

“You must help the people of God never to lose their sense of sin”

POPE JOHN PAUL ADDRESSES SEMINARIANS AND RELIGIOUS IN FORMATION AT THE CATHEDRAL OF SAN FERNANDO IN SAN ANTONIO ON SEPTEMBER 13TH

“Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground” (*Ex. 3:5*)

These words of God marked the beginning of a new way of life for Moses. The place where he was standing was holy ground, for he was standing in the awesome presence of Almighty God. And on that holy ground, he heard a voice calling him to a special mission of service to the People of God. From that moment forward, Moses’ life would be radically altered. He would henceforth place his life at the service of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No longer would his life be his own. He would lead the Chosen People out of slavery in Egypt toward freedom in the Promised Land. In meeting God on holy ground, speaking with Him there, and hearing His summons to service, Moses came to a new understanding of himself and entered into a deeper commitment to God and His people. The mission of Moses began under the sign of God’s holiness.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord: it is a deep joy for me to be with you today in this historic Cathedral of San Fernando, the oldest cathedral sanctuary in the United States. It is with great gratitude to God that I meet with you who are preparing to serve the Lord as priests and Religious, you who in a singular and remarkable way have, like Moses, heard the voice of God calling you to that “holy ground” of a special vocation in the Church. You have stood in the awesome presence of the Lord and heard Him call you by name. And listening to His voice with prayerful discernment you have joyfully begun your formation for the priesthood of the Religious life.

A vocation in the Church, from the human point of view, begins with a discovery, with finding the pearl of great price. You discover Jesus: His Person, His message, His call. In the Gospel which we have heard today, we reflect on the call of Jesus to the first disciples. The first thing that Andrew did after meeting Jesus was to seek out his brother Simon and tell him: “We have found the One Messiah!” Then Philip, in a similar way, sought out Nathanael and told him: “We have found the One Moses spoke of in the Law – the Prophets too – Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth” (*cf. Jn. 1:35-51*). After the initial discovery, a dialog in prayer ensues, a dialog between Jesus and the one called, a dialog which goes beyond words mind expresses itself in love

Questions are an important part of this dialog. For example, in the Gospel account of the call of the disciples, we are told that “when Jesus turned around and noticed them following Him, He asked them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to Him, ‘Rabbi’ (which means teacher), ‘where do you stay?’ ‘Come and see,’ He answered” (*Jn. 1:38-39*).

What begins as a discovery of Jesus moves to a greater understanding and commitment through a prayerful process of questions and discernment. In this process, our motives are purified. We come face to face with pointed questions such as “What are you looking for?” And we even find ourselves asking questions of Jesus, as Nathanael did: “How do

you know me?" (*Jn.* 1:48). It is only when we have reflected candidly and honestly in the silence of our hearts that we begin to be convinced that the Lord is truly calling us.

Yet, even then, the process of discernment is not over. Jesus says to us as He said to Nathanael: "You will see much greater things than that" (*Jn.* 1:50). Throughout our lives, after we have made a sacred and permanent commitment and after our active service of the Lord has begun, we still need the dialog of prayer that will continually deepen our knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear students for the priesthood and candidates for the Religious life: you stand in a long line of people who have given themselves totally for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and who have shared our Lord's Sacrifice and entered into His Paschal victory. For generations many of the generous priests and Religious who have served the Church in Texas have come with immigrants from other lands, or as missionaries from other places. I wish to express my gratitude to God for the contribution which they have made to establishing the Church here. At the same time I praise the Lord of the harvest for all of you and for the growing numbers of native-born vocations, and I fervently pray that this increase continues.

Like all those who have gone before you, you will have trials. Your fidelity will be ensured only when you invoke the strength of the Lord, only when you rely on Christ's grace. But if Christ is the center of your lives, the One for whom you live and die, then your generous service to your brothers and sisters will know no limits. You will love those who are difficult to love, and you will enrich the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I would now like to speak to the seminarians. Dear brothers in Christ: as men preparing for priestly ordination, it is important for you to have a clear understanding of the vocation to which you feel called, so that your promise of lifelong fidelity may be maturely made and faithfully kept. Your life in the priesthood will closely join you with the Eucharist; you will be ministers of the mysteries of God; you will be expected to preach and teach in the name of the Church.

The Eucharist is the principal reason for the ordained priesthood. As I said in my 1980 Holy Thursday letter: "Through our ordination... we priests are united in a singular and exceptional way to the Eucharist. In a certain way we derive *from* it and exist *for* it" (No. 2). No work we do as priests is so important. The celebration of the Eucharist is the way that we best serve our brothers and sisters in the world because it is the source and center of the dynamism of their Christian lives.

