

# PRIESTHOOD AND PASTORAL CARE OF THE FAMILY

Pope John Paul II

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*Holy Thursday Letter To Priests given at the Vatican on 13 March released on 22 March 1994.*

1. Today we meet one another in the celebration of the eucharist, in which, as the Second Vatican Council recalls, is contained the whole spiritual treasure of the church (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5). As we commemorate the institution of the eucharist in the liturgy of Holy Thursday, we see very clearly what Christ has left us in this wondrous sacrament: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn. 13:1). In a sense, these words of St. John contain the whole truth about the eucharist: the truth which is at the same time the heart of the truth about the church. In a certain sense the church is daily born from the eucharist, celebrated in so many places all over the world, in so many different situations, among such diverse cultures, and so the re-enactment of the eucharistic mystery becomes as it were a daily "creation." Thanks to the celebration of the eucharist, the evangelical awareness of the people of God grows ever more profound, both in nations of age-old Christian tradition and among peoples who have only recently entered the new dimension imparted to human culture in all times and places by the mystery of the incarnation of the Word and by the mystery of the redemption accomplished by his death on the cross and his resurrection.

The sacred triduum leads us into this mystery in a way which is unique for the whole liturgical year. The liturgy of the institution of the eucharist is a singular anticipation of Easter, which continues through Good Friday and the Easter Vigil, up to the Sunday of the resurrection and its octave. At the threshold of the celebration of this great mystery of faith, dear brothers in the priesthood, you gather today around your respective bishops in the cathedrals of the diocesan churches, in order to relive the institution of the sacrament of the priesthood and that of the eucharist. The bishop of Rome celebrates this liturgy surrounded by the presbyterate of his church, just as my brother bishops do with the priests of their diocesan communities.

This is the reason for today's letter. It is my wish on this occasion to address a special word to you, so that all of us together may live to the full the great gift which Christ has bestowed on us. For us priests the priesthood is the supreme gift, a particular calling to share in the mystery of Christ, a calling which confers on us the sublime possibility of speaking and acting in his name. Every time we offer the eucharist, this possibility becomes a reality. We act *in persona Christi* when, at the moment of the consecration, we say the words: "This is my body which will be given up for you.... This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me." We do precisely this: with deep humility and profound thanks. This exalted yet simple action of our daily mission as priests opens up our humanity, so to speak, to its furthestmost limits.

We share in the mystery of the incarnation of the Word, "the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15), who in the eucharist restores to the Father the whole of creation: the world of the past and the world of the future, and above all the world of today. In this world he lives with us, he is present through us and precisely through us he offers to the Father the sacrifice of our redemption. We share in the mystery of Christ, "the firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18), who by his Passover unceasingly transforms the world, bringing it ever closer to "the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). In this way the whole of reality, in all its aspects, becomes present in our eucharistic ministry, which at the same time embraces every concrete personal need, all suffering, expectation, joy or sadness, in accordance with the intentions which the faithful present for holy Mass. We receive these intentions in a spirit of charity, thus introducing every human problem into the dimension of universal redemption.

Dear brothers in the priesthood! This ministry forms a new life in us and around us. The eucharist evangelizes our surroundings and confirms us in the hope that Christ's words will not pass away (cf. Lk. 21:33). His words will remain, for they are rooted in the sacrifice of the cross: We are special witnesses and privileged ministers of the permanence of this truth and of God's love. We can therefore rejoice together when people feel the need for

the new catechism or are prompted to read the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. All of this strengthens us in the conviction that our ministry of the Gospel becomes fruitful through the power of the eucharist.

As Jesus said to his apostles at the Last Supper: "No longer do I call you servants ... but I have called you friends.... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (Jn. 15:15-16).

What unfathomable riches the church offers us during the sacred triduum, and especially today, Holy Thursday, in the chrisem Mass! My words are but a partial reflection of the feelings which each of you undoubtedly experiences in his heart. Perhaps this letter for Holy Thursday will help to ensure that the many different manifestations of Christ's gift implanted in so many hearts will come together before the majesty of the great "mystery of faith" in a meaningful sharing of what the priesthood is and will always be within the church. May our union around the altar embrace all those who are marked by the indelible sign of this sacrament, including those brothers of ours who in some way or other have distanced themselves from the sacred ministry. I trust that this remembrance will lead each of us to live ever more deeply the excellence of the gift which is the priesthood of Christ.

