

Text of Homily at Philadelphia Civic Center

The following is excerpted from the text of the pontiff's homily at Philadelphia's Civic Center during a mass for priests, religious and seminarians.

Dear Brother Priests,

As we celebrate this Mass, which brings together the presidents or chairmen of the priests' senates, or councils, of all the dioceses of the United States, the theme that suggests itself to our reflection is a vital one: the priesthood itself and its central importance to the task of the church. In the encyclical letter Redemptor Hominis, I described this task in these words: 'The church's fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of God, to help men to be familiar with the profundity of the redemption taking place in Christ Jesus.'

I want this Mass to be the special occasion on which I can speak through you to all my brother priests throughout this nation about our priesthood. With great love I repeat the words that I wrote to you on Holy Thursday: 'For you I am a bishop, with you I am a priest.'

Fidelity to the call to the priesthood means building up this priesthood with God's people by a life of service according to apostolic priorities: concentration on prayer and the ministry of the word.

At times, our concept of this ministry is too earthbound; we lack confidence in him who calls us. We can also become too attached to our own vision of ministry, thinking that it depends too much on our own talents and abilities, and at times forgetting that it is God who calls us, as he called Jeremiah from the womb. Nor is it our

work or our ability that is primary; we are called to speak the words of God and not our own; to minister the sacraments he has given to his church; and to call people to a love which he has first made possible.

Hence the surrender to God's call can be made with utmost confidence and without reservation. Our surrender to God's will must be total — the 'yes' given once for all which has as its pattern the 'yes' spoken by Jesus himself.

As St. Paul tells us, 'As God keeps his word, I declare that my word to you is not 'yes' one minute and 'no' the next. Jesus Christ . . . was not alternately 'yes' and 'no'; he was never anything but 'yes.'

This call of God is grace: it is a gift, a treasure possessed in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from

us.' But this gift is not primarily for the priest himself; it is rather a gift of God for the whole church and for her mission to the world.

Priesthood is an abiding sacramental sign which shows that the love of the Good Shepherd for his flock will never be absent. In my letter to you priests last Holy Thursday, I developed this aspect of the priesthood as God's gift: Our priesthood, I said, 'constitutes a special ministerium, that is to say 'service,' in relation to the community of believers. It does not, however, take its origin from that community, as though it were the community that 'called' or 'delegated.'

The sacramental priesthood is truly a gift for this community and comes from Christ himself, from the fullness of his priesthood. It is in this gift-giving to his people, it is the divine giver who takes

the initiative; it is he who calls the ones he himself had decided on.'

Hence when we reflect on the intimacy between the Lord and his prophet, his priest — an intimacy arising as a result of the call which he has initiated — we can better understand certain characteristics of the priesthood and realize their appropriateness for the church's mission today as well as in times past:

Priesthood is forever — tu es sacerdos in aeternum — tu es sacerdos in aeternum — we do not return the gift once given. It cannot be that God who gave the impulse to say 'yes' now wishes to hear 'no.'

Nor should it surprise the world that the call of God through the church continues to offer us a celibate ministry of love and service after the example of our Lord Jesus

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Official Representative

Father John T. Walsh, pastor of St. Paul's Church in Webster, was the official representative of the Diocese of Rochester at the papal Mass in Philadelphia, Wednesday, Oct. 3.

U.S. Bishops

From 6A

Catholic unity with the bishops and the Apostolic See — there are great insights of faith. The Holy Spirit is active in enlightening the minds of the faithful with his truth, and inflaming their hearts with his love. But these insights of faith and this sensus fidelium are not independent of the Magisterium of the Church, which is an instrument of the same Holy Spirit and is assisted by him. It is only when the faithful have been nourished by the word of God, faithfully transmitted in its purity and integrity, that their own charisms are fully operative and fruitful. Once the word of God is faithfully proclaimed to the community and is accepted, it brings forth fruits of justice and holiness of life in abundance. But the dynamism of the community in understanding and living the word of God depends on its receiving intact the depositum fidei; and for this precise purpose a special apostolic and pastoral charism has been given to the Church. It is one and the same Spirit of truth who directs the hearts of the faithful and who guarantees the magisterium of the pastors of the flock."

One of the greatest truths of which we are the humble custodians is the doctrine of the Church's unity — that unity which is tarnished on the human face of the Church by every form of sin, but which subsists indestructibly in the Catholic Church. A consciousness of sin calls us incessantly to conversion. The will of Christ impels us to work earnestly and perseveringly for unity with all our Christian brethren, being mindful that the unity we seek is one of perfect faith, a unity in truth and love. We must pray and study together, knowing however that intercommunion between divided Christians is not the answer to Christ's appeal for perfect unity. And with God's help we will continue to work humbly and resolutely to remove the real divisions that still exist, and thus to restore that full unity in faith which is the condition for sharing in the Eucharist. The commitment of the Ecumenical Council belongs to each of us, as does the testament of Paul VI, who writing on Ecumenism stated: "Let the work of drawing near

to our separated brethren go on, with much understanding, with much patience, with great love; but without deviating from the true Catholic doctrine."

