



*Congregatio pro Clericis*

**Letter of the Congregation for the Clergy on the occasion of the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests, to be celebrated on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, 15 June 2007.**

Dear Priest Friends,

The *World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests* which will be celebrated on the upcoming Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is an opportunity to reflect together on the gift of our priestly ministry, sharing your pastoral concern for all believers and for all humanity and in particular, for the portion of the People of God entrusted to your respective Ordinaries, whose most precious collaborators you are.

The theme proposed for this year: *“The priest, nourished by the Word of God, is a universal witness to Christ’s charity”*, is in tune with the recent Magisterium of Benedict XVI and especially with the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007).

The Holy Father writes in it: “The love that we celebrate in the Sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. What the world needs is God’s love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church’s life, but also of her mission: ‘an authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church’ (*Propositio* 42)” (n. 84).

## **1. A man of God,**

### **a man of mission**

To bring God to humankind: this is the priest’s essential mission. The sacred minister is empowered to carry out this mission because, chosen by God, he lives with God and for God.

In his Address at the opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops’ Conferences (13 May 2007) on the theme *“Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our peoples may have life in him”*, addressing priests, the Holy Father said:

“The first promoters of *discipleship* and *mission* are those who have been called ‘to be with Jesus and to be sent out to preach’ (cf. Mk 3:14).... The priest must be above all a ‘man of God’ (I Tim 6:11) who knows God directly, who has a profound personal friendship with Jesus and shares with others the same sentiments that Christ has (cf. Phil 2:5). Only in this way will the priest be capable of leading men to God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, and of being the representative of his love” (n. 5; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition [*ORE*], 16 May 2007, p. 18).

This truth is expressed in a verse of the priestly Psalm which was once part of the rite of admission to the clerical state: *“The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot”* (Ps 16[15]:5).

We know from Deuteronomy (cf. 10:9) that after taking possession of the Promised

Land every tribe — by the drawing of lots — obtained its portion of the Holy Land and thereby fulfilled God's promise to Abraham.

The tribe of Levi alone received no portion of land: its inheritance was God himself. This affirmation certainly had a practical reason. Priests did not live like the other tribes by cultivating the earth, but on offerings.

Yet, what the Psalmist says is a sign and a symbol of something deeper: the true foundation of the priest's life, the ground of his existence, the land of his life, is God himself. The Church has seen in this Old Testament interpretation the meaning and explanation of the priestly mission in the following of the Apostles and in the communion with Christ himself.

Concerning this Benedict XVI said: "The priest can and must also say today, with the Levite: *"Dominus pars hereditatis meae et calicis mei"*. God himself is my portion of land, the external and internal foundation of my existence.

"This theocentricity of the priestly existence is truly necessary in our entirely function-oriented world in which everything is based on calculable and ascertainable performance. The priest must truly know God and experience him from within and thus bring him to men and women: this is the prime service that contemporary humanity needs" (*Address to the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas greetings*, 22 December 2006; *ORE*, 3 January 2007, p. 6).

If in a priestly life this focus on God is lost, the entire foundation of pastoral action collapses and in an excess of activism it risks losing the content and meaning of pastoral service.

It is then that exaggerated and misleading protagonism might arise. In vain would the substance be substituted, exhausting itself without progressing.

Only those who have learned "to stay with Christ" are truly ready to be "sent out to preach" authoritatively by him (cf. Mk 3:14). The secret of a convincing proclamation of Christ is passionate love for Christ.

"The Christian Teacher should pray before preaching", St Augustine said (cf. *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4, 15, 32: *PL* 34, 100), exhorting ordained ministers to be disciples of prayer at the Master's school.

In celebrating the *Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, the Church invites all believers to look with the gaze of faith "on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37) and on the Heart of Christ, a living and eloquent *sign* of the invincible love of God and an inexhaustible source of grace.

She does this, exhorting priests to seek this *sign* within themselves, as depositories and administrators of the riches of Christ's Heart and to pour out the merciful love of Christ upon others, upon everyone.

Truly, "the love of Christ urges us on (cf. II Cor 5:14), St Paul wrote. "Extend your charity over the whole earth if you will love Christ, for Christ's members are over all the earth", St Augustine reminds us (*Commentary on the First Letter of St John*, 10, 5).

This is why every priest must have a missionary or truly "catholic" spirit and must "set out anew from Christ" to address everyone, mindful of what was said by Our Saviour who "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tm 2:4-6).

