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Letter of John Paul II to Gaston Poulain,
bishop of Perigueux and Sarlat, for the fourth centenary of the priestly
ordination of the great apostle of charity.

To the Most Reverend Gaston POULAIN Bishop of Perigueux and Sarlat.

1. On the occasion when the diocese of Perigueux and the Vincentian family are celebrating the fourth centenary of the priestly ordination of Saint Vincent de Paul, I am happy to join, through my prayer and thanksgiving, this event taking place in the heart of the great Jubilee of the year 2000.

On 23 September 1600, the young Vincent de Paul received the sacrament of orders from the hands of your predecessor, François de Bourdeille, bishop of Perigueux, in the church of Château-l'Évêque.

Although Vincent had aspired to an “honest retirement”, his encounter with men of faith, like Pierre de Bérulle and, even more, his discovery of the bodily and spiritual misery of the poor quickly had to lead him to a decisive change in his way of understanding and living his priesthood.

His greatest concern, something still important today, would from then on be to proclaim the Good News to the most materially and spiritually abandoned. It became clear to him that evangelization is a responsibility involving all the baptized, the entire Church. Moreover, he undertook his first great works with the laity, both women and men. But he quickly realized that the benefits of the mission would not endure if zealous and educated priests who base their life and ministry on an intimate encounter with the Christ would not maintain its flame. For Father Vincent, priests are irreplaceable in their role in the souls of those whom God confides to them. In addition, his awareness of the difficult situation that many priests, particularly country priests, experienced in the France of his day led him to participate actively in the reform of the clergy which was developing as an outcome of the Council of Trent. His commitment to the service of the clergy and to their formation, in a missionary perspective, grew and developed into retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, the development of seminaries. Likewise, the Congregation of the Mission which he founded, to: *preach the good news of salvation to poor people, especially in rural areas; and also to help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue, so that they can be effective in their ministry.* (Common Rules, I,1)

Father Vincent's vision of the priesthood, based on his personal experience of giving missions, assumed a universal dimension. He explained to his confreres: “God has chosen us as instruments of the great and paternal charity that he wishes to establish and flourish in souls . . . Therefore, our vocation is not to go just to one parish or to one diocese, but to go everywhere in the world. And to do what? To inflame human hearts, to do what the Son of God has done, who came to light a fire in

the world to illumine it with his love. Thus it is true that I am sent, not only to love God, but also to have others love Him. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love Him.” (Coste, XII, 262).

2. This jubilee year, when we especially celebrate the Incarnation of the Son of God two thousand years ago, opens us up to the messianic mission of Christ. He was consecrated by the anointing of the Holy Spirit and sent by the Father to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to bring liberty to those without it, to free prisoners and to give sight to the blind. (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente* n. 11). We find in this the basic intuition of Father Vincent, translated vigorously into action all during his life. Let us hear once again his call to conform ourselves to Jesus in his relationship to the Father and to all humanity, to the poor and the abandoned, those to whom he was sent. “You have to empty yourselves to put on Jesus Christ” (Coste XI, 343), in conforming your life to that of Christ, completely dedicated to God, completely dedicated to all humanity! In Father Vincent’s apostolic perspective, the incarnate Word occupies a central place: “Remember that we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, . . . and that your life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.” (Coste, I, 295).

I strongly hope that the celebration of the anniversary of the priestly ordination of Saint Vincent de Paul will be, for the priests and the faithful of the diocese of Perigueux, as well as for all the members of the Vincentian family, the occasion of a spiritual and missionary renewal, and will encourage their apostolic service.

Vincent de Paul was a man who had encountered God and his brothers and sisters. He was a man open to the action of the Holy Spirit. He invites us to look in a new way on the mission in today’s world. Through a generous collaboration and constant mutual support, respecting their own vocation, priests and lay people should move with ever greater boldness to meet the men and women of our times to announce the Gospel to them! Let the Christian faithful form living communities, open to all, and open especially to the most abandoned and the most marginalized. Let them witness to each one God’s personal love for them! When they care for the human and spiritual development of individuals and groups, they will contribute to the authentic messianic mission of Jesus, the mission they are called to pursue.

3. To witness authentically to Christ, today as in the time of Father Vincent, priests and faithful alike should have a formation that is solidly human, doctrinal, pastoral and spiritual. The efforts already undertaken in this direction, and which should always be continued particularly for the youth, are a source of hope for the vitality of the Church and the credibility of its witness. I also hope that the sons of Father Vincent will pursue and renew their commitment, received from their founder, to contribution to the formation and spiritual support of priests in an ecclesial and missionary spirit.

I warmly encourage the diocese of Perigueux in its plan of resolutely undertaking, during the course of the coming year, spiritual and pastoral studies with the goal of promoting the awakening, the development and the support of priestly vocations. May your fervent prayer obtain for the Church priests totally dedicated to God and to their brothers and sisters, the kind of priests the Church needs. May the Church in France benefit from the celebrations of the fourth centenary of the ordination of Saint Vincent de Paul, and may it see new vocations flourish among the youth!

To the young people of France whom the Lord is calling, I wish to repeat here strongly: Do not let yourselves be blocked by doubt or fear! Following the example of Saint Vincent, say yes, unreservedly, and dedicate yourself completely to Him who is faithful to his promises! The Lord will make you joyful servants of your brothers and sisters and will grant you the happiness you desire.

4. Dear brother in the episcopate, I confide to the intercession of Saint Vincent de Paul the diocese of Perigueux and Sarlat, the Church in France and the Vincentian family in all its diversity. I invoke also in a special way Francis Regis Clet, a priest of the Congregation of the Mission whom I will have the joy of canonizing in a few days along with other Chinese martyrs. In making the generous gift of his life so that the name of Christ would be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, he has become a model of priestly and missionary life. To you, to the members of your diocese, to the members of the spiritual family of Father Vincent, and to all those taking part in the celebrations of this fourth centenary, I willingly grant an apostolic blessing.

From the Vatican, 8 September 2000.