

Saints in order to sanctify others

*Address to the clergy of Cordoba during the Year for Priests
November 20, 2009*

Bishop Javier Echevarría:

We are now in the Year for Priests convoked by Pope Benedict XVI for the entire Church. In the letter that he wrote for this occasion, the Holy Father expressed his hope to “deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world.”¹

A desire to help foster this initiative of the Roman Pontiff has moved my beloved brother in the Episcopate, Archbishop Juan José Asenjo of Seville, who is also Apostolic Administrator of Córdoba, to invite me to speak on this subject to a group of priests. I express to him my deep thanks although, at the same time, it seems to me that I am here to “sell honey to the beekeeper.” This was an expression St. Josemaría Escrivá liked to use when he was invited to speak to his brothers in the priesthood. He wanted to emphasize that any one of them could have done this very well just by opening his heart and showing the love for God and souls that he had inside.

If this could be said by such a holy priest, who had received the divine task of opening up the path of holiness in the fulfillment of the duties of each one’s state in life, and who the Church has raised up, together with other illustrious priests, as a model of holiness for priests and laity, imagine what I could say. I go to his intercession before our Lord, asking that my words will manage to transmit at least a little of his rich teaching on the priesthood, so that his words and example may spur us—myself as well—to carry out the interior conversion that the Church awaits from each of us in this Year for Priests.

Identification with Christ, the foundation of our priesthood

In the first Chrism Mass that he celebrated after receiving the ministry of Peter, Benedict XVI addressed the priests who were concelebrating with him in St. Peter’s Basilica with these words: “The mystery of the priesthood in the Church lies in the fact that we, miserable human beings, by virtue of the Sacrament, can speak with his “P”: *in persona Christi*. Christ wishes to exercise *his* priesthood through us.”²

The priest of the New Testament is one alone, Jesus Christ our Lord, as the letter to the Hebrews makes clear (cf. *Heb 7:11-28*). We are his instruments in virtue of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which identifies us with him. This is manifested clearly in the gestures and words of the Bishop during the ordination rite. When, in silence, he places his hands on the head of the candidate, and invokes the Holy Spirit with the consecrating prayer, it is Jesus Christ himself—the Eternal High Priest—who takes possession of each

¹ Benedict XVI, Letter to Priests, June 16, 2009.

² Benedict XVI, Homily at the Chrism Mass, April 13, 2006.

one. Priestly ordination produces a real change in the one who receives it, visible only to the eyes of faith. St. Josemaría emphasized this when, speaking about the priest's identity (which, in those years just after the Council, some were calling into question), he did not hesitate to state: "What is the identity of the priest? That of Christ. All of us Christians can and should be not just other Christs, *alter Christus*, but Christ himself: *ipse Christus!* But in the priest this happens in a direct way, by virtue of the sacrament."³

This is a reality that has to be shown in a very specific way in the most diverse situations, also outside the acts proper to the *sacrum ministerium*. An event in the life of St. Josemaría gives eloquent testimony to this reality.

It was in the academic year 1942-43. The owner of a building on Jenner Street in Madrid, where the first university residence of Opus Dei after the civil war was located, made it known that he needed the house right away because his son was getting married. This caused a problem that was difficult to solve. What should be done about the dozens of students living there, in the middle of the school year? One couldn't just leave them on the street. Nevertheless, none of the arguments presented by the directors of that apostolic work managed to change the owner's mind. Finally the founder of the Work went to see him personally, accompanied by Amadeo de Fuenmayor, who was the director of the residence at that time and who recounted this incident.

The conversation, courteous but cold, made it clear that the person was not disposed to making any concessions. Suddenly St. Josemaría changed the tone of the interview: "Don't you know who you are speaking with?" he asked in a strong voice. And in response to the owner's surprised look, he said: "I am a priest of Jesus Christ. And I can't consent to having fifty students, whose souls have been entrusted to me, being forced to leave the residence in the middle of the school year." Professor Fuenmayor, who was present at the conversation without saying a word, noted that the tone of the interview changed completely after that moment. The landlord agreed to continue renting the house till the end of the school year.⁴

This episode forcefully emphasizes the vivid awareness of being identified with Jesus Christ the Priest that the Founder of Opus Dei always had. It highlights the fact that the character of Holy Orders affects the whole life of the person sealed with this sacrament. Something analogous is true of the ordinary faithful, anointed by the baptismal character: their whole life is conformed to that of Christ. They are not Christians, children of God and sharers in Christ's priesthood, only from time to time, when they pray or take part in a liturgical ceremony. Being a Christian imbues—it ought to imbue—the twenty-four hours of each day, and all the baptized have to aspire to make this a reality. The same should happen with those of us who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders. As St. Josemaría liked to insist, we have to be "*priest-priests*, priests through and through,"⁵ at every moment and in all circumstances.