2. Today I wish to entrust to you, dear brothers, the letter which I have addressed to families in the year dedicated to the family. I believe it to be providential that the United Nations organization has set aside 1994 as the International Year of the Family. The church, fixing her gaze on the mystery of the Holy Family of Nazareth, is taking part in this initiative, seeing it as an exceptional opportunity to proclaim the "gospel of the family." Christ proclaimed this gospel by his hidden life in Nazareth in the bosom of the Holy Family. It was then proclaimed by the apostolic church, as is clear from the New Testament, and it was later witnessed to by the post-apostolic church, which has taught us to consider the family as the *ecclesia domestica*.

In our own century the "gospel of the family" has been taught by the church through the voices of very many priests, pastors, confessors and bishops, and in particular through the voice of the successor of Peter. Almost all my predecessors have devoted a significant part of their "Petrine magisterium" to the family. The Second Vatican Council showed its love for the institution of the family in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, in which it reaffirmed the need to uphold the dignity of marriage and of the family in today's world.

The 1980 Synod of Bishops inspired the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, which can be considered the Magna Carta of the apostolate to families. The difficulties of the contemporary world, and particularly of the family, courageously faced by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, demanded an overall examination of the human family and the *ecclesia domestica* in today's society. The apostolic exhortation sought to do precisely this. It was necessary to develop new methods of pastoral activity in order to meet the needs of the contemporary family. In a word, it may be said that concern for the family, and particularly for married couples, children, young people and adults, requires of us, as priests and confessors, a deep appreciation and a constant promotion of the lay apostolate in this area. The pastoral care of the family—and I know this from personal experience—is in a way the quintessence of priestly activity at every level. All of this is discussed in *Familiaris Consortio*. The "Letter to Families" simply takes up and gives renewed expression to this heritage of the post-conciliar church.

It is my wish that this letter may prove helpful to families both inside and outside the church, and that it may assist you, dear priests, in your pastoral ministry to families. It is rather like my 1985 "Letter to Youth," which prompted numerous apostolic and pastoral initiatives on behalf of young people in every part of the world. An expression of this movement is the World Youth Day celebrated in parishes and dioceses and at the level of the whole church—like the one recently held in Denver, in the United States of America.

This "Letter to Families" is broader in scope. The problems of the family are in fact more complex and wide ranging. In preparing the letter, I was confirmed in my conviction that the magisterium of the Second Vatican Council, and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* in particular, represents a truly rich source of Christian

thinking and life. I hope that the letter, inspired by the council's teaching, will be no less helpful to you than to all the families of good will to whom it is addressed.

For a correct approach to this letter, it will be useful to turn to that passage in the Acts of the Apostles where we read that the first communities devoted themselves "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). The Letter to Families" is not so much a doctrinal statement as a preparation for and an exhortation to prayer with families and for families. This is the first task through which you, dear brothers, can begin or carry forward the apostolate to families in your parish communities. If you find that you are asked, "How are we to attain the objectives of the Year of the Family?" the exhortation to prayer contained in the letter will show you the simplest direction in which to proceed. Jesus said to the apostles: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). It is clear that we must "do as he does," that is, pray on bended knee. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). These words of Christ should be translated into concrete initiatives in every community. A good pastoral program can be drawn from them, indeed a fruitful one, even when very few resources are available. There are so many families in the world which pray! Children pray; they are the ones to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs before anyone else (cf. Mt. 18:2-5). Thanks to them not only do mothers pray, but fathers too, and sometimes return to religious practice after having fallen away. Is this not often the case at the time of first holy communion? And do we not notice how there is a rise in the "spiritual temperature" of young people, and not merely young people, during pilgrimages to holy places? The age-old routes of pilgrimage in East and West, whether those to Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostela, or those to the Marian shrines of Lourdes, Fatima, Jasna Gora and many others, have in the course of the centuries become a way for great numbers of believers and certainly many families to discover the church. The Year of the Family should confirm, broaden and enrich this experience. Pastors, as well as all agencies responsible for the family apostolate, should be attentive to this, in cooperation with the Pontifical Council for the Family, which is entrusted with this apostolate at the level of the universal church. As you know, the president of that council inaugurated the Year of the Family at Nazareth on the solemnity of the Holy Family, Dec. 26, 1993.

3. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). According to the constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the church is "the household of God (cf. 1 Tm. 3:15), in which his family lives, the dwelling place of God in the Spirit (cf. Eph. 2:19-22), 'God's dwelling with men' (Rv. 21:3)" (No. 6).

