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**THEOLOGY OF PRIESTHOOD ACCORDING TO POPE JOHN PAUL II:
REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLY THURSDAY LETTERS TO PRIESTS (1979-2005)**

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ABSTRACT

During his long pontificate, Pope John Paul II addressed in his Encyclicals, *Letters and Homilies* various issues in the life of the Church. This study is focused on gleaning the theology of ministerial priesthood by John Paul II as found in his 27 Holy Thursday Letters to Priests. An Expository Analytic method is employed: Selected relevant texts dealing with ministerial priesthood in the twenty-seven Holy Thursday Letters to Priests are grouped thematically and analysed. A four-fold matrix is employed so that the ontological, existential, moral or social, and eschatological aspects of priesthood are highlighted. The ontological aspect addresses the identity or essence of priesthood while responding to the question: “What is priesthood?” The existential approach centres on the question: “How is ministerial priesthood experienced or lived?” The moral or social approach focuses on the question: “What does the gift of priesthood demand of those who have received it?” Lastly, the eschatological approach provides the response of John Paul II to the question: “What does the gift of priesthood promise?”

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

During his long pontificate that lasted from 1978 to 2005, Pope John Paul II provided extensive teachings and reflections on issues affecting the Church and mankind. One of the frequent themes in his teachings was the nature and role of the ministerial priesthood within the Catholic Church. Since the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the priesthood was under attack both within and outside the Church. In response to that, Pope John Paul II commenced a tradition of writing Holy Thursday Letters to Priests annually, from the beginning of his twenty-seven years long pontificate to the end (1979-2005), to reflect on priesthood. When he did so, it was generally acknowledged that the priesthood was in a period of crisis, and, as we enter a period of evaluating his contribution to the church, it seems fitting to ask if this clarified some of the urgent questions which continue to occupy the minds and hearts of all those for whom ordained ministry remains a vital part of the Church's self-understanding then, or is able to clarify them now.¹

This study seeks to reconstruct the theology of priesthood of the Supreme Pontiff by analysing selected relevant texts from all his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests. As a result, this will bring a unified presentation of cardinal points on which the Holy Father has constructed his theology of priesthood. John Paul II did not write a single theological treatise on the theology of the priesthood: nor did he write a number of easily accessible theological articles. His thought on this matter is rather best understood from a variety of sources: his Holy Thursday Letters to priests, the Apostolic Exhortations *Pastores dabo Vobis*, his frequent and often lengthy reflections on the priesthood in many of his major Encyclicals, Apostolic Exhortations and other authoritative documents, and the

¹Timothy J Costelloe, "Priesthood in the Theology of John Paul II", *Compass Review*, 2005, <https://compassreview.org/winter05/3.html>, [accessed on 14/05/2022].

many addresses, homilies, catechetical instructions, and occasional talks in which the ordained ministry is the main focus.

Faith always seeks to be understood (*fides quaerens intellectum*).² This assertion underscores the key theological tenet. Priesthood is one of the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church. It is worthy to achieve its deeper understanding as the reality of the Church. While there may be studies undertaken in the theology of priesthood in the light of Holy Thursday Letters to Priests, none has followed the four-fold matrix and done analysis of texts in all the letters.

1.1 RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

Though Pope John Paul II wrote Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* in 1992, which concerned the formation of priests and was addressed to both clergy and the lay faithful of the Catholic Church, he continued issuing Holy Thursday Letters to priests which deal with identity and function of ordained priesthood in the Church till the end of his pontificate in 2005. This study is relevant in a way that a systematic/thematic presentation of the theology of priesthood according to Pope John Paul II shall be reconstructed from his Holy Thursday Letters to priests. In other words, the study sets out to offer a unified presentation on the cardinal points on which the Holy Father has constructed his theology of priesthood.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to identify the major texts dealing with priesthood in the Holy Thursday Letters of John Paul II to all the priests of the Church from 1979 to 2005. These texts will be

² Peter E Fink S.J. “The Priesthood of Jesus Christ in the Ministry and Life of the Ordained,” in *Priests Identity and Ministry*, Edited by Robert Wister, Michael Glazier, Inc. 1990 pp.71-91

grouped thematically rather than chronologically and analysed in order to bring out the Theology of priesthood according to Pope John Paul II.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

The study investigated the theology of priesthood according to John Paul II following Expository-analytic method. Major/principal texts which deal with priesthood have been identified in the twenty-seven Holy Thursday Letters to priests. These texts have been grouped thematically rather than chronologically and analysed to tease the theology of priesthood of the author.

1.3.1 EXPOSITORY-ANALYTIC METHOD

1.3.1.1 Expository method

The word expository comes from the word expose, and this means to uncover something so that other people are able to understand it for what it is. “An expository essay is a genre of writing which tends to explain, illustrate, clarify, or explicate something in a way that it becomes clear for readers. Therefore, it could be an investigation, evaluation or even argumentation about an idea for clarification.” [<https://7esl.com/expository-essay#how to Write an Expository Essay.>]

1.3.1.2 Analytic Method

Analysis is a process used by researchers for reducing data to a story and interpreting it to derive insights. The data analysis process helps in reducing a large chunk of data into smaller fragments, which makes sense. Three essential things take place during the data analysis process – the first data organization. Summarisation and categorization together contribute to becoming the second known method used for data reduction. It helps in finding patterns and themes in the data for easy

identification and linking. Third and last way is data analysis – researchers do it in both top-down and bottom- up fashion. [<https://www.questionpro.com.blog/data-analysis-in-research>].

All the major texts dealing with priesthood in his twenty-seven Holy Thursday letters to priests have been identified and then organized thematically whereby a four-fold structure will be employed so that the ontological, existential, moral or social, and eschatological aspects of priesthood will be explored. “This four-fold matrix arises from the distinctive yet correlated philosophical trends of thought which have shaped Catholic thought.”³

Ontological approach deals with the nature of being. In this case, it is about priestly identity. It will address the question: ‘What is priesthood?’ Existential approach focuses on the question: ‘How is priesthood lived /experienced?’ Moral/social approach is about the way of life. It will deal with how St. John Paul II answered the question: ‘What does the gift of priesthood demand?’ In other words, ‘What moral responsibility the gift of priesthood impels those who have received it to assume into their everyday lives?’. Eschatological approach is established in the hope-inspired perspectives of Christians found in the Scriptures, concerning the destiny of all humankind. It answers the question: ‘What does the gift of priesthood promise?’

1.4 LIMITS OF THE STUDY

This study will mainly focus on the Holy Thursday Letters to priests (1979 to 2005). These messages do not have the doctrinal weight of Encyclicals and Exhortations, yet they are texts of Catholic magisterial teaching that provide insight into the papal thinking about ministerial

³ Nicodemus T Makhalemele, “Pneumatological Themes in the Writings of Karol Wojtyła,” in *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Inc. Sage Journals, 2002 pp. 241-250.

priesthood. Any other documents of Pope John Paul II that deal with priesthood have been used as secondary sources or supporting documents.

1.5 CHAPTER STRUCTURE

Following the four-fold structure outlined above, the chapters of the study correspond to the four questions which the material had answered. While chapter one is about the introduction to the study, chapter two deals with the priestly identity, chapter three focuses on the texts dealing with how the priesthood is being experienced, chapter four is on the responsibilities that the gift of priesthood impels those who have received it to assume into their everyday lives and chapter four on what the gift of priesthood promises.

CHAPTER TWO

ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PRIESTHOOD

What is Ministerial Priesthood?

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the ontological aspect of priesthood is explored. This deals with an essence of Priesthood. In other words, this chapter is going to address how Pope John Paul II answers the question: “What is priesthood?” Thus, the response of the Holy Father to this question will form the content of the part of the study. Following the expository-analytic method, the major texts identified and extracted from the twenty-seven Maundy Thursday Letters of the Supreme Pontiff to Priests, dealing with the priestly identity are analysed, flowing into one another gradually, illustrating what makes a priest to be who he is. And, at the end, this will add up to other chapters in order to successfully tease the Theology of Priesthood of the author.

2.1 ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

In his 1996 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II accentuated that priesthood is a special call from God. In the same way that Jesus Christ did not exalt himself to the position of High Priest, but was exalted by God, priests are also called by God:

‘Let us consider our call, brethren’ (cf. 1Cor1:26). The priesthood is a call, a particular vocation: ‘one does not take this honour upon himself, but he is called by God’ (Heb. 5:4). The letter to the Hebrews harks back to the priesthood of the Old Testament in order to lead us to an understanding of the mystery of Christ the Priest: ‘Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him

who said to him: ... You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek' (5:5-6).⁴

This is very important in the understanding of priesthood according to Pope John Paul II. Here the Holy Father reiterates the traditional teaching of the Church that priesthood is first and foremost a vocation from God. This means that, among the members of the People of God – the Church, the community of the called, there are those certain baptized who are called to the priesthood primarily in order to serve others. They discern this call in their spirit and decide to accept it with the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit. He further affirms that the origin of priesthood is Christ who did not appoint himself to be made a High Priest but rather was appointed by God after the order of Melchizedek. In fact, for the Supreme Pontiff, Christ is the priest *par excellence*. His priesthood is unique, unrepeatable, and non-transferable. All those who are called to be priests sacramentally participate in his priesthood. The Holy Father refers to the letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 5:4), underlining the fact that Christ did not appoint himself to the position of High Priest of the new covenant. In other words, being the Son of God, he was called by God, the Father to the position of the High Priest. This goes on to show that those who participate in Christ's priesthood should be conscious of the fact that they are priests because they have been given special vocation among the People of God. In short, to be a priest is a special "grace" from God. It is not something that one can claim for himself.

In his fourth Holy Thursday Letter addressed to priests, the Supreme Pontiff, reiterated that priests are chosen by Christ to share in His priesthood, impressing on their souls an indelible mark that empowers them to offer the sacrifice of reconciliation:

⁴ John Paul II, 1996, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

We give thanks to you, O Christ. Because you have chosen us yourself, associating us in a special way with your priesthood and marking us with an indelible character that makes each of us capable of offering your sacrifice as the sacrifice of all the people: a sacrifice of reconciliation in which you offer yourself incessantly to the Father, also offering in you man and the world.⁵

This is a theologically dense text. Here, Pope John Paul II is gradually leading the reader into the core of the Catholic theology of priesthood. Firstly, he insists that priests are called by Christ to his priesthood. It is not difficult for the reader to note that here the Pope has at the back of his mind the words of the letter to the Hebrews referred to in the previous text: “And one does not take the honour upon himself, but he is called by God as Aaron was.” (Heb. 5:4). Secondly, he maintains that priests are marked with an indelible character. It is in Catholic teaching that the sacrament of Orders like the sacrament of Baptism imprints on the soul of the recipient a sacramental mark that is indelible. The Holy Father indicates that priests are ontologically transformed, marked with a permanent sacramental sign that cannot be erased in any way; the Christians ordained into priesthood remain priests for the rest of their life. This indelible character is conferred through the Sacrament of Holy Orders which is received by priests on the day of their Ordination, primarily to configure them into the priesthood of Christ. Finally, it empowers them to offer the sacrifice of reconciliation which is the sacrifice of Christ that he offered on Calvary to reconcile the world with God. This sacrifice which was offered once and for all on the cross continues to be offered by himself to the Father| through the hands of priests. In other words, when the priest offers the sacrifice, it is Christ offering himself to the Father.

⁵John Paul II, 1982,1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

Later in the same Letter, the Pope indicated that Holy Thursday marked the birthday of priests; they originate from the Holy Thursday Paschal Mystery. And he goes on to underline the relationship between the two sacraments, that is, ministerial priesthood and the sacrament of the Body and Blood Christ:

Holy Thursday is the day on which our priesthood was born. It is on this day that we are all born. As a son is born from the womb of his mother, so we are born, O Christ, of your one and eternal priesthood. We were born in the grace and strength of the new and eternal Covenant; we were born of the body and blood of your redemptive sacrifice: of the body that is “given for us” (cf. Lk.22:19) and of the blood that is “shed for all of us” (cf. Mt. 26:28).⁶

Here, the Holy Father makes it known to the readers that Holy Thursday, also called Maundy Thursday, is a special day for priests. This is the Thursday that begins the “Eastern Triduum” when Christ instituted the Eucharist during the Last Supper. It was on this day that the priesthood was also instituted. It originated from the one and eternal priesthood of Christ. During that Holy Thursday, Christ instituted not only priesthood but also shared bread and wine with his Apostles, declaring that those were his Body and Blood that will be given for the forgiveness of the sins of the world. Indeed, the Eucharistic species of bread and wine are the sacramental signs of the sacrifice of his Body and Blood. On the same occasion, he made his Apostles partakers in his priesthood by commanding them: “Do this in memory of me”. John Paul II reiterates, “At the Last Supper, this ‘being with’ Jesus on the part of the Apostles reached its culmination. By celebrating the Passover meal and instituting the Eucharist, the divine Master brought their vocation to its fulfilment. By saying ‘Do this in memory of me’, he put a Eucharistic seal on their mission and,

⁶ John Paul II, 1982, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

by uniting them to himself in sacramental communion, he charged them to perpetuate that most holy act in his memory.”⁷ This is not just a mere commemoration. Elsewhere the Supreme Pontiff expresses the same idea as follows: “For Christians too, the Eucharist is a ‘memorial’, but of a unique kind: it not only commemorates, but also sacramentally makes present the death and resurrection of the Lord.”⁸ Christ, the only Priest enabled his Apostles to share in his unique and eternal priesthood so that they can continue his mission and ministry of bringing about the new Covenant which he himself inaugurated on the Cross. The priests of today are the successors to the Apostles; sharing in the priesthood of Christ passes from one generation to another through ordination. The supreme Pontiff further affirms that priests were born in the grace and strength of the new Covenant which was established by the Body and Blood of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. Christ himself established the new Covenant; by offering himself on the Cross, he offered himself as sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. His Body was given out for many and his Blood shed for multitudes to cleanse them from all sins.

In the Holy Thursday Letter, issued in 1986, the Holy Father maintains that throughout his life, the priest finds the source of his identity in Christ the Priest who has marked him with the seal of his priesthood in order to be a participant in Christ’s function as one Mediator and Redeemer:

The priest always finds, and in an immutable way, the source of his identity in Christ the Priest. It is not the world that sets its status, according to the needs or conceptions of social roles. The priest is marked by the seal of the priesthood of Christ, to participate in his function as the one Mediator and Redeemer.⁹

⁷ John Paul II, 2004, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁸ John Paul II, 2005, 5, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁹ John Paul II, 1986, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

According to Pope John Paul II, it is not a social role to be a priest because the priests are marked by the seal of the priesthood of Christ. At their Ordination, the priests are configured to Christ through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Each one becomes the *Alter Christus* and acts in *persona Christi*. Because of this seal, the priest continuously finds his way of being or identity in Christ. In the very same Holy Thursday Letter, Pope John Paul II cites the example of the life of Saint John Mary Vianney to underscore the close association between Christ and the priest brought about by the sacrament of Holy Orders. He writes: “He tried to conform his heart and his life to the pattern of Christ. Prayer was the soul of his life.”¹⁰ This association with Christ therefore enables priests to be instruments of Christ’s function as the Mediator and Redeemer.

