

## **"One Who Prays Is Not Afraid; One Who Prays Is Never Alone"**

*(Address of Pope Benedict XVI during the general audience at St. Peter's Square on July 1, 2009, continuing the theme on the Year for Priests.)*

Dear brothers and sisters:

As you know, with the celebration of First Vespers for the solemnity of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, the Pauline Year has come to a close -- the year that marked the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Let us give thanks to the Lord for the spiritual fruits that this important initiative has brought to so many Christian communities.

As a precious heritage of the Pauline Year, we can reap the Apostle's invitation to go deeper into the knowledge of the mystery of Christ, so that he becomes the heart and center of our personal and social realities.

This is, in fact, the indispensable condition for a true spiritual and ecclesial renewal. As I already emphasized during the first Eucharistic celebration in the Sistine Chapel after my election as the Successor of the Apostle St. Peter, it is precisely from that 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 ardor of love for all, especially the poorest and lowliest" (1st Message at the End of the Eucharistic Concelebration With the Members of the College of Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel, April 20, 2005).

This is true in the first place for priests. Because of this, I thank Divine Providence, which now offers us the possibility of celebrating the Year for Priests. It is my heartfelt wish that this will be an opportunity for interior renewal for every priest, and consequently, [a year of] firm reinvigoration in the commitment to his own mission.

Just as during the Pauline Year, our constant reference point was St. Paul, so in the coming months we will look to St. John Vianney, the holy Curé d'Ars, recalling the 150th anniversary of his death. In the letter I wrote to priests for this occasion, I wanted to emphasize what shines forth in the existence of this humble minister of the altar: "the complete identification of the man with his ministry."

He often said that "a good pastor, a pastor after the heart of God, is the greatest treasure that the good God can give to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy." And almost unable to conceive the greatness of the gift and the task entrusted to a poor human creature, he sighed, "Oh how great is the priesthood! ... If he could understand himself, he would die. ... God obeys

him: He pronounces two words and Our Lord descends from heaven at his beckoning and enters into a tiny Host."

In truth, precisely considering the binomial "identity-mission," every priest can better see the need for this progressive identification with Christ that will guarantee him fidelity and fruitfulness in the evangelical testimony.

The very theme of the Year for Priests—Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of Priests—shows that the gift of divine grace precedes every possible human response and pastoral accomplishment, and thus, in the life of the priest, missionary proclamation and worship are never separable, just as the ontological-sacramental identity and the evangelizing mission are not separable.

Apart from that we could say the objective of every priest's mission is "cultic": so that all people can offer themselves to God as a living host, holy and pleasing to Him (cf. Romans 12:1), that in creation itself, in people, it becomes worship and praise of the Creator, receiving from it that charity that they are called to abundantly dispense among each other.

We clearly see this in the beginnings of Christianity. St. John Chrysostom said, for example, that the sacrament of the altar and the "sacrament of one's brother" or, as they say, the "sacrament of the poor," are two aspects of the same mystery. Love for neighbor, attention to justice and to the poor, are not just themes of social morality, but rather the expression of a sacramental conception of Christian morality, because through the ministry of the priest, the spiritual sacrifice of all the faithful is carried out, in union with that of Christ, the one Mediator: the sacrifice that priests offer in an unbloody and sacramental manner awaiting the new coming of the Lord.

This is the principal dimension, essentially missionary and dynamic, of priestly identity and ministry: by way of the proclamation of the Gospel, those who still do not believe are begotten in the faith, so that they can unite their sacrifice to the sacrifice of Christ, that translates in love for God and neighbor.

Dear brothers and sisters, faced with so many uncertainties and struggles, it is urgent to recover—also in the exercise of priestly ministry—a clear and unmistakable judgment about the absolute primacy of divine grace, recalling what St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: "The smallest gift of grace surpasses the natural good of the whole universe" (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2).

The mission of every priest depends, therefore, also and above all on the awareness of the sacramental reality of his "new being." The priest's renewed enthusiasm for his mission will always depend on the certainty of his personal identity, which is not artificially constructed, but rather given and received freely and divinely. What I have written in the encyclical "Deus Caritas Est" is also true for 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" (No. 1).

Having received such an extraordinary gift of grace with their "consecration," priests become permanent witnesses of their encounter with Christ. Beginning precisely from this interior awareness, they can plentifully fulfill their "mission," by means of the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. After the Second Vatican Council, the impression has come about that in our times, there is something more urgent in priests' missions; some believed that they should in the first place build up a distinct society. On the other hand, the verses from the Gospel that we heard at the beginning call our attention to the two essential elements of priestly ministry. Jesus sends the apostles, at that time and now, to proclaim the Gospel and he gives them the power to cast out evil spirits. "Proclamation" and "power," that is to say "word" and "sacrament," are therefore the two foundational pillars of priestly service, beyond its many possible configurations.

When the "diptych" consecration-mission is not taken into account, it becomes truly difficult to understand the identity of the priest and his ministry in the Church. Who in fact is the priest, if not a man converted and renewed by the Spirit, who lives from a personal relationship with Christ, constantly making the Gospel criteria his own? Who is the priest, if not a man of unity and truth, aware of his own limits and at the same time, of the extraordinary greatness of the vocation he has received, that of helping to extend the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth?

Yes! The priest is a man totally belonging to the Lord, because it is God himself who calls him and who establishes him in his apostolic service. And precisely being totally of God, he is totally of mankind, for all people. During this Year for the Priest, which will continue until the next solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, let us pray for all priests. May there be an abundance of prayer initiatives and, in particular, Eucharistic adoration, for the sanctification of the clergy and for priestly vocations—in dioceses, in parishes, in religious communities (especially monasteries), in associations and movements and in the various pastoral groups present in the whole world—responding to Jesus' invitation to pray "to the lord of the harvest that he may send workers to his harvest" (Matthew 9:38).

Prayer is the first task, the true path of sanctification for priests, and the soul of an authentic "vocational ministry." The numerical scarcity of priestly ordinations in some countries should not discourage, but instead should motivate a multiplication of opportunities for silence and listening to the Word, and better attention to spiritual direction and the sacrament of confession, so that the voice of God, who always continues calling and confirming, can be heard and promptly followed by many youth.

One who prays is not afraid; one who prays is never alone; one who prays is saved! St. John Vianney is undoubtedly a model of an existence made prayer.

Mary, Mother of the Church, help all priests to follow his example so as to be, like him, witnesses of Christ and apostles of the Gospel.