



MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
FOR THE 45TH WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR
VOCATIONS
13TH APRIL 2008 – 4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

THEME: “*Vocations to the service of the Church-mission*”

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. For the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, which will be celebrated on 13 April 2008, I have chosen the theme: *Vocations to the service of the Church-mission*. The Risen Jesus gave the command to the Apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28,19), assuring them: “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28, 20). The Church is missionary as a whole and in each one of its members. If because of the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, every Christian is called to witness and to announce the Gospel, the missionary aspect is specially and intimately bound with the priestly vocation. In the covenant with Israel, God entrusted to certain chosen men, called by him and sent to the people in his name, the mission to be prophets and priests. This is what he did, for example, with Moses: “Come, - God told him - I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people ... out of Egypt ...when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you will serve God upon this mountain” (Ex 3, 10.12). The same thing happened with the prophets.

2. The promises made to our fathers became full reality in Jesus Christ. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council says: “The Son, therefore, came, sent by the Father. It was in him, before the foundation of the world, that the Father chose us and predestined us to become adopted sons ... To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth and revealed to us the mystery of that kingdom. By his obedience he brought about redemption” (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 3). Early in his public life, during his preaching in Galilee, Jesus chose some disciples as his nearest collaborators in the messianic ministry. For example, on the occasion of the multiplication of loaves, when he said to the Apostles: “You give them something to eat” (*Mt* 14, 16), he encouraged them to take on the needs of the crowds to whom he wanted to offer food so that they would not remain hungry, but also to reveal the food “which endures to eternal life” (*Jn* 6, 27). He was moved to compassion for the people, because while he went about the cities and the villages, he met the crowds, harassed and helpless, “like sheep without a shepherd” (cfr *Mt* 9, 36). From this look of love, flowed the invitation to his disciples: “Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (*Mt* 9, 38), and he sent the Twelve first “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” with precise instructions. If we stop to meditate on this page of the Gospel of Matthew, which is usually called the “missionary discourse”, we note all those aspects which characterize the missionary activity of a Christian community that wants to remain faithful to the example and teaching of Jesus. Answering the call of the Lord means facing with prudence and simplicity every danger and even persecutions, since “a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master” (*Mt* 10, 24). Having become one with the Master, the disciples are no longer alone to announce the Kingdom of heaven, but it is Jesus himself who is acting in them: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me” (*Mt* 10, 40). Furthermore, as true witnesses, “clothed with power from on high” (*Lk* 24, 49), they preach “repentance and forgiveness of sins” (*Lk* 24, 47) to all nations.

3. Precisely because they are sent by the Lord, the Twelve are called “Apostles”, called to go along the roads of the world announcing the Gospel as witnesses of the death and resurrection of Christ. Saint Paul, writing to the Christians of Corinth, says: “We – meaning the Apostles – preach Christ crucified” (1 *Cor* 1, 23). The Book of the *Acts of the Apostles* attributes a very important role in this process of evangelization, also to other disciples whose missionary vocation results from providential circumstances, sometimes painful ones, like the expulsion from their own land because they were followers of Jesus (c.f. 8,1-4). The Holy Spirit permits this trial to be changed into an occasion of grace, and that because of it the name of the Lord is preached to other peoples, so that the circle of the Christian community is widened. These are men and women who, as the Luke writes in the Book of the *Acts of the Apostles*, “have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15, 26). First among them is undoubtedly Paul of Tarsus, who was called by the Lord himself to be a true Apostle. The story of Paul, the greatest missionary of all times, brings out in many ways, what is the link between vocation and mission. Accused by his opponents that he was not authorized for the apostolate, he makes a repeated appeal precisely to the call which he received directly from the Lord (c.f. *Rm* 1, 1; *Gal* 1, 11-12.15-17).

