



The Holy See

ORDINATION OF NEW PRIESTS FOR THE DIOCESE OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Sixth Sunday of Easter, 27 April 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today the words that say "You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing" come true for us in a very special way. Indeed, besides the joy of celebrating the Eucharist on the Lord's Day there is the spiritual exultation of the Easter Season, of which we have now reached the Sixth Sunday, and above all the celebration of the ordination of new priests. Together with you I greet with affection the 29 deacons who are shortly to be ordained priests. I express deep gratitude to those who have guided them in their process of discernment and preparation and I ask you all to thank God for his gift to the Church of these new priests. Let us support them with intense prayer during this celebration, in a spirit of fervent praise to the Father who has called them, to the Son who has attracted them to him and to the Spirit who has formed them. The Ordination of new priests usually takes place on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, known as "Good Shepherd" Sunday, which is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations but this was not possible because I was away on the [Pastoral Visit to the United States of America](#). The image of the Good Shepherd seems to be the one which sheds more light than any other on the role and ministry of the priest in the Christian community. However, the biblical passages which today's liturgy offers for our meditation also illumine the priest's mission, from a different angle.

The First Reading, from chapter 8 of the Acts of the Apostles, tells of the mission of the deacon Philip in Samaria. I would like immediately to draw attention to the sentence that ends the first part of the text: "The rejoicing in that town rose to fever pitch" (v. 8). This expression does not communicate an idea or a theological concept but refers to a circumstantiated event, something that changed people's lives: in a specific city of Samaria, in the period that followed the violent persecution of the Church in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 8: 1), something happened that caused "great

joy". So what was it? The sacred Author recounts that to escape the persecution which had been unleashed in Jerusalem against those who had converted to Christianity, all the disciples except the Apostles left the Holy City and scattered in the countryside around it. This distressing event mysteriously and providentially gave new dynamism to the spread of the Gospel. Among those who had dispersed was Philip, one of the Community's seven deacons, a deacon like you, dear Ordinands although, of course, in a different way because, in the unrepeatable season of the nascent Church, the Apostles and deacons were endowed by the Holy Spirit with extraordinary power in both preaching and in healing. Now, it happened that the inhabitants of the region of Samaria mentioned in this chapter of the Acts of the Apostles unanimously accepted Philip's proclamation and, thanks to their adherence to the Gospel, he was able to heal many sick people. In that town of Samaria, in the midst of a people traditionally despised and virtually excommunicated by the Jews, the proclamation of Christ, which opened the hearts of all who accepted it, resounded. This explains why, St Luke emphasizes, "there was great joy" in that town.

Dear friends, this is also your mission: to bring the Gospel to everyone so that everyone may experience the joy of Christ and that there be joy in every city. What can be more beautiful than this? What can be greater, more exciting, than cooperating in spreading the Word of life in the world, than communicating the living water of the Holy Spirit? To proclaim and to witness joy: this is the central core of your mission, dear deacons who will soon become priests. The Apostle Paul called Gospel ministers "servants of joy". He wrote in his Second Letter to the Christians of Corinth: "Domineering over your faith is not my purpose. I prefer to work with you toward your happiness. As regards faith, you are standing firm" (II Cor 1: 24). These are programmatic words for every priest. In order to be collaborators in the joy of others, in a world that is often sad and negative, the fire of the Gospel must burn within you and the joy of the Lord dwell in you. Only then will you be able to be messengers and multipliers of this joy, bringing it to all, especially to those who are sorrowful and disheartened.

Let us return to the First Reading which offers us another element of meditation. In it is mentioned a prayer meeting which takes place precisely in the Samaritan town evangelized by the deacon Philip. Presiding at it are the Apostles Peter and John, two "pillars" of the Church, who came from Jerusalem to visit this new community and strengthen it in the faith. Through the imposition of their hands, the Holy Spirit descended upon all those who had been baptized. In this episode we can see a first attestation of the rite of "Confirmation", the second Sacrament of Christian initiation. The reference to the ritual gesture of the imposition of hands is especially meaningful also for us who are gathered here. Indeed, it is also the central gesture of the rite of Ordination through which, in a little while, I shall confer on the candidates the dignity of the priesthood. It is a sign inseparable from the prayer of which it is a silent prolongation. Without speaking, the consecrating Bishop and after him the other priests, place their hands on the heads of the ordinands, thereby expressing the invocation to God that he will pour out his Spirit upon them and transform them, making them sharers in the priesthood of Christ. It is a matter of only a few seconds, a very short time, but full of an extraordinary spiritual intensity.

