



BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 24 June 2009

Year for Priests

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Last Friday, 19 June, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a Day traditionally dedicated to prayer for the sanctification of priests, I had the joy of inaugurating the Year for Priests which I established on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the "birth in Heaven" of the Curé d'Ars, St John Baptist Mary Vianney. And on entering the Vatican Basilica for the celebration of Vespers, first by way of a symbolic gesture I paused in the Chapel of the Choir to venerate the relic of this holy pastor of souls: his heart. Why a Year for Priests? Why precisely in memory of the Holy Curé d'Ars who did not, apparently, achieve anything extraordinary?

Divine Providence has ensured that his figure be juxtaposed with that of St Paul. Indeed, while the Pauline Year, dedicated to the Apostle to the Gentiles an extraordinary evangelizer who made several missionary voyages in order to spread the Gospel is drawing to a close, this new Jubilee Year invites us to look at a poor peasant who became a humble parish priest and carried out his pastoral service in a small village. If the two saints differ widely because of the paths through life that characterized them one went from one region to the next to proclaim the Gospel, the other welcomed thousands and thousands of the faithful while remaining in his own tiny parish some basic factor binds them together nevertheless; and it is their total identification with their own ministry, their communion with Christ, which made St Paul say "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2: 20). And St John Mary Vianney used to like to repeat: "if we had faith, we would see God hidden in the priest like a light behind glass or like wine mixed with water". The purpose of this Year for Priests, as I wrote in my Letter addressed to priests for this occasion, is

therefore to encourage every priest in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends, and first and foremost to help priests and with them the entire People of God to rediscover and to reinforce their knowledge of the extraordinary, indispensable gift of Grace which the ordained minister represents for those who have received it, for the whole Church and for the world which would be lost without the Real Presence of Christ.

There is no doubt that the historical and social conditions in which the Curé d'Ars lived have changed and it is right to wonder how priests in today's globalized societies can imitate him by identifying with him in their own ministries. In a world in which the common vision of life includes less and less of the sacred, instead of which "functionality" becomes the only crucial element, the Catholic concept of the priesthood might risk losing its natural esteem, at times even within the ecclesial conscience. Two different conceptions of the priesthood are frequently compared and at times even set against one another, in theological milieus as well as in actual pastoral practice and the formation of the clergy. In this regard I pointed out several years ago that there is: "on the one hand a social and functional concept that defines the essence of the priesthood with the concept of 'service': service to the community in the fulfilment of a function.... Moreover, there is the sacramental-ontological concept, which of course does not deny the priesthood's character of service but sees it anchored to the minister's existence and claims that this existence is determined by a gift granted by the Lord through the mediation of the Church, whose name is sacrament" (J. Ratzinger, *Ministero e vita del Sacerdote*, in *Elementi di Teologia fondamentale. Saggio su fede e ministero*, Brescia 2005, p. 165). The terminological shifting of the word "priesthood" to "service, ministry, assignment", is also a sign of this different conception. The primacy of the Eucharist, moreover, is linked to the former, the ontological-sacramental conception, in the dual term: "priesthood-sacrifice", whereas the primacy of the word and of the service of proclamation is held to correspond with the latter.

Clearly these two concepts are not contradictory and the tension which nevertheless exists between them may be resolved from within. Thus the Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, says: "For, through the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel, the People of God is called together and assembled so that when all who belong to this People have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, they can offer themselves as 'a sacrifice, living, holy, pleasing to God' (Rm 12: 1). Through the ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ, the sole Mediator. Through the hands of priests and in the name of the whole Church, the Lord's sacrifice is offered in the Eucharist in an unbloody and sacramental manner until he himself returns" (n. 2).

Then let us ask ourselves: "What precisely does 'to evangelize' mean for priests? What does the 'primacy' of proclamation consist in?". Jesus speaks of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God as the true purpose of his coming into the world and his proclamation is not only a "discourse". At the same time it includes his action: the signs and miracles that he works show that the Kingdom comes into the world as a present reality which ultimately coincides with Jesus himself. In this sense it is only right to recall that even in

the primacy of proclamation, the word and the sign are indivisible. Christian preaching does not proclaim "words", but the Word, and the proclamation coincides with the very Person of Christ, ontologically open to the relationship with the Father and obedient to his will. Thus, an authentic service to the Word requires of the priest that he strive for deeper self-denial, to the point that he can say, with the Apostle, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me". The priest cannot consider himself "master" of the Word, but its servant. He is not the Word but, as John the Baptist, whose birth we are celebrating precisely today, proclaimed, he is the "voice" of the Word: "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mk 1: 3).

For the priest, then, being the "voice" of the Word is not merely a functional aspect. On the contrary, it implies a substantial "losing of himself" in Christ, participating with his whole being in the mystery of Christ's death and Resurrection: his understanding, his freedom, his will and the offering of his body as a living sacrifice (cf. Rm 12: 1-2). Only participation in Christ's sacrifice, in his kenosis, makes preaching authentic! And this is the way he must take with Christ to reach the point of being able to say to the Father, together with Christ: let "not what I will, but what you will" be done (Mk 14: 36). Proclamation, therefore, always involves self-sacrifice, a prerequisite for its authenticity and efficacy.

As an alter Christus, the priest is profoundly united to the Word of the Father who, in becoming incarnate took the form of a servant, he became a servant (Phil 2: 5-11). The priest is a servant of Christ, in the sense that his existence, configured to Christ ontologically, acquires an essentially relational character: he is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ, at the service of humankind. Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation, their happiness and their authentic liberation, developing, in this gradual assumption of Christ's will, in prayer, in "being heart to heart" with him. Therefore this is the indispensable condition for every proclamation, which entails participation in the sacramental offering of the Eucharist and docile obedience to the Church.

The saintly Curé d'Ars would often say with tears in his eyes: "How dreadful it is to be a priest!". And he would add: "How a priest who celebrates Mass like an ordinary event is to be pitied! How unfortunate is a priest with no inner life!". May the Year for Priests lead all priests to identify totally with the Crucified and Risen Jesus so that, in imitation of St John the Baptist, they may be prepared to "shrink" that Christ may grow and that, in following the example of the Curé d'Ars, they feel constantly and profoundly the responsibility of their mission, which is the sign and presence of God's infinite mercy. Let us entrust to Our Lady, Mother of the Church, the Year for Priests which has just begun and all the priests of the world.