³ St. Josemaría Escrivá, Homily, *A Priest Forever*, April 13, 1973.

⁴ Cf. Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 2, pp. 412-13.

⁵ Homily, *A Priest Forever*.

“Being a priest,” I remind you in words of Benedict XVI, “means becoming an ever closer friend of Jesus Christ with the whole of our existence. The world needs God—not just any god but the God of Jesus Christ, the God who made himself flesh and blood, who loved us to the point of dying for us, who rose and created within himself room for man. This God must live in us and we in him. This is our priestly call: only in this way can our action as priests bear fruit.”⁶

We are convinced that the Pope’s words reflect the reality of priests’ lives. But we also know—as St. Paul wrote—that we bear the divine treasure in vessels of clay (cf. *2 Cor* 4:7). Perhaps at some moment we have relived Simon Peter’s experience after the miraculous catch of fish. The disproportion between the greatness of the task entrusted to us—to make Christ present among mankind—and our personal limitations can sometimes reveal itself to us in all its amplitude. Nevertheless, at all times, the memory of the fact that Jesus has called us friends (cf. *Jn* 15:15) and is sustaining us with his grace, strengthens us and helps us to overcome any difficult moments. “Faith in Jesus, Son of the living God, is the means through which, time and again, we can take hold of Jesus’ hand and in which he takes our hands and guides us.”⁷

Identification with Christ in ministerial actions

If our whole life is marked by the priestly character, how much more so should this be true when we perform the actions proper to our ministry; and it is especially there that we have to seek our sanctification.

The Servant of God Bishop Alvaro del Portillo explained this very clearly. At the Second Vatican Council he was one of the experts who did the most to stress the fact that priests are called to seek sanctity precisely in the exercise of their ministry. Let me read you some words of his that can serve as a summary of what I want to tell you in this fraternal conversation.

“It is essential that priests acquire in their years of preparation, and in their later permanent ongoing formation, a clear awareness of the identity between the fulfillment of their personal vocation—that of being a priest in the Church—and the exercise of their ministry *in persona Christi Capitis*. Their service to the Church consists essentially (other ways of priestly service may be legitimate, but are secondary) in personifying among their brethren actively and humbly Christ the Priest, who gives his life and purifies the Church, Christ the Good Shepherd, who leads it in unity to the Father, and Christ the Teacher, who comforts and urges it forward with his Word and with the example of his Life.

“The priest’s formation is something that lasts his whole life, because, in its various aspects, it tends—it should tend—to form Christ in him (cf. *Gal* 4:19). This identification is carried out as a task, in response to what has already been received as a sacramental gift. It is a task that requires, even before an incessant pastoral activity and as a condition

⁶ Benedict XVI, Homily in the Chrism Mass, April 13, 2006.

⁷ Ibid.

for its effectiveness, an intense life of prayer and penance, a sincere spiritual direction of one's own soul, a recourse to the sacrament of Penance carried out on a regular basis and with extreme delicacy, and one's entire life rooted, centered and unified in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.”⁸

I want to briefly consider now especially the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice and the administration of Penance, because it is in those moments that our being *ipse Christus*, Christ himself, as priests, attains its greatest ontological reality.

The Mass: “in persona Christi”

The Pope has invited us to reflect especially on the figure of the Holy Curé of Ars in this Year for Priests, in which we are commemorating the 150th anniversary of his *dies natalis*, his birth in heaven. “He was convinced that the fervor of a priest's life depended entirely upon the Mass: ‘The reason why a priest is lax is that he does not pay attention to the Mass! My God, how we ought to pity a priest who celebrates as if he were engaged in something routine!’ He was accustomed, when celebrating, also to offer his own life in sacrifice: ‘What a good thing it is for a priest each morning to offer himself to God in sacrifice!’ ”⁹