In his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father clarified the two ways in which one participates in the priesthood of Christ. These are the common priesthood of the faithful and ministerial priesthood. Despite their differences in essence and degree, they are related to each other:

The priesthood in which we participate through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which has been forever “impressed” in our souls by a means of a particular sign of God, that is the “Character,” remains in explicit relation to the common priesthood of the faithful, that is, of all the baptized and, at the same time, differs from it “essentially, and not only in degree” (Lumen Gentium,10).¹¹

In this text, the Holy Father maintains that it is through the Sacrament of Holy Orders that priests share in the priesthood of Christ. Before being called to the specific vocation of priesthood, priests are members of the baptized – members of the Body of Christ which is the Church. It is through

¹⁰ John Paul II, 1986, 11, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

¹¹John Paul II, 1979, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

the Sacrament of Baptism that they are the members of the People of God. And this is one of the ways of participating in the priesthood of Christ. It is called the common priesthood of the faithful which is sometimes called the priesthood of the baptized. Each and every Christian participates in the priesthood of Christ in this way. It is within this context of the priesthood of the whole Church that priests are called to the specific vocation to the priesthood through the Sacrament of Holy Orders they receive at the ordination. This sacrament confers to the priest, the character – the permanent mark which divinely transforms him and configures him to Christ, empowering him to act in the “Person of Christ.” These two ways of participating in the priesthood of Christ relate to each other in that priests are called to serve other members of the People of God. Hence why this way of participation is called ministerial priesthood. However, they differ in essence and degree: The sacrament of Holy Orders is sometimes called the sacrament of Differentiation. It is the only sacrament that differentiates priests from other Christians. In the very same letter, the Pope posits, “... because by virtue of the sacrament of Orders, which I also received from the hands of my Bishop, you are my brothers.”¹² What makes priests who they are, regardless of their hierarchical order, is the Sacrament of Differentiation – the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Pope John Paul II considered himself a priest together with other priests whom he called his brothers only because they have all received the Sacrament of Holy Orders. This is the essence of the ministerial priesthood.

Later in the same document, the Pope reiterates that the sacrament of Holy Orders, which is particular to priests as a singular gift from God and the foundation of priestly identity is intrinsically connected to the common priesthood of all the faithful:

¹² John Paul II, 1979, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

This sacrament, dear Brothers, which is specific for us, which is the fruit of the special grace of vocation and the basis of our identity, by virtue of its very nature and of everything that it produces in our life and activity, serves to make the faithful aware of their common priesthood and activate it.¹³

The supreme Pontiff declares that the sacrament of Holy Orders particular to priests is not received unless the receiver is conscious of being called by God and ordained to the priesthood. That is, it is the result of the divine choice of God. As it has already been stated in the previous texts, priests are chosen among other members of the People of God and receive the sacrament of Holy Orders at their ordination. During this occasion, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they are configured to Christ and therefore enabled to speak and act in his person. According to John Paul II, this is the foundation for their genuine identity. He further goes on to say that in the sacrament of Holy Orders, through divine transformation, priests are turned into another Christ, *Alter Christus*. And that enables them to speak and act in the person of Christ. This Character conferred by the sacrament of Holy Orders enables the ministerial priest to serve the Christian community by leading the faithful to participate in their proper way to the priesthood of Christ.

In his ninth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Pope reminded them that their priesthood is sacramental and ministerial, and that it is a unique sharing in the priesthood of Christ. In addition, it absolutely depends upon Him:

We know that the priesthood – sacramental and ministerial – is a special participation in the priesthood of Christ. It does not exist without him and outside of him. It does not develop and bear fruit without taking root in him. “Without me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). Jesus said at the Last

¹³ John Paul II, 1979, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

Supper at the conclusion of the parable of the vine and the branches.¹⁴

In this text, Pope John Paul II emphasizes one way of participating in the priesthood of Christ. He distinguishes this type from others. As it has been discovered, from the previous text that there are only two ways of participating in Christ's priesthood: Priesthood of the baptized and that of the ordained, it is clear that he is differentiating it from the common priesthood of the faithful. The Pope reiterates that the priesthood of the ordained is sacramental and ministerial. This means that this participation is special because within the community of the baptized, there are certain Christians called and ordained to the ministerial priesthood. During their priestly ordination, they receive the sacrament of Holy Orders which confers the indelible Character assimilating them to Christ to act in his person. As a result, they are enabled to serve God and other members of the People of God. Hence, a ministerial priesthood. Again, he insists that this priesthood is absolutely dependent on Christ; his priesthood is the source of ministerial priesthood. The Holy Father states, "It 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."¹⁵

On the fourth year of his Pontificate, the Holy Father pointed out that Christ is the one who configures priests to him and enables them to participate into his priesthood, giving them a special mandate to build up the Church through proclaiming him, administering sacraments, and partaking in his pastoral authority:

¹⁴ John Paul II, 1987, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

¹⁵ John Paul II, 1979, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

We thank you for having modelled us on you as ministers of your priesthood, calling us to build up your body, the Church, not only through the administration of the sacraments, but also, and you first of all, through the proclamation of your “Message of salvation” (Acts 13:26), making us participate in your responsibility as Pastor.¹⁶

The Holy Father makes it understandable to the readers that Christ is the one who shapes priests into ministers of his priesthood; he shapes them by configuring them to himself through the Holy Spirit during their ordination. And this gives them power to speak and act in *Persona Christi Capitis*, that is, “in the person of Christ, the Head.” Eventually, this Character conferred on the priests is the one that equips them to build up the mystical Body of Christ. They execute this important task through proclaiming Christ and the Good News of salvation to all mankind and administering sacraments to the People of God. In other words, they continue the mission of Christ in this world: Jesus Christ proclaimed the Good News of salvation during his earthly ministry, and he also administered, in fact, instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper and entrusted his Apostles to perpetuate the administration of this sacrament in his remembrance. Thus, priests, as the successors to Christ’s Apostles whom they were commanded to offer the Eucharist in his memory, still participate in these dimensions of Christ’s function mainly to build up the Church. They also share in the responsibility of Christ as Shepherd. As Shepherds, priests take care of their flock which is the community of the faithful, by teaching them the Word and leading them to God. They also provide them with continuous encouragement in pursuit of holiness, which is what God has called them for.

¹⁶ John Paul II, 1982, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II posits that priests are first and foremost Christians and subsequently members of the hierarchical order. They originate from Christ's complete mission and ministry as Prophet, Priest and King, bearing witness to him, both inside the Church and to the outside world:

As Christians, members of the People of God, and subsequently, as priests, sharers in the hierarchical order, we take our origin from the combination of the mission and office of our Teacher, who is Prophet, Priest, and King, in order to witness to him in a special way in the Church and before the world.¹⁷

This is a very important text in which the Supreme Pontiff precisely unfolds the origin of priests. By inference, he points out that priests are first and foremost Christians – members of the People of God. They originate from the entire mission and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ who is Prophet, Priest, and King. He uses this formula of Baptism to underline that priests are Christians through the Sacrament of Baptism. He goes on to say that, through Baptism, priests are incorporated into Christ, becoming members of the People of God. According to him, Baptism is the Sacrament of initiation. It includes other two sacraments: the sacrament of Confirmation and the Eucharist. He considers them to be one sacrament. He affirms, “It is thus clear that, within the broader context of the Christian vocation, the priestly vocation is a specific call. And this tends to be borne out in our personal experience as priests: we received Baptism and Confirmation; we took part in Catechesis, in celebrations of the Liturgy and above all in the Eucharist. Our vocation to the priesthood first appeared in the context of the Christian life.”¹⁸ It is through this sacrament of initiation that the Holy Spirit offers the baptized strength to be authentic witnesses of Christ

¹⁷ John Paul II, 1979, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

¹⁸ John Paul II, 1996, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

both inside the Church and to the outside world. The Holy Father further declares that priests, as the members of the mystical body of Christ, are set apart mainly for a special purpose, which is service. They are ordained and receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. At their ordination, the Holy Spirit gives them power to be unique witnesses of Christ. Hence, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, they are bound to bear witness twice as often as other Christians. In addition, this sacrament introduces them to the participation in the ecclesiastical hierarchy which consists of three degrees, namely *Deaconate*, *Presbyterate* and *Episcopate*.

On the eighteenth year of his pontificate, the Pope highlighted that priests become who they are by ordination which takes place through the imposition of Bishop's hands. At the ordination ceremony, the Holy Spirit outpours the grace to mark their lives:

I still cherish in my memory that great moment when, fifty years ago, assembly invoked "*Veni, Creator Spiritus*" over us young Deacons lying prostrate in the middle of the Church, before we received ordination by the imposition of the Bishop's hands. We give thanks to the Holy Spirit for that outpouring of grace which has marked our lives.¹⁹

Taking his personal experience of priestly ordination as the starting point, the supreme Pontiff helps readers comprehend the place of the Holy Spirit in the identity of priests. He declares the Third Person of the Holy Trinity as the key agent in the process of priestly ordination: before Ordination takes place, the Church – the priestly nation of the New Covenant, intensely calls upon the Paraclete, the Creator to come upon those certain members called and chosen among them, by God, into the specific vocation of priesthood. In reference to the previous text, among the three levels of the hierarchical order, these chosen constituents of the Priestly nation are known at this

¹⁹ John Paul II, 1996, 8, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

stage as Deacons. They are then ordained by the Holy Spirit summoned by the whole Church. And the Bishop, with the sacred power he has been endowed with, facilitates this august process of priestly ordination by imposition of his hands. As he places his hands on them, he prays to God to provide them an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his grace, setting them apart from other members of the Church and enabling them to serve God among His People. For Pope John Paul II, the priesthood is indeed the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is why they do not pride themselves as those who are at a better rank and therefore to be served by others but consider themselves as those who are set aside to serve the People of God. The grace of the Divine *Pneuma* actually confers this nature of ‘service’ which is their own Master’s, for whom they act in his person. This is what the Holy Father observed when he said, “We give thanks to the Holy Spirit for that outpouring of grace which has marked our lives.” This grace divinely and permanently transforms them to be like Christ – *Alter Christus*. Pope John Paul II affirms, “In all of you I honour the image of Christ which you received at your consecration, the “character” which marks each of you indelibly.”²⁰

In his 1998 letter to priests, the Holy Father emphasized that there is an intimate connection between the priesthood and the Holy Spirit, as well as his mission. He indicated that during ordination, Christ, through the Holy Spirit, transforms the called Christians into priests just as he did with his Apostles at the Last Supper:

An intimate bond unites our priesthood to the Holy Spirit and to his mission. On the day of our priestly ordination, by virtue of a unique outpouring of the *Paraclete*, the Risen One accomplished in his disciples on the evening of Easter and set us in the world as those who continue his mission (cf. John 20:21-23). This gift of the Spirit, with its mysterious sanctifying power, is the source and root of the

²⁰ John Paul, 2000, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

special task of evangelization and of sanctification which is entrusted to us.²¹

The Holy Father further insists that there is an intimate connection between the priesthood and the Holy Spirit, as well as his mission. He describes it as thus: During priestly ordination, through the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Christ once again completes in each priest what he accomplished in his disciples on the evening of Easter and set them as those responsible for carrying out his mission. He takes the readers back to the previous text where he indicated that the third Person of the Holy Trinity is the key agent in the process of priestly ordination. He enacts what Christ did at the Last Supper to his disciples, making them priests and setting them aside as those who continue his mission. For more understanding to the readers, the Pope further describes this connection, this way: “Precisely during that Paschal event Christ revealed to the Apostles that their vocation was to become priests like him and in him. This took place when, in the Upper Room, on the eve of his Death on the Cross, he took bread and then the cup of wine, and spoke over them the words of consecration. The bread and the wine became his Body and Blood, given up in sacrifice for all mankind. Jesus concluded by commanding the Apostles: ‘Do this ... in memory of me’ (1Cor 11:25). With these words he entrusted to them his own sacrifice and, through their hands, communicated it to the Church for all time. By entrusting to the Apostles, the memorial of his sacrifice, Christ made them sharers in his priesthood. For there is a close and inseparable bond between the offering and the priest: the one who offers the sacrifice of Christ must have a share in the priesthood of Christ. Consequently, the vocation to the priesthood is a vocation to offer in persona Christi his own sacrifice, by virtue of sharing in his priesthood. From the Apostles,

²¹John Paul II, 1998, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

then, we have inherited the priestly ministry.”²² This creates a vivid picture in the minds of the addresses of this invaluable input of the Pope that Catholic priests are the successors of the Apostles in the continuation of Christ’s mission in this world. And the Holy Spirit is the one making this succession, possible. The Holy Father goes on to say that it is this gift of the Holy Spirit which is the source and foundation of the unique mission of the proclamation of Christ and his Gospel and of the consecration entrusted to priests. They have been empowered to sanctify because they have also been sanctified. Later in the same letter, he states, “On the evening of Easter, the Risen Jesus said to the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 20:22); and, after promising another outpouring, he sent them to the roads of the world, entrusted with the salvation of their brothers and sisters: “Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt. 28:19 – 20).”²³ This is definitely the core mission mandated to priests by Christ through the Holy Spirit.

In his Holy Thursday message of 1984, the supreme Pontiff stressed that priests are servants of Christ, stewards of the mysteries of God, men of the divine economy of salvation and instruments of the grace of the Holy Spirit:

This verse of the Responsorial Psalm (88:89:2) of today’s liturgy reminds us that we are in a very special way “servants of Christ and of the intentions of the mysteries of God” (1Cor. 4:1), that we are men of the divine economy of salvation, that we are a conscious “instrument” of grace, that is, of the Holy Spirit in the power of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.²⁴

²² John Paul II, 1996,4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

²³ John Paul II, 1998, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

²⁴ John Paul II, 1984, 2, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

For clarity about the priestly identity, John Paul II reiterates that in a unique way, priests are servants of Christ. He used the phrase, “in a very special way.” This must bring the attention to the readers that, there are other servants of Christ which are members of the royal priesthood, the baptized. But among them, there are those that are chosen by Christ and ordained by the Holy Spirit to serve Christ mainly by serving his mystical Body, the Church. They participate in the God’s plan of salvation: they spread the Gospel of salvation to all the people and guide them in the path of holiness by teaching them the Scripture and administering sacraments. The Holy Father further insists that a priest is a channel of grace through which the Holy Spirit conveys the power of Christ’s Cross and Resurrection to other members of the People of God. The power of the Holy Spirit he receives during ordination configures him to Christ and therefore acquires the Character which enables him to convey the grace of salvation to all mankind in the name of Christ.

