

...your life as a priest will become an eternal song of love

Rome, May 15, 2006

Dear

This coming May 20th, I will be able to attend in person your ordination to the diaconate: I will also be present, with my most sincere and brotherly prayer, before God's holy altar in the church of Saint..... in, where you will take the "first step" in this calling as you go up those steps which will lead you to being anointed a priest forever.

What a sublime and high vocation is that to which you have been called! That of celebrating the sacrifice of salvation, of consecrating the Eucharistic species which make Christ present in the celebration of the Holy Mass: real, living and at work in His Church, who, though weak and sinful, trusts in God's grace and blessing.

It is the priest who celebrates the Eucharistic sacrifice. You will be called within a few months to this ancient and so very admirable ministry. Remember always that the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, means performing an act which must configure your very being, namely who you are as a person and as a priest. When you offer the sacrifice of the altar, remember that you must offer yourself together with the sacrifice, as a sign of your willingness to total oblation which encompasses the whole of your life in time, rendered sacred in the diakonia of charity lived for love of Christ.

There will be difficulties, moments of crisis, periods of suffering, especially spiritual suffering, not so much from the weight of the ministry that you are to begin, nor due to the vast extent of the battle to be fought against sin and the temptations of the evil one, but above all due to circumstances within Church circles, on account of individual ecclesiastics, of situations of scandal emerging within the Catholic Church, of unjust, cruel and absurd persecutions *in partibus-fidelium* (i.e., in Christian lands) which will put your priestly faith to the test.

Hold fast always, absolutely, totally, invincibly, and inseparably to the Cross: this instrument of annihilation and defeat has become for us Christians the weapon of our victory. Stay with Mary at the foot of the cross: there lies the inexhaustible source of the Eucharistic sacrament which marks your priestly vocation. It is there that the supernatural power of grace is revealed: lifted on high from the earth, Christ draws to himself peoples from all the nations of the five continents and to the ends of the earth.

To Christ, through Mary. An ancient rule. Simple perhaps; humble one might say, yet proven true and effective for every priest who wishes to devote his life

completely to the service of the Gospel. Every day give precedence to fidelity to the Office, which marks the rhythm of prayer and of charity, and to devotion to the Holy Rosary, which brings us back into the intimacy of our inner selves, granting peace, serenity, light and infinite graces through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

Get used to standing your ground: constantly, no matter what the cost, as a soldier in the first line of battle, who fights without fail in his duties, never retreating even one millimeter, so as to give no ground to the enemy.

The experience of a Christian vocation—be it that of priestly, religious or married life— can be likened to a *marathon*: the winner is the one able to arrive at the finish line in one piece without losing the faith. Though a run, the pace must be slow, rhythmical, and gradual, so as not to burn out one's strength in the first few kilometers. You need to measure it out: day after day, month after month, year after year. In Psalm 89, we ask God *to teach us to number our days that we may gain wisdom of heart*. What's important is winning in the last meter, not taking the lead in the first hundred. A marathon: a slow pace, yet constant, like the constant climb of mountaineers who know how to reach the summit, unlike those Sunday tourists who run and then stop exhausted halfway up the trail. May that never be your case: the priestly vocation is not for those *who look back and leave the plough* in the middle of the field. It is a grace and a gift that must resonate within you, vibrant, always and unceasingly spreading faith, hope and charity to those around you.

Tu es sacerdos in aeternum. The Lord has called you to serve him with the total gift of your heart, mind, and strength: it is no longer you who live to achieve merely human ends, which are fleeting and ephemeral, but *Christ who lives in you* and works through you things truly wonderful and impossible for man to achieve on his own. All this to bring about the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, which *is here already*, and at the same time *is not yet*, and will come in glory, and shall be always, forever and ever.

On the occasion of our last meeting in Rome, over a "poor Franciscan" pizza and a "Cardinal-size" pizza, you expressed your fear of not being able to reach out to those who are far from Christ. Don't worry. In fact, the opposite is what happens: a holy priest, who lives with consistency his evangelizing mission, is like a light that shines in the darkness. Those who wander in the dark are in search of the light. They await that hope and they seek that source of life which will enable them to escape the dreary anguish of the darkness of sin and evil. Only Christ is capable of satisfying the deepest aspirations of the human heart. You need not go out, but rather wait: what matters is that you live with sincerity and fidelity your vocation at the service of Christ and of the Catholic Church.

