

“With you I am a Priest”

THEOLOGY OF THE BODY REFLECTIONS ON POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II'S
“LETTERS TO ALL PRIESTS OF THE CHURCH”

“As you know, I feel particularly close to each one of you on this occasion. And, the same as every year, as a sign of our sacramental union in the same priesthood, and impelled by my affectionate esteem for you and by my duty to confirm all my brothers in their service of the Lord, I wish to send you this letter to help you to stir up the wonderful gift that was conferred on you through the laying on of hands.”
(Pope Saint John Paul II, Holy Thursday, 1986)

At the Chrism Mass during Holy Week, priests gather with their bishops to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. During this liturgy, priests and their bishops renew the promises that they made at the time of their ordination. On this occasion throughout his pontificate, Pope Saint John Paul II addressed a Letter to all the Priests of the Church.

In this resource, priests have illuminated the words of the late Holy Father by reflecting upon them through the lens of the Theology of the Body, the first series of catecheses of the pontificate of Pope Saint John Paul II. The reflections are encouraging and enriching. Each reflection hopes to encourage priests to live out their vocation even more authentically and fully with the wisdom given in the Theology of the Body and reflected in Pope Saint John Paul II's letters to his brother priests. *“For you I am a Bishop, with you I am a Priest.”*

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Letter to all Priests of the Church HOLY THURSDAY, 1979.



SUMMARY & REFLECTION BY FR. JOHN LINDEN

Summary

John Paul II wants in his first letter as pope to his fellow priests on the occasion of Holy Thursday, 1979 to emphasize the special bond he shares with all priests throughout the world. He sees unity and harmony with the Bishop and as a presbyterate as very essential to the work of evangelization.

Love for Christ and his Bride the Church is a gift from the Holy Spirit and enables a priest to give himself in self-emptying service of both. If we truly love Christ we will love what he loves.

It is significant for priests to remember that we are men chosen from among men and therefore share the same needs as all men. This is important so that we never begin to feel ourselves any less in need of repentance and forgiveness. We share the same lot and the same need for a redeemer.

The priest is a gift of service to the community to such a degree that his life becomes a gift of service. This is all in an effort to grow in imitation of the life of the Good Shepherd. This service is all about the salvation of souls and it becomes the “supreme art” of the priesthood. Priests are meant to lead the people of God by way of their own example to become “little Christs” themselves. The laity who authentically live Christ’s priesthood through their baptism are nevertheless meant to participate in the “mutually related” but “essentially and not only in degree” different ministerial priestly gifts that are given only to the ordained. These ministerial priestly gifts are not meant to profit only the ordained themselves but are meant to be for all the faithful to share through the selfless offering of them by the ordained.

A priest must be authentic and love all people disinterestedly and not for show. He must be close to his people and their problems in a “priestly” way. In a very special way John Paul points out that celibacy opens the door for the priest to love and should not devalue human love or hamper his ability to offer love. Priestly celibacy is a gift meant for the sake of helping the priest be open to and free for the leading of all toward the kingdom of heaven.

Prayer is what strengthens and sustains both the gift of the priesthood and the gift of celibacy and it also helps priests to prove their love for God and for his Bride even when priests are tested in “trials by fire.” Prayer is also a priest’s pathway to continual conversion and helps them to “rediscover the dimensions of that kingdom for whose coming we pray every day.” Prayer also helps priests to “rediscover the gift obtained from Christ himself in the Sacrament of Orders.”

Finally, as John Paul II most often did he speaks of the relationship to the Blessed Mother. He said that priests (like all men, but in a particular way due to their unique relationship with Christ) have been given to Mary along with John the Beloved from the very Cross of Christ. The priest must always look to Mary “with exceptional hope and love.”

Reflection

“One can say that the choice of continence for the kingdom of heaven is a charismatic orientation toward that eschatological state in which human beings ‘take neither wife or husband’”. (TOB 73:4) This choice to live celibate is a very important focus of John Paul’s first letter to his brother priests on the occasion of Holy Thursday. Celibacy opens the door to love. John Paul speaks of the knowledge of “how to love disinterestedly.”

