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HOMILY AT THE PRIESTLY ORDINATION OF JUAN CARLOS ROJAS

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Translated from the original Spanish by Fr. Wally Platt, CSB

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Introduction

On this solemn occasion for the Basilian Fathers, for the Church in Cali and in Colombia, and for the family Rojas, the Liturgy invites us to reflect on the greatness and the responsibility of the ministerial priesthood, this inestimable gift of the Lord to his People, which today he gives to our brother Juan Carlos. This Ordination also coincides providentially with the feast of Saint Basil and his friend Saint Gregory Nazianzen, in whom the Basilians have an extraordinary example of sanctity and vocational self-giving.

First of all, I should like to remind you that you are members of a priestly people (cf. *Ap* 1,6; 5, 9-10; *IP* 2, 5, 9), called by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Each one has his or her own history of a vocation, of a call which comes from the Lord and, for that reason, is a gift and mystery which is accomplished in our personal response.

At the same time we are celebrating today the act of love by which Jesus freely called upon the Twelve to share his very own life. This participation, which is a communion of mind and heart with Him, is at the same time a demand inherent in the priestly mission itself, and is given today to our brother Juan Carlos.

Gift and Love

The ministerial priesthood, we must remember, is a pure gift of love to humanity and especially to the Christian community. It is the merciful love of the Redeemer which saves us. And for this to be realized, ordinarily the service of priests, is required, “useless servants” though we may be. The priest is the property of God and of his brothers and sisters.

Only as belonging to God can the priest consider himself truly a minister of hope for the holy people of God. In fact, it is not possible to be at the service of persons if one is not already a “servant of God.” Nor can one be the servant of God if he is not already a “man of God.”¹

In the heart of the priest should resonate the words of the saint of today, Gregory of Nazianzen. The Saint writes:

One must begin by purifying oneself before one can purify others; one must be instructed before one can instruct others; one must be a light in order to illuminate, draw close to God in order to draw close to others, be sanctified in order to sanctify, to take by the hand and to counsel intelligently.²

The Three Missions/“Gifts” of the Priesthood

¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores gregis*, 13.

² *Oración II*, n. 71; PG 35. 479.

Juan Carlos: this day will be unforgettable for you. Today you are called “to serve Christ, Prophet, Priest and King, participating in his ministry, which unceasingly builds the Church here on earth as the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.”³ These are the three functions of the ministerial priesthood which now are given you by the imposition of hands and by the consecratory prayer which asks of God the pouring out the Holy Spirit: to be a prophet as preacher of the Word; to be priest who sanctifies the people; to be pastor of the flock of the Lord, and fisher of men. And you will do all this to give glory to God. For to give glory to the Father by the oblation of your life is the essence of the priesthood as it was the essence of the mission of Jesus.

Preacher and Witness to the Word of God

All the activities of the priesthood should focus on proclaiming fearlessly the Gospel,” which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (*Rm* 1, 16). The priest helps the People of God to respond to Revelation with the obedience of faith (cf. *Rm* 1, 5) and embrace the teaching of Christ.

Before he can be one who transmits the Word, the priest, like each one of the faithful, must be a hearer of this same Word. He must be “within” the Word, to allow himself to be protected and nourished as one in his mother’s womb.⁴ With St Ignatius of Antioch, the priest also exclaims: “I have taken refuge in the Gospel, as though in it were present Christ himself.”⁵

Indeed, we priests touch the Word of Life. It is not ours, but rather the Word of *God*. And here is the great humility of the priest: to know how to use his poor human word to incarnate, to give voice to, the Word which is not his. For this reason the priest is a man who should maintain through every day an intimacy with the Word of God.

People of our time ask of the priest not only that he “speak” of Christ, but also that in a certain way he make Him visible. And in order to do this, he cannot fail to be a contemplator of the beautiful suffering face of Jesus.⁶

As a proclaimer of the Good News to the poor (cf. *Lc* 4, 18), the priest must show in his life as disciple a personal consistency. His teaching must be accompanied by the witness and the example of an authentic life of faith.

His preaching should be marked by courage, which is the fruit of the action of the Spirit in him (Cf. *Hch* 4, 31). In this way, going out of himself to announce Jesus Christ, the priest assumes his mission with confidence, truly becoming a “bridge” held out to his brothers.

In the Face of Injustice

Dear brother priests: we cannot improve the society for which we have given our lives, if we do not go to the root—to the struggle against sin—to the change of heart of each person, in a word, to the conversion to Christ. Only if the priest lives the truth of Redemption can he approach efficaciously the worrisome problems of our time.

For this reason, bound intimately to the radicalism of the Gospel, the faithful priest has the duty of unmasking the false ideas concerning human dignity and rescue those values despised by the world.

In his apostolic exhortation on the Church on our Continent, Pope John Paul II said: “The priests, as pastors of the People of God in America, must also be attentive to the challenges of the world today and aware of the suffering and hopes of their people, sharing their experiences, and, above all, assuming solidarity with the

³ *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 1.

⁴ Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores gregis*, 15.

⁵ *A los Filadelfios*. 5: PG 5. 700

⁶ Cf. John Paul II. *Novo millennio ineunte*. 16.

poor.”⁷

In the face of situations of injustice, the priest is the defender of the rights of man created in the image and likeness of God. He must vigorously defend the dignity of life from conception to natural end; take on the defence of the weakest, being the voice of those who have no voice. At the same time, he must always warn that the Christian is obliged to avoid revenge and to be disposed to pardon enemies. In fact, there is no justice without pardon and a true peace is only possible through pardon.⁸ The liberating social doctrine of the Church, which belongs to the preaching of the New Evangelization, is capable of sustaining hope even in the most difficult situations of family and society.

