



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY

TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADAMEETING WITH THE PRIESTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICAADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Church of Saint Martha, Miami

Thursday, 10 September 1987

Dear brother Priests,

1. Coming here today, I wish also to open my heart to you and to *celebrate with you the priesthood* that we all share: "*Vobis sum Episcopus, vobiscum Sacerdos*". I am convinced that there is no better way to start than *to direct our thoughts and our hearts to that Shepherd whom we all know* – the Good Shepherd, the one High Priest, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

My heart is full of gratitude and praise as *I express my love for the priesthood*, the beautiful vocation, the wonderful vocation in which we participate not because we are worthy, but because Christ has loved us, loves us and has entrusted to us this particular ministry of service. *And I thank God for you, my brother priests*. In the words of Saint Paul: "I thank God... whenever I remember you in my prayers—as indeed I do constantly, night and day" (2 *Tim.* 1,3). *I am also grateful to you, my brother priests*, for your welcome of fraternal love, expressed personally and through Father McNulty as your representative. I address my words to all of you present here and to all the priests in the United States. To all of you I express my gratitude for your ministry, for your perseverance, for your faith and love, for the fact that you are striving to live the priesthood, close to the people, in truth – the truth of being ministers of Christ the Good Shepherd. As priests, *we all hold a "treasure in earthen vessels"* (2 *Cor.* 4,7). Through no merit of our own, and with all our human weaknesses, we have been called to proclaim God's word, to celebrate the sacred mysteries, especially the Eucharist, to care for the People of God, and to continue the Lord's ministry of reconciliation. In this way, we are servants both of the Lord and of his people, being ourselves constantly called to conversion, constantly invited to "walk in newness of life" (*Rom.* 6, 4). I have come to the United States, my brother priests, in order to confirm you in your faith, according to the will of Christ (Cfr. *Luc.* 22, 32). I have come to you because I want all distances to be bridged, so that, together, we may grow and become ever more truly *a communion of faith, hope and love*. I affirm you in the good gifts you have received and in the generous response you have made to

the Lord and his people, and I encourage you to become more and more like Jesus Christ, the Eternal High Priest, the Good Shepherd. Saint Paul reminds us, as he reminded Timothy, to be fearless in serving Christ: "The Spirit God has given us is no cowardly spirit, but rather one that makes us strong, loving and wise. Therefore, *never be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord...* but with the strength which comes from God bear your share of the hardship which the Gospel entails" (2 *Tim.* 1, 7-8). We know that proclaiming the Gospel and living out our ministry very definitely entail hardship. It would be wrong to reduce priestly life to this one dimension of suffering, but it would also be wrong not to recognize this dimension or to resent it when we encounter it. We are not exempt from the human condition, nor can we ever escape that *emptying of self*, after the example of Jesus, who "was himself tested through what he suffered" (*Hebr.* 2, 4).

2. It is important that we find satisfaction in our ministry, and that we be clear about the nature of the satisfaction which we can expect. The physical and emotional health of priests is an important factor in their overall human and priestly well-being, and it is necessary to provide for these. I commend your bishops and you yourselves for giving particular attention to these matters in recent years. Yet, the fulfilment that comes from our ministry does not, in the final analysis, consist in physical or psychological well-being; nor can it ever consist in material comfort and security. *Our fulfilment depends on our relationship with Christ and on the service that we offer to his Body, the Church.* Each of us is most truly himself when he is "for others".