In his fifth Holy Thursday Letter to priests, John Paul II underlined the relationship between the Eucharist, the Church, and the priesthood. He further affirms that this sacrament of priesthood was initiated with the Apostles during the Last Supper and is transmitted by the Bishop to the priests on the day of ordination:

This priesthood was instituted for the Eucharist and therefore for the Church, which, as a community of the People of God, is formed from the Eucharist. We received it on the day of our ordination by the ministry of the Bishop, who transmitted to each of us the sacrament inaugurated with the Apostles, inaugurated during the Last Supper, in the Upper Room, on the Holy Thursday.²⁵

²⁵ John Paul II, 1983, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

Here, the Holy Father imparts to the readers understanding of the theological background of the ministerial priesthood. He explains why and how it came into existence. And from this explanation, the element of priestly identity can be attained. He accentuates that the reasons for the initiation of priesthood were the Eucharist and the Church. At the same time the Eucharist was initiated by Christ, priesthood was also initiated in the Upper Room on Holy Thursday. This is because Christ wanted his Apostles to be the celebrants of the commemoration of his Sacrifice in the Church. The Church was formed from the Eucharist, which represents Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross which is for mankind to be reconciled with God. The priests are members of the Church set apart to administer this sacrament to the community of the People of God since they have been configured to Christ and therefore enabled to act in his person. In the process of expounding on priesthood, the Holy Father goes on to underscore the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church which can be summed up as follows: the Church does not only make the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also makes the Church. This signifies the words of the Holy Father: "... priesthood was instituted for the Eucharist and therefore for the Church." He further insists that the sacrament of priesthood is received during ordination. It is transmitted to the persons to be ordained, by the Bishop. He says, it is transmitted to each priest because it was first initiated with the Apostles during the Last Supper, when Christ commanded them: 'Do this in memory of me.' And, since then, the priesthood exists for the Eucharist and the Church. It is transmitted through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic priests of today are the successors of the Apostles as it has been clearly explained in the previous text. They are still the celebrants of the Eucharist which they administer to the Church.

On the sixteenth year of his pontificate, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, John Paul II, , observed that, for priests, the priesthood is the remarkable gift and a special vocation to share in

the mystery of Christ, a vocation that gives them a glorious opportunity to speak and act in Christ's name. And this possibility turns into a reality each time they offer the Eucharist:

For us the priests the priesthood is the supreme gift, a particular calling to share in the mystery of Christ, a calling which confers on us the sublime possibility of speaking and acting in his name. Every time we offer the Eucharist, this possibility becomes a reality. We act "in persona Christi" when at the moment of the consecration, we say the words: "This is my Body which will be given up for you ... This is the Cup of my Blood, the Blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me."²⁶

In this text, Pope John Paul II describes priesthood as the specific vocation whose hall mark is sharing in the mystery of Christ. It is specific because those who are called to it are chosen from the larger setting of the community of the baptized. This Christ's mystery in which they share in, is about his redemptive sacrifice on the Cross which is eternal. The Pope unfolds this Christ's mystery for more clarity in this manner: "He who offered himself as a bloody sacrifice on the Cross also instituted its unbloody "memorial" for all times, under the species of bread and wine. And under these species he entrusted his Sacrifice to the Church. In this way the Church – and in the Church every priest – celebrates the one Sacrifice of Christ."²⁷ The priesthood gives priests an opportunity to speak and act in the name of Christ: When ordained, they are configured to Christ and therefore acquire the sacred nature with sacred power which enables them to be another Christ – *Alter Christus*. And when they are *Alter Christus*, they act in *Persona Christi*. The manner in which this participation in the mystery of Christ takes place is mainly through offering the Eucharist. At any occasion, when priests offer the sacrament of Thanksgiving, they speak and act

²⁶ John Paul II, 1994, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

²⁷ John Paul II, 1997, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

in the person of Christ; they take bread and wine consecutively and exactly repeat what Jesus Christ said during the Last Supper in the Upper Room when he was sharing bread and wine with his Apostles. As they are doing this, they “make Christ present, under the species of bread and wine, in the saving act of his self-sacrifice on the Cross”²⁸

Pope John Paul II’s fifth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, highlighted the fact that, Christ who instituted the Eucharist and the sacrament of ministerial priesthood, came back to his Apostles after his resurrection to pour upon them the Holy Spirit so that they will be able to act in his name in the forgiveness of sins of mankind:

How revealing is for us the fact that Christ, after his resurrection, entered again into this Upper Room where, on the Holy Thursday, he had left to the Apostles, with the Eucharist, the sacrament of the ministerial priesthood, and that he then said to them “Receive the Holy Spirit. Every man to whom you forgive his sins, they will be forgiven to him; every man to whom you maintain his sins, they will be kept to him (In 20:22 – 23).”²⁹

The Supreme Pontiff indicates the place of the Person of the Holy Spirit in the identity of priests. He accentuates that Christ who instituted the Eucharist as well as the sacrament of the ministerial priesthood – Holy Orders, during the Last Supper, came back into the Upper Room to his Apostles after his resurrection to confer the Holy Spirit upon them. For John Paul II, by referring to the Gospel of John 20: 22 – 23, the purpose of the outpouring of the Third Person of the Trinity to the Apostles was to empower them to act in Christ’s name in the forgiveness of sins of mankind. Here, the Holy Father clearly underlines the connection between Eucharist, forgiveness of sins or the sacrament of reconciliation and ministerial priesthood. Eucharist is Christ’s sacrifice offered to

²⁸ John Paul II, 1997, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

²⁹ John Paul II, 1983, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

restore sinful mankind into perfect relationship with God. And it is made present by the ministry of priests who are the successors of the Apostles who have been given power by Christ, outpouring the Holy Spirit upon them in order to enable them to forgive sins. Thus, priests forgive sins and administer Eucharist. The Pope makes it clear that priests do not operate on their own; it is the power of the Holy Spirit endowed on them that enables them to carry out Christ's mission. It is clear from the above text for Pope John Paul II, priests continue the redemptive Word of Christ by celebrating the two sacraments: the sacrament of Thanksgiving and Reconciliation. The two sacraments define ministerial priesthood in the Catholic Church. The Holy Spirit is still present, performing the same task in the priests of today because they are Apostles' successors. Since then, the Holy Spirit conferred by Christ to his Apostles was transmitted to priests during ordination. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is the core in the ministerial priesthood. At the Last Supper, Christ "revealed to the Apostles that their vocation was to become priests like him and in him."³⁰ That is the very vocation to the priesthood that the Church's tradition is built on.

On the fifth year of his pontificate, the Holy Father maintained that the identity of ministerial priesthood is based on priests cultivating special intimacy with Christ who gives up his life in the mystery of redemption which is daily renewed in the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist:

To be a priest means to be particularly friendly with the mystery of Christ, with the mystery of the Redemption, in which he gives "his flesh so that the world may have life". We who celebrate every day the Eucharist, the sacrament of Body and Blood, bearer of salvation, must be in a special intimacy with the mystery from which this sacrament derives its origin. The ministerial priesthood is explained only and exclusively in the line of this divine mystery, and it is only in this line that it is realized.³¹

³⁰John Paul II, 1996,4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

³¹ John Paul II, 1983, 2, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In this text, Pope John Paul II underlined the identity of the ministerial priesthood as resting on the priests cultivating special intimacy with Christ who gave up himself as sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins so that the world may have eternal life. This is the mystery of redemption which they always have a special level of closeness to. They are the perpetual celebrants of the Eucharist which actually makes present the death and resurrection of Christ in his Church. And, as they celebrate this sacrament, they become closely familiar with this mystery of Christ which is its source. The Holy Father goes on to emphatically insist that it is by faithful daily celebration of the sacrament of Thanksgiving that priests live out their commitment to Christ and manifest the intimate bond with him in the sacrament that defines their being and origin.

In his sixth Letter to Priests, the supreme Pontiff reiterates that priestly identity is rooted in the messianic mission of Christ, the Priest:

It is precisely in the innermost part of this messianic mission of Christ the Priest that your vocation and mission are also rooted: the vocation and mission of the priests of the new and eternal Covenant.³²

The Holy Father indicates that the first and foremost source of the vocation and mission of priests of the New Testament is in the messianic mission of Christ which entails proclamation of the Good News of salvation and caring for the People of God. The priests' mandate is to continue this messianic mission so that all mankind may be saved and have eternal life that Christ Jesus has brought through his Cross and Resurrection. In this text, John Paul II reveals to the readers that priests of the New Testament are the servants of Christ by participating in his mission to free the

³² John Paul II, 1984, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

world from the bondages of sin. Being the servants of Christ also implies being servants of his mystical Body, the Church; priests ensure the well-being of the Christian community in various ways, either through individual or collective approach. They console Christians in their hardships, encourage them and guide them through their spiritual journey to holiness which pleases God. In a nutshell, the Holy Father is saying ministerial priesthood is lived fully and effectively when it is “*imitatio Christi*” – that is, priests live up to their divine vocation not only through ontological configuration to Christ but also by concrete imitation of his works and deeds.

2.2 CONCLUSION

This chapter delved into Pope John Paul II’s reflections on the ontological aspect of priesthood as expressed in his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests. Through the analysis of relevant, selected texts, several key aspects emerged, shedding light on priestly identity according to the Supreme Pontiff. First and foremost, the Holy Father emphasized that priesthood is a special and divine call from God. Priests are chosen by Christ himself to share in his priesthood, and through the sacrament of Holy Orders, they are marked with an indelible character that configures them to Christ in order to act in *Persona Christi*. Christ is the one who models them into his priesthood.

The Holy Father reiterates that there is an intimate bond between priesthood and the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, as well as His mission. On the day of Ordination, priests receive the Holy Spirit through the imposition of the Bishop’s hands and this together with the sacrament of Holy Orders, entitles them to be *Alter Christus*, fulfilling their mission as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. The *Paraclete*, with His sanctifying power, is also the source and root of

the task of evangelization and of sanctification entrusted to priests. He is the absolute source of the divine power for priests.

The Holy Father further underlined the fact that the priesthood finds its origin in the Paschal Mystery, that is, the life, death and resurrection of Christ which is commemorated every Holy Thursday. In his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests, the Pope highlights the profound relationship between the priesthood and the Eucharist, affirming that the Holy Orders, along with the Eucharist were instituted at the Last Supper with the Apostles and transmitted to ordained ministers on the day of Ordination. According to John Paul II, another sacrament that defines the priesthood is the sacrament of Reconciliation. He pointed out that Christ after his resurrection, came back to the Apostles to pour upon them, the *Paraclete* so that they would be able to act in his name in the forgiveness of sins of mankind, reconciling them with God. Priests are by nature, indeed the servants of Christ by participating in the messianic mission to free the world from the bondage of sin.

The Pope teaches that there are two ways of participating in the priesthood of Christ. It is through the common priesthood of the faithful also known as priesthood of the baptized and the ministerial priesthood. Although these two modes of participation differ in essence and degree, they are intrinsically related to each other. The sacrament of Holy Orders serves as the foundation of ministerial priesthood, which is at the service of the priesthood of the baptized.

According to the Holy Father, priests are first and foremost members of the faithful. Subsequently, through ordination, they are members of the hierarchical order, originating from Christ's complete mission as Prophet, Priest, and King. Their vocation makes them to be witnesses to Christ both within the Church and in the world.

In his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests, the Pope highlights the profound relationship between the Church and the priesthood. He affirms that priests are members of the People of God set apart to minister to the Church – the Community of God. In the process of expounding on priesthood, he goes on to underscore the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church which could be summed up as follows: the Church does not only make the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also makes the Church.

This chapter has shed light on the profound and sacred nature of ministerial priesthood according to Pope John Paul II. It has revealed priesthood as a divine call. It is a way of ‘being’ before it becomes a profession of function. For John Paul II, ministerial priesthood is defined by its close relationship to Christ, the Priest *par excellence* and to the Holy Spirit as the primary agent in the process of Ordination. The subsequent chapters of the dissertation will further explore other dimensions of ministerial priesthood as reflected by Pope John Paul II in his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests.

CHAPTER THREE

EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO PRIESTHOOD

How is Priesthood experienced or lived?

3.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the existential aspect of priesthood is investigated. It is about the response of Pope John Paul II to the following question: “How is priesthood experienced or lived?” Thus, all the texts, identified from the Letters of the Supreme Pontiff addressed to the priests on the occasion of Holy Thursday, that focus on how the ministerial priesthood is experienced are analysed in this chapter in order to give clarity to the readers with the aim of contributing to the building up of the author’s Theology of Priesthood.

3.1 ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

At the beginning of his pontificate, in his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II reminded priests that they should always be mindful of a particular vocation they have received, which made them the bearers of the grace of Christ, the eternal Priest and the bearers of the charism of the Good Shepherd:

Nevertheless, within all these differences, you are always and everywhere the bearers of your particular vocation: you are bearers of the grace of Christ, the eternal Priest, and bearers of the charism of the Good Shepherd. And this you can never forget; this you can never renounce; this you must put into practice at every moment, in every place and in every way. In this consists that “supreme art” to which Jesus

Christ has called you. “The supreme art is the direction of souls”, wrote Saint Gregory the Great.³³

This is a very important existential text that links with the preceding text on the essence of priesthood. The ancient axiom that action follows being will be evident in the analysis of the texts that form this present chapter. As it has been stated in the beginning of the previous chapter that priesthood is a “particular vocation – a call from God,” this chapter shows how this call is experienced or lived-in real-life situation. The Supreme Pontiff here indicates that priests, every day and everywhere, are the bearers of this particular Christian vocation. In this way, they carry the spiritual gift of the Good Shepherd and the grace of Christ, the eternal Priest. And as part of their nature, they should always put these gifts into practice in order to successfully lead souls to Christ who saves and, to whom their call and mandate comes from. This charism of the Good Shepherd empowers them to continue the exact ministry of Christ of caring for the flock which is the People of God and leading them to eternal salvation. In short, the Holy Father is urging those who have been called to ministerial priesthood to exude in their daily existence the grace and charism bestowed upon them.

In the same Holy Thursday message, the Holy Father makes it clear that priests, empowered by the love of Christ who bestowed upon them the specific vocation, dedicate themselves to the service of the Church- the community of believers in order to address their difficult issues, particularly those pertaining to eternal salvation:

I know that I am addressing those whom only the love of Christ has enabled, by means of a specific vocation, to give themselves to the service of the Church and, in the Church, to the service of man for the solution of the most important

³³ John Paul II, 1979, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

problems, and especially those regarding man's eternal salvation.³⁴

In this particular text, Pope John Paul II insists on service as manifestation of priestly ministry. This service is profoundly enabled by the love of Christ who configured them to himself during priestly ordination. Hence, acquiring the specific vocation which enables them to serve members of the body of Christ. Service is mainly what was at the heart of the Master during his earthly ministry. Priests, having been configured to Him, are enabled to speak, and act in his name in perpetuating his ministry. As *Alter Christus*, animated solely by the love of Christ, priests unreservedly give themselves to the service of humanity in order to address those grave existential challenges, particularly those pertaining to their attainment of eternal salvation. This is the ultimate goal of the Master and therefore, the priests' goal to ensure eternal salvation for everyone.

