

Letters to My Brother Priests

Complete Collection of Holy Thursday Letters (1979–2005)

Pope John Paul II

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LETTER
OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO ALL THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH
ON THE OCCASION OF HOLY THURSDAY 1979

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate!

The great day is drawing near when we shall share in the liturgy of Holy Thursday together with our brothers in the priesthood and shall meditate together on the priceless gift in which we have become sharers by virtue of the call of Christ the eternal Priest. On that day, before we celebrate the liturgy *in cena Domini*, we shall gather together in our cathedrals to renew before him who became for us "obedient unto death"¹ in total self-giving to the Church, his spouse, our giving of ourselves to the exclusive service of Christ in his Church.

On this holy day, the liturgy takes us inside the Upper Room, where, with grateful hearts, we set ourselves to listen to the words of the divine Teacher, words full of solitude for every generation of bishops called, after the Apostles, to take upon themselves care for the Church, for the flock, for the vocation of the whole People of God, for the proclamation of God's word, for the whole sacramental and moral order of Christian living, for priestly and religious vocations, for the fraternal spirit in the community. Christ says: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you."² It is precisely this sacred triduum of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord that re-evokes in us, in a vivid way, not only the memory of his departure, but also faith in his return, in his continuous coming. Indeed, what is the meaning of the words: "I am with you always; yes, to the end of time"³

Venerable and dear brothers, in the spirit of this faith, which fills the entire triduum, it is my desire that, in our vocation and our episcopal ministry, we should feel in a special way this year—the first of my Pontificate—that unity which the Twelve shared in when together with our Lord they were assembled for the Last Supper. It was precisely there that they heard those words that were most complimentary and at the same time most binding: "I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; 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; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last."⁴

Can anything be added to those words? Should one not rather pause in humility and gratitude before them, given the greatness of the mystery we are about to celebrate? There then takes root even deeper within us our awareness of the gift that we have received from the Lord through our vocation and our episcopal ordination. In fact the gift of the sacramental fullness of the priesthood is greater than all the toils and also all the sufferings involved in our pastoral ministry in the episcopate.

The Second Vatican Council reminded us and clearly showed us that this ministry, while being a personal duty of each one of us, is nevertheless something that we carry out in the brotherly communion of the whole of the Church's episcopal college or "body." While it is right that we should address every human being, and especially every Christian as "brother," this word takes on an altogether special meaning with regard to us bishops and our mutual relationship: in a certain sense it goes back directly to that brotherhood which gathered the Apostles about Christ; it goes back to that friendship with which Christ honored them and through which he united them to one another, as is attested by the words of John's Gospel quoted above.

Therefore, venerable and dear brothers, we must express the wish, today especially, that everything that the Second Vatican Council so wonderfully renewed in our awareness should take on an ever more mature character of collegiality, both as the principle of our collaboration (*collegialitas effectiva*) and as the character of a cordial fraternal bond (*collegialitas affectiva*), in order to build up the Mystical Body of Christ and to deepen the unity of the whole People of God.

As you gather in your cathedrals, with the diocesan and religious priests who make up the *presbyterium* of your local churches, your dioceses, you will receive from them—as is provided for—the renewal of the promises that they placed in the hands of you, the bishops, on the day of their priestly ordination. With this in mind, I am sending to the priests another letter that—as I hope—will enable you and them to live even more deeply this unity, this mysterious bond that joins us in the one Priesthood of Jesus Christ, brought to completion with the sacrifice of the Cross, which merited for him entrance "into the sanctuary."⁵ Venerable brothers, I hope that these words of mine addressed to the priests, at the beginning of my ministry in the See of