

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO PRIESTS
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 2001

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood!

1. On the day when the Lord Jesus gave to the Church the gift of the Eucharist, and with it instituted our priesthood, I cannot but address to you — as is now traditional — a word of friendship and, I might say, of intimacy, wishing to join you in thanksgiving and praise.

Lauda Sion, Salvatorem, lauda ducem et pastorem, in hymnis et canticis! Great indeed is the mystery of which we have been made ministers. A mystery of love without limit, for "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (*Jn* 13:1); a mystery of unity, which from the source of Trinitarian life is poured out upon us in order to make us "one" in the gift of the Spirit (cf. *Jn* 17); a mystery of divine *diakonia* which prompts the Word made flesh to wash the feet of his creation, thus showing that service is the high road in all genuine relationships between people: "You also should do as I have done to you" (*Jn* 13:15).

Of this great mystery we have been made, in a special way, witnesses and ministers.

2. This is the first Holy Thursday after the Great Jubilee. What we have experienced together with our communities, in that special celebration of mercy, two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, now becomes the incentive to continue the journey. *Duc in altum!* The Lord invites us to put out into the deep, with trust in his word. Let us learn from the Jubilee experience and persevere in the task of bearing witness to the Gospel with the enthusiasm that contemplating the face of Christ engenders in us!

As I in fact stressed in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, we must start out from Christ, in order to be open, in him, with the "ineffable" groanings of the Spirit (cf. *Rom* 8:26), to the embrace of the Father: "*Abba!* Father!" (*Gal* 4:6). Christ must be our point of departure in rediscovering the source and the profound rationale of our brotherhood: "As I have loved you, you also must love one another" (*Jn* 13:34).

3. Today I wish to express to each of you my gratitude for all that you did during the Jubilee Year to ensure that the people entrusted to your care might experience more intensely the saving presence of the Risen Lord. At this time, I am also thinking of the work you do every day, work that is often hidden and, without making headlines, causes the Kingdom of God to advance in people's minds and hearts. I want you to know of my admiration for this ministry, discreet, tenacious and creative, even if it is sometimes watered by those tears of the soul which only God sees and "stores in his bottle" (cf. *Ps* 56:8). Your ministry is all the more admirable when it is tested by the resistance

of a widely secularized environment, which subjects priestly activity to the temptations of fatigue and discouragement. You well know that such daily commitment is precious in the eyes of God.

At the same time, I wish to echo the voice of Christ who continuously calls us to deepen our relationship with him. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (*Rev 3:20*). Chosen to proclaim Christ, we are first of all invited to live in intimacy with him: we cannot give to others what we ourselves do not have! There is a thirst for Christ which, despite many appearances to the contrary, emerges even in contemporary society; it is present among all the inconsistencies of new forms of spirituality; it can be seen even where, on important ethical issues, the Church's witness becomes a sign of contradiction. This thirst for Christ — whether conscious or not — cannot be quenched with empty words. Only authentic witnesses can communicate in a credible way the word that saves.

4. In my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* I said that the true legacy of the Great Jubilee is the experience of a more intense encounter with Christ. From among the many aspects of this encounter, today I would like to choose for this reflection the theme of *sacramental reconciliation*: this too was a central feature of the Jubilee Year, also because it is closely connected with the gift of the Jubilee indulgence.

Here in Rome, and I am sure that you too had similar experiences in your local Churches, *one of the most visible manifestations of the Jubilee* was certainly the exceptional numbers of people receiving the Sacrament of mercy. Even non-religious observers were impressed by this. The confessionals in Saint Peter's and in the other Basilicas were "stormed", as it were, by pilgrims, who often had to wait in long queues, patiently waiting their turn. The interest shown by young people in this Sacrament during the splendid week of their Jubilee was particularly significant.

5. As you well know, in recent decades this Sacrament has passed through *a certain crisis*, for a number of reasons. Precisely in order to tackle this crisis, in 1984 a Synod was held, the conclusions of which were presented in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*.

It would be naive to think that the mere intensifying of the practice of the Sacrament of forgiveness during the Jubilee Year is proof of a definitive turnabout. It was nevertheless an encouraging sign. It impels us to recognize that *the profound needs of the human spirit*, to which God's saving plan responds, *cannot be cancelled out by temporary crises*. We should accept this Jubilee indication as a sign from on high, and make it a reason for renewed boldness in re-proposing the meaning and practice of this Sacrament.

6. But it is not so much on pastoral problems that I wish to dwell. Holy Thursday, the special day of our vocation, calls us to reflect above all on "who we are", and in particular on our journey to holiness. It is from this source too that our apostolic zeal will flow.

So, as we gaze upon Christ at the Last Supper, as he becomes for us the "bread that is broken", as he stoops down in humble service at the feet of the Apostles, how can we not

experience, together with Peter, *the same feeling of unworthiness* in the face of the greatness of the gift received? "You shall never wash my feet" (*Jn 13:8*). Peter was wrong to reject Christ's gesture. But he was right to feel unworthy of it. It is important, on this day of love *par excellence*, that we should feel *the grace of the priesthood as a super-abundance of mercy*.

