



The Holy See

HOLY MASS FOR THE ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD OF 19 DEACONS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Fourth Sunday of Easter, 3 May 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

According to a beautiful tradition, the Sunday of "the Good Shepherd" is when the Bishop of Rome meets with his clergy for the Ordination of new priests for the Diocese. This is a great gift from God every time; it is his grace! Therefore let a deep feeling of faith and gratitude in living today's celebration arise in us. With this sentiment I am pleased to greet the Cardinal Vicar Agostino Vallini, the Auxiliary Bishops, the other Brothers in the episcopacy and in the priesthood, and with special affection you, dear Deacon candidates to the priesthood, with your families and friends. The word of God that we have listened to offers many points for meditation: I will choose a few to shed an indelible light on the path of your life and your ministry.

"This [Jesus] is the stone... there is no other name... given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4: 11-12). In the passage of the Acts of the Apostles the first reading the singular "homonymy" between Peter and Jesus strikes us and makes us reflect: Peter, who received his name from Jesus himself, here asserts that he, Jesus, is "the stone". In fact, the only true rock is Jesus. The only name that saves is his. The apostle, and therefore the priest, receives his "name", his very identity, from Christ. Everything he does is done in his name. His "I" becomes totally relative to the "I" of Jesus. In the name of Christ, and most certainly not in his own, the apostle may perform acts of healing for the brethren, may help the "crippled" to rise again and take their path (cf. Acts 4: 9-10). In Peter's case, the miracle that had just occurred makes this especially evident. And even the reference to what was said in the Psalm is essential: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner stone" (Ps 118[117]: 22). Jesus was "rejected", but the

Father favoured him and put him as the foundation of the Temple of the New Covenant. Thus the apostle, like the priest, experiences in turn the Cross, and only through this can he become truly useful to the building of the Church. God loves to build his Church with people who, following Jesus, place their entire trust in God, as the Psalm itself mentions: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes" (v. 8-9).

The disciple shares the same destiny as the Teacher, which ultimately is the destiny expressed in God the Father's own will! Jesus confessed at the end of his life, in the great prayer called "priestly": "O righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you" (Jn 17: 25). Even before he had asserted: "No one knows the Father except the Son" (Mt 11: 27). Jesus himself experienced the rejection of God by the world, the misunderstanding, the indifference, the disfiguration of the Face of God. And Jesus passed the "witness" on to the disciples: "I made known to them your name", he further confides in the prayer to the Father, "and I will make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn 17: 26). Therefore the disciple and especially the apostle experiences the same joy that Jesus did, in knowing the name and the Face of the Father; and also shares his suffering, seeing that God is not recognized, that his love is not returned. On one hand we joyfully exclaim, like John did with joy in his first Letter: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are!"; and on the other with bitterness we observe: "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him" (1 Jn 3: 1). It is true, and we priests experience this: the "world" in an acceptance of the Johannine definition of the term does not understand the Christian, does not understand the ministers of the Gospel. Somewhat because it does not know God, and somewhat because it does not want to know him. The world does not want to know God so as not to be disturbed by his will, and therefore it does not want to listen to his ministers; this could cause a crisis.

Here we must pay attention to a de facto reality: that this "world", interpreted in the evangelical sense, also lures the Church, infecting her members and even ordained ministers. With the word "world", St John indicates and seeks to define a mentality, a way of thinking and living that can pollute even the Church, that in fact does pollute her, thereby requiring constant vigilance and purification. Until God is fully manifest, even his sons are not yet fully "like Him" (1 Jn 3: 2). We are "in" the world, and we risk being also "of" the world, the world in the sense of this mentality. And in fact at times we are. Because of this, Jesus at the end did not pray for the world in this same sense but for his disciples, so that the Father may keep them from evil that they may be free and different from the world, while living in the world (cf. Jn 17: 9,15). At that moment, at the end of the Last Supper, Jesus raised to the Father the prayer of consecration for the apostles and for all the priests of all times, when he said: "Sanctify them in the truth" (Jn 17: 17). And he added: "And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they may also be consecrated in truth" (Jn 17: 19). I emphasized these words of Jesus in the [Homily of the Chrism Mass, last Holy Thursday](#). Today I take up this reflection referring to the Gospel of the Good Shepherd, when Jesus declared: "I give

my life for the sheep" (cf. Jn 10: 15,17,18).

To become priests in the Church means to enter into this self-donation of Christ through the Sacrament of Orders and to enter with all of one's being. Jesus gave his life for all, but in a special way he consecrated himself for those the Father had given to him, that they may be consecrated in truth, that is in him, and could speak and act in his name, represent him, continue his saving actions: breaking the Bread of life and remitting sins. Thus, the Good Shepherd offered his life for all the sheep, but he gave it and gave it in a special way for those that he himself, "with a feeling of favour", called and calls to follow him on the path of pastoral service. Then, in a singular way, Jesus prayed for Simon Peter, and sacrificed himself for him, because he would say to him one day, on the banks of the Sea of Tiberias: "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21: 16-17). In the same way, every priest is the recipient of Christ's personal prayer, and only because of this he is able to collaborate with him in feeding the flock, which is completely and only the Lord's.

Here I would like to touch upon a point that is particularly dear to me: the prayer and its ties with service. We have seen that to be ordained priests means to enter in a sacramental and existential way into Christ's prayer for "his own". From this we priests derive a particular vocation to pray in a strongly Christocentric sense: we are called, that is, to "remain" in Christ as the evangelist John likes to repeat (cf. Jn 1: 35-39; 15: 4-10) and this abiding in Christ is achieved especially through prayer. Our ministry is totally tied to this "abiding" which is equivalent to prayer, and draws from this its efficacy. In this perspective, we must think of the different forms of prayer of a priest, first of all daily Holy Mass. The Eucharistic Celebration is the greatest and highest act of prayer, and constitutes the centre and the source from which even the other forms receive "nourishment": the Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic adoration, *Lectio divina*, the Holy Rosary, meditation. All these expressions of prayer, which have their centre in the Eucharist, fulfil the words of Jesus in the priest's day and in all his life: "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep" (Jn 10: 14-15). In fact, this "knowing" and "being known" in Christ and, through him, in the Most Holy Trinity, is none other than the most true and deep reality of prayer. The priest who prays a lot, and who prays well, is progressively drawn out of himself and evermore united to Jesus the Good Shepherd and the Servant of the Brethren. In conforming to him, even the priest "gives his life" for the sheep entrusted to him. No one takes it from him: he offers it himself, in unity with Christ the Lord, who has the power to give his life and the power to take it back not only for himself, but also for his friends, bound to him in the Sacrament of Orders. Thus the life of Christ, Lamb and Shepherd, is communicated to the whole flock, through the consecrated ministers.

Dear Deacons, may the Holy Spirit impress this divine word which I have briefly commented upon in your hearts, so that it may bear abundant and lasting fruit. We ask this through the intercession of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul and St John Mary Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, to whose protection I have dedicated the next Presbyteral Year. And through the Mother of the Good Shepherd, Mary Most Holy. In every circumstance of your life, look to her, the star of your

priesthood. As she said to the servants at the wedding in Cana, Mary repeats to you too: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2: 5). At the school of the Virgin, always be men of prayer and service, to become, in the faithful practice of your ministry, holy priests after God's heart.

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