As bishops who are servants of truth, we are also called to be servants of unity, in the communion of the Church.

In the communion of holiness we ourselves are called, as I mentioned above, to conversion, so that we may preach with convincing power the message of Jesus: "Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel." We have a special role to play in safeguarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so that, in fidelity to a divine precept, we and our people may experience in our innermost being that "grace has far surpassed sin." I, too, ratify the prophetic call of Paul VI, who urged the bishops to help their priests to "deeply understand how closely they collaborate through the Sacrament of Penance and indicate the precise limits of General Absolution, just as Paul VI did in his ad limina address to the American Bishops.

Conversion by its very nature is the condition for that union with God which reaches its greatest expression in the Eucharist. Our union with Christ in the Eucharist presupposes, in turn, that our hearts are set on conversion, that they are pure. This is indeed an important part of our preaching to the people. In my encyclical I endeavored to express it in these words: "The Christ who calls to the Eucharistic banquet is always the same Christ who exhorts us to penance and repeats his 'Repent'. Without this constant and ever-renewed endeavor for conversion, partaking of the eucharist would lack its full redeeming effectiveness. . . ." In the face of a widespread phenomenon of our time, namely that many of our people who are among the great numbers who receive Communion make little use of Confession, we must emphasize Christ's basic

call to conversion. We must also stress that the personal encounter with the forgiving Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a divine means which keeps alive in our hearts and in our communities a consciousness of sin in its perennial and tragic reality, and which actually brings forth, by the action of Jesus and the power of his Spirit, fruits of conversion in justice and holiness of life. By this Sacrament we are renewed in fervor, strengthened in our resolves and buoyed up by divine encouragement.

As chosen leaders in a community of praise and prayer, it is our special joy to offer the Eucharist and to give our people a sense of their vocation as an Easter people, with the "alleluia" as their song. And let us always recall that the validity of all liturgical development and the effectiveness of every liturgical sign presupposes the

testimony be clear and without reproach. In this regard the Catholic press and the other means of social communication are called to fulfill a special role of great dignity at the service of truth and charity. The Church's aim in employing and sponsoring these media is linked to her mission to evangelization and of service to humanity; through the media the Church hopes to promote ever more effectively the uplifting message of the Gospel.

And each individual Church over which you preside and which you serve is a community founded on the word of God and acting in the truth of this word. It is in fidelity to the communion of the universal Church that our local unity is authenticated and made stable. In the communion of the universal Church local Churches find their own identity and enrichment ever more clearly. But all of this requires that the

great principle that the Catholic liturgy is theocentric, and that it is above all "the worship of divine majesty," in union with Jesus Christ. Our people have a supernatural sense whereby they look for reverence in all liturgy, especially in what touches the mystery of the Eucharist. With deep faith our people understand that the Eucharist in the Mass and outside the Mass — is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and therefore deserves the worship that is given to the living God and to him alone.

As ministers of a community of service, it is our privilege to proclaim the truth of Christ's union with his members in his Body, the Church. Hence we commend all service rendered in his name and to his brethren.

In a community of witness and evangelization may our individual Churches should maintain complete openness

toward the universal Church.

And this is the mystery that we celebrate today in proclaiming the holiness and truth and unity of the episcopal ministry.

Brothers: this ministry of ours makes us accountable to Christ and to his Church. Jesus Christ, the chief Shepherd, loves us and sustains us. It is he who transmits his Father's word and consecrates us in truth, so that each of us may say in turn of our people: "For them I consecrate myself for their sake now, that they may be consecrated in truth."

Let us pray for and devote special energy to promoting and maintaining vocations to the sacred priesthood, so that the pastoral care of the priestly ministry may be ensured for future generations. I ask you to call upon parents and families, upon priests, religious and laity to unite in fulfilling this vital responsibility of the entire community. And to the young people themselves let us hold up the full challenge of following Christ and of embracing his invitation with full generosity.

As we ourselves pursue every day the justice and holiness born of truth, let us look to Mary, Mother of Jesus, Queen of Apostles, and Cause of our Joy. May Saint Francis Xavier Cabrini, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and Saint John Neumann pray for you, and for all the people whom you are called to serve in holiness and truth and in the unity of Christ and his Church.

Dear Brothers: "Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with unflinching love."

Seminary Delegation

Father Frank E. Lioi, rector of St. Bernard's Seminary, and Father Thomas R. Statt, Becket Hall rector, led a delegation from the diocesan seminaries to a special Mass celebrated last Thursday by Pope John Paul II in the Philadelphia Civic Center.

The group included 16 seminarians and their spiritual directors, Father William Darling of St. Bernard's and Father Vincent Panepinto of Becket.

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