

Rome, 10-16 January 2007

MEETING: HELP TO CONFRERES IN DIFFICULTY

Homily Opening Eucharist

Wednesday, 10 January 2007

Readings: Hebrews 2:14-18; Mark 1:29-39

Brothers,

I want to welcome you to the city of Rome, to this house of the Daughters of Charity, who offer a warm welcome, to this gathering of mutual fraternity and of special service to the Congregation, and most especially to this Eucharist. Thank you for coming and for your participation.

For us ordained to the priesthood, the word of God today presents to us Jesus as priest, as “the only high priest.” Three characteristics define his priesthood.

1. Jesus Christ, the high priest, is the brother of all of humanity. In effect, being the Son of God, Jesus is one with us “in flesh and blood.” As our priest, “he became like his brothers and sisters in all ways”; he was of our same family. Is it possible to be priest and not be brother, to be priest and not listen attentively to the needs and hopes of his brothers and sisters, to be priest and silence the cry of his brother’s blood? John Paul II reminded us about the brotherly and priestly vocation of the Church when he said, “man is the *way* of the Church” (RH 14). This is the same way that Vincent travelled and for which he lamented with great pains when he returned to Paris after having given himself completely in the missions.

2. Jesus Christ, as priest, is compassionate. If from anyone, people expect mercy and compassion from their priests, and they long for it from us. Compassion, understanding, generosity, forgiveness, kindness — the heart and soul of mercy — are the wellsprings of our mission as priests. What good does our apostolic activity do if people, when they meet us as priests, do not feel liberated and full of hope, if they do not feel that they can change their lives and be full of light? Jesus Christ, as priest being compassionate and faithful to God, is the one who “offered himself in expiation for our sins.” Our Constitutions, in describing our apostolic activity, clearly invite us to walk this road and remind us that “the

love of Christ, who had pity on the crowd, is the source of our apostolic activity, and urges us to “make the gospel really effective.”

3. Jesus Christ, the high priest, is the one who has passed the test of suffering. The test and the mystery of pain, at times, make us cry out in protest to God for his saving power. The personal experience of carrying our cross, however, is also an occasion to touch the silent mystery of God, absent and mysteriously present, to draw near to the profound mystery of our own human being, and most of all, to be in communion with the pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters. How can we be in communion with those who are wounded by life, or consumed by sickness, to our brother struggling in his vocation, or who feels burned out in regard to community life or his ministry? Maybe the only way to draw near is with our silent solidarity, reaching out to him with our heart and hands, knowing that in the face of great struggles words seem so small. Maybe our silent solidarity, the outward sign of our personal experience or “the test of suffering” is the only aid that can heal our brother’s wound. As high priest, Jesus has passed the test of suffering and can bring aid to those who are going through it right now. Our priestly ministry will only be of help to our wounded brothers if we ourselves have met our trials and suffering with Christian determination and integrity and we know well their meaning.

4. Here, in Rome, high priest has a ring of “high pontiff.” In ancient Rome, pontiff (*pons - facere*) was the one who took care of and guarded the bridge of the Tiber River; the one who *was* the bridge between the two shores of the river, who made possible communication between those in the heart of the city and those who were on its periphery or margins. In the same way in times of danger the pontiff protected the city by defending the bridge from the hands of the enemy. This original meaning, which only later took on religious significance, today holds for us meaning and offers us a special invitation. We are called to be “pontiffs”: to be bridges for our brothers who today live on the margins of or are absent from the Little Company for various reasons, and at the same time, to defend the life of our city, the life of the Congregation of the Mission as our gift to the Kingdom of God.

Fr. José María Nieto, C.M.

(THOMAS J. STEHLIK, C.M., translator)