How crucial it is, then for our own happiness and for the sake of a fruitful ministry, that we cultivate a deep love for the Eucharist. During your seminary days, a thorough theological study of the nature of the Eucharistic Mystery and an accurate knowledge of liturgical norms will prepare you well to foster the full, conscious, and active participation of the community in the liturgy. The future priest is called to reflect and to profess with the Second Vatican Council that "the other sacraments, as well as every

ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are linked with the Holy Eucharist and are directed toward it. For the Most Blessed Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ Himself" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5).

The task of preaching the Gospel is of supreme importance in the priesthood. And since, as St. Paul says, "faith comes through hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), seminary formation must aim at fostering a deep understanding of the word of God as it is lived and proclaimed by the Church. Always remember the words of the Prophet Jeremiah: "When I found your words, I devoured them; they became my and the happiness of my heart, because I bore your name, O Lord" (*Jer.* 15:16).

In order for your preaching to bear fruit in the lives of those whom you will serve, you will have to nourish in your own mind and heart a real internal adherence to the *Magisterium* of the Church. For, as the Council reminded us, "the task of priests is not to teach their own wisdom but God's word, and to summon all people urgently to conversion and to holiness" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4).

The priest needs to know the real living conditions of the people he serves, and he must live among them as a true brother in Christ. He can never be separated from the community. But there is a real sense in which, like the Apostle Paul, he is – in the very words of Scripture – "Set apart to proclaim the Gospel of God" (*Rom.* 1:1). In his priestly identity, he is commissioned for a special service – a unique service – to the Body of Christ. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council spoke in this way: "By their vocation and ordination, priests of the New Testament are indeed set apart in a certain sense within the midst of God's people. But this is so, not that they may be separated from this people or from any man, but that they may be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord raised them up. They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they are witnesses and dispensers of a life other than this earthly one" (*ibid.*, 3).

Each one of you is called to embrace freely a celibate life for the sake of Jesus and His Kingdom, in order to become a "man for others." If modeled on the generous divine and human love of Jesus for His Father and for every man, woman, and child, your celibacy will mean an enhancement of your life, a greater closeness to God's people, an eagerness to give yourself without reserve. By embracing celibacy in the context of the priesthood, you are committing yourself to a deeper and more universal love. Above all, celibacy, means the gift of yourself to God. It will be the response, in Christ and the Church, to the gifts of creation and redemption. It will be part of your sharing, at the deepest level of human freedom and generosity, in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Humanly speaking, this sacrifice is difficult because of our human weaknesses; without prayer it is impossible. It will also require discipline and effort and persevering love on your part. But in your gift of celibacy to Christ and His Church, even the world will be able to see the meaning of the Lord's grace and the power of His Paschal Mystery. This victory must always be visible in your joy.

The Council stressed the essential difference between the ordained priesthood and the priesthood of all the baptized, and prescribed a priestly formation in seminaries which is

distinct from other forms of formation (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 10; *Optatam Totius*, 4). At the heart of this essential difference is the truth that Jesus entrusted the Twelve with the authority to proclaim the Gospel, celebrate the Eucharist, forgive sins, and provide for the pastoral care of the community.

This authority is given for a truly specific purpose and through Ordination is shared by the successors of the Apostles and their collaborators in the ordained priesthood. It is given for a particular ministry of service to be carried out in imitation of the Son of Man who came to serve. The ministry of the ordained priest is essential to the life and development of the Church; it is an essential service to the rest of the Church. It is clear that those who are preparing for this specific ministry will have special needs and requirements that differ from those of the rest of the community.

All the members of the Church are summoned to share in her mission by reason of their Baptism and Confirmation. Priests can best assist and encourage others in the service of the Gospel by being faithful themselves to their priestly ministry in the Church. “Hence, whether engaged in prayer and adoration, preaching the word, offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and ministering the other sacraments, or performing any works of the ministry for people, priests are contributing to the extension of God’s glory as well as to the development of divine life in people” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2).

And now I turn to you, my brothers and sisters who are preparing for the Religious life. Yours too is a great and specific gift of God’s love. To each of you, as to the first disciples, Jesus has said: “Come and see” (*Jn*, 1:39). There is no force or coercion on the part of Christ, but rather an invitation, extended simply and personally, to come and stay in His house, to be in His presence, and with Him to praise His Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

A Religious vocation is a gift, freely given and freely received. It is a profound expression of the love of God for you and, on your part, it requires in turn a total love for Christ. Thus, the whole life of a Religious is aimed at strengthening the bond of love which was first forged in the Sacrament of Baptism. You are called to do this in Religious consecration through the profession of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience (cf. Can, 573, §§ 1-2).

During your years of preparation, the Church is eager that you receive a formation that will prepare you to live your Religious consecration in fidelity and joy, a formation that is both deeply human and Christian, a formation that will help you to accept ever more generously the radical demands of the Gospel and bear public witness to them. Your very life is meant to be a confident and convincing affirmation that Jesus is “the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (*Jn*. 14:6).

