

**“Mary and the Call to Priestly Holiness
in the Magisterium of Twentieth Century Popes
with Particular Reference to Pope Saint John Paul II”**

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One of the frequently cited features of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* is the fact of its insistence in chapter five on the universal call to holiness. This is certainly not a new teaching because the gospel preached by our Blessed Lord clearly calls all to holiness, but it cannot be denied that Jansenism and its ideology, which had survived into the twentieth century, discouraged many lay people from pursuing a deeper spiritual life. Many lay people were content to leave more serious prayer to priests and religious. The emphasis of the council in this regard was surely an important one and it still needs to be preached. At the same time in the aftermath of the council there was an enormous exodus from the priesthood and the religious life and – as we now know, unfortunately – a serious moral crisis in the priesthood. The call to priestly holiness has probably never been more needed than it is now and all of the twentieth century popes have spoken about it.

The fact is that the call to priestly holiness is really a call for the upbuilding of the entire Church and this was described by Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard (1858-1935) early in the twentieth century who cites two sources to drive his point home:

If the priest is a saint (the saying goes), the people will be fervent; if the priest is fervent, the people will be pious; if the priest is pious, the people will at least be decent. But if the priest is only decent, the people will be godless. The spiritual generation is always one degree less intense in its life than those who beget it in Christ

We would not go so far as to accept this proposition, but we consider that the following words of St. Alphonsus sufficiently well express the *cause* to which we may attribute the responsibility for our present situation:

“The good morals and the salvation of the people depend on good pastors. If there is a good priest in charge of the parish, you will soon see devotion flourishing, people frequenting the Sacraments, and honoring the practice of mental prayer. Hence the proverb: like pastor, like parish: *Qualis pastor, talis parocchia*.¹

¹ Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OCSO, *The Soul of the Apostolate* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1946) 39-40.

Happily, the twentieth century popes were concerned to hold priests to two high standards of holiness, which the popes elected at its beginning and end attained themselves: Pope Saint Pius X (1903-1914) and Pope Saint John Paul II (1978-2005).

I. Pope Saint Pius X (1903-1914)

On the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary of priestly ordination Pope Saint Pius X issued *Hærent Animo* an exhortation to the clergy of the world emphasizing the importance of priestly holiness and the means to obtain it. At the very beginning of this document issued on 4 August 1908 he stated: “Our first and chief concern is that all who are invested with the priestly ministry should be in every way fitted for the discharge of their responsibilities. For we are fully convinced that it is here that hope lies for the welfare and progress of religious life.”² At the conclusion of this exhortation he referred to Our Lady as Queen of the Apostles in this way:

Finally, beloved sons, we are happy to express our heartfelt thanks for the manifold expressions of good wishes, inspired by filial piety, which were offered by you on the approach of the fiftieth anniversary of our ordination. The good wishes which we convey to you in return, we entrust to the care of the great Virgin Mother, Queen of Apostles, in order that they may be fulfilled even more abundantly.

It was she who by her example showed the Apostles, who were the first to share the blessing of the priesthood, how they should persevere with one mind in prayer until they were clothed with power from on high; *by her prayers she secured that power for them in more abundant measure, she increased and strengthened it by her counsel, so that their labors were abundantly blessed.*³

True, this is not a direct plea to Our Lady for the growth of the clergy of the world in holiness; it is rather a suggestion. As she taught the Apostles by her example, interceded for them and counselled them, so she can be for the priests of the world.

II. Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922)

At the conclusion of his Encyclical *Humani Generis Redemptionem* On Preaching the Word of God of 15 June 1917 Benedict XV implored

² *Acta Sanctæ Sedis* [ASS] XLI (1908) 555 [Monsignor Pierre Veuillot, *The Catholic Priesthood According to the Teaching of the Church: Papal Documents from Pius X to Pius XII (1939-54)* (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1957) #120, pp. 52-53].

³ ASS 41 XLI 1908) 577 [Veuillot #191, p. 78] (my emphasis).

May the merciful, eternal Shepherd, Jesus Christ, look down upon his flock, and *through the prayers of the Blessed Virgin, the August Mother of the Incarnate Word and Queen of the Apostles, may he restore the apostolic spirit among the clergy* and grant a great increase of those who endeavor “to present themselves approved to God, workmen who need not be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” [II Tim. ii:15].⁴

This, effectively, is a prayer that the Lord may “restore the apostolic spirit among the clergy” through Mary’s intercession.

