

Year For Priests

On Friday, I received an e-mail from my friend Sister Veronica who is a cloistered Carmelite nun living in Haifa, Israel. She reminded me of her prayers and those of her community for us priests as we begin the "Year for Priests." You may have heard that Pope Benedict XVI has decided to establish a special Year for Priests on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney, the Curé d'Ars. The Year for Priests began on Friday, June 19, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart and will end on June 19, 2010.

In a letter of June 16, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI described his reasons for establishing this special year. The Holy Father wrote that the Year for Priests was meant "to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today's world." Quoting St. John Vianney who said, "The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus," the Pope explained that this "expression makes us reflect, first of all, with heartfelt gratitude on the immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself." Pope Benedict continued: "I think of all those priests who quietly present Christ's words and actions each day to the faithful and to the whole world, striving to be one with the Lord in their thoughts and their will, their sentiments and their style of life. How can I not pay tribute to their apostolic labors, their tireless and hidden service, their universal charity? And how can I not praise the courageous fidelity of so many priests who, even amid difficulties and incomprehension, remain faithful to their vocation as "friends of Christ", whom he has called by name, chosen and sent?"

The Holy Father pointed out that "there are also, sad to say, situations which can never be sufficiently deplored where the Church herself suffers as a consequence of infidelity on the part of some of her ministers. Then it is the world which finds grounds for scandal and rejection. What is most helpful to the Church in such cases is not only a frank and complete acknowledgment of the weaknesses of her ministers, but also a joyful and renewed realization of the greatness of God's gift, embodied in the splendid example of generous pastors, religious afire with love for God and for souls, and insightful, patient spiritual guides. Here the teaching and example of Saint John Mary Vianney can serve as a significant point of reference for us all. The Curé of Ars was quite humble, yet as a priest he was conscious of being an immense gift to his people: 'A good shepherd, a pastor after God's heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy.' He spoke of the priesthood as if incapable of fathoming the grandeur of the gift and task entrusted to a human creature: "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...". Explaining to his parishioners the importance of the sacraments, he would say: "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."

The Year for Priests will be an occasion for us priests to renew our commitment to our divine calling, and for all of us to pray for priests and their continued sanctification. There will be more information about the Year for Priests in next weekend's bulletin.

In Christ,
Father Blaise Berg