The Second Vatican Council stated in the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* that the celebration of the Mass is the most important moment of the priest's day: “the root and center of the whole life of a priest.”¹⁰ Therefore we want to strive to celebrate it each day as well as possible. I think that all of us were impressed by the witness of the Servant of God John Paul II, when, as he was about to celebrate his golden anniversary as a priest, he said with all simplicity: “In these almost fifty years of priesthood, the celebration of the Eucharist continues being for me the most important and sacred moment. I am fully aware of celebrating at the altar *in persona Christi*. Never in the course of these years have I failed to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice. If this did ever happen, it was only for reasons independent of my will. *The Holy Mass is the absolute center of my life and of my whole day.*”¹¹

The Blessed Trinity grants priests an inexpressible gift: to be an instrument to make our Lord's passion, death and resurrection, which occurred in history two thousand years ago, sacramentally present, in its true reality and with its full sanctifying efficacy. As John Paul II said, thanks to the Eucharist there takes place in our world “a mysterious ‘oneness in time’ between that *Triduum* and the passage of the centuries. The thought of this leads us to profound amazement and gratitude. . . This amazement should always fill

⁸ Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, “*Sacerdotes para una nueva evangelización*,” in *Escritos sobre el sacerdocio*, 6th ed., Palabra 1991, p. 202.

⁹ Benedict XVI, Letter to Priests, June 16, 2009. Cf. Bernard Nodet, “*Le Curé d’Ars. Sa pensée — Son Coeur*,” ed. Xavier Mappus 1966, pp. 104 and 105.

¹⁰ Vatican II, decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 14.

¹¹ John Paul II, words at the conclusion of the meeting to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, October 27, 1995.

the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist.”¹²

A priest should never grow accustomed to this marvel of love that takes place each day on the altar and that remains in the tabernacle after Mass. With God’s help, he has to foster an ever new astonishment at what he recognizes with the eyes of faith, without tiring of considering this marvel once and again. Just as children, to whom the Kingdom of heaven belongs (cf. *Mt* 18:3-4), enjoy a practically unlimited capacity for amazement, so too a priest needs to marvel at this mystery, with eyes of faith and love, in celebrating the Eucharist.

Every Catholic has to cultivate this astonishment, but especially priests, who have been granted the power to carry out this very great miracle. The priest’s identity—I repeat once again in words of St. Josemaría—consists in being “a direct and daily instrument of the saving grace which Christ has won for us. If you grasp this, if you meditate on it in the active silence of prayer, how could you ever think of the priesthood in terms of renunciation? It is a gain, an incalculable gain. Our mother Mary, the holiest of creatures—only God is holier—brought Jesus Christ into the world just once; priests bring him on earth, to our soul and body, every day: Christ comes to be our food, to give us life, to be, even now, a pledge of future life.”¹³

We will never fully fathom this astonishing reality: on the altar the priest is *ipse Christus*, Christ himself, in a sacramental way! He lends to Jesus Christ his voice, his hands, his whole being, so that the Holy Sacrifice of Calvary can be made present throughout every corner of the world, until the end of time. It is a duty—a duty of love, but a duty—for the priest to be demanding on himself, in order to go up to the altar with the least possible unworthiness on his part.

To grow in this awareness, a practical counsel may help: divide the day into two parts. In the morning, make acts of thanksgiving to the Blessed Trinity for having celebrated Holy Mass; in the afternoon, begin preparing for the next day’s Mass. This is how a holy priest expressed it: “I try to make the last thought [of each day] one of thanksgiving to our Lord for having celebrated Mass that day. And I also say: ‘Lord, I give you thanks because by your mercy I hope to celebrate Holy Mass tomorrow as well, renewing the Divine Sacrifice *in persona Christi* and consecrating your Body and your Blood.’ Thus even while I’m sleeping I’m preparing.”¹⁴

A manifestation of priestly outlook, which Benedict XVI recalled, is that of going up to the altar with the proper liturgical vestments. The Holy Father invites us to focus on the significance of the vestments (the amice, the alb, the stole, the chasuble), so clearly expressed in the prayers that the Church advises for the moment of vesting before the celebration. “The fact that we are standing at the altar clad in liturgical vestments must make it clearly visible to those present that we are there ‘in the person of an Other.’ The priestly vestments that developed over the course of time are a profound symbolic

¹² John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, no. 5.

¹³ St. Josemaría, Homily *A Priest Forever*, April 13, 1973.