III. Pope Pius XI (1922-1939)

In his Encyclical *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii* On the Catholic Priesthood of 20 December 1935 Pius XI spoke of the devotion which a priest should have to the Blessed Virgin Mary in this way:

Though this piety should be directed primarily to our heavenly Father, it should extend also to the Virgin Mother of God. *The priest should have a more intense love for Our Lady than the lay faithful, because the intimate union that existed between her and her divine Son bears a resemblance to the relation between Christ and the priest.*⁵

For Pius XI, then, Jesus’ relationship to Mary is analogous to his relationship to the priest and therefore the priest should cultivate a relationship to Mary.

IV. The Venerable Pope Pius XII (1939-1958)

With the Venerable Pius XII one begins to discern a more intimate way of writing about Mary and her relationship with the priest. There are many beautiful Marian passages in his Encyclical *Menti Nostræ* of 23 September 1950 addressed to the clergy of the world on the sanctification of priestly life and Mary’s role in this.

Inasmuch as priests can be called by a very special title, sons of the Virgin Mary, they will never cease to love her with an ardent piety, invoke her with perfect confidence, and frequently implore her strong protection. So that every day, as the Church herself recommends, they

⁴ *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis* [AAS] 9 (1917) 317 [Veillot #291, p. 118] (my emphasis).

⁵ AAS 28 (1936) 24 [Veillot #483, p. 217] (my emphasis).

will recite the holy rosary, which, by proposing for our meditation the mysteries of the Redeemer, leads us “to Jesus through Mary.”⁶

Pius begins with a notion frequently alluded to by John Paul II i.e., that if the Apostle John represent all of us in being given Mary as our Mother, he represents in particular, as an Apostle, all who are called to the hierarchical priesthood. He exhorts priests “to love her with an ardent piety, invoke her with perfect confidence, and frequently implore her strong protection”. The final quote is obviously from Saint Bernard.

In speaking of the virtue of chastity to be inculcated in seminarians he says:

These and all the other priestly virtues can be easily acquired and firmly possessed by seminarians if from the beginning they have acquired and cultivated a sincere and tender devotion to Christ Jesus present “truly, really, and substantially” in our midst in the most august Sacrament, and if they make of Him the inspiration and the end of all their actions and their aspirations. And, *if to devotion to the Blessed Sacrament they unite filial devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, full of trust and abandonment to the Mother of God and urging the soul to imitate her virtues*, then the Church will be supremely happy, because the fruit of an ardent and zealous ministry can never be wanting in a priest whose adolescence has been nourished with the love of Jesus and Mary.⁷

Here he speaks of the great desirability that seminarians should be “abandoned to the Mother of God” in the sense of the consecration to Mary promoted by Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort whom he himself had canonized on 20 July 1947.

He concludes *Menti Nostræ* in this way:

When you meet very serious difficulties in the path of holiness and the exercise of your ministry, *turn your eyes and your mind trustfully to her who is the Mother of the Eternal Priest and therefore the loving Mother of all Catholic priests*. You are well aware of the goodness of this Mother. In many regions you have been the humble instruments of the mercy of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in wonderfully reviving the faith and charity of the Christian people.

Our Lady loves everyone with a most tender love, but *She has a particular predilection for priests who are the living image of Jesus Christ*. Take comfort in the thought of the love of the Divine Mother for

⁶ AAS 42 (1950) 673 [Papal Encyclicals Online] (my emphasis).

⁷ AAS 42 (1950) 691 [Papal Encyclicals Online] (my emphasis).

each of you and you will find the labors of your sanctification and priestly ministry much easier.

To the Beloved Mother of God, mediatrix of heavenly graces, We entrust the priests of the whole world in order that, through her intercession, God will vouchsafe a generous outpouring of His Spirit which will move all ministers of the altar to holiness and, through their ministry, will spiritually renew the face of the earth.

Trusting in the powerful patronage of the Immaculate Virgin Mary as far as the realization of these wishes is concerned, We implore an abundance of divine graces on all, but especially on the Bishops and priests who suffer persecution, imprisonment and exile because of their dutiful defense of the rights and the freedom of the Church. We express Our most tender affection to them and exhort them paternally to continue to give an example of priestly courage and virtue.⁸

In these beautiful lines the Venerable Pius XII reveals his own love for the Mother of God whose glorious Assumption he would solemnly declare and define on All Saints Day of that same year. He entrusts priests to Mary and brings together here the concept of Mary's motherhood of priests and the concept of the sanctification of priests, but does not explicitly speak of her influence in the sanctification of the clergy.

His Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas* of 25 March 1954 is not addressed directly to priests and religious, but *de facto*, it does pertain explicitly to those who have made vows of chastity and promises of celibacy and he does address them in the following excerpt:

The eminent way to protect and nourish an unsullied and perfect chastity, as proven by experience time and again throughout the course of centuries, is solid and fervent devotion to the Virgin Mother of God. In a certain way all other helps are contained in this devotion; there is no doubt that whoever is sincerely and earnestly animated by this devotion is salutarily inspired to constant vigilance, to continual prayer, to receive the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. Therefore in a paternal way We exhort all priests, religious men and women, to entrust themselves to the special protection of the holy Mother of God who is the Virgin of virgins and the "teacher of virginity," as Ambrose says, and the most powerful Mother of those in particular who have vowed and consecrated themselves to the service of God.

⁸ AAS 42 (1950) 701 [Papal Encyclicals Online] (my emphasis).

That virginity owes its origin to Mary is the testimony of Athanasius, and Augustine clearly teaches that “The dignity of virginity began with the Mother of the Lord.” Pursuing the ideas of Athanasius, Ambrose holds up the life of the Virgin Mary as the model of virgins. “Imitate her, my daughters ... ! Let Mary’s life be for you like the portrayal of virginity, for from her, as though from a mirror, is reflected the beauty of chastity and the ideal of virtue. See in her the pattern of your life, for in her, as though in a model, manifest teachings of goodness show what you should correct, what you should copy and what preserve. . . She is the image of virginity. For such was Mary that her life alone suffices for the instruction of all ... Therefore let holy Mary guide your way of life.” *“Her grace was so great that it not only preserved in her the grace of virginity, but bestowed the grace of chastity upon those on whom she gazed.”* How true is the saying of Ambrose, “Oh the richness of the virginity of Mary!” Because of this richness it will be very useful for religious men and women and for priests of our day to contemplate the virginity of Mary, in order that they may more faithfully and perfectly practice the chastity of their calling.

But it is not enough, beloved sons and daughters, to meditate on the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary: “with absolute confidence fly to her and obey the counsel of St. Bernard, let us seek grace and seek it through Mary.” In a special way entrust to her during the Marian Year the care of your spiritual life and perfection, imitating the example of Jerome who asserted, “My virginity is dedicated in Mary and to Christ.”⁹

In this magnificent text Pius XII not only encourages entrustment to Mary on the part of priests and consecrated religious: not only does he indicate her as a “teacher of virginity” and guide; not only does he exhort meditation on her virtues; not only does he exhort priests and religious to “fly to her with absolute confidence”, but finally he says “let us seek grace and seek it through Mary.” At last he emphasizes her instrumentality, her mediation of grace for growth in holiness.

Now I must make a simple admission. There may be many more valuable texts of the supreme pontiffs whose doctrine I have presented here. It would take much more detailed research to unearth and present them. The same is true in the case of Pope Saint John XXIII and Pope Saint Paul IV. I have simply not had access to further sources. There may well be much more for other researchers to do in this field.

V. Pope Saint John Paul II (1978-2005)

⁹ AAS 46 (1954) 187-189 [Vatican website] (my emphasis).

I now pass on to texts of Pope Saint John Paul II since I have spent almost forty years of my priesthood studying his magisterium and can still humbly say that I have by no means exhausted its richness. I have contended for many years that his Marian output remains his greatest single legacy to the Church. But in the course of his long pontificate stretching into twenty-six years he has shown an enormous pastoral concern for priests, not only in his annual Holy Thursday Letters to Priests, but also very frequently in the course of his many pastoral voyages and in the Vatican. He very consistently and regularly made reference to Mary's role in speaking with his brother priests.