Dear Ordinands, in the future you must always think back to this moment, to this gesture that has nothing magical about it and yet is full of mystery, because this is the origin of your new mission. In that silent prayer the encounter between two freedoms comes into being: the freedom of God, who works through the Holy Spirit and the freedom of man. The imposition of hands visually expresses the specific manner of this meeting: the Church, impersonated by the Bishop standing with extended hands, prays to the Holy Spirit to consecrate the candidate: the deacon, on his knees, receives the imposition of hands and entrusts himself to this mediation. Altogether these gestures are important but the invisible spiritual movement that they express is infinitely more important, a movement clearly evoked by the sacred silence that envelops everything, internal and external.

We also find in this Gospel passage the mysterious Trinitarian "movement" that leads the Holy Spirit and the Son to dwell in the disciples. Here, it is Jesus himself who promises that he will ask the Father to send his Spirit, defined as "another Paraclete" (Jn 14: 16), a Greek word that is equivalent to the Latin "*ad-vocatus*", an advocate-defender. The first Paraclete is in fact the Incarnate Son who came to defend man from the accuser by antonomasia, who is Satan. At the moment when Christ, his mission fulfilled, returns to the Father, he sends the Spirit as Defender and Consoler to remain with believers for ever, dwelling within them. Thus, through the mediation of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, an intimate relationship of reciprocity is established between God the Father and the disciples: "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you", Jesus says (Jn 14: 20). However, all this depends on one condition which Christ imposes clearly at the beginning: "If you love me" (Jn 14: 15), and which he repeats at the end: "He who obeys the commandments he has from me is the man who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father. I too will love him and reveal myself to him" (Jn 14: 21). Without love for Jesus, which is expressed in the observance of his commandments, the person is excluded from the Trinitarian movement and begins to withdraw into himself, losing the ability to receive and to communicate God.

"If you love me". Dear friends, Jesus said these words at the Last Supper in the context of the moment when he instituted the Eucharist and the priesthood. Although they were addressed to the Apostles, in a certain sense they are addressed to all their successors and to priests who are the closest collaborators of the successors of the Apostles. Let us hear them again today as an invitation to live our vocation in the Church ever more coherently: you, dear Ordinands, listen to them with special emotion because precisely today Christ makes you share in his priesthood. Accept them with faith and with love! Let them be imprinted on your hearts, let them accompany you on the journey of your whole life. Do not forget them, do not lose them on the way! Reread them, meditate on them often and, especially, pray on them. Thus you will remain faithful to Christ's love and realize with joy ever new that his divine word "walks" with you and "grows" within you.

One more observation on the Second Reading: it is taken from the First Letter of Peter, near whose tomb we find ourselves and to whose intercession I would especially like to entrust you. I

make my own and consign to you with affection his words: "Venerate the Lord, that is, Christ, in your hearts. Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply (3: 15). Worship Christ the Lord in your hearts: cultivate a personal relationship of love with him, your first and greatest love, one and totalizing, in which to live, purify, illumine and sanctify all your other relationships. The "hope that is in you" is linked to this "adoration", to this love of Christ, who through the Spirit, as we said, dwells within us. Our hope, your hope is God, in Jesus and in the Spirit. It is a hope which from today becomes in you a "priestly hope", that of Jesus the Good Shepherd who dwells within you and gives shape to your desires in accordance with his divine Heart: a hope of life and forgiveness for the people who will be entrusted to your pastoral care; a hope of holiness and apostolic fruitfulness for yourselves and for all the Church; a hope of openness to faith and to the encounter with God for those who support you in their quest for the truth; a hope of peace and comfort for the suffering and for those wounded by life.

Dear friends, this is my wish on this day which is so important for you: that hope rooted in faith may become more and more your own! And may you, who are wise and generous, gentle and strong, always be respectful and convinced witnesses and dispensers of it. May the Virgin Mary, whom I urge you to welcome anew, as did the Apostle John beneath the Cross, accompany you on this mission and protect you always, as the Mother and Star of your life and your priesthood. Amen!

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