

SPEECH AT NCDVD MORNING OF REFLECTION (SEPTEMBER 29, 2009) by Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades, Bishop of Harrisburg

“JESUS CHRIST, THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST”

It is a joy to be with you today to share some thoughts during this convention on the theme: “Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest.” I thank the NCDVD for the invitation to be with you at this Morning of Reflection. I remember attending a few past NCDVD conventions when I was Rector of Mount Saint Mary’s Seminary. It is good to participate again. I wish to express gratitude to you for your important and devoted ministry as diocesan vocation directors. In *Pastores dabo vobis*, Pope John Paul II wrote that “the time has come to speak courageously about priestly life as a priceless gift and a splendid and privileged form of Christian living” (*PDV 39*). This is what you are called to do, not only in your conversations with seminarians and young men whom you invite to consider a possible call to the priesthood, but also in all your initiatives and programs in parishes and other ecclesial communities. Indeed, the promotion of priestly vocations will never bear fruit unless the whole Church gains a deeper appreciation of the priceless gift of the

priesthood. How blessed we are that Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed this Year for Priests! The Holy Father has written that this year is “meant to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world” (cf. *Letter Proclaiming a Year for Priests*). The Holy Father sees this year as an opportunity “for making the importance of the priest’s role and mission in the Church and in contemporary society ever more clearly perceived” (cf. *Address to Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy*, March 16, 2009). And Pope Benedict sees this year as a “favourable opportunity... for asking the Lord to give numerous holy priests to the Church (*Remarks after the Angelus*, June 14, 2009).

The theme of this convention: “Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest” is most fitting since all work on behalf of priestly vocations, indeed all reflection on the ministerial priesthood, must have its center in the One whom the author to the letter to the Hebrews called the Great High Priest, in Him who called Himself “the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep.” Jesus’ self-identification as the good shepherd who offers His life in sacrifice for His sheep harmonizes perfectly with the letter to the Hebrews’ designation of Him as the great

high priest whose self-offering has brought about our redemption. He is, as the letter to the Hebrews proclaims, “the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance...” (*Hebrews 9:15*).

We cannot truly speak of the Catholic priesthood without reference to the priesthood of Christ. As Saint Thomas Aquinas taught: “Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers.” The ministerial priesthood, like the common priesthood, is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. Through the ministerial priesthood, the Lord Jesus “unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders” (*CCC 1547*).

In our work on behalf of priestly vocations, we should be filled with a spirit of wonder in contemplating the mystery of the priesthood. That wonder arises when we consider the truth about this sacrament in which men, through priestly consecration, become living instruments of Christ the eternal high priest. “By the sacramental anointing of Holy Orders, the Holy Spirit configures them in a new and special way to

Jesus Christ the Head and Shepherd (of the Church)” (*Pdv* 15). They are equipped thereby “to act in the name and in the person of Christ Himself” (*Pdv* 20). The identity of the ordained priest is centered in Christ. It must be. It is His priesthood. Priestly ordination effects a configuration to the Great High Priest in such a way that those ordained are able to act in the person of Christ the Head and Shepherd.

To understand and appreciate the nature and meaning of the Catholic priesthood, one needs to reflect deeply on the priestly consecration and mission of Jesus Christ. This reflection was first explicitly done, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, by the author of the letter to the Hebrews. Prior to this letter, the New Testament mention of priests and priesthood all referred to Jewish priests and the Old Testament priesthood. That is not to say that the letter to the Hebrews presents a radical departure from the evangelists’ or Saint Paul’s understanding of Jesus, His identity and His mission, nor of Jesus’ own self-understanding. There is indeed a true continuity and convergence between the Christology of the Gospels, the Christology of the letters of Saint Paul and other New Testament books, and the Christology of the letter to the Hebrews. What is new is the explicit

