



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL ANTONIO MARÍA ROUCO VARELA,
ARCHBISHOP OF MADRID AND PRESIDENT
OF THE SPANISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

To Cardinal Antonio María Rouco Varela

Archbishop of Madrid and President of the Spanish Episcopal Conference

1. On the occasion of the meeting of Spanish priests to honour St John of Avila on the fifth centenary of his birth, I would like to extend a cordial greeting to the Pastors and priests of the various Spanish Dioceses who have wished to commemorate this event solemnly at the tomb of the principal patron of the Spanish secular clergy in the Cordovan city of Montilla.

I am doing so as I still have a vivid memory of my visit to the Holy Places and, in particular, to the Upper Room from where I sent a Letter to all priests, as I recalled what happened there on that night charged with mystery and saw in my mind's eye Jesus and the Apostles seated at table with him (cf. *Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 2000*, n. 2). From that time "began a new presence of Christ for the world, a presence which constantly occurs wherever the Eucharist is celebrated and a priest lends his voice to Christ" (*ibid.*, n. 13). The celebration of this meeting must be a new sign of gratitude to the Lord for the gift of his abiding presence among his own through the priestly ministry, of which St John of Avila is an ever timely model.

2. In fact, at a historical moment full of controversies and profound changes, John of Avila was able to face the great challenges of his era with fortitude, in a way known only to men of God: by relying unconditionally on Christ, full of love for his brethren and impatient to bring them the light of the Gospel. This was the mystery of his extensive apostolic work, his vast literary output and his creativity in the task of evangelizing all areas of society. The example of his life and holiness is the best lesson that he continues to impart to today's priests, who are also called to give new vigour to evangelization in circumstances that are frequently disconcerting because of rapid changes or the vast diversity of mentalities and cultures, sometimes intermingled in the same context. He teaches

us that there is a culture of the spirit from which flow the serenity and far-sightedness required to face the most complicated personal and pastoral situations by helping us to distinguish between ephemeral, superficial aspects and those which indicate what the Spirit is truly saying to the Church today (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 23).

3. Imbued with this culture, John of Avila found the path which gave fullness to his life and meaning to his ministry. No difficulty, not even the injustice of persecution, could separate him from what was most essential in his life: to be a minister and apostle of Jesus Christ. He wanted to pass on this desire to many others, working courageously so that priests would respond suitably to the ambitious project of ecclesial renewal in their time with a deep interior life, a rigorous intellectual formation, an unflinching fidelity to the Church and a constant desire to bring Christ to others.

As they face the challenges of the new evangelization, his example also offers encouragement and light to today's priests who, as stewards of God's mysteries, are at the very heart of the Church where she is built on firm foundations and gathers in charity. For this reason, as John of Avila's concern for all the areas which form and enrich the Christian community also shows, priests bear that sign of universality which marks the Church of Christ, in which all charisms are welcomed and no person or thing should feel misunderstood or rejected in the one ecclesial community.

4. With these sentiments, I would like to express my best wishes that this meeting will strengthen the bonds of brotherhood between priests and their close communion with their Bishops, that it will support them in their vocation, so that they can better serve the pilgrim People of God in the various regions of Spain with generosity, "purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God" (2 *Cor* 6: 6-7). As I entrust those taking part in this meeting and all other Spanish priests to the motherly care of the Blessed Virgin Mary and ask the Lord, through the intercession of St John of Avila, to continue to call many sons of this noble land to proclaim the Gospel within and beyond its borders, I am pleased to impart to them my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 10 May 2000, the liturgical memorial of St John of Avila.

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