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EDITORIAL

A Priest is Always Wrong

If he begins his mass on time, his watch is advanced; If he begins a minute later, he keeps people waiting. If he preaches too long, he makes people get bored; If his homily is too short, he is unprepared. If he owns a car, he is luxurious; If he does not own one, he does not go with the times. If he goes out to visit families, he is always out: If he does not, he has no time for them. If he asks for donations, he is a moneymaker; If he does not do it, he is too proud and lazy. If he takes time in the confessional, he is too slow; If he makes it too fast, he has no time for his penitents. If he renovates the church, he throws away money; If he does not do it, he allows everything to rot away. If he is with the youth, he forgets the old. If he is seen with women, he is a playboy; If he goes with men, he is not normal; If he is young, he has no experience; If he is old, he should retire. As long as he lives, there are always people who are better than him; but if the priest dies...there is nobody to take his place! (<http://madharasan.blogspot.com/2008/12/priest-is-always-wrong-because.html>)

Clichéd and archaic as it may be, the preceding text nonetheless captures what may be considered as the challenges that confront the priest even today. In what comes as a litany of negative things that can be attributed to a priest, the inevitable conclusion is that he shall always be a disappointment, forever condemned to leave his flock dissatisfied and short-changed. Whatever the circumstance, he shall never be enough.

This year has been pronounced by the Holy Father as one dedicated for the priest, for him who, as the above text says, is never enough, who always fell short of the flock's expectations, and who is perpetually deemed standing precariously between the demands of divine vocation and the limitations of his human condition. That is why it may be considered a hallowed inspiration that the year is aptly heralded by the image of a cleric who is, by the world's measures, so inadequate that he could very well personify what could be called substandard, insufficient, and unworthy. Perhaps, by today's norms, St. John Marie Vianney – the *Curé d'Ars*, the ecclesiastically proclaimed patron of priests – would have not survived

initial formation for priesthood. He had an extremely limited knowledge, being confined to a little arithmetic, history, and geography, and found learning, excessively difficult. In fact, he was so deficient in Latin as to be obliged to follow the philosophy course in French. Even then, he failed to pass the examinations for entrance to the seminary proper, and succeeded later only upon re-examination. Yet, he received the sacrament of the Holy Orders and became a legacy for the Catholic clergy by his life and example even years after his death.

As with all other subjects of varying expectations, the priesthood becomes a source of inconsistencies that compel one to turn to the heavens and wonder how conflicting actualities could be possible. Indeed, when one becomes a witness to the human side of such a divine office, it is easy to realize what St. John Chrysostom stated, *“And all men are ready to pass judgment on the priest as if he was not a being clothed with flesh, or one who inherited a human nature...”* With what the society’s common paradigms may consider acceptable, it is often a challenge to comprehend realities that run in conflict against such standards. Even the apostle Paul, who knew the mysteries of the kingdom of God perhaps as well as ever any man, confessed himself at a loss amidst what may only be credited as a manifestation of God’s infinite wisdom: *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!”* (Romans 11:33)

Today, the church celebrates the year for priests not as a sign of protest for having been too often a subject of unreasonable prejudices and even humanly impossible demands. It is rather an affirmation of the mystery of the sacrament, which is beyond the human capacity to grasp. For forty years, St. John Marie Vianney practiced mortification with food and sleep that may even be considered insufficient, humanly speaking, to sustain life. Yet he labored incessantly, with unflinching humility, gentleness, patience, and cheerfulness, until he breathed his last. And this was greatest miracle of his life – an untiring dedication to the gift not only of the priesthood, but also of the faith – a reminder of the simplicity of the Gospel message to every faithful who are themselves helplessly confronted with complicated expectations. In the words of Mother Teresa, *“Do not think that love, in order to be genuine, has to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired.”* ■

FEATURES

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER
PROCLAIMING A YEAR FOR PRIESTS
ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE “DIES NATALIS”
OF THE CURÉ OF ARS
Vatican, 16 June 2009

HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

Dear Brother Priests,

On the forthcoming Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, Friday 19 June 2009 – a day traditionally devoted to prayer for the sanctification of the clergy –, I have decided to inaugurate a “Year for Priests” in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the “*dies natalis*” of John Mary Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests worldwide.[1] This Year, 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, will conclude on the same Solemnity in 2010. “*The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus*”, the saintly Curé of Ars would often say.[2] This touching 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. 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 labours, 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?

I still treasure the memory of the first parish priest at whose side I exercised my ministry as a young priest: he left me an example of unreserved devotion to his pastoral duties, even to meeting death in the act of bringing viaticum to a gravely ill person. I also recall the countless confreres whom I have met and continue to meet, not least in my pastoral visits to different countries: men generously dedicated to the daily exercise of their priestly ministry. Yet the expression of Saint John Mary also makes us think of Christ's pierced Heart and the crown of thorns which surrounds it. I am also led to think, therefore, of the countless situations of suffering endured by many priests, either because they themselves share in the manifold human experience of pain or because they encounter misunderstanding from the very persons to whom they minister. How can we not also think of all those priests who are offended in their dignity, obstructed in their mission and persecuted, even at times to offering the supreme testimony of their own blood?

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".[3] 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...".[4] 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".[5] These words, welling up from the priestly heart of the holy pastor, might sound excessive. Yet they reveal the high esteem in which he held the sacrament of the priesthood. He seemed overwhelmed by a boundless sense of responsibility: "Were we to fully realize what a priest is on earth, we would die: not of fright, but of love... Without the priest, the passion and death of our Lord would be of no avail. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth... What use would be a house filled with gold, were there no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door: he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of his goods ... Leave a parish for twenty years without a priest, and they will end by worshiping the beasts there ... The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you".[6]

He arrived in Ars, a village of 230 souls, warned by his Bishop beforehand that there he would find religious practice in a sorry state: "There is little love of God in that parish; you will be the one to put it there". As a result, he was deeply aware that he needed to go there to embody Christ's presence and to bear witness to his saving mercy: "[Lord,] grant me the conversion of my parish; I am willing to suffer whatever you wish, for my entire life!": with this prayer he entered upon his mission.[7] The Curé devoted himself completely to his parish's conversion, setting before all

else the Christian education of the people in his care. Dear brother priests, let us ask the Lord Jesus for the grace to learn for ourselves something of the pastoral plan of Saint John Mary Vianney! The first thing we need to learn is the complete identification of the man with his ministry. In Jesus, person and mission tend to coincide: all Christ's saving activity was, and is, an expression of his "filial consciousness" which from all eternity stands before the Father in an attitude of loving submission to his will. In a humble yet genuine way, every priest must aim for a similar identification. Certainly this is not to forget that the efficacy of the ministry is independent of the holiness of the minister; but neither can we overlook the extraordinary fruitfulness of the encounter between the ministry's objective holiness and the subjective holiness of the minister. The Curé of Ars immediately set about this patient and humble task of harmonizing his life as a minister with the holiness of the ministry he had received, by deciding to "live", physically, in his parish church: As his first biographer tells us: "Upon his arrival, he chose the church as his home. He entered the church before dawn and did not leave it until after the evening Angelus. There he was to be sought whenever needed".[8]

The pious excess of his devout biographer should not blind us to the fact that the Curé also knew how to "live" actively within the entire territory of his parish: he regularly visited the sick and families, organized popular missions and patronal feasts, collected and managed funds for his charitable and missionary works, embellished and furnished his parish church, cared for the orphans and teachers of the "Providence" (an institute he founded); provided for the education of children; founded confraternities and enlisted lay persons to work at his side.

