



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 1st July 2009

Year for Priests

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The celebration of First Vespers of the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles, Peter and Paul in the Basilica of St Paul-Outside-the-Walls on 28 June, as you know, brought to a close the Pauline Year commemorating the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Let us thank the Lord for the spiritual fruit that this important initiative has brought to so many Christian communities. We may accept the Apostle's invitation to deepen our knowledge of the mystery of Christ as a precious heritage of the Pauline Year because he is at the heart and the centre of our personal and community existence. This is in fact the indispensable condition for a true spiritual and ecclesial renewal. As I emphasized during the first Eucharistic Celebration in the Sistine Chapel after my election as Successor of the Apostle Peter, it is precisely from full communion with Christ that "flows every other element of the Church's life: first of all, communion among all the faithful, the commitment to proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel, the ardour of love for all, especially the poorest and lowliest". This applies to priests in the first place. For this reason let us thank God's Providence for offering us the possibility of celebrating the Year for Priests now. My heartfelt hope for every priest is that it will be an opportunity for inner renewal and, consequently, that it will firmly strengthen him in his commitment to his mission.

Just as during the Pauline Year our constant reference point was St Paul, so in the coming months we shall look in the first place to St John Mary Vianney, the Holy Curé d'Ars, recalling the 150th anniversary of his death. In the Letter I wrote to priests on this occasion, I wished to underline

what shines brightest in the life of this humble minister of the altar: his "complete identification... with his ministry". He used to like to say that "a good shepherd, a pastor after God's heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy", and, almost not managing to understand the greatness of the gift and task entrusted to a poor human creature, he would sigh: "O, how great is the priest! ... If he realized what he is, he would die... God obeys him: he utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host".

In fact, precisely by considering the pairing of identity with mission each priest is able to be more aware of the need for that gradual identification with Christ which will guarantee him fidelity and the fruitfulness of Gospel witness. The very title of the Year for Priests *Faithfulness of Christ, faithfulness of priests* highlights the fact that the gift of divine grace precedes every possible human response and pastoral initiative. Thus, in the priest's life, missionary preaching and worship can never be separated, just as the ontological-sacramental identity and evangelizing mission must never be separated. Moreover, we might say that the purpose of every priest's mission is one of worship. Thus may all people offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him (cf. Rm 12: 1), which in Creation itself, in people, becomes worship, praise of the Creator, receiving that love which they in turn are called to offer to each other in abundance. The early Christian communities were already clearly aware of this. St John Chrysostom said, for example, that the sacrament of the altar and the "sacrament of the brother" or "sacrament of the poor man", are two aspects of the same mystery. Love for one's neighbour, attention to justice and to the poor are not so much themes of a moral society as they are an expression of a sacramental conception of Christian morality. This is because, through the ministry of priests, the spiritual sacrifice of all the faithful is fulfilled in union with that of Christ, the one Mediator: a sacrifice that priests offer in an unbloody and sacramental way as they wait for the Lord to come again. This is the principal, essentially missionary and dynamic dimension of the priestly ministry and identity: through the proclamation of the Gospel they generate faith in those who do not yet believe, so that they may combine their sacrifice with Christ's through love of God and of one's neighbour.

Dear brothers and sisters, in the face of so much uncertainty and weariness that also arises in the exercise of the priestly ministry, the recovery of a clear and unequivocal opinion on the absolute primacy of divine grace is urgent, remembering what St Thomas Aquinas wrote: "The good of grace in one is greater than the good of nature in the whole universe" (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2). The mission of each individual priest will therefore depend also and above all on knowledge of the sacramental reality of his "new being". His ever renewed enthusiasm for the mission depends on the certainty of his own identity not artificially and humanly constructed but freely and divinely given and received. And what I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* also applies to priests: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (n. 1).

Having received such an extraordinary gift of grace with their "consecration", priests become

permanent witnesses of their encounter with Christ. Starting precisely from this inner awareness, they can fully carry out their "mission" through the proclamation of the word and the administration of the Sacraments. After the [Second Vatican Council](#), an impression spread that there was a more pressing need in the mission of priests in our time; some thought that above all it was necessary for a new society to be built. The Gospel passage that we heard at the outset recalls instead the two essential elements of the priestly ministry. Jesus sends the Apostles out to proclaim the Gospel and gives them the power to expel evil spirits. "Proclamation" and "power", that is, "word" and "sacrament", are therefore the two basic pillars of priestly service, over and above its possible multiple circumstances.

When the "diptych" of consecration and mission is not taken into account, it becomes truly difficult to understand the identity of the priest and his ministry in the Church. Indeed, who is the priest if not a man who has been converted and renewed by the Spirit, who lives on his personal relationship with Christ, ceaselessly making the Gospel criteria his own? Who is the priest if not a man of unity and truth, aware of his own limitations and at the same time of the extraordinary greatness, of the vocation he has received, namely that of helping to spread the Kingdom of God to the very ends of the earth? Yes! The priest is a man who belongs totally to the Lord, for it is God himself who has called him and establishes him in his apostolic service. For the very reason that he belongs completely to the Lord, he belongs completely to the people, for the people. During this [Year for Priests](#) that will last until the next Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, let us pray for all priests. Let us pray that in dioceses, parishes, religious and especially monastic communities, in associations and movements, in the various pastoral groups that exist throughout the world there may be an increase in prayer initiatives and in particular in Eucharistic Adoration for the sanctification of the clergy and for priestly vocations, in response to Jesus' invitation to pray "the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9: 38). Prayer is the first commitment, the true path of sanctification for priests and the soul of an authentic "vocations ministry". Not only must the scarcity of ordinations to the priesthood in certain countries not discourage us, but it must also be an incentive to increase the number of places of silence and listening to the word, to better attend to spiritual direction and the sacrament of Confession. In this way God's voice, which always continues to call and to strengthen, may be heard and promptly followed by numerous young people. Those who pray are not afraid; those who pray are never alone; those who pray are saved! St John Mary Vianney is without a doubt the model of an existence made prayer. May Mary, Mother of the Church, help all priests to follow his example in order to be, like him, witnesses of Christ and apostles of the Gospel.

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the

pilgrimage groups from England, Scotland, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Canada and the United States. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I cordially invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly I address a cordial greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Many of you, dear friends, will have the possibility in these months of spending a holiday period and I hope that it will be peaceful and fruitful for you all. But there are also many who for various reasons will be unable to benefit from a holiday. I reach out to you with my affectionate greeting and the hope that you will not lack the solidarity and closeness of your loved ones. Lastly, I address a special thought to the young people who are sitting examinations in these days, and assure each one of my remembrance in prayer. May the Lord whom we now invoke with the singing of the *Pater Noster* watch over everyone with his love. a greater appreciation of the role of the priest in the life of the ecclesial community.

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