

HOMILY FOR PRIESTLY ORDINATION
LEGIONARIES OF CHRIST - APRIL 29, 2023

Dear brother deacons who today receive priestly ordination, dear friends and brothers in Christ.

I would like to begin this reflection with the words of the venerable Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio, who said this on the 50th anniversary of his priestly ordination. Card. Pironio wrote, “thank you, oh Jesus, eternal high priest, because you have chosen me to continue your singular priesthood, to the glory of the Father and the redemption of mankind. I feel immense joy to be a priest and I would like everyone, especially young people, to know it. Thank you, Lord, for having united me to your paschal mystery in baptism and for having configured me, through the sacrament of Orders, to you, Christ, priest and victim. In your name I can announce the good news of the Kingdom to the poor, celebrate the Eucharist daily, and administer the sacrament of Reconciliation. Thank you, Lord, for calling me to be a priest. Thank you, Lord, for the triple gift with which you have accompanied me during my long priestly life – the profound experience of the love of the Father, the constant presence of Mary, my Mother, and the fruitfulness of your paschal cross.”

These words describe in Card. Pironio the identity of the priest according to the Heart of Christ: chosen by God from among men to continue His work of redemption among his brothers and sisters in the world. To be an instrument of Divine Mercy, so that through the Eucharist and the sacraments, the salvation worked by Christ with his Passion, death, and Resurrection might enter the world. Always and throughout his life accompanied by the Cross and the presence of the Virgin Mary.

These words of Card. Pironio lead us into the Gospel that we have just heard. In it John relates what was called even in antiquity the “priestly prayer” of Jesus. This definition is perfectly appropriate, because the Lord came to this world as High Priest, to offer himself in expiation for the sin of humanity. He is the intercessor before the Father for all eternity on behalf of his creatures, and this prayer clearly expresses that. John the Evangelist does not describe the place where Jesus pronounced this prayer. We know, nevertheless, that with this prayer Jesus wished to manifest his role as intercessor at the right hand of the Father for the pilgrim Church on earth. It is the longest prayer of Jesus that is found in the Gospels. Its language is simple and profound at the same time, and is completely oriented toward the glorification of God. If we look closely, we see it is divided in three parts:

The first refers to Christ himself, who affirms that his work on earth is complete and asks for the glory that he enjoyed with the Father before the creation of the world. The second refers to his apostles, whom he commends to the Father, that they be sanctified in the truth. Jesus intercedes for the disciples who have stood with him. At the center of this prayer of intercession and expiation is the petition for consecration. Jesus addresses the Father, “Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, so I also send them into the world; I

consecrate myself for them, so that they may also be consecrated in the truth” (Jn 17:16-19). To consecrate means to make something God’s property, that is, to separate it from common things to be given totally to God, in order to be sent on mission.

The third part is addressed to the faithful throughout history, without distinction, that they may be fraternally united among themselves and in full communion with God, for the glory of Christ at the right hand of the Father. In this regard, the Catechism of the Catholic Church comments, “Jesus fulfilled the work of the Father completely; his prayer, like his sacrifice, extends until the end of time. The prayer of this hour fills the end-times and carries them toward their consummation” (CCC 2749).

Dear candidates for the priesthood, John the Evangelist, relates in another passage the words of Jesus addressed to his disciples, “You have not chosen me, rather I have chosen you and I have sent you that you may go and bear fruit, and that your fruit may remain, so that anything you ask the Father in my name, he may give you. This I command you, that you love one another.”

This great desire to follow the Lord Jesus, the same one that he manifested, is expressed in the Gospel of John, when an anonymous disciple says to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” We see that this man was inspired by the encounter with Jesus and his word, and freely decides to follow him. Jesus’ response is more discouraging than inviting. He does not promise comfort or success. Taking the road to Jerusalem is not a hike, it is an ascent to a city where, in fulfillment of prophecy, Jesus will experience arrest, condemnation, humiliation and death. It means to accept in advance exposing oneself to the cruelty of men, to free the very perpetrators from the cycle of violence in which they are trapped. Theologically this is called redemption, that is, ransom. In the same way, in communion with the sacrifice of Jesus, the priest himself must also become an instrument of salvation and source of communion.