His example naturally leads me to point out that there are sectors of cooperation which need to be opened ever more fully to the lay faithful. Priests and laity together make up the one priestly people[9] and in virtue of their ministry priests live in the midst of the lay faithful, "that they may lead everyone to the unity of charity, 'loving one another with mutual affection; and outdoing one another in sharing honour'" (Rom 12:10).[10] Here we ought to recall the Second Vatican Council's hearty encouragement to priests "to be sincere in their appreciation and promotion of the dignity of the laity and of the special role they have to play in the Church's mission. ... They should be willing to listen to lay people, give

brotherly consideration to their wishes, and acknowledge their experience and competence in the different fields of human activity. In this way they will be able together with them to discern the signs of the times”.[11]

Saint John Mary Vianney taught his parishioners primarily by the witness of his life. It was from his example that they learned to pray, halting frequently before the tabernacle for a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.[12] “One need not say much to pray well” – the Curé explained to them – “We know that Jesus is there in the tabernacle: let us open our hearts to him, let us rejoice in his sacred presence. That is the best prayer”.[13] And he would urge them: “Come to communion, my brothers and sisters, come to Jesus. Come to live from him in order to live with him...[14] “Of course you are not worthy of him, but *you need him!*”.[15] This way of educating the faithful *to the Eucharistic presence and to communion* proved most effective when they saw him celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Those present said that “it was not possible to find a finer example of worship... He gazed upon the Host with immense love”.[16] “All good works, taken together, do not equal the sacrifice of the Mass” – he would say – “since they are human works, while the Holy Mass is the work of God”.[17] He was convinced that the fervour of a priest’s life depended entirely upon the Mass: “The reason why a priest is lax is that he does not pay attention to the Mass! My God, how we ought to pity a priest who celebrates as if he were engaged in something routine!”.[18] He was accustomed, when celebrating, also to offer his own life in sacrifice: “What a good thing it is for a priest each morning to offer himself to God in sacrifice!”.[19]

This deep personal identification with the Sacrifice of the Cross led him – by a sole inward movement – from the altar to the confessional. Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this sacrament. In France, at the time of the Curé of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion. Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence. He thus created a “*virtuous*” circle. By spending long hours in church before the tabernacle, he inspired the faithful to

imitate him by coming to visit Jesus with the knowledge that their parish priest would be there, ready to listen and offer forgiveness. Later, the growing numbers of penitents from all over France would keep him in the confessional for up to sixteen hours a day. It was said that Ars had become “a great hospital of souls”. [20] His first biographer relates that “the grace he obtained [for the conversion of sinners] was so powerful that it would pursue them, not leaving them a moment of peace!”. [21] The saintly Curé reflected something of the same idea when he said: “It is not the sinner who returns to God to beg his forgiveness, but God himself who runs after the sinner and makes him return to him”. [22] “This good Saviour is so filled with love that he seeks us everywhere”. [23]

We priests should feel that the following words, which he put on the lips of Christ, are meant for each of us personally: “I will charge my ministers to proclaim to sinners that I am ever ready to welcome them, that my mercy is infinite”. [24] From Saint John Mary Vianney we can learn to put our unfailing trust in the sacrament of Penance, to set it once more at the centre of our pastoral concerns, and to take up the “dialogue of salvation” which it entails. The Curé of Ars dealt with different penitents in different ways. Those who came to his confessional drawn by a deep and humble longing for God’s forgiveness found in him the encouragement to plunge into the “flood of divine mercy” which sweeps everything away by its vehemence. If someone was troubled by the thought of his own frailty and inconstancy, and fearful of sinning again, the Curé would unveil the mystery of God’s love in these beautiful and touching words: “The good Lord knows everything. Even before you confess, he already knows that you will sin again, yet he still forgives you. How great is the love of our God: he *even forces himself to forget the future*, so that he can grant us his forgiveness!”. [25] But to those who made a lukewarm and rather indifferent confession of sin, he clearly demonstrated by his own tears of pain how “abominable” this attitude was: “I weep because you don’t weep”, [26] he would say. “If only the Lord were not so good! *But he is so good!* One would have to be a brute to treat so good a Father this way!”. [27] He awakened repentance in the hearts of the lukewarm by forcing them to see God’s own pain at their sins reflected in the face of the priest who was their confessor. To those who, on the other hand, came to him already desirous of and suited to a deeper spiritual life, he

flung open the abyss of God's love, explaining the untold beauty of living in union with him and dwelling in his presence: "Everything in God's sight, everything with God, everything to please God... How beautiful it is!".[28] And he taught them to pray: "My God, grant me the grace to love you as much as I possibly can".[29]

In his time the Curé of Ars was able to transform the hearts and the lives of so many people because he enabled them to experience the Lord's merciful love. Our own time urgently needs a similar proclamation and witness to the truth of Love: *Deus caritas est* (1 Jn: 4:8). Thanks to the word and the sacraments of Jesus, John Mary Vianney built up his flock, although he often trembled from a conviction of his personal inadequacy, and desired more than once to withdraw from the responsibilities of the parish ministry out of a sense of his unworthiness. Nonetheless, with exemplary obedience he never abandoned his post, consumed as he was by apostolic zeal for the salvation of souls. He sought to remain completely faithful to his own vocation and mission through the practice of an austere asceticism: "The great misfortune for us parish priests – he lamented – is that our souls grow tepid"; meaning by this that a pastor can grow dangerously inured to the state of sin or of indifference in which so many of his flock are living.[30] He himself kept a tight rein on his body, with vigils and fasts, lest it rebel against his priestly soul. Nor did he avoid self-mortification for the good of the souls in his care and as a help to expiating the many sins he heard in confession. To a priestly confrere he explained: "I will tell you my recipe: I give sinners a small penance and the rest I do in their place".[31] Aside from the actual penances which the Curé of Ars practiced, the core of his teaching remains valid for each of us: souls have been won at the price of Jesus' own blood, and a priest cannot devote himself to their salvation if he refuses to share personally in the "precious cost" of redemption.

In today's world, as in the troubled times of the Curé of Ars, the lives and activity of priests need to be distinguished by *a forceful witness to the Gospel*. As Pope Paul VI rightly noted, "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses".[32] Lest we experience existential emptiness and the effectiveness of our ministry be compromised, we need to ask ourselves ever anew: "Are we truly pervaded by the word of God? Is that

word truly the nourishment we live by, even more than bread and the things of this world? Do we really know that word? Do we love it? Are we deeply engaged with this word to the point that it really leaves a mark on our lives and shapes our thinking?.”[33] Just as Jesus called the Twelve to be with him (cf. Mk 3:14), and only later sent them forth to preach, so too in our days priests are called to assimilate that “new style of life” which was inaugurated by the Lord Jesus and taken up by the Apostles.[34]

It was complete commitment to this “new style of life” which marked the priestly ministry of the Curé of Ars. Pope John XXIII, in his Encyclical Letter *Sacerdotii nostri primordia*, published in 1959 on the first centenary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney, presented his asceticism with special reference to the “three evangelical counsels” which the Pope considered necessary also for priests: “even though priests are not bound to embrace these evangelical counsels by virtue of the clerical state, these counsels nonetheless offer them, as they do all the faithful, the surest road to the desired goal of Christian perfection”.[35] The Curé of Ars lived the “evangelical counsels” in a way suited to his priestly state. His *poverty* was not the poverty of a religious or a monk, but that proper to a priest: while managing much money (since well-to-do pilgrims naturally took an interest in his charitable works), he realized that everything had been donated to his church, his poor, his orphans, the girls of his “*Providence*”,[36] his families of modest means. Consequently, he “was rich in giving to others and very poor for himself”.[37] As he would explain: “My secret is simple: give everything away; hold nothing back”.[38] When he lacked money, he would say amiably to the poor who knocked at his door: “Today I’m poor just like you, I’m one of you”.[39] At the end of his life, he could say with absolute tranquillity: “I no longer have anything. The good Lord can call me whenever he wants!”.[40] His *chastity*, too, was that demanded of a priest for his ministry. It could be said that it was a chastity suited to one who must daily touch the Eucharist, who contemplates it blissfully and with that same bliss offers it to his flock. It was said of him that “he radiated chastity”; the faithful would see this when he turned and gazed at the tabernacle with loving eyes”.[41] Finally, Saint John Mary Vianney’s *obedience* found full embodiment in his conscientious fidelity to the daily demands of his ministry. We know how he was tormented by the thought of his inadequacy for parish ministry

and by a desire to flee “in order to bewail his poor life, in solitude”. [42] Only obedience and a thirst for souls convinced him to remain at his post. As he explained to himself and his flock: “There are no two good ways of serving God. There is only one: serve him as he desires to be served”. [43] He considered this the golden rule for a life of obedience: “Do only what can be offered to the good Lord”. [44]

In this context of a spirituality nourished by the practice of the evangelical counsels, I would like to invite all priests, during this Year dedicated to them, to welcome the new springtime which the Spirit is now bringing about in the Church, not least through the ecclesial movements and the new communities. “In his gifts the Spirit is multifaceted... He breathes where he wills. He does so unexpectedly, in unexpected places, and in ways previously unheard of... but he also shows us that he works with a view to the one body and in the unity of the one body”. [45] In this regard, the statement of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* continues to be timely: “While testing the spirits to discover if they be of God, priests must discover with faith, recognize with joy and foster diligently the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, whether these be of a humble or more exalted kind”. [46] These gifts, which awaken in many people the desire for a deeper spiritual life, can benefit not only the lay faithful but the clergy as well. The communion between ordained and charismatic ministries can provide “a helpful impulse to a renewed commitment by the Church in proclaiming and bearing witness to the Gospel of hope and charity in every corner of the world”. [47] I would also like to add, echoing the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of Pope John Paul II, that the ordained ministry has a radical “*communitarian form*” and can be exercised only in the communion of priests with their Bishop. [48] This communion between priests and their Bishop, grounded in the sacrament of Holy Orders and made manifest in Eucharistic concelebration, needs to be translated into various concrete expressions of an effective and affective priestly fraternity. [49] Only thus will priests be able to live fully the gift of celibacy and build thriving Christian communities in which the miracles which accompanied the first preaching of the Gospel can be repeated.

