



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
*TO PRIESTS*  
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 1999**

*“Abba, Father!”*

Dear Brothers in the priesthood, my Holy Thursday appointment with you in this year which immediately precedes the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 focuses on this invocation in which, the exegetes tell us, we hear the *ipsissima vox Iesu*. It is an invocation which encloses the unfathomable mystery of the Word made flesh, sent by the Father into the world for the salvation of humanity.

The mission of the Son of God reaches its fulfilment when, offering himself, he brings about our adoption as sons and daughters and, by giving the Holy Spirit, makes it possible for human beings to share in the very communion of the Trinity. In the Paschal Mystery, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, God the Father stoops down to every man and woman, offering the possibility of redemption from sin and liberation from death. By grace we are the ministers of this reality.

1. In the Eucharistic celebration we conclude the Opening Prayer with the words: “Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you, and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever”. He lives and reigns with you, Father! This conclusion, we may say, has the nature of an ascent: through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, towards the Father. This is also the theological outline behind the three-year period of preparation, 1997-1999: first the year of the Son, then the year of the Holy Spirit and now the year of the Father.

This *ascending* movement is rooted, as it were, in the *descent* described by the Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Galatians. We pondered this text with particular intensity in the liturgy of the Christmas season: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that they might receive

adoption as sons and daughters” (*Gal 4:4-5*).

Here we find expressed the descending movement: God the Father sends the Son to make us, in him, his adopted children. In the Paschal Mystery, Jesus accomplishes the Father's plan by giving his life for us. The Father then sends the Spirit of the Son to enlighten us with regard to this extraordinary privilege: “Because you are sons and daughters, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, *Abba*, Father! So through God you are no longer slaves but sons and daughters, and if sons and daughters, then heirs” (*Gal 4:6-7*).

How can we fail to notice the uniqueness of what the Apostle writes? He declares that it is precisely the Spirit who cries out: *Abba*, Father! Historically in fact, through the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, the witness to the fatherhood of God has been the Son of God: it was he who taught us to turn to God and call him “Father”. He himself invoked God as “my Father”, and he taught us to pray to God with the affectionate name of “our Father”. Yet Saint Paul tells us that it is through the inner instruction of the Holy Spirit that the Son's teaching must, in a certain sense, be brought to life in the soul of those who listen to him. In fact, only through the work of the Spirit are we able to adore God in truth, invoking him as “*Abba*, Father”.

2. I write these words to you, dear Brothers in the priesthood, with Holy Thursday in mind, picturing you gathered round your Bishops for the Chrism Mass. It is my earnest wish that, as you meet in the communion of your local presbyterates, you may feel united with the whole Church as she lives the year of the Father, the year which is the prelude to the end of the twentieth century and, at the same time, of the second Christian millennium.

In this perspective, how can we fail to give thanks to God as we think of the hosts of priests who, in this vast span of time, have spent their lives in the service of the Gospel, sometimes to the point of the supreme sacrifice of life itself? In the spirit of the coming Jubilee, while confessing the limitations and shortcomings of past Christian generations, and therefore also of the priests of those times, we recognize with joy that a very significant part of the Church's inestimable service to human progress is due to the humble and faithful work of countless ministers of Christ who, in the course of the millennium, have been generous builders of the civilization of love.

The immensity of time! If time is always a movement away from the beginning, it is also, when we think of it, a return to the beginning. And this is of fundamental importance: if time did no more than take us ever further from the beginning, and if its final orientation — the recovery of the origin — were not clear, then our whole existence in time would lack a definite direction. It would have no meaning.

Christ, “the Alpha and Omega ... the One who is, who was and who is to come” (*Rev 1:8*), has given direction and meaning to our human passage through time. He said of himself: “I came from the Father and have come into the world; now I am leaving the world and going to the Father” (*Jn*

16:28). Thus the Christ-event pervades the passage of each one of us. It is with Christ that we pass through time, going in the same direction that he has taken: towards the Father.

This becomes even more evident during the Sacred Triduum, the holy days *par excellence* during which we share, through the mystery, in Christ's return to the Father through his passion, death and resurrection. Faith assures us that this journey of Christ to the Father, his Passover, is not an event which involves him alone. We too are called to be part of it. His Passover is our Passover.

So then, together with Christ we journey towards the Father. We do so through the Paschal Mystery, reliving those crucial hours when Christ, dying on the Cross, cried out: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (*Mk 15:34*), and then: "All is accomplished" (*Jn 19:30*), "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (*Lk 23:46*). These expressions from the Gospel are familiar to every Christian and in a particular way to every priest. They speak of our living and of our dying. At the end of each day, we say in the Liturgy of the Hours: "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit", to prepare ourselves for the great mystery of our passage, our own personal Easter experience, when Christ, by virtue of his death and resurrection, will take us to himself in order to present us to the Heavenly Father.

3. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the learned and clever and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your gracious will. All things have been given to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (*Mt 11:25-27*). Yes, the Son alone knows the Father. He who "is in the bosom of the Father" — as Saint John writes in his Gospel (1:18) — has brought the Father close to us, has spoken to us of him, has revealed to us his face and heart. At the Last Supper, when the Apostle Philip asks, "Show us the Father" (*Jn 14:8*), Christ replies: "Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me, Philip? ... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?" (*Jn 14:9-10*). With these words, Jesus bears witness to the Trinitarian mystery of his own eternal generation from the Father as Son, the mystery which is the deepest secret of his divine Person.

