

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
FOR THE 50th WORLD DAY
OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS
21 APRIL 2013 - FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Theme: Vocations as a sign of hope founded in faith**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the occasion of the 50th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, to be held on 21 April 2013, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, I want to invite you to reflect on the theme: “Vocations as a sign of hope founded in faith”, which happily occurs during the Year of Faith, the year marking the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. While the Council was in session, the Servant of God, Paul VI, instituted this day of worldwide prayer to God the Father, asking him to continue to send workers for his Church (cf. Mt 9:38). “The problem of having a sufficient number of priests”, as the Pope stated at the time, “has an immediate impact on all of the faithful: not simply because they depend on it for the religious future of Christian society, but also because this problem is the precise and inescapable indicator of the vitality of faith and love of individual parish and diocesan communities, and the evidence of the moral health of Christian families. Wherever numerous vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life are to be found, that is where people are living the Gospel with generosity” (Paul VI, Radio Message, 11 April 1964).

During the intervening decades, the various Christian communities all over the world have gathered each year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, united in prayer, to ask from God the gift of holy vocations and to propose once again, for the reflection of all, the urgent need to respond to the divine call. Indeed, this significant annual event has fostered a strong commitment to placing the importance of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life ever more at the centre of the spirituality, prayer and pastoral action of the faithful.

Hope is the expectation of something positive in the future, yet at the same time it must sustain our present existence, which is often marked by dissatisfaction and failures. On what is our hope founded? Looking at the history of the people of Israel, recounted in the Old Testament, we see one element that constantly emerges, especially in times of particular difficulty like the time of the Exile, an element found especially in the writings of the prophets, namely remembrance of God’s promises to the Patriarchs: a remembrance that invites us to imitate the exemplary attitude of Abraham, who, as Saint Paul reminds us, “believed, hoping against hope, that he would become ‘the father of many nations,’ according to what was said, ‘Thus shall your descendants be’” (Rom 4:18). One consoling and enlightening truth which emerges from the whole of salvation history, then, is God’s faithfulness to the covenant that he entered into, renewing it whenever man infringed it through infidelity and sin, from the time of the flood (cf. Gen 8:21-22) to that of the Exodus and the journey through the desert (cf. Dt 9:7). That same faithfulness led him to seal the new and eternal covenant with man, through the blood of his Son, who died and rose again for our salvation.

At every moment, especially the most difficult ones, the Lord’s faithfulness is always the authentic driving force of salvation history, which arouses the hearts of men and women and confirms them in the hope of one day reaching the “promised land”. This is where we find the sure foundation of every hope: God never abandons us and he remains true to his word. For that reason, in every situation, whether positive or negative, we can nourish a firm hope and pray with the psalmist: “Only in God can my soul find rest; my hope comes from him” (Ps 62:6). To have hope, therefore, is the equivalent of trusting in God who is faithful, who keeps the promises of the covenant. Faith and hope, then, are closely related.

“Hope” in fact is a key word in biblical faith, to the extent that in certain passages the words “faith” and “hope” seem to be interchangeable. In this way, the Letter to the Hebrews makes a direct connection between the “unwavering profession of hope” (10:23) and the “fullness of faith” (10:22). Similarly, when the First Letter of Saint Peter exhorts the Christians to be always ready to give an account of the “logos” – the meaning and rationale – of their hope (cf. 3:15), “hope” is the equivalent of “faith” (Spe Salvi, 2).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, what exactly is God’s faithfulness, to which we adhere with unwavering hope? It is his love! He, the Father, pours his love into our innermost self through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5). And this love, fully manifested in Jesus Christ, engages with our existence and demands a response in terms of what each individual wants to do with his or her life, and what he or she is prepared to offer in order to live it to the full. The love of God sometimes follows paths one could never have imagined, but it always reaches those who are willing to be found. Hope is nourished, then, by this certainty: “We ourselves have known and believed in the love that God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16). This deep, demanding love, which penetrates well below the surface, gives us courage; it gives us hope in our life’s journey and in our future; it makes us trust in ourselves, in history and in other people. I want to speak particularly to the young and I say to you once again: “What would your life be without this love? God takes care of men and women from creation to the end of time, when he will bring his plan of salvation to completion. In the Risen Lord we have the certainty of our hope!” (Address to Young People of the Diocese of San Marino-Montefeltro, 19 June 2011).

Just as he did during his earthly existence, so today the risen Jesus walks along the streets of our life and sees us immersed in our activities, with all our desires and our needs. In the midst of our everyday circumstances he continues to speak to us; he calls us to live our life with him, for only he is capable of satisfying our thirst for hope. He lives now among the community of disciples that is the Church, and still today calls people to follow him. The call can come at any moment. Today too, Jesus continues to say, “Come, follow me” (Mk 10:21). Accepting his invitation means no longer choosing our own path. Following him means immersing our own will in the will of Jesus, truly giving him priority, giving him pride of place in every area of our lives: in the family, at work, in our personal interests, in ourselves. It means handing over our very lives to Him, living in profound intimacy with Him, entering through Him into communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit, and consequently with our brothers and sisters. This communion of life with Jesus is the privileged “setting” in which we can experience hope and in which life will be full and free. Vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life are born out of the experience of a personal encounter with Christ, out of sincere and confident dialogue with him, so as to enter into his will. It is necessary, therefore, to grow in the experience of faith, understood as a profound relationship with Jesus, as inner attentiveness to his voice which is heard deep within us. This process, which enables us to respond positively to God’s call, is possible in Christian communities where the faith is lived intensely, where generous witness is given of adherence to the Gospel, where there is a strong sense of mission which leads people to make the total gift of self for the Kingdom of God, nourished by recourse to the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and by a fervent life of prayer. This latter “must on the one hand be something very personal, an encounter between my intimate self and God, the living God. On the other hand it must be constantly guided and enlightened by the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly.” (Spe Salvi, 34).

Deep and constant prayer brings about growth in the faith of the Christian community, in the unceasingly renewed certainty that God never abandons his people and that he sustains

them by raising up particular vocations – to the priesthood and the consecrated life – so that they can be signs of hope for the world. Indeed, priests and religious are called to give themselves unconditionally to the People of God, in a service of love for the Gospel and the Church, serving that firm hope which can only come from an openness to the divine. By means of the witness of their faith and apostolic zeal, therefore, they can transmit, especially to the younger generations, a strong desire to respond generously and promptly to Christ who calls them to follow him more closely. Whenever a disciple of Jesus accepts the divine call to dedicate himself to the priestly ministry or to the consecrated life, we witness one of the most mature fruits of the Christian community, which helps us to look with particular trust and hope to the future of the Church and to her commitment to evangelization. This constantly requires new workers to preach the Gospel, to celebrate the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. So let there be committed priests, who know how to accompany young people as “companions on the journey”, helping them, on life’s often tortuous and difficult path, to recognize Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14:6), telling them, with Gospel courage, how beautiful it is to serve God, the Christian community, one’s brothers and sisters. Let there be priests who manifest the fruitfulness of an enthusiastic commitment, which gives a sense of completeness to their lives, because it is founded on faith in him who loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19).

Equally, I hope that young people, who are presented with so many superficial and ephemeral options, will be able to cultivate a desire for what is truly worthy, for lofty objectives, radical choices, service to others in imitation of Jesus. Dear young people, do not be afraid to follow him and to walk the demanding and courageous paths of charity and generous commitment! In that way you will be happy to serve, you will be witnesses of a joy that the world cannot give, you will be living flames of an infinite and eternal love, you will learn to “give an account of the hope that is within you” (1 Pt 3:15)!

From the Vatican, 6 October 2012

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