The Pauline Year now coming to its close invites us also to look to the Apostle of the Gentiles, who represents a splendid example of a priest entirely devoted to his ministry. “The love of Christ urges us on” – he

wrote – “because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14). And he adds: “He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor 5:15). Could a finer programme be proposed to any priest resolved to advance along the path of Christian perfection?

Dear brother priests, the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney (1859) follows upon the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Lourdes (1858). In 1959 Blessed Pope John XXIII noted that “shortly before the Curé of Ars completed his long and admirable life, the Immaculate Virgin appeared in another part of France to an innocent and humble girl, and entrusted to her a message of prayer and penance which continues, even a century later, to yield immense spiritual fruits. The life of this holy priest whose centenary we are commemorating in a real way anticipated the great supernatural truths taught to the seer of Massabielle. He was greatly devoted to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin; in 1836 he had dedicated his parish church to Our Lady Conceived without Sin and he greeted the dogmatic definition of this truth in 1854 with deep faith and great joy.”[50] The Curé would always remind his faithful that “after giving us all he could, Jesus Christ wishes in addition to bequeath us his most precious possession, his Blessed Mother”.[51]

To the Most Holy Virgin I entrust this Year for Priests. I ask her to awaken in the heart of every priest a generous and renewed commitment to the ideal of complete self-oblation to Christ and the Church which inspired the thoughts and actions of the saintly Curé of Ars. It was his fervent prayer life and his impassioned love of Christ Crucified that enabled John Mary Vianney to grow daily in his total self-oblation to God and the Church. May his example lead all priests to offer that witness of unity with their Bishop, with one another and with the lay faithful, which today, as ever, is so necessary. Despite all the evil present in our world, the words which Christ spoke to his Apostles in the Upper Room continue to inspire us: “In the world you have tribulation; but take courage, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). Our faith in the Divine Master gives us the strength to look to the future with confidence. Dear priests, Christ is counting on you. In the footsteps of the Curé of Ars, let yourselves be enthralled by him. In this way you too will be, for the world in our time, heralds of hope, reconciliation and peace! ■

NOTES:

- [1] He was proclaimed as such by Pope Pius XI in 1929.
- [2] *“Le Sacerdoce, c’est l’amour du cœur de Jésus”* (in *Le curé d’Ars. Sa pensée – Son cœur*. Présentés par l’Abbé Bernard Nodet, éd. Xavier Mappus, Foi Vivante, 1966, p. 98). Hereafter: *NODET*. The expression is also quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1589).
- [3] *NODET*, p. 101.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- [5] *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.
- [6] *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- [8] *MONNIN, A., Il Curato d’Ars. Vita di Gian. Battista-Maria Vianney*, vol. I, ed. Marietti, Turin, 1870, p. 122.
- [9] Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 10.
- [10] *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9.
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] “Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me’: this is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to his holy Curé about his prayer before the tabernacle” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2715).
- [13] *NODET*, p. 85.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- [16] *MONNIN, A., op. cit., II*, pp. 430ff.
- [17] *NODET*, p. 105.
- [18] *Ibid.*
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- [20] *MONNIN, A., op. cit., II*, p. 293.
- [21] *Ibid.*, II, p. 10.
- [22] *NODET*, p. 128.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- [29] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- [30] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- [31] *Ibid.*, p. 189.
- [32] *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41.
- [33] *BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the Chrism Mass*, 9 April 2009.
- [34] Cf. *BENEDICT XVI, Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy*, 16 March 2009.
- [35] P. I.
- [36] The name given to the house where more than sixty abandoned girls were taken in and educated. To maintain this house he would do anything: “*J’ai fait tous les commerces imaginables*”, he would say with a smile (*NODET*, p. 214).

- [37] NODET, p. 216.
- [38] Ibid., p. 215.
- [39] Ibid., p. 216.
- [40] Ibid., p. 214.
- [41] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 112.
- [42] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 82-84; 102-103.
- [43] Ibid., p. 75.
- [44] Ibid., p. 76.
- [45] BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for the Vigil of Pentecost*, 3 June 2006.
- [46] No. 9.
- [47] BENEDICT XVI, *Address to Bishop-Friends of the Focolare Movement and the Sant'Egidio Community*, 8 February 2007.
- [48] Cf. No. 17.
- [49] Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 74.
- [50] Encyclical Letter *Sacerdotii nostri primordia*, P. III.
- [51] NODET, p. 244.

SOURCE:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20090616_anno-sacerdotale_en.html



Priests:
Called to be Bearers of Passion,
Compassion and Service

HOMILY DELIVERED ON THE OPENING MASS OF THE
WEEK OF PRAYER AND GRATITUDE FOR PRIESTS

University of Santo Tomas, Manila

27 July 2009

MOST REV. CAMILO D. GREGORIO, DD
PRELATE OF BATANES

It is always a joy to return to UST especially on a happy occasion like this – the Opening Mass for your Week of Prayer and Gratitude for Priests, with the theme: “*Priests: Called to be Bearers of Passion, Compassion and Service.*” Congratulations and thank you for this worthy endeavor!

I am happy to be with you again, Fr. Rector Rolando dela Rosa, Fr. Pablo Tiong, Reverend fathers, sisters, seminarians, and you – representatives of the UST Academic family and community, and all of you, parishioners of Sto. Rosario Parish. I am happy to see Fr. Rey Adalid and Fr. Norberto Castillo back with us again here at UST.

A little earlier today was the State of the Nation Address of the President of the Republic of the Philippines. Amidst and despite shouts of indignation and protests, commentators claimed it to be a or the Sound of Glory. But now – at this Eucharist, amidst an atmosphere of refreshing silence and peaceful joy, we hear another sound, the life-giving sound of the Word of God, the Sound of Victory, saying especially to priests all over the world and of our country: “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you... that you may go and bear fruit...!” (John 15:16-17). It is a sound of victory of the Lord for the whole Church and for all humanity.

This Week of Prayer and Gratitude for Priests coincides so beautifully with the declaration of Pope Benedict XVI making this year, the “Year of the Priest” in commemoration of the 150th *Dies Natalis* of St. John Marie Vianney, the Patron of all priests, especially parish priests. More meaning and significance is given to your week-long reflection on Priests and Priesthood also by the announcement of the CBCP making this year, as the “Year of the Two Hearts” – the hearts of Jesus and Mary. Furthermore, this “Year of the Priest” is affirmed by the most recent celebration also of the 150th Anniversary of the Apparition of the Blessed Mother in Lourdes. It is a “connection” with Mary, the Mother of Priests.

