



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER  
JOHN PAUL II  
TO PRIESTS  
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 1988**

*Dear Brothers in the Priesthood,*

1. Today we all return to the Upper Room. Gathering at the altar in so many places throughout the world, we celebrate in a special way the memorial of the Last Supper in the midst of the community of the People of God whom we serve. The words which Christ spoke on "the day before he suffered" re-echo on our lips at the evening liturgy of Holy Thursday as they do every day; yet they do so in a particular way since they refer back to that special evening which is recalled by the Church precisely today.

Like our Lord, and at the same time in persona Christi, we say the words: "Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body....Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood." Indeed, the Lord himself commanded us to do so, when he said to the apostles: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19).

And as we do this, the whole mystery of the Incarnation must be alive in our minds and hearts. Christ, who on Holy Thursday announces that his body will be "given up" and his blood "shed," is the eternal Son, who "coming into the world," says to the Father: "A body you prepared for me....Behold, I come to do your will" (cf. Heb 10:5-7).

It is precisely that Passover which is drawing near, when the Son of God, as Redeemer of the world, will fulfill the Father's will through the offering and the immolation of his Body and Blood on Golgotha. It is by means of this sacrifice that he "entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking...his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12). Indeed, this is the sacrifice of the "new and everlasting" covenant. See how it is intimately connected with the mystery of the Incarnation: the Word who became flesh (cf. Jn 1:14) immolates his humanity as

*homo assumptus* in the unity of the divine Person.

It is appropriate during this year, being lived by the whole Church as a Marian Year, to recall the reality of the Incarnation as it relates to the institution of the Eucharist and also to the institution of the Sacrament of the Priesthood. The Incarnation was brought about by the Holy Spirit when he came down upon the Virgin of Nazareth and she spoke her fiat in response to the angel's message (cf. Lk 1:38).

Hail, true Body, born of the Virgin Mary: you truly suffered and were immolated on the cross for man.

Yes, the same Body! When we celebrate the Eucharist, through our priestly ministry there is made present the mystery of the Incarnate Word, the Son who is of one being with the Father, who as a man "born of woman" is the Son of the Virgin Mary.

2. There is no indication that the Mother of Christ was present in the Upper Room at the Last Supper. But she was present on Calvary, at the foot of the cross, where as the Second Vatican Council teaches, "she stood, in accordance with the divine plan (cf. Jn 19:25), suffering grievously with her only-begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart to his sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim which she herself had brought forth."<sup>(1)</sup> How far the fiat uttered by Mary at the annunciation had taken her!

When, acting in persona Christi, we celebrate the sacrament of the one same sacrifice of which Christ is and remains the only priest and victim, we must not forget this suffering of his Mother, in whom were fulfilled Simeon's words in the Temple at Jerusalem: "A sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Lk 2:35). They were spoken directly to Mary forty days after Jesus' birth. On Golgotha, beneath the cross, these words were completely fulfilled. When on the cross Mary's Son revealed himself fully as the "sign of contradiction," it was then that this immolation and mortal agony also reached her maternal heart.

Behold the agony of the heart of the Mother who suffered together with him, "consenting to the immolation of this victim which she herself had brought forth." Here we reach the high point of Mary's presence in the mystery of Christ and of the Church on earth. This high point is on the path of the "pilgrimage of faith" to which we make special reference in the Marian Year.<sup>(2)</sup>

Dear Brothers: who more than we has an absolute need of a deep and unshakable faith—we, who by virtue of the apostolic succession begun in the Upper Room celebrate the sacrament of Christ's sacrifice? We must therefore constantly deepen our spiritual bond with the Mother of God who on the pilgrimage of faith "goes before" the whole People of God.

And in particular, when we celebrate the Eucharist and stand each day on Golgotha, we need to

have near us the one who through heroic faith carried to its zenith her union with her Son, precisely then on Golgotha.

