



The Holy See

**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO PRIESTS
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 1998**

My dear Brothers in the Priesthood!

With mind and heart turned to the Great Jubilee, the solemn celebration of the second millennium of the birth of Christ and the beginning of the third Christian millennium, I wish to join you in invoking the Spirit of the Lord, to whom we dedicate in a special way the second stage of the spiritual journey of immediate preparation for the Holy Year of 2000.

Docile to the Spirit's loving inspirations, we prepare ourselves to share intensely in this *favourable time*, imploring from *the Giver of gifts* the graces necessary to discern the signs of salvation and to respond with full fidelity to the call of God.

An intimate bond unites our priesthood to the Holy Spirit and to his mission. On the day of our priestly ordination, by virtue of a unique outpouring of the Paraclete, the Risen One accomplished again in each of us what he accomplished in his disciples on the evening of Easter, and set us in the world as those who continue his mission (cf. *Jn 20:21-23*). This gift of the Spirit, with its mysterious sanctifying power, is the source and root of the special task of evangelization and of sanctification which is entrusted to us.

On Holy Thursday, the day when we commemorate the Lord's Supper, we contemplate Jesus, the Servant "obedient unto death" (*Phil 2:8*), who institutes the Eucharist and Holy Orders as the supreme sign of his love. He leaves us this extraordinary testament of love, so that always and everywhere the mystery of his Body and Blood may be perpetuated and people may approach the inexhaustible source of grace. Is there a more appropriate and evocative moment than this for us priests to contemplate the work of the Holy Spirit in us and to implore his gifts in order to conform

ourselves all the more to Christ, the Priest of the New Covenant?

1. The Holy Spirit, Creator and Sanctifier

*Veni, Creator Spiritus,
Mentes tuorum visita,
Imple superna gratia,
Quae tu creasti pectora.*

Come, O Creator Spirit,
visit our minds.
Fill with your grace
the hearts you have created.

This ancient liturgical hymn reminds every priest of his Ordination day, recalling the commitment made in that unique moment to be completely open to the action of the Holy Spirit. It reminds him as well of the Paraclete's special assistance and of the many moments of grace, joy and intimacy which the Lord has granted him to enjoy on his life's journey.

In the Creed of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople the Church proclaims her faith in the Holy Spirit as *the Lord and Giver of Life*, which expresses well the role he plays in the events of human life, particularly in accompanying the Lord's disciples on the way to salvation.

He is the Creator Spirit, whom Scripture presents at the dawn of human history as "*moving over the face of the waters*" (Gn 1:2) and, at the dawn of the work of redemption, as the one through whom the Word of God took flesh (cf. Mt 1:20; Lk 1:35).

One in substance with the Father and the Son, "in the absolute mystery of the Triune God, he is the Person-love, the uncreated gift, who is the eternal source of every gift that comes from God in the order of creation, the direct principle and, in a certain sense, the subject of God's self-communication in the order of grace. The mystery of the Incarnation constitutes the climax of this giving, this divine self-communication" (Encyclical Letter, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 50).

The Holy Spirit directs the earthly life of Jesus towards the Father. Through his mysterious intervention, the Son of God is conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary (cf. Lk 1:35) and becomes man. It is again the Spirit who, descending on Jesus in the form of a dove at the baptism in the Jordan (cf. Lk 3:21-22), shows him to be Son of the Father; and, immediately afterwards, it is the Spirit who drives him into the desert (cf. Lk 4:1). After his victory over the temptations, Jesus begins his mission "in the power of the Spirit" (Lk 4:14); Jesus rejoices in the Holy Spirit and blesses the Father for his providential plan (cf. Lk 10:21); and by the Spirit's power he drives out demons (cf. Mt 12:28, Lk 11:20). In the drama of the Cross, Jesus offers himself "through the

eternal Spirit" (*Hb* 9:14), through whom he then rose (cf. *Rm* 8:11) and was "designated Son of God in power" (*Rm* 1:4).

On the evening of Easter, the Risen Jesus said to the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (*Jn* 20:22); and, after promising another outpouring, he sent them out on the roads of the world, entrusted with the salvation of their brothers and sisters: "Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt* 28:19-20).

The presence of Christ in the Church of all times and all places *becomes living and powerful in the hearts of the faithful through the work of the Consoler* (cf. *Jn* 14:26). For our time too the Spirit is the "principal agent of the new evangelization. ... [He] builds the Kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people's hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 45).

2. Eucharist and Orders, Fruits of the Spirit

*Qui diceris Paraclitus,
Altissimi donum Dei,
Fons vivus, ignis, caritas
Et spiritalis unctio.*

O you who are called Paraclete,
gift of the Most High God,
living spring, fire, love,
anointing of the soul.

