

# **A Reflection for Priests in the Archdiocese of Manila on the Feast of St. John Mary Vianney**

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in the mind of Jesus Christ the Priests are ever linked with the life of and care for the Church. The beginning paragraph of the Decree on the Ministry and Life of the Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis) expressly mentions that the task of renewing the Church falls under the responsibility of the Priest. It is for this reason that the Local Church, the Archdiocese of Manila is appreciative of the priests' response to their vocation, answering to the call of Jesus Christ who calls, saying of His disciples, "You did not choose me, no, it was I who chose you." (John 15:16).

Definitive in the Priesthood is that man does not decide to be priest; it is Jesus Christ Himself who chooses and decides that these men will be priests. Our role as priests is to consent to what the Lord Jesus wants of us, as we put aside what we ambition in this sacred calling. Thus the priest's utter dependence on the Lord is, from the outset, very clear. Christ's choice of the priest underlines his total dependence on Jesus. It is a dependence that expresses itself in persevering prayer, in the pastoral zeal, in living an authentic spiritual life in as much as he is configured to Christ as shepherd and head, and all these are summed up for the priestly life and ministry in Pastoral Charity.

## ***Opportunity for Renewal***

We see all these in the life of a zealous priest as he lives the priesthood in its total given-ness to the prayer and reflection on the Word, the service of the Sacraments, the care of the poor and weak, the accompanying of the young and the listening to those who need to be heard. Answering the call to the Priesthood, the priest offers himself as a gift to Jesus Christ in the Church, for this is what is at the very heart the Pastoral Charity. In the light of Pastoral Charity which is at the heart of the Priesthood's Spirituality, the individual priest cannot but be a total gift of himself to the Church in the example of Jesus. The total giving of self distinguishes the priest among all Christians. Done in and only in love, the gift of self to God "determines the priest's way of thinking, his behavior and style of relating with people." (PDV, 23).

We pray always for you, dear brother priests in the Archdiocese, because of your pastoral responsibilities in our Local Church, but also and especially because as priests, you not only pray for others, but the need to be prayed for is many times greater than what most people think of.

The way some priests were reported to have behave lately, although admittedly only on the part of a few of them, had without any doubt hurt the many more who were faithful and true. Worldwide there are signs of what in the priesthood in the past had

been identified with, a cry for clerical reform. The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI said in an Audience on July 01, 2009, “Let us thank God’s Providence for offering us the possibility of celebrating the Year of the Priests now. My heartfelt hope for every priest is that it will be an opportunity for inner renewal and, consequently, that it will firmly strengthen him in his commitment to his mission.”

### ***Renewal and Commitment!***

Two words the Holy Father used in order to sum up what every priest should commit himself to in order to remain the chosen one of Jesus as disciple, as friend and as brother. St. Paul in his Second Letter to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6) used the diminishing flame as an analogy for the slackening gift of priestly consecration via “the laying of hands.” Humanly speaking there will be a slackening in our prayers, dryness in our spiritual reading, there will be spiritual fatigue in the practice of virtues. Love will be there, but it will turn cold especially in the practice of charity. Here is where Paul reminded Timothy, “That is why I am reminding you now to fan into flame a gift of God that you possess through laying on of hands!” Weakness calls for serious effort to recover strength, while spiritual exercise must replace spiritual lassitude.

### ***St. John Mary Vianney and Prayer***

It was Jesus Himself who invited the disciples who returned from their first mission, drunk with accomplishment and success. And so He led them to a secluded place to rest for a while. (Mark 6:31). As the saying goes, success has a way of making failures of many a man. Thus the Lord disarms his friends of the false idea of self in moments of seeming triumph. Rest for a while; reflect; pray. The Cure d’ Ars’ regimen for life has set a time for prayer in the morning. He first lights a candle and stays focus on the Tabernacle. He reads; many times he is just quiet before the Blessed Sacrament. If prayer is the ability to commune with God in thought, in desires, in love, then Father John Mary Vianney believes that absolutely every one has the ability to pray, to wish, to desire and to love. He once said, “There is no one who cannot pray—and pray at all times and in all places; by night or day, when in hard work or resting; in the country, at home, or when traveling.” Every place for him can be a place of prayer.