Then you will be salt and light for your people on Swiss soil, whence many apostles and saints shall arise. What is the pastoral method to be taken? There is only one, and it doesn't require special studies or strategies: fidelity to the Gospel, *free of any embellishment! (sine glossa!)* The coherence and holiness of the clergy generate holy laity, holy Christian families, holy vocations to the seminary, holy priests, nuns and bishops, etc..., an unbroken chain of grace, in which "*Bonum*" is *diffusivum sui*.

The priest is like a *magnet that* attracts others to himself only to attract them to God, through the power of attraction of the grace in him, not by his own merit, but by the abundant mercy of God, who has called him to act as an intermediary between heaven and earth, through the service of the Word and of the Sacraments. St. Paul writes: "*Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law - though I myself am not under the law - to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law - though I am not outside God's law but within the law of Christ - to win over those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some.*"

The secret of pastoral work is all right here.

The rest is just more or less clever and more or less substantiated idle talk which serves primarily the purpose of giving work to a prevalent group of priests and nuns—those so-called 'Pastoral Specialists', who would otherwise be without a job.

The priest is a magnet that attracts those who are in sin, in pain, in need, and in desperation: the poorest, the weakest, the sick, especially those suffering of spiritual and moral sickness. It is the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, in the Lucan parable, who are invited to dinner instead of those first invited, who proved to be just as rude as they were absent. The Evangelist Matthew applies the content of this parable to the wedding feast of the Son of the King: he commanded his servants to go out to the byroads and summon to the banquet everyone they could find. Every man should be able to partake in the mystical 'marriage' of Christ—Redeemer and Sanctifier—in their local Church.

The priest is a *shepherd*: his participation in the mission of Christ impels him to identify himself with the Good Shepherd. The exercise of this authority must be carried out from the perspective of that humility which Jesus taught us by the washing of the feet of his Apostles. Christ, who is the Master, *did not come to be served but to serve*. Hence humility is the soil that enables charity to flourish, the fruitful bearer of an "agapic" tension capable of placing itself at the service of the People of God.

St. Bernard, referring to the Marian model that every priest should meditate upon, writes: "Humility adds merit to virginity and virginity adorns humility. Virginity is undoubtedly a commendable virtue, but humility is more greatly needed: the first is recommended; the second is commanded. To one you are invited. To the other you are obliged."

You will be the shepherd of a flock. It doesn't matter whether it's small or large, whether in a prestigious city or in an unheard-of mountain village. Where there is an altar consecrated to God, there the Church is.

The flock is placed under the protection of the shepherd. Hence the two possible attitudes of a priest: to act as a true shepherd who loves his sheep to the point of giving his life, or to be like the hireling, who flees at the sight of wolves. This will be the crux decision of your life: God will call you to account for it, when you present yourself before Him on the last day.

What a tremendous responsibility, for He is jealous of the souls of His creatures, whom he entrusts to the pastoral care of a priest!

Love with the same intensity of the heart of Christ those sheep which will be assigned to you, and take care, not just that none be lost, but that many others be won over to the following the Gospel. Do not judge them, scorn them, or frighten them away. Take compassion on them, on their weaknesses, limitations, and imperfections. Love them, with the tenderness of a mother; educate them with the virile energy of a father: as the parent who sees his beloved children grow before his eyes. Love them. That is all. This, and this alone, is required of you, but with an undivided heart.

The true shepherd *gives his life* for his sheep; the hireling *flees* at the sight of danger. What are the *wolves* of today? In the absence of direct and physical persecutions, the wolves are the criticisms, the daily martyrdom of misunderstanding, of slander, of that murmuring that attacks those who are faithful to Christ and to the Catholic Church. The daily stoning is that of backwardness, hypocrisy, and lies; void of truth and mercy. Never be afraid. Never respond with hatred. Never doubt the powerful assistance of God: He is a faithful God. He tests our faith, but doesn't let our "enemies" destroy us. The Lord tries us hard, like gold in the crucible, but does not deliver us to death. *Our defense is in the Lord. He saves the upright of heart. The Lord blesses the just: He covers him with His benevolence like a shield.*

The true shepherd does not flee from accepting to walk, just as Christ did, the painful path of Calvary and the torture of the crucifixion for the redemption and salvation of all humanity. This is an oath of fidelity which will mark and accompany your vocation to the priesthood for your whole life.