3. And just here, of course, arises a problem for us in our ministry. So much is asked of us by so many different people, and so often it seems that our response is inadequate to their needs. Sometimes this is due to our own human limitations. We can then be tempted to indulge in excessive self-criticism, forgetting that *God can use our weakness as easily as our strength* in order to accomplish his will. It is a great credit to you, my brothers, that *you are striving to be merciful and gentle and forgiving like the Good Shepherd* whom you know and imitate and love, and to whom you have pledged your fidelity. No other path is possible. Sometimes, however, what is asked of you in the name of compassion may not be in accord with the full truth of God, whose eternal law of love can never contradict the fact that he is always "rich in mercy" (*Eph.* 2, 4). True mercy takes into account God's plan for humanity, and this plan – marked by the sign of the Cross – was revealed by a merciful High Priest, who is able to sympathize with our weakness, ...one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned" (*Hebr.* 4, 15). If on the other hand, what is claimed to be a gesture of mercy goes contrary to the demands of God's word, it can never be truly compassionate or beneficial to our brothers and sisters in need. Jesus, who was himself the perfect expression of the Father's love, was also conscious of being "a sign of contradiction". The Apostle tells us that, at a certain point in the Lord's ministry, "many of his disciples broke away and would not remain in his company any longer" (*Jo.* 6, 66). And today there are indeed *many sensitive issues* which priests must deal with in their daily ministry. I know from listening to many priests and many bishops that there are different approaches to such issues. What is seen in one way by some of our brothers is evaluated differently by others. Yes, we all have questions that arise from the exercise of our priesthood, *questions which require us to seek continually the light and wisdom that come only from the Holy Spirit.* In this regard, however, it is important for us to realize that the same Holy Spirit from whom come all the different and wonderful charisms, and who dwells in the hearts of all

the faithful, has placed in the Church the specific charism of the Magisterium, through which *he guides the whole community to the fullness of truth*. Through the action of the Holy Spirit the promise of Christ is constantly being fulfilled: "Know that *I am with you always*, until the end of the world" (*Matth. 28, 20*). We know that through the Second Vatican Council the Church has clearly and collegially expressed her teaching on many of the sensitive issues and that much of this teaching has subsequently been reiterated in the different sessions of the Synod of Bishops. By its nature therefore this teaching of the Church is normative for the life of the Church and for all pastoral service. The forthcoming Synod, after extensive consultation and fervent prayer, will consider at length and take a pastoral position on other important issues in the life of the Church. I am very much aware that *your fidelity to Christ's will for his Church and your pastoral sensitivity demand great sacrifice and generosity of spirit*. As I told the bishops of the United States, just a few weeks after I was elected Pope: "Like yourselves, I learned as a bishop to understand at first hand the ministry of priests, the problems affecting their lives, the splendid efforts they are making, the sacrifices that are an integral part of their service to God's people. Like yourselves, I am fully aware of how much Christ depends on his priests in order to fulfill in time his mission of redemption" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Ad Archiepiscopos et Episcopos V et VII Regionis Pastoralis Foederatarum civitatum Americae Septemtrionalis, coram simul admissos occasione habita eorum visitationis «ad limina»*, die 9 nov. 1978: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, I* (1978) 122). 4. In expressing the conviction that Christ needs his priests and will to associate them with himself in his mission of salvation, we must also emphasize the consequence of this: *the need for new vocations to the priesthood*. It is truly necessary for the whole Church to work and pray for this intention. As Father McNulty stated so well, we priests must personally invite generous young men to give their lives in the service of the Lord; they must truly be attracted by the joy that we project in our own lives and ministry. There is still one more factor to be considered in evaluating the future of vocations, and it is *the power of Christ, of Christ's Paschal Mystery*. As the Church of Christ, we are all called to profess his power before the world; to proclaim that he is able, in virtue of his Death and Resurrection, to draw young people to himself, in this generation as in the past; to declare that he is strong enough to attract young men even today to a life of self-sacrifice, pure love and total dedication to the priesthood. As we profess this truth, as we proclaim with faith the power of the Lord of the harvest, we have a right to expect that he will grant the prayers that he himself has commanded to be offered. *The present hour calls for great trust* in him who has overcome the world. 5. The authentic renewal of the Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council has been a great gift of God to his people. Through the action of the Holy Spirit an immense amount of good has been done. We must continue to pray and work that the Holy Spirit will bring his design to fulfilment in us. In this regard *priests have an indispensable role to play in the renewed life of the Church*. Each day the Church is being renewed by grace as she seeks a deeper and more penetrating understanding of the word of God, as she strives to worship more authentically in spirit and in truth, and as she recognizes and develops the gifts of all her members. These dimensions of renewal require those enduring tasks of priests which give their ministry its unique character: namely, the *ministry of word and sacrament, the tending of the flock of Christ*. True renewal presupposes the clear, faithful and effective *proclamation of the word of*