All these year-long celebrations highlight two very glaring realities: First, the continuing and continuous outpouring of God’s blessings on us all through the instrumentality of priests. We are moved to awe and gratitude for the great things or “*mirabilia*” that the “*Diyos na hindi natutulog at ang Diyos na kumikilos*” is showering on us through the sacramental or ministerial priesthood we are privileged to bear and use for you, our people. All these evoke our GRATITUDE and PRAYERS to our priests. Indeed, as Pope Benedict XVI repeatedly reminds us, quoting the *Curé de Ars*, St. John Mary Vianney: “a good shepherd, a Pastor after God’s heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish.” This echoes what Pope John Paul II in turn, also said in Chile in

1984 to priests: “Your holiness is your greatest gift to your people.” It also echoes Pope Paul VI’s insistence that: “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”

This makes us pause in deep prayer and gratitude for all the priests of this country who lived that WITNESSING. We are grateful to all the missionaries who planted the seeds of faith at the cost of much deprivation and sacrifice – as did the Dominican Missionaries in Batanes and in the whole Cagayan Region. Let me mention Bp. Jesus Villaverde, OP and Beato Pedro Capillas. We are grateful for our UST Martyrs and Saints who shed their blood for this country that we may grow and live in the love of Christ. We are grateful to Cardinals, Bishops and priests of and from UST who blazed the trail of Pastoral Evangelization for us. To mention but a few – we have Bishop Alfredo Verzosa of Vigan and Lipa, Bishop Alfredo Ma. Obviar of Lucena whose cause for beatification is now being processed and Father Amador Foz of Vigan.

The second thing that the “Year of the Priest is highlighting for us is the need for deep, intense and interior Renewal of all priests – Religious or Diocesan. The Holy Father sees the need not only for *aggiornamento* but *Kenosis* that leads to holiness. Benedict XVI admits that, I quote: “After Vatican II, in some places, the impression arose that there were more important things in the mission of priests in our time: some people believed that the priority was to build a new society.” I remember my early years as a Bishop when the *in-thing* was just “Social Action” and “Liberation Theology. They were good endeavors but unfortunately, they were devoid of spirituality. We have gone a long way since, thank God and thanks to Benedict XVI, we are back to basics, “back to nature – the nature of Charity in the priesthood, back to spirituality.”

And this spirituality we are speaking about is seeing Christ’s Charity. Our Pope may be called “The Pope of Charity.” His encyclicals all converge in the theme of God’s love to be shared to the full – “*Deus Caritas Est*” and “*Caritas in Veritate*”

In both encyclicals, we see the challenge of your theme for this week of Prayer and Gratitude for Priests: “*Priests: Called to be Bearers of Passion, Compassion and Service.*”

In days to come, others will talk more in detail about all these. Let it suffice to say for now: the effectiveness of the priest's ministry flows from his ("dual term") – "identity-mission" with Christ, the source and strength of our priesthood. The priest's passion and compassion and service – or should we not rather say – The Priest's Compassionate service flows from his total identification with the pierced Heart of Jesus who knew and felt what sinners go through, what the sick and the poor hunger for, and what "sheep without a shepherd" are looking for.

Let me conclude this reflection with the very Gospel we proclaimed today, the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast. Both images portray littleness, weaknesses, limitations, unworthiness and even corruption. We all are the "mustard seeds" – priests, religious and lay faithful. Mustard seeds do not really become big mustard trees. Mustard Trees do not exist but figuratively Jesus is telling us that, by His grace, He can do great things through us and He can make us great in His eyes despite our unworthiness. He can make us great and Holy priests, religious and holy people. He can make us exclaim like Mary: *Magnificat... fecit mihi magna qui potens est...* (My soul rejoices in the Lord...He who is mighty has done great things for me.)

Allow this week of prayer and gratitude to make mustard trees out of us. Allow the "absolute primacy of Divine Grace" as Pope Benedict says, impel us to perfection of charity in all our priestly ministry and pastoral involvement. Then we can mean what we say when we sing ...

*"Keep us in beauty, in truth and virtues' impassioned embrace.
Ever your valiant legions, imbued with unending grace!" ■*



The Social Doctrine of the Church and *Pondo ng Pinoy*

Manila
July 2009

FAUSTO B. GOMEZ, OP

Our main objective in writing this paper is to show that the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) can help us understand better the meaning and implications of *Pondo ng Pinoy (PnP)* and consequently aid us become more committed to its movement. At the end, we hope to have convinced you, dear readers, of the significance of the SDC in grounding doctrinally *PnP*.

To be able to attain that objective, we plan to answer four questions: First: How do we see the reality of poverty around us? Second: How may the Social Doctrine of the Church help us understand better *Pondo ng Pinoy*? Third: How does the SDC urge us to share twenty-five centavos daily, or more, with the poor? And, fourth: What to do now?

I. FACING THE POVERTY AROUND US

How do we face the reality of poverty in our world and around us? We are all aware that poverty is the greatest social problem in the world and also in the Philippines. At present, there are one billion people who are poor, which is one-sixth of the world's population. Millions of our brothers and sisters throughout the world die of hunger every year; millions more are malnourished. In the Philippines, nearly twenty-eight million people are poor, about thirty-one per cent of the population. We all see in our streets the many faces of the poor.

On the first day of the Third Millennium, Pope John Paul II the Great said: "At the beginning of the Century, the issue that challenges most of our human and Christian consciences is the poverty of countless millions of men and women."¹ The words of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) still ring true unfortunately: "The destitution of millions of Filipinos is an indictment on all of us who call ourselves believers."²

As members of the human family, as *citizens* of the world and of our own country, we cannot be unconcerned – like passive spectators – about the tragic drama of poverty. We are asked by our common human bonds to be concerned, to be involved, and to do something to solve the grave problem of poverty, particularly among our Filipino brothers and sisters.

As *followers of Christ*, we are asked by our faith in Jesus to follow him, to be just to and love our neighbors, particularly the poor and marginalized. We know that without this concrete love for the poor neighbor, we will not be saved.

The Church of Christ, our Mother and Teacher, presents to us a body of powerful doctrine that teaches us to be good citizens and Christians in our world and in our own society. Through her social teachings, the universal Church and our local Church help us understand the intrinsic goodness and the dynamic attraction of *Pondo ng Pinoy*. *PnP* is an excellent instrument for us – as citizens and Christians – to face poverty around us.

II. THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

How may the Social Doctrine of the Church help us understand better Pondo ng Pinoy? PnP is a brainchild of the Manila Archbishop Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, who has developed passionately and compassionately what he calls the “Theology of the Crumbs” (see *Lk* 1:19-31).³ This theology, and spirituality, is a theology of the small – small is indeed beautiful! A good application and example of this theology is the daily donation to the *PnP* Fund of twenty-five centavos only. It is a compelling theory of social action, and as such, it is grounded on the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC).

The SDC is essentially important for all persons of good will and especially for all Christians, including in particular the lay faithful. Pope John Paul II wrote: “It is indispensable that the lay faithful have a more exact knowledge of the Church’s social doctrine.”⁴

In Philippine context, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) underlined the formation of a social conscience, which requires “knowledge and the interiorization of the social teachings of the Church.”⁵

The SDC is part of the ordinary *Magisterium* of the Church and of her evangelizing mission.⁶ In theology, the Social Doctrine of the Church is part of moral theology as the science of Christian praxis.⁷

As human beings, we are social beings: “No man is an island.” We belong to the human family. As Christians, we are children of God, brothers and sisters of one another in Christ, and members of the Church, which is the People of God. Indeed, “the human person is a social being.”⁸ Therefore, to be a good human being and a good Christian, we ought to be good social human beings.

How to be a good social human being? The Social Doctrine of the Church shows us the path to be and become more a good social human being. The SDC represents the teaching of the Church on social life, structures and relationships. Through her social doctrine, the Church does not offer technical solutions to the problems of society, nor an economic system. She is not a political party either. Vatican II says:

Christ, to be sure, gave his Church no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose that He set before her is a religious one. But out of this religious mission itself comes a function, a light, and an energy that can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law."¹⁰

The SDC is a dynamic body of doctrine on social, political, economic and cultural life. Although there are basic social teachings in the Bible and in theology, the official Social Doctrine of the Church began formally in 1891 with the first social encyclical, namely *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII. Thereafter, all the Popes issued significant social teachings within different contexts. I wish to mention here the following encyclicals: *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) of Pius IX, *Pacem in Terris* (1962) of John XXIII, *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II, *Populorum Progressio* (1967) of Paul VI, *Justice in the World* of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Centesimus Annus* (1981) of John Paul II, and *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) of Benedict XVI.¹¹

The Christian social vision articulated by the SDC is formulated in principles of reflection, criteria for judgment and guidelines for action. The *principles of reflection* underline the ethical principles of the dignity of the human person, the common good, justice, love, subsidiarity and the universal destination of the goods of the earth. Among the *criteria for judgment*, the SDC highlights the principle of the preferential love for the poor. Concerning the *guidelines for action*, the social *Magisterium* of the Church promotes peaceful means towards the solutions of social problems and conflicts.¹²