The image of "God's household," among the many other biblical images, is used by the council to describe the church. This image, moreover, is in some way contained in all the others. It figures in the Pauline analogy of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13, 27; Rom. 12:5), to which Pope Pius XII referred in his historic encyclical *Mystici Corporis*. It is also found in the notion of the people of God, to which the council made reference. The Year of the Family is for all of us a call to make the church ever more "the household of God, in which his family lives."

This is a call, an invitation, which could prove extraordinarily fruitful for the evangelization of the modern world. As I wrote in the "Letter to Families," the fundamental dimension of human existence constituted by the family is under serious threat from various quarters in contemporary society (cf. No. 13). And yet this aspect of life, which is "being a family," represents a great good for every individual. The church wishes to be at its service. The Year of the Family thus represents an important opportunity for renewing the church's "being a family" in all areas of her life.

Dear brothers in the priesthood! Each of you will surely find in prayer the light necessary for knowing how to make all this come to pass: you yourselves in your parishes and in your different fields of evangelical work; the bishops in their dioceses; and the Apostolic See through the Roman Curia, in accordance with the apostolic constitution *Pastor Bonus*.

The church, in fidelity to the will of Christ, is striving to become ever more a "family," and the Apostolic See is committed to encouraging this growth. Bishops making their visits *ad limina apostolorum* are well aware of this. Their visits, both to the pope and to the different curial offices, while fulfilling what canon law prescribes, are less and less juridical-administrative in tone than was the case in the past. More and more there is the atmosphere of an "exchange of gifts," in accordance with the teaching of the constitution *Lumen Gentium* (cf. No. 13). My brother bishops often mention this at our meetings.

On this occasion I wish to mention the directory prepared by the Congregation for the Clergy which will be presented to bishops, priests' councils and all priests. It will certainly make a providential contribution to the renewal of their life and ministry.

4. The call to pray with families and for families, dear brothers, concerns each one of you in a very personal way. We owe our life to our parents, and we owe them a permanent debt of gratitude. Whether they are still alive or have already passed into eternity, we are united with them by a close bond which time does not destroy. While we owe our vocation to God, a significant role in it is also to be attributed to our parents. The decision of a son to dedicate himself to the priestly ministry, particularly in mission lands, is no small sacrifice for his parents. This was true also in the case of our own dear ones, yet they offered their feelings to God, letting themselves be guided by a deep faith. They then followed us with their prayer, just as Mary did with Jesus when he left the home at Nazareth in order to carry out his messianic mission.

What an experience it was for each of us, and at the same time for our parents, our brothers and sisters and those dear to us, when we celebrated our first holy Mass! What a great thing that celebration was for our parishes and the places where we grew up! Every new vocation makes the parish aware of the fruitfulness of its spiritual motherhood: The more often it happens, the greater the encouragement that results for others!

Every priest can say of himself: "I am indebted to God and to others." There are many people who have accompanied us with their thoughts and prayers, just as there are many who by their thoughts and prayers accompany my own ministry in the see of Peter. This great prayerful solidarity is a source of strength for me. People really do place their trust in our vocation to serve God. The church prays constantly for new priestly vocations and rejoices at their increase; she is saddened at the lack of vocations in certain places, regretting the lack of generosity of many people.

On this day every year we renew the promises we made in connection with the sacrament of the priesthood. These promises have great implications. What is at stake is the word we have given to Christ himself. Fidelity to our vocation builds up the church, and every act of infidelity is a painful wound to the mystical body of Christ. And so, as we gather together and contemplate the mystery of the institution of the eucharist and the priesthood, let us implore our High Priest who, as sacred Scripture says, showed himself to be faithful (cf. Heb. 2:17), that we too may remain faithful. In the spirit of this "sacramental brotherhood" let us pray for one another—priests for priests! May Holy Thursday become for us a renewed call to cooperate with the grace of the sacrament of the priesthood! Let us pray for our spiritual families, for those entrusted to our ministry. Let us pray particularly for those who in a special way expect our prayers and are in need of them. May our fidelity to prayer ensure that Christ will become ever more the life of our souls.

O great sacrament of faith, O holy priesthood of the Redeemer of the world! Lord Jesus Christ, how grateful we are to you for having brought us into communion with you, for having made us one community around you, for allowing us to celebrate your unbloody sacrifice and to be ministers of the sacred mysteries in every place: at the altar, in the confessional, the pulpit, the sickroom, prisons, the classroom, the lecture hall, the offices where we work. All praise to the most holy eucharist! I greet you, the church of God, his priestly people (cf. 1 Pt. 2:9), redeemed by his precious blood!

From the Vatican, 13 March the fourth Sunday of Lent, in the year 1994, the 16th of my pontificate.