In the same document, the supreme Pontiff urges the priests to imitate Christ, the Priest by cultivating the same anxious concern towards the faithful. He also encourages them to put it into practice so that it serves as the cornerstone of their priestly ministry:

The solicitude of every good shepherd is that all people "may have life and have it to the full", (Jn 10:10) so that none of them may be lost, (cf. Jn 17:12) but have eternal life. Let us endeavour to make this solicitude penetrate deeply into our souls; let us strive to live it. May it characterize our personality and be at the foundation of our priestly identity.³⁵

The key word in this text is "solicitude." In ordinary language, it means anxious concern towards someone. This word is very dear to Pope John Paul II. In 1987, he authored an Encyclical titled:

³⁴ John Paul II, 1979, 2, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

³⁵ John Paul II, 1979, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests

“*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*” – “The Social Concern of the Church.” In this Encyclical, he dispels the misconception that the Church is concerned only about the next life or life beyond the grave. In this context, John Paul II is suggesting that priestly service manifests itself first and foremost by anxious concern towards the good of the faithful or salvation of the faithful. This care or concern towards the community of the faithful is manifested by imitating Jesus Christ who is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his own life so that his followers may have life in abundance. Here John Paul II is suggesting that priestly ministry is not a function but a vocation. It is lived fully when one lays down one’s life as Christ did for the good of the People of God. In other words, the Pope is suggesting that one is called into ministerial priesthood not for personal gain or aggrandizement but to live up to the call by seeking the good and welfare of the People of God entrusted to his pastoral care. The Holy Father urges them to strive to live this life of concern for the People of God because this is who they are. In other words, the solicitude of a Good Shepherd is the cornerstone of their priestly ministry.

In his Holy Thursday message of 1979, the supreme Pontiff affirmed priestly ministry is manifested in the service of truth and justice, knowledge, and morality:

Our task is to serve truth and justice in the dimensions of human “temporality” but always in a perspective that is the perspective of eternal salvation. This salvation takes into account the temporal achievements of the human spirit in the spheres of knowledge and morality, as the Second Vatican Council wonderfully recalled (cf. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 38-39,42 ...) ³⁶

³⁶ John Paul II, 1979, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

To understand the impact of this text, one should bear in mind both the historical and communist background of Karol Wojtyla. Born and raised under Nazi and communist oppression, where people were denied freedom of expression and self-determination, John Paul II sees the task of priestly ministry as being primarily at the service of truth and justice among the people in whatever situation they find themselves. He believes firmly that truth and justice should never be compromised. Ordained ministers' task is to stand for these values. However, he is adamant that in their service to truth and justice, priests should always adopt a religious approach. They should not follow the *modus operandi* of politicians and civil leaders. They should always be guided by the principles of eternal salvation. The Pope goes on to show that human beings are capable of profoundly evil and superhuman achievements during their lifetime. As a result, priests in their ministry are best positioned to help people in the sphere of knowledge so that they can know who they are and morally so that they can differentiate what is good or wrong.

In his second Holy Thursday message to priests, the Pope reminded priests of their primary office which by virtue of ordination, is to represent Christ, be his instruments and ministers of Holy Eucharist:

But one must not forget the primary office of priests, who have been consecrated by their ordination to represent Christ the Priest: for this reason, their hands, like their words and their will, have become the direct instruments of Christ. Through this fact, that is, as ministers of the Holy Eucharist, they have a primary responsibility for the sacred species, because it is a total responsibility: they offer the bread and wine, they consecrate it, and then distribute the sacred species to the participants in the assembly who wish to receive them.³⁷

³⁷ John Paul II, 1980, 11, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

This is a theologically dense text. Here the Holy Father touches on the existential reality of being a priest. To the question: “How is priesthood lived?”, John Paul II responds that the fundamental duty of priests which comes by virtue of ordination, is to be representatives of Christ, the Priest and act in *Persona Christi* to the extent that they are his direct instruments. By configuration to Christ himself, priests are also consecrated ministers of the Holy Eucharist with which they nourish the assembly of the faithful. The tone of this papal text suggests that as they have primary responsibility for the sacred species, priests are expected, in fact, demanded to lead a life worthy of the sacred things they interact with on daily basis. This is what they were told on the day of Ordination, to conform their life to what they offer on the altar. In his 2002 message, the Holy Father summarises the above as follows: “Jesus, in the Upper Room associated a specific duty of the Apostles and their successors. From that time on, to be an apostle of Christ, as are the Bishops and priests sharing in their mission, has involved being able to act in *Persona Christi Capitis*... For then the priest as it were lends Christ his own face and voice: “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19).”³⁸

On the twenty-first year of his pontificate, the Holy Father underlined the close association between the person of priest and the Holy Eucharist:

In the Eucharist the priest personally draws near to the inexhaustible mystery of Christ and of his prayer to the Father. He can immerse himself daily in this mystery of redemption and grace by celebrating Holy Mass, which retains its meaning and value even when, for a just reason, it is offered without the participation of the faithful, yet always for the faithful and for the whole world.³⁹

³⁸ John Paul II, 2002, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

³⁹ John Paul II, 1999, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

This is a curious text. In it, Pope John Paul II clearly underlines the close association between the person of priest and the Eucharist. For him, the priest adheres to the Eucharist from which he draws inspiration and strength to live the gift of priesthood. For the Pope, the Holy Eucharist is the inexhaustible source of life for the priest, because in it, the priest participates in the mystery of Christ and his prayer to the Father. The Pope goes further to insist that the close relationship between the priest and the Eucharist necessitates daily celebration of this mystery of redemption and grace even when there is no participation of the faithful because such daily celebration manifests and strengthens his relationship with Christ, the Priest, before it becomes a prayer for the faithful and for the whole world. Elsewhere, the Supreme Pontiff proclaimed: “We were born from the Eucharist. If we can truly say that the whole Church lives from the Eucharist (*“Ecclesia de Eucharistia vivit”*), ..., we can say the same thing about the ministerial priesthood: it is born, lives, works and bears fruit *“de Eucharistia.”*”⁴⁰

During the final year of his pontificate, John Paul II reminded priests that their life takes on the true meaning when they imitate what they celebrate in the Eucharist:

It is impossible to repeat the words of consecration without feeling oneself caught up in this spiritual movement. In a certain sense, when he says the words: “take and eat”, the priest must learn to apply them also to himself, and to speak to them with truth and generosity. If he is able to offer himself as a gift, placing himself at the disposal of the community and at the service of anyone in need, his life takes on its true meaning.⁴¹

This is a theologically significant text. To understand its theological import, one should recall the words said by the Bishop during the ordination to priesthood when the candidate is presented with

⁴⁰ John Paul II, 2004, 2, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁴¹ John Paul II, 2005, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

the gifts of Bread on Paten, Wine, and Chalice. The Bishop says: “Know what you are doing and imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s Cross.” (Rite of Priestly Ordination in the Catholic Church). One cannot fail to sense that John Paul II had these words at the back of his mind taken from the Rite of Priestly Ordination when he wrote the above text. Even though this text makes no explicit mention of the Eucharist, the Holy Father is here reminding the priests that they are expected to imitate the mystery they are celebrating. In simple words, John Paul II is reminding priests to “walk the talk.” As they repeat the words of Christ during the act of consecration: “take and eat,” the Pope insists that priests should do so consciously and in truth. They should offer themselves unreservedly to the community assigned to their care. It is only when they imitate what they celebrate that their life takes on true meaning.

In his twenty-second Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II articulated that priestly ministry is not confined to celebrating the Eucharist only. But it is first and foremost a service of proclamation of the Good News, sanctification through the Sacraments and leadership of God’s People:

Our ministry is not of course limited to celebrating the Eucharist: it is a service which includes the proclamation of the Word, the sanctification of the faithful through the Sacraments, and the leadership of God’s People in communion and service. But the Eucharist is the point from which everything else comes forth and to which it all returns.⁴²

This text is loaded with theological insights. To understand the three levels of service that John Paul II is talking about here, one should have at the back of one’s mind the three levels or degrees

⁴² John Paul II, 2000, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

of the Sacrament of Holy Orders to which these levels of service correspond. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is divided into three levels, namely, Diaconate, Presbyterate and Episcopate. When the Holy Father talks about the ministerial priesthood as a service which includes the proclamation of the Good News, sanctification of the faithful through the Sacraments and the leadership of God's People, one who is familiar with Catholic theology of ministerial priesthood has no difficulty seeing that the Holy Father is here referring to the three levels of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. In other words, the ministry of the ordained is not limited to the celebration of the Eucharist only but it is first and foremost a service carried out by the ordained in their respective levels. However, John Paul II alludes to the words of Second Vatican Council document on the Church that "the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life." In this context, this priestly service is inspired by the Eucharist, and it enhances the Eucharistic celebration.

In 1986, in the Holy Thursday Letter addressed to priests, the Supreme Pontiff pointed out that priests are for the service of the faithful: they are ordained to empower them in the exercise of their baptismal priesthood:

The priest is for the laity. He encourages and sustains them in the exercise of the common priesthood of the baptized, highlighted by the second Vatican council, which consists of making their life a spiritual offering, bearing witness to the Christian spirit within the family, taking responsibility in temporal things and participate in the evangelization of their brothers.⁴³

The Holy Father indicates that all what the priests do is for the service of the laity. In other words, the faithful are the principal beneficiaries of priestly service. This underlines what the Holy Father repeatedly taught in his Holy Thursday messages that one does not become a priest for oneself. As

⁴³ John Paul II, 1986, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

their priestly tasks have been stated in the previous text, all of them are carried out for the faithful to encourage them in the exercise of the common priesthood of the faithful. However, it could be recalled from the previous texts that ministerial priesthood is not a function, but a vocation - a call from God. The ministerial priests have been ordained in order to serve the faithful, with the main office being the celebration of the Eucharist. John Paul II puts it thus: “The sacramental priesthood is truly a gift for this community and comes from Christ himself, from the fullness of his priesthood. This fullness finds its expression in the fact that Christ, while making everyone capable of offering the spiritual sacrifice, calls some and enables them to be ministers of his own sacramental Sacrifice, the Eucharist – in the offering of which all the faithful share – in which are taken up all the spiritual sacrifices of the People of God.”⁴⁴ Apart from offering spiritual sacrifices, other elements of common priesthood of the baptized are: bearing witness to the Christian spirit within the family, taking responsibility in temporal things and participating in the evangelization of fellow human beings. All of these are encouraged by the service of the priest.

On the eighteenth year of his pontificate, John Paul II insisted that a priest’s existence is for giving praise to God through the celebration of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation:

When the priest celebrates the Eucharist, when he grants God’s pardon in Penance or administers the other sacraments, always he is giving praise to God. The priest must therefore love the glory of the living God and proclaim, together with the community of believers the divine glory which shines forth in creation and in redemption.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ John Paul II, 1979, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, 1996, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

This is a very important text. Brief and uncomplicated as it may seem, it takes us into the heart of John Paul II's theology of ministerial priesthood. The two sacraments define or necessitate priesthood according to Pope John Paul II. They are the Sacrament of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. For the Holy Father, the administration of the two sacraments gives praise to God because the mission of the Son furthers the plan of the Father of reconciling the world to himself and incessantly giving thanks to God for his mighty saving acts – *Meraviglia Dei* accomplished through his Son who took our human nature and became like us in everything but sin. Through these two sacraments, the glory of God shines forth in the lives of mortals. In short, the glory and might of God is manifested when humans turn away from sin and are reconciled with the Father. It is also manifested when believers bless and praise Him for his goodness – God is blessed when peace and harmony reign in the world.

Reflecting on priesthood in the context of the year 1983 – the Holy year of redemption and extraordinary Jubilee, Pope John Paul II, in his fifth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, focused on priests being at the service of reconciliation of humanity with God:

In this Jubilee Year, we must, dear Brothers, become particularly aware of being at the service of such reconciliation with God, which has been accomplished once and for all in Jesus Christ. We are the servants and administrators of this sacrament in which the Redemption is manifested and realized as forgiveness, as the remission of sins.⁴⁶

In 1983, Pope John Paul II, in line with the tradition began by Pope Pius XI who proclaimed the year 1933 as the 1 900th special anniversary of the death of Jesus, declared 1983 as the 150th anniversary of Redemption. Reflecting on priesthood in the context of the same year, the Holy

⁴⁶ John Paul II, 1983, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

Father focused on priests as being at the service of reconciliation with God. In other words, the Pope is saying priests exist to further the work of reconciliation begun by Jesus Christ. By referring to priests as being at the service of reconciliation, the Pope is echoing the words of St. Paul in 2 Cor. 5:20: “This makes us ambassadors for Christ, God as it were appealing through us. We implore you, in Christ’s name: be reconciled with to God!” The Holy Father is emphatic that the primary ministry of priests is in the domain of reconciliation with God. They are servants and dispensers of the forgiveness of sins which Christ accomplished on the Cross.

In his twenty-third Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II urged ordained ministers to constantly seek reconciliation with God and lead a life of holiness to which they beckon the faithful:

For this very reason it is important for us to rediscover the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a fundamental means of our sanctification. Approaching a brother priest in order to ask for the absolution that we so often give to the faithful enables us to live the great and consoling truth that, before being ministers, we are all members of the same people, a “saved” people.⁴⁷

This text connects with the previous one in the sense that it underlines the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in priestly ministry according to John Paul II. For him, the principal duty of ordained ministers is not the celebration of the Eucharist but to further the mission of reconciling humanity with God, inaugurated by Christ. However, in this particular text, John Paul II goes further to argue that before priests could dispense the Sacrament of Reconciliation, they are themselves urged to rediscover the importance of that sacrament in their personal lives in order

⁴⁷ John Paul II, 2001, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

to lead a life of holiness to which they summon the faithful. In other words, John Paul II is saying, priests as ministers of reconciliation, should be the first to be reconciled with God. The Supreme Pontiff maintains that ordained ministers should not only remind the faithful a life of holiness but they themselves should be seen to be holy people and, the Holy Father categorically affirms that the only means to life of sanctity is through frequent conversion of one's sins. He goes on to show that ministers of reconciliation should endeavour to be holy people because they are by virtue of baptism members of the People of God – people saved by the Blood of Christ on the Cross – a Holy People (1Peter 2:9).

In his sixth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II talks about the Word, personal prayer, and the sacraments as the cornerstones of priestly existence:

Think of the Word, sharper than a two-edged sword (cf. Heb. 4:12); think of the liturgical prayer, especially that of the hours, in which Christ himself prays with us and for us; and think of the sacraments, especially that of Penance, a true plank of salvation for so many consciences, a place of boarding towards which so many men of our time tend. Priests must once again give great importance to this sacrament, for their own spiritual life and for that of the faithful. ⁴⁸

In his sixth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II touches on the foundation of priestly existence by talking about the Word, regular personal prayer, and Sacraments. The Pope is adamant that a priest should be faithful to the Word through constant meditation and practice. He goes further to single out daily personal prayer and frequent celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is clear from this text that for Pope John Paul II, the personal sanctity of a priest

⁴⁸ John Paul II, 1984, 5, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

is paramount to the success of his ministry. That is why the Holy Father insists on the special place the Sacrament of Reconciliation occupies in the life and ministry of an ordained minister. The tone of this text underlines the basic conviction of John Paul II about ministerial priesthood, namely, priesthood is not a concern or set of functions, but it is a way of life.