4. At the beginning, as well as later on, what “impels” the Apostles (c.f. 2 *Cor* 5, 14) is always “the love of Christ”. As faithful servants of the Church, docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, innumerable missionaries, throughout the centuries, have followed in the footsteps of the first disciples. The Second Vatican Council notes: “Although every disciple of Christ, as far in him lies, has the duty of spreading the faith, Christ the Lord always calls whomever he will from among the number of his disciples, to be with him and to be sent by him to preach to the nations (c.f. *Mk* 3, 13-15)” (Decree *Ad gentes*, 23). In fact, the love of Christ, must be communicated to the brothers by example and words, with all one’s life. My venerable Predecessor John Paul II wrote: “The special vocation of missionaries “*for life*” retains all its validity: it is the model of the Church’s missionary commitment, which always stands in need of radical and total

self-giving, of new and bold endeavours”. (Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, 66)

5. Among the persons who dedicate themselves totally to the service of the Gospel, there are, in a special way, priests, called to preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, and who are committed to help the least, the sick, those who are suffering, the poor, and those who experience hardship in areas of the world where there are, at times, many who even today have not had a real encounter with Jesus Christ. The missionaries announce for the first time to these people Christ’s redemptive love. Statistics show that the number of baptized persons increases every year thanks to the pastoral work of these priests, who are wholly consecrated to the salvation of their brothers. In this context, special thanks must be given “to those *fidei donum* priests who work faithfully and generously at building up the community by proclaiming the word of God and breaking the Bread of Life, devoting all their energy to serving the mission of the Church. Let us thank God for all those priests who have suffered even to the sacrifice of their lives in order to serve Christ ... Theirs is a moving witness that can inspire many young people to follow Christ and to expend their lives for others, and thus to discover true life” (Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, 26).

6. There have always been in the Church many men and women who, inspired by the action of the Holy Spirit, choose to live the Gospel in a radical way, professing the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. This multitude of religious men and women, belonging to innumerable Institutes of contemplative and active life, plays “the main role in the evangelisation of the world” (Decree *Ad gentes*, 40). With their continual prayer and their prayer in community, the religious of contemplative life intercede incessantly for all humanity; those religious of active life, with their various charitable activities, bring to all their lively witness of the love and mercy of God. As regards these apostles of our times, the Servant of God Paul VI said: “Thanks to their consecration they are eminently

willing and free to leave everything and to go and proclaim the Gospel even to the ends of the earth. They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by an originality, by a genius that demands admiration. They are generous: often they are found at the outposts of the mission, and they take the greatest of risks for their health and their very lives. Truly the Church owes them much” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 69).

7. Besides, in order that the Church may continue to carry out the mission entrusted to her by Christ, and in order that there will never be a lack of those who preach the Gospel and who are badly needed by the world, it is necessary that Christian communities do not fail to give both children and adults a constant education in the faith. It is necessary to maintain alive in the faithful an active sense of missionary responsibility and a shared solidarity with the peoples of the world. The gift of faith calls all Christians to co-operate in the work of evangelization. This awareness must be nourished by preaching and catechesis, by the liturgy, and with a constant formation in prayer. It must be increased with the practice of welcoming others, by charity and spiritual accompaniment, by reflection and discernment, as well as by pastoral planning in which the care of vocations plays an integral part.

8. Only in a spiritual soil that is well cultivated can vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life flourish. In fact, the Christian communities, which live the missionary dimension of the mystery of the Church in a profound way, will never be inward looking. Mission, as a witness of divine love, becomes particularly effective when it is shared in a communitarian way, “so that the world may believe” (c.f. *Jn* 17, 21). It is for the gift of vocations that the Church prays everyday to the Holy Spirit. As at its beginning, gathered around the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Apostles, the community of the Church learns from her how to implore the Lord for a flowering of new apostles who will know how to live in themselves that faith and that love which are necessary for the mission.

9. While I entrust this reflection to all the Church communities, so that they may make it their own, and, above all, so that they may draw inspiration from it for their prayer, I encourage the commitment of those who work with faith and generosity in the service of vocations, and with all my heart I send to educators, catechists and to all, especially young people on their vocational journey, a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 3 December 2007

Benedictus PP XVI