It is necessary to experience the love of God, as Card. Pironio emphasizes, “to experience it in moments of prayer and adoration, in moments of generous self-giving to others and shared joy with our brother priests.” The day we lose this experience and this awareness that God is love and that therefore he has chosen and sent us, our life becomes dark. Life becomes dark, we become tired and discouraged, bored and sad. We lose the joy of being priests, of celebrating the Eucharist every day and contemplating the Word of the Lord, allowing the seed to grow in our good earth. We lose the joy of availability and service.

It is essential to experience the love of God, including in times of trial, desolation, suffering, the experience of the love of God throws new light on our existence. At the end of the priestly prayer of Jesus, he will say the same as a form of invocation: I have made known to them your name and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (Jn 17:26).

The venerable Card. Pironio always had a special love for priests, since he worked in the field of priestly formation. He always showed love for the priesthood, referring to the paschal joy of

being a priest. He wanted to form priests for the future, masters of prayer, source of communion and prophet of hope. To that end, he asked seminarians and priests to live poverty, contemplation, and service. He radiated to those around him the paschal joy of his priesthood, with the daily simplicity of a man who truly felt himself to be a “father” and who loves his brothers “in the sincerity of love.” You, dear candidates, should feel honored to have been chosen by the Lord to perpetuate his mission on the earth. As Legionaries of Christ, that is, consecrated to God, you should live by allowing yourselves to be penetrated by contemplation and evangelization. The original charism of the Legionaries, that is, to live in communion with Jesus, meditate on and learn from the Gospel to announce the Kingdom of God to your brothers and sisters who are in the world.

During his homily in the mass of priestly ordinations, Pope Francis, in the Basilica of St. Peter’s on Sunday, April 25th 2021, addressing those who are about to be promoted to the order of the presbyterate, invited them to consider that by exercising the ministry of sacred doctrine they will be participating in the mission of Christ, the only Teacher. “You will be like shepherds,” the pope said, “this is what he wants of you. Shepherds of the holy faithful people of God. Shepherds who go with the people of God, sometimes in front of the flock, sometimes in the middle or behind, but always there with the people.”

The priesthood is a service, a service like that which God renders to his people. And this service of God to his people, emphasized the pontiff, has “marks, it has a style, a style that you have to follow. A style of closeness, compassion, and tenderness. This is the style of God. Closeness, compassion, tenderness. These are the signs of the closeness of God in prayer, in the sacraments, in the mass.” Closeness among yourselves and closeness with the people of God.

I would like to conclude this reflection with what Card. Pironio wrote on May 22nd, 1970 to a deacon who was going to be ordained in two days.

“What do I wish for you? What I have always wished for myself – that you be ‘a man of God’, that you live in joyful intimacy with the Father to ceaselessly communicate God to others, in the Word, in the Eucharist, by your simple presence. That you be “a man of the Church’ – with perfect fidelity to your ministry, with great affection for your bishop, with generous self-giving in service to the whole People of God that has been entrusted to you. That you be ‘a man of the people’, that you know how to understand and interpret them, that you have a great capacity to take on their joys and hopes, that you always show the poor and good heart of a father, a brother, and a friend, that you always know to tell them, without telling them, how good God is and how good it is to be a priest.”

What can I tell you now? You will be a priest, “the friend of God on behalf of men,” the one who knows how to listen attentively, speak opportunely, walk the path daily with others. You will be the “presence of the Lord” among your brothers, the one who knows how to reveal to men the secrets of the Father, to communicate the grace of his Love to them, to lead them in light and peace to the Paschal wedding feast.

You will be the “Servant of Yahweh”, with a disciple’s ear and voice to proclaim the Good News to those whose hearts are oppressed, one who knows their suffering in order to understand the ignorant or mistaken, always ready to die to become a covenant of the peoples and light of the nations.

May the Virgin Mary, whom we honor in this basilica with the title “Salus Populi Romani”, accompany you, protect you, and make you ever more perfect disciples of her Son.

Amen.