

World Day of Prayer for Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life Sunday 3rd May 2009

Themes and Background

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

This year the Holy Father's letter for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations takes as its theme "Faith in the divine initiative – the human response". Pope Benedict reminds us that all vocation is God's initiative - God's call - so our response to that call, like our prayer for vocations, always has a sure foundation on which we can confidently place our trust. Our first duty, he says, is to keep prayer for vocations alive in our families, parishes and all sectors of Church and diocesan life – prayer that is trusting and continuous. Several times Pope Benedict speaks of trust regarding vocations. Perhaps it is all the more important to sustain that trust in God's initiative today when we can so easily become discouraged. We can too readily think of our prayers and efforts to promote vocations as being our own work and therefore to judge it in terms of success or failure.

In addition, the Holy Father has declared a "Year for Priests" beginning on 19 June 2009. This year coincides with the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney and will be dedicated above all to promoting the spiritual perfection of priests "upon which the effectiveness of their ministry principally depends". Pope Benedict also presents this initiative as a timely opportunity to restore at the heart of the Church a "correct valuation of priestly ministry" rather than seeing as inevitable a time when we will need to rely on alternative pastoral provision because the shortage or absence of priests. Here too, confidence and trust in the providence of God should be paramount in our encouragement of priestly vocations.

Whilst this Sunday has been set aside to pray particularly for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, all our pastoral work, every day of the year, should aim at promoting a culture of vocation. Now is a time when many families understandably have concerns about their situations and futures. In times of uncertainty, steadfast prayer is a constant reminder of the Good Shepherd's love for us. Whatever our aspirations and fears, there is no greater hope than responding in love and generosity to the call to holiness that is the vocation of all the baptized.

Thank you for all the work you do throughout the year to help others come to know and love the Lord and hear his call in their lives.

With all good wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+George Stack". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Rt. Rev. George Stack
Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Westminster

Newsletter Insert

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is known as Good Shepherd Sunday because in the Gospel we hear Jesus speak of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. That is why it is the day chosen as World Day of Prayer for Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life and the Holy Father has written to us on this day inviting us to pray trustingly to God for those called to share in the Good Shepherd's ministry of caring for his flock.

Pope Benedict has also invited us to celebrate a Year for Priests, beginning on 19th June - the feast of the Sacred Heart. It is to be dedicated to promoting the spiritual perfection of priests and to recognizing more fully the irreplaceable value of priestly ministry at the heart of the Church. The Pope says we should not allow ourselves to become discouraged by accepting as inevitable that a time will come when we have to do without priests. Once again, we entrust the whole Church to the providence of God in our prayer for and encouragement of priestly vocations.

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER FOR THE 46TH WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

Theme: "Faith in the divine initiative - the human response"

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Brothers and Sisters,

On the occasion of the next World Day of prayer for vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life, which will be celebrated on 3 May 2009, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, I want to invite all the People of God to reflect on the theme: *Faith in the divine initiative - the human response*. The exhortation of Jesus to his disciples: "Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (*Mt 9:38*) has a constant resonance in the Church. Pray! The urgent call of the Lord stresses that prayer for vocations should be continuous and trusting. The Christian community can only really "have ever greater faith and hope in God's providence" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 26) if it is enlivened by prayer.

The vocation to the priesthood and to the consecrated life constitutes a special gift of God which becomes part of the great plan of love and salvation that God has for every man and woman and for the whole of humanity. The Apostle Paul, whom we remember in a special way during this Pauline Year dedicated to the Two-thousandth anniversary of his birth, writing to the Ephesians says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in

him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (*Ef* 1:3-4). In the universal call to holiness, of particular relevance is God's initiative of choosing some to follow his Son Jesus Christ more closely, and to be his privileged ministers and witnesses. The divine Master personally called the Apostles "to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons" (*Mk* 3:14-15); they, in turn, gathered other disciples around them as faithful collaborators in this mission. In this way, responding to the Lord's call and docile to the movement of the Holy Spirit, over the centuries, countless ranks of priests and consecrated persons placed themselves totally at the service of the Gospel in the Church. Let us give thanks to God, because even today he continues to call together workers into his vineyard. While it is undoubtedly true that a worrisome shortage of priests is evident in some regions of the world, and that the Church encounters difficulties and obstacles along the way, we are sustained by the unshakable certitude that the one who firmly guides her in the pathways of time towards the definitive fulfilment of the Kingdom is he, the Lord, who freely chooses persons of every culture and of every age and invites them to follow him according to the mysterious plans of his merciful love.

Our first duty, therefore, is to keep alive in families and in parishes, in movements and in apostolic associations, in religious communities and in all the sectors of diocesan life this appeal to the divine initiative with unceasing prayer. We must pray that the whole Christian people grows in its trust in God, convinced that the "Lord of the harvest" does not cease to ask some to place their entire existence freely at his service so as to work with him more closely in the mission of salvation. What is asked of those who are called, for their part, is careful listening and prudent discernment, a generous and willing adherence to the divine plan, and a serious study of the reality that is proper to the priestly and religious vocations, so as to be able to respond responsibly and with conviction.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* rightly reminds us that God's free initiative requires a free response on the part of men and women; a positive response which always presupposes acceptance of and identification with the plan that God has for everyone; a response which welcomes the Lord's loving initiative and becomes, for the one who is called, a binding moral imperative, an offering of

thanksgiving to God and a total cooperation with the plan which God carries out in history (cf. n. 2062).

