



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONFERENCE
ORGANIZED BY THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY**

*Hall of Blessing
Friday, 12 March 2010*

*Your Eminences,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Distinguished Participants,*

I am glad to meet you on this particular occasion and I greet you all with affection. I address a special thought to Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, and thank him for his words to me. My gratitude also goes to the entire Dicastery for the dedication with which it coordinates the many initiatives of the Year for Priests that include this Theological Convention on the theme: *"Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of the Priest"*.

I am delighted with this initiative that has gathered more than 50 Bishops and more than 500 priests, many of whom are national or diocesan directors of the clergy and of continuing formation.

Your attention to the themes that concern the ministerial priesthood is one of the fruits of this special Year, which I chose to inaugurate precisely in order "to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today's world" (*Letter for the Inauguration of the Year for Priests*, 6 June 2009; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 24 June, p. 3).

The theme of priestly identity, the subject of your first study day, is crucial to the exercise of the priestly ministry, today and in the future. In an epoch like our own, so "polycentric" and inclined to blur every conception of identity, deemed by many contrary to freedom and democracy, it is important to keep clearly in mind the theological particularity of the Ordained Ministry to avoid

succumbing to the temptation to reduce it to the prevalent cultural categories.

In a context of widespread secularization, which is gradually excluding God from the public sphere and tendentially also from the common social conscience, the priest often appears "foreign" to the common perception. This is precisely because of the most fundamental aspects of his ministry, such as, being a man of the sacred, removed from the world to intercede on behalf of the world and being appointed to this mission by God and not by men (cf. Heb 5:1).

For this reason it is important to overcome dangerous forms of reductionism. In recent decades these have used categories that are functionalist rather than ontological and have introduced the priest almost as a "social worker", at the risk of betraying Christ's Priesthood itself.

Just as the hermeneutics of continuity are proving ever more urgent for a satisfactory understanding of the Second Vatican Council's texts, likewise a hermeneutic we might describe as "of priestly continuity" appears necessary. This has come down to our day, starting from Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ, and passing through the 2,000 years of the history of greatness and holiness, of culture and devotion which the Priesthood has written in the world.

Dear brother priests, in the time in which we live it is particularly important that the call to participate in the one Priesthood of Christ in the ordained Ministry flourishes in the "charism of prophecy": there is a great need for priests who speak of God to the world and who present God to the world; men who are not swayed by transient cultural trends but are capable of living authentically that freedom which alone the certainty of belonging to God can give.

As your Convention has clearly emphasized, the most necessary prophecy today is that of faithfulness, which, based on Christ's Faithfulness to humanity, leads through the Church and the ministerial Priesthood to living one's own priesthood in total adherence to Christ and to the Church. Indeed, the priest no longer belongs to himself but, because of the sacramental seal he has received (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1563, 1582), is the "property" of God. The priest's "belonging to Another", must become recognizable to all, through a transparent witness.

In the way of thinking, speaking, and judging events of the world, of serving and loving, of relating to people, also in his habits, the priest must draw prophetic power from his sacramental belonging, from his profound being.

Consequently he must do all he can to separate himself from the predominant mindset that tends not to associate the minister's value with his being but with his function alone, thereby underestimating the work of God, which affects the profound identity of the priest as a person, configuring him to himself once and for all (cf. *ibid.*, n. 1583).

The horizon of the ontological belonging to God also constitutes the proper framework for

understanding and reaffirming, in our day too, the value of sacred celibacy which in the Latin Church is a charism required for Sacred Orders (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 16) and is held in very great consideration in the Eastern Churches (cf. *CCEO*, can. 373).

It is an authentic prophecy of the Kingdom, a sign of consecration with undivided heart to the Lord and to "the affairs of the Lord" (1 Cor 7:32), the expression of their gift of self to God and to others (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1579).

The priest's vocation is thus most exalted and remains a great mystery, even to us who have received it as a gift. Our limitations and weaknesses must prompt us to live out and preserve with deep faith this precious gift with which Christ has configured us to him, making us sharers in his saving Mission. Indeed, our comprehension of the ministerial priesthood is bound to faith and requires, ever more forcefully, a radical continuity between seminary formation and continuing formation. The prophetic life, without compromises, with which we serve God and the world, proclaiming the Gospel and celebrating the Sacraments, will encourage the advent of the Kingdom of God already present and the growth of the People of God in faith.

Dear priests, the men and women of our time ask us only to be truly priests and nothing more. The lay faithful will find in a great many other people what they humanly need, but in the priest alone will they be able to find the word of God that must always be on his lips (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 4); the Mercy of the Father, abundantly and freely bestowed in the Sacrament of Reconciliation; the Bread of new Life, "true food given to men" (cf. Hymn of the Office of the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* of the Roman Rite).

Let us ask God, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of St John Mary Vianney to obtain that we may thank him every day for the great gift of our vocation and that we may live our Priesthood with full and joyous faithfulness. Thanks to you all for this meeting! I very willingly impart the Apostolic Blessing to each one.

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