



MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI FOR THE 43rd WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

7 MAY 2006 - FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

"Vocation in the Mystery of the Church"

*Venerable Brethren in the Episcopate,
Dearest Brothers and Sisters*

The celebration of the coming World Day of Prayer for Vocations gives me the opportunity to invite the entire People of God to meditate the theme *Vocation in the mystery of the Church*. The Apostle Paul writes: "Blessed be God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world ... He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ" (*Eph 1,3-5*). Before the creation of the world, before our coming into existence, the heavenly Father chose us personally, calling us to enter a filial relationship with Him, through Jesus, the Incarnate Word, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Dying for us, Jesus introduced us into the mystery of the Father's love, a love which completely embraces his Son and which He offers to all of us. In this way, united with Jesus, the Head, we form a sole body, the Church.

The weight of two millennia of history makes it difficult to grasp the novelty of this wonderful mystery of divine adoption, which is at the centre of St Paul's teaching. The Father, as the Apostle reminds us, "has made known to us the mystery of his will ..., as a plan to unite all things in him" (*Eph 1,9-10*). And he adds, with enthusiasm: "In everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren" (*Rom 8,28-29*). The concept is indeed wonderful: we are called to live as brothers and sisters of Jesus, to feel that we are sons and daughters of the same Father. This is a gift that overturns every merely human idea and plan. The confession of the true faith opens wide our minds and hearts to the inexhaustible mystery of God, which permeates human existence. What should be said therefore of the temptation, which is very strong nowadays, to feel that we are self-sufficient to the point that we close ourselves to the mysterious plan of God for us? It is the love of the Father, which is revealed in the person of Christ, which puts this question to us.

In order to answer the call of God and start on our journey, it is not necessary to be already perfect. We know that the awareness of his own sin allowed the prodigal son to start on his return journey and thus feel the joy of reconciliation with the Father. Weaknesses and human limits do not present obstacles, as long as they help us to make us more aware of the fact that we need the redeeming grace of Christ. This is the experience of St Paul who confessed: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 *Cor* 12,9). In the mystery of the Church, the mystical Body of Christ, the divine power of love changes the heart of man, making him able to communicate the love of God to his brethren. Down the centuries many men and women, transformed by divine love, have consecrated their own existences to the cause of the Kingdom. Already on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, many allowed themselves to be conquered by Jesus: they were in search of healing in body or spirit, and they were touched by the power of his grace. Others were chosen personally by Him and became his apostles. We also find persons, like Mary Magdalene and other women, who followed him on their own initiative, simply out of love. Like the disciple John, they too found a special place in his heart. These men and women, who, through Jesus, knew the mystery of the love of the Father, represent the variety of vocations which have always been present in the Church. The model of one who is called to give witness in a particular manner to the love of God, is Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who, in her pilgrimage of faith, is directly associated with the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption.

In Christ, the Head of the Church, which is his Body, all Christians form "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him" (1 *Pt* 2,9). The Church is holy, even if her members need to be purified, in order that holiness, which is a gift of God, can shine in them with its full splendour. The Second Vatican Council highlights the universal call to holiness, when it affirms: "The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to his own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the Baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way, they are really made holy" (*Lumen gentium*, 40). Within the framework of this universal call, Christ, the High Priest, in his solicitude for the Church, then calls, in every generation, persons who are to take care of his people; in particular, he calls to the ministerial priesthood men who are to exercise a fatherly role, whose source is the very fatherhood of God (cfr *Eph* 3,14). The mission of the priest in the Church cannot be substituted. Therefore, even if in some regions there is a scarcity of clergy, it should never be doubted that Christ continues to raise up men who, like the Apostles, leaving behind all other work, dedicate themselves completely to the celebration of the sacred mysteries, to the preaching of the Gospel and to the pastoral ministry. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, my venerated Predecessor John Paul II wrote in this regard: "The relation of the priest to Jesus Christ, and in him to his Church, is found in the very being of the priest by virtue of his sacramental consecration/anointing and in his activity, that is, in his mission or ministry. In particular, «the priest minister is the servant of Christ present in the Church as *mystery, communion and mission*. In virtue of his participation in the 'anointing' and 'mission' of Christ, the priest can continue Christ's prayer, word, sacrifice and salvific action in the Church. In this way, the priest is a *servant of the Church as mystery* because he actualizes the Church's sacramental signs of the presence of the risen Christ»" (n.16).

Another special vocation, which occupies a place of honour in the Church, is the call to the consecrated life. Following the example of Mary of Bethany who "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (*Lk* 10, 39), many men and women consecrate themselves to a total and exclusive following of Christ. Although they offer different kinds of services in the field of human formation and the care of the poor, in teaching or in assisting the sick, they do not consider these activities as the principal aim of their life, since, as the Code of Canon Law well underlines, "The first and foremost duty of all religious is to be the contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer" (can. 663 §1). Moreover, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* John Paul II noted: "In the Church's tradition religious profession is considered to be a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism, inasmuch as

it is the means by which the close union with Christ already begun in Baptism develops in the gift of a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration to him through the profession of the evangelical counsels” (n. 30).

Remembering the counsel of Jesus: “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest”. (*Mt* 9,37), we acknowledge the great need to pray for vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. It is not surprising that, where people pray fervently, vocations blossom. The holiness of the Church depends essentially on union with Christ and on being open to the mystery of grace that operates in the heart of the Christians. Therefore, I should like to invite all the faithful to nurture an intimate relationship with Christ, the Teacher and Pastor of his people, imitating Mary who kept the divine mysteries in her heart and meditated them diligently (cfr *Lk* 2,19). Together with her, who occupies a central position in the mystery of the Church, we pray:

*O Father, raise up among Christians
numerous and holy vocations to the priesthood,
to keep the faith alive
and guard the gracious memory of your Son Jesus
through the preaching of his word
and the administration of the Sacraments,
with which you continually renew your faithful.
Give us holy ministers of your altar,
who are careful and fervent guardians of the Eucharist,
the sacrament of the supreme gift of Christ
for the redemption of the world.
Call ministers of your mercy,
who, through the sacrament of Reconciliation,
spread the joy of your forgiveness.
Grant, O Father, that the Church may welcome with joy
numerous inspirations of the Spirit of your Son
and, docile to His teachings,
may she care for vocations to the ministerial priesthood
and to the consecrated life.
Sustain the Bishops, priests and deacons,
consecrated men and women, and all the baptized in Christ,
so that they may faithfully fulfil their mission
at the service of the Gospel.
This we pray You through Christ our Lord. Amen.
Mary, Queen of Apostles, pray for us.*

From the Vatican, 5th March 2006.

Benedict XVI