Mercy is the absolutely free initiative by which God has chosen us: "You did not choose me but I chose you" (*Jn 15:16*).

Mercy is his deigning to call us to act as his representatives, though he knows that we are sinners.

Mercy is the forgiveness which he never refuses us, as he did not refuse it to Peter after his betrayal. The avowal that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (*Lk 15:7*) also holds true for us.

7. Let us then rediscover our vocation as a "mystery of mercy". In the Gospel we find that Peter receives his special ministry with precisely this spiritual attitude. His experience is indicative for all those who have received the apostolic task in the different grades of the Sacrament of Orders.

Our thoughts turn to the scene of the *miraculous catch of fish* as described in the Gospel of Luke (5:1-11). Jesus asks Peter for an act of trust in his word, inviting him to put out into the deep for a catch. A disconcerting request, humanly speaking: after a sleepless and exhausting night spent casting the nets with no result, how could one believe him? But trying again, "at Jesus' word", changes everything. The fish arrive in such quantities as to tear the nets. The Word reveals his power. The result is wonder, but also fear and trembling, as when we are unexpectedly struck by an intense beam of light which lays bare all our personal limits. Peter exclaims: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (*Lk 5:8*). But scarcely has he uttered his admission when the Master's mercy becomes for him the beginning of new life: "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men" (*Lk 5:10*). The "sinner" becomes a minister of mercy. From a fisher of fish to a "fisher of men"!

8. Dear priests, this is a great mystery: *Christ was not afraid to choose his ministers from among sinners*. Is not this our own experience? It is Peter once again who will become more aware of this in his touching dialogue with Jesus after the Resurrection. Before entrusting him with the mandate to care for the flock, the Master asks the embarrassing question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (*Jn 21:15*). The one being questioned is the very man who a few days earlier had denied him three times. It is easy to understand the humble tone of his reply: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (*Jn 21:17*). And it is on the basis of this love, which knows all too well its own frailty, a love professed with both trust and hesitation, that Peter receives the commission: "Feed my lambs", "feed my sheep" (*Jn 21:15, 16, 17*). It will be on the basis

of this love, strengthened by the fire of Pentecost, that Peter will be able to accomplish the ministry entrusted to him.

9. And is it not within an experience of mercy that *Paul's vocation* too is born? No one experienced the gratuitousness of Christ's choice as vividly as he did. His past as a ferocious persecutor of the Church seared itself deep into his soul: "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (1 Cor 15:9). Yet, far from stifling his enthusiasm, this memory made it soar. The more he was embraced by mercy, the more Paul felt the need to bear witness to it and to let it shine forth in his life. The "voice" which speaks to him on the road to Damascus leads him to the heart of the Gospel, and enables him to discover the Gospel as the merciful love of the Father who in Christ is reconciling the world to himself. On this basis, Paul will also understand *apostolic service as the ministry of reconciliation*: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18-19).

10. Dear priests, the witness of Peter and Paul contains valuable pointers for us. Their lives invite us to *live the gift of the ministry with a sense of endless thanksgiving*: nothing is due to our merits, all is grace! The experience of the two Apostles prompts us to abandon ourselves to the mercy of God, to give over to him in sincere repentance our frailties, and with his grace to set out again on our journey to holiness. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* I indicated the commitment to holiness as the first element of all wise pastoral "planning". It is the basic task of all believers, so how much more must it be for us (cf. Nos. 30-31)!

For this very reason it is important for us to rediscover the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a fundamental means of our sanctification. Approaching a brother priest in order to ask for the absolution that we so often give to the faithful enables us to live the great and consoling truth that, before being ministers, we are all members of the same people, a "saved" people. What Augustine said of his task as bishop is true also of the service of priests: "If I am anxious about being for you, I am consoled by being with you. For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian ... In the first there is danger, in the second there is salvation" (*Discourses*, 340, 1). It is wonderful to be able to confess our sins, and to hear as a balm the word which floods us with mercy and sends us on our way again. Only those who have known the Father's tender embrace, as the Gospel describes it in the parable of the Prodigal Son – "he embraced him and kissed him" (Lk 15:20) – only they can pass on to others the same warmth, when after receiving pardon themselves they administer it to others.

11. On this holy day, therefore, let us ask Christ to help us to rediscover, *for ourselves*, the full beauty of this Sacrament. Did not Jesus himself help Peter to make this discovery? "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me" (Jn 13:8). Jesus of course was not referring directly to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but in some sense he was

pointing to it, alluding to that process of purification which would begin with his redeeming Death, and to its sacramental application to individuals down the ages.