2. The Priest-Sanctifier

Another priestly function of our brother Juan Carlos—possibly the principal one—is that of sanctifier of us, directing prayer for the people and with the people, celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and the great sacrament of Reconciliation, which offers divine mercy to the sinner.

Every priest, in virtue of the sacred power received, is configured in a special way to the High Priest, Jesus Christ. He is able—again as a gift—to represent Him visibly before us. By the grace of the Holy Spirit conferred this evening, Juan Carlos will actually be able to act as a living instrument of Christ, Head of the Church. Thus, just as the pascal mystery was the centre of the life and mission of the Good Shepherd, the Eucharist which “contains all the spiritual good of the Church,”⁹ is also the centre of the life and mission of the priest.

Dear Juan Carlos: keep always in mind that the gift of presiding at the Eucharist, which today the Lord gives you for the Church, carries a very great responsibility and a profound joy. Sometimes the thought will come to you that you are a poor, unworthy man—just like the Prophet Jeremiah or the Apostle Peter, as we hear in the readings today—and it is true: we are all such. But listen to the Lord Jesus; “Don’t be afraid... Friends”: as Jesus called his Apostles in the Cenacle (cf. *Jn* 15, 15). In the same way He wants to call you “friend,” thanks to your sacerdotal ordination. Listen to these words of the Cenacle with great humility. God the Father, who has called you, now offers you all his help through the Holy Spirit to be a priest in love with Christ, dedicated to the salvation of souls. “Live the mystery which is placed in your hands.”

3. Shepherd in the Image of the Good Shepherd

The third mission conferred on the priest through the sacrament of Orders is that of pastor of the people of God, he being inspired always by the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for his flock (cf. *Mt* 20, 28; *Mt* 10, 45; *Lc* 22, 26-7; *Jn* 10, 11). “Whoever wishes to be first, let him be the last of all and the servant of all” (*Mt* 9, 35): words of Jesus directed in a special way to the priest: servant and instrument of the authority of Christ.

To be a shepherd means to lead to our loving Father all persons: old and young, poor and rich, learned and illiterate, those who have already a sense of God and those who doubt his existence. All these the priest-shepherd must lead, following the example of Jesus, who knew his sheep, calling them by name, defending them against the wolf and, when necessary, suffering to save them. The good shepherd is he who, in the midst of the doubts, the fears and the anxieties of the contemporary world, speaks a word of hope.

The priest-shepherd goes into the desert looking for his lost sheep. He comes inspired by “the holy concern of Christ”. And, as the Holy Father said in his homily at the beginning of his petrine ministry,

He is not indifferent to the fact that many persons wander in the desert. And there are many forms of desert: the desert of poverty; the desert of hunger and thirst; the desert of abandonment, of solitude, of broken love. There is also the desert of the obscurity of God, of the emptiness of souls who no longer are aware of the dignity

⁷ John Paul II, *The Church in America*, 39.

⁸ Cf. John Paul II. *Message for the World Day of Peace 2002* (8 December 2001), 8: AAS 94 (2002), 137.

⁹ *Presbyterorum ordinis* 5.

and of the pathway of mankind. Exterior deserts multiply in the world, because interior deserts have spread ... The Church in the midst of this, as well as her Shepherds, must set out like Christ to rescue all persons from the desert and bring them to the place of life, to friendship with the Son of God, to Him who gives us life and gives it abundantly.¹⁰

As shepherd, Juan Carlos, you are also called to reunite dispersed peoples, those who are considered far from God and enemies among themselves, persons from broken human families. You are one who gathers together, who creates community and unity among the faithful. For this reason, the priest cannot be partial, nor can he be a man of factions. On the contrary, he is called to a man of the Church, a man of communion. As a good shepherd, he must bring all together around the altar.

Conclusion

Juan Carlos: from this day on, people will call you not only “Brother” but “Father.” And why? Because they need love, compassion and, I should say, the serenity and the security of a father. It is a new mission: spiritual paternity as “a man for others.” Jesus wishes you to be such from this day onward, a man of compassion and goodness for a weak and weary humanity. What you offer us is not your human gifts, such as they are, but the liberating Word of Truth, the Bread of Life and the Way of Salvation.

With the grace of the priesthood received in the sacrament of Orders, which we are about to celebrate, you begin to have the mission of Mary, which was the mission to be in the stable at Bethlehem, to show Jesus to the humble shepherds and to men of learning—to all who come. It was the mission of Mary as Mother: to show Jesus to those who sought him with sincere hearts. This is also your mission as a priest.

Juan Carlos: we—the Basilian Fathers, your family, your friends, and the community here present—are all proud of you and of your readiness to accept this new ministry in the Church as a priest of Jesus Christ. We promise you our prayers and we confide your priesthood to Saint Basil our patron, to Our Lady of the Assumption and Mother of the Redeemer, to Jesus, our High and Eternal Priest. May Mary be ever the mother who accompanies you in your ministry by means of which you guide us to the heavenly Jerusalem, where all together we hope to see the triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—face to face.

+ J. Michael Miller C.S.B.
Secretary
The Congregation for Catholic Education.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI. Homily at the solemn initiation of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).