In our dioceses in Europe, at least for the moment, to give your life for the sheep doesn't entail so much *dying* as it does *living for* those who are entrusted to the pastoral care of priests. It is the exacting demand of a total coherence, especially in the living the three priestly promises: chastity, poverty and obedience.

Absolutely at the service of the Lord: the chastity of a heart consecrated to Christ, never fossilized in selfishness and mediocrity; voluntary poverty, lived as the evangelical lifestyle; total obedience first to the Word of God, even before Church authorities. A demanding but beautiful way of life awaits you: it's worth living it to the full, completely, without interposing obstacles, delays, or uncertainties that could ruin its beauty, holiness and perfection.

Totus Tuus. All is God's, for the pastoral care of souls. Have the same heart as Christ: merciful, immense, in love with the truth as the perfect form of freedom, open to dialogue but firm in your principles, capable of sacrifice and self-giving. What problems, what difficulties can affect a priest, to thwart his mettle and determination? Nothing. Who or what can separate a young man who has given his life to Christ from this love which is so intense and profound? No one and nothing. If you're not chasing after careers, promotions, power, money, popularity before men (which is always ephemeral and fleeting), then *all is grace*.

Who can separate you from the Love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? The Apostle confirms for us that in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

In the solemn promise that you will make before the altar of the Lord, I can hear resounding those words of the Apostle which you chose as the phrase for the little card given out at your diaconate ordination: *Be on your guard, know to endure suffering; carry out the task of proclaiming the Gospel; fulfill your ministry.* What a perfect synthesis of the priestly vocation!

May God give you the grace of realizing this life project, which on paper is simple and even ordinary, but in the existential praxis is demanding and requires generous and heroic sacrifice.

Every moment of your life's eternal priesthood will correspond to the eternal cadence of a continuous and uninterrupted existential colloquy with the source of grace, joy, hope, and charity. *Omnia vestra in caritate fiant.* Thus St. Paul exhorts us: that every action, thought, and deed be wrought in the Love of God. Then your priestly life will become an eternal song of Love, the new *stairway of Jacob*, which rises from the earth to heaven, joining the celestial harmonies of the angels, who sing forever the glory of God.

The priestly vocation, to which you responded with trusting confidence in the will of God, is a call to live the unique and permanent priesthood of Christ, the High Priest of the New Covenant and sole Mediator between God and men. Always be conscious and aware of the fact that souls have been bought at the price of the innocent blood of Christ. The priestly office of Jesus, culminating in his self-offering as the paschal victim will be prolonged in time through your priestly ministry.

I have followed your formative journey as a seminarian, first personally in Rome for a year, and then from afar with my prayers. You've almost arrived at your goal; the port is already in sight: but a few months and you will be a priest of God. How should you live this period of waiting? "*Noli foras ire: in te ipsum redi. In homine interior habitat veritas.*" This is St. Augustine's advice. Return to yourself and especially in prayer seek the necessary determination, concentration and strength to live to the full the event of priestly ordination.

I try to imagine your emotions, the deep longing and the last-minute doubts, knowing that you're just one step away from the big day of ordination. It's time to *beg* and to *give thanks*. Beg God for His strength and blessing, as viaticum for the long journey ahead. Thank Him for the great gift of your vocation, a gift that you will learn to appreciate all the more as you grow in your priestly life.

I send you my warmest greetings, looking forward to the 20th of May: from today on I will remember you in my prayers and recite a decade of the Holy Rosary for you every day up till that joyful moment of your ordination to the diaconate. Please send me at least one photograph, perhaps by email, as a keepsake of that joyful day.

With my fraternal embrace.

Prof. Marco Arosio

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marco Arosio', written in a cursive style.