In 1987, in his Holy Thursday message to priests, the supreme Pontiff maintains that priests, as participants in the priesthood of Christ, should have their entire priestly existence erected on the solid foundation of prayer:

As sharers in the priesthood of Christ, which is inseparably connected with His sacrifice, we too must place at the foundation of our priestly existence the cornerstone of prayer. It will enable us to harmonize our lives with our priestly service, preserving intact the identity and authenticity of this vocation, which has become our inheritance in the Church, as the community of the People of God.⁴⁹

This is undoubtedly one of those texts where Pope John Paul II candidly speaks about the core of priestly existence. For him, by reason of their association and participation in the priesthood Christ, ordained ministers should have their entire priestly existence erected on the solid foundation of prayer. In simple terms, priests according to John Paul II, are bound to be men if prayer as their Master Jesus Christ was. The Holy Father goes further to spell out the benefits of prayer in the life of an ordained minister. First of all, he says it cements one's life with priestly ministry. Secondly, it is through prayer that an ordained minister is able to preserve the identity and authenticity of the priestly vocation received in the Church for the benefit of the entire Christian community. In other words, prayer is the yardstick to measure the credibility of truthfulness of a priestly life.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, 1987, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In the same document, the Holy Father pointed out the importance and relevance of prayer in priestly life as enabling an ordained minister to develop and maintain pastoral sensitivity:

Prayer is essential for maintaining pastoral sensitivity to everything that comes from the “Spirit,” for *correctly “discerning”* and properly employing those charisms that lead to union and are linked to priestly service in the Church. For it is the task of priests to “gather the People of God,” not to divide it. And they fulfil this task above all as ministers of the Holy Eucharist.⁵⁰

This text is a continuation of the previous one. John Paul II continues to show the importance and relevance of prayer in priestly life. According to him, it is through prayer that one is able to develop and maintain what he calls “pastoral sensitivity” which could be understood as an innate ability to respond appropriately to the pastoral needs of the People of God. He goes on to show that since priestly service is above all a spiritual service, prayer is essential for proper discernment and committing to good use of those gifts of Spirit given to promote unity of the People of God. The Holy Father concludes this reflection proclaiming that a personal life of prayer of an ordained minister enhances and culminates in the communal Eucharistic celebration.

In his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, at the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II emphasized the importance of prayer in priestly life and ministry:

It is prayer that shows the essential style of the priest; without prayer this style is deformed. Prayer helps us always to find the light that has led us since the beginning of our priestly vocation, and which never ceases to lead us, even though it seems at times to disappear in the darkness. Prayer enables us to be converted continually, to remain in a state of continuous reaching out to God, which is essential if we wish to lead others to him. Prayer helps us to believe,

⁵⁰ John Paul II, 1987, 12, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

to hope and to love, even when our human weakness hinders us.⁵¹

In his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, at the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II spoke at length on the importance of prayer in priestly life and ministry. He pointed out that commitment to prayer defines a priest. That is to say, a priest is by definition, one who is committed to prayer. The Holy Father warns that negligence of prayer does not only jeopardize the personal life of a priest but also his entire ministry. The supreme Pontiff goes on to show that prayer sustains and nourishes the priestly vocation. It is in the light of prayer that one sees the truth about one's life and, prayer spurs one to change and convert continuously. Finally, prayer sustains a life of cardinal virtues: a life permeated by faith, hope, charity, notwithstanding human frailty.

In his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, which was written in the eighteenth year of his pontificate, recalling the opening words of *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope John Paul II exhorts priests to refrain from being indifferent to the challenges people face on a daily basis:

The priest thus becomes a sharer in many life choices, sufferings and joys, disappointments and hopes. In every situation, his task is to show God to man as the final end of his personal existence. The priest becomes the one to whom people confide the things most dear to them and their secrets, which are sometimes very painful.⁵²

This is a very curious text. The opening line of this text evokes the opening words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) which reads: "The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way

⁵¹ John Paul II, 1979, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁵² John Paul II, 1996, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

affiliated, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Having this programmatic text of the Second Vatican Council at the back of his mind, Pope John Paul II underlines the fact that priests share in the life situations of the men and women of their time. In other words, they cannot be indifferent to the challenges people face every day in their lives. The Holy Father goes on to proclaim that in their ministry, priests are like prophets. That is, they show how God is present in people’s lives. He also admits that priests are counsellors to whom people turn to seek guidance in times of difficulties, uncertainties, and pain.

Reflecting on the encounter of Jesus with the rich young man in the Gospel story (cf. Mt. 19:16-22; Mk 10: 17-22; Lk 18:18-23), Pope John Paul II urged priests to imitate that accessibility and availability demonstrated by Jesus:

Each of us must make ourselves as accessible as Christ: young people must have no difficulty in approaching the priest and find in him the same openness, the same benevolence, the same availability in the face of the problems that assail him. Even if they have a somewhat reserved temperament, if they are closed in on themselves, the behaviour of the priest must help them to overcome the reluctance that ensues.⁵³

In his sixth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father reflected on priestly service and youth ministry. Taking as the starting point of his meditation on priesthood, the Gospel story about the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, he drew a number of conclusions. Firstly, the young people of today also have questions about the meaning of their lives. Secondly, priests should have special concern for youth and, in their ministry among young people, they should imitate Jesus by being approachable, accessible, and available to interact with young people. For

⁵³ John Paul II, 1985, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

John Paul II, it is incumbent on Priests to cultivate the same openness and benevolence of Jesus that made the young fellow to be open and frank with him about his deep-rooted existential questions and aspirations.

In the first year of his pontificate, in his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, John Paul II summarised what he called “the full meaning of priesthood”:

In practical terms, the only priest who will always prove necessary to people is the priest who is conscious of the full meaning of his priesthood: the priest who believes profoundly, who professes his faith with courage, who prays fervently, who teaches with deep conviction, who serves, who puts into practice in his own life the programme of beatitudes, who knows to love disinterestedly, who is close to everyone, and especially to those who are most in need.⁵⁴

In 1979, the Holy Father, reflecting on priests as stewards and witnesses, admonished ordained ministers against ‘secularization of priestly life.’ That is, the tendency to want to be like the laity. He proclaimed that priests who will prove relevant and necessary are those who do not in any way dilute their priestly charism but who understand and appreciate the full import of this ecclesiastical gift. John Paul II is adamant that when all is said and done, priesthood is meaningful when lived by an ordained minister who believes profoundly, who is not afraid to profess his faith, whose life is sustained by continuous fervent prayer, who proclaims the Gospel with deep conviction and determination and serves those around him guided by Jesus’ teaching of the sermon on the Mount, loves in a disinterested manner, who is compassionate and kind to all.

⁵⁴ John Paul II, 1979, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

At the beginning of his pontificate, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father encouraged priests to pursue continuous conversion since it is at the very core of their priestly ministry:

In consequence, we must all be converted anew every day. We know that this is a fundamental exigency of the Gospel, addressed to everyone (cf. Mt. 4:17; Mk 1:15), and all the more do we have to consider it as addressed to us. If we have the duty of helping others to be converted, we have to do the same continuously in our own lives.⁵⁵

Towards the end of his 1979 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II, taking inspiration from Lk 3:10, asked: “What must we do then?” This is the same question that the audience asked John the Baptist upon hearing his message of repentance. In the same vein, the Pope is suggesting that having reflected on the important points of priesthood, the ordained should also ask the same question. His answer to the question is not far from that of John the Baptist. He reminds fellow priests that the appropriate response to his message and the gift of priesthood is continuous conversion. He goes on to say that this is what the Good News calls everyone to. Priests above all should heed this call to newness of life because it is at the very core of their ministry. That is, they should not only call others to a change of heart but should also be the first to lead by example. In his own words, he wrote: “We must be converted every day, we must rediscover every day the gift obtained from Christ himself in the sacrament of Orders, by penetrating the importance of the salvific mission of the Church and by reflecting on the great meaning of our vocation in the light of that mission.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ John Paul II, 1979, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁵⁶ John Paul II, 1979, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

3.2 CONCLUSION

This chapter dealt with the existential dimension of ministerial priesthood gleaned from Pope John Paul II's Holy Thursday Letters to Priests. The Supreme Pontiff highlighted that regular personal prayer and commitment to the Word and the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation form the foundation of priestly existence. The Holy Father went on to proclaim that it is through constant prayer that priests develop "the mind that was in Christ, Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Prayer disposes priests to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16). Prayer enables pastors to respond appropriately to the pastoral needs of the People of God. It impels them to be accessible and available to the faithful, imitating Jesus' example.

The Supreme Pontiff underlined that the close relationship with the Eucharist is central to the life of a priest. Daily celebration of this mystery of redemption and grace strengthens their bond with Christ and fortifies their commitment to minister to the faithful. Their service is not limited to the Eucharist alone; ordained ministers should leave no stone unturned in the proclamation of the Good News, sanctification through the sacraments, and leadership of God's people.

For the Holy Father priests are entrusted with the charism of the Good Shepherd, they are called to put these spiritual gifts into practice continually, leading souls to Christ, the ultimate Saviour. According to John Paul II priestly ministry is rooted in service, which is animated by the profound love of Christ, who configured them to himself during priestly ordination. Through the gift of priesthood, ordained ministers are made representatives of Christ, the Priest and His direct instruments in the world. The cornerstone of priestly ministry, according to John Paul II, lies in imitating Christ, the eternal Priest, by showing solicitude and care towards the faithful. Priests

should strive to serve truth and justice among the people in all circumstances, adopting a religious approach in their actions.

In the Holy Thursday Letters of John Paul II, the sacrament of Reconciliation is of great importance in the life of a priest. Ordained ministers exist to further the work of Reconciliation initiated by Jesus Christ, serving as the dispensers of forgiveness, and guiding the faithful on their journey towards holiness. Ultimately, for John Paul II, the meaningfulness of the priesthood is realized when priests deeply believe, fearlessly profess their faith, live a life sustained by fervent prayer, proclaim the Gospel with conviction, and serve others with love, compassion, and kindness. By embracing these principles, priests fulfil their sacred vocation to lead souls to Christ and exemplify the teachings of Jesus in their lives.

This chapter has shed light on how priesthood is experienced according to Pope John Paul II. He elucidated that priests are spiritual shepherds after the manner of Christ – the Good Shepherd. Their service is animated by charity and dedication to Christ and the faithful. They are representatives of Christ. Their close relationship with the Eucharist cements their bond with Christ and the faithful. Prayer, Word, and Sacraments form the foundation of a priestly existence. The upcoming chapters will further explore other aspects of priesthood as presented by Pope John Paul II in his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOCIAL OR MORAL APPROACH TO PRIESTHOOD

What Does the Gift of Ministerial Priesthood Demand?

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the Social or moral aspect of priesthood. It is about the response of Pope John Paul II to the question: “What moral responsibility does the gift of priesthood impel those who have received it to assume into their everyday life?” or “What does the gift of priesthood demand of the ordained ministers?” The texts have been selected from the twenty-seven Holy Thursday Letters to Priests, and those dealing with what the gift of priesthood demands have been identified and analysed. As with the two preceding chapters, the present one tries to further develop the theology of priesthood of the author in the concept of moral or social responsibility.

4.1 ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II reminded priests that their vocation demands integrity of both life and service, for that is what is appropriate for their priestly identity:

The priesthood calls for a particular integrity of life and service, and precisely such integrity is supremely fitting for our priestly identity. In that identity there are expressed, at the same time, the greatness of our dignity and the “availability” proportionate to it: it is a question of the humble readiness to accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to transmit to others the fruits of love and peace, to give them that certainty of faith from which derive the profound understanding of the meaning of human existence and the

capacity to introduce the moral order into the life of individuals and of the human setting.⁵⁷

This text revolves around to key concepts which the gift of priesthood demands, namely, a particular integrity of life and service. Pope John Paul II does not mince words that priestly vocation calls for a life of integrity as this is no line with priestly identity. In his view, it is this identity that manifest the sublime dignity bestowed during priestly Ordination. The second concept is integrity of service. According to His Holiness, priesthood is by nature, ministerial. That is, it is characterized by service just as its founder, Christ the Priest said: “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve...” (Mk 10:45). The Pope teaches that the hallmark of priestly service is availability which is promoted by one’s readiness to be led by the Third Person of the Holy Trinity and to radiate among the gifts of the Holy Spirit, charity, and Shalom (wholeness). The gift of priesthood demands that the ordained ministers be exemplary in leading those entrusted to their care to the certainty of faith and guide their consciences.

In the last year of his pontificate, the Holy Father exhorted ordained ministers to strive to experience the gift of salvation more fully so that they may become convinced and convincing heralds of it:

We are the first to be touched inwardly by the grace which raises us from our frailty and makes us cry “Abba, Father” with the confidence of God’s children (cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). This in turn commits us to advance along the path of perfection. Holiness, in fact, is the full expression of salvation.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ John Paul II, 1979, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁵⁸ John Paul II, 2005, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In the last year of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II urged those in ministerial priesthood to do everything possible to experience first-hand, the gift of salvation so that they may become convinced and convincing heralds of it. It is only when they become aware of this gift that they will experience the grace of God operating secretly inside them. That special grace will enable them to rise above their limitations as they wholeheartedly trust in God with filial attitude. To the question: “What does the gift of priesthood demand?”, the Holy Father proclaims that it calls for committed advance in the path of perfection. It is probable that he had at the back of his mind the invitation to wholeness by the Divine Master in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect therefore as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” This life of perfection is, according to Pope John Paul II, the clear expression of the saving power of God.

In the Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, issued in 1987, the Supreme Pontiff proclaimed that priests have a special role of leading, guiding and assisting the baptized in their journey of faith:

The Second Vatican Council presents the life of the Church as a pilgrimage of faith. Each of us, brothers, by reason of our priestly vocation and ordination, has a special part in this pilgrimage. We are called to go forward guiding others, helping them along their way as ministers of the Good Shepherd. As stewards of the mysteries of God, we must therefore possess a maturity of faith corresponding to our vocation and our tasks. Indeed, “it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy,” since the Lord commits His inheritance to them.⁵⁹

This is a theologically dense text. Taking as the starting point of his reflection, the words of the Second Vatican Council on Christian life as a journey of faith, the Holy Father goes on to affirm that those who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders have a special role to play in the

⁵⁹ John Paul II, 1987, 13, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

journey of faith. He maintains that priests are set apart to lead, guide and assist the faithful in their spiritual journey. He insists that they do so imitating the example of the Good Shepherd. The Supreme Pontiff goes on to warn his audience that as God has bestowed on them a special grace and made them partakers in his divine plan of salvation, they ought to display a certain maturity of faith worthy of their calling and mission. The Holy Father ends his reflection by a direct reference to the words of Saint Paul to the elders of the Church in Corinth: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.” (1Cor 4:2). For Pope John Paul II, priests should be trustworthy because God has entrusted his gifts for the salvation of the world to them.

In his 1988 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Pope teaches that those called to ministerial priesthood are no longer servants but friends of Christ and, as a result, they are expected to be committed to the priestly cause:

Such a friendship involves a commitment. Such a friendship should instil a holy fear, a much greater sense of responsibility, a much greater readiness to give of oneself all that one can, with the help of God. In the Upper Room such a friendship has been profoundly sealed with the promise of the *Paraclete*: “He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you... He will bear witness to me, and you also are witnesses” (Jn 14:26; 15:26-27).⁶⁰

Taking his inspiration from the words of Jesus in the Upper Room where he said to the Apostles: “I no longer call you servants... but I have called you friends.” (Jn 15:15), the Holy Father teaches that those called to ministerial priesthood are by extension, no longer servants but friends of Christ

⁶⁰ John Paul II, 1988, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

as well. Because they have been made friends, they are expected to be committed to the priestly cause. He goes on to show that the fact that they have been befriended by the Divine Master should implant holy fear in them which in turn will urge them to be accountable and ready to give the best of themselves. Pope John Paul II concludes that it is only when they live their lives animated by the spirit of friendship with Christ, priests become credible witnesses to him.