With these words, the Church invokes the Holy Spirit as *spiritalis unctio*, anointing of the soul. Through the anointing of the Spirit in the immaculate womb of Mary, the Father consecrated Christ the Eternal High Priest of the New Covenant who wished to share his priesthood with us, calling us to be his presence in history for the salvation of our brothers and sisters.

On Holy Thursday, *Feria Quinta in Cena Domini*, we priests are invited to give thanks with the whole community of the faithful for the gift of the Eucharist and to renew our sense of the grace of our unique vocation. We are also inspired to entrust ourselves to the action of the Spirit with fresh heart and full receptiveness, allowing ourselves to be conformed day by day to Christ the priest.

In tender and mysterious language, the Gospel of John tells the story of the first Holy Thursday, when the Lord, at table with his disciples in the Upper Room, "having loved his own who were in

the world, loved them to the end" (13:1). *To the end!*: until, that is, the institution of the Eucharist, which anticipates not only Good Friday and the sacrifice of the Cross but the entire Paschal mystery. At the Last Supper, Jesus takes bread in his hands and for the first time utters the words of consecration: "This is my body which will be given up for you". Then, over the chalice filled with wine, he proclaims the words of consecration: "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven", and he adds: "Do this in memory of me". Thus, in the Upper Room and without the shedding of blood, Christ completes the Sacrifice of the New Covenant, which will be accomplished in blood on the following day, when he will say on the Cross: "*Consummatum est*" - "It is accomplished" (*Jn* 19:30).

By the power of the Holy Spirit, this Sacrifice, offered once and for all on Calvary, is entrusted to the Apostles as the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Church. Seeking the mysterious intervention of the Spirit, the Church begs before the words of consecration: "And so, Father, we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Holy Spirit, that they may become the Body and Blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate this Eucharist" (*Eucharistic Prayer III*). Without the power of God's Spirit, how could human lips ever make of bread and wine the Body and Blood of the Lord, even to the end of time? It is only *because of the power of God's Spirit* that the Church can profess unceasingly the great mystery of faith: "Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!".

The Eucharist and Orders are fruits of the same Spirit: "As in the Mass it is he who works the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, so in the Sacrament of Orders it is he who works the consecration of bishop or priest" (*Gift and Mystery*, p. 53).

3. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

*Tu septiformis munere
Digitus paternae dexteræ
Tu rite promissum Patris,
Sermone ditans guttura.*

Finger of God's right hand,
the Saviour's promise,
send forth your seven gifts,
stir in us the word.

How could we not reflect in a special way upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which the tradition of the Church, following the Biblical and Patristic sources, describes as the sevenfold gift ("sacrum Septenarium")? Scholastic theology gave thorough attention to this doctrine, amply illustrating its meaning and its characteristics.

"God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (*Gal* 4:6). "All who are led by the Spirit are children of God... It is that very Spirit bearing witness to our spirit that we are children of God" (*Rm* 8:14, 16). The words of the Apostle Paul remind us that the fundamental gift of the Spirit is sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*), with which we receive the theological virtues—faith, hope and charity—and all the infused virtues (*virtutes infusae*), which enable us to act under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the charisms, which are bestowed for the service of others, these gifts are offered to all, because they are intended to lead the person to sanctity and perfection.

The names of the gifts are familiar. The Prophet Isaiah mentions them in sketching the figure of the future Messiah: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord" (11:2-3). The number will become seven in the translation of the Septuagint and the Vulgate, which add *piety* and eliminate from Isaiah's text the repetition of *fear of the Lord*.

Saint Irenaeus also makes mention of *the sevenfold gift* and adds: "God gave this same Spirit to the Church [...] sending the Consoler upon the earth" (*Adversus Haereses*, III, 17, 3). Saint Gregory the Great in turn illustrates the supernatural dynamic which the Spirit imparts to the soul, listing the gifts in inverse order: "Through the fear of the Lord we rise to piety, from piety then to knowledge, from knowledge we derive strength, from strength counsel, with counsel we move towards understanding and with intelligence towards wisdom and thus, by the sevenfold grace of the Spirit, there opens to us at the end of the ascent the entrance to the life of heaven" (*Hom. In Hezech.*, II, 7, 7).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* regards the gifts of the Holy Spirit as a special awakening of the human soul and its faculties to the action of the Paraclete, and as such "they complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations" (No. 1831). This means that the moral life of Christians is sustained by these "permanent dispositions which make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.* No. 1830). These bring to maturity the supernatural life which grace works in every human being. Indeed, the gifts are wonderfully well adapted to our spiritual dispositions, perfecting them and opening them in a special way to the action of God.

4. The Influence of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit upon Man

Accende lumen sensibus

Infunde amorem cordibus

Infirma nostri corporis

Virtute firmas perpeti.

Be light to the mind,
 burning love in the heart.
 Heal our wounds
 with the balm of your love.