Rooted in Sacred Scriptures and Christian Tradition – including the social teachings of the Fathers of the Church and great theologians, above all, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas – the doctrinal building of the Social Doctrine of the Church is constructed upon four columns, namely, *truth, freedom, justice and love*.¹³

Another essential column that I believe should be added to the four mentioned above is life – *human life*, above all. The Christian is asked by his humanity and his faith to defend a culture of life against a culture of death by proclaiming, celebrating and serving human life, which ought to be defended from the moment of conception to natural death.¹⁴

Among the classical four columns, or social values, of the SDC, two are given pre-eminence, namely, justice and love. To these two, we add today life. As John Paul II said in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the social teaching of the church is a guide to life and a commitment to justice and solidarity.¹⁵

Although justice and love are deeply connected in Sacred Scriptures and in the teaching of the Church, to the point that we can only speak of justice/love, the supreme principle of Christian morality is love, that is, love of God and love of neighbor: “Charity is the greatest social commandment.” As Vatican II affirms in social ethics, love of neighbor as fraternal love is deeply underlined: “Every one must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary to living it with dignity.”¹⁶ The value and virtue most needed to practice *Pondo ng Pinoy* is love of neighbor, particularly the poor neighbor. Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales writes: “No one is allowed to give even just 25 centavos if it is not out of love.”¹⁷ Giving 25 centavos daily – or 5, 10, 100 Pesos or more – is an act of love of neighbor, an act that implies justice and goes beyond it. Being unjust and giving alms to the poor cannot be a true act of love. Giving gifts and not a just salary to laborers is not true love, but, perhaps, a cover-up of injustice.

Indeed, *there can be no true love without justice*. Charity without justice is a caricature of justice – false charity! Justice is mini-charity and authentic charity is “just” charity plus love of neighbor. In the SDC, love of neighbor as fraternal love, as solidarity with the poor, as compassion is deeply underlined: “Every one must consider his every neighbor as another self.”¹⁸

On the other hand, *there can be no perfect justice without love*. Justice in itself is a cold, imperfect and impersonal value; its language is “mine,” “yours,” while the language of love is “ours.” Still justice is a very necessary value and virtue. Our authorities ought to give all citizens justice understood not just as giving to each person his/her due, but, more radically, as giving to each one his/her rights. We all have to be just, and also charitable.

Perfect justice needs love, which means to give to others of what is, in some way only, “mine.” (God is the owner of everything; we are only stewards!) Pope Benedict XVI writes: “There will always be the service of love;” “Love – *caritas* – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society;” there will always be people who suffer, who are lonely and only charity can give “loving personal concern.” As John Paul II said, “The soul of justice is charity.”¹⁹

Justice needs love to be perfect justice, and love cannot exist without justice. In the teachings of the Sacred Scriptures as well as in Christian tradition, justice and love are intertwined. Hence we speak not of justice alone, nor of love alone, but of justice/love.

The justice of the follower of Christ is, then, a charitable justice or a fraternal justice. It is, Jesus tells us, the justice of the Father of the Prodigal Son, and not of the elder son (cf. *Lk* 15:11-32); it is the justice of the owner who needs laborers in his vineyard and pays the same salary to all, including the workers who went last, and not the justice of the laborers who went to work first (cf. *Mt* 20:1-16). The justice of Jesus Christ is the justice of his Father – and ours – who is just with a justice permeated by love, compassion and generosity.²⁰

For classical theology, particularly for Saint Thomas Aquinas, love (or charity as love of neighbor) is the social virtue, and all the other virtues, including justice, are mediations of love, which is the form of all virtues.

By being a member of *Pondo ng Pinoy* movement, we become servants of Christ and, in the words of Benedict XVI, “instruments only of the Lord’s hands,” for after all, “it is God who governs the world, not we.”²¹ In the second part of his first encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI speaks beautifully and powerfully of the charitable activities of the Church – and all her members. *PnP* is a wonderful charitable activity of the local Church. The money we give to *PnP* is not just a dole out, but also a needed contribution to help the poor gain their due dignity – a decent shelter, food and clothing, quality education for their children, and employment.

III. PREFERENTIAL LOVE FOR THE POOR

How does the Social Doctrine of the Church urge us to share 25 centavos daily with the poor? As Christians, we have to be just to all and to love all persons, but in the first place, the needy, and the poor. The Christians' priority in their practice of charitable justice is the poor. Our faith speaks, particularly after Vatican II, of the so-called preferential option or love for the poor.

Why are we obliged to share something – or much – with the poor around us? Because God created the earth for all, including the poor, who are also entitled to their share in the goods of the earth; because we are stewards of God's creation and therefore obliged to share what truly belongs to God with the poor around us; because, as followers of Christ, we have to see him and serve him in the poor, and because at the end of our life, we shall be examined on love, particularly on love of the needy and the poor.

God is the Creator and the true owner of all things. A text from Vatican II:

God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people. Thus, as all men follow justice and unite in charity, created goods should abound for them on a reasonable basis. ...Attention must always be paid to the universal purpose for which created goods are meant. In using them, therefore, a man should regard his lawful possessions not merely as his own but also as common property in the sense that they should accrue to the benefit of not only himself but of others...The right to have a share of earthly goods for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone.²²

The teaching on the universal destination of the goods of the earth is grounded on the Sacred Scriptures, where we clearly see that God is preferentially on the side of the poor, the downtrodden and the outcasts.²³ At the end, Jesus taught us, we will be examined on our love for the poor and needy (see *Mt 25: 31-46.*)

Siding with the poor does not imply side-lining the rich. True love of neighbor is not selective. We – including the rich – all have to love all, preferentially the poor.

The poor are the economically and socially deprived. They are,

according to John Paul II, “the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better future.” PCP II includes among the poor and marginalized the following: The rural and urban poor, tribal Filipinos, street children, farmers, fishermen, women and the disabled and others.²⁴

We are asked by our Christian faith to share something with the poor not only out of charity (almsgiving), but – more radically – out of justice: something of what we have belongs to the poor. Following the Fathers of the Church and theologians like Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Church speaks of the right of the poor: the right of the poor to their share in the goods of the earth!

When the poor do not have their due share, what can they do? They are entitled to take it in case of need. Saint Thomas Aquinas writes, “in case of need, everything is in common.” Vatican II states: “If a person is in extreme necessity, he has the right to take from the riches of others what he himself needs.”²⁵ This apparently radical teaching that belongs to Christian Tradition was well formulated by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

The Seventh Commandment forbids *theft*, which is, usurping another’s property against the reasonable will of the owner. There is no theft if consent can be presumed or if refusal is contrary to reason and the universal destination of goods. This is the case in obvious and urgent necessity when the only way to provide for immediate, essential needs (food, shelter, clothing...) is to put at one’s disposal and use the property of others.²⁶

Hence, the preferential love (or option) for the poor is not an option among others, but deeply connected with the fundamental option for Christ. It is not optional but a grave obligation of justice/love. It implies for all, *a simple lifestyle*. Indeed, in the midst of crippling poverty, the wasteful lifestyle of some cries to heaven. Christians in particular are asked “to live simply so that others might simply live,” as the Canadian Bishops aptly said (cf. *Lk* 12:22-34; *Jn* 5:1-5). Certainly, excessive spending and squandering are sins.²⁷ Words to ponder: “No one has the right to live like the rich man when Lazarus is at the gate (W. Barclay); “No one can be poor in spirit while living like the rich man” (J. L. Martin Descalzo).

I remember the words of Paul VI in his outstanding social encyclical *Populorum Progressio*:

When so many people are hungry, when so many families suffer from destitution, when so many remain steeped in ignorance, when so many schools, hospitals, and homes worthy of the name remain to be built, all public or private squandering of wealth, all expenditures prompted by motives of national or personal ostentation, every exhausting armaments race, becomes an intolerable scandal.²⁸

Let us not forget the strong, realistic words of the Synod of Bishops '71 to us who live in a developing country: "Our examination of conscience now comes to the lifestyle of all: bishops, priests, religious and lay people. In the case of needy peoples, it must be asked whether belonging to the Church places people on a rich island within the ambience of poverty."²⁹

We said earlier: there can be no true love without justice; there can be no perfect justice without love. We add now: *there is no true prayer without justice/love*. The great prophets in the Old Testament proclaimed that worship without justice is not true worship (see *Ho* 6:6; *Mt* 9:13). The Prophet Jesus of Nazareth continues teaching us that prayer without justice/love is not saving: "I was hungry and you gave me food... What you did to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me" (cf. *Mt* chapter 25).