Here is a section of his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests of 8 April 1979:

Dear Brothers, at the beginning of my ministry I entrust all of you to the Mother of Christ, who in a special way is our Mother: the Mother of Priests. In fact, the beloved disciple, who, as one of the Twelve, had heard in the Upper Room the words "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19), was given by Christ on the Cross to his Mother, with the words: "Behold your son" (Jn. 19:26). The man who on Holy Thursday received the power to celebrate the Eucharist was, by these words of the dying Redeemer, given to his Mother as her "son". All of us, therefore, who receive the same power through priestly Ordination have in a certain sense a prior right to see her as our Mother. And so I desire that all of you, together with me, should find in Mary the Mother of the priesthood which we have received from Christ. I also desire that you should entrust your priesthood to her in a special way. Allow me to do it myself, entrusting to the Mother of Christ each one of you – without any exception – in a solemn and at the same time simple and humble way. And I ask each of you, dear Brothers, to do it yourselves, in the way dictated to you by your own heart, especially by your love for Christ the Priest, and also by your own weakness, which goes hand in hand with your desire for service and holiness. I ask you to do this.

The Church of today speaks of herself especially in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. Here too, in the last chapter, she proclaims that she looks to Mary as to the Mother of Christ, because she calls herself a mother and wishes to be a mother, begetting people for God to a new life (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter VIII). Now, dear Brothers: how near you are to this cause of God! How deeply it is imprinted upon your vocation, ministry and mission. In consequence, in the midst of the People of God, that looks to Mary with immense love and hope, you must look to her with exceptional hope and

love. Indeed, you must proclaim Christ who is her Son; and who will better communicate to you the truth about him than his Mother? You must nourish human hearts with Christ: and who can make you more aware of what you are doing than she who nourished him? “Hail, true Body, born of the Virgin Mary”. In our “ministerial” priesthood there is *the wonderful and penetrating dimension of nearness to the Mother of Christ*. So let us try to live in that dimension. If I may be permitted to speak here of my own experience, I will say to you that in writing to you I am referring especially to my own personal experience.¹⁰

This sounds many themes that will resonate and be further developed in the course of his pontificate, especially that of entrustment to Mary.¹¹ But there is also a kind of intimacy and fraternal dimension, not found in the previous papal documents which we have presented and analyzed. His familiarity with Mary and his love for “his brother priests” meld together in a way that is personal and uniquely “Wojtyła” that we will find over and over again.

Here is an excerpt from the homily which he gave during a priestly ordination which he conferred at Rio de Janeiro on 2 July 1980:

Dear ordinands, dear priests, at this point my address becomes a prayer, a prayer which I wish to entrust to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of the Church and Queen of the Apostles. In your anxious expectation of the priesthood, you certainly took your place near her, like the Apostles in the Upper Room. *May she obtain for you the graces you most need for your sanctification and for the religious prosperity of your country. May she grant you especially love, her love – the love that gave her the grace of generating Christ – in order to be capable of carrying out your mission of generating Christ in souls, too. May she teach you to be pure, as she was; may she make you faithful to the divine call, and make you understand the whole beauty, joy and power of a ministry lived unreservedly in dedication and immolation for the service of God and of souls. Finally, let us ask Mary, for you and for all of us*

¹⁰ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II* [hereafter *Inseg.*] II (1979) 860-861; 879 [James Socias, ed., John Paul II, *Letters to My Brother Priests: Complete Collection of Holy Thursday Letters (1979-2005)* (Woodridge, IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 2006) 23-24 (my emphasis except for last instance).

¹¹ Cf. Arthur Burton Calkins, *Totus Tuus: Pope Saint John Paul II's Program of Marian Consecration and Entrustment*, Second edition, revised and brought up to the end of the Pontificate of Pope Saint John Paul II (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2017) *passim*.

*here present, to help us to say, following her example, the great word: "Yes," to the will of God, even when it is painful for us. Amen.*¹²

Here he says quite specifically: "May she obtain for you the graces you most need for your sanctification" along with many other Marian exhortations.

On 30 April 1982 he developed a beautiful meditation on receiving/welcoming Mary¹³ in a homily at a Mass for a large group of priests who work with the Focolari Movement (also known as "Opera di Maria"). This time he drew out the meaning of John 19:27 with particular reference to priests.