In his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father affirms that priesthood as an unquestionable call from God, is given for the service of the faithful after the example of Christ. Therefore, it should never be renounced on account of challenges encountered:

Since the priesthood is given to us so that we can unceasingly serve others, after the example of Christ the Lord, the priesthood cannot be renounced because of the difficulties that we meet, and the sacrifices asked of us. Like the Apostles, we have left everything to follow Christ (cf. Mt. 19:27; therefore, we must persevere beside him also through the Cross.⁶¹

In this text, Pope John Paul II affirms that priesthood is sheer grace from God, meaning it is God who chooses those He calls. It is not something one can claim for oneself. For the Holy Father, those who are called to ministerial priesthood are given this grace not for their own good or benefit but for the selfless service of others just as the Divine Master did not spare his life in service of fellow humans. Because it is a gift that God bestows freely on those He chooses, the Holy Father concludes that this choice cannot be renounced on account of challenges encountered. This gift demands some form of sacrifice on the part of those who have received it. Pope John Paul II takes the example of the Apostles who left everything to follow Jesus as an indication that those chosen

⁶¹ John Paul II, 1979, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

for ministerial priesthood should equally leave everything to dedicate their undivided attention to Christ. The Holy Father concludes this text by proclaiming that the gift of priesthood demands perseverance on the part of those who have received it.

Later in the same document, the Supreme Pontiff encourages fidelity to priestly vocation highlighting that priests should be good examples for married couples and witness to their vocation until death since they have received the Sacrament of Holy Orders while the faithful joined by marriage have received the Sacrament of Matrimony which are both life-long commitment:

Finally, we should add that our brothers and sisters joined by the marriage bond have the right to expect from us, Priests and Pastors, good example, and the witness of fidelity to one's vocation until death, a fidelity to a vocation that we choose it through the sacrament of Holy Orders just as they choose it through the sacrament of Matrimony.⁶²

This is a curious text. Here, Pope John Paul II compares the two sacraments: Holy Orders and Matrimony. He teaches that those who enter the covenant of marriage vowing to be faithful to each other until death rightfully expect a similar faithfulness from those who enter Holy priesthood. For the Supreme Pontiff, Priests and Pastors who are official ministers of the sacraments of the Church ought to be the first examples of what those sacraments mean and demand. For example, when he talks about the sacrament of reconciliation, Pope John Paul II says priests should be the first ones to be converted and reconciled with God. Similarly, when they witness to the vows in the sacrament of Matrimony, where couples vow fidelity to each other until death, priests are also reminded to be faithful to their vocation until death, though the Ordination rite does not specifically say: “until death” but says: “One is priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:5 – 6).

⁶² John Paul II, 1979, 9, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In his twenty-fourth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, John Paul II reminded priests that in the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation, they are charged with mediating God's forgiveness to the repentant sinners which requires of them availability and fidelity so that they can work his wonders in the lives of humans:

We know that in this sacrament, as in others, we are called to be agents of a grace which comes not from us but from on high and works by its own inner power. In other words – and this is a great responsibility – God counts on us, on our availability and fidelity, in order to work his wonders in human hearts.⁶³

In his twenty-fourth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father continued his reflection began the previous year on the relationship between the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation. He reminded fellow priests that in the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation, they are charged with mediating the forgiveness of God who welcomes the repentant sinner back into his embrace. He went further to proclaim that in this sacrament, priests are called to be vehicles of God's grace which as he puts it, does not depend on those who administer it but comes directly from God who makes use of human intermediary. The Holy Father admitted that to be chosen to act on behalf of God is indeed a great responsibility which demands availability and fidelity on the part of the ordained minister. He concludes by saying that it has pleased God in his divine wisdom to trust humans in order to work wonders in human lives.

On the twenty-sixth year of his pontificate, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Supreme Pontiff reminded priests that their vocation requires a close relationship with Christ, the Priest. He

⁶³ John Paul II, 2002, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

also encouraged them to pray tirelessly as they also encourage their communities to pray for vocations:

Dear brother priests, your particular mission in the Church requires that you be “friends” of Christ, constantly contemplating his face with docility at the school of Mary Most Holy. Pray unceasingly, as the Apostle exhorts (cf. 1Th 5:17), and encourage the faithful to pray for vocations, for the perseverance of those called to the priestly life and for the sanctification of all priests. Help your communities to love ever more fully that unique “gift and mystery” which is the ministerial priesthood.⁶⁴

In his 2004 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father reminded priests that their special vocation within the Church demands that they be friends of Christ, the Priest, whose words, and deeds they should meditate constantly just as Mary, the Mother of Jesus kept these things pondering them in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19). He urged priests to pray tirelessly and to encourage their communities to pray for vocations but above all, so that those called to ministerial priesthood may persevere and lead a saintly life. By their life and service, they will help their communities to appreciate and value the gift of priesthood to the Church.

In his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II prompted his addressees to continuously work upon themselves, connecting prayer to this ongoing formation that encompasses the priest’s spiritual life and pastoral and intellectual aspects:

We must link prayer with continuous work upon ourselves: this is the *formatio permanens*. As is rightly pointed out by the Document on this theme issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, (cf. Circular Letter of 4 November 1969: AAS 62 (1979), pp. 123 ff.) this formation must be both interior, that is to say directed towards the

⁶⁴ John Paul II, 2004, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

deepening of the priest's spiritual life and must also be pastoral and intellectual (philosophical and theological).⁶⁵

In his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests issued after his ascension to the throne of Peter, Pope John Paul II reminded his audience that to lead authentic and convincing priestly life, one needs to be continuously converted as conversion is the Gospel exigency. He went on to show that to achieve this goal, one needs to continuously work upon oneself. And this takes the form of ongoing formation which he insists should start from within so that priestly life is enhanced. The Holy Father is adamant that this exercise needs to be coupled with prayer which as he teaches helps priests always to find the light that has led them since the beginning of their priestly vocation. Lastly, he insists that the ongoing formation should also extend to cover both pastoral and intellectual aspects.

On the twenty-first year of his pontificate in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Supreme Pontiff readdressed the point of the need for conversion for the ordained ministers which he talked about early in the beginning of his papacy (1979), so that they can help the faithful to be converted too and enjoy the privilege of belonging to God:

The powerful missionary impulse which Providence has inspired in the Church in our time, especially through the Second Vatican Council, is a challenge above all to her ordained ministers, calling them first of all to conversion. They themselves must be converted in order to convert others or, in other words, they themselves must experience intensely that they are children of God in order to help all the baptized to discover the dignity and joy of belonging to our Heavenly Father.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ John Paul II, 1979, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁶⁶ John Paul II, 1999, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

Twenty years later, in 1999, the Holy Father returned to the theme of conversion which he talked about at length in his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests. This time the Supreme Pontiff acknowledges that the second Vatican Council has not only ushered in a new missionary era in the Church but has above all, been a wake-up call to all ordained ministers to rediscover their priestly vocation and mission. As a staunch believer in ancient axiom: “*nemo dat quod non habet*,” meaning one cannot give what he does not have, Pope John Paul II urges priests to be converted so that they can convert others, to experience first-hand the privilege of belonging to God so that they may be in a position to remind the faithful about their dignity and privilege acquired through baptism.

In the final year of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II centred his Holy Thursday reflection on the words of consecration during the Eucharistic celebration:

These words provide us with illuminating insights for priestly spirituality: if the whole Church draws life from the Eucharist, all the more then must the life of a priest be “shaped” by the Eucharist. So, for us, the words of institution must be more than a formula of consecration: they must be a “formula of life”.⁶⁷

The Holy Father maintained that the words repeated during consecration shed some light on what he calls “priestly spirituality.” That is, spiritual guidelines for authentic priestly life. The Pope argues that if the entire ecclesial community draws its life from the Eucharist presided by an ordained minister, it is incumbent on every celebrant of the Eucharist to make sure that his life is moulded by this sacrament. In other words, a priest’s conduct and life should reflect and be

⁶⁷ John Paul II, 2005, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

consonant with what he celebrates in the sacrament of Thanksgiving. This takes the reader back to what the Holy Father, namely: “It is impossible to repeat the words of consecration without feeling oneself caught up in this spiritual movement.”⁶⁸ The Holy Father concludes his remarks insisting that the words repeated during consecration are meant to be a formula and programme of life not just a rubric for liturgical correctness. In short, the Supreme Pontiff urges ordained ministers to live out what they say and do on the altar. This is not at all new because that is what every priest is told on the day ordination as an integral part of the ordination rite.

In his 1999 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father reflected on the pedagogical importance of the Eucharistic liturgy within the Church:

It is precisely in this context that I exhort all priests to carry out with confidence and courage their duty of guiding the community to authentic Christian prayer. This is a duty which no priest may ever forsake, even though the difficulties caused by today’s secularized mentality can at times make it extremely demanding for him.⁶⁹

During the last year of the preparation for the great Jubilee of 2000, a year dedicated to the Father, Pope John Paul II reflected on the pedagogical importance of the Eucharistic liturgy within the Church. He exhorted priests to fulfil their duty of leading their communities to authentic Christian prayer with confidence and courage. For him, this is the greatest responsibility laid on the shoulders of all ordained ministers in the Church. He insists that the fulfilment of this duty should not be compromised or hampered by the secular culture prevalent in today’s world.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, 2005, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, 1999, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

On the ninth year of his pontificate, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II addressed priests that an ordained minister fully fulfils his priestly vocation when he sacrifices his life for others, imitating Jesus' example, and that is strengthened by prayer:

Following Jesus' example, the priest, "the steward of the mysteries of God," is truly himself when he is "for others." Prayer gives him sensitivity to these "others," making him attentive to their needs, to their lives and destiny. Prayer also enables the priest to recognize those whom "the Father has given to him." These are in the first place, those whom the Good Shepherd has as it were placed on the path of his priestly ministry, of his pastoral care. They are children, adults and the aged. They are the youth, married couples, families, but also those who are alone. They are the sick, the suffering, the dying...⁷⁰

In 1987, the Holy Father addressed his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, reminding them that the model of priestly ministry is Jesus' example. By virtue of their calling and Ordination, priests are to use Saint Paul's words: "the steward of the mysteries of God." Pope John Paul II goes further to proclaim that an ordained minister lives his priestly vocation to the fullest when he gives his life for others. In other words, when everything he is or does is for the benefit of those to whom he is sent. The Holy Father insists that to reach this level of self-oblation, a priest needs prayer. It is only in the spirit of prayer that one cultivates sensitivity to the needs and demands of others. It is in prayer that one understands and appreciates that priestly ministry is for all those that God, in his goodness, has placed under the ordained ministers' care. In other words, as John Paul II understands it, the pastoral care of an ordained minister benefits all those whom Christmas given

⁷⁰ John Paul II, 1987, 11, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

his life for on the Cross. Lastly, the Supreme Pontiff underlines the fact that all categories of people in whatever situation, they find themselves are direct beneficiaries of priestly service or ministry.

In his 2005 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father exhorted priests that as ministers of the Eucharist, they should model their existence on this Sacrament of Thanksgiving:

In the Eucharist Jesus thanks the Father with us and for us. How could this Thanksgiving of Jesus fail to shape the life of a priest? He knows that he must cultivate a constant sense of gratitude for the many gifts he has received in the course of his life: in particular, for the gift of faith, which it is his task to proclaim, and for the gift of the priesthood, which consecrates him totally to the service of the kingdom of God.⁷¹

In the final year of his pontificate, the Holy Father, taking his inspiration from the Eucharist as the sacrament of Thanksgiving in which Jesus, the High Priest thanks the Father with us and for us, asked the question: “How could this Thanksgiving of Jesus fail to shape the life of a priest?” In other words, the Pope is suggesting that the priest as the minister of the Eucharist, should model his existence on this Sacrament of Thanksgiving. As the celebrant of the Eucharist, the ordained minister should be filled with what he calls ‘a constant sense of gratitude’ for the many gifts bestowed on him, he should be thankful for his life, faith, priestly vocation, and that God has chosen him to be at the service of the kingdom.

In his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests of 1980, the Supreme Pontiff insisted on the liturgical responsibility of those designated as celebrants and ministers of the Eucharist which demands a special sense of common good of the Church:

⁷¹ John Paul II, 2005, 2, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

The priest as minister, as celebrant, as the one who presides over the Eucharistic assembly of the faithful, should have a special sense of the common good of the Church, which he represents through his ministry, but to which he must also be subordinate, according to a correct discipline of faith. He cannot consider himself a “proprietor” who can make free use of the liturgical text and of the sacred rite as if it were his own property, in such a way as to stamp it with his own arbitrary personal style.⁷²

In the second year as the Supreme Shepherd of the Church, Pope John Paul II in his Holy Thursday Letter addressed to Episcopal Conferences and Priests, insisted on the liturgical responsibility of those designated as celebrants and ministers of the Eucharist. He maintained that the Eucharist is the common possession of the Church and as such, demands that all those who participate in it respect the Tradition and guidelines approved by the Church. This according to Pope John Paul II, demands a special sense of common good of the Church. It also calls for a deep sense of humility on the part of celebrants to abide by the rules laid by the Church. It would go against the common good of the Church if the ordained minister would behave himself as if he was the ‘proprietor’ of the Eucharist. What the Holy Father is saying is, to serve the Church as a minister of the Eucharist, demands humility, obedience, and faithfulness to what the Church teaches and practices.

In his 2005 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father insisted that priests are expected to live a self-giving life similar to that of Christ, and their close relationship to the Eucharist demands a certain amount of obedience to the legitimate authority in the Church:

This is exactly what Jesus expected of his Apostles, as the Evangelist John emphasizes in his account of the washing of the feet. It is also what the People of God expect of a priest. If we think about it more fully, the priest’s promise not obedience, which he made on the day of Ordination and

⁷² John Paul II, 1980, 12, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

is asked to renew at the Chrism Mass, is illuminated by this relationship with the Eucharist. Obeying out of love, sacrificing even a certain legitimate freedom when the authoritative discernment of the Bishop so requires, the priest lives out in his own flesh that “take and eat” with which Christ, in the Last Supper, gave himself to the Church.⁷³

In 2005, the Holy Father addressed his last Holy Thursday Letter to Priests. Taking inspiration from the words of Jesus in the Upper Room, during the Last Supper, when he said: “Take and eat. This is my body which will be given for you,” John Paul II understands these words which the priest repeats during consecration not just as a formula but a programme of life. He says a priest should live out this self-giving just as Christ meant and lived out what he said on that particular occasion. The Pope further proclaims that the close relationship between the priest and the sacrament of the self-giving of Christ (Eucharist) demands a certain amount of obedience to the legitimate authority in the Church as well as a degree of self-sacrifice on the part of the priest. In other words, Pope John Paul II is reiterating what he said earlier in the previous Letters that an authentic priestly existence takes place when the ordained minister lives out what he says and does on the altar.

