

Articles, Addresses, and Interviews

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*"The Future of the Year for
Priests"*

The Year for Priests concluded this past June 16th. The topic is still quite a timely one, and challenges each of us to reflect on what the Church has sought to attain by convoking it. Therefore we can ask: What has happened in this Year of the Priesthood? What impact has it had on us priests, called by the Roman Pontiff to spend this year reflecting on that exemplary brother of ours, St. Jean Marie Vianney?

As Benedict XVI wrote in his letter of convocation, "This year seeks to contribute to promoting a commitment to interior renovation of all priests, so that their Gospel witness in the world might be more intense and incisive." He also cited some words that the Curé of Ars frequently repeated and that the Catechism of the Catholic Church has recalled: "the priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus." To understand who he is, a priest needs to consider more than his pastoral tasks; he has to reach much further, to Christ, whose humanity reveals to us the fullness of Trinitarian life and in whom this Life is offered to all mankind.

It is only from this perspective that we can understand some other words of St. Jean Marie Vianney, cited by the Roman Pontiff: the priest "will not understand himself except in heaven." Only in heaven, on seeing the infinite and ineffable gift of God's self-giving to mankind, will the priest savor who he truly is. God not only wanted to communicate himself to mankind; he took on our very nature in Christ Jesus; he instituted the Church and called specific men whom, through the sacrament of Holy Orders, he made his ministers and instruments. The Pope asks us to reflect on the "audacity of God," who "conscious of our weaknesses, nonetheless considers men capable of acting and being present in his stead," who trusts in us to the point of "abandoning himself into our hands." That audacity is the "grandeur concealed in the word 'priesthood'" (Benedict XVI, Homily at the closing of the Year for Priests).

During this year, through the Pope's homilies, letters and allocutions, in celebrations, meetings for reflection, and days of prayer, these great truths have been repeated throughout the world, calling everyone, and especially priests, to a new, deep and joyful conversion. For it is impossible to savor the excess of divine love that the priesthood entails, without feeling personally committed to be—as St.

Josemaría used to say—“one hundred percent priests” (Homily “A Priest Forever,” April 13, 1973).

What does this phrase mean? A full answer to this question would require a long exposition on the theology and spirituality of the priesthood. Here I will limit myself to highlighting three key ideas:

a) It asks for a deep awareness of the dignity of the priesthood, of the value and richness that is implied by that status, so that it permeates all of one’s conduct, and endows with authenticity every moment of our life, with the certainty that, in spite of our littleness, Christ wants to make use of us to communicate to mankind the fruit of his redemptive work.

b) It calls for the priest to identify himself with Christ, to nourish his “same sentiments” (see *Phil* 2:5), to die to himself so that Christ dwells in him (see *Gal* 2:20); it requires being a man of the Eucharist, living the Holy Mass with the faith that each celebration perpetuates the sacrifice of Christ, who died and rose again, and who comes to his Church to draw us to Himself and to lead us with the Spirit to filial intimacy with God the Father.

c) It requires an eagerness to serve joyfully, *cum gaudio*, in Christ and for Christ, serving one’s own flock, the Church and all men and women. Thus in our heart, as in Christ’s, there will be no room for selfishness or for indifference in the

face of others’ needs. It entails dedicating oneself with determination, although it may cost us great effort, to whatever contributes to the good of souls, with a charity shown in deeds, and to preaching the Word of God and to the sacrament of reconciliation where, in the name of and with the authority of Christ, priests grant the divine gift of forgiveness.

The Year for Priests has reminded us of what is eternal: God’s love, which never passes away or ceases, but is always young and active. And of the marvelous reality that this love, made visible in Christ Jesus, becomes known through the Church, through every Christian, and through each priest. The Year for Priests will undoubtedly produce many rich fruits in preaching, in catechesis, in care for the liturgy, in the various fields of pastoral work, and especially in the interior renewal of each priest, reflected in the growth of the number of seminarians in the diocese. The “audacity of God” that Benedict XVI spoke about in his homily on June 11 convokes all of us, as the Roman Pontiff stressed, to answer Him personally, “awaiting our yes.”

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