The Gospel text just cited offers us the model for our devotion to Mary. "And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (Jn. 19:27). Can the same be said of us? *Do we also welcome Mary into our homes? Indeed, we should grant her full rights in the home of our lives, of our faith, of our affections, of our commitments, and acknowledge the maternal role that is hers, that is to say, her function as guide, as adviser, as encourager, or even merely as a silent presence which at times may of itself be enough to infuse us with strength and courage.* On the other hand, the first Scripture reading reminded us that the first disciples, after Jesus' ascension, were gathered with "Mary, the Mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14). She was, therefore, also a part of their community; in fact, perhaps it was she who gave it cohesion. And the fact that she is specified as "the Mother of Jesus" shows how closely she was linked to the figure of her son; it tells us that Mary recalls always and only the salvific value of what Jesus did, our only Saviour, and on the other hand it likewise tells us that to believe in Jesus Christ cannot dispense us from including also in our act of faith the one who was his mother. In God's family, and so much more in the priestly family, Mary watches over the diversity of each one within the communion of all. *And at the same time she can teach us to be open to the Holy Spirit, to share anxiously Christ's total dedication to the will of the Father; above all she can teach us to participate deeply in the passion of the Son and carry out our ministry with assured spiritual fruitfulness. "Behold, your mother!" (Jn. 19:27). Everyone feels that these words are addressed to him, and therefore draws faith and enthusiasm from them for an always more*

¹² *Inseg* II/2 (1980) 62 [*Through the Priestly Ministry the Gift of Salvation: Messages of John Paul II to Bishops, Priests and Deacons*, Vol. 2 (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1982) 222-223] (my emphasis).

¹³ Cf. *Totus Tuus* 154-155, 258-266, 283, 295-297, 300-302, 317, 329.

*determined and serene journey along the committed road of his priestly life.*¹⁴

To welcome, to receive Mary “as guide, as adviser, as encourager, or even merely as a silent presence” is a concrete translation of what the text *’élaben autèn ho mathètes ’eis tà ’idia*, “to receive Mary as one of his spiritual goods” (Jn. 19:27) means. It is an exhortation to which the Holy Father likes to return, especially with priests, since the “beloved disciple” represents not only all the faithful, but as a member of the Apostolic College, priests in a special way.¹⁵ To ordinands in Valencia on 8 November 1982 he said, “Welcome her [Mary] as a Mother as John welcomed her at the foot of the Cross”¹⁶ and he took up the theme explicitly in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests of 25 March 1988.¹⁷

Saint John Paul’s Holy Thursday Letter of 25 March 1988 was written during the Marian Year that he had proclaimed and Mary occupied a great part of that letter. Let us listen to it in sections.

Dear Brothers: who more than we have an absolute need of a deep and unshakable faith – we, who by virtue of the apostolic succession begun in the Upper Room celebrate the sacrament of Christ’s sacrifice? *We must therefore constantly deepen our spiritual bond with the Mother of God who on the pilgrimage of faith “goes before” the whole People of God.*

And in particular, when we celebrate the Eucharist and stand each day on Golgotha, we need to have near us the one who through heroic faith carried to its zenith her union with her Son, precisely then on Golgotha.

Moreover, has Christ not left us a special sign of this? See how during his agony on the cross he spoke the words which have for us the

¹⁴ *Inseg* V/1 (1982) 1370-71 [*L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, with cumulative number of edition and secondly page number = *ORE* 736:12] (my emphasis).

¹⁵ While there continues to be a great deal of speculation in certain scholarly circles on the identity of the “beloved disciple” as to whether he is John, the son of Zebedee and also the author of the fourth gospel [cf. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*. Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1966) lxxxvii-cii], the John Paul II continued to follow the tradition in assuming him to be John the Apostle. Cf. *Inseg* X/3 (1987) 1377 [*ORE* 1020:11]; *Inseg* XI/1 (1988) 724, 736 [*ORE* 1032:6] and Evangelist, cf. *Inseg* X/1 (1987) 735 [St. Paul edition 64]. Pope Benedict XVI, even as a great scripture scholar, followed in the same way; cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus, The Apostles, and the Early Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007) 71-80.

¹⁶ *Inseg* V/3 (1983) 1224 [my trans.].

¹⁷ *Inseg* XI/1 (1988) 726-727 [*ORE* 1032:6-7]. He also quoted from the section of this letter on the welcoming of Mary at an Ordination Mass in Florida, Uruguay. Cf. *Inseg* XI/2 (1988) 1224 [*ORE* 1041:5-6].

meaning of a testament: “When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home” (Jn. 19:26-27).