Contemplating the mystery of the Eucharist, which expresses in a sublime way the free gift of the Father in the Person of his Only Begotten Son for the salvation of mankind, and the full and docile readiness of Christ to drink to the dregs the “cup” of the will of God (cf. *Mt* 26:39), we can more readily understand how “*faith in the divine initiative*” models and gives value to the “*human response*”. In the Eucharist, that perfect gift which brings to fulfilment the plan of love for the redemption of the world, Jesus offers himself freely for the salvation of mankind. “The Church”, my beloved predecessor John Paul II wrote, “has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as a gift – however precious – among so many others, but as the *gift par excellence*, for it is the gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11).

It is priests who are called to perpetuate this salvific mystery from century to century until the Lord’s glorious return, for they can contemplate, precisely in the Eucharistic Christ, the eminent model of a “vocational dialogue” between the free initiative of the Father and the faithful response of Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist it is Christ himself who acts in those whom he chooses as his ministers; he supports them so that their response develops in a dimension of trust and gratitude that removes all fear, even when they experience more acutely their own weakness (cf. *Rm* 8:26-28), or indeed when the experience of misunderstanding or even of persecution is most bitter (cf. *Rm* 8:35-39).

The awareness of being saved by the love of Christ, which every Mass nourishes in the faithful and especially in priests, cannot but arouse within them a trusting self-abandonment to Christ who gave his life for us. To believe in the Lord and to accept his gift, therefore, leads us to entrust ourselves to Him with thankful hearts, adhering to his plan of salvation. When this does happen, the one who is “called” voluntarily leaves everything and submits himself to the teaching of the divine Master; hence a fruitful dialogue between God and man begins, a mysterious encounter between the love of the Lord who calls and the freedom of

man who responds in love, hearing the words of Jesus echoing in his soul, “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).

This intertwining of love between the divine initiative and the human response is present also, in a wonderful way, in the vocation to the consecrated life. The Second Vatican Council recalls, “The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls. The counsels are a divine gift, which the Church received from its Lord and which it always safeguards with the help of His grace” (*Lumen Gentium*, 43).

Once more, Jesus is the model of complete and trusting adherence to the will of the Father, to whom every consecrated person must look. Attracted by him, from the very first centuries of Christianity, many men and women have left families, possessions, material riches and all that is humanly desirable in order to follow Christ generously and live the Gospel without compromise, which had become for them a school of deeply rooted holiness. Today too, many undertake this same demanding journey of evangelical perfection and realise their vocation in the profession of the evangelical counsels. The witness of these our brothers and sisters, in contemplative monasteries, religious institutes and congregations of apostolic life, reminds the people of God of “that mystery of the Kingdom of God is already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven” (*Vita Consecrata*, 1).

Who can consider himself worthy to approach the priestly ministry? Who can embrace the consecrated life relying only on his or her own human powers? Once again, it is useful to reiterate that the response of men and women to the divine call, whenever they are aware that it is God who takes the initiative and brings His plan of salvation to fulfilment, is never patterned after the timid self-interest of the worthless servant who, out of fear, hid the talent entrusted to him in the ground (cf. *Mt* 25:14-30), but rather expresses itself in a ready adherence to the Lord’s invitation, as in the case of Peter who, trusting in the Lord’s word, did not hesitate to

let down the net once more even after having toiled all night and catching nothing (cf. *Lk* 5:5). Without in any sense renouncing personal responsibility, the free human response to God thus becomes “co-responsibility”, responsibility in and with Christ, through the action of his Holy Spirit; it becomes communion with the One who makes it possible for us to bear much fruit (cf. *Jn* 15:5).

An emblematic human response, full of trust in God’s initiative, is the generous and unmitigated “Amen” of the Virgin of Nazareth, uttered with humble and decisive adherence to the plan of the Most High announced to her by God’s messenger (cf. *Lk* 1:38). Her prompt “Yes” allowed Her to become the Mother of God, the Mother of our Saviour. Mary, after this first “fiat”, had to repeat it many times, even up to the culminating moment of the crucifixion of Jesus, when “standing by the cross of Jesus” as the Evangelist John notes, she participated in the dreadful suffering of her innocent Son. And it was from the cross, that Jesus, while dying, gave her to us as Mother and entrusted us to her as sons and daughters (cf. *Jn* 19:26-27); she is especially the Mother of priests and consecrated persons. I want to entrust to her all those who are aware of God’s call to set out on the road of the ministerial priesthood or consecrated life.

Dear friends, do not become discouraged in the face of difficulties and doubts; trust in God and follow Jesus faithfully and you will be witnesses of the joy that flows from intimate union with him. Imitating the Virgin Mary whom all generations proclaim as blessed because she believed (cf. *Lk* 1:48), commit yourselves with every spiritual energy, to realise the heavenly Father’s plan of salvation, cultivating in your heart, like her, the ability to be astonished and to adore him who is mighty and does “great things”, for Holy is his name (cf. *Lk* 1:49).

From the Vatican, 20 January 2009

Benedictus PP XVI