

"The Heart of God Throbs With Compassion"

(Homily of the Holy Father during the inauguration for the Year for For Priests. The year began June 19, the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, marking the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, known as the Curé d'Ars.)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In a little while, we shall be singing in the Antiphon to the Magnificat: "The Lord has welcomed us in his Heart Suscepit nos Dominus in sinum et cor suum". God's heart, considered to be the organ of his will, is mentioned 26 times in the Old Testament.

Man is judged according to God's Heart. Because of the pain his heart feels at the sins of man, God decides on the flood, but is subsequently moved by human weakness and forgives.

Then there is an Old Testament passage in which the subject of God's Heart is expressed with absolute clarity: it is in chapter 11 of the Book of the Prophet Hosea in which the first verses describe the dimension of the love with which the Lord turned to Israel at the dawn of its history: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11: 1). Israel, in fact, responds to God's tireless favour with indifference and even outright ingratitude.

"The more I called them", the Lord is forced to admit, "the more they went from me" (v. 2). Nonetheless he never abandons Israel to the hands of the enemy because "my heart", the Creator of the universe observes, "recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (v. 8).

The Heart of God throbs with compassion! On today's Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus the Church offers us this mystery for contemplation, the mystery of the Heart of a God who feels compassion and pours forth all his love upon humanity. It is a mysterious love, which in the texts of the New Testament is revealed to us as God's immeasurable love for the human being. He does not give in to ingratitude or to rejection by the People he has chosen; on the contrary, with infinite mercy he sends his Only-Begotten Son into the world to take upon himself the burden of love immolated so that by defeating the powers of evil and death he could restore the dignity of being God's children to human beings, enslaved by sin.

All this comes about at a high price: the Only-Begotten Son of the Father is sacrificed on the Cross, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (cf. Jn 13: 1).

A symbol of this love which goes beyond death is his side, pierced by a spear. In this regard, the Apostle John, an eye-witness, says: "one of the soldiers

pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (cf. Jn 19: 34).

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you because, in response to my invitation, you have come in large numbers to this celebration with which we begin the Year for Priests. I greet the Cardinals and Bishops, in particular the Cardinal Prefect and the Secretary of the Congregation for the Clergy with their collaborators, and the Bishop of Ars. I greet the priests and seminarians of the various seminaries and colleges of Rome; the men and women religious and all the faithful.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us pause together to contemplate the pierced Heart of the Crucified One. We have heard again, just now, in the brief Reading from the Letter of St Paul to the Ephesians, that "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2: 4-6). To be in Jesus Christ, is to be already seated in heaven.

The essential nucleus of Christianity is expressed in the Heart of Jesus; in Christ the whole of the revolutionary newness of the Gospel was revealed and given to us: the Love that saves us and already makes us live in God's eternity.

The Evangelist John writes: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (3: 16). His divine Heart therefore calls to our hearts, inviting us to come out of ourselves, to abandon our human certainties to trust in him and, following his example, to make of ourselves a gift of love without reserve.

If it is true that Jesus' invitation to "abide in my love" (cf. Jn 15: 9) is addressed to every baptized person, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Day for priestly sanctification, this invitation resounds more powerfully for we priests, particularly this evening at the solemn inauguration of the Year for Priests, which I wanted to be celebrated on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé d'Ars.

One of his beautiful and moving sayings, cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, immediately springs to my mind: "The Priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus" (n. 1589).

How is it possible not to remember with emotion that the gift of our priestly ministry flowed directly from this Heart? How can we forget that we priests were consecrated to serve humbly and authoritatively the common priesthood of the faithful?

Ours is an indispensable mission, for the Church and for the world, which demands full fidelity to Christ and in unceasing union with him this to remain in his love means that we must constantly strive for holiness, this union, as did St John Mary Vianney.

In the Letter I addressed to you for this special Jubilee Year, dear brother priests, I wanted to highlight certain qualifying aspects of our ministry, with

references to the example and teaching of the Holy Curé d'Ars, model and protector of all of us, priests, and especially parish priests.