That disciple, the Apostle John, was with Christ at the Last Supper. He was one of the “Twelve” to whom the Master addressed, together with the words instituting the Eucharist, the command: “Do this in memory of me.” He received the power to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice instituted in the Upper Room on the eve of the passion, as the Church’s most holy sacrament.

At the moment of death, Jesus gives his own Mother to this disciple. John “took her to his own home.” He took her as the first witness to the mystery of the Incarnation. And he, as an evangelist, expressed in the most profound yet simple way the truth about the Word who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14), the truth about the Incarnation and the truth about Emmanuel.

And so, by taking “to his own home” the Mother who stood beneath her Son’s cross, he also made his own all that was within her on Golgotha: the fact that she “suffered grievously with her only-begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart in his sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim that she herself had brought forth.” All this – the superhuman experience of the sacrifice of our redemption, inscribed in the Heart of Christ the Redeemer’s own Mother – was entrusted to the man who in the Upper Room received the power to make this sacrifice present through the priestly ministry of the Eucharist.

Does this not have special eloquence for each of us? If John at the foot of the cross somehow represents every man and woman for whom the motherhood of the Mother of God is spiritually extended, how much more does this concern each of us, who are sacramentally called to the priestly ministry of the Eucharist in the Church!

The reality of Golgotha is truly an amazing one: the reality of Christ’s sacrifice for the redemption of the world! Equally amazing is the mystery of God of which we are ministers in the sacramental order (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1). But are we not threatened by the danger of being unworthy ministers? By the danger of not presenting ourselves with sufficient fidelity at the foot of Christ’s cross as we celebrate the Eucharist?

Let us strive to be close to that Mother in whose Heart is inscribed in a unique and incomparable way the mystery of the world’s redemption.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Inseg* XI/1 (1988) 723-725; 736-737 [Socias 141-143] (my emphasis).

Father Emil Neubert wrote a beautiful book entitled *Life of Union with Mary*.¹⁹ One might justly say that Pope Saint John Paul II steadily proposed a “Life of Union with Mary” addressed especially to priests. He first insists above that priests must “constantly deepen our spiritual bond with the Mother of God”. Secondly, he makes a point of saying:

If John at the foot of the cross somehow represents every man and woman for whom the motherhood of the Mother of God is spiritually extended, how much more does this concern each of us, who are sacramentally called to the priestly ministry of the Eucharist in the Church!

Thirdly, he emphasizes in a striking way that in receiving Mary as a minister of the Eucharist the priest is receiving the treasure of all that she suffered in her Sorrowful and Immaculate Heart:

All this – the superhuman experience of the sacrifice of our redemption, inscribed in the Heart of Christ the Redeemer’s own Mother – was entrusted to the man who in the Upper Room received the power to make this sacrifice present through the priestly ministry of the Eucharist.

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Fourthly, he recognizes that priests are always in danger of being “unworthy ministers”, of not being sufficiently faithful and his response to this is “Let us strive to be close to that Mother in whose Heart is inscribed in a unique and incomparable way the mystery of the world’s redemption”.

Next, he comments on Saint Paul’s words about “the children with whom I am again in travail” (cf. Gal. 4:19) and about Christ as the Spouse who “nourishes and cherishes” the Church as his body (cf. 5:29):

It is worth recalling these scriptural references, so that the truth about the Church’s motherhood, founded on the example of the Mother of God, may become more and more a part of our priestly consciousness. If each of us lives the equivalent of this spiritual motherhood in a manly

¹⁹ Fr. Emil Neubert, SM, *Life of Union with Mary* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2014).

way, namely, as a “spiritual fatherhood,” then Mary, as a “figure” of the Church, has a part to play in this experience of ours. The passages quoted show how profoundly this role is inscribed at the very center of our priestly and pastoral service. *Is not Paul’s analogy on “pain in childbirth” close to all of us in the many situations in which we too are involved in the spiritual process of man’s “generation” and “regeneration” by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Giver of life?* The most powerful experiences in this sphere are had by confessors all over the world-and not by them alone.