Dear priests, let us make regular use of this Sacrament, that the Lord may constantly purify our hearts and make us less unworthy of the mysteries which we celebrate. Since we are called to show forth the face of the Good Shepherd, and therefore to have the heart of Christ himself, we more than others must make our own the Psalmist's ardent cry: "A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me" (*Ps 51:12*). The Sacrament of Reconciliation, essential for every Christian life, is especially a source of *support, guidance and healing for the priestly life*.

12. The priest who fully experiences the joy of sacramental reconciliation will find it altogether normal to repeat to his brothers and sisters the words of Paul: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (*2 Cor 5:20*).

The crisis of the Sacrament of Reconciliation which I mentioned earlier is due to many factors from the diminished sense of sin to an inadequate realization of the sacramental economy of God's salvation. But perhaps we should also recognize that another factor sometimes working against the Sacrament has been *a certain dwindling of our own enthusiasm and availability* for the exercise of this delicate and demanding ministry.

Conversely, now more than ever the People of God must be helped to rediscover the Sacrament. We need to declare with firmness and conviction that the Sacrament of Penance is *the ordinary means* of obtaining pardon and the remission of grave sins committed after Baptism. We ought to celebrate the Sacrament in the best possible way, *according to the forms laid down by liturgical law*, so that it may lose none of its character as the celebration of God's mercy.

13. A source of renewed confidence in the revival of this Sacrament is not only the fact that, despite many incongruities, *a new and urgent need for spirituality* is becoming widespread in society. There is also *a deeply-felt need for interpersonal contact*, which is increasingly experienced as a reaction to the anonymous mass society which often leaves people interiorly isolated, even when it involves them in a flurry of purely functional relationships. Obviously sacramental confession is not to be confused with a support system or with psychotherapy. But neither should we underestimate the fact that the Sacrament of Reconciliation, when correctly celebrated, also has a "humanizing" effect, which is in perfect harmony with its primary purpose of reconciling the individual with God and the Church.

Here too, it is important that the minister of reconciliation should fulfil his role correctly. His ability to be welcoming, to be a good listener and to engage in dialogue, together with his ready accessibility, is essential if the ministry of reconciliation is to be seen in all its value. The faithful and uncompromising proclamation of the radical demands of God's word must always be accompanied by great understanding and sensitivity, in imitation of Jesus' own way of dealing with sinners.

14. The liturgical form of the Sacrament also needs to be given due attention. *The Sacrament forms part of the structure of communion which is the mark of the Church.* Sin itself cannot be properly understood if it is viewed in a purely "private" way, forgetting that it inevitably affects the entire community and lowers the level of holiness within it. Moreover, the offer of forgiveness expresses a mystery of supernatural solidarity, since its sacramental significance rests on the profound union between Christ the Head and the members of his Body.

It is extremely important to help people recover this "community" aspect of the Sacrament, also by means of *community penance services* which conclude with individual confession and absolution. This manner of celebration enables the faithful to appreciate better the two-fold dimension of reconciliation, and commits them more effectively to following the penitential path in all its revitalizing richness.

15. Then there is also the fundamental problem of *catechetical teaching about the moral conscience and about sin*, so that people can have a clearer idea of the radical demands of the Gospel. Unfortunately, there exists a minimalist tendency which prevents the Sacrament from producing all the benefits that we might hope for. Many of the faithful have an idea of sin that *is not based on the Gospel but on common convention*, on what is socially "acceptable". This makes them feel not particularly responsible for things that "everybody does", and all the more so if these things are permitted by civil law.

Evangelization in the third millennium must come to grips with the urgent need for a presentation of the Gospel message which is dynamic, complete and demanding. The Christian life to be aimed at cannot be reduced to a mediocre commitment to "goodness" as society defines it; it must be a true quest for holiness. We need to re-read with fresh enthusiasm the fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, which deals with the universal call to holiness. Being a Christian means to receive a "gift" of sanctifying grace which cannot fail to become a "commitment" to respond personally to that gift in everyday life. It is precisely for this reason that I have sought over the years to foster a wider recognition of holiness, in all the contexts where it has appeared, so that Christians can have many different models of holiness, and all can be reminded that they are personally called to this goal.

16. Dear Brother Priests, let us go forward in the joy of our ministry, knowing that we have at our side the One who called us and does not abandon us. May the certainty of his presence sustain and console us.

On Holy Thursday may we have an even more vivid sense of this presence, as we contemplate with deep emotion the hour when Jesus, in the Upper Room, gave himself to us under the signs of bread and wine, sacramentally anticipating the sacrifice of the Cross. Last year I wrote to you from the Upper Room itself, during my visit to the Holy Land. How can I forget that touching moment? I re-live it today, not without sorrow for the tragic situation which persists in the land of Christ.

Our spiritual meeting-place on Holy Thursday is still there, in the Upper Room, as we celebrate in union with the Bishops in the cathedrals of the whole world the mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ and gratefully recall the origins of our Priesthood.

In the joy of the immense gift which we have all received, I embrace you all and give you my blessing.

From the Vatican, on 25 March, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, in the year 2001, the twenty-third of my Pontificate.

JOHN PAUL II