

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
FOR THE 45th WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS**

13 APRIL 2008 - FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Theme: “Vocations at the service of the Church on mission”

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. For the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, to be celebrated on 13 April 2008, I have chosen the theme: *Vocations at the service of the Church on mission*. The Risen Jesus gave to the Apostles this command: “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 in herself and in each one of her members. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, every Christian is called to bear witness and to announce the Gospel, but this missionary dimension is associated in a special and intimate way with the priestly vocation. In the covenant with Israel, God entrusted to certain men, called by him and sent to the people in his name, a mission as prophets and priests. He did so, 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 and 12*). The same happened with the prophets.

2. The promises made to our fathers were fulfilled entirely 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). And Jesus already in his public life, while preaching in Galilee, chose some disciples to be his close collaborators in the messianic ministry. For example, on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves, he said to the Apostles: “You give them something to eat” (*Mt 14: 16*), encouraging them to assume the needs of the crowds to whom he wished to offer nourishment, but also to reveal the food “which endures to eternal life” (*Jn 6: 27*). He was moved to compassion for the people, because while visiting cities and villages, he found the crowds weary and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (cf. *Mt 9: 36*). From this gaze of love came 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 initially “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” with

precise instructions. If we pause to meditate on this passage of Matthew's Gospel, commonly called the "missionary discourse", we may take note of those aspects which distinguish the missionary activity of a Christian community, eager to remain faithful to the example and teaching of Jesus. To respond to the Lord's call means facing in 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 their Master, the disciples are no longer alone as they announce the Kingdom of heaven; Jesus himself 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 the forgiveness of sins" (*Lk* 24: 47) to all peoples.

3. Precisely because they have been sent by the Lord, the Twelve are called "Apostles", destined to walk the roads of the world announcing the Gospel as witnesses to the death and resurrection of Christ. Saint Paul, writing to the Christians of Corinth, says: "We – the Apostles – preach Christ crucified" (*1 Cor* 1: 23). The Book of the *Acts of the Apostles* also assigns a very important role in this task of evangelization to other disciples whose missionary vocation arises from providential, sometimes painful, circumstances such as expulsion from their own lands for being followers of Jesus (cf. 8,1-4). The Holy Spirit transforms this trial into an occasion of grace, using it so that the name of the Lord can be preached to other peoples, stretching in this way the horizons of the Christian community. These are men and women who, as Luke writes in 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, called by the Lord himself, hence a true Apostle. The story of Paul, the greatest missionary of all times, brings out in many ways the link between vocation and mission. Accused by his opponents of not being authorized for the apostolate, he makes repeated appeals precisely to the call which he received directly from the Lord (cf. *Rom* 1: 1; *Gal* 1: 11-12 and 15-17).

4. In the beginning, and thereafter, what "impels" the Apostles (cf. *2 Cor* 5: 14) is always "the love of Christ". Innumerable missionaries, throughout the centuries, as faithful servants of the Church, docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, 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 [cf. *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 those totally dedicated to the service of the Gospel, are priests, called to preach the word of God, administer the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, committed to helping the lowly, the sick, the suffering, the poor, and those who experience hardship in areas of the world where there are, at times, many who still have not had a real encounter with Jesus Christ. 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 and sisters. In this context, a special word of thanks must be expressed "to the *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 the 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, prompted 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 men and women religious, belonging to innumerable Institutes of contemplative and active life, still plays "the main role in the evangelisation of the world" (*Ad Gentes*, 40). With their continual and community prayer, contemplatives intercede without ceasing for all humanity. Religious of the active life, with their many charitable activities, bring to all a living witness of the love and mercy of God. The Servant of God Paul VI concerning these apostles of our times 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. Furthermore, so that the Church may continue to fulfil the mission entrusted to her by Christ, and not lack promoters of the Gospel so badly needed by the world, Christian communities must never fail to provide both children and adults with constant education in the faith. It is necessary to keep alive in the faithful a committed sense of missionary responsibility and active 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 by constant formation in prayer. It must grow through the practice of welcoming others, with charity and spiritual companionship, through reflection and discernment, as well as pastoral planning, of which attention to vocations must be an integral part.

8. Vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life can only flourish in a spiritual soil that is well cultivated. Christian communities that 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 community, “so that the world may believe” (cf. *Jn* 17: 21). The Church prays everyday to the Holy Spirit for the gift of vocations. Gathered around the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Apostles, as in the beginning, the ecclesial community learns from her how to implore the Lord for a flowering of new apostles, alive with the faith and love that are necessary for the mission.

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

From the Vatican, 3 December 2007

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