¹⁴ St. Josemaría, notes taken from a family conversation, May 10, 1974 (AGP, P01 Oct-1974, p. 64).

expression of what the priesthood means. . . . Vesting ourselves in them must be more than an external event: it means entering ever anew into the ‘yes’ of our office—into that ‘no longer I’ of Baptism, which priestly ordination gives to us in a new way and at the same time asks of us.”¹⁵

Ministers of God’s mercy

Along with the Eucharistic celebration, the administration of the sacrament of Reconciliation is another moment when the priest’s identification with the Eternal High Priest reaches its greatest intensity. People have spoken a lot about the *crisis of confession*, but in reality (and this is how the Roman Pontiffs have put it at various times in recent years) it is more a case of a *crisis of confessors*. The proof of this is the fact that when priests are available for confession in a church, with clear schedules and unmistakable signs of their presence, in a short time many of the faithful come to receive this sacrament.

Things are not more difficult now than in past epochs, but certainly we need to teach people about the need for the sacrament of divine mercy, taking advantage of homilies, courses of preparation for Confirmation or Marriage, etc., and we priests have to make ourselves available to hear confessions. As Benedict XVI wrote: “In France, at the time of the Curé of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day. . . . Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence. He thus created a ‘virtuous’ circle. By spending long hours in church before the tabernacle, he inspired the faithful to imitate him by coming to visit Jesus with the knowledge that their parish priest would be there, ready to listen and offer forgiveness. Later, the growing numbers of penitents from all over France would keep him in the confessional for up to sixteen hours a day.”¹⁶

We are certainly not asked to do the same as the Holy Curé of Ars. And perhaps the time available for the administration of this sacrament depends on many factors, on the tasks that we have been entrusted with, etc. But surely if we examine ourselves with sincerity we will discover that we can do more; that, by cutting back a little on the time we dedicate to other tasks, we can find a few hours each week to be available in the confessional. Perhaps in no other moment is it more clearly seen—as St. John Marie Vianney said—that “the priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.”¹⁷

Here as well St. Josemaría offers us the testimony of his own experience, corroborated by that of many other priests. He told someone who asked about dedicating time to the sacrament of Penance: “Some brotherly advice: sit in the confessional every day, or at least two or three times a week, awaiting souls there, much as a fisherman waits for fish. At first no one may come. Take the breviary with you, or a book of spiritual

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Chrism Mass, April 5, 2007.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, Letter to Priests, June 16, 2009

¹⁷ Cited by Benedict XVI in his Letter to Priests, June 16, 2009.

reading or a text to meditate on. The first few days you'll have time to make use of this material. Then an old lady will come, and you'll teach her it's not enough for her to be good; she ought to bring her small grandchildren. Four or five days later, two young girls will come; then a big boy, and then a man, somewhat furtively.... Before two months are out, they won't leave you free; there will be no more time in the confessional for praying, because your anointed hands will be occupied, just like Christ's—made one with his, for you are Christ—as you say: 'I absolve you..'" And he concluded: "Love the confessional. Love it, love it a lot! . . . That is the way to make amends to our Lord for so many of our brothers who no longer want to sit in the confessional, nor listen to souls, nor administer God's forgiveness."¹⁸

Friendship with our Lord

The deepest meaning of the priesthood can be summed up in being ministers and friends of Jesus. Ministers who say, like St. Paul: *We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:20)*. And intimate friends who—as the Gospel stresses—know how to persevere at his side in moments of difficulty (cf. *Lk 22:28*). Intimacy means a communion of thoughts and wills, of sentiments and aspirations, in accord with the advice of the Apostle to the Gentiles: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5)*.

Union with Jesus is not merely something interior; it also has to be shown in deeds. "This means," explains the Pope, "that we should know Jesus in an increasingly personal way, listening to him, living together with him, staying with him. Listening to him in the *lectio divina*, that is, reading Sacred Scripture not in an academic but in a spiritual way. Thus we learn to encounter Jesus who is present, who speaks to us. We must reason and reflect, before him and with him, on his words and actions. The reading of Sacred Scripture is prayer, it must be prayer—it must emerge from prayer and lead to prayer."¹⁹

Our Lord's example is very clear. The evangelists show him in constant conversation with God the Father, and also how he often retired to a mountain to pray alone; that is to say, he dedicated specific periods of time to prayer, apart from the crowds and even from the apostles themselves. The priest, *ipse Christus*, has to imitate the example of the Master. Only in this way will he grow in intimacy with him and be a good instrument to communicate his friendship to others.

We know very well that the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend on the personal holiness of the one who administers them, since they act *ex opere operato*, by their own power; that is to say, they are before and above all else actions of Christ, the one and perfect Priest, source of supernatural life. But, through the Communion of Saints, more graces will reach souls if the priest is closely united to Christ. And this good disposition is assured by assiduous contact with our Lord in the Bread and in the Word,

¹⁸ St. Josemaría, notes taken in a get-together with priests in Oporto, October 31, 1972 (AGP P04, vol. II, p. 758).