The Gospel is a continuous revelation of the Father. When the twelve-year-old Jesus is found by Joseph and Mary among the teachers in the Temple, he replies to his Mother's words, "My son, why have you done this to us?" (*Lk 2:48*), by referring to the Father: "Did you not know that I must be about the things of my Father?" (*Lk 2:49*). Even at the age of twelve he already has a clear awareness of the meaning of his own life, of his mission, which, from the first moment to the last, is wholly dedicated to "the things of the Father". This mission reaches its high point on Calvary, with the sacrifice of the Cross, accepted by Christ in a spirit of obedience and filial devotion: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me! Yet not as I will, but as you will ... Your will be done!" (*Mt 26:39, 42*). And the Father in turn accepts the sacrifice of the Son, for he so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that man might not die but have eternal life (cf. *Jn 3:16*). Yes, the Son alone knows the Father and therefore he alone can reveal him to us.

4. “*Per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso ...*”. “Through him, with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, Almighty Father, for ever and ever”.

Spiritually united and visibly gathered in our Cathedral Churches on this special day, we give thanks to God for the gift of the priesthood. We give thanks for the gift of the Eucharist which we celebrate as priests. The doxology with which the Canon ends has a fundamental importance in every Eucharistic celebration. In a certain sense it expresses the crowning moment of the *Mysterium Fidei*, of the central core of the Eucharistic sacrifice, realized at the moment when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we effect the changing of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, just as he himself did for the first time in the Upper Room. When the great Eucharistic Prayer reaches its climax, the Church, at that precise moment, in the person of the ordained minister, addresses these words to the Father: “Through him, with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, Almighty Father”. *Sacrificium laudis!*

5. After the assembly has responded with the solemn acclamation “Amen”, the celebrant intones the “Our Father”, the Lord's Prayer. The succession of these two moments is very significant. The Gospel relates that the Apostles, marvelling at the Master's inner recollection in his dialogue with the Father, asked him: “Lord, teach us to pray” (*Lk 11:1*). Then, for the first time, he spoke the words which would become the principal and most frequently used prayer of the Church and of individual Christians: the “Our Father”. When we, as the liturgical assembly, make these words our own during the Eucharistic celebration, they take on a particular eloquence. It is as though we were professing at that moment that Christ taught us his own prayer to the Father in the fullest and most definitive way by explaining it through his sacrifice on the Cross.

It is in the context of the Eucharistic Sacrifice that the “Our Father”, recited by the Church, discloses its whole meaning. Each of its invocations acquires a special ray of truth. On the Cross the name of the Father is supremely “hallowed”, and his Kingdom irrevocably comes; in the “*consummatum est*” his will is definitively done. And is not the petition “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those ...” perfectly reflected in the words of the Crucified Jesus: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (*Lk 23:34*)? Asking for our daily bread becomes more meaningful than ever when, under the species of “broken bread”, we receive the Body of Christ in Eucharistic Communion. And does not the prayer, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”, attain its greatest efficacy at the very moment when the Church offers to the Father the ultimate price of our redemption and our deliverance from evil?

6. In the Eucharist the priest personally draws near to the inexhaustible mystery of Christ and of his prayer to the Father. He can immerse himself daily in this mystery of redemption and grace by celebrating Holy Mass, which retains its meaning and value even when, for a just reason, it is offered without the participation of the faithful, yet always for the faithful and for the whole world. Precisely because of this indissoluble bond linking him to the priesthood of Christ, the priest is the teacher of prayer, and the faithful can rightly put to him the same request which the disciples put

one day to Jesus: “Teach us to pray”.

The Eucharistic liturgy is a pre-eminent school of Christian prayer for the community. The Mass opens up a wide variety of possibilities for a sound pedagogy of the spirit. One of these is Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, which is a natural prolongation of the Eucharistic celebration. Through Adoration, the faithful can enjoy a particular experience of “abiding” in the love of Christ (cf. *Jn 15:9*), entering ever more deeply into his filial relationship with the Father.

It is precisely in this context that I exhort all priests to carry out with confidence and courage their duty of guiding the community to authentic Christian prayer. This is a duty which no priest may ever forsake, even though the difficulties caused by today's secularized mentality can at times make it extremely demanding for him.

The powerful missionary impulse which Providence has inspired in the Church in our time, especially through the Second Vatican Council, is a challenge above all to her ordained ministers, calling them first of all to conversion. They themselves must be converted in order to convert others or, in other words, they themselves must experience intensely that they are children of God in order to help all the baptized to discover the dignity and joy of belonging to our Heavenly Father.

7. On Holy Thursday we shall renew, dear brothers, our priestly promises. In doing so, we desire that Christ may somehow enfold us once more in his holy priesthood, in his sacrifice, in his agony in Gethsemane and his death on Golgotha, and in his glorious resurrection. Retracing, as it were, the footsteps of Christ in all these saving events, we discover his profound openness to the Father. And it is for this reason that every Eucharist in a way repeats the request of the Apostle Philip in the Upper Room: “Lord, show us the Father”, and, in the *Mysterium Fidei*, Christ seems to reply each time: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me? ... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” (*Jn 14:9-10*).

This Holy Thursday, dear priests throughout the world, as we recall the anointing with chrism received on the day of our Ordination, we shall proclaim with one voice and with renewed gratitude:

*Per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso,  
est tibi Deo Patri omnipotenti,  
in unitate Spiritus Sancti,  
omnis honor et gloria  
per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen!*

*From the Vatican, on 14 March, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, in the year 1999, the twenty-first of my Pontificate.*

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