God. The Second Vatican Council indicated that this is *the priest's first task* (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4). Those who preach must do so with dynamic fidelity. This means being ever faithful to what has been handed on in Tradition and Scripture, as taught by the living pastoral authority of the Church, and making every effort to present the Gospel as effectively as possible in its application to new circumstances of life. As often as the word is truly proclaimed, Christ's work of redemption continues. But what is proclaimed must first be lived. Renewal in Christ's grace and life greatly depends on the development of *the Church's life of worship*. Because we priests preside at the liturgy, we must come to know and appreciate the rites of the Church through study and prayer. We are called to lead celebrations which are both faithful to the Church's discipline and legitimately adapted, according to her norms, for the good of our people. Genuine renewal also depends upon the way in which priests exercise their *task of tending the flock of Christ*, especially as they encourage the faithful to use their gifts in the apostolate and in various special forms of service. The Church's *commitment to evangelization*, to proclaiming the word of God, to calling people to holiness of life, cannot be sustained without the tireless efforts and selfless support of priests. In the matter of inviting people, as Jesus did, to conversion – the total conversion of the Gospel – *the example of priests* is extremely important for the authenticity of the Church's life. This is particularly true in *our own use of the Sacrament of Penance*, through which we are repeatedly converted to the Lord. On this condition rests the full supernatural effectiveness of our "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5, 18), and of our whole priestly lives. The experience of the Church teaches us that "the priest's celebration of the Eucharist and administration of the other sacraments, his pastoral zeal, his relationship with the faithful, his communion with his brother priests, his collaboration with his bishop, his life of prayer – in a word, the whole of his priestly existence, suffers an inexorable decline if by negligence or for some other reason he fails to receive the Sacrament of Penance at regular intervals and in a spirit of genuine faith and devotion. If a priest were no longer to go to confession or properly confess his sins, his *priestly being* and his *priestly action* would feel its effects very soon, and this would also be noticed by the community of which he was the pastor" (2 Cor. 5, 18). People expect us to be men of faith and prayer. People look to us for *Christ's truth* and the teaching of his Church. They ask to see *Christ's love* incarnate in our lives. All this reminds us of a very basic truth, that the priest is "another Christ". In a sense, we priests are Christ to all those to whom we minister. This is true of all aspects of our priestly work. But it is particularly true *in the Eucharistic Sacrifice* – from which our priestly identity flows and in which it is expressed most clearly and effectively. This truth has special relevance also for our service as *ministers of the Sacrament of Reconciliation*, through which we render a unique service to the cause of conversion and peace, and to the advancement of God's Kingdom on earth. At this point I would like to repeat those words which I have already addressed to the priests of the Church: "Praise then to this silent army of our brothers who have served well and serve each day the cause of reconciliation through the ministry of sacramental Penance" (Ioannis Pauli PP.II. *Reconciliation et Paenitentia*, 29).

In her *mission to the world*, the Church is renewed as she calls humanity to respond to God's commandment of love, and as she upholds and promotes the values of the Gospel as they affect

public life. In doing this she becomes a prophetic voice on matters of truth and justice, mercy and peace. In these tasks involving the world, the leadership of priestly ministry has been and continues to be decisive. Priests who *encourage and support* the laity help them to exercise their own mission to bring the values of the Gospel into public life. Thus, priests and lay people working together can challenge society itself to defend life, to defend all human rights, to protect family life, to work for greater social justice, to promote peace.

6. One of the notable experiences of priests in the United States in the years since the Council has been *a renewal of their spiritual lives*. Many priests have sought this renewal in groups of fraternal support, through spiritual direction, retreats, and other commendable endeavours. These priests have found their ministry revitalized by a rediscovery of the importance of personal prayer. As you continue to discover Christ both in your prayer and in your ministry, you will experience more deeply that he – the Good Shepherd – is *the very center of your life, the very meaning of your priesthood*.

