

A REFLECTION ON THE *Year for Priests*

BY THE MOST REVEREND
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Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, inaugurated the *Year for Priests* that began in June 2009 and ended this past Friday. What was it? There could just as easily be, and should be a year set aside for Religious, married people, or people living a dedicated single life. So, why a *Year for Priests*?

Maybe it was called for because of our need for priests to practice fully our Catholic Faith, or our need for more priests, or our need for priests to conform themselves more closely to the mind and heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This last motive is in fact the Holy Father's principal reason for inaugurating the *Year for Priests*.

The imitation of Christ is not something new or peculiar to priests. It is an effort that begins for all Christians with Baptism and for which we receive strength from the Holy Spirit with Confirmation. And Ordination to the priesthood ratchets up this effort to a radical level.

Along with all the baptized, yet in a more tangible way, a priest is ordained to continue the mission of Christ. Jesus ascended into heaven, yes, but he has not abandoned us; he is still with us in the Church, in the lives of individual Christians, and in the life and ministry of a priest.

Jesus emptied himself to come among us as a man, shared our lot and life, taught us saving truths, forgave sinners, served others, even sacrificed himself, and rose to new life. All Christians, whether married, or Religious, or dedicated single people are called to be the hands, the voice, the face of Jesus, to do what Jesus did, each according to their own circumstances.

What did Jesus do? And what does a priest in particular do?

In the first place, St. Paul refers to Jesus emptying himself, humbling himself to come among us in human likeness (see *Philippians 2:7-8*). Jesus identified with us, shared our life, so that ultimately we might share in God's life.

A priest likewise empties himself, expressed especially in terms of his commitment to celibacy and his promise of obedience. Just as a man leaves his father and mother to cling to his wife, so a priest leaves not only his father and mother, but also the prospect of having a wife and family, as well as the free exercise of his own will in a total gift of self.

A priest does not resent this emptying of self, anymore than spouses resent it in reference to each other. His focus is not on what he leaves behind, but on what, or better yet on whom he now clings to: to God in personal and liturgical prayer, to

brothers in the fraternity of priests, and to the people he is sent to love, forgive, and serve as he might a spouse and children. The priest does all this so that others might share in God's life here and in the hereafter.

The public ministry of Jesus began with his preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God: "For this purpose I have come," Jesus says (*Mark 1:38*).

As in the life of Jesus, preaching is first and foremost in the ministry of a priest. Jesus wanted all people to learn the saving truths he preached (see *Matthew 28:20*). Priests are among those authorized to preach these gospel truths, that others might hear, believe, and be saved (see *Romans 10:14*). Preaching is also instrumental for the on-going formation of believers: teaching them, showing them their errors, correcting them, and training them in holiness (see *2 Timothy 3:16*).

And as in all things, preaching is done in love (see *Ephesians 4:15*), such that what was said of Jesus might be said of the preacher as well: "the bruised reed he will not crush" (*Matthew 12:20*).

A major theme in the mission of Jesus was forgiveness. Sinners were pardoned by him. He taught his followers to forgive everyone of any offense. And he freed us from the slavery to sin through the merits of his passion, death, and resurrection.

Jesus entrusts to priests the message and ministry of reconciliation, especially in the confessional. God uses priests to appeal to sinners, exhorting them to repent, confess, and make amends (see *2 Corinthians 5:18-20*). And it is through the ministry of the Church exercised by priests that sinners are forgiven and reconciled.

It is said that a priest should be a lion in the pulpit, but a lamb in the confessional: welcoming, treating penitents with kindness and gentleness, rejoicing with the angels when they repent, and encouraging them to have hope and try again. This attitude is conceived and supported when the priest confesses in humility that he too is a sinner in need of mercy.

In his public ministry, Jesus took the stance of servant of others, saying that he came to serve and not to be served (see *Matthew 20:28*). And he told his apostles that they should seek to be the last of all and the servant of all (see *Mark 9:35*).

A priest is given a place of prominence in the Church, placed before others but for the sake of his being for others as a servant. The members of a parish do not exist to serve the priest: pray, pay, and obey. Rather, they serve as partners with the priest to continue the mission of Jesus. And the priest serves his parishioners, helping them to bring the grace of their baptism to flower and bear fruit for the glory of God and the benefit of others.

And as with Jesus, the priest serves especially by caring about and for all people. The priest's only motive need be that Jesus himself cares about and for the person in front of him. The priest is to look on them the way Jesus did, with love and



translating that love into caring for others. And as with Jesus, there is no service that is beneath him, no place or parish that he will not go, no people of whatever stripe that he will not serve.

The fullest expression of Jesus' love is when he laid down his life, sacrificing himself on Calvary's cross to pay our debt for sinning against him. What love! What else could explain such an act? If love did not hold Jesus bound to the cross, wrote St. Catherine of Siena, the nails would have been powerless to do so.