The *Holy Eucharist* is the center of our Christian life, not merely celebration but also commitment to the poor and needy: The Eucharist is a call to charity, compassion and solidarity with the poor: "If you want to honor the body of Christ, do not despise him when He is naked" (St. John Chrysostom). As the International Eucharistic Congress in Guadalajara, Mexico (October 2004) put it: "Share one's table and Mass with the poor, in the service of charity. Combine spiritual commitment with the needs of the poor."

Our Philippine Church is a deeply praying community. It appears that at times our prayer is not lived in action – in social action. In one of the petitions of the *Our Father*, we ask our Father: "Give us this day our daily bread." Our daily bread is the Bread of the Eucharist, but also the bread needed by our bodies (mine, yours and the bodies of the poor). "The petition of the Lord's Prayer cannot be isolated from the parables of the poor Lazarus and that of the Last Judgment." The *Catechism for Filipino*

Catholics comments: “Bread is human only when it is shared and supports communion with others. This bread calls for a collective conversion that responds to the scandalous hunger and starvation so widespread, and so unnecessary, in the world today, and even in our own Philippines.”³⁰

At the end, we shall be examined on our love – or lack of it – for the poor. Jesus’ Parable of the Last Judgment urges us to do good deeds for the poor, to share something with them. Our own salvation will be decided by the way we treat the poor around us. Jesus says:

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, “Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the Kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me (Mt 25:34-37, see Mt 25:41-43).

Jesus is truly present in the poor and we are asked to see him in the poor. He is present in the poor and in those who are close to the poor. We remember the words of Bossuet: “The poor are the citizens of heaven; all the others, all of us may obtain this nationality only if we truly honor the poor and live for them.”

In this context, *Pondo ng Pinoy* is a God-sent grace to us as a simple, easy and attractive opportunity to fulfill in a constant way our grave obligation to share something of what we have with the poor. In giving twenty-five centavos of a peso daily (or more), we fulfill our obligation; we make an act of justice/love to the poor; we imitate Jesus who taught us to be like God on the side of the poor and the little ones; we may be saved!

Another positive point of *PnP* is this: all of us can participate, including the poor. It is an exemplary path to become what PCP II envisioned: a community of disciples and a Church of the poor, “where no one is so poor as to have nothing to give, and no one is so rich as to have nothing to receive.”³¹

IV. ACTION, PLEASE!

Our fourth and final question is: *What to do now?* We began our reflection by facing the terrible poverty around us, to conclude: as citizens and as Christians, we have to do something to help solve the tragic social problem of forced poverty. One exemplary way to help is by participating in the hopeful movement *Pondo ng Pinoy*.

We continued our thoughts by describing the Social Doctrine of the Church, to realize that indeed the SDC does help us understand better the *PnP* movement, particularly by pointing out that justice/love is its core content, and that we have to practice charitable or fraternal justice with all, principally with the poor. Hence, the SDC grounds firmly our commitment to *PnP*.

In the third part of our study, we were hopefully convinced that the priority of justice/love is the love of and commitment to the poor around us. We were encouraged, urged to love the poor around us with just and loving good deeds. Again, we saw that *Pondo ng Pinoy* is a simple, practical, personal and communitarian instrument to practice the preferential love for the poor around us. We are invited to continue or start participating in the charity-pilgrimage of *PnP*. This wonderful pilgrimage to deeper conversion to God, neighbor and the poor has already produced incredible results.

PnP, a project of the Archdiocese of Manila in partnership with 14 dioceses had collected by the end of 2008 over one hundred and sixty million Pesos – 160M. So far, it has funded more than one hundred projects for the poor, including livelihood projects, health care, education and micro-lending to the poor. The two biggest projects are: the *Hapag-Asa* Project and *SHEC* (St. Hannibal Empowering Center) Housing Project. *Hapag-Asa* is a six-month feeding program for severely malnourished children 1-7 years old; it has helped already more than 60,000 recipients. The *SHEC* Housing Project for Malibay slum-dwellers is the other star project of *Pondo ng Pinoy*: In January 2009, Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales turned over 294 houses.³²

The goal of the Social Doctrine of the Church is – like the goal of the teaching mission of the Church – conversion, or change, which

is personal and social integral liberation, final salvation.³³ By defending human dignity and rights, by promoting the social values of justice and love, by urging the practice of the preferential love for the poor, the SDC contributes to the transformation of persons and structures, to positive social praxis.

The Social Doctrine of the Church entails orthodoxy, or correct teaching, and primarily orthopraxy, or correct social action. Orthopraxis is, above all, the practice of justice/love towards the poorest: the Parable of the Last Judgment (*Mt 25:35-37*) is not a simple invitation to practice the works of charity. “It is a page of Christology that sheds a ray of light on the ministry of Christ; by these words no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity as the Bride of Christ.”³³ One may conclude that a Christian may be a heretic not only when denying a truth of faith but also when not practicing the preferential love for the poor.

The main problem of the Social Doctrine of the Church is not doctrinal but practical – meaning insufficient social praxis. We know what we have to do, but at times we do not do it! We need to be witnesses more than teachers. Who does not remember the often-quoted words of Pope Paul VI? “Modern man listens more to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”³⁴

When all is said and done – in ethics, particularly in social ethics, what matters most is love, the main principle and virtue of the Social Doctrine of the Church – and of life! In our context – and in all contexts – what is needed most is love of the poorest, who are “the most threatened species of the earth” (L. Boff).

Facing the forced poverty of many peoples and nations in a world that has enough for all to live a decent life, the Lord questions every Christian: “*What are you doing for the poor around you?*” The greatness of *Pondo ng Pinoy* is this: it gives us a great opportunity to answer that unavoidable question. I commit myself to give at least twenty-five centavos of a peso every day: I know that my contribution will help partly solve some of the needs of the poor around me. We remember the Lord’s consoling words: “What you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me” (see *Mt 25:31-46*).

We all remember March 12, 2000, the Day of Pardon, when Pope John Paul II asked for forgiveness for the past and present sins of Christians. One of the specific sins he mentioned was: "Lord, forgive us for not listening to the cry of the poor." *We are sorry, Lord, and because we are truly sorry – with your divine grace – we amend our ways and start or continue sharing something with the poor.* The poor around us are waiting for our daily twenty-five centavos. Our donation is not merely a material donation, but also a sharing, an act of communion with the poor, in imitation of Christ, Mary and the saints.

Let me close with the ever challenging words of the Saint Basil, bishop and monk:

He who takes the clothes from a man is a thief. He who does not clothe the indigent, when he can, does he deserve another name but thief? The bread that you keep belongs to the hungry; to the naked, the coat that you hide in your closet; to the shoeless, the shoes that are dusty at your home; to the needy, the silver that you hide, In brief, you offend all those who can be helped by you. ■

NOTES:

- ¹ *Message for the World Day of Peace: January 1, 2000*; see Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, GS, no. 43; Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, OA, no. 48.
- ² CBCP, *Ang Mahal na Birhen*, 1975, no. 96.
- ³ Gaudencio B. Rosales, D. D., "Spirituality of the 'Crumbs'," *Boletin Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, Vol. LXXXII, No. 853 (March-April 2006), pp. 201-208.
- ⁴ *Chritifideles Laici*, 60; see also his *Ecclesia in Asia*, 32.
- ⁵ PCP II, *Acts and Decrees* (Manila: CBCP, 1992), no. 289.
- ⁶ See Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, LG, 25; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, CA, 54.
- ⁷ See John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, MM, 22, and *Pacem in Terris*, PT, 32-38; John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, SRS, 41.
- ⁸ GS, 12; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC, 1879.
- ⁹ GS, 42.
- ¹⁰ For a complete list of the main social documents of the Church, you may see Fausto B. Gómez, O. P., "The Social Doctrine of the Church: Nature and Development," in his book *A Pilgrim's Notes: Ethics, Social Ethics, Bioethics* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2005), pp. 42-61.