My brothers: in speaking to you about *prayer*, I am not telling you what you do not know or urging you to do something that you do not practice. Prayer has been part of your daily lives since your seminary years and even earlier. But *perseverance in prayer*, as you know, is difficult. Dryness of spirit, external distractions, the tempting rationalization that we could be spending our time more usefully—these things are familiar to anyone who is trying to pray. Inevitably, at one time or another, these elements assail the prayer life of a priest.

For us priests, prayer is neither a luxury nor an option to be taken up or put aside as seems convenient. *Prayer is essential to the pastoral life*. Through prayer we grow in sensitivity to the Spirit of God at work in the Church and in ourselves. And we are made more aware of others, becoming more "attentive to their needs, to their lives and destiny" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Epistula ad universos Ecclesiae Sacerdotes adveniente feria V in Cena Domini anno MCMLXXXVII*, 11, die 13 apr. 1987: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, X, 1 (1987) 1314). Indeed, through prayer we come to love deeply those whom Jesus has entrusted to our ministry. Of special importance for our lives and our ministry is the *great prayer of praise* – the Liturgy of the Hours – which the Church enjoins on us and which we pray in her name and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7. In recent years, priests have often told me of the need they feel for *support in their ministry*. The challenges of priestly service today are indeed great, and the demands on our time and energy seem to increase every day. In such circumstances how easily we can give into temptations to discouragement! But, dear brothers, at these times it is more important than ever that we heed the advice of the Letter to the Hebrews: "*Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus*, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the Cross, heedless of its shame... Remember how he endured the opposition of sinners; hence do not grow despondent or abandon the struggle" (*Hebr.* 12, 2-4).

The encouragement and support that we find *in one another* is a great gift of God's love—a

characteristic of Christ's priesthood. The increase of mutual support among brother priests through prayer and sharing is a most encouraging sign. The same can be said, on a different level, for the development of presbyter councils committed to the solidarity of priests with one another and with their bishop in the mission of the universal Church. As priests we also need *examples of priestly ministry*, "artists" of pastoral work who both inspire us and intercede for us – priests like Philip Neri, Vincent de Paul, John Vianney, John Bosco, and Maximilian Kolbe. And we can also reflect upon the priestly lives of men whom we have known personally, exemplary priests who inspire us—because they have lived the one priestly ministry of Jesus Christ with deep generosity and love. To persevere in our pastoral ministry we need above all that "one thing only" which Jesus tells us is "required" (Cfr. *Luc.* 10, 42). We need to know the Shepherd very well. We need *a deep personal relationship with Christ* – the source and supreme model of our priesthood – a relationship that requires union in prayer. Our love for Christ, rekindled frequently in prayer –especially prayer before the Blessed Sacrament – is at the foundation of our commitment to celibacy. This love also makes it possible for us, as servants of God's Kingdom, *to love our people freely and chastely and deeply*. My brothers: sharing in the one priesthood of Christ, we share the same joys and sorrows. What a joy it is for me to be with you today. I thank you again for the gift of yourselves to Christ and his Church, and I want you to know that I am close to you in your efforts to serve the Lord and his people. You have my gratitude, my prayers, my support and my love. And as I conclude, I express the hope that each of us will always experience the joy of which the Psalmist speaks: "Behold, *how good it is, and how pleasant, where brethren dwell at one!*" (*Ps.* 133 (132), 1). Dear brother priests: *Catholic unity is our vocation*. As priests in America you are called to live this Catholic unity in the particular Churches – the dioceses – to which you belong. But all these particular Churches are never more completely themselves, never more faithful to their identity, than when they are living to the full the communion of faith and love of the universal Church. *At the summit of your priestly ministry is this mystery of ecclesial unity*, and you are called to live it in sacrifice and love, in union with Mary the Mother of Jesus. The protection and tender human love of our Blessed Mother is a great support to all of us priests. Her prayers assist us, her example challenges us, her closeness consoles us. In her presence we experience the joy and hope that we need so much. Is this not the day and the hour, dear brother priests, to turn to her, as we must have done on our ordination day, and *to entrust to her anew ourselves, our people and our sacred ministry?* Why? For the glory of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Dear priests of America, dear brothers: "My love to all of you in Christ Jesus" (1 *Cor.* 16, 24).

© Copyright 1987 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana