

Dear readers,

On March 16, Pope Benedict XVI, during an audience granted to participants in the plenary assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy, announced the Year for the priests. The theme for the priestly year is "Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of Priests." The opening of the year was scheduled with a celebration of vespers on June 19, the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in the presence of the relic of the Curé of Ars, which was to be brought to Rome by Bishop Guy Bagnard of Belley-Ars. The closing ceremony will take place exactly one year later, with a World Meeting of Priests in St. Peter's Square. During this year, a directory for confessors and spiritual directors will be published, along with a compilation of texts by the Pope on the core issues of the life and mission of priests in modern times. Benedict XVI will officially proclaim St. Jean Marie Vianney as "patron saint of all the priests of the world."

We welcome
efforts by dedi-



the initiative of the Pope and join his
cating this issue of Convictions
to the priesthood. The articles
will strive to reveal the very nature
of the priesthood, to show
the dignity of this vocation, to
encourage the priests and to ap-

peal to the faithful to pray for priestly vocations and for the fidelity of priests: "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he send labourers into his harvest." (Luke 10:2)

Speaking about the priesthood, first of all we have to mention its permanence. By his ordination the priest receives the sacramental character of the priesthood. He becomes a minister of Christ and enters into a permanent relationship with Him. This ontological sign is printed in his soul and can never be erased. Hence the bishop reminds the newly ordained: "Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech." (Psalm 109:4) This reality affects already the way the young man prepares for the priesthood in the seminary. Later on, it marks the way he understands himself as a chaste spouse of the Church and spiritual father of the faithful. This supernatural mark distinguishes him from the laity; it places him above the flock of his faithful. He is much more than a simple functionary who performs during fixed hours ritual actions; his office exceeds that of an animator or the administrator of the parish: He is a mediator between God and man at every moment, in all situations and in all his activities.

The second principle we have to bring up is that the priest, whenever he administers the sacraments, acts "in persona Christi". In the sacraments it is not the priest himself who will give the grace. He is only the instrument: Christ has chosen him, and Christ will use his humanity to approach souls. The priest gives his tongue, his hands, and his entire person for the

service of Christ, who will be active and give His grace. This ability to be an instrument of Christ is a comfort to the faithful, inasmuch as they realize that their faith is not based on the personality of the priest, but rather on the Person of Christ working through the priest.

Another side of this is that, although the priest has received the sacerdotal character, he is obliged to keep working on his own personal character development as a man striving for holiness. He must act with caution and avoid the trap of functionalism or activism. Never may he become so busy that he forgets his priestly nature. He must remain supernaturally sensitive, grounding himself by being a man of prayer who encounters God through daily, silent meditation, desiring an ever more intimate relationship with Him.

Furthermore, the priest is not his own, but rather he belongs to and represents the Church. He acts "in persona Ecclesiae." He prays the Liturgy of the Hours, as he promised at his ordination, for the needs of the whole Church. Likewise, he embraces and hands down the teachings of the Church as the steward, not the master, of her truths. He is also proud - in the true sense - to be visibly recognizable as a priest, knowing that he is called to courageously be a sign and symbol pointing beyond himself to Christ. Everything the priest does is priestly and has an immense value, as Christ desires to work through him at all times. This happens in a particular way when preaching, shepherding, and healing God's people as their spiritual father.

Finally the priest should never stop working on his ongoing priestly formation. The Thomistic axiom, "agere sequitur esse" - doing follows being - is true for all priests; the more they understand their priestly identity, the more they will be able to act and serve in the manner Christ has called them. In the midst of full liturgical schedules, parish councils, leaking roofs and hospital visits, travelling from east to west and from north to south, the priest must continually open his heart and mind to Christ in prayer and study, annual retreats and seminars. This proper understanding does not guarantee fidelity or holiness, but it certainly is a strong foundation to build upon. Priests who have a clear understanding of this doctrine are more likely to be content in their ministry and joyful in their vocation.

O Lord, give us many holy priests!

Father Jürgen Wegner