- ¹¹ See Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004). This is an excellent systematic treatise of the social teachings of the Church
- ¹² See John XXIII, *PT*, 35; Vatican II, *GS*, 26.
- ¹³ The outstanding encyclical on the defense and promotion of human life is John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, *EV*.
- ¹⁴ *SRS*, no. 41. See also *GS*, 76; John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 14; *PCP II*, no. 80,
- ¹⁵ *GS*, 27; *CCC*, 1889.
- ¹⁶ Gaudencio B. Rosales, D. D., "Spirituality of the Crumbs," *l.c.* p, 212.
- ¹⁷ Vatican II, *GS*, 27.
- ¹⁸ *Address*, March 31, 1999; Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, *DCE*, 2005, no. 28, b.
- ¹⁹ See Fausto B. Gómez, O. P., "Some Notes on Biblical Teachings on Justice," *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. XLI, No. 121 (January-April 2006), pp. 47-80.
- ²⁰ *DCS*, no. 35.
- ²¹ *GS*, 69; see *PCP II*, no. 297.
- ²² John Paul II, *CA*, 30-43; *PCP II*, 297-310.
- ²³ *SRS*, 42; see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 182; *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, *CFC*, no. 186; *PCP II*, nos. 312 and 375.
- ²⁴ Vatican II, *GS*, 69; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 66, 7.
- ²⁵ *CCC*, 2408.
- ²⁶ *CCC*, 2409.
- ²⁷ *Populorum Progressio*, *PP*, 53.
- ²⁸ *Justice in the World*, no. 48; see John XXIII, *MM*, nos. 161 and 168; Paul VI, *PP*, no. 49, and *OA*, 48.
- ²⁹ *CFC*, no. 2170; *CCC*, 2831.
- ³⁰ *PCP II*, *Message of the Council, o.c.*, pp. XCVI-XCVII
- ³¹ The source of this information comes from Henrietta T. de Villa, Chairperson, PnP Promotion (January 15, 2009) and form *Halina*, *SALI TAYO*, 4th Anniversary Issue (June 2008), pp. 1-12.
- ³² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *EN*, nos. 10, 18, 19.
- ³³ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, *NMI* (January 6, 2001), no. 49.
- ³⁴ Paul VI, *EN*, 41; see John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, *RM*, no. 42, and *Ecclesia in Asia*, 42.

DOCUMENTATION

The Heart of God Burns with Compassion

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER
ON THE OPENING OF THE YEAR FOR PRIESTS
ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH
OF SAINT JOHN MARY VIANNEY

*Saint Peter's Basilica
Friday, 19 June 2009*

HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In a little while we shall sing in the antiphon to the *Magnificat*: “The Lord has drawn us to his heart — *Suscepit nos Dominus in sinum et cor suum*”. God’s heart, as the expression of his will, is spoken of twenty-six times in the Old Testament. Before God’s heart men and women stand judged. His heartfelt pain at sins of mankind makes God decide on the

flood, but then he is touched by the sight of human weakness and offers his forgiveness. Yet another passage of the Old Testament speaks of God's heart with absolute clarity: it is in the eleventh chapter of the book of the Prophet Hosea, whose opening lines portray the Lord's love for Israel at the dawn of its history: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1). Israel, however, responds to God's constant offer of love with indifference and even outright ingratitude. "The more I called them", the Lord is forced to admit, "the more they went from me" (v. 2). Even so, he never abandons Israel to the power of its enemies, because "my heart" — the the Creator of the universe observes — "recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (v. 8).

The heart of God burns with compassion! On today's solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus the Church presents us this mystery for our contemplation: the mystery of the heart of a God who feels compassion and who bestows all his love upon humanity. A mysterious love, which in the texts of the New Testament is revealed to us as God's boundless and passionate love for mankind. God does not lose heart in the face of ingratitude or rejection by the people he has chosen; rather, with infinite mercy he sends his only-begotten Son into the world to take upon himself the fate of a shattered love, so that by defeating the power of evil and death he could restore to human beings enslaved by sin their dignity as sons and daughters. But this took place at great cost — the only-begotten Son of the Father was sacrificed on the Cross: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (cf. Jn 13:1). The symbol of this love which transcends death is his side, pierced by a spear. The Apostle John, an eyewitness, tells us: "one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (cf. Jn 19:34).

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for responding to my invitation and coming in great numbers to this celebration with which we inaugurate the Year for Priests. I greet the Cardinals and Bishops, in particular the Cardinal Prefect and the Secretary of the Congregation for the Clergy, together with the officials of that Congregation and the Bishop of Ars. I greet the priests and seminarians from the various seminaries and colleges in Rome; the men and women religious and all the lay faithful present. In a special way I greet His Beatitude Ignace Youssef Younan, the Patriarch of Antioch of the Syrians, who has come to Rome to meet

me and to recognize publicly the “*ecclesiastica communio*” which I have granted him.

Together let us pause to contemplate the pierced heart of the Crucified One. Just now we heard once again, in the brief reading from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, that “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4-6). To be “in” Jesus Christ is already to be seated in heaven. The very core of Christianity is expressed in the heart of Jesus; in Christ the revolutionary “newness” of the Gospel is completely revealed and given to us: the Love that saves us and even now makes us live in the eternity of God. As the Evangelist John writes: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). God’s heart calls to our hearts, inviting us to come out of ourselves, to forsake our human certainties, to trust in him and, by following his example, to make ourselves a gift of unbounded love.

While it is true that Jesus’ invitation to “abide in my love” (cf. Jn 15:9) is addressed to all the baptized, on this feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the day of prayer for the sanctification of priests, this invitation resounds all the more powerfully for us priests. It does so in a special way this evening, at the solemn inauguration of the Year for Priests which I have proclaimed to mark the 150th anniversary of the death of the saintly Curé of Ars. A lovely and touching saying of his, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, comes immediately to mind: “the priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus” (n. 1589). How can we fail to be moved when we recall that the gift of our priestly ministry flows directly from this heart? How can we forget that we priests were consecrated to serve, humbly yet authoritatively, the common priesthood of the faithful? Ours is a mission which is indispensable for the Church and for the world, a mission which calls for complete fidelity to Christ and constant union with him. To abide in his love entails constantly striving for holiness, as did Saint John Mary Vianney.

In the Letter which I wrote to you for this special Jubilee Year, dear brother priests, I wished to highlight some essential aspects of our ministry by making reference to the example and teaching of the Curé

of Ars, the model and protector of all priests, especially parish priests. I hope that my Letter will prove a help and encouragement to you in making this Year a graced opportunity to grow ever closer to Jesus, who counts on us, his ministers, to spread and build up his Kingdom, and to radiate his love and his truth. As I invited you at the conclusion of my Letter: “in the footsteps of the Curé of Ars, let yourselves be enthralled by Christ. In this way you too will be, for the world in our time, heralds of hope, reconciliation and peace!”.

To be completely enthralled by Christ! This was the goal of the entire life of Saint Paul, to whom we looked throughout the Pauline Year now ending; this was the goal of the entire ministry of the Curé of Ars, whom we shall invoke in particular during this Year for Priests; may it also be the primary goal for each and every one of us. Certainly, to be ministers at the service of the Gospel, study and careful, ongoing pastoral and theological formation are useful and necessary, but even more necessary is that “knowledge of love” which can only be learned in a “heart to heart” encounter with Christ. For it is he who calls us to break the bread of his love, to forgive sins and to guide the flock in his name. And for that reason we must never step back from the source of love which is his heart, pierced on the Cross.

Only in this way can we cooperate effectively in the mysterious “plan of the Father” which consists in “making Christ the heart of the world”! This plan is accomplished in history as Jesus gradually becomes the Heart of human hearts, beginning with those called to be closest to him: namely his priests. We are reminded of this constant commitment by the “priestly promises” that we made on the day of our ordination and which we renew yearly on Holy Thursday during the Chrism Mass. Even our shortcomings, our limitations and our weaknesses ought to bring us back to the heart of Jesus. If it is true that by contemplating Christ sinners learn from him the “sorrow for sins” needed to bring them back to the Father, this is even more the case for sacred ministers. How can we forget, in this regard, that nothing causes more suffering for the Church, the Body of Christ, than the sins of her pastors, especially the sins of those who become “thieves and robbers” of the sheep (cf. Jn 10:1 ff.), lead them astray by their own private teachings, or ensnare them in the toils of sin and death? Dear priests, the summons to conversion and to trust in God’s mercy also

applies to us; we too must humbly, sincerely and unceasingly implore the heart of Jesus to preserve us from the terrifying risk of endangering the very people we are obliged to save.