priestly terminology used in Hebrews as well as the author's systematic theological reflection on Christ's identity and mission in relation to the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices. It is clear in the books of the New Testament that Jesus offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice to the Father for the salvation of mankind. It is quite natural that in reflecting on this truth, the Church would come to recognize this as a priestly action, as the fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices. This is what the letter to the Hebrews expounds: a priestly Christology, a presentation of the identity and mission of Christ in priestly terms. The author shows how Jesus Christ alone has been able to establish a truly efficacious mediation between God and humanity. He is the true priest, the perfect priest, the mediator of the new covenant, the one whose sacrifice indeed accomplished the ultimate purpose of the Old Testament sacrifices which they could not accomplish: definitive redemption and the restoration of communion with God. Jesus the priest was able to do this because He was true God and true man, because of the hypostatic union, because of the Incarnation. In fact, the tradition of the Church is overwhelming in its teaching that Christ's priesthood began at the Incarnation. His sacrifice on Calvary was a priestly offering which was consummated in his glorification. In

heaven, Christ, the eternal high priest, intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father as the mediator of a new covenant.

The idea of participating in the priesthood of Christ is not foreign to the New Testament. In the first letter of Peter and in the book of Revelation, we find the basis for a priestly ecclesiology. In first Peter, we read: “like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 *Peter* 2:5) and a few verses later we read: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 *Peter* 2:9). In the book of Revelation, we read: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever” (*Revelation* 1:6; cf. also *Revelation* 5:9-10). The whole Christian community is a priestly one. Individual Christians, through Baptism, share in Christ’s priesthood. The Second Vatican Council described the Church as a priestly community and affirmed that the common priesthood of the faithful is one participation in the priesthood of Christ, exercised by the

participation of the faithful in the offering of the Eucharist, by the reception of the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, by self-denial and active charity (*LG 10*). The Catechism states that “the common priesthood is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace – a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit” (*CCC 1547*).

The other participation in the one priesthood of Christ is the ministerial priesthood, a priesthood which is at the service of the common priesthood, “directed,” as the Catechism teaches, “at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians” (*CCC 1547*). This participation in the priesthood of Christ is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, in the sense that the apostles and pastors, those involved in pastoral ministry, are never called “priests” in the New Testament. Even though the apostles and other ministers of the Church are not given the explicit title of priest in the New Testament itself, one finds in the New Testament the beginnings of a priestly understanding of their ministry. The fact that they were not yet called priests is understandable since the Jewish priesthood still existed. But we do find the apostles and pastors of the New Testament churches acting as living

instruments of Christ the mediator, Christ the priest. They were not simply delegates of the people, of the community. They acted with the authority of Christ in teaching, sanctifying, and governing. Jesus had said to the apostles “He who hears you, hears me” and “he who receives you, receives me.” At the Last Supper, he commanded the apostles to celebrate the Eucharist in his memory. On the first Easter Sunday, he gave them the power to forgive sins in his name. Before the Ascension, He commanded them to teach all nations and to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The apostles and their co-workers and delegates continued His healing ministry when they anointed the sick. They carried on the ministry of Jesus with an authority and power which came from Christ and which they, in turn, shared with others who succeeded them. Very early on, as testified in the New Testament, they used the ancient gesture of the laying on of hands and prayer to share the apostolic power and mission they had received from Jesus. In all these actions, in their sanctifying, teaching, and governing, they were not acting alone; they were making visible and efficacious the priestly mediation of Christ. They were acting by His power and in His person. Eventually, they would be called priests. In the second century, bishops began to be described as priests and a

century or two later, presbyters were called priests. This development was a natural one, especially as the understanding of the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist deepened. But even before they were explicitly called priests, they were making visible the priestly mediation of Christ in a way that differed from the priestly activity of their fellow believers. We can say, to use contemporary theological language, that they were acting in the person of Christ the Head and Shepherd of the Church. In this way, their participation in Christ's priesthood was essentially different. At the same time, when they acted in this way, it was always in service of the whole community of believers, helping them to live in faith, hope, and charity, through the bestowal of God's grace through their ministry.

In our vocations' ministry, it is absolutely essential that we present the nature of the Catholic priesthood in all its truth and beauty, faithful to the Church's rich doctrine. There is no excuse today for the confusion and the errors about priestly identity and mission that were prevalent a few decades ago. We are called to present good, strong catechesis about the nature of the priesthood in our parishes, schools, religious education, campus ministry and youth ministry programs.