3. Moreover, has Christ not left us a special sign of this? See how during his agony on the cross he spoke the words which have for us the meaning of a testament: "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (Jn 19:26-27).

That disciple, the Apostle John, was with Christ at the Last Supper. He was one of the "Twelve" to whom the Master addressed, together with the words instituting the Eucharist, the command: "Do this in memory of me." He received the power to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice instituted in the Upper Room on the eve of the passion, as the Church's most holy sacrament.

At the moment of death, Jesus gives his own Mother to this disciple. John "took her to his own home." He took her as the first witness to the mystery of the Incarnation. And he, as an evangelist, expressed in the most profound yet simple way the truth about the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14), the truth about the Incarnation and the truth about Emmanuel.

And so, by taking "to his own home" the Mother who stood beneath her Son's cross, he also made his own all that was within her on Golgotha: the fact that she "suffered grievously with her only-begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart in his sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim that she herself had brought forth." All this—the superhuman experience of the sacrifice of our redemption, inscribed in the heart of Christ the Redeemer's own Mother—was entrusted to the man who in the Upper Room received the power to make this sacrifice present through the priestly ministry of the Eucharist.

Does this not have special eloquence for each of us? If John at the foot of the cross somehow represents every man and woman for whom the motherhood of the Mother of God is spiritually extended, how much more does this concern each of us, who are sacramentally called to the priestly ministry of the Eucharist in the Church!

The reality of Golgotha is truly an amazing one: the reality of Christ's sacrifice for the redemption of the world! Equally amazing is the mystery of God of which we are ministers in the sacramental order (cf. 1 Cor 4:1). But are we not threatened by the danger of being unworthy ministers? By the danger of not presenting ourselves with sufficient fidelity at the foot of Christ's cross as we celebrate the Eucharist?

Let us strive to be close to that Mother in whose heart is inscribed in a unique and incomparable way the mystery of the world's redemption.

4. The Second Vatican Council proclaims: "Through the gift and role of her divine motherhood, by which the Blessed Virgin is united with her Son,...she is also intimately united with the Church. As St. Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a 'type' of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the Church, herself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar of both virginity and motherhood."(3)

The Council text goes on to develop this typological analogy: "The Church, moreover, contemplating Mary's mysterious sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, becomes herself a mother by faithfully accepting God's word. For by her preaching and by Baptism, she brings forth to a new and immortal life children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God. The Church herself is a virgin, who keeps whole and pure the fidelity she has pledged to her Spouse." The Church, therefore, "imitating the Mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity."(4)

At the foot of the cross on Golgotha, "the disciple took to his own home" Mary, whom Christ had pointed out to him with the words, "Behold, your mother." The Council's teaching demonstrates how much the whole Church has taken Mary into "the Church's own home," how profoundly the mystery of this Virgin Mother belongs to the mystery of the Church, to the Church's intimate reality.

All this is of fundamental importance for all the sons and daughters of the Church. It has special significance for us who have been marked with the sacramental sign of the priesthood which, while being "hierarchical," is at the same time "ministerial," in keeping with the example of Christ, the first servant of the world's redemption.

If everyone in the Church - the people who by Baptism participate in Christ's priestly function - possesses the common "royal priesthood" of which the Apostle Peter speaks (cf. 1 Pt 2:9), then all must apply to themselves the words of the Conciliar Constitution just quoted. But these words refer in a special way to us.

The Council sees the Church's motherhood, which is modelled on Mary's, in the fact that the Church "brings forth to a new and immortal life children who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God." Here we find echoed St. Paul's words about "the children with whom I am again in travail" (cf. Gal 4:19), in the same way as a mother gives birth. When, in the Letter to the Ephesians, we read about Christ as the Spouse who "nourishes and cherishes" the Church as his body (cf. 5:29), we cannot fail to link this spousal solicitude on the part of Christ above all with the gift of Eucharistic food, similar to the many maternal concerns associated with "nourishing and cherishing" a child.

