

Jesus Christ - The Great High Priest

Keynote Address

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Thank you very much. Your Excellencies, dear brothers, priests, sisters in Christ. I came to this meeting with great enthusiasm. And I have to confess to you that I feel very young this morning. The reason is that I have dedicated the two first years of my priesthood to be Rector of my Minor Seminary and in charge of vocations. So I go back to the origin of my priesthood this morning. Your Excellency, (Archbishop Myers), thank you for not only the support you gave for this meeting, thank you for the example that you gave. You said a phrase this morning, "I love vocation all my life." Today, we lost the abbot to put seeds, we like to go for harvest. There is no harvest where you have not put seeds. So, we have to learn how to put seeds of vocation to be sure you will collect a lot of them. Greetings also to the other Bishops and to all present.

I. The Confession of Faith:

Ecce Sacerdos Magnus. Jesus Christ the Great High Priest. That confession of faith, found in the Letter to the Hebrews, echoing the 110th Psalm, is your theme in this year's 46th National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors. In this "Year for Priests", it is a most fitting theme.

The letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the Faithful and Compassionate High Priest:

*Therefore, holy brothers, sharing in a heavenly calling, reflect on **Jesus, the apostle and high priest** of our confession, who was faithful to the one who appointed him (Heb 3:1).*

The same Letter also describes Jesus' Eternal Priesthood and Eternal Sacrifice:

*Jesus has entered on our behalf as forerunner, becoming **high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek** (Heb 6:20).*

These verses in the Letter to the Hebrews echo the words of the 110th Psalm:

*The Lord has sworn and he will not repent: “**You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek**” (Ps 110:4).*

This forever is what can put fear in the young of today. They have nothing around themselves that is forever. Those who are marrying, they say, “We try.” We will see how fate will go. The parents frequently they separate themselves. It's difficult this word forever. You will be my priest forever to the youth of today. Forever, because among the changing reality of this world, the love of God for you independently for what you are and what you are doing. The love of God for you is forever. For this the call of God for priesthood is a call forever.

This theme was heard last year when our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI addressed the seminarians at Saint Joseph Seminary in New York on 19 April 2008. He spoke about priestly vocations, and about priests as “Living Icons of Christ the Eternal High Priest”. I quote:

“I am glad to know your numbers are increasing! The People of God look to you to be holy priests, on a daily journey of conversion, inspiring in others the desire to enter more deeply into the ecclesial life of believers. I urge you to deepen your friendship with Jesus the good shepherd. Talk heart to heart with Him. Reject any temptation to ostentation, careerism, or conceit. Strive for a pattern of life truly marked by charity, chastity, and humility, in imitation of Christ, the Eternal High Priest, of whom you are to become living icons. Dear seminarians, I pray for you daily. Remember that what counts before the Lord is to dwell in his love and to make his love shine forth for others.”

The Pope has shown the Seminarians of New York that he would pray for them daily. Those responsible for vocations in a diocese should not let a single day pass without praying to the Lord for vocations. And without asking to the Lord that they should become inspirants of vocation. If the Pope prays everyday for vocations, how much also should the Bishops pray everyday for vocations, already obtained, and the future of vocations in their dioceses?

And now we celebrate this “Year for Priests”. The Holy Father, in proclaiming the “Year for Priests”, indicated that this entire year is a time to “*deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world*”.

Saint John Marie Vianney, the *Curé* of Ars, patron saint of parish priests worldwide, whose 150th anniversary of death and birth into eternal life, this “Year for Priests” commemorates, often used this expression: “The Priesthood is the Love of the Heart of Jesus”.

Our vocation, then, is to be Living Icons of Jesus Christ the Great High Priest. Our vocation is to radiate the Love of the Heart of Jesus. Through our faithful witness to this vocation, we as diocesan vocation directors are called to inspire, influence, and work with others as they journey in discernment of their vocations.

When I was a young Priest, I went to Lyon in France to learn French and Ars is not so far from there. I went on a pilgrimage to this church of St. John Marie Vianney. I was shocked to see a very small church. Quite dark because of the smoke of the candles. Very simple but the church has become the center of a Catholic France during this period of this ignorant Curé that was St. John Marie Vianney. And there you can have clear holiness as the main part of our Apostolate.