Through the Spirit, God comes intimately to the person and penetrates the human world more and more: "The Triune God who 'exists' in himself as a transcendent reality of interpersonal gift, giving himself in the Holy Spirit as gift to man, *transforms the human world from within*, from inside hearts and minds" (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, 59).

This truth leads the great Scholastic tradition to give a privileged place to the action of the Spirit in human affairs and to stress God's saving initiative in the moral life. Neither negating our personality nor depriving us of freedom, God saves us in a way which surpasses all our plans and expectations. A logic such as this reveals the gifts of the Holy Spirit as "perfections of man which dispose him to follow readily the promptings of God" (Saint Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 68, a. 2).

With the *seven gifts*, the believer can enter into a personal and intimate relationship with the Father, with the freedom proper to the children of God. This is what Saint Thomas underscores in noting how the Holy Spirit leads us to act not because we are compelled but because we love. "The Holy Spirit", he writes, "leads the children of God in freedom, through love, not by compulsion, through fear" (*Contra Gentiles*, Book IV, 22). The Spirit renders Christian action *God-like*, in harmony, that is, with God's way of thinking, loving and acting, so that the believer becomes a visible sign of the Blessed Trinity in the world. Sustained by the friendship of the Paraclete, by the light of the Word and by the love of the Father, the believer can boldly set out to imitate the perfection of God (cf. *Mt* 5:48).

The Holy Spirit moves on two fronts, as my revered Predecessor, the Servant of God Paul VI, recalled: "The first of these fronts is the individual soul..., that point where I am "I". Into this depth of our existence, mysterious even to ourselves, there comes the breath of the Holy Spirit; in the soul it spreads with this first and greatest charism, which we call *grace* and which is like new life, at once empowering the soul to act in ways which surpass its natural capacity". "The power of Pentecost moves" on a second front which is "the visible body of the Church... Of course '*Spiritus ubi vult spirat*' (*Jn* 3:8); but, in the economy decreed by Christ, it is through the apostolic ministry that the Spirit moves". In virtue of this ministry, priests receive power to impart the Spirit to the faithful "as those authorized to proclaim the Word of God with authority, as those who guide the Christian People and offer them the sacraments (cf. *1 Cor* 4:1), which are simply springs of grace, sources that is of the Paraclete's sanctifying power" (*Homily at Pentecost*, 25 May 1969).

5. The Gifts of the Spirit in the Life of the Priest

*Hostem repellas longius
Pacemque dones protinus;
Ductore sic te praevio
Vitemus omne noxium.*

From the enemy defend us,
bring forth the gift of peace.
With your invincible hand
keep us from all harm.

The Holy Spirit re-establishes in the human heart full harmony with God and, assuring man of victory over the Evil One, opens him to the boundless measure of divine love. Thus the Spirit draws man from love of self to love of the Trinity, leading him into the experience of inner freedom and peace, and prompting him to make his own life a gift. And so, by means of the sevenfold gift, the Spirit guides the baptized to the point where they are wholly configured to Christ and are in complete harmony with the horizon of the Kingdom of God.

This is the path along which the Spirit gently urges each of the baptized; but, in order that they may exercise their demanding ministry with profit, the Spirit reserves a special attention for those who have received Holy Orders. With the gift of *wisdom*, therefore, the Spirit leads the priest to evaluate all things in the light of the Gospel, helping him to read in his own experience and the experience of the Church the mysterious and loving plan of the Father. With the gift of *understanding*, the Spirit fosters in the priest a deeper insight into revealed truth, pressing him to proclaim with conviction and power the Good News of salvation. With the gift of *counsel*, the Spirit illuminates the ministry of Christ so that the priest may direct his activities according to the perspectives of Providence, never allowing himself to be swayed by the judgements of the world. With the gift of *strength*, the priest is sustained in the hardships of his ministry and provided with the boldness (*parresia*) required for the proclamation of the Gospel (cf. *Acts* 4:29, 31). With the gift of *knowledge*, the priest is able to understand and accept the sometimes mysterious interweaving of secondary causes with the First Cause in the turn of events in the universe. With the gift of *piety*, the Spirit revives in the priest the relationship of intimate communion with God and of trusting surrender to his Providence. Finally, with the gift of *fear of the Lord*, last in the hierarchy of gifts, the Spirit gives the priest a stronger sense of his own human weakness and of the indispensable role of divine grace, since "neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (*1 Cor* 3:7).

6. The Spirit Leads Us into the Life of the Trinity

*Per te sciamus da Patrem
Noscamus atque Filium
Teque utriusque Spiritum*

Credamus omni tempore.

Light of eternal wisdom,
unveil to us the great mystery
of God the Father and the Son
united in one single Love.