It is worth recalling these scriptural references, so that the truth about the Church's motherhood,

founded on the example of the Mother of God, may become more and more a part of our priestly consciousness. If each of us lives the equivalent of this spiritual motherhood in a manly way, namely, as a "spiritual fatherhood," then Mary, as a "figure" of the Church, has a part to play in this experience of ours. The passages quoted show how profoundly this role is inscribed at the very center of our priestly and pastoral service. Is not Paul's analogy on "pain in childbirth" close to all of us in the many situations in which we too are involved in the spiritual process of man's "generation" and "regeneration" by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Giver of life? The most powerful experiences in this sphere are had by confessors all over the world-and not by them alone.

On Holy Thursday we need to deepen once again this mysterious truth of our vocation: this "spiritual fatherhood" which on the human level is similar to motherhood. Moreover, does not God himself, the Creator and Father, make the comparison between his love and the love of a human mother (cf. Is 49:15; 66:13)? Thus we are speaking of a characteristic of our priestly personality that expresses precisely apostolic maturity and spiritual "fruitfulness." If the whole Church "learns her own motherhood from Mary,"(5) do we not need to do so as well? Each of us, then, has to "take her to our own home" like the Apostle John on Golgotha, that is to say, each of us should allow Mary to dwell "within the home" of our sacramental priesthood, as mother and mediatrix of that "great mystery" (cf. Eph 5:32) which we all wish to serve with our lives.

5. Mary is the Virgin Mother, and when the Church turns to Mary, figure of the Church, she recognizes herself in Mary because the Church too is "called mother and virgin." The Church is virgin, because "she guards whole and pure the faith given to the Spouse." Christ, according to the teaching contained in the Letter to the Ephesians (cf. 5:32), is the Spouse of the Church. The nuptial meaning of redemption impels each of us to guard our fidelity to this vocation, by means of which we are made sharers of the saving mission of Christ, priest, prophet and king.

The analogy between the Church and the Virgin Mother has a special eloquence for us, who link our priestly vocation to celibacy, that is, to "making ourselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." We recall the conversation with the apostles, in which Christ explained to them the meaning of this choice (cf. Mt 19:12) and we seek to understand the reasons fully. We freely renounce marriage and establishing our own family, in order to be better able to serve God and neighbor. It can be said that we renounce fatherhood "according to the flesh," in order that there may grow and develop in us fatherhood "according to the Spirit" (cf. Jn 1:13), which, as has already been said, possesses at the same time maternal characteristics. Virginal fidelity to the Spouse, which finds its own particular expression in this form of life, enables us to share in the intimate life of the Church, which, following the example of the Virgin, seeks to keep "whole and pure the fidelity she has pledged to her Spouse."

By reason of this model-yes, of the prototype which the Church finds in Mary-it is necessary that our priestly choice of celibacy for the whole of our lives should also be placed within her heart. We

must have recourse to this Virgin Mother when we meet difficulties along our chosen path. With her help we must seek always a more profound understanding of this path, an ever more complete affirmation of it in our hearts. Finally, in fact, there must be developed in our life this fatherhood "according to the Spirit," which is one of the results of "making ourselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God."

From Mary, who represents the singular "fulfillment" of the biblical "woman" of the Proto-evangelium (cf. Gen 3:15) and of the Book of Revelation (12:1), let us seek also a proper relationship with women and the attitude toward them shown by Jesus of Nazareth himself. We find this expressed in many passages of the Gospel. This theme is an important one in the life of every priest, and the Marian Year impels us to take it up again and to develop it in a special way. By reason of his vocation and service, the priest must discover in a new way the question of the dignity and vocation of women both in the Church and in today's world. He must understand thoroughly what Christ intended to say to all of us when he spoke to the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:1-42); when he defended the adulteress threatened with stoning (cf. Jn 8:1-11); when he bore witness to her whose many sins were forgiven because she had loved much (cf. Lk 7:6-50); when he conversed with Mary and Martha at Bethany (cf. Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11:1-44); and, finally, when he conveyed to the women, before others, "the Easter Good News" of his resurrection (cf. Mt 28:9-10).