II. The Priestly Vocation as “Gift” and “Mystery”:

The priestly vocation is ultimately a mystery and a gift. The Servant of God John Paul II recounted the story of his own vocation in his memoir written on his 50th Anniversary of Priestly Ordination: Gift and Mystery. I would like to share some points from that memoir with you today. The Holy Father’s reflections begin:

*The story of my priestly vocation? It is known above all to God. At its deepest level, **every vocation to the priesthood is a great mystery; it is a gift** which infinitely transcends the individual. Every priest experiences this clearly throughout the course of his life. Faced with the greatness of the gift we sense our own inadequacy.*

A vocation is a mystery of divine election: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (Jn 15:16). “And one does not take this honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was” (Heb 5:4). “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5). These inspired words cannot fail to move deeply the heart of every priest.

These words cannot fail to inspire your hearts and your work as vocation directors.

III. Vocational “Signs”:

The Holy Father identified the **first signs of his vocation**, signs for which you, as Diocesan Vocation Directors, should always be alert and vigilant.

A young Karol Wojtyla was chosen to give the welcome address in his secondary school for the metropolitan Archbishop of Krakow, Prince Adam Stefan Sapieha. When the Archbishop asked what the future Pope’s study would be after secondary school, his religion teacher said “Polish language and letters”. The archbishop replied “A pity it is not theology”.

However, as Karol began his studies in language at the Jagiellonian University, he discovered that the mystery of language brings us back to *the inscrutable mystery of God himself*. As he came to appreciate the power of the word in his literary and linguistic studies, he inevitably drew close to the mystery of the Word, that Word of which we speak every day in the *Angelus*: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). Polish language and literature for him prepared the ground for an encounter with philosophy and theology.

These studies came to an end with the German occupation and the outbreak of the Second World War. The former Holy Father began working as a laborer in a stone quarry to avoid deportation and forced labor in Germany. There he witnessed the death of a fellow laborer in a detonation. He wrote: *“They took his body and walked in a silent line. Toil still lingered about him, a sense of wrong.”*

When he became assistant to the rock blaster, his co-worker Franciszek said *“Karol, you should be a priest. You have a good voice and will sing well; then you’ll be all set”*. He said this in all simplicity expressing a view then widely held in society about how priests lived. Those words stuck in Karol’s memory.

In the Theater of the Living Word, he admits “the whole experience of the theater left a deep impression on me, even though at a certain point I came to realize that this was not my real vocation”.

Finally, he discovered his real vocation was to enter the seminary and become a priest. This was 1942, formation was clandestine, and seminarians were still working as laborers as well as studying. But through it all he recounts:

Today I think back with deep gratitude on all the superiors, spiritual directors, and professors who contributed to my formation during my time at the seminary. May the Lord repay their efforts and sacrifice!

IV. Vocational “Influences”:

Pope John Paul recalls that there were **many influences on his vocation**. This influential priestly presence is something that you, as Diocesan Vocation Directors, are called to be for men discerning vocations today. Pope John Paul writes:

I have spoken at length about my seminary experience because this was the greatest influence on my priestly formation. But looking at the fuller picture, I clearly see that a number of other situations and individuals had a positive influence on me, and that God was using them to make his voice heard.

Among them were:

1. His Family: his parents and brother, especially his father who was a widower at an early age, and a deeply religious man. “We never spoke about a vocation to the priesthood, but his example was in a way my first seminary, a kind of domestic seminary”.
2. The Solvay Plant: his experience was that of a worker-seminarian. H wrote: “I knew quite well the meaning of physical labor. Every day I had been with people who did heavy work. I came to know their living situations, their families, their interests, their human worth, and their dignity”.

It is extremely important this aspect one of the signs of vocation is when somebody through his prayer and conversation with Jesus Christ is capable to go out of himself. To think of the need of the others and to dedicate himself for this. The enemy of vocation is selfishness, his egoism. Why the capacity of dedication is a great sign that the spirit of the Lord entered in this person and can guide him very far.

3. His Parish in Cracow: the Salesian fathers and their work among the youth, headed by Jan Tyranowski, who created a network called The Living Rosary, engaging them in spiritual formation.
4. The Monastery of the Carmelite Fathers: making retreat with them.

It's not bad. If I can say an experience of mine a few months before deaconate, I was troubled if to take forever. This is the season of my life. I was studying at the Roman Seminary and I went to a Trappist convent in Rome and a Father with an angelical face, use to silence and to prayer, came to receive me and I entrusted him with my interior troubles. And, he gave me a great serenity with his answer and I still remember, “Don't worry to be Priest forever, because God loves you forever.”

5. His Confessor and Spiritual Director: Father Figlewicz.
6. The Blessed Virgin Mary: “In speaking of the origins of my priestly vocation, I cannot overlook its Marian Thread”.
7. Brother Saint Albert: the Polish tradition of radical Gospel idealism.

