



LETTER TO SEMINARIANS
on the Occasion of the Day for the Sanctification of Priests
The Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

7 June 2013

Cardinal Mauro Piacenza has published a letter to seminarians to mark the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Dearest Seminarians,

On the solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, we celebrate most significantly the day for the sanctification of priests and, as you are in the Seminary to respond in the most fitting way possible to your vocation, it is important for me to send you this letter, with great affection, so that you may feel involved and, as such, remember this important occasion.

We contemplate together today the origin of the divine vocation. The Holy Father has emphasized firmly the love in which those who are Priests of Christ and of the Church must participate. In his homily at his first Chrism Mass (28 March 2013), Pope Francis said “This I ask you: be shepherds, with the ‘odor of the sheep’”. By this striking image, the Successor of Peter invites us **to have a strong and solid love for the People of God, a love which – as the same Pontiff has noted – is not fed from purely human sources, nor is it reinforced by techniques of self-persuasion.** It is the personal encounter with the Lord; it is keeping alive the knowledge of having been called by Him, who gives the truly greater supernatural strength to be Priests in the image of the Good Shepherd of all, Christ Jesus. But in order to be such tomorrow, you have to prepare yourselves today. In very clear words, Pope Francis has referred to the primacy of grace in the priestly life: “It is not in soul-searching or constant introspection that we encounter the Lord: self-help courses can be useful in life, but to live our priestly life going from one course to another, from one method to another, leads us to become pelagians and to minimize the power of grace” (ibidem).

For the disciple walking with Christ, walking in grace, means taking on with spiritual joy the weight of the priestly cross. We hear again the Holy Father teaching about this: “When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly” (Homily at the Holy Mass with the Cardinals, 14 March 2013). On the contrary, to live our ministry as a service to Christ crucified, prevents us from understanding the Church as a human organization “a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord” (ibidem).

In the light of these first magisterial teachings of Pope Francis, I invite you to consider your life as a gift of God and, at the same time, a task which has been entrusted to you, not simply by men but – albeit by way of the necessary mediation by the Church – ultimately by **the Lord himself, who has a plan for your life and for the lives of the brothers and sisters whom you will be called to serve.**

It is necessary to view the whole of our life in terms of a divine call, and also of a generous human response. This involves cultivating within ourselves the vocational sense, which interprets life as a continual dialogue with the Lord Jesus, risen and alive. In every age, Christ has called and continues to call men to follow him more closely by participating in his priesthood – that implies that, in every period of the history of the

Church, the Lord has held a vocational dialogue with the faithful that He has chosen, so that they may be his representatives among the people of God, as well as mediators between heaven and earth, particularly in the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments. In fact, one can say that the liturgy opens heaven wide here on earth.

On this basis, you are called through ordination – without any merit of your own – to be mediators between God and his people and to make possible the salvific encounter through the celebration of the divine mysteries. Notwithstanding your own limits, you have responded to this call with generosity and joy. It is important that you always keep alive the sense of youthfulness in your hearts: “We must live the faith with a young heart, always: a young heart, even at the age of seventy or eighty. Dear young people! With Christ, the heart never grows old” (Pope Francis, Homily for Palm Sunday, 24 March 2013, no. 3).

The youthfulness of the priestly spirit, firm in its vocation, is guaranteed by prayer, that is the continually maintained *attitude of interior silence which favors listening to God every day*. This continual opening of the heart happens, naturally, within a stability that – once the fundamental life decisions have been taken – is capable, with the help of grace, to remain faithful to the tasks which have been solemnly accepted, right up to the end of our earthly life. However, this necessary stability does not imply closing our ear to the ongoing call of God, because the Lord, while confirming us every day in our fundamental vocation, is always at the door of our heart knocking (cf. Acts 3:30), waiting for us to open it to Him with the same generosity with which we said to him our first “fiat”, *imitating the availability of the Ever Virgin Mother of God* (cf. Lk. 1:38). We can, therefore, never place limits on the plan that God has for us and that he will communicate to us day after day, throughout the whole of our life.