Such authentic catechesis can and does inspire young men to consider a possible vocation to share in the priestly consecration of Jesus and His great redemptive mission. It is both exciting and humbling to contemplate acting in the person of Jesus Christ, the great High Priest. It is challenging, yet also appealing, in light of the idealism of youth, to consider living in imitation of the Lord in a radical way according to the evangelical counsels. Young men can be inspired when their understanding of the priesthood is much more than a functional one, but rather, one which sees its ontological truth. Priestly ordination is a deeply personal assimilation to Christ and His priesthood that touches one's very being, one's very soul. A true appreciation of priestly character leads to a sense of gratitude for this gift from Christ to His Church as well as a sense of wonder in the face of the mystery it conveys.

Discernment of the call to the priesthood is more than an intellectual exercise. Yes, the mind is involved, but so must be the heart. In fact, it is there that one truly discovers the Lord's call. I think often of the words of Pope Benedict in his papal inauguration homily: "There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the

encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him. The task of the shepherd, the task of the fisher of men, can often seem wearisome. But it is beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God's joy, which longs to break into the world." The Holy Father was surely expressing his own personal experience. It is this experience, this encounter with Christ, which should be the experience of every disciple of Christ, an experience of the love of God. This was the experience of the first apostles, including Saint Paul who said with the deepest conviction: "Christ loved me and gave himself for me." This knowledge, this experience, led him to say regarding his untiring ministry: "the love of Christ impels me." Is this not the deep core of every authentic priestly vocation, indeed of every Christian vocation? Without this experience, one's vocation in Christ can be superficial and shallow. Are our young people today surprised by the Gospel? Have they truly encountered the living Christ in a personal way? It only becomes exciting and attractive to share in His priesthood if one has truly experienced the love that is the very heart of His priesthood. Again, Pope Benedict provides some inspiring words about this loving encounter with Christ in his first encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est." He

states that in the words of Saint John “*we have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us*, the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John describes that event in these words: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should... have eternal life (3:16).*” Again, this fundamental life decision, believing in God’s love for us, encountering Christ, the incarnate love of God, is the pre-condition, the necessary fertile soil, not only for growth in the Christian life, but also for the cultivation of priestly vocations. The Catholic priesthood is all about Christ, a gift from Him to build up His Body, the Church. Young men who truly encounter Christ, who believe in His love, are more likely to be attracted to a vocation to embody His way of life, to embrace His Spouse, the Church, and to make Him visible in the midst of the world. The most fundamental and most important part of our work in service of priestly vocations is promoting this personal encounter with Christ in the Church among our youth.

It is good that the theme of this convention highlights the centrality of Christ in every aspect of promoting vocations. That centrality is essential in evangelization and catechesis and in the theology of the priesthood. It is also essential in one's interior life. In our own lives and in the lives of those we invite to consider the priestly vocation, it is necessary to encounter Christ in prayer, to encounter Him in the Word, most especially in the Gospels, to encounter Him in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and in Eucharistic adoration. It is necessary also to encounter the merciful and compassionate High Priest in the sacrament of Penance. The encounter with Christ is strengthened and nurtured through an intimate relationship with Mary, the Mother of Christ, and the experience of her maternal love. The promotion of these spiritual exercises and devotions are our most effective means of promoting priestly vocations. I also wish to mention in this context the importance of encountering Christ in the powerful witness of good and holy priests, both of the past and the present. In this Year for Priests, Pope Benedict holds up as a great model of priestly holiness the saintly Cure of Ars, Saint John Vianney. Priests who live their configuration to Christ through imitation of His life inspire their people, including young men whom God is calling to the

priesthood. Seeing their pastoral charity, their joy in the priesthood, their fidelity and courage, young men can be inspired to consider the priestly vocation.

Thank you again for this opportunity to be with you this morning and thank you for your generous and devoted service to the Church. May Saint John Vianney intercede for all of you in your vocation ministry! May Jesus, the Great High Priest, bless you with His abundant grace!