8. The Experience of the War: He writes: *My priestly vocation took definitive shape at the time of the Second World War, during the Nazi occupation. Was this a mere coincidence or was there a more profound connection between what was developing within me and external historical events? It is hard to answer such a question. Certainly in God's plan nothing happens by chance. All I can say is that the tragedy of the war had its effect on the gradual choice of a vocation.*
9. The Sacrifices made by Polish Priests: *the arrests and deportation to concentration camps of an immense number of Polish priests, in Dachau alone about 3000 were interned. I had the blessing of beatifying many of them.*
10. Goodness: he experienced goodness and love even “amid the harshness of war”.

I can understand that after the sex scandal can be felt a little bit of difficulty to speak about vocations. And maybe you can imagine how the people in front of you can receive the message a new vocation will be new Priest who will violate our children. But I would say that as the Pope was encouraged to take a final decision by the great number of priests in Poland who were brought to the camp of concentration, you today, you should be pushed in your many strengths by the fact that so many priests have abandoned their mission or have been forced to abandon their mission. The church in America will pass through a difficult time of poverty of priests. But a new springtime will come. With more priests and better quality and you are the instrument of this springtime of Priesthood in the Church of America.

While the office of vocation director, not to mention a National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors, was not an ecclesial reality at the time when the Servant of God Pope John Paul II was a seminarian, nevertheless it can be seen that he had many ‘vocation directors’: his Archbishop, his teachers, his co-workers, his youth leader, his confessor and spiritual director, heroic Polish priest-martyrs...all inspiring him to say ‘YES’ to Jesus the High Priest, and ‘YES’ to becoming an instrument of his Love. And for all of them, he was most grateful.

V. The Church - Responsible for Priestly Vocations:

It is true that the priestly vocation is a mysterious gift. It is a gift from God; it is a gift to the Church. For this reason, the Holy Father, in the Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis, speaks of “safeguarding the gift.” I quote:

The Church therefore is called to safeguard this gift, to esteem it, and love it. She is responsible for the birth and the development of priestly vocations. Consequently, the pastoral work of promoting vocations has as its active agents, as its protagonists, the ecclesial community as such, in its various expressions.

I am deeply convinced that today like yesterday the Lord gives the needed vocation to his church. Maybe today differently from yesterday its changing the way to discover vocations and to propose in the name of Jesus Christ vocation to the youth today. Don't forget, to pray always before speaking of vocation so that the listeners will through your voice, hear the invitation of Jesus Christ himself. And don't be afraid to be as explicit in that call in the name of Jesus. Many young people of today even in the diplomatic call I have a lot of conferences with young people. I have schools visiting me and I go to visit organizations of young people. Many young people of today, they don't know what to do with their life. They suffer a great sense of emptiness. They are terribly unsure about their future. Has it ever come to your mind that this emptiness, that this lack of assurance is because you have not yet think that the Lord is calling you and only in Him you will experience fullness and you will see your future is secure because guided by Him. Don't be ashamed to call people openly to priesthood or to religious vocation in the name of Jesus Christ. This is a small problem that I can understand that can deceive you and your enthusiasm. Ask any priest in your diocese when it has been last time that they made a homily on vocations. And you will be extremely surprised. Maybe if you ask closer to your Bishop when is the last time he spoke about Priestly vocation or religious vocation and that may say there are no more vocations. If you love your priesthood, if you love your priesthood, you like to speak about your love. You don't speak about what you don't love. But if you love your vocation, you speak with even enthusiasm of your vocation. So before saying there are no vocations today, try to convince yourself and to convince the priests of your diocese to speak more frequently and more openly about vocation today.

Among those agents in the ecclesial communion responsible for promoting vocations, the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* names six in particular:

They say I escaped to the critics of the Bishop because the Pope speak of that.

1. The first responsibility for the pastoral work of promoting priestly vocations lies with **the bishop**, who is called to be the first to exercise this responsibility even though he can and must call upon many others to cooperate with him. *[You are the bishop's chosen collaborator]*
2. The bishop can rely above all on the cooperation of **his presbyterate**. All its priests are united to him and share this responsibility in seeking and fostering priestly vocations. *[To them, you are a model for fostering vocations]*
3. A very special responsibility falls upon **the Christian family**, which by virtue of the sacrament of matrimony shares in its own unique way in the educational mission of the Church - teacher and mother.... The Christian family, which is truly a 'domestic Church' has always offered and continues to offer favorable conditions for the birth of vocations *[To families, you are their sanctifier]*
4. **The lay faithful** also, and particularly catechists, teachers, educators, and youth ministers, each with his or her own resources and style, have great importance in pastoral work of promoting priestly vocations *[For the laity, you are their leader]*
5. With regard to **diocesan and parish communities**, special appreciation and encouragement should be given to groups which promote vocations *[To these communities, you are their inspirer]*
6. We should also remember the numerous **groups, movements, and associations** of lay faithful whom the Holy Spirit raised up and fosters in the Church with a view to a more missionary Christian presence in the world. *[To these movements, you are called to be open to their presence and their work]*