The Church's mission, from apostolic times, was taken up in different ways by men and by women. In our own times, since the Second Vatican Council, this fact involves a new call addressed to each one of us, if the priesthood which we exercise in the different communities of the Church is to be truly ministerial and by this very fact effective and fruitful at the apostolic level.

6. Meeting today, on Holy Thursday, at the birthplace of our priesthood, we desire to read its fullest meaning through the prism of the Council teaching about the Church and her mission. The figure of the Mother of God belongs to this teaching in its entirety, as do the reflections of the present meditation.

Speaking from the cross on Golgotha, Christ said to the disciple: "Behold, your mother." And the disciple "took her to his own home" as Mother. Let us also take Mary as Mother into the interior "home" of our priesthood. For we belong to the "faithful in whose rebirth and development" the Mother of God "cooperates with a maternal love."<sup>(6)</sup> Yes we have, in a certain sense, a special "right" to this love in consideration of the mystery of the Upper Room. Christ said: "No longer do I call you servants..., but I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15). Without this "friendship" it would be difficult to think that, after the apostles, he would entrust to us the sacrament of his Body and Blood, the sacrament of his redeeming death and resurrection, in order that we might celebrate this ineffable sacrament in his name, indeed, in persona Christi. Without this special "friendship" it would also be difficult to think about Easter evening, when the Risen Lord appeared in the midst of the apostles, saying to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,

and whose sins you retain are retained" (Jn 20:22-23).

Such a friendship involves a commitment. Such a friendship should instill a holy fear, a much greater sense of responsibility, a much greater readiness to give of oneself all that one can, with the help of God. In the Upper Room such a friendship has been profoundly sealed with the promise of the Paraclete: "He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you....He will bear witness to me, and you also are witnesses" (Jn 14:26; 15:26-27).

We always feel unworthy of Christ's friendship. But it is a good thing that we should have a holy fear of not remaining faithful to it.

The Mother of Christ knows all this. She herself has understood most completely the meaning of the words spoken to her during his agony on the cross: "Woman, behold, your son....Behold, your mother." They referred to her and to the disciple-one of those to whom Christ said in the Upper Room: "You are my friends" (Jn 15:14); they referred to John and to all those who, through the mystery of the Last Supper, share in the same "friendship." The Mother of God, who (as the Council teaches) cooperates, with a mother's love, in the rebirth and the training of all those who become brothers of her Son-who become his friends-will do everything in her power so that they may not betray this holy friendship. So that they may be worthy of it.

7. Together with John, the Apostle and Evangelist, we turn the gaze of our soul towards that "woman clothed with the sun," who appears on the eschatological horizon of the Church and the world in the Book of Revelation (cf. 12:1ff.). It is not difficult to recognize in her the same figure who, at the beginning of human history, after original sin, was foretold as the Mother of the Redeemer (cf. Gen 3:15). In the Book of Revelation we see her, on the one hand, as the exalted woman in the midst of visible creation, and on the other, as the one who continues to take part in the spiritual battle for the victory of good over evil. This is the combat waged by the Church in union with the Mother of God, her "model," "against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness," as we read in the Letter to the Ephesians (6:12). The beginning of this spiritual battle goes back to the moment when man "abused his liberty at the urging of personified Evil and set himself against God and sought to find fulfillment apart from God." (7) One can say that man, blinded by the prospect of being raised beyond the measure of the creature which he was (in the words of the tempter: "you will become as God"; cf. Gen 3:5), has ceased to seek the truth of his own existence and progress in Him who is "the first-born of all creation" (Col 1:15), and has ceased to give this creation and himself in Christ to God, from whom everything takes its origin. Man has lost the awareness of being the priest of the whole visible world, turning the latter exclusively towards himself.

