is not a gift that is made once and for all as one might donate a large sum of money. It is a gift that is made over and over again; it must be continually renewed. The generosity which prompted our lifelong promise must be kept alive day in day out, through prayerful union with Christ and a constant desire to offer loyal service to the Church. Not only must we avoid impurity; we must also avoid greed and selfishness, and whatever else might weaken our commitment to love Christ with an undivided heart.

7. I now wish to say a few words specifically to the seminarians, although what I have already said is intended for you as well. I am sure that I speak for all the priests here present and all the priests here present and all the priests of Australia when I say how grateful we are to God for you. As priests, we love the Church; we are concerned about her future; we are eager to see our own ministry, the mission of Christ, continued in the years to come. But even more than that, we want you to discover in the priesthood the joy of Christ, the joy we have found in giving ourselves to the one who said of himself: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".

There are many things about which I would like to speak to you in detail: for example, the importance of study and discipline, the need for generosity and fidelity, the value of celibacy and pastoral charity. There is no time to do this here, but let me just emphasize the vital importance of prayer. In my first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, in 1979, I wrote: "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". Yes, dear brothers, it is prayer that also shows the essential style of the seminarian.

8. As I am speaking to brother priests and to those preparing for the priesthood, I wish to mention the need for priestly vocations. So often we hear that the numbers of those offering themselves for the priesthood and religious life have diminished. To you priests and seminarians, and to parents and others who may hear my words, I insist that we cannot accept this situation as inevitable and unchangeable.

I repeat the appeal I made to the whole Church earlier this year in my message for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations: "The Church has an urgent need of priests. This is one of the most crucial problems facing Christian communities. Jesus did not want a Church without priests. If priests are lacking, then Jesus is lacking in the world, as in his Eucharist and his forgiveness. To carry out the Church's mission, all the rich variety of consecrated vocations are vitally necessary. Christians cannot accept with passivity and indifference the decline in vocations. Vocations are the future of the Church. A community which is poor in vocations impoverishes the whole Church; but a community which is rich in vocations enriches the whole Church". We owe it to Jesus Christ not to doubt the power of his Paschal Mystery. He is for ever able, through his Death and Resurrection, to raise up vocations in his Church, and to sustain young people in generous sacrificial love.

Dear brothers: you have enriched the whole Church by responding to the call of Christ to special service as priests and seminarians. Be assured that the joy which you experience and communicate to others will, with Christ's grace, help promote vocations. It is far from foolish to be "fools for the sake of Christ". Communicate that message to others. Pray for vocations. Pray that

parents will encourage their children to ask themselves whether they have a vocation and to accept that challenge. And never doubt the truth that priests remain essential for the full life of the Church, today and always. The Lord Jesus needs you to fulfil his plan for the salvation of the world.

Let us go forward, then, with gratitude for the priesthood, with confidence in God's love, with praise in our hearts.

Let us "sing for ever of the goodness of the Lord"!

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