



# The Holy See

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**VIDEO MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL RETREAT FOR PRIESTS  
[ARS, SEPTEMBER 27 - OCTOBER 3, 2009]**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

As you can easily imagine, I would have been extremely happy to be with you on this international retreat for priests on the theme: "The joy of priesthood: consecrated for the salvation of the world". A large number of you are taking part and you have the benefit of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn's teaching. I greet him cordially together with the other preachers and Bishop Guy-Marie Bagnard of Belley-Ars. I must be content with addressing this recorded message to you, but please believe that through these words I am speaking to each one of you in the most personal way possible because, as St Paul says: "I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace" (Phil 1: 7).

St John Mary Vianney emphasized the indispensable role of the priest when he said: "A good pastor, a pastor according to the heart of God, is the greatest treasure that the good Lord can give to a parish and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy" (*Le Curé d'Ars, Pensées*, presented by Abbé Bernard Nodet, Desclée de Brouwer, Foi Vivante, 2000, p. 101). In this [\*Year for Priests\*](#) we are all called to explore and to rediscover the greatness of the sacrament which has configured us for ever to Christ the High Priest and has "consecrated" us all "in truth" (Jn 17: 19).

Chosen from among men, the priest continues to be one of them and is called to serve them by giving them the life of God. It is he who "continues the work of redemption on earth" (Nodet, p. 98). Our priestly vocation is a treasure that we bear in earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4: 7). St Paul expressed with happiness the infinite distance that exists between our vocation and the poverty of the responses we can give to God. From this point of view, a secret bond unites the Pauline Year with the [\*Year for Priests\*](#). Let us keep present in our ears and in the depths of our hearts the moving and trusting exclamation of the Apostle who said: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12: 10). Awareness of this weakness opens us to intimacy with God who gives us strength and joy. The more the priest perseveres in friendship with God, the more he will continue the

Redeemer's work on this earth (cf. Nodet, p. 98). The priest does not exist for himself, he exists for everyone (cf. Nodet, p. 100).

That is precisely where one of the greatest challenges of our time lies. Indeed, today more than ever the priest, a man of the divine word and of the sacred, must be a man of joy and hope. To people who can no longer conceive that God is pure Love, he will always affirm that life is worth living and that Christ gives it its full meaning because he loves human beings, he loves them all. The religion of the Curé d'Ars is a religion of joy, not a morbid quest for mortification as has sometimes been believed: "Our happiness is too great; no, no, we shall never understand it" (Nodet, p. 110), he would say, and further: "when we are travelling and see a bell-tower, this view should quicken our heart beat, just as the sight of the roof of her beloved's dwelling place quickens the bride's heart beat" (*ibid.*). Here I would like to greet with very special affection all those of you who have pastoral responsibility for several bell-towers and spend yourselves without counting the cost to keep up the sacramental life in your respective communities. The Church is immensely grateful to you all! Do not lose heart but continue to pray and to have prayers said that numerous young men will be ready to respond to the call of Christ who never stops wanting to increase the number of his apostles to reap the harvest in his fields.

Dear priests, think too of the extreme diversity of the ministries you exercise in the service of the Church. Think of the great number of Masses you have celebrated or will celebrate, making Christ really present on the altar each time. Think of the innumerable absolutions you have given and will give, enabling a sinner to be forgiven. Then you perceive the infinite fruitfulness of the sacrament of Orders. In the space of a moment your hands, your lips became the hands and lips of God. You bear Christ within you; through grace, you have entered the Holy Trinity. Just as the saintly Curé said: "if we had faith, we would see God hidden in the priest like a light behind glass or like wine mixed with water" (Nodet, p. 97). This consideration should lead to harmonizing relations between priests so as to create a priestly community, as St Peter exhorted (cf. 1 Pt 2: 9), in order to build up the body of Christ and build up yourselves in love (cf. Eph 4: 11-16).

The priest is the man of the future: it is he who has taken seriously Paul's words: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above" (Col 3: 1). What he does on earth is in the order of the means ordered to the last things. The Mass is this one point of union between the means and the End because it already enables us to contemplate, under the humble appearances of bread and wine, the Body and Blood of the One we shall adore for eternity. The holy Curé's simple, concentrated sentences on the Eucharist help us perceive more clearly the riches of this unique moment in the day when we experience an encounter that is life-giving for ourselves and for each one of the faithful. "The happiness that exists in saying Mass", he wrote, "will only be properly understood in Heaven" (Nodet, page 104).

I therefore encourage you to strengthen your faith and that of your faithful in the sacrament you celebrate, which is the source of true joy. The Saint of Ars wrote: "The priest must feel the same

joy (as the Apostles) in seeing Our Lord whom he holds in his hands" (*ibid.*). In giving thanks for what you are and for what you do, I repeat to you: "Nothing will ever replace the ministry of priests at the heart of the Church" (*Homily, Mass on the Esplanade des Invalides*, Paris, 13 September 2008). Living witnesses of the power of God at work in human weakness, consecrated for the salvation of the world, you remain, my dear brothers, chosen by Christ himself in order to be, through him, salt of the earth and light of the world. At this spiritual retreat may you have a profound experience of the "inexpressible closeness" (St Augustine, *Les Confessions*, III, 6, 11 BA 13, p. 383) in order to be perfectly united to Christ so as to proclaim his Love around you and to be wholly committed to the service of the sanctification of all the members of the People of God. As I entrust you to the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and of priests, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.