The words of the Proto-evangelium at the beginning of the Scriptures and the words of the Book of Revelation at the end refer to the same battle in which man is involved. In the perspective of this spiritual battle which takes place in history, the Son of the woman is the Redeemer of the world.

The redemption is accomplished through the sacrifice in which Christ-the Mediator of the new and eternal covenant-"entered once for all into the Holy Place...with his own blood," making room in the "house of the Father"-in the bosom of the Most Holy Trinity-for all "those who are called to the eternal inheritance" (cf. Heb 9:12, 15). It is precisely for this reason that the crucified and risen Christ is "the high priest of the good things to come" (Heb 9:11) and his sacrifice means a new orientation of man's spiritual history towards God-the Creator and Father, towards whom the first-born of all creation leads all in the Holy Spirit.

The priesthood, which has its beginning in the Last Supper, enables us to share in this essential transformation of man's spiritual history. For in the Eucharist we present the sacrifice of redemption, the same sacrifice which Christ offered on the cross "with his own blood." Through this sacrifice we too, as its sacramental dispensers, together with all those whom we serve through its celebration, continually touch the decisive moment of that spiritual combat which, according to the Books of Genesis and Revelation, is linked with the "woman." In this battle she is entirely united with the Redeemer. And therefore our priestly ministry too unites us with her: with her who is the Mother of the Redeemer and the "model" of the Church. In this way all remain united with her in this spiritual battle which takes place throughout the course of human history. In this battle we have special part by virtue of our sacramental priesthood. We fulfill a special service in the work of the world's redemption.

The Council teaches that Mary advanced in her pilgrimage of faith through her perfect union with her Son unto the cross and goes before, presenting herself in an eminent and singular way to the whole People of God, which follows the same path, in the footsteps of Christ in the Holy Spirit. Should not we priests unite ourselves with her in a special way, we who as pastors of the Church must also lead the communities entrusted to us along the path which from the Upper Room of Pentecost follows Christ throughout human history?

8. Dear Brothers in the Priesthood: as we come together today with our Bishops in so many different places on earth, it has been my wish to develop in this annual letter precisely the motif which also seems to me particularly linked with the subject of the Marian Year.

As we celebrate the Eucharist at so many altars throughout the world, let us give thanks to the Eternal Priest for the gift which he has bestowed on us in the Sacrament of the Priesthood. And in this thanksgiving may there be heard the words which the Evangelist puts on Mary's lips on the occasion of her visit to her cousin Elizabeth: "The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Lk 1:49). Let us also give thanks to Mary for the indescribable gift of the priesthood, whereby we are able to serve in the Church every human being. May gratitude also reawaken our zeal! Is it not through our priestly ministry that there is accomplished what the next verses of Mary's Magnificat speak of? Behold, the Redeemer, the God of the cross and of the Eucharist, indeed "lifts up the lowly" and "fills the hungry with good things." He who was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf. 2 Cor 8:9), has entrusted to the



humble Virgin of Nazareth the admirable mystery of his poverty which makes us rich. And he entrusts the same mystery to us too through the Sacrament of the Priesthood.

Let us unceasingly give thanks for this. Let us give thanks with the whole of our lives. Let us give thanks with all our strength. Let us give thanks together with Mary, the Mother of priests. "How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me? The cup of salvation I will raise; I will call on the Lord's name" (Ps 115/116:12-13).

With fraternal charity I send to all my brothers in the priesthood and in the episcopate, for the day of our common celebration, my heartfelt greetings and my Apostolic Blessing.

*From the Vatican, on March 25, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, in the year 1988, the tenth of my Pontificate.*

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NOTES(1) Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, n. 58.(2) Cf. Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Mater, n. 33: AAS 79 (1987), p. 402.(3) Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, n. 63.(4) Ibid., n. 64.(5) Cf. Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Mater, n. 43: AAS 79 (1987), p. 420.(6) Cf. Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, Lumen Gentium, n. 63.(7) Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes, n. 13.

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