

The Priesthood and the Mass

Theologian Notes the Priest's Privileged Role

By Father Mauro Gagliardi

BENEDICT XVI proclaimed, as everyone knows, the Year for Priests (June 2009-June 2010), on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the "dies natalis" of the holy Curé d'Ars. The purpose is "to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel in today's world"[1].

St. John Mary Vianney, besides concretely representing a supreme model of the priesthood, always proclaimed with clarity and incomparable emphasis the dignity of the priesthood and the centrality of the ordained ministry in the heart of the Church. Drawing from his teachings, the Holy Father re-proposed these words of the saint: "O, how great is the priest! ... If he realized what he is, he would die. [...] God obeys him: He utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host."

And again: "Without the Sacrament of Holy Orders, we would not have the Lord. Who put him there in that tabernacle? The priest. Who welcomed your soul at the beginning of your life? The priest. Who feeds your soul and gives it strength for its journey? The priest. Who will prepare it to appear before God, bathing it one last time in the blood of Jesus Christ? The priest, always the priest. And if this soul should happen to die [as a result of sin], who will raise it up, who will restore its calm and peace? Again, the priest... After God, the priest is everything! [...] Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is."[2]

As we see, St. John Mary points to the greatness of the priest with the privileged reference to the power that he exercises in the sacraments in the name of the Person of Christ. Benedict XVI brought this light, citing still other words of the Curé d'Ars, which refer in particular to the office of celebrating the Holy Eucharist. The Pope writes that the saint "was convinced that the fervor of a priest's life depended entirely upon the Mass: 'The reason why a priest is lax is that he does not pay attention to the Mass! My God, how we ought to pity a priest who celebrates as if he were engaged in something routine!'"[3].

The Year for Priests proposes for our reflection the figure of the priest and, in a special way, his dignity of ordained minister who celebrates the sacraments, for the benefit of the whole Church, in the Person of Christ, high and eternal priest.[4]

In this Year for Priests, which will be celebrated between 2009 and 2010, there are nevertheless also other recurrences that merit attention because they are intimately connected with the Eucharistic nature of the priestly dignity. In 1969,

Pope Paul VI proclaimed, with the apostolic constitution "Missale Romanum," the new missal prepared after the Second Vatican Council. In the present year, 2009, then, we celebrate 40 years since this promulgation.

Next year, 2010, we will celebrate two other anniversaries that are also directly linked to the celebration of the Eucharist. The first is the 40th anniversary (1970-2010) of the promulgation of the definitive "editio typica" (first) of the "Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani." The second is the 440th anniversary of the promulgation of the missal that we currently call "Vetus Ordo" or "Usus antiquior," promulgated by St. Pius V with the apostolic constitution "Quo primum" of July 14, 1570. This constitution is recalled, together with Pius V's missal, from the very first words of Paul VI's above-mentioned apostolic constitution "Missale Romanum." [5]

The two missals, also united in the celebrations of the respective anniversaries, are two forms of the one "lex orandi" (law of prayer) of the Church of the Latin Rite. Benedict XVI has expressed himself in this manner, teaching that, in relation to the missal of Paul VI, "the Roman Missal promulgated by St. Pius V and reissued by Blessed John XXIII is to be considered as an extraordinary expression of that same 'lex orandi,' and must be given due honor for its venerable and ancient usage. These two expressions of the Church's 'lex orandi' will in no way lead to a division in the Church's 'lex credendi' (law of belief). They are, in fact, two usages of the one Roman rite. It is, therefore, permissible to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass following the typical edition of the Roman Missal promulgated by Bl. John XXIII in 1962 and never abrogated, as an extraordinary form of the Liturgy of the Church." [6]

The possibility of a serene and harmonious coexistence of the two forms of the one Roman Rite also has been indirectly affirmed by the presence of both "Ordines Missae" (of Bl. John XXIII and Paul VI) within the very recent "Compendium Eucharisticum," published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. [7]

The concurrence of these different anniversaries has likewise determined the theme that the Spirit of the Liturgy column proposes to explore this year: The Priest in the Eucharistic Celebration.

Through these periodic articles by expert theologians, liturgists and canonists, we will try to present the role and the task of the priest in the various parts of the Mass in a clear and accessible way, with respect to both missals. The hope is that these articles will help priests take advantage of the opportunity for reflection and conversion offered by the Year for Priests and move them to a care that is always more attentive to the "ars celebrandi" (art of celebrating).

We hope, moreover, that the contributions will also help the other readers—men and women religious, seminarians, faithful lay people—to reconsider with greater attention, and venerate with profound religious respect, the grandeur of the Eucharistic mystery and the dignity of the sacerdotal office, and rediscover their centrality in the life and mission of the Church.

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Notes

[1] Benedict XVI, "Letter Proclaiming a Year for Priests," June 16, 2009.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Priests "exercise their sacred function especially in the Eucharistic worship or the celebration of the Mass by which acting in the person of Christ ["in persona Christi"] and proclaiming his mystery they unite the prayers of the faithful with the sacrifice of their Head and renew and apply in the sacrifice of the Mass until the coming of the Lord the only sacrifice of the New Testament namely that of Christ offering Himself once for all a spotless Victim to the Father." Vatican Council II, "Lumen Gentium," No. 28: AAS 57 (1965), p. 34. Cf. also "Presbyterorum Ordinis," Nos. 2; 12; 13.

[5] Cf. Paul VI, "Missale Romanum," April 3, 1969: AAS 61 (1969), p. 217.

[6] Benedict XVI, "Summorum Pontificum," July 07, 2007, art. 1.

[7] Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Compendium Eucharisticum," LEV, Vatican City, 2009. The preparation of this text was entrusted to the dicastery directly by the Holy Father, who mentioned it in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation "Sacramentum Caritatis," Feb. 22, 2007, No. 93.

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