The priest is called to encounter Christ in prayer and also to know and love him on the way of the Cross, which is the way of active, self-denying charity. Only in this way is the authenticity of his love for God tested and the merciful Face of Christ reflected upon all. "The beauty of this image shines out in us who are in Christ when we show in our actions that we are good men", St Cyril of Alexandria recalled (*Tractatus ad Tiberium Diaconum socioque*, II, in *divi Johannis Evangelium*).

## 2. To be an authentic witness of Christ's charity in society

The mission that the priest receives in Ordination is not an external element juxtaposed to consecration but rather is its intrinsic and vital destination: "consecration is for mission" (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 24). "Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God" the Holy Father writes (Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 15).

In the Eucharist, which is the invaluable treasure of the Church, in a special way, making ourselves ministers of the *Bread of eternal life*, we are constantly invited to contemplate the beauty and depth of the mystery of the love of Christ and to pour out the passion of his loving Heart upon all people without distinction, especially the poor and the weak, and upon the poorest of the poor which is what sinners are, in a continuous, humble and more often than not hidden service of charity.

The missionary aspiration is a constitutive part of the Eucharistic form of priestly life. The Holy Father writes in this regard, "The first and fundamental mission that we receive from the sacred mysteries we celebrate is that of bearing witness by our lives. The wonder we experience at the gift God has made to us in Christ gives new impulse to our lives and commits us to becoming witnesses of his love. We become witnesses when, through our actions, words and way of being, Another becomes present and communicates himself" (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 85).

The priest is called to make himself "bread broken for the life of the world", to serve all with the love of Christ who loved them "to the end": thus, the Eucharist becomes in a priest's life what it signifies in its celebration. Christ's sacrifice is a mystery of liberation which ceaselessly challenges and moves us.

Every priest truly feels within him the same compelling need to work in the midst of men and women for justice and solidarity; the priest is called to witness to Christ himself among them.

*Nourished by the Word of life*, priests cannot remain on the margins of the fight to defend and proclaim the dignity of the human person and his universal and inalienable rights. Benedict XVI wrote concerning this: "Precisely because of the mystery we celebrate, we must denounce situations contrary to human dignity, since Christ shed his blood for all, and at the same time affirm the inestimable value of each individual person" (*ibid.* n. 89).

Let us discover the true meaning of *amoris officium*, that pastoral charity of which St Augustine speaks (*In Evangelium Johannis Tractatus* 123, 5: CCL 36, 678).

The Church, as the Bride of Christ, wants to be loved by the priest totally and exclusively, as she was loved by Christ himself, her Head and Bridegroom. Let us understand the theological motivation of the Latin Church's ecclesiastical law on celibacy and its profoundly expedient connection with Sacred Orders: as an inestimable gift of God, as a unique participation in God's fatherhood and, in the fruitfulness of the Church, as a formidable missionary dynamism, as greater love, and a testimony to the world of the eschatological Kingdom.

Celibacy, accepted with a free and loving decision, becomes a gift of self in and with Christ to his Church and expresses the priest's service to the Church in and with the Lord (cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 16; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 29).

We might well ask ourselves: but what are the contexts of the priestly testimony of Christ's love?

a) First of all the mission, the *Kerygma* and *catechesis*; the catechesis of young people

and adults, of those near and far. In catechesis, Christ's message is communicated in a complete and clear form. Today, an adequate knowledge of the faith is urgently needed, which is clearly summed up in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its *Compendium*.

It is a matter of sparing no effort to reach out to Catholics who have fallen away and to those who know little or nothing about Christ. Benedict XVI said recently to the Bishops of Brazil: "Education in Christian personal and social virtues is also an essential part of catechesis, as is education in social responsibility...."

"We Pastors must be faithful servants of the Word, eschewing any reductive or mistaken vision of the mission entrusted to us. It is not enough to look at reality solely from the viewpoint of personal faith; we must work with the Gospel in our hands and anchor ourselves in the authentic heritage of the Apostolic Tradition, free from any interpretations motivated by rationalistic ideologies" (*Address to the Brazilian Bishops after the celebration of Vespers, Cathedral of Sé, São Paulo, 11 May 2007, nn. 4, 5; ORE, 16 May 2007, p. 8*).

In this area the traditional contexts of catechesis do not suffice — lessons, lectures, Bible and theology courses — but it is necessary to open ourselves to the other new *areopaghi* of global culture.

