

# THE HOLY FATHER'S TALK TO THE CLERGY OF ROME\*

This yearly meeting at the beginning of Lent in *capite ieiunii*, as is the traditional expression in the Church's liturgy and asceticism, places us straight away in a setting of confidence. I hope that this confidence is mutual, even if this spiritual and family conversation gives me, your bishop, the role of sole speaker, with each one of you being called to reply to me in the silence of his soul. I perform that role with the simplicity and affection that mark the heart of a priest.

The heart of a priest: I think that your hearts too are at times uneasy and disturbed by the many questions and problems that have arisen since the Council even in our ordinarily tranquil minds. What has happened? The exploration of the causes and the examination of the phenomena of this state of mind which is unusual for a priest precisely because of what he is and what he does, have given rise, as you know, to much study, writing, discussion, and certainly also to many personal reflections on your part. The aggressive tide brought by the critical period that we are going through has reached us too. From some points of view it is providential, from others it is dangerous and negative. It has obliged us to rethink our priesthood in all its elements: biblical, theological, canonical, ascetical, and operative. The fact that this rethinking has been taking place face to face with the challenges of the whirlwind of changes in modern life, both in the field of ideas and above all in the practical, active, and social field, has made us to ask whether the traditional life of the priest should not be studied in a new historical and spiritual context. The world is changing, and are we standing there motionless, as though we were canonically mummified in our crystallized outlook and in our traditional customs, the meaning and value of some of which are no longer understood by many, neither by the so-

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\* This is the address given by the Pope at the beginning of Lent, 17 February 1972.

ciety that surrounds us, nor at times by ourselves. Trust in a certain type of renewal is given us not only by this formidable pressure from outside but also by the Council, which was authoritative and good, and which spoke to us of "aggiornamento". Some have interpreted this "aggiornamento" as a justification, indeed as an apologia for an extremely delicate criterion, that of historical relativism, of adaptation to the times, to the famous "signs of the times" (as though these were capable of being interpreted intuitively by all) of conforming, in other words, to the world, that world in which we find ourselves and from which the Council urged the Church no longer to separate herself as a matter of principle, but to immerse herself in it in order to fulfill her mission.

The onslaught of this thrust towards novelty has often given us ecclesiastics too a certain feeling of dizziness (cf. Is 19:14) a lack of confidence in tradition, a certain low estimation of ourselves, a mania for change, a capricious need for "creative spontaneity", and so on. Intentions which are without doubt subjectively upright and generous have also found a place in this vast and complex attempt at transforming ecclesiastical life. We shall point out two of them to show you how we follow these phenomena with loving attentiveness. First, there is the intention, deeply and painfully felt, of escaping from the state of what is now called frustration, that is, from a sense, experienced by some, of the **uselessness of one's being paralysed in the discipline of the ecclesiastical organization.** What is the use, they ask, of being a priest? It is a bitter and anguished question in places where the community to which these priests belonged has profoundly changed in numbers and life style and where the priest's ministry, tied to a fixed place and fixed customs, seems to have become either superfluous or ineffective. The objection that one's life is useless is, especially today, when we are so conscious of utilitarian efficiency, a very tormenting one. It deserves, at the least, loving understanding, even if an adequate remedy is not possible. The other intention, which is likewise certainly inspired by a good desire, is that of those who would like to **remove every clerical or religious distinction of a sociological nature, of dress, profession, or state, in order to identify with the ordinary people and to conform to the life style of others — in short, to laicize themselves, in order thus to penetrate society more easily.** This is, if you will, a missionary intention, but what a dangerous and injurious one it is if it ends up with the loss of that spe-

cific power of reacting on society that is included in our definition of "the salt of the earth", and if it reduces the priest to a uselessness worse than that to which we have already referred. This is what the Lord says: "What is the good of salt that has become tasteless?" (cf. Mt. 5:13).

Dear brothers, read the introductory part of the document on the ministerial priesthood discussed in the recent Synod of Bishops. There, in a brief but comprehensive and vigorous synthesis, is described the priest's situation today, with all its problems. You will see with what an attentive eye, and with what an affectionate heart the Church is considering the present condition of the clergy. Realism and love have shaped this serious, but at the same time considerate and optimistic, study.