After preaching, next in importance for the life and ministry of a priest is offering the sacrifice of Holy Mass. Preaching imparts knowledge of God, which potentially leads to love of God, which in turn is expressed best in the self-offering made by priest and congregation at Holy Mass. By this self-offering, the same sacrifice of Christ on Calvary is mystically re-presented on the altar. And filled with the Spirit of Jesus through Holy Communion, priest and people also re-present the sacrifice of Christ in their daily lives.

The priest's life is given up, laid down, to bring Jesus to people and them to Jesus. His life blood is poured out for their reconciliation with God. This is an expression of an unsurpassed Jesus love. Like Jesus, the priest is always yes. It is as if he says to others: You first. What do you need? How can I help you? He lives in a sacrificial spirit of taking less for himself and giving more to others.

Finally, Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven to open the gates of heaven to all those judged worthy, and sent the Holy Spirit as a guide to the followers of Jesus on the way to heaven.

The priest, as do all other Christians, tries to live on earth as if he is already risen from the dead and united with God in heaven, expressing in his own words and deeds God's justice, mercy, forgiveness, pity, peace, and love. The priest points out the way of truth to life in heaven. He teaches the values of the Kingdom of God, which are upside down compared to those of the world. And he provides in his own life an example to follow of how to walk this way.

Again, all Christians, whether married, or Religious, or dedicated single people are called to be the hands, the voice, the face of Jesus, to do what Jesus did, each according to their own circumstances. But the priest plays an essential and instrumental role to help the other followers of Jesus to carry out theirs.

What does a priest do? He births us into divine life when he baptizes. He nourishes that life by feeding us with the spiritual food of the Holy Eucharist. He directs and forms that divine life with preaching eternal truths. He heals the wound of sin in Confession, restoring the vigor of Christ's life in us. He anoints those who are sick to embrace the cross of Christ and those who are dying to pass on into eternity without fear. He is a bridge for us from earth to heaven.

We receive all these spiritual blessings from God through the hands of the priest, regardless of the personal sanctity of the priest.

The story is told of a priest struggling with alcoholism going to Madonna House for spiritual care and treatment. A worker there asked for his blessing, and after receiving it kissed the priest's hand. In response to the priest's astonishment, the worker said that his struggles were utterly immaterial to his blessing: spiritual gifts are given by God through the hands of a priest.

The priest must of course take care that who he is and what he does – the course of his life and the actions of his ministry – flow from his being consecrated a priest, another Christ. His hands are now the hands of Christ to do what Jesus did, to continue the mission of Christ and his Catholic Church: to bless, to forgive, to touch in healing, to be nailed to the cross of sacrifice, giving the gift of self in service to God and others.

A priest does all this, not for money, honors, or power, and even if there is no salary, no title, no special garb, no place of prominence in the community, and even if being a priest is met with derision, harassment, persecution, arrest, or the threat of death. A priest does all this for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the Gospel, to continue the mission of Christ. The priest finds his joy in this.

And a priest does all this, conscious that his priesthood is an undeserved gift given by God for his own benefit and that of others, and that only with the Holy Spirit will his priestly life and ministry bear spiritual fruit. In fact, the fruits of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity (see *Galatians* 5:22-23) – serve as a guide and an examination for the exercise of priestly life and ministry like Jesus.

As stated above, the *Year for Priests* was inaugurated by Pope Benedict XVI to invite priests to step up their personal efforts to conform themselves more closely to the mind and heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This is not an easy task; there is no hope of any progress without divine help, and without the prayers and encouragement of others.

For this reason, and because of how much we all benefit when the priest does make progress in his likeness to Christ, the *Year for Priests* is also an impetus for us to pray for, to encourage, and to thank our priests for their efforts towards this end.

Pray for our priests. Jesus is never perfectly reflected in the life and ministry of a priest, but then there is no perfection this side of heaven. The moral failures of priests, and the hurt and scandal these cause, cannot be overlooked or swept under the carpet; rather, they must lead to repentance, asking for forgiveness, and the commitment to ensure as far as is humanly possible that they do not happen again.

But focusing on what is not, that is, lamenting the failures of priests to reflect perfectly Jesus only serves to make us sad and bitter. It is far better to focus rather on what is, on the many more priests who serve well by bringing Jesus to us and us to Jesus, and to encourage their growth in this by affirmation of them.

Perhaps the greatest affirmation a priest could receive is for others to make good use of his ministry: going to Confession at least monthly; going daily or at least each Sunday to Holy Mass and Communion; listening to the homily for personal edification; calling on the priest to anoint a sick or dying family member or friend; and partnering with him in carrying out the mission of the Church.

And one last way of affirmation: to say "thank you" to a priest for how he uses God's gift to him for our spiritual benefit. The Diocese of Wichita has been and is now served well by priests who come from our parishes, from other parts of the United States, and from other countries like Burma, Ireland, Mexico, the Philippines, Venezuela, and Vietnam. And all for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the Gospel, to bring Jesus to us and us to Jesus, to lead us on the way of truth to life in heaven.

Thank you, Fathers.