In addition to the press, radio and television, there should be more frequent recourse to e-mail, internet sites, webpages and video-conferences and to many other recent systems in order to communicate the *kerygma* effectively to a large number of people. The pastor's very presence, bearing and behaviour that results from his own "being", must constitute a catechesis for one and all.

There may have been times when we underestimated this aspect which people appreciate and which, if it is an expression of content, is not formalism but rather a suitable way of conveying substance.

b) Another context for this witnessing is *the promotion of the Church's charitable institutions* which can carry out a valuable service for the weakest and most deprived people at various levels.

"If the persons [you] encounter are living in poverty, it is necessary to help them, as the first Christian communities did, by practising solidarity and making them feel truly loved", the Pontiff said at the above-mentioned Meeting (Cathedral of Sé, 11 May, *ibid.*, n. 3)

"We must denounce those who squander the earth's riches, provoking inequalities that cry out to heaven (cf. Jas 5:4)", Benedict XVI wrote. He continued: "the Lord Jesus, the Bread of eternal life, spurs us to be mindful of the situations of extreme poverty in which a great part of humanity still lives: these are situations for which human beings bear a clear and disquieting responsibility" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 90).

c) *Support of the culture of life*. The priests, in communion with their own Bishops, are called to foster everywhere a culture of life which, as Paul VI asserted, makes possible "the passage from misery towards the possession of necessities", to "the acquisition of culture... cooperation for the common good... the acknowledgment by man of supreme values, and of God their source and their finality" (Encyclical Letter, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 21).

In this regard, in the formation of lay faithful it would be necessary to stress that authentic development must be *integral*, in other words, it must be directed to the promotion of the whole man and of all men, suggesting the necessary means to do away with the serious social inequalities and the great disparity in access to goods.

d) *The formation of the lay faithful*. Formed at the school of the Eucharist, they should be encouraged and helped increasingly to assume their political and social responsibilities directly, consistent with, and motivated by, their Baptism.

All baptized men and women must become aware that in the Church they have been

configured to Christ the Priest, Prophet and Pastor, through the common priesthood of the faithful. They must feel co-responsible in building society in accordance with the criteria of the Gospel and, in particular, with the Church's social doctrine.

“This teaching, the fruit of the Church's whole history, is distinguished by realism and moderation; it can help to avoid misguided compromises or false utopias” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 91).

As the Petrine Magisterium has several times reminded the lay faithful, incumbent upon them is the special responsibility to change *unjust structures* and to erect *just ones*, producing the necessary consensus on moral values and the strength to live in accordance with the model of these values (cf. Benedict XVI, *Inaugural Address at the opening session of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conferences*, 13 May 2007, n. 4; *ORE*, 16 May, p. 18).

e) *Support of the family*. All priests are called to support the Christian family by encouraging — in various ways, according to the different vocational charisms and the mission entrusted to you — a satisfactory organic *pastoral care of the family* in the respective ecclesial communities (cf. John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 47).

Especially important is the need to sustain the value of the oneness of marriage as a life-long union between a man and a woman in which, as husband and wife, they share in God's loving work of creation.

Unfortunately, numerous political doctrines and currents of thought are continuing to fuel a culture that damages human dignity by ignoring or blighting, to a varying degree, the truth about marriage and about the family. The priest must tirelessly proclaim in Christ's name that the family, as the teacher of people par excellence, is indispensable for a true “human ecology” (cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 39).

### **3. Rejoicing to raise the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the Lord (cf. Ps 116[115]:12-13)**

John Paul II exclaimed in his Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 2002: “How marvellous is this vocation of ours, my dear Brother Priests! Truly we can repeat with the Psalmist: *‘What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord’* (Ps 116[115]:12-13)”.

This chalice is the *cup of blessing* (I Cor 10:16), *the cup of the new covenant* (cf. Lk 22:20; I Cor 11:25).

On this St Basil comments: “*So what shall I render to the Lord? Neither sacrifices nor holocausts... but my entire life*. This is why the Psalmist says: *‘I will lift up the cup of salvation, describing as a cup suffering in the spiritual combat and resistance to sin until death’* (Homily on Psalm 116[115]: *PG XXX*, 109).