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Chrism Mass, April 13, 2006.

in the Eucharist and in prayer. “Only in this way can we truly speak *in persona Christi*, even if our inner remoteness from Christ cannot jeopardize the validity of the Sacrament. Being a friend of Jesus, being a priest, means being a man of prayer.”²⁰

The Church’s magisterium, the teachings of the saints, and experience itself show the need for priests to foster a strong interior life, with the daily celebration of the Eucharist, with frequent recourse to sacramental confession, with the prayer of the Divine Office and time dedicated to personal prayer, with a filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin. That is the guarantee of truly efficacious pastoral action. “The time we set aside for prayer,” Benedict XVI said to a group of priests, “is not time taken from our pastoral responsibility but is precisely pastoral ‘work’; it is also praying for others. In the *Common of Pastors*, one reads as a typical feature of the good Pastor that ‘*multum oravit pro fratribus*.’ This is proper to the Pastor, that he should be a man of prayer, that he should come before the Lord praying for others, even replacing others who perhaps do not know how to pray, do not want to pray or do not take the time to pray. Thus it is clear that this dialogue with God is pastoral work!”²¹

In this context special importance must be given to being faithful to the Liturgy of the Hours. It would be a great mistake to think that those moments of vocal and mental prayer were a waste of time in the face of the demands of pastoral work, and that it doesn’t matter if we omit it. This public prayer of the Church is one of the tasks entrusted to those who receive priestly ordination. But this is not merely an obligation imposed from without. Rather it is a need of the priestly heart for one who realizes he is a minister in Christ’s Mystical Body.

The Pope said on one occasion that the Church “imposes upon us—but always like a good Mother—the obligation to make free time for God with the two practices that constitute a part of our duties: the celebration of Holy Mass and the recitation of the Breviary. However, rather than reciting it, this means putting it into practice by listening to the word which the Lord offers us in the Liturgy of the Hours.”²² Thus by interiorizing the liturgical prayer, reserving the most appropriate moments for it, we prolong the great chain of supplication that was begun by the just men in the Old Testament. We pray with our Lord, or better, our Lord prays in us, as St. Augustine explains: *orat pro nobis ut sacerdos noster; orat in nobis ut caput nostrum; oratur a nobis ut Deus noster*.²³ He prays for us as our Priest; he prays in us as our Head; he is prayed to by us as our God. We pray with the Church of all times. Then we understand that the task we have received is a precious responsibility conferred on the priest, so that he keeps the indispensable torch of prayer enkindled in the world, until the end of time.

St. Josemaría once spoke about the need to make an effort to pray when prayer becomes difficult. This has special relevance in the context of the Liturgy of the Hours: “You can unite yourself to the prayer of all Christians of every epoch: those who have

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Benedict XVI, meeting with priests of the diocese of Albano, August 31, 2006.

²² Ibid.

²³ St. Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms* 85[86]:1.

preceded us, those who are living now, those who will come in future centuries. Thus, feeling this marvel of the Communion of Saints which is an unending song of praise to God, although you don't feel like it, although you find it hard—dry!—you will pray with effort, but with greater trust.”²⁴

Concern for priests

I don't have time here to speak about the many other aspects that the Year for Priests suggests. I have limited myself to recalling some points that seem especially important to me, because they form part of the ministry entrusted to us and deeply affect the search for holiness. But I don't want to end without referring to another essential point for priests: concern for one another, for the spiritual and material welfare of our brothers in the priesthood, for their sanctity.

A brother helped by his brother is like a walled city (Prov 18:19, Vulgate). Our Lord has appointed ministers in the Church to provide the faithful with the saving power of the Gospel—the word of God and the sacraments—and thus to lead them along the path of holiness. And they have to strive to be an example to the others: to be a light that shines to illumine everyone, salt that seasons Christian life (cf. Mt 5:13-14). But each priest knows that he himself is beset with weakness (cf. Heb 5:2) and needs the help of the others. “It is very important that all priests, whether diocesan or religious, help one another always to be fellow workers in the truth.”²⁵ This is how the Vatican II decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* expresses it. Fraternity among priests is a necessary means for progress on their path, for overcoming any moments of weakness or exhaustion that may arise.