We now draw your attention to this important matter. Throughout this situation with its internal and external problems, one question concerning our priesthood stands out above the others. . . In a certain sense it sums them all up. It is that question which has become a common one in the complex discussion concerning us; the question is about the so-called identity of the priest: who is he? **Who is the priest?** Is there really a priest in the Christian religion? And if there is a minister of the Gospel, what is the role that he should assume? All the temptations of the early Protestant polemic have been revived. Perhaps even deeper temptations springing from a preternatural have come to life — this is a mystery, not fantasy — temptations of doubt, not as a method of research, but as a disheartened response proceeding from ungrasped truth and from uncertainty to the point of blindness — a response which is assumed as a dramatic and condescending attitude by a person deprived of interior light. These temptations have been felt even at the very centre of the intimate self-awareness of the priest and have disturbed that blessed interior certitude about his role in the Church: **Tu es sacerdos in aeternum**; in its place there has been substituted a nagging question: Who am I? Does not the answer of the Church suffice — the answer that has always been given and that was taught to us from our years in the seminary, the answer that has burned as an everlasting flame in the centre of our hearts and has become part of our personal outlook? Indeed it is a question that at first sight seems as superfluous as it is dangerous; but the fact is that it has been shot as an arrow into the hearts of many priests, especially of some young men on the threshold of ordination, and of other brothers when they had arrived at the fullness of maturity.

The tendency of our brothers, when they have found themselves in this difficult situation of doubt concerning themselves and the authority of the Church, a tendency per se hypothetically legitimate, but soon transformed into temptation and deviation because of the impossibility of finding a satisfying answer — the tendency has been to seek the definition of the priest's identity in the wrong place, or outside the household of the faith, in the writings of sociology especially, or of psychology, or in the comparison with Christian Churches separated from Catholic roots, or finally in a humanism which has the axiom: the priest is above all a man, a whole man, like all others...

We do not concentrate on this analysis, except to follow spiritually and with sorrowful regret the priests who have left us: how could we not love them still? And in this we wish also to recall to you, beloved brothers, who — we would say with Jesus the Lord — "have remained with me in my trials" (Lk 22:28), how much teaching the Church has dedicated in recent times to her priests, and how much your own reading in the scriptural, theological, historical, spiritual and pastoral field has confirmed and spread this teaching. **The reading of a good document on the Catholic priesthood will be a providential strengthening comfort not only of your learning, but also of your inner peace and fervour.** We cite one as an example: *Sacerdoce et Célibat*, by J. Coppens and other prominent authors, Louvain, 1971.

We limit ourselves here to a fundamental affirmation: we must search for the definition of the priest's identity in the thought of Christ. Only faith can tell us who we are and what we should be. The rest — what history, experience, society, the needs of the times, etc. can tell us — we will look for afterwards, with the responsible and wise assistance of the Church, as a logical derivation from an encounter in faith and from a commentary and application of it. Let then the Lord speak to us. This is the theme of our discourse, which each one of you can later develop on his own, in the inner sanctuary of the meeting with God.

And so let us humbly ask Jesus our Master: what are we? Should we not perhaps consider what he thinks of us and what he wishes us to be and what our identity is, in his eyes?

We get a first reply immediately. **We are men who have been called.** Our Gospel begins with our vocation. It seems to us justifiable to see in the history of the Apostles the history

of us priests. As for the first men that Jesus chose to be his own, the Gospel story is very clear and very beautiful. The Lord's intention is obvious, and it is very interesting in the messianic setting and, later, in the context of the economy of Christianity. It is Jesus who takes the initiative; he himself points this out: "You did not choose me, no, I chose you" (Jn. 15:16; 15:19; cf. Jn 6:70); and the simple and delightful scenes which portray for us the calling of each disciple show fixed choices being carried out with precision (cf. Lk. 6:13). It will be a pleasure for us to meditate on them. Whom does he call? He does not seem to take account of the social standing of those he chooses (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27); nor does he seem to want to make use of those who offer themselves with superficial enthusiasm (cf. Mt. 8:19-22).

This design in the Gospels concerns us personally. I repeat: we are men who have been called. The familiar question of vocation concerns the personality and destiny of each one of us. **How our vocations developed and were formed is the most interesting factor in the personal history of our lives.** It would be foolish to try to reduce a vocation to a complex of trivial external circumstances. On the contrary, we should note the ever more assiduous and careful attention with which the Church nurtures, selects and assists priestly vocations. This is a factor providing certainty in confirmation of our identity — an identity that is often today subjected to specious analysis with the aim of declaring it unauthentic. In fact today it is an extremely difficult thing for a vocation to the Church to be based upon internal and external motives that could be honestly questioned. The saying of Pascal: "The most important thing life is the choice of a profession: chance decides it" (cf. *Pensées*, 97) does not hold good for us. It was not chance that decided for us.

