

Year for Priests

By Fr. Roy Cimagala

POPE Benedict XVI has just declared a Year for Priests last March 16. It will start on June 19, both the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests.

It is meant to celebrate also the 150th anniversary of the death of the patron for priests, the saintly Cure of Ars, St. John Mary Vianney.

In that announcement, the Pope said the year-long event is meant “to encourage priests in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends.”

I think it’s good for everyone to get involved in this Church happening. Everyone should have an abiding concern for us, priests, since we need to be nothing less than true ministers of Christ, and the only way to do that is for us to be really holy and competent.

Already the head of Vatican’s Congregation for the Clergy suggested that the year be spent in “prayer by priests, with priests, and for priests.” Let’s pray also for more priestly vocations and for the sanctity of priests all over the world.

We have to rediscover the great power of prayer. This simple conversation with God, that should spring from faith and love embedded in one’s heart, cannot fail to move God’s heart too.

Prayer is the language proper and indispensable in one’s relationship with God. With it one gets united with God. With it one not only enjoys God’s presence but also takes part in his potencies and activity.

Especially if coursed through the intercession of Our Lady and other saints, our prayers acquire such power that God could hardly refuse what we would ask from him. Prayer should be like the beating of our heart. It should be like the breath that we make.

It cannot be denied that in spite of our priestly limitations and shortcomings, our mistakes and failures, not to mention the occasional scandals that we cause, we priests do an irreplaceable work in the Church and society.

Conformed to Christ as head of the Church, we bring to the present the very redeeming sacrifice of our Lord on the Cross every time we celebrate Mass. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is the summit of our priesthood. Every other priestly ministry flows from it and leads to it.

It is for everyone's benefit that the priestly conformation to Christ, while objectively effected through the sacrament of order, be corresponded to with a progressive subjective conformation by the priests themselves, supported by all others.

We priests need to be experts in prayer, to be truly men of God, so identified with him we could easily discern his will for us, for the Church, for the world.

This will require nothing less than continuing formation that should always be provided and equipped with adequate plans and programs, personal and collective. Every priest, like every Christian faithful, is expected to have a personal plan of life that nourishes his spiritual life everyday.

For this purpose, the head of the Vatican's clergy congregation precisely suggested that the event be an occasion for "intense appreciation of the priestly identity, of the theology of the Catholic priesthood, and of the extraordinary meaning of the vocation and mission of priests within the Church and in society."

"This will require," he said, "opportunities for study, days of recollection, spiritual exercises reflecting on the priesthood, conferences and theological seminars in our ecclesiastical faculties, scientific research and respective publications."

I wish that the Year for Priests be an occasion also to review every aspect of priestly life and ministry, as contained in the Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests, published by the Vatican years ago.

The sad fact is that there's still a big gap between the factual and the juridical, the real and the ideal, in spite of the rich experience through the centuries within the Church with regard to priestly life and ministry.

We are already in the 21st century, enjoying so many technological advances, of course with some accompanying problems that are more complicated and subtle. It would be an anomaly if these achievements are not taken advantage of for the good of the priesthood.

While its essence has to be kept and strengthened, the priesthood too has to get updated, making use of the good things progress has achieved and quick to identify and tackle the subtler problems and more complicated challenges of the times.

(This article appeared at the June 8, 2009 issue of the CBCP Monitor)