Where are you in this, Diocesan Vocation Directors? These various elements, agents, and members of the Church, who are involved in the pastoral work of promoting vocations, are in need of collaboration, modeling, sanctifying, guidance, inspiration, openness *and enthusiasm*. *We cannot attract anybody if we sell a sad image of us as Priest. Because*

nobody will follow a sad person. But everybody will be interested to discover the souls of joy in a happy Priest. You are those episcopal collaborators and those ecclesial coordinators. So, as you see, you need not fear, for you do not work alone.

VI. One Prospective Vocation:

In this “Year for Priests”, I would like to pose this hypothetical question to all the Vocation Directors of the United States of America. If Saint John Vianney, whom the Church is honoring in this “Year for Priests”, came to you as a prospective seminarian today, how would you encounter him? How would you view him? Would you help him to discern his vocation? Or, perhaps, sadly, not. I propose for you two vocational “scenarios”:

The 1st scenario: “Our new Seminarian ... Mr. John Mary Vianney”

“Bishop, I have been meeting with this young man, John Mary Vianney; he’s a little older than the rest, but he’s a very dedicated worker; On account of his rural upbringing (he had been a shepherd), he is behind in his studies for someone his age, but he is very devout, and he surely knows the faith from praying with his family. He may not grasp Latin or other languages as readily as some of our other seminarians, but he has a certain inclination toward sacrifice, and, I believe, a real call toward sanctity, which is the essential element for fruitfulness in the priesthood. Other priests who teach him in the seminary are supportive of him, even though they see how he struggles; they have told me that they feel his vocation is authentic. I’ll continue to work with him”.

The 2nd scenario: “No new seminarians this year, again; just this one inquirer”

*“Bishop, one young man came by the other day, ragged looking, with long hair, and just about illiterate, His knowledge of the faith, well, it seemed to me a bit too provincial, and way too devotional. When he speaks about discerning his call to the priesthood, he’s really focused on the Mass, and on visits to the Blessed Sacrament; I think he’s “too” **much** Eucharistic! You know, too much into the “cultic model”.*

He speaks about desiring to be always available for confessions for his parishioners. Really, who goes anymore? He sounds a bit too “Old Church” for us. You should have heard what he had to say about dances - very negative! Could you imagine what his homilies would be like? If he has a vocation, I think that maybe he’s more suited to one of those traditional orders. Let me write him a “Thanks, but no thanks” note. ‘Dear Mr. John Mary Vianney...’.”

My brothers, be prudent vocation directors, yes; but also be good vocation directors! Be happy priests! And, especially, be faithful priests! This is the year to recommit to that priestly fidelity: *Fidelity of Christ, Fidelity of the Priest*. And, as Pope Benedict reminded us very recently in his Address on the Pastoral Care of Vocations, be sowers of trust and of hope: **I quote,**

*“Dear friends, be sowers of trust and hope. The sense of being lost that the youth of today often experience is indeed profound. Human words are frequently without a future or prospects, and also lack meaning and wisdom. The attitude of frenetic impatience and the inability to live through a period of waiting is spreading. Yet, this could be God’s hour...**The Year for Priests therefore offers a beautiful opportunity to rediscover the profound sense of the vocations ministry**, as well as the fundamental decision on its method: simply and credible witness, communion, with itineraries organized and shared within the local Church, the daily routine which is a lesson in following the Lord in everyday life; listening, guided by the Holy Spirit, to orient youth in their search for God and for true happiness, and lastly truth, which alone can give rise to inner freedom”.*

Those words of our Holy Father sound like a very wise plan for you in this Year for Priests. And you will have many others assisting you in the particular Churches – from your bishops all the way down to the newest movements – so as to help you, Diocesan Vocations Directors, to be truly positive influences on future priestly vocations in the United States of America.

And you will have vocations!

And, you never know; one of them may be a saint!

It's important this meeting, you are so many. You are more difficult region, you have all the region while the number of vocation and the quality of them is increasing. With great humility put your experience of the service of the orchard but go away from this big meeting full of as the Pope said, "...of trust and hope the Lord is ready to use you as his instrument to call all the Priests needed, holy Priests needed, to the Church of the United States. May God Bless You.