



The Holy See

ORDINATION OF NEW PRIESTS FOR THE DIOCESE OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Fourth Sunday of Easter, 29 April 2007

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Presbyterate,

Dear Ordinandi,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter traditionally known as "Good Shepherd Sunday", has a special significance for us who are gathered in this Vatican Basilica. It is an absolutely unique day especially for you, dear deacons, upon whom, as Bishop and Pastor of Rome, I am pleased to confer priestly Ordination. In this way you join our "presbyterium".

Together with the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishops and the priests of the Diocese, I thank the Lord for the gift of your priesthood which enriches our Community with 22 new Pastors.

The theological density of the brief Gospel passage which has just been proclaimed helps us to perceive better the meaning and value of this solemn Celebration.

Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who gives eternal life to his sheep (cf. Jn 10: 28). This image of the shepherd is deeply rooted in the Old Testament and dear to Christian tradition. The Prophets attributed to David the title: "Shepherd of Israel", which hence possesses an indisputable messianic importance (cf. Ex 34: 23).

Jesus is the true Shepherd of Israel, since he is the Son of Man who desired to share the condition of human beings to give them new life and lead them to salvation.

Significantly, the Evangelist adds to the term "*shepherd*" the adjective *kalós*, good, which he only

uses with reference to Jesus and his mission. In the account of the Wedding at Cana, the adjective *kalós* is also used twice to signify the wine offered by Jesus, and it is easy to see it as a symbol of the *good* wine of messianic times (cf. 2: 10).

"I give them (that is, to my sheep) eternal life and they shall never perish" (Jn 10: 28). These are the words of Jesus, who had said a little earlier, "the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (cf. Jn 10: 11).

John uses the verb *tithénai* - *to offer*, which he repeats in the following verses (cf. 15, 17, 18). We find the same verb in the Last Supper narrative when Jesus "laid aside his garments" in order to "take" them back later (cf. Jn 13: 4, 12).

Thus, it is clear that the intention is to affirm that the Redeemer has absolute freedom to do with his life as he chooses and thereby give it up or take it back freely.

Christ is the true Good Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep, for us, sacrificing himself on the Cross. He knows his sheep and his sheep know him, just as the Father knows him and he knows the Father (cf. Jn 10: 14-15).

This is not a matter of mere intellectual knowledge but of a profound, personal relationship: a knowledge of the heart, of one who loves and one who is loved; of one who is faithful and one who knows how to be trustworthy.

It is a knowledge of love, by virtue of which the Pastor invites his sheep to follow him and which is fully manifest in the gift of eternal life that he offers to them (cf. Jn 10: 27-28).

Dear Ordinandi, may the certainty that Christ does not abandon us and that no obstacle can prevent the accomplishment of his universal plan of salvation be a cause of constant consolation - also in difficulties - and steadfast hope for you. The Lord's goodness is always with you, and it is powerful.

The Sacrament of Orders, which you are about to receive, will make you sharers in the very mission of Christ; you will be called to scatter the seed of his Word, the seed that carries in itself the Kingdom of God; to dispense divine mercy and to nourish the faithful at the table of his Body and Blood.

To be his worthy ministers, you must ceaselessly nourish yourselves with the Eucharist, source and summit of Christian life.

In approaching the altar, your daily school of holiness, of communion with Jesus, of the way of entering into his sentiments in order to renew the sacrifice of the Cross, you will increasingly

discover the richness and tenderness of the love of the divine Teacher, who today is calling you to a closer friendship with him.

If you listen docilely to him, if you follow him faithfully, you will learn to express in your life and in your pastoral ministry his love and his passion for the salvation of souls.

With Jesus' help, dear Ordinandi, each one of you will become a Good Shepherd, ready, if necessary, to lay down your life for him.

Thus it was at the beginning of Christianity with the first disciples, while as we heard in the First Reading the Gospel continued to be disseminated amid consolations and difficulties.

It is worth stressing the last words in the passage from the Acts of the Apostles which we have heard: "The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (13: 52).

Despite the misunderstandings and disagreements, about which we have heard, the apostle of Christ does not lose joy; indeed, he is a witness of that joy which flows from being with the Lord and from love for him and for the brothers and sisters.

On today's World Day of Prayer for Vocations, whose theme this year is: "*The vocation to the service of the Church as communion*", let us pray that all who are chosen to such a lofty mission may be accompanied by the prayerful communion of all the faithful

Let us pray that in every parish and Christian community attention to vocations and to the formation of priests will increase: it begins in the family, continues at the seminary and involves all who have at heart the salvation of souls.

Dear brothers and sisters who are taking part in this evocative celebration, and in the first place you, relatives, family members and friends of these 22 deacons who will shortly be ordained priests!

Let us surround these brothers of ours in the Lord with our spiritual solidarity. Let us pray that they may be faithful to the mission to which the Lord is calling them today and ready to renew their "yes" to God, their "here I am", every day without reserve.

And let us ask the Lord of the harvest on this Day for Vocations to continue to bring forth many holy priests who are totally dedicated to the service of the Christian people.

At this most solemn and important moment of your life, dear Ordinandi, I once again address you with affection. On this day Jesus repeats to you: "I no longer call you servants, but friends". Welcome and nurture this divine friendship with "Eucharistic love"!

May Mary, the heavenly Mother of priests, accompany you. May she who beneath the Cross united herself with the Sacrifice of her Son and after the Resurrection accepted together with the other disciples the gift of the Spirit, help you and each one of us, dear brothers in the priesthood, to allow ourselves to be inwardly transformed by God's grace.

Only in this way is it possible to be faithful images of the Good Shepherd; only in this way can we carry out joyfully the mission of knowing, guiding and loving the flock which Jesus acquired at the price of his blood. Amen.

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