

MESSAGE OF POPE BENEDICT XVI FOR THE 45TH WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

APRIL 13, 2008 – 4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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” (cf 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 (cf. 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 (cf. *Rm 1, 1; Gal 1, 11-12.15-17*).

4. At the beginning, as well as later on, what “impels” the Apostles (cf. 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 foot steps 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 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,