And whenever it is that John Vianney prays, he brings to God’s presence the person he knows best—himself. There is no pretense in prayer; it is himself that he brings to prayer, thus true prayer is always a humble prayer. And the man who truly prays is a humble person.

No matter what is said of prayer as a free exercise, true prayer is a disciplined act. It takes a lot of self control and will power to focus on the Lord, and yet this presence before the Lord is unforced; it is free, it is made in love. Love cannot be forced. This too is the reason why Father John Mary Vianney wakes up early in the morning for his personal prayer, since he loves to be in commune with the Father in Jesus His Son. And when one is in love, the rest of behavior is free. The man in love with God will long for a time of prayer; he will set that time and he will defend that time for the God he loves.

### ***Father John Mary Vianney and the poor and simple People***

The parish called Ars is a small village of poor and simple people. Ars which was said to be accessible through thirty-five kilometers of bad roads from the city of Lyons is far from the big town's mainstream. On foot Father John Vianney journeyed to his first parish and asked for directions from children who gave him short instructions. In gratitude for the short encouragement from the young he said, "You have shown me the way to Ars, I shall show you the way to heaven."

It is said that a place has a way of defining the character of its people. When the place, village or slope is a stony sterile region, people are tough and accustomed to rough ways. They may also be prone to making special efforts to make the barren soil more productive. They may tend to be more industrious, more inventive and more creative. Working with poor people encouraged Fr. John Vianney to take up the behavior of the poor and the simple, himself having come from a farming clan.

To become a priest of the poor he lived in a simple rectory giving himself little furnishings to lean on, eating the simple food of the farming people, reading books that were given him by priest-friend, Mons. Balley. On the surface he looked and lived as an ordinary person whose feet once stood on farming land, a simple pastor. Simple as he was, his heart was different from what is seen by parishioners. Father Vianney had simpler and fewer desires. His time was hardly his; he spent much time giving advice to ordinary people, hearing their confessions, celebrating the Eucharist with them, meeting visitors from nearby towns seeking comforting words from a pastor.

Poverty for him meant knowing what to do with the less that he had. It meant doing much within the little time made available to him. Like all of us he had only twenty-four hours in one day. But hearing confessions for as long as sixteen to eighteen hours in a day, Father Vianney was still reported to have done the following in one hour: eat his lunch (meal), clean the utensils and the rectory, sweep the floor and take a siesta. Expert Management of time? I would rather say that here was a man who was as serious as the angels in being the steward of whatever it was that the Almighty Father had entrusted to him.

What a beautiful life we priests are asked to live for Christ Jesus and the Church! Allow me to end with the beautiful words of Pope Benedict XVI when he underlined the "hinged" life of the priest. "When the "diptych" of consecration and mission is not taken into account, it becomes truly difficult to understand the identity of the priest and his ministry in the Church. Indeed, who is the priest if not a man who has been converted and renewed by the Spirit, who lives on his personal relationship with Christ, ceaselessly making the Gospel criteria his own? Who is the priest if not a man of unity and truth, aware of his own limitations and at the same time of extraordinary greatness, of the vocation he has received, namely that of helping to spread the Kingdom of God to the very ends of the earth"?

"Yes! The priest is a man who belongs totally to the Lord, for it is God himself who has called him and establishes him in his apostolic service. For the very reason that he belongs completely to the Lord, he belongs completely to the people, for the people." (Papal Audience, July 01, 2009).

Dear Brother Priests, we end with those encouraging word of the Holy Father for us priests.

Let those words be our prayer, as it is the will of our Father shared with us in Jesus in the divine power if the Spirit.

Priests' Day

Archdiocese of Manila

St. John Mary Vianney Galilee Development and Retreat Center for Priests

Tagaytay City,

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