For many years, St. Josemaría dedicated his best energies to his brothers in the priesthood, as his biographers have shown. And his love for the Church led him to continually encourage priestly vocations. He had this concern deeply engraved on his soul because he well knew that the Church's future required well-formed priests, filled with a desire for sanctity and zeal for souls. This solicitude was shown especially in the immediate post-Conciliar years when one began to notice almost all over the world a considerable reduction in the number of priestly vocations. His concern became so strong that he literally lost sleep over it, while at the same time it spurred him to pray and to get others to pray untiringly for this intention.

Unfortunately, in most countries—especially in the developed nations of the West—this shortage of priestly vocations is continuing, with its inevitable repercussion on the pastoral attention of the faithful. All of us have to beseech our Lord to send many more workers into his field (cf. Mt 9:37-38). We cannot consider this task as one that corresponds only to the bishops and to those assigned to vocation work: it is a joint task of pastors and faithful, united in love for the Church, which urgently needs many holy priests. Therefore all Catholics share in this responsibility: to beseech Jesus Christ, the Supreme Priest, for this intention, making use of practical, specific means that are within

²⁴ St. Josemaría, notes taken in a family gathering, September 6, 1973 (AGP, P01 October, 1973, p. 31).

²⁵ Vatican II, decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 8.

everyone's reach.

We should all speak about this topic in our preaching and catechesis, fostering in fathers and mothers the holy desire that our Lord call a child of theirs to the path of the priesthood. Let us take advantage of the means entrusted to us—from the administration of the sacrament of Penance to the ordinary events of each day—to open horizons of dedication to God, for this is an urgent apostolic priority at the present moment. Let us sow unceasingly the seed of possible vocations: the divine Sower will provide the increase.

Reinforcing communion with the bishops

I cannot neglect to point out the need for priests, all of them, to be very united to their bishop. Our Lord has repeated to us in many ways that every city or house that is disunited will end up destroying itself (cf. *Mt* 12:25). He also tells us that the branches have to be united to the vine (cf. *Jn* 15:5) to give savory and abundant fruit. This unity between the clergy and their Prelate, between the Ordinary and his priests, was graphically expressed in the Second Vatican Council when it cited St. Ignatius of Antioch, comparing this close union to that which exists between Christ and the Church, or between Christ and God the Father.²⁶

The communion of the clergy in each diocese with their Pastor is one of the specific objectives stressed by the Pope for this Year for Priests. “Echoing the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of Pope John Paul II, the ordained ministry has a radical ‘communitarian form’ and can be exercised only in the communion of priests with their Bishop. This communion between priests and their Bishop, grounded in the sacrament of Holy Orders and made manifest in Eucharistic concelebration, needs to be translated into various concrete expressions of an effective and affective priestly fraternity (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 74). Only thus will priests be able to live fully the gift of celibacy and build thriving Christian communities in which the miracles which accompanied the first preaching of the Gospel can be repeated.”²⁷

Let us help the bishops, also in order to help priests. We all have to strive to foster the clear mutual interdependence that will bring about such marvelous consequences for the entire People of God. Always, and even more so in today's circumstances, this strong union is a necessary element for building up the Church as Christ wants it. The *mandatum novum* (*Jn* 13:34) needs to be fulfilled also in this specific aspect: for the Church of Christ to be recognized, we pastors have to love one another *as He has loved us* (cf. *ibid.*).

I close with some other words of St. Josemaría, with the hope that they will stir up in all priests an even stronger holy anxiety to foster priestly vocations. During a trip to South America, almost at the end of his earthly life, he urged a group of diocesan priests to be concerned about the formation of those who give hopes of receiving a call to the

²⁶ Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 27.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, Letter to Priests, June 16, 2009.

priesthood. And he gave specific advice: “Seek financial assistance, and send [to the seminary] the souls you have been preparing from their childhood. Give them interior life; teach them to love God, to find him within their soul, to have a filial piety towards our Lady, to realize that the greatest thing in the world is to be another Christ, Christ himself. And a firm resolution: at the very least, I’ll find one successor! And since some drop out, at least two. . . . If you strive to do this, you will turn everything around. It is enough that you want to.”²⁸

The Blessed Virgin, Mother of the Eternal High Priest and our Mother, will obtain from her Son—with our specific effort—the gift of sanctity in the exercise of our priestly work, so that we may be effective instruments for the sanctification of souls, which the Holy Trinity wants to bring about through our ministry.

²⁸ St. Josemaría, notes taken in a get-together with priests in Lima, July 26, 1974 (AGP, P04 1974, vol II, p. 401).