This vocational openness also represents the most certain way to live evangelical joy. It is, in fact, the Lord who will make us truly happy. Our joy does not come from mundane satisfaction, which makes us briefly happy and quickly disappears, as St. Ignatius of Loyola noted in his first spiritual discernment (cf. Liturgy of the Hours, Office of Readings of 31 July, II Reading). Our joy is Christ! In the daily dialogue with Him, our spirit is reassured and continually renews our passion and our zeal for the salvation of souls.

This *prayerful dimension of the priestly vocation* reminds us of still more very important aspects. First among them is the fact that vocations grow not principally from a pastoral strategy, but above all through prayer. As Jesus taught: “Pray... the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Lk. 10:2). Commenting on these evangelical words, Pope Benedict XVI noted: “We cannot simply ‘produce’ vocations; they must come from God. This is not like other professions; we cannot simply recruit people by using the right kind of publicity or the correct type of strategy. *The call which comes from the heart of God must always find its way into the heart of man*” (Meeting with Priests and Permanent Deacons of Bavaria. 14 September 2006). You, dear Seminarians, have been called by the Lord, but many people spread throughout the world have supported and are supporting your response with their prayers and their sacrifices. Be grateful for this and unite yourselves to these prayers and sacrifices to support other responses to vocations. To the primacy of prayer can then be added, as a channel of this divine grace, the sound, motivated and enthusiastic vocational pastoral action on the part of the Church. With regard to this ecclesial collaboration with the divine work of giving pastors to the People of God and the Mystical Body of Christ, it is appropriate to remember briefly a few matters that mark it out, that is: respect for priestly vocations, the witness of the lives of Priests, the specific work of Seminary formators.

It is first of all necessary that the Church appreciates you for your priestly vocation, considering that the Community of the disciples of Christ cannot exist without the service of the sacred ministers. From this comes the care, attention and reverence for the priesthood. Secondly, vocations are highly favored, as can be seen from the example and the care that the priests offer them. It would be difficult for an exemplary priest not to stimulate the question in the minds of young people: could I not also be called to a wonderful and happy life like this? Particularly in this way, Priests are channels through which God makes the divine call resound in the heart of those He has chosen. Priests then will nurture the seeds of vocation that begin to spring in the souls of the young, by means of sacramental Confession, spiritual direction, preaching and pastoral enthusiasm. I am sure that many of you will be witnesses to and beneficiaries of this. I would, furthermore, like to say a word about the important role of those priests to whom the Bishops entrust your formation. The Seminary formators are called to continue and to deepen the care for priestly vocations, while they provide all the required help for the necessary personal discernment of every candidate. As to this, we must remember the two principles which must guide the evaluation of vocations: the friendly welcome and the just severity. While every prejudice as well as every rigorism should be avoided in the treatment of seminarians, on the other hand it is of the greatest importance to guard carefully against laxism and carelessness in judgment.

The Church certainly needs Priests, but not any kind of Priest! The love that welcomes must therefore accompany the truth which judges with clarity whether, for a particular candidate, the signs of a vocation and the human qualities necessary for a trustworthy response to it are present. The pastoral urgency of the Church cannot be permitted to bring about haste in conferring the sacred ministry. On the contrary, where there is doubt, it is better to take the time necessary and carry out appropriate evaluations, which will not exclude the dismissal of those candidates who are not able to offer sufficient guarantees. My dearest Seminarians, with these brief comments, I have endeavored to redirect our spiritual attention to the immense gift and to the absolutely free mystery of our special vocation.

We *entrust to the intercession of our most holy Mother Mary and of St. Joseph the gifts of fidelity and of perseverance in the divine call* that, by pure grace, they may be bestowed upon us and that we may seek to respond to the divine generosity, which always sends pastors for the flock with renewed apostolic zeal. Keep persevering, always remembering that we show our love in this world by our fidelity.

I remember you each day in prayer with great affection, and I implore the Lord to send down his divine benediction upon you.

Mauro Cardinal Piacenza
Prefect
Congregation for the Clergy