On Holy Thursday we need to deepen once again this mysterious truth of our vocation: this “spiritual fatherhood” which on the human level is similar to motherhood. Moreover, does not God himself, the Creator and Father, make the comparison between his love and the love of a human mother (cf. Is. 49:15; 66:13)? Thus, we are speaking of a characteristic of our priestly personality that expresses precisely apostolic maturity and spiritual “fruitfulness.” *If the whole Church “learns her own motherhood from Mary,” do we not need to do so as well? Each of us, then, has to “take her to our own home” like the Apostle John on Golgotha, that is to say, each of us should allow Mary to dwell “within the home” of our sacramental priesthood, as mother and mediatrix of that “great mystery” (cf. Eph. 5:32) which we all wish to serve with our lives.*²⁰

These are striking reflections. Priests need to recognize Mary’s role in their spiritual fatherhood and learn from her. They need to allow her to dwell “within the home” of their sacramental priesthood.

Again, on the basis of this portion of the letter, which follows an ecclesiotypical line, he offers advice to those who struggle with the issue of celibacy:

By reason of this model – yes, of the prototype which the Church finds in Mary – it is necessary that our priestly choice of celibacy for the whole of our lives should also be placed within her heart. *We must have recourse to this Virgin Mother when we meet difficulties along our chosen path.* With her help we must seek always a more profound understanding of this path, an ever more complete affirmation of it in our hearts.²¹

He recognizes the problem and offers a serious solution and he does so again in his 1995 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests:

²⁰ *Inseg XI/1 (1988) 726-727; 738 [Socias 144] (my emphasis).*

²¹ *Inseg XI/1 (1988) 728; 739 [Socias 144] (my emphasis).*

Today our thoughts and prayers turn in a special way to *our brothers in the priesthood who meet with difficulties in this area*, and to all those who precisely because of a woman have abandoned the priestly ministry. Let us commend to Mary Most Holy, Mother of Priests, and to the intercession of the countless holy priests in the Church's history the difficult time which they are experiencing, and let us implore for them *the grace of a return to their first fervor* (cf. Rev. 2:4-5). The experience of my own ministry, and I believe that this is true of every Bishop, confirms that such returns do occur and that even today they are not rare. God remains faithful to his covenant with man in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.²²

In that same Holy Thursday Letter of 1995 he makes an interesting reflection on Mary and the Last Supper, Mary and the Mass.

Even though the Holy Thursday liturgy does not speak of Mary – rather we find her on Good Friday at the foot of the Cross with the Apostle John – *it is difficult not to sense her presence at the institution of the Eucharist*, the anticipation of the Passion and Death of the Body of Christ, that Body which the Son of God had received from the Virgin Mother at the moment of the Annunciation.

For us, as priests, the Last Supper is an especially holy moment. Christ, who says to the Apostles: “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24), institutes the Sacrament of Holy Orders. With respect to our lives as priests, this is an eminently Christocentric moment: for we receive the priesthood from Christ the Priest, the one Priest of the New Covenant. But as we think of the sacrifice of the Body and Blood, which we offer *in persona Christi*, we find it difficult not to recognize therein the presence of the Mother. Mary gave life to the Son of God so that he might offer himself, even as our mothers gave us life, that we too, through the priestly ministry, might offer ourselves in sacrifice together with him. Behind this mission there is the vocation received from God, but there is also hidden the great love of our mothers, just as behind the sacrifice of Christ in the Upper Room there was hidden the ineffable love of his Mother. *O how truly and yet how discreetly is motherhood and thus womanhood present in the Sacrament of Holy Orders* which we celebrate anew each year on Holy Thursday!²³

²² *Inseg* XVIII/1 (1995) 593 [Socias 219] (emphasis in original).

²³ *Inseg* XVIII/1 (1995) 588-589 [Socias 216] (emphasis in original).

He would make an even more explicit about Mary's Presence in the Mass in an address to the Plenary Session of the Congregation for the Clergy on 23 November 2001:

I recommend to each one to turn, in the daily exercise of pastoral care, to the maternal help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, seeking to live in profound communion with Her. In the ministerial priesthood, as I wrote in the Letter to Priests, on the occasion of Holy Thursday 1979, "there is the wonderful and penetrating dimension of nearness to the Mother of Christ" (n. 11). *When we celebrate Holy Mass, dear Brother priests, the Mother of the Redeemer is beside us. She introduces us into the mystery of the redemptive offering of her divine Son. "Ad Jesum per Mariam": may this be our daily programme of spiritual and pastoral life!*²⁴

John Paul's final word on Mary's presence in the Mass will appear in his last Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and I have presented the development of his thought on this matter in two different places.²⁵

He would say his final word on this theme in his very last Holy Thursday Letter to Priests of 2005:

The relationship between the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Eucharist is a very close one, as I pointed out in the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (cf. Nos. 53-58). In its own sober liturgical language, every Eucharistic Prayer brings this out. Thus, in the Roman Canon we say: "In union with the whole Church we honour Mary, the ever-virgin Mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God". In the other Eucharistic Prayers, honour leads to petition, as for example in Prayer II: "Make us worthy to share eternal life with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God."