How evocative it is to imagine these words on the lips of the priest who, together with the faithful entrusted to his pastoral care, walks the path which leads to Christ! The priest yearns to come with them to a true knowledge of the Father and the Son, and so to pass from the experience of the Paraclete's action in history "*per speculum in aenigmate*" (1 Cor 13:12) to the contemplation of the living and pulsating reality of the Trinity "*facie ad faciem*" (*ibid.*). He is well aware that he faces "a long crossing on little boats" and that he soars heavenwards "on little wings" (Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Poems*, 1). But he can also count on the One who set himself to teach the disciples everything (cf. Jn 14:26).

Once he has learnt to read the signs of God's love in his personal story, the priest, as he comes closer to the moment of his final encounter with the Lord, prays with ever greater urgency and intensity. This is the sign of a mature faith which wants to obey the will of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Paraclete, "stairway of our ascent to God" (Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 24, 1) draws the priest to the Father, stirring in his heart a burning desire to see God's face. The Paraclete makes known to him everything concerning the Son, drawing him to Christ with a deepening nostalgia; and the Paraclete illumines the priest about his own Person, that the priest may come to see the Spirit in his own heart and in history.

Therefore, among the joys and anxieties, the sufferings and hopes of the ministry, the priest learns to put his trust in the final victory of love, thanks to the unfailing action of the Spirit who, despite the limitations of men and institutions, leads the Church to live the mystery of unity and truth in its fullness. This enables the priest to trust in the power of God's word, which surpasses every human word, and in the power of grace, which overcomes human sins and shortcomings. In time of trial, this makes the priest strong, despite his human weakness, and makes him ready to return with all his heart to the Upper Room where, persevering in prayer with Mary and the disciples, he can rekindle the enthusiasm he needs in order to resume the toil of apostolic service.

7. Prostrate in the Presence of the Spirit

*Deo Patri sit gloria
Et Filio, qui a mortuis
Surrexit, ac Paraclito*

In saeculorum saecula.

Amen.

To God the Father be glory,
to the Son who is risen
and to the Spirit, the Paraclete,
For ages unending.
Amen.

As we ponder the birth of our Priesthood on this Holy Thursday, each of us recalls that most evocative moment when, on the day of our priestly Ordination, we prostrated ourselves on the sanctuary floor. This gesture of deep humility and obedient openness was splendidly designed to ready our soul for the sacramental imposition of hands, through which the Holy Spirit entered us to accomplish his work. Once we had risen from the floor, we knelt before the Bishop to be ordained priests and our hands were anointed by him for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice, while the congregation chanted: "living spring, fire, love, anointing of the soul".

These symbolic gestures, which point to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, invite us to renew this experience day by day in order to strengthen in ourselves the gifts of the Spirit. It is important that he should continue to work in us and that his influence should guide our way, but more important still that it should be the Spirit who acts through us. When temptation sets its trap and human strength grows weak, then is the moment to invoke the Spirit more urgently, that he come to help us in our weakness and grant us the strength and prudence which God wills. Our heart must always be open to this action of the Spirit which exalts and ennobles human efforts and leads to that spiritual depth where we find knowledge and love of the ineffable mystery of God.

Dearest Brothers in the Priesthood! Since the solemn invocation of the Holy Spirit and the eloquent gesture of humility during our priestly Ordination, the *fiat* of the Annunciation has resounded through our life. In the silence of Nazareth, Mary became ever more open to the will of the Lord and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, she conceived Christ, the salvation of the world. This first obedience pervades her entire life on earth and reaches its climax at the foot of the Cross.

The priest is called to match the *fiat* of Mary at all times, allowing himself to be led by the Spirit as she was. The Virgin will support him in his choice of evangelical poverty and will prepare him to listen humbly and sincerely to his brothers and sisters, that he may recognize in the drama of their lives and in their aspirations the "groans of the Spirit" (cf. *Rm* 8:26). She will enable the priest to serve them with enlightened discretion, that he may teach them the values of the Gospel. She will make him diligent in searching for "the things that are above" (*Col* 3:1), that he may witness convincingly to the primacy of God. The Virgin will help the priest to welcome the gift of chastity as the expression of a greater love which the Spirit awakens so that the love of God may come to birth in a host of brothers and sisters. She will lead him down the ways of evangelical obedience,

that the Paraclete may draw him, beyond all his own plans, towards total acceptance of the mind of God.

Accompanied by Mary, the priest will be able to renew his consecration day after day; and the time will come when, trusting the guidance of the Spirit whom he has invoked on his journey as man and as priest, he will set forth upon the ocean of light which is the Trinity.

Through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Priests, I invoke upon you all a special outpouring of the Spirit of love.

Come, Holy Spirit! Come, that our service of God and our brothers and sisters may yield a rich harvest!

Assuring you once more of my affection and wishing you the consolations of God in your ministry, I impart to you with all my heart a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, on 25 March, Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord in the year 1998, the twentieth of my Pontificate.