



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CARDINAL ARCHBISHOP OF PRAGUE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE CANONIZATION OF ST JOHN NEPOMUCENE**

*To my Venerable Brother
Frantisek Cardinal Tomasek
Archbishop of Prague*

Venerable and beloved Brother,

The 250th anniversary of the canonization of St John Nepomucene will fall on 19 March next; therefore we will celebrate also 16 May, his liturgical feast, more solemnly than in other years. If you rejoice at this event, you, Archbishop of that same city to which the glorious Martyr brought renown with his constancy and even greater renown with his martyrdom, and if the whole people of God takes delight with you in the memory of such a venerable priest, no less do I rejoice, who have always loved this hero of the faith with deep piety, and who have felt my veneration for him grow since God, in his mysterious wisdom, chose me to be Bishop of Rome and Pastor of the universal Church.

The Saint came as a pilgrim to this eternal city, in fact, in the 1390 jubilee. Here, in the Lateran Basilica, he was declared Saint by my predecessor Benedict XIII in 1729. Here, fifty years ago, the Pontifical Nepomucene College was founded in his honour. Here, finally, images and statues bear witness to the love, cult and veneration bestowed on him both by the Sovereign Pontiffs and by the simple faithful people.

All this opens my heart to praise, admiration, and prayer to obtain his intercession for his people and for the whole Church. In fact, the cult of your Patron Saint has spread beyond the frontiers of Bohemia and especially among neighbouring nations. In Poland from which I come, and in particular in the Archdiocese of Krakow, we often come across his images and, above all, the

statues usually placed near bridges or rivers to recall his martyrdom.

If now we wish to consider briefly the noble figure of the Saint, history presents him to us at first as dedicated to study and preparation for the priesthood. Aware as he was that, according to St Paul's expression, he would be changed into another Christ, he changed his soul into a pure temple of the spirit. With equal piety he was parish priest of St Gallus, in the city of Prague; then Canon; then Vicar General. In this office, which made him in a way jointly responsible for the government of his church, he found his martyrdom and at the same time his glory. And since he, more than others, defended the rights and the legitimate freedom of the Church in opposition to the wishes of King Wenceslas IV, more than others he drew upon himself the anger of the monarch. The latter took part personally in his torture, which caused his death; then he had him thrown from the bridge into the river Moldau. Thus its waters were sanctified by the body and blood of the Martyr and became his first tomb. That happened on the night of 20 March 1393. The light of that night spread all over the world, and still shines out brightly.

Some decades after the death of the man of God, the rumour spread that the King had had him killed for refusing to violate the secrecy of confession. And thus the martyr of ecclesiastical freedom was venerated also as a witness to the sacramental seal.

Rightly, my venerable and beloved Brother, your predecessor, Archbishop of Prague at that time, the people, and then the Church acclaimed him a Saint. Moreover, the examination of his relics made by a Commission of Experts in the years 1971-1973 confirmed the tortures suffered by John Nepomucene, signs of which still remain like a seal in his bones, which are kept in Prague as a holy and Venerable thing.

At this point, venerable and beloved Brother, I cannot help exhorting myself; you, your priests, and your people to consider the excellent virtues of your Patron Saint with deep humility of heart, both to admire them, and to imitate them.

And first of all his faith, alive like an ardent flame. It is not only the principle and root of all justification, but it develops in us such certainties as to make us fearless in the avowal and practice of our religion. Pointing out to us eternal goods, the object of our hope, and seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis*, it makes easier an equitable judgment on the goods of this world and their use. Faith, furthermore, making God present to us, is also a source of moral perfection. The Christian knows through faith that everyday activity is a sacrifice pleasing to the Lord when it is accompanied by purity of intentions, charity, the giving of oneself.

Living faith, then, will induce us more and more to serve our brothers, as the Lord Jesus says in the description of the Last judgment (Mt 25:31 ff.). In this way it will be proved that faith not only nourishes virtues in the individual's heart, but also contributes considerably to the edification of society, stimulating believers to honesty, faithfulness, sincerity, loyalty, love of the family and a

sense of justice.

The grand figure of St John, venerable Brothers, has examples and gifts for everyone. But since he was in holy orders, a parish priest and Vicar General, it seems natural that priests should be the first to drink at his fountain. True, the model of models is Jesus, to whom the voice of the Father refers us; but the Saints, too, are our models, having loved God above everything else. Well, St John incarnates in himself the ideal of one who has a deep knowledge of the mysteries of God, straining as he did to the perfection of virtues, of study, and of discipline; also the ideal of the Parish Priest who sanctifies his faithful with the example of his life and with his zeal for souls; furthermore, that of the Vicar General who carries out his duties carefully, in harmony with the will of his Archbishop in the spirit of ecclesial obedience.

The lesson that springs from this, venerable and beloved Brother, is that also all of us, that is, priests, must don his virtues, and be excellent pastors. The good shepherd knows his sheep, their requirements, their needs. He helps them to get out of sin, to overcome the obstacles and the difficulties that they meet. Unlike the hireling, he goes in search of them, helps them to carry their burden, and always knows how to encourage them. He dresses their wounds and heals them with grace, especially through the sacrament of reconciliation. He nourishes them with the word of God, preparing his homilies carefully; he forms them to piety and respect for truth; he teaches them to avoid all hypocrisy and all lies. He is able to encourage them with his personal example, with his fortitude and his wisdom. He does not think of himself but only of the salvation of souls, knowing that even the finest words are ineffective if they are not based on testimony of life (cf. Conciliar Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 29).

The Pope, the Bishop, and the Priest, in fact, do not live for themselves but for the faithful, just as parents live for their children and as Christ gave himself to the service of his Apostles: "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).

Such priests, faithful to the order of their Lord, who came "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn 11:52), are also constructors of a real communion which becomes a fertile soil for spiritual vocations. These must be the object of the solicitude of us all, beloved Brother, and we are all responsible for them (cf. Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 11).

Vocations, then, mature in the Seminaries. Here sacred Doctrine is taught; here the future messengers of the Good Tidings assimilate it; here the flame of their devotion is kindled, their character is strengthened, and their disposition tempered. From the Seminaries there must come out men of God, whom our time needs, apostles of Christ who came to bear witness to truth and charity. The Seminary is the heart of the diocese and the hope of the Church. May St John Nepomucene always be the model and protector of the seminarians of his native land!

And now, my venerable Brother, in the joy that comes from common faith and grace, I warmly

send the Apostolic Blessing to you, to your priests and seminarians, to men and women religious, to all the faithful and to the whole of Czechoslovakia, humbly praying to our Father in heaven that, by the intercession of St John Nepomucene, He may open hearts to the precious heritage he left and may lavish all good things upon you.

From the Vatican, 2 March in the year of our Lord 1979.

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