What you must develop, first and foremost, is the habitat and discipline of prayer. For who you are is more fundamental than any service you perform. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council said that Religious should “seek God before all things” and “combine contemplation with apostolic love” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 5). This is no easy task, for prayer has many dimensions and forms. It is both personal and communal, liturgical and private. It deepens our union with God and fosters our apostolic love. A

climate of silence is needed as well as a personal life-style that is simple and ready for sacrifice.

The liturgical life of the community greatly influences the personal prayer of all the members. The Eucharist will always be the source and summit of your life in Christ. It is the Sacrament through which the worship of your whole existence is presented to God in union with Christ (cf. Can. 607, § 1). The Eucharist is the point where the offering of your chastity, poverty, and obedience is made one with the Sacrifice of Christ.

In your Religious consecration, the Sacrament of Penance is a constant reminder to you of the call of Jesus to conversion and newness of life. Precisely because you are called by your Religious profession to bear witness to the holiness of God, you must help the People of God never to lose their sense of sin. To be authentic in following Christ in the perfection of charity, you must be the first to recognize sin in your hearts, to repent, and to glorify God's grace and mercy. Conversion is a lifelong process requiring repentant love. The Sacrament of Penance is the Sacrament in which our weakness meets God's holiness in the mercy of Christ.

In a thousand ways the Church will call you into service in her mission for the Kingdom of God. She needs your talents, your availability to come and go according to the needs of the hour, which are often the needs of the poor. She needs your collaboration in the cause of faith and justice. She needs your work and everything that you can do for the Gospel. But, above all, the Church needs what you are; she needs you: men and women consecrated to God, living in union with Christ, living in union with His Church, striving after the perfection of love. Why? Because of the holiness of God! Dear brothers and sisters: What you do is important, but what you are is even more important – more important for the world, more important for the Church, more important for Christ.

In Mary, the Mother of Christ and the Church, you will understand the identity of your own life. She showed throughout her life the meaning of the evangelical counsels, to which your Religious consecration is directed. Her words to the angel – “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say” (*Lk.* 1:38) – show the obedient total surrender which our consecration to God requires and which your vows express.

Of course the call to holiness is a universal call. All members of the Church, without exception, are summoned by God to grow in personal sanctity and to share in the mission of the Church. A heightened awareness of this truth has been one of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council. And it has helped foster a clearer awareness of the role of the laity in building up the Kingdom, as well as a close collaboration of the laity with the clergy and Religious. As persons preparing for the priesthood and Religious life, it will be your privilege to help explore still more effective forms of collaboration in the future. But even more importantly, you will be in a position to encourage the lay people to fulfill that mission which is uniquely their own in those situations and places in which the Church can be the salt of the earth only through them.

The Council spoke very clearly about their special mission. Among other things it stated: “The laity, by their very vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is,

in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven” (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). This activity of the laity constitutes a specific contribution to the Body of Christ. Yours is another charism, a different gift to be lived differently, so that, in true diversity, there may be real unity in the work of service.

On this occasion, I cannot fail to express my special gratitude and encouragement to those of you who are responsible for the formation of candidates for the priesthood and Religious life. Be assured that all your efforts, work, and sacrifice are deeply appreciated by the Church and by me personally. Your task is a vital one for the future of the Church, and your contribution to the life of the People of God is a lasting one. Certainly it is crucial that you yourselves be steeped in sound doctrine, pastoral experience, and holiness of life. Of great importance is your attitude of faith, and particularly your personal example of filial love for the Church, as well as your loyal adherence to her authentic ordinary *Magisterium* (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25). St. Paul tells us: “Christ loved the Church. He gave Himself up for her to make her holy” (*Eph. 5:25-26*). I pray that your own lives will be always animated by this kind of sacrificial love.

I wish to add a word of deep appreciation to all those parents who sustain and encourage their children in the following of Christ. The prayerful support, understanding, and love that you give them is of immense value.

At this time, I wish to appeal to the Church in the United States for vocations to the priesthood and Religious life. The duty of fostering such vocations rests on the whole Christian community, and certainly families have traditionally made the greatest contribution.

We must always remember too the impact on vocations that can be made by zealous priests and Religious, by their example of generous service, by the witness of their charity, their goodness, and their joy. Above all, the key to vocations is persevering prayer, as Jesus Himself commanded: “The harvest is good but laborers are scarce. Beg the harvest master to send out laborers to gather his harvest” (*Mt. 9:37-38*).

Dear brothers and sisters: you have come to know the Lord Jesus. You have heard His voice, discovered His love, and answered His call. May He, the Lord Jesus, who has begun this good work in you, bring it to completion for the glory of His Father and by the power of His Spirit. Remember always: “The place where you stand is holy ground” (*Ex. 3:5*).

And may the Blessed Virgin Mary help you by her prayers, and by the example of her love.