

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE 44th WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS**

29th APRIL 2007 - FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Theme: “*The vocation to the service of the Church as communion*”

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear brothers and sisters!*

The annual World Day of Prayer for Vocations is an appropriate occasion for highlighting the importance of vocations in the life and mission of the Church, as well as for intensifying our prayer that they may increase in number and quality. For the coming celebration, I would like to draw the attention of the whole people of God to the following theme, which is more topical than ever: *the vocation to the service of the Church as communion*.

Last year, in the Wednesday general audiences, I began a new series of catechesis dedicated to the relationship between Christ and the Church. I pointed out that the first Christian community was built, in its original core, when some fishermen of Galilee, having met Jesus, let themselves be conquered by his gaze and his voice, and accepted his pressing invitation: “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men!” (Mk 1: 17; cf. Mt 4: 19). In fact, God has always chosen some individuals to work with him in a more direct way, in order to accomplish his plan of salvation. In the Old Testament, in the beginning, he called Abraham to form a “great nation” (Gn 12: 2); afterwards, he called Moses to free Israel from the slavery of Egypt (cf. Ex 3: 10). Subsequently, he designated other persons, especially the prophets, to defend and keep alive the covenant with his people. In the New Testament, Jesus, the promised Messiah, invited each of the Apostles to be with him (cf. Mk 3: 14) and to share his mission. At the Last Supper, while entrusting them with the duty of perpetuating the memorial of his death and resurrection until his glorious return at the end of time, he offered for them to his Father this heart-broken prayer: “I made known to them your name, and I will make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17: 26). The mission of the Church, therefore, is founded on an intimate and faithful communion with God.

The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution *Lumen gentium* describes the Church as “a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (n. 4), in which is reflected the very mystery of God. This means that the love of the Trinity is reflected in her. Moreover, thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit, all the members of the Church form “one body and one spirit” in Christ. This people, organically structured under the guidance of its Pastors, lives the mystery of communion with God and with the brethren, especially when it gathers for the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the source of that ecclesial unity for which Jesus prayed on the eve of his passion: “Father...that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17: 21). This intense communion favours the growth of

generous vocations at the service of the Church: the heart of the believer, filled with divine love, is moved to dedicate itself wholly to the cause of the Kingdom. In order to foster vocations, therefore, it is important that pastoral activity be attentive to the mystery of the Church as communion; because whoever lives in an ecclesial community that is harmonious, co-responsible and conscientious, certainly learns more easily to discern the call of the Lord. The care of vocations, therefore, demands a constant “education” for listening to the voice of God. This is what Eli did, when he helped the young Samuel to understand what God was asking of him and to put it immediately into action (cf. 1 Sam 3: 9). Now, docile and faithful listening can only take place in a climate of intimate communion with God which is realized principally in prayer. According to the explicit command of the Lord, we must implore the gift of vocations, in the first place by praying untiringly and together to the “Lord of the harvest”. The invitation is in the plural: “Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Mt 9: 38). This invitation of the Lord corresponds well with the style of the “Our Father” (Mt 6: 9), the prayer that he taught us and that constitutes a “synthesis of the whole Gospel” according to the well-known expression of Tertullian (cf. *De Oratione*, 1,6: CCL I, 258). In this perspective, yet another expression of Jesus is instructive: “If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven (Mt 18: 19). The Good Shepherd, therefore, invites us to pray to the heavenly Father, to pray unitedly and insistently, that he may send vocations for the service of the Church as communion.

Harvesting the pastoral experience of past centuries, the Second Vatican Council highlighted the importance of educating future priests to an authentic ecclesial communion. In this regard, we read in *Presbyterorum ordinis*: “Exercising the office of Christ, the shepherd and head, according to their share of his authority, the priests, in the name of the Bishop, gather the family of God together as a brotherhood enlivened by one spirit. Through Christ they lead them in the Holy Spirit to God the Father” (n. 6). The post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* echoes this statement of the Council, when it underlines that the priest is “the servant of the Church as communion because – in union with the Bishop and closely related to the presbyterate – he builds up the unity of the Church community in harmony of diverse vocations, charisms and services” (n. 16). It is indispensable that, within the Christian people, every ministry and charism be directed to full communion; and it is the duty of the Bishop and priests to promote this communion in harmony with every other Church vocation and service. The consecrated life, too, of its very nature, is at the service of this communion, as highlighted by my venerable predecessor John Paul II in the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*: “The consecrated life can certainly be credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of witness to the Trinity. By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships and create a new type of solidarity” (n. 41).

At the centre of every Christian community is the Eucharist, the source and summit of the life of the Church. Whoever places himself at the service of the Gospel, if he lives the Eucharist, makes progress in love of God and neighbour and thus contributes to building the Church as communion. We can affirm that the “Eucharistic love” motivates and founds the vocational activity of the whole Church, because, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, vocations to the priesthood and to other ministries

and services flourish within the people of God wherever there are those in whom Christ can be seen through his Word, in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist. This is so because “in the Church’s Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love” (n. 17).

Lastly, we turn to Mary, who supported the first community where “all these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer” (Acts 1: 14), so that she may help the Church in today’s world to be an icon of the Trinity, an eloquent sign of divine love for all people. May the Virgin, who promptly answered the call of the Father saying, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Lc 1: 38), intercede so that the Christian people will not lack servants of divine joy: priests who, in communion with their Bishops, announce the Gospel faithfully and celebrate the sacraments, take care of the people of God, and are ready to evangelize all humanity. May she ensure, also in our times, an increase in the number of consecrated persons, who go against the current, living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, and give witness in a prophetic way to Christ and his liberating message of salvation. Dear brothers and sisters whom the Lord calls to particular vocations in the Church: I would like to entrust you in a special way to Mary, so that she, who more than anyone else understood the meaning of the words of Jesus, “My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8: 21), may teach you to listen to her divine Son. May she help you to say with your lives: “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God” (cf. Heb 10: 7). With these wishes, I assure each one of you a special remembrance in prayer and from my heart I bless you all.

From the Vatican, 10 February 2007.

BENEDICT XVI