We ought rather to think about certain aspects of this vocation which came to us. It marked the highest moment for the exercise of our freedom: we freely thought, reflected, will-ed, and decided. It brought about the great choice of our life; like the words "I do" spoken by the person contracting marriage, our response to it, in contrast to the wordiness of the man lacking ideals greater than himself, was a commitment of our life: a commitment of the form, the extent, and the duration of our self-offering. It is therefore the most beautiful and the most ideal historical page of our human existence. It would be tragic to underestimate it. Our response at once

qualified our entire life with its awesome "yes", making our life that of one who is set aside from the ordinary manner in which others lead their lives. St. Paul says it of himself: "Set apart for the Gospel of God". It is a "yes" which in a moment tore us from everything that we had: "they left everything and followed him" (Lk. 5:11); it is a "yes" which placed us in the ranks of the idealists, dreamers, madmen, even perhaps of those who seemed like fools, but also, thank God, in the ranks of the strong, of those who know why they are living and for whom they are living — "I know who it is that I have put my trust in" (1 Tim. 1:12) — of those who have set themselves the task of serving and giving their lives, their whole lives, for others. This is what we are called to. We are indeed set apart from the world, but we are not separated from that world for which we must be, with Christ and like Christ, ministers of salvation (cf. *Ench. Cler.*, 104, 360, 1387, etc.).

There is something else to say concerning our vocation. As we were saying, we are men who are called. We are called by Christ, called by God. That means that we are loved by Christ, loved by God. Do we think about this? "I know", says the Lord, "the ones I have chosen" (Jn. 13:18). A divine plan conceived beforehand rests firmly on each one of us, so that of us it can be said what the prophet Jeremiah says to Israel in the name of God: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, so I am constant in my affection for you" (31:3). An identity entered in heaven, "in the book of life" (cf. Rev. 3:5).

We are called, therefore. But for what purpose? Our identity is enriched by another essential characteristic: we are disciples. We are, so to speak, the disciples. The term "disciple" necessarily involves another term: "master". Who is our Master? It is absolutely essential to remember this: "You have only one Master, and you are all brothers. . . you have only one Teacher, Christ" (Mt. 23:8-10). Jesus wanted to be known by this title of Master (cf. Jn. 13:13). After speaking to the crowd, after instructing everyone, Jesus taught the group of his special followers, the disciples, recognizing that they had a prerogative of supreme importance: "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven are revealed to you, but they are not revealed to them" (Mt. 13:11). Because those whom he called were disciples, they were raised to the position of teachers, not of their own doctrine, clearly, but of the doctrine revealed to them by Christ. In spite of the infinite difference, this is analogous to what Christ said of himself: "My teaching is not

from myself; it comes from the one who sent me" (Jn. 7:16). Therefore, inasmuch as we are disciples, we can also say that our priestly identity carries with it a connotation of magisterium: we are disciples and we are teachers; we listen to the Word of Christ and we proclaim that same Word.

This description of ourselves would involve a long and patient study of its meaning in the Gospel. It will be interesting and essential for us all to make this study, in order both to know the Lord's thought regarding ourselves and consequently to become conscious of our nature: as pupils who must act as teachers.

The first characteristic, that of disciples, upon which we are now concentrating our attention, is a very important one. As you know, dear brothers, this characteristic involves a two-fold duty for the life of the priest in search of authenticity. The first duty is that of **studying Christ's teaching**. This study branches out in various directions, all of which are concerned with essential aims for our definition as priests. We hasten to say that this duty is that of **listening**, listening to the voice of Christ's Spirit, that is to the inspirations that have the mark of true supernatural origin (cf. Rev 2:6 ff.; Mt. 10:19; Jn. 14:26). We must listen therefore to the voice of the Church, when she speaks in the exercise of her magisterium, whether **ordinary or extraordinary** (cf. Lk. 10:16). We must listen to the echo of Christ's voice in the words of those who speak to us in the name of the Lord, as do the bishop, the spiritual director or some good and wise friend. We must listen also the voice of the People of God, when it recalls us to our duties or occasionally asks from us some service which is in accordance with our ministry. **But we must act with due prudence**, which is so necessary in such circumstances, for here it is easy to suffer from excess, from the pressure of publicity or the presence of outside interests or methods. We must listen through the study of the sacred sciences; often lay experts are better informed about their own subjects than we are about religious teachings (cf. Lk. 16:8). Finally we must listen through mental prayer and meditation. We are well aware that this is meant for the nourishment of our personal spiritual life (cf. Jn. 8:31). We can truly say with Jesus: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk. 11:28; cf. 8:21).