In recent years, I have warmly recommended the contemplation of the face of Christ, especially in my Letters *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (cf. Nos. 23ff.) and in *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (cf. Nos. 9ff.), and I have pointed to Mary as our great teacher. In the Encyclical on the Eucharist I then spoke of her as the "Woman of the Eucharist" (cf. No. 53). *Who more than Mary can help us taste the greatness of the Eucharistic*

²⁴ *Inseg* XXIV/2 (2001) 944 [ORE 1721:2] (my emphasis).

²⁵ "Mary's Presence in the Mass: The Teaching of Pope John Paul II" in *Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal* Vol. 10, N° 2 (2006) 132-158; Mary's Presence in the Mass according to Pope John Paul II" in *Mary at the Foot of the Cross – VI: Marian Coredemption in the Eucharistic Mystery. Acts of the Sixth International Symposium on Marian Coredemption* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2007) 11-38.

mystery? She more than anyone can teach us how to celebrate the sacred mysteries with due fervor and to commune with her Son, hidden in the Eucharist. I pray to her, then, for all of you, and I entrust to her especially the elderly, the sick, and those in difficulty. This Easter, in the Year of the Eucharist, I gladly repeat to each of you the gentle and consoling words of Jesus: “Behold your Mother” (Jn. 19:27).²⁶

On the occasion of an address on 23 March 2003 to officials of the Penitentiary, confessors of the Patriarchal Basilicas of Rome and priests taking part in annual course on the internal forum, he also wished to underscore Mary’s discreet role in the Sacrament of Penance.

The just and fruitful ministry of penance and love for the personal use of the sacrament of Penance depends above all on the Lord’s grace. To obtain this gift for the priest, the mediation of Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of priests, has unique importance since she is the Mother of Jesus, the Eternal High Priest. May she obtain from her Son the gift of holiness for every priest, through the sacrament of Penance, humbly received and generously offered.²⁷

Perhaps it will be appropriate to conclude these grace-filled words of Pope Saint John Paul II with this exquisite reflection that he made in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests of 25 March 1998:

The priest is called to match the *fiat* of Mary at all times, allowing himself to be led by the Spirit as she was. The Virgin will support him in his choice of evangelical poverty and will prepare him to listen humbly and sincerely to his brothers and sisters, that he may recognize in the drama of their lives and in their aspirations the “groans of the Spirit” (cf. Rom. 8:26). She will enable the priest to serve them with enlightened discretion, that he may teach them the values of the Gospel. She will make him diligent in searching for “the things that are above” (Col. 3:1), that he may witness convincingly to the primacy of God. The Virgin will help the priest to welcome the gift of chastity as the expression of a greater love which the Spirit awakens so that the love of God may come to birth in a host of brothers and sisters. *She will lead him down the ways of evangelical obedience, that the Paraclete may draw him, beyond all his own plans, towards total acceptance of the mind of God.*

²⁶ *Inseg* XXVIII (2005) 223 [Socias 369] (my emphasis).

²⁷ *Inseg* XXVI/1 (2003) 397 [ORE 1788:5] (my emphasis).

*Accompanied by Mary, the priest will be able to renew his consecration day after day; and the time will come when, trusting the guidance of the Spirit whom he has invoked on his journey as man and as priest, he will set forth upon the ocean of light which is the Trinity.*²⁸

I believe that these exhortations and reflections of twentieth century popes are words that can nourish priests today on growth in holiness. I believe that they also show a certain progression in leading priests to live a life in union with Mary. This, I believe, was brought to a very high point of development by the most Marian Pope of the twentieth century, John Paul II. May all priests be nourished by his secure Marian doctrine so as to growth day by day to ever greater holiness!

²⁸ *Inseg XXI/1* (2003) 640 [Socias 256-257] (my emphasis). *Inseg XXVI/1* (2003) 397 [