May my Letter be a help and encouragement to you in making this Year a favourable opportunity to grow in intimacy with Jesus, who counts on us, his ministers, to spread and to consolidate his Kingdom, to radiate his love, his truth.

Therefore, "in the footsteps of the Curé of Ars", my Letter concluded, "let yourselves be enthralled by him. In this way you too will be, for the world in our time, heralds of hope, reconciliation and peace!" (L'Osservatore Romano, English edition, see p. 5).

To let oneself be totally won over by Christ! This was the purpose of the whole life of St Paul to whom we have devoted our attention during the Pauline Year which is now drawing to a close; this was the goal of the entire ministry of the Holy Curé d'Ars, whom we shall invoke in particular during the Year for Priests; may it also be the principal objective for each one of us.

In order to be ministers at the service of the Gospel, study and a careful and continuing pastoral and theological formation is of course useful and necessary, but that "knowledge of love" which can only be learned in a "heart to heart" with Christ is even more necessary. Indeed, it is he who calls us to break the Bread of his love, to forgive sins and to guide the flock in his name. For this very reason we must never distance ourselves from the source of Love which is his Heart that was pierced on the Cross.

Only in this way will we be able to cooperate effectively in the mysterious "plan of the Father" that consists in "making Christ the Heart of the world"! This plan is brought about in history, as Jesus gradually becomes the Heart of human hearts, starting with those who are called to be closest to him: priests, precisely.

We are reminded of this ongoing commitment by the "priestly promises" that we made on the day of our Ordination and which we renew every year, on Holy Thursday, during the Chrism Mass. Even our shortcomings, our limitations and our weaknesses must lead us back to the Heart of Jesus.

Indeed, if it is true that sinners, in contemplating him, must learn from him the necessary "sorrow for sins" that leads them back to the Father, it is even more so for holy ministers. How can we forget, in this regard, that nothing makes the Church, the Body of Christ, suffer more than the sins of her pastors, especially the sins of those who are transformed into "a thief and a robber" of the sheep (Jn 10: 1 ff.), or who deviates from the Church through their own private doctrines, or who ensnare the Church in sin and death?

Dear priests, the call to conversion and recourse to Divine Mercy also applies to us, and we must likewise humbly address a heartfelt and ceaseless invocation to the Heart of Jesus to keep us from the terrible risk of harming those whom we are bound to save.

I have just had the opportunity to venerate in the Choir Chapel the relic of the Holy Curé D'Ars: his heart. It was a heart that blazed with divine love, that

was moved at the thought of the priest's dignity and spoke to the faithful in touching and sublime tones, affirming that "After God, the priest is everything! ... Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is" (cf. Letter, Year for Priests, p. 3).

Dear Brothers, let us cultivate this same emotion in order to carry out our ministry with generosity and dedication, or to preserve in our souls a true "fear of God": the fear of being able to deprive of so much good, through our negligence or fault, those souls entrusted to us, or God forbid of harming them.

The Church needs holy priests; ministers who can help the faithful to experience the merciful love of the Lord and who are his convinced witnesses.

In the Eucharistic Adoration that will follow the celebration of Vespers, let us ask the Lord to set the heart of every priest on fire with that "pastoral charity" which can enable him to assimilate his personal "I" into that Jesus the High Priest, so that he may be able to imitate Jesus in the most complete self-giving.

May the Virgin Mary, whose Immaculate Heart we shall contemplate with living faith tomorrow, obtain this grace for us. The Holy Curé d'Ars had a filial devotion to her, so profound that in 1836, in anticipation of the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, he consecrated his parish to Mary, "conceived without sin".

He kept up the practice of frequently renewing this offering of his parish to the Blessed Virgin, teaching the faithful that "to be heard it was enough to address her", for the simple reason that she "desires above all else to see us happy".

May the Blessed Virgin, our Mother, accompany us during the Year for Priests which we are beginning to day, so that we are able to be sound and enlightened guides for the faithful whom the Lord entrusts to our pastoral care. Amen!