The second duty, if we are to be true disciples, is to **imitate**. How much there is to say about this second consequence of the fact that we are members of Christ's school, precisely at

this time when we are assailed by secularization and the attempt to cause the clergy to lose its external marks, and, unfortunately, its interior ones too. So-called "human respect", which caused even Peter to fall, could tempt us also to hide what we are and make us forget Saint Paul's exhortation: "Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you" (Rom. 12:2). In fact the "imitation of Christ" must be the practical study for our conduct. We will not say anything further on a subject which is so well-known and so closely connected with the intrinsic demands of the priestly identity. In the thought of Jesus there is still another essential characteristic needed for our identity. It is the fact that **he has promoted us from disciples to apostles**. As a synthesis of what we are saying, listen to the words of the Evangelist Saint Luke: Christ "summoned his disciples and picked out twelve of them; he called them apostles" (Lk. 6:13). *Servatis servandis*, it does not seem exaggerated to us that this supreme title of apostle should be applied to priests, and indeed that certain powers and functions proper to the priest of Christ should be looked for in his very title.

Each one of us can say: "I am an apostle." What does "apostle" mean? It means "sent". Sent by whom? And sent to whom? Jesus himself gives us the answer to both these questions on the evening of his Resurrection: "As the Father sent me, so am I sending you" (Jn. 20:21). Think of it. Here is something that leaves us really amazed. Where does my priesthood come from and where does it lead? What else is it but the channel of the divine life, serving, by an extension of the saving mission of Christ, God and Man, to communicate the divine mysteries to mankind? Let people consider us, Saint Paul says, as "stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). **We are ministers of God** (2 Cor. 6:4). We are friends of Christ. Ours is a mission which sets up a personal relationship with Christ, a relationship which is singular and different from that which he has with all others: "I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father. You did not choose me, no, I chose you" (Jn. 15:15-16). This is a friendship which has its roots in the uncreated love of the Trinity itself: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love" (Jn. 15:9). **We are servants of the brethren**; we will never succeed in giving this term enough fullness of meaning with regard both to ourselves and even more to our mission. Christ wished thus to define his mission (cf. Mt. 20:28) and he wished ours to be similar, in deep humility and in perfect charity: "... and you



should wash each other's feet!" (Jn. 13:14). But at the same time what dignity and what powers such service involves! It is the service of an ambassador! "We are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). In addition we have the sacramental powers that make us instruments of the very action of God in men's hearts. It is no longer just our human activity that marks us, but the conferral of the divine power working through our ministry.

Once the meaning and sacramental value of our ministry, that is, our apostolate, is understood, a whole set of other elements can give shape to the spiritual, ecclesial, and even the social figure of the Catholic priest, so as to identify him as unique among all, whether inside or outside the ecclesiastical society. The priest is not just a presbyter presiding over the community on religious occasions. He is truly the indispensable and exclusive minister of official worship, performed in persona Christi (in the person of Christ) and at the same time in nomine populi (in the name of the people); he is the man of prayer, the only one who brings about the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the man who gives life to dead souls, the dispenser of grace, the man of blessings. The apostle-priest is the witness of the faith, the missionary of the Gospel, the prophet of hope, the centre of the community. From him it goes outwards and to him it returns. He builds up the Church of Christ, which is founded on Peter. And here we come to that title which is properly his, a title both lowly and sublime: he is the shepherd of God's people. He is the worker of charity, the guardian of orphans and little ones, the advocate of the poor, the consoler of the suffering, the father of souls, the confidant, the counsellor, the guide, the friend of all, the man for others, and, it need be, the willing and silent hero. If you look closely at the anonymous countenance of this solitary man with no home of his own, you will see one who can no longer love just humanly, because he has given all his heart, without withholding any portion of it, to that Christ who gave himself for him even to the Cross (cf. Gal 2:20) and to that neighbour whom he has resolved to love to the extent that Christ does (cf. Jn. 13:15). This is in fact the meaning of his intense, happy sacrifice in celibacy. To put it in a single phrase, he is another Christ.

This in the final analysis is the priest's identity: as we have so often heard repeated, he is another Christ.

Well then, what ground is there for doubt or fear?