To love is to certainly be interested in the other and so the meaning of disinterest does not so much refer to the other as it does to the self. Disinterested love is that which seeks only the good of the beloved regardless of the benefit or lack thereof to the self. “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Mt. 16:25).”

This was the love of Christ himself as he lived celibate on earth and gave himself away in totality. All that he did was in the interest of the others that he came to die for and even more so for the Father whom he wished to please. Yet, it is not natural or good to disregard the needs of the self because the self belongs to God just as much as the others do. We are not called to be masochists as priests; rather, we must look for fulfillment of the self in a different form (and even from a different source) while the self looks after the others. Jesus hung on the cross and forgave those who so ruthlessly neglected him (and hung him there) because he knew that there was an “Other” who loved him and was not overlooking his sufferings with neglect.

The priest, as celibate, has the power to seemingly love without return only because he does not seek that return in the normal manner of human existence on earth. Being cherished exclusively by a spouse is what we all naturally tend to desire and we are also ordered to desire for that love shared to produce the personal fruit of such love (children). A celibate priest retains all of these natural inclinations but nevertheless orients them by choice in God’s grace toward the deepest order of fulfillment in the Kingdom.

In the kingdom there will be a fullness of the experience of intimacy with God that will be a “self-communication” of God with each person he has created “a love of such depth and power of concentration on God himself will be born in the person that it completely absorbs the person’s whole psychosomatic subjectivity” (TOB 68:3). Moreover we will experience “the union of a perfect inter-subjectivity that will unite all the ‘sharers in the other world,’ men and women, in the mystery of the communion of saints.” (TOB 75:1) This self-communication between persons, John Paul says, will be revealed in “simplicity and splendor”(TOB 69:6) and will give “the fullest understanding of the virginal meaning of the body”. (TOB 75:1) This virginal meaning of the body (of the person) will be, according to JP II, a “perfect inter-subjectivity” when all is gift and nothing is “taken” without being truly offered. We will know and be known, love and be loved perfectly and in totality with and by all. (TOB 69:6)

A priest does not will to give up on love at all. A priest simply cannot settle for anything less than the deepest and most meaningful love there is – the love that will be found in the kingdom. This does not however, mean that the priest settles to wait until he is in heaven to experience this love because, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The priest as celibate on earth seeks through deep prayer to love as if he were already in the kingdom. And this love is of such a profound nature that it would be, you might say, too confined, to direct it toward only one other in this world. This love is of such a nature that it is offered to no less than all. This love is also necessary in order to live the gift of celibacy and, therefore, this love is a gift that must be nurtured.

Prayer leading to an ever deepening connection to Christ is the only way that this love can be most fully obtained, and further maintained throughout the life of the priest. Yet, even though this love is oriented toward all, just as in Christ himself, the love is first ordered toward the Source, namely God himself. And God has given us a way to love him in our own nature, Jesus Christ. The priest must grow madly in love with Christ. “Continence ‘for the kingdom of heaven,’ the choice of virginity or celibacy for one’s whole life, has become in the experience of the disciples and followers of Christ the act of a particular response to the love of the Divine Bridegroom and therefore acquired the meaning of an act of spousal love.” (TOB 79:9)

So, the celibate priest certainly does not forgo the natural desire to be cherished exclusively by a spouse with whom he shares the deepest love. Nor does he give up on that desire for this shared love to produce personal fruit. The fruit of Christ’s love for the priest and the priest’s love for Christ is the spiritual children that they both love into the kingdom. We turn to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for our ultimate solace, brothers, and this opens the door to disinterested love and service for our brothers and sisters rather than to seek our ultimate solace in them (see 1Pet 5:2). In this way, we prove our love for both God and his flock and we help to safely return his flock to him.