At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II shed some light on celibacy in Catholic priesthood explaining that renunciation of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is what one embraces voluntarily:

Did not Jesus Christ, after he had presented the disciples with the question of the renunciation of marriage “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”, add these significant words: “Let anyone accept this who can?” (Mt. 19:12). The Latin Church has wished, and continues to wish, referring

⁷³ John Paul II, 2005, 3, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

to the example of Christ the Lord himself, to the apostolic teaching and to the whole tradition that is proper to her, that all those who receive the sacrament of Orders should embrace this renunciation “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”⁷⁴

In his first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II summarily touched on the issue of celibacy in Catholic priesthood. The Holy Father argues that renunciation of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is what one embraces freely just as Jesus said, “Let anyone accept this who can.” (Mt. 19:12). The Supreme Pontiff goes on to provide his audience with what one can call the theological basis for priestly celibacy in the Catholic Church. For John Paul II, the practice of celibacy among the Clergy in the Latin Church is premised first and foremost on the living example of Christ himself who lived a celibate life. Secondly, the Holy Father argues that the apostolic teaching supports this practice because the Apostles are the authoritative mediators between the historical Jesus and the later generations. Lastly, this practice is based on the living Tradition of the Latin Church as the second source of divine revelation.

On the twenty-sixth year of his pontificate, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Supreme Pontiff exhorted priests that their entire lives should bear a living testimony to the Eucharist which they celebrate:

Finally, never forget that you yourselves are the first “Apostles” of Jesus the High Priest. Your own witness counts more than anything else. Altar servers see you at the regular Sunday and weekday celebrations; in your hands they see the Eucharist “take place”, on your face they see its mystery reflected, and in your heart, they sense the summons of a greater love. May you be for them fathers,

⁷⁴ John Paul II, 1979, 8, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

teachers and witnesses of Eucharist piety and holiness of life!⁷⁵

In his twenty-sixth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II reflected at length on the relationship between the priest and the sacrament of the Eucharist. He reminded his audience that the totality of the person of a priest under normal circumstances should reflect what he celebrates on the altar. In short, his entire life should bear a living testimony to the Eucharist he celebrates. He goes on to maintain that it is by living a Eucharistic life that priest's witness counts more than anything else. The Holy Father concludes that by imitating what they celebrate on the altar, priests become "Apostles" of Jesus, the High Priest. Whether priests know it or not, their life impacts closest to them, for instance, their immediate assistants such as altar servers these as young they may be, expect to see the conduct of the Eucharistic celebrant reflect and confirm what he does and says on the altar.

4.2 CONCLUSION

This chapter dwelled on the examination of the moral aspect of priesthood, through the lens of Pope John Paul II's teachings in his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests. It revealed a profound understanding of the responsibilities and demands placed upon those who have received the gift of priesthood.

⁷⁵ John Paul II, 2004, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

According to Pope John Paul II, priestly vocation is not simply a profession but a call to integrity in both life and service, reflecting the identity of a priest. Priests should strive to experience the gift of salvation more fully so that they can become convinced and convincing heralds of it to others. Priests play a special role in leading and assisting the baptized in their faith journey. Those called to ministerial priesthood are no longer servants but friends of Christ and as result, they are expected to be committed to the priestly cause.

The Holy Father insisted that the call to priesthood is from God and requires unwavering dedication, regardless of the challenges encountered. He emphasized fidelity to the priestly vocation, urging priests to be exemplary figures for married couples and witnesses to their vocation until death. The sacrament of reconciliation places upon priests the task of mediating God's forgiveness to repentant sinners requires of them availability and fidelity so that God can work His wonders in the lives of humans.

According to the Supreme Pontiff, a close relationship with Christ is central to a genuine and convincing priestly life, necessitating continuous conversion as per the Gospel's exigency. He also pointed out that the Eucharist as the heart of priestly life, moulds ordained ministers' being and serves as a source of strength and guidance. Living a self-giving life akin to that of Christ, priests' close relationship with the Eucharist entails obedience to legitimate authority in the Church. Ultimately, their entire lives should bear witness to the Eucharist they celebrate, displaying a deep commitment to their priestly identity.

Another responsibility of priests, as presented by Pope John Paul II in his Holy Thursday Letters, is that they are called to lead their communities in an authentic Christian prayer with confidence and courage, fulfilling their liturgical responsibilities with a sense of the common good of the Church, respecting her Tradition and approved guidelines.

In essence, Pope John Paul II's teachings underscore that priesthood is a sacred vocation demanding unwavering commitment, a close relationship with Christ, and a life of self-giving service to the faithful. It is a calling that requires continuous conversion, fidelity, and obedience to fulfil the profound responsibilities bestowed upon those who have received the gift of Priesthood.

CHAPTER FIVE

ESCHATOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PRIESTHOOD

What Does the Gift of Ministerial Priesthood Promise?

5.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the analysis of Pope John Paul II's response to the question: "What does the gift of priesthood promise?" This constitutes the eschatological dimension of priesthood. In pursuit of the main objective of reconstructing the theology of priesthood of the Supreme Pontiff, this chapter similar to the three previous chapters, contributes to that. The relevant texts selected from the twenty-seven Holy Thursday Letters to Priests that deal with the eschatological dimension of priesthood will be analysed.

5.1 ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

In his fourth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father highlighted the significance of Holy Thursday (*dies sacerdotalis*) as a reminder and testimony to Christ's redemptive love revealed through his passion and death in which priests are invited to embrace their vocation with devotion and unwavering commitment:

On Holy Thursday the day on which the priesthood of each of us was born, we see with our eyes of faith the immensity of this love which, in Paschal mystery, commanded us to become "obedient to the point of death"; and in this light we also see better our unworthiness.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ John Paul II, 1982, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In this text, the Holy Father emphasized that Holy Thursday is a reminder and testimony to the saving love which Christ revealed through his passion and death. Captivated and inspired by such act of intense self-sacrificing love, priests, according to Pope John Paul II, are invited to live and follow their priestly vocation with the same filial obedience and total commitment that Jesus exemplified during his life and passion. To the question: “What does the gift of priesthood promise?”, the response of the Holy Father would be: It promises total commitment, absolute obedience, and complete trust in God as the love of God does not only draw us towards God but also lays bare human frailty and unworthiness.

In his fifth year of his pontificate which was also the commemorative Year of Redemption and the Extraordinary Jubilee, the Supreme Pontiff, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, emphasized that Christ promised his friendship to the Apostles and to those who succeed them through the sacrament of Holy Orders:

Christ made it known to the Apostles, and to all who inherit from them the ordained priesthood, that in this vocation and this ministry they must become His friends – they must become the friends of that mystery which he came to accomplish.⁷⁷

In the following year, the Holy Father reflected on the words of Christ in the Upper Room during the institution of the Eucharist and the sacrament of Holy Orders when he said: “ I no longer call you servants..., now I call you my friends...” (Jn 15:15), highlighting that what Christ promised his Apostles would be enjoyed by those who succeed them through the sacrament of Holy Orders.

⁷⁷ John Paul II, 1983, 2, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In other words, those who are called to ministerial priesthood and continue the ministry Christ entrusted to the Apostles and they are by virtue of their vocation and ordination, made friends of Christ. John Paul II goes on to show that being a friend of the Divine Master also means being united to him in his mission and the Cross – the sacrifice of redemption. The gift of priesthood therefore promises everlasting friendship with the Redeemer.

In 2001, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II reflected on the importance of the sacrament of Reconciliation in Christian life:

Being a Christian means to receive a “gift” of sanctifying grace which cannot fail to become a “commitment” to respond personally to that gift in everyday life. It is precisely for this reason that I have sought over the years to foster a wider recognition of holiness, in all the contexts where it has appeared, so that Christians can have many different models of holiness, and all can be reminded that they are personally called to this goal.⁷⁸

During the celebration of the Jubilee of 2000 years since the death and resurrection of Christ (Jubilee of Redemption), Pope John Paul II reflected on the importance of the sacrament of Reconciliation in Christian life. He insisted that the call to holiness is addressed to all people in the Church though lived differently depending on different vocations within the Church. Since for him, priests are first and foremost Christians, and chosen among the faithful of God, for the faithful, to lead and guide them in the path of holiness, the Pope argues that their ministry is to help the faithful to personally live out their commitment to sanctity in everyday life as the vocation to Holy Orders demands and promises. For John Paul II, the sacrament of Reconciliation is necessary because it restores one to the state of grace after sinning. The Supreme Pontiff concludes

⁷⁸ John Paul II, 2001, 15, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

his reflection by pointing out that it is the task of priests to remind the faithful of the universal call to holiness.

On the seventeenth year of his pontificate, the Holy Father focused his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests on Mary, the Mother of God, imploring her to inspire in the hearts of her sons in the Son an ardent desire for holiness:

May she especially inspire in our hearts a burning desire for holiness. As I wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo Vobis*: “The evangelization needs new evangelizers, and these are priests who are serious about living their priesthood as a specific path towards holiness” (n. 82). Holy Thursday, by taking us back to the origins of our priesthood, reminds us also of the duty to strive for holiness, to be “ministers of holiness” to the men and women entrusted to our pastoral service.⁷⁹

As a contribution to the international conference called by the United Nations Organisation in Beijing, in September of 1995, which would be devoted to women, the Holy Father chose to focus his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests on Mary, the Mother of God because “in Christianity, in fact, the figure of the Mother of God represents a great source of inspiration not only for the life of piety but also for Christian culture and even for love of country.”⁸⁰ According to John Paul II, Mary, the Mother of Jesus played a crucial role in the process of redemption. She is exemplary not only by her “*FIAT*” (yes) to God’s plan of salvation, but also by her relationship to her Son. For this reason, the Holy Father does not hesitate to beseech her to inspire in the hearts of her sons in the Son an ardent desire for holiness which the gift of the grace of priesthood promises. Referring to his Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo Vobis* which concerned the formation of priests and was

⁷⁹ John Paul II, 1995, 8, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁸⁰ John Paul II, 1995, 2, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

addressed to both the Clergy and the Laity, the Holy Father reiterated that the ministry to bring the Good News to the world needs priests who are committed to lead a life of holiness just as the celebrations of every Holy Thursday stand out to remind priests of their origins and their call to holiness of life demanded by this vocation. For Pope John Paul II, ordained ministers are not only to strive for sanctity of life but should also be seen to be ministers of holiness.

At the last year of his pontificate, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II reflected on priestly spirituality indicating that it is only when priests lead life that bears testimony to the gift of salvation that they can become credible heralds of it:

Only if our lives manifest the fact that we are saved so we become credible heralds of salvation. Moreover, a constant awareness of Christ's will to offer salvation to all cannot fail to inspire us with fresh missionary fervour, spurring each of us on to become 'all things to all men, in order to save at least some of them' (1Cor 9:22).⁸¹

In his last Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, which as he says, he wrote at the time he was recuperating in hospital, as "a patient alongside other patients," Pope John Paul II chose to reflect on some aspects of priestly spirituality. In the course of his reflection, the Holy Father focused on "A life that is "saved" in order to save." He insisted that it is only when priests lead a life that bears testimony to the gift of salvation which the gift of priesthood promises that they can become credible heralds of it. In other words, the Supreme Pontiff is of the conviction that the lifestyle of priests shouts more than what they can say or preach. He goes on to remind his audience that it is through keeping fresh in their minds and hearts Christ's will to save everyone, that their missionary zeal will be enkindled and sustained. When priests are animated by this desire to see everyone

⁸¹ John Paul II, 2005, 4, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

saved, they will make sure that no one is excluded from their ministry so that the Lord can draw to himself those he chooses.

In his fifteenth Holy Thursday Letter addressed to Priests, the Holy Father reflected on the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church, stipulating that the Eucharist touches and transforms every aspect of the life of the Church:

The Eucharist evangelizes our surroundings and confirms us in the hope that Christ's words will not pass away (cf. Lk 21:33). His words will remain, for they are rooted in the sacrifice of the Cross: we are special witnesses and privileged ministers of the permanence of this truth and of God's love.⁸²

In his fifteenth Holy Thursday Letter addressed to Priests, the Holy Father reflected on the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church. He concluded that the sacrament of Christ's love (Eucharist) touches and transforms every aspect of the life of the Church. It is also a guarantee that the promises of Christ are for real. Because Christ has sealed or stamped his words by his precious blood on the Cross – thereby giving them a permanent import, his will last as long as the benefits of his death last. For the Supreme Pontiff, priests by becoming ministers of the Eucharist, are made privileged witnesses and ministers of the eternal gift of God's self-communication and love for humanity. By virtue of the gift of ordination ministers are made witnesses to that truth and unchanging love of God.

⁸² John Paul II, 1994, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

During the twenty-fourth year of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II dedicated his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests to the mission which the Lord has given priests to represent him not just in the Eucharistic sacrifice but also in the sacrament of Reconciliation:

Please God, we shall know how to cooperate with the mercy that welcomes and the love that saves. This we can do by our words and our attitude as pastors who are concerned for each individual, skilful in sensing people's problems and in delicately accompanying them on their journey and knowing how to help them to trust in God's goodness.⁸³

In 2002, Pope John Paul II dedicated his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests to the mission which the Lord has given priests to represent him not just in the Eucharistic sacrifice but also in the sacrament of Reconciliation. The Holy Father reminded priests that even before they are invited by the faithful to administer the sacrament of Reconciliation, they should never lose sight of the fact that mercy has already touched the heart of the repentant sinner. As a result, he prays to God that ministers of the sacrament of Reconciliation may know how to cooperate with the welcoming mercy of God and his love that wills all to be saved. Through ordination, priests are turned into channels and vehicles of God's mercy. For Pope John Paul II, this requires from the minister a certain maturity and attitude that is animated by solicitude or genuine concern for others and readiness to understand life challenges and willingness to accompany them in their pilgrimage of faith while helping them to trust in the unfailing love of God.

In 1985, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Supreme Pontiff proclaimed that the gift of priesthood is similar to a talent that is given to each priest in order to be multiplied and increased

⁸³ John Paul II, 2002, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

and as their vocation promises, they will have to give a full account on how they utilized it before Christ when they depart from this world:

The feeling of humble gratitude must prepare us, year after year, to make fruitful the talent that the Lord has granted us as we leave this world, so that we can appear before Him on the day of His second coming, to whom He said, “I no longer call you servants..., but I call you friends... It was not you who chose me; but it is I who have established you that you may go and bear fruit and that your fruit may remain.”⁸⁴

During the International Year of Youth in 1985, the Holy Father focused his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests on ministry among young people. He proclaimed that the gift of priesthood is similar to a talent that is given to each priest so that it can multiply and increase. Priests are therefore urged to welcome it with humility and gratitude and year after year, especially on Holy Thursday when they commemorate the institution of the sacrament of Eucharist along with Holy Orders. The Holy Father is, in fact, urging priests to live the priestly vocation cognisant of the fact that as their vocation to Holy Orders promises, they will have to give a full account on how they utilized their talent before the High Priest when they depart from this world. Priests need to be reminded constantly that it is Christ, the Priest who called them and ordained them to take part in his saving mission. This line of thought is consistent with Pope John Paul II’s thinking that one becomes a priest not for oneself but for building the Community of God – the Church.

