

HOLY FATHER ANNOUNCES A SPECIAL YEAR FOR PRIESTS

VATICAN CITY, 16 MAR 2009 (VIS) - This morning in the Vatican the Holy Father received members of the Congregation for the Clergy, who are currently celebrating their plenary assembly on the theme: "The missionary identity of priests in the Church as an intrinsic dimension of the exercise of the 'tre munera'".

"The missionary dimension of a priest arises from his sacramental configuration to Christ the Head", said the Pope. This involves "total adherence to what ecclesial tradition has identified as 'apostolica vivendi forma', which consists in participation ... in that 'new way of life' which was inaugurated by the Lord Jesus and which the Apostles made their own".

Benedict XVI highlighted the "indispensable struggle for moral perfection which must dwell in every truly priestly heart. In order to favour this tendency of priests towards spiritual perfection, upon which the effectiveness of their ministry principally depends, I have", he said, "decided to call a special 'Year for Priests' which will run from 19 June 2009 to 19 June 2010". This year marks "the 150th anniversary of the death of the saintly 'Cure of Ars', Jean Marie Vianney, a true example of a pastor at the service of Christ's flock".

"The ecclesial, communal, hierarchical and doctrinal dimension is absolutely indispensable for any authentic mission, and this alone guarantees its spiritual effectiveness", he said.

"The mission is 'ecclesial'", said the Pope, "because no-one announces or brings themselves, ... but brings Another, God Himself, to the world. God is the only wealth that, definitively, mankind wishes to find in a priest.

"The mission is 'communal' because it takes place in a unity and communion which only at a secondary level possess important aspects of social visibility. ... The 'hierarchical' and 'doctrinal' dimensions emphasise the importance of ecclesiastical discipline (a term related to that of 'disciple') and of doctrinal (not just theological, initial and permanent) formation".

Benedict XVI stressed the need to "have care for the formation of candidates to the priesthood", a formation that must maintain "communion with unbroken ecclesial Tradition, without pausing or being tempted by discontinuity. In this context, it is important to encourage priests, especially the young generations, to a correct reading of the texts of Vatican Council II, interpreted in the light of all the Church's doctrinal inheritance".

Priests must be "present, identifiable and recognisable - for their judgement of faith, personal virtues and attire - in the fields of culture and of charity which have always been at the heart of the Church's mission".

"The centrality of Christ leads to a correct valuation of priestly ministry, without which there would be no Eucharist, no mission, not even the Church. It is necessary then, to ensure that 'new structures' or pastoral organisations are not planned for a time in which it will be possible to 'do without' ordained ministry, on the basis of an erroneous interpretation of the promotion of the laity, because this would lay the foundations for a further dilution in priestly ministry, and any supposed 'solutions' would, in fact, dramatically coincide with the real causes of the problems currently affecting the ministry".

ST. JEAN MARIE VIANNEY: PATRON SAINT OF ALL PRIESTS

VATICAN CITY, 16 MAR 2009 (VIS) - "Faithfulness of Christ, faithfulness of priests" is the theme of the Year for Priests announced today by the Holy Father, according to a communique issued by the Holy See Press Office.

The Pope will inaugurate the Year on 19 June, presiding at Vespers in St. Peter's Basilica where the relics of the saintly 'Cure of Ars' will be brought for the occasion by Bishop Guy Bagnard of Belley-Ars, France. He will close the year on 19 June 2010, presiding at a "World Meeting of Priests" in St. Peter's Square.

During the course of the Year, Benedict XVI will proclaim St. Jean Marie Vianney as patron saint of all the priests of the world. A "Directory for Confessors and Spiritual Directors" will also be published, as will a collection of texts by the Supreme Pontiff on essential aspects of the life and mission of priests in our time.

The Congregation for the Clergy, together with diocesan ordinaries and superiors of religious institutes, will undertake to promote and co-ordinate the various spiritual and pastoral initiatives which are being organised to highlight the role and mission of the clergy in the Church and in modern society, and the need to intensify the permanent formation of priests, associating it with that of seminarians.

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VATICAN CITY (Zenit) - The prefect for the Congregation for Clergy is urging the local churches to plan events to celebrate and show appreciation for priests.

Cardinal Cláudio Hummes affirmed this in a letter released today for the Year of Priests, which will be inaugurated June 19, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests.

Benedict XVI announced this year as a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, the Curé of Ars.

The cardinal noted that this year should be "both positive and forward looking," a time for the Church to say to its priests, "but also to all the faithful and to wider society by means of the mass media, that it is proud of its priests, loves them, honors them, admires them and that it recognizes with gratitude their pastoral work and the witness of their life."

He affirmed that priests are important "not only for what they do but also for who they are."

"Sadly," the prefect said, "it is true that at the present time some priests have been shown to have been involved in gravely problematic and unfortunate situations."

However, he noted, it is important to remember that these pertain to a "very small portion of the clergy."

Sacred ministry

The cardinal continued: "The overwhelming majority of priests are people of great personal integrity, dedicated to the sacred ministry; men of prayer and of pastoral charity, who invest their entire existence in the fulfillment of their vocation and mission, often through great personal sacrifice, but always with an authentic love towards Jesus Christ, the Church and the people, in solidarity with the poor and the suffering.

"It is for this reason that the Church is proud of her priests wherever they may be found."

He expressed the hope that this year will be a time of "intense appreciation of the priestly identity" and of the "extraordinary meaning of the vocation and mission of priests within the Church and in society."

To this end, he called for reflection on the priesthood through study opportunities, days of recollection, spiritual exercises, conferences and seminars, research and publications.

The prefect affirmed that this year must be "a year of prayer by priests, with priests and for priests, a year for the renewal of the spirituality of the presbyterate and of each priest."

At the heart of this priestly spirituality, he said, is the Eucharist.

Cardinal Hummes called for attention to the material sustenance of clergy "since they live, at times, in situations of great poverty and hardship in many parts of the world."

Celebration

He also encouraged the Catholic community to "pray, to reflect, to celebrate, and justly to give honor to their priests."

May it be an opportunity, he said, "to develop the communion and friendship between priests and the communities entrusted to their care."

The prefect urged the local churches and dioceses to establish a program for the year "at the earliest opportunity" and to plan a "notable event" for its inauguration.

He invited the churches to join the Pope on June 19 "to participate in the opening of the year, ideally by some particular liturgical act and festivity."

The cardinal added an invitation to "those who are able" to come to Rome for the inauguration, "to manifest their own participation in this happy initiative of the Pope."