As many holy priests experienced in the heroic exercise of their ministry, we are likewise invited to find in the Eucharist the necessary strength to witness to the Truth without weakening, irenicisms, “without false compromises, so as not to water down the Gospel!”, as Benedict XVI recalled at his meeting with the German Bishops (*Address at the Archdiocesan Seminary, Cologne, 21 August 2005; ORE, 31 August 2005, p. 3*).

In societies and cultures that are all too often closed to transcendence, stifled by consumeristic behaviour and enslaved by old and new forms of idolatry, we rediscover with amazement the meaning of the Eucharistic Mystery.

Let us renew our liturgical celebrations so that they may be more eloquent signs of Christ's presence in our Dioceses, particularly in our parishes; let us guarantee new spaces to silence, prayer and adoring contemplation of the Eucharist, to have within us a true and

vibrant missionary spirit.

John Paul II said to our Brother Prelates from Portugal, "As sentinels of God's House, see that all ecclesial life reflects in a way the twofold rhythm of Holy Mass with the liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic liturgy. Take as your example the case of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who only recognized Jesus in the breaking of the Bread (cf. Lk 24:13-35)" (*Address to Portuguese Bishops on a visit ad limina Apostolorum*, n. 6, 30 November 1999; *ORE*, 15 December 1999, p. 10).

In the Eucharist lies the secret of the fidelity and perseverance of our faithful, the safety and soundness of our Ecclesial Communities among the afflictions and difficulties of the world. In our pastoral work that consists of words and Sacrament, let us avoid the pitfalls of activism, of doing for the sake of doing and, by bringing the *Bread of eternal life*, we will allay the attacks of laicism and secularism in which Christ has neither a voice nor a place.

Let us think of the *missionary* importance of our parishes which are, as it were, the connective tissue of our dioceses (cf. *CIC*, can. 374, § 1).

Let us think of every parish which is a *comunitas Christifidelium* but it cannot be so unless it is a *Eucharistic community* open to those farthest away; in other words, unless it is a Community properly suited, in a spirit of mission, for celebrating the Eucharist, the living source of its upbuilding and the sacramental bond of its being, in full communion with the whole Church (cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, 30 December 1988, n. 26; *ORE*, 6 February 1989, n.6, p. 8).

Let us think of parish priests who can only be *ordained priests* because what they say and do in the Eucharistic liturgy and in the liturgy of the Word, they cannot do or say "in proprio", "on their own"; indeed, they act and speak "*in persona Christi capitis*".

Let us think of all of the priests, young and elderly, healthy and sick who, in rediscovering the radical gift of themselves inherent in their ordained ministry, can repeat with John Paul II: "The time has come to speak courageously about priestly life as a priceless gift and a splendid and privileged form of Christian living" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 39).

Thus, the Church of the Word and of the Sacraments will necessarily be the Church of the unflagging exercise of the priestly ministry; she will be the Church of the holy priest, the priest who loves from the bottom of his heart and with his whole being the call he has received from the Teacher to act at every moment as *ipse Christus*.

Benedict XVI said recently, in his Address to the members of the Bishops' Conference of Quebec, Canada, on a visit *ad limina Apostolorum* (11 May 2006), "However, the decline in the number of priests,... in certain places, disconcertingly calls into question the place of sacramentality in the life of the Church. The needs of pastoral organization must not compromise the authenticity of the ecclesiology that is expressed in it. The central role of the priest, who teaches, sanctifies and governs the community *in persona Christi capitis*, must not be minimized. The ministerial priesthood is indispensable to the existence of an ecclesial community. The importance of the role of lay people, whose generous service to the Christian communities I acknowledge, must never overshadow the ministry of priests, which is absolutely indispensable to the life of the Church" (*ORE*, 24 May 2006, p. 3).

Let us priests be concerned to make our true ontological identity shine out and to exercise a joyful ministry even amid the worst difficulties, an ardent missionary ministry because it derives from our identity.

Together with all the faithful, let us make sure we pray tirelessly to the Lord of the harvest to send workers to his harvest. Vocations exist but we must encourage a positive response with these means, the means the Lord has taught us and no others.

This is the Church which we would like to see flourishing anew and producing new fruit in her vitality and work. She is the Church of the divine mission, the Church *in statu missionis*.

Let us turn to Mary, *Queen of the Apostles and Mother of priests*. Let us entrust ourselves, our pastoral ministry and every priest to her. May she help us, in imitation of her, to be tabernacles and monstrances of Jesus the Good Shepherd!

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