During the last year of his pontificate, the Holy Father maintained that every time the mystery of Christ - death and resurrection, is celebrated, it enkindles in human spirit an ardent desire for a definitive encounter with Him:

⁸⁴ John Paul II, 1985, 1, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

“Mortem tuam annuntiamus, Domine, et tuam resurrectionem confitemur donec venias.” Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, the remembrance of Christ in his Paschal Mystery leads to desire for a full and definitive encounter with Him. We live in expectation of His coming.⁸⁵

During the last year of his pontificate, the Supreme Pontiff reflected on “A life centred on Christ.” He maintained that every time the mystery of Christ - death and resurrection, is celebrated, it enkindles in human spirit an ardent desire for a definitive encounter with Him. In other words, in the Eucharistic celebration, that union with Christ is anticipated through priestly ministry. For John Paul II, it is this very desire that spurs every priest to carry out his pastoral commitments with extreme sensitivity and charity. The same desire within the hearts of ordained ministers compels them to dedicate their life and ministry to the faithful entrusted to them while guiding them towards wholeness and making sure that hope in Christ does not fade.

In 2002, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II proclaimed that it is by holding firm to the promise of Christ that the ordained ministers can face the future with optimism which is the characteristic of the gift of priesthood:

It is precisely our faith in Christ which gives us the strength to look trustingly to the future. We know that the human heart has always been attracted to evil, and that man will be able to radiate peace and love to those around him only if he meets Christ and allows himself to be “overtaken” by him. As ministers of the Eucharist and of sacrament of Reconciliation, we in particular have the task of communicating hope, goodness, and peace to the world.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ John Paul II, 2005, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁸⁶ John Paul II, 2002, 11, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

Two years after the celebration of the great Jubilee of Redemption, the Holy Father looks back to assess the impact of this great moment in the history of the Church and the world. As he puts it, the Jubilee was intended to be a fresh start with Christ. In his realistic approach, Pope John Paul II bemoans unrelenting atrocities, wars, divisions and hostilities among nations and peoples. Within the Church herself, the Holy Father is saddened by the many priests who turned against the grace of ordination and engaged in sinful acts and behaviour which at end do not only cause scandal but also tarnish the conduct and ministry of committed priests. In the light of the foregoing, the Holy Father proclaims that it is by holding firm to the promise of Christ that the ordained ministers can face the future with optimism which is the characteristic of the gift of priesthood. The Supreme Pontiff is realistic in his assessment. He acknowledges that the propensity to sin is part of human weakness. However, since humanity was not created for evil, man can still live in peace and harmony with those around him only if he accepts Christ into his life. In other words, for Pope John Paul II, the mystery of sin the world can only be overcome by the mystery of the Cross. Priests as ministers of the sacrifice of Christ and his saving mercy have a special role in the dissemination of hope, goodness, and peace that Christ offers to the world.

In his twenty-third Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father urged priests to make regular use of the sacrament of Reconciliation since in it, Christ himself cleanses his ministers of their iniquities:

Dear priests, let us make regular use of this Sacrament, that the Lord may constantly purify our hearts and make us less unworthy of the mysteries which we celebrate. Since we are called to show forth the face of the Good Shepherd, and therefore to have the heart of Christ himself, we more than others must make our own the Psalmist ardent cry: "A pure

heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me”
(Ps 51:12).⁸⁷

In his twenty-third Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Supreme Pontiff devoted his attention to the Holy Orders and sacrament of Reconciliation. He urged priests to make regular use of the latter since in it, Christ himself cleanses his ministers for their iniquities and restores that purity of heart necessary for the celebration of sacred mysteries as the gift of priesthood demands and promises. Pope John Paul II does not mince words when it comes to reminding ordained ministers that they are the face of Christ in the world of their time. In other words, those who encounter them should feel the encounter with Christ. In order to live up to this sublime calling, ministers of the Eucharist should internalize the cry of the Psalmist and pray unceasingly to God for that purity of heart and mind peculiar to the service of the Most High (cf. Psalm 24:3-5).

In his eleventh Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father maintains that priestly ministry is intended to be of service to humans in this world helping them to better understand and respond to their challenges animated by the hope in the world to come which the priestly vocation bears witness to:

Priests “cannot be ministers of Christ unless they are witnesses and dispensers of a life other than this earthly one”, yet at the same time “they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men.”⁸⁸

In his eleventh Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father talks about the need for ordained ministers to value the special place and role and “secularism” of the laity. John Paul II insists that

⁸⁷ John Paul II, 2001, 11, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁸⁸ John Paul II, 1989, 5, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

ordained ministers need not compete or usurp the role of the baptized since they have their special charism in the Church. The Pope is adamant that as ministers of the Word, their vocation is to bear witness to the life that is beyond the present one to which Christ calls his Church. In the same vein, the Pope hastens to warn against “*Contemptus mundi*) “contempt of this world” or disinterestedness in the affairs of the present life. In other words, the Holy Father maintains that priestly ministry is intended to be of service to humans in this world helping them to better understand and respond to their challenges and conditions animated by the hope in the world to come which the priestly vocation bears witness to.

During the seventh year of his pontificate, the Supreme Pontiff prayed that the grace of ordination which entitles priests to ascend to the “Altar of God” could prove to be a source of supernatural youthfulness of the spirit:

On this day, dear brothers, my wish for each and every one of you – independently of your age and of generation to which you belong is that the “going to the altar of God” (as the Psalm says) may be the source of that supernatural youthfulness of spirit that comes from God himself. He makes us rejoice with the youth fullness” of His eternal mystery in Jesus Christ. As priests of this saving mystery, we have a share in the very source of the youthfulness of God this inexhaustible “newness of life” which with Christ is poured out in human hearts.⁸⁹

During the United Nations Organisation’s International Year of Youth, the Holy Father dedicated his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests to reflect on the qualities of young people. He singled out youthfulness of spirit among others. He prayed that the grace of ordination which entitles priests to ascend to the “Altar of God” could prove to be a source of supernatural youthfulness of spirit.

⁸⁹ John Paul II, 1985, 6, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In other words, the Pope prays for priests to experience and live again the enthusiasm, contentment, and freshness of vocation which they savoured on the day of Ordination. The Supreme Pontiff goes on to maintain that youthfulness is what God gives and abundantly pours out into the hearts of those He calls to ministry together with his Son.

In the final year of his pontificate, the Supreme Pontiff affirms that as priests celebrate the Eucharist, repeating the words of consecration, they are not only reminded of the eternal life that God promises but also implore that it gives them strength to continue in their pilgrimage:

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.”⁹⁰

In the final year of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II, taking his inspiration from the words of the Eucharistic consecration, found in the Eucharistic Prayers in the Catholic Church focused on the role of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. According to the Holy Father it is clear that in these Prayers, the Church honours Mary in a special way and wishes to imitate her in the acknowledgement of her role in the mystery of Redemption and unique relationship with Christ. The Supreme Pontiff points out that in the Second Eucharistic Prayer, the Church pleads with God to make her have a share in that eternal salvation enjoyed by Mary, the Mother of God. As priests celebrate the Eucharist every time, they repeat these words they are not only reminded of the eternal life that God promises but they also implore that it gives strength to continue in their pilgrimage of faith.

⁹⁰ John Paul II, 2005, 8, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

At the beginning of his ministry as the Supreme Shepherd, John Paul II stressed the need for continuous conversion as a way of priestly life:

Prayer also enables us to continually rediscover the dimensions of that kingdom, for whose coming we pray every day, repeating the words that Christ taught us. Then we feel our place in the realization of this request: “Thy kingdom come”, and we see how necessary we are for it to be realized.⁹¹

At the beginning of his ministry as the Supreme Shepherd, John Paul II stressed the need for continuous conversion as a way of priestly life. He insisted that prayer in all its dimensions, plays a pivotal role in this process. Focusing on Eucharistic Prayer, he remarked that every time priests repeat the words taught by Christ when praying for the coming of the kingdom, they should be conscious of the fact that they are cooperating with Christ in praying for the coming of the kingdom. Furthermore, the Pope notes that they are therefore necessary instruments in the realization of that kingdom. In other words, the gift of priesthood promises priests to become co-workers with Christ in praying for a concrete realization of the kingdom.

In his eighteenth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II reflected on the ministry of a priest as one who accompanies the faithful to eternal life in God:

As a witness to Christ, the priest is the messenger of man’s supreme vocation to eternal life in God. And while he accompanies his brothers and sisters, he prepares himself: the exercise of the ministry enables him to deepen his own vocation to give glory to God in order to have a share in eternal life. He thus moves forward towards the day when Christ will to him: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant, ... enter into the joy of your master (Mt 25:21).⁹²

⁹¹ John Paul II, 1979, 10, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

⁹² John Paul II, 1996, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

In his eighteenth Letter addressed to priests on the occasion of Holy Thursday annual celebration, the Holy Father reflected on the ministry of a priest as one who accompanies the faithful to the fullness of life in God. He noted that as one who has been configured to Christ and having a share in his mission, the priest cooperates with Christ to remind the world that God has a plan and that his plan is for humanity to enjoy eternal life with him. This is the project inaugurated by Christ during his first coming. At this point in time, it is in the hands of priests to continue it. As he reminds and accompanies the faithful, he internalizes his own vocation and ministry that God has a plan for humanity. At the end of his ministry, he can hope for a full manifestation and realization of that promise.

In his fourth Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, the Holy Father cautioned ordained ministers that the sentiments of unworthiness and uselessness need not lead them to despair but rather make them accept their predicament with humility and simplicity which will ultimately make them “men of hope”:

But let us make sure that we see this “unworthiness” of ours with a simplicity that makes us men of great hope. “Hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”⁹³

In his Holy Thursday meditation on ministerial priesthood, in 1982, John Paul II hinted to the fact that when one ponders the events of Holy Thursday – the day on which priesthood was born, one can only be overwhelmed by a deep sense of gratitude and unworthiness. Making reference to Lk 17:10, “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say We are unworthy

⁹³ John Paul II, 1982, 7, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

servants; we only have done what was our duty.”, the Holy Father insisted that the annual commemoration of Holy Thursday Liturgy should impel each ordained minister more than any other day, to profess with humility: “Lord, I am not worthy.” The Supreme Pontiff, however, hastens to caution those who have received the gift of priesthood that the sentiments of worthlessness and uselessness need not lead them to despair. Instead, he urges them to accept their predicament with humility and simplicity which will ultimately make them “men of great hope.” Because as Christ said: “You did not choose me, but it is I who chose you.” (Jn 15:16). This reality should spur ordained ministers to count on the promises Christ. The gift of priesthood impels the ordained ministers to be witnesses to this hope that does not disappoint.

In 1990, in his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, Pope John Paul II prays, imploring God that priests may ever more experience in their life and ministry the love of Christ and to be filled with the fullness of God:

May it be granted us to know ever more perfectly “the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge!” (Eph 3:19). In him and through him may we be “filled with all the fullness of God” (ibid.) In our priestly service.⁹⁴

The 1990 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests was written among others to set the tone for the upcoming Synod of Bishops which was convoked in Rome that same year to discuss the priesthood in the Church. At the end of this Letter, Pope John Paul II prays, imploring that priests may ever more experience in their life and ministry the love of Christ and to be filled with the fullness of God. In the context of Holy Thursday celebration which Pope John Paul II calls – the dies Sacerdotalis of the whole Church, the Holy Father urges priests to return to the source of their

⁹⁴ John Paul II, 1990, 5, Holy Thursday Letter to Priests.

vocation and ministry which is Christ, the Priest who trusted and made them his representatives. The gift of priesthood therefore promises every priest to be filled with the fullness of God as they minister to the faithful entrusted to their care.

5.2 CONCLUSION

This chapter has successfully explored eschatological dimension of ministerial priesthood as presented in the Supreme Pontiff's Holy Thursday Letters to Priests. Pope John Paul II has revealed a profound understanding of the priestly vocation and hope. To the question: "What does the gift of priesthood promise?", the Supreme Pontiff's response is that it promises eternal salvation, total commitment, absolute obedience, and complete trust in God.

According to the Holy Father, priests are also promised everlasting friendship with Christ and are tasked with guiding the faithful in the pursuit of sanctity on daily basis. Pope John Paul II proclaimed that the gift of priesthood promises a strong desire for holiness along with the extraordinary gift of God's self-communication and love for humanity. Ordained ministers are also promised to cooperate with Christ in praying for the coming of the kingdom. They are promised that they will have to give a full account on how they utilized their talent - priesthood when their time on earth comes to an end. Additionally, the gift of priesthood ensures that the ordained ministers will share in eternal life alongside Mary, the Mother of God. In essence, the gift of priesthood promises the ordained ministers to be "men of great hope" in spite of their unworthiness.

6.0 GENERAL CONCLUSION

This study has successfully led to the unified presentation of the theology of ministerial priesthood according to Pope John Paul II. While the first chapter is about the introduction to the enquiry, other four chapters correspond to the questions: “What is Priesthood?”, “How is priesthood experienced?”, “What does the gift of priesthood demand?”, and “What does priesthood promise?”

Chapter two has shed light on the profound and sacred nature of ministerial priesthood according to Pope John Paul II. It has revealed priesthood as a divine call. It is a way of ‘being’ before it becomes a profession of function. For John Paul II, ministerial priesthood is defined by its close relationship to Christ, the Priest *par excellence* and to the Holy Spirit as the primary agent in the process of Ordination.

Chapter three dwelled on how priesthood is experienced according to Pope John Paul II. He elucidated that priests are spiritual shepherds after the manner of Christ – the Good Shepherd. Their service is animated by charity and dedication to Christ and the faithful. They are representatives of Christ. Their close relationship with the Eucharist cements their bond with Christ and the faithful. Prayer, Word, and Sacraments form the foundation of a priestly existence.

In chapter four it was discovered that Pope John Paul II’s teachings underscore that priesthood is a sacred vocation demanding unwavering commitment, a close relationship with Christ, and a life of self-giving service to the faithful. It is a calling that requires continuous conversion, fidelity, and obedience to fulfil the profound responsibilities bestowed upon those who have received the gift of Priesthood.

Chapter five examined the eschatological dimension of priesthood. The insights of Pope John Paul II in his Holy Thursday Letters to Priests emphasized several promises of the gift of priesthood

including eternal salvation, total commitment to the service of God and His People, absolute obedience, and trust in God. Priests are also promised everlasting friendship with Christ. The gift of priesthood promises a strong desire for holiness, along with eternal gift of God's self-communication and love for humanity. It promises cooperation of ordained ministers with Christ in praying for the coming of the kingdom. They are promised that they will have to give a full account on how they utilized their talent - priesthood when they depart from this world. It promises share in eternal life with Mary, the Mother of God. In essence, the gift of priesthood promises the ordained ministers to be "men of great hope" in spite of their unworthiness.

In essence, this study has shed light on the nature of priesthood as the divine call, affirming its significance and role in the life of the Church. It has also elucidated that the gift of priesthood requires absolute commitment and fidelity that will ultimately yield the ordained ministers eternal life.

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