A few moments ago, in the Choir Chapel, I was able to venerate the relic of the saintly Curé of Ars: his heart. A heart that blazed with divine love, experienced amazement at the thought of the dignity of the priest, and spoke to the faithful in touching and sublime tones, telling them that “after God, the priest is everything! ... Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is” (cf. *Letter for the Year for Priests*, p. 3). Dear brothers, let us cultivate this same amazement, in order to carry out our ministry with generosity and dedication, and to maintain the true “fear of God” in our hearts: the fear, that is, that we can deprive of so much good, by our negligence or fault, the souls entrusted to our care, or that — God forbid — we can do them harm. The Church needs holy priests; ministers capable of helping the faithful to experience the Lord’s merciful love, and convinced witnesses of that love. In the Eucharistic Adoration which is to follow our celebration of Vespers, let us ask the Lord to set the heart of every priest afire with that “pastoral charity” which can make him one in heart and mind with Jesus the High Priest, and thus to imitate Jesus in complete self-giving. May the Virgin Mary, whose Immaculate Heart we shall contemplate with lively faith tomorrow, obtain this grace for us. The Curé of Ars had a filial devotion to Mary, a devotion so profound that in 1836, in anticipation of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, he dedicated his parish to Mary “conceived without sin”. He frequently renewed this offering of the parish to the Blessed Virgin, teaching his parishioners that “to be heard it is enough to speak to her”, for the simple reason that she “desires above all else to see us happy”. May the Blessed Virgin, our Mother, accompany us during the Year for Priests which we begin today, so that we can be wise and steady guides of the flock which the Lord has entrusted to our pastoral care. Amen! ■

SOURCE:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090619_anno-sac_en.html





The Priest is a Servant of Christ

GENERAL AUDIENCE WITH THE POPE
ON THE YEAR FOR PRIESTS

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 24 June 2009

HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Friday, 19 June, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a Day traditionally dedicated to prayer for the sanctification of priests, I had the joy of inaugurating the Year for Priests which I established on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the “birth in Heaven” of the Curé d’Ars, St John Baptist Mary Vianney. And on entering the Vatican Basilica for the celebration of Vespers, first by way of a symbolic gesture I paused in the Chapel of the Choir to venerate the relic of this holy pastor of souls: his heart. Why a Year for Priests? Why precisely in memory of the Holy Curé d’Ars who did not, apparently, achieve anything extraordinary?

Divine Providence has ensured that his figure be juxtaposed with that of St Paul. Indeed, while the Pauline Year, dedicated to the Apostle to the Gentiles an extraordinary evangelizer who made several missionary voyages in order to spread the Gospel is drawing to a close, this new Jubilee Year invites us to look at a poor peasant who became a humble parish priest and carried out his pastoral service in a small village. If the two saints differ widely because of the paths through life that characterized them one went from one region to the next to proclaim the Gospel, the other welcomed thousands and thousands of the faithful while remaining in his own tiny parish some basic factor binds them together nevertheless; and it is their total identification with their own ministry, their communion with Christ, which made St Paul say “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2: 20). And St John Mary Vianney used to like to repeat: “if we had faith, we would see God hidden in the priest like a light behind glass or like wine mixed with water”. The purpose of this Year for Priests, as I wrote in my Letter addressed to priests for this occasion, is therefore to encourage every priest in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends, and first and foremost to help priests and with them the entire People of God to rediscover and to reinforce their knowledge of the extraordinary, indispensable gift of Grace which the ordained minister represents for those who have received it, for the whole Church and for the world which would be lost without the Real Presence of Christ.

There is no doubt that the historical and social conditions in which the Curé d’Ars lived have changed and it is right to wonder how priests in today’s globalized societies can imitate him by identifying with him in their own ministries. In a world in which the common vision of life includes less and less of the sacred, instead of which “functionality” becomes the only crucial element, the Catholic concept of the priesthood might risk losing its natural esteem, at times even within the ecclesial conscience. Two different conceptions of the priesthood are frequently compared and at times even set against one another, in theological milieus as well as in actual pastoral practice and the formation of the clergy. In this regard I pointed out several years ago that there is: “on the one hand a social and functional concept that defines the essence of the priesthood with the concept of “service’: service to the community in the fulfillment of a function....

Moreover, there is the sacramental-ontological concept, which of course does not deny the priesthood's character of service but sees it anchored to the minister's existence and claims that this existence is determined by a gift granted by the Lord through the mediation of the Church, whose name is sacrament" (J. Ratzinger, *Ministero e vita del Sacerdote*, in *Elementi di Teologia fondamentale. Saggio su fede e ministero*, Brescia 2005, p. 165). The terminological shifting of the word "priesthood" to "service, ministry, assignment", is also a sign of this different conception. The primacy of the Eucharist, moreover, is linked to the former, the ontological-sacramental conception, in the dual term: "priesthood-sacrifice", whereas the primacy of the word and of the service of proclamation is held to correspond with the latter.

Clearly these two concepts are not contradictory and the tension which nevertheless exists between them may be resolved from within. Thus the Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, says: "For, through the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel, the People of God is called together and assembled so that when all who belong to this People have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, they can offer themselves as 'a sacrifice, living, holy, pleasing to God' (Rm 12: 1). Through the ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ, the sole Mediator. Through the hands of priests and in the name of the whole Church, the Lord's sacrifice is offered in the Eucharist in an unbloody and sacramental manner until he himself returns" (n. 2).

Then let us ask ourselves: "What precisely does 'to evangelize' mean for priests? What does the 'primacy' of proclamation consist in?". Jesus speaks of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God as the true purpose of his coming into the world and his proclamation is not only a "discourse". At the same time it includes his action: the signs and miracles that he works show that the Kingdom comes into the world as a present reality which ultimately coincides with Jesus himself. In this sense it is only right to recall that even in the primacy of proclamation, the word and the sign are indivisible. Christian preaching does not proclaim "words", but the Word, and the proclamation coincides with the very Person of Christ, ontologically open to the relationship with the Father and obedient to his will. Thus, an authentic service to the Word requires of the priest

that he strive for deeper self-denial, to the point that he can say, with the Apostle, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me". The priest cannot consider himself "master" of the Word, but its servant. He is not the Word but, as John the Baptist, whose birth we are celebrating precisely today, proclaimed, he is the "voice" of the Word: "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mk 1: 3).

For the priest, then, being the "voice" of the Word is not merely a functional aspect. On the contrary, it implies a substantial "losing of himself" in Christ, participating with his whole being in the mystery of Christ's death and Resurrection: his understanding, his freedom, his will and the offering of his body as a living sacrifice (cf. Rm 12: 1-2). Only participation in Christ's sacrifice, in his kenosis, makes preaching authentic! And this is the way he must take with Christ to reach the point of being able to say to the Father, together with Christ: let "not what I will, but what you will" be done (Mk 14: 36). Proclamation, therefore, always involves self-sacrifice, a prerequisite for its authenticity and efficacy.

As an *alter Christus*, the priest is profoundly united to the Word of the Father who, in becoming incarnate took the form of a servant, he became a servant (Phil 2: 5-11). The priest is a servant of Christ, in the sense that his existence, configured to Christ ontologically, acquires an essentially relational character: he is *in* Christ, *for* Christ and *with* Christ, at the service of humankind. Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation, their happiness and their authentic liberation, developing, in this gradual assumption of Christ's will, in prayer, in "being heart to heart" with him. Therefore this is the indispensable condition for every proclamation, which entails participation in the sacramental offering of the Eucharist and docile obedience to the Church.

The saintly Curé d'Ars would often say with tears in his eyes: "How dreadful it is to be a priest!". And he would add: "How a priest who celebrates Mass like an ordinary event is to be pitied! How unfortunate is a priest with no inner life!". May the Year for Priests lead all priests to identify totally with the Crucified and Risen Jesus so that, in imitation of St John the Baptist, they may be prepared to "shrink" that Christ may grow

and that, in following the example of the Curé d'Ars, they feel constantly and profoundly the responsibility of their mission, which is the sign and presence of God's infinite mercy. Let us entrust to Our Lady, Mother of the Church, the Year for Priests which has just begun and all the priests of the world.

TO SPECIAL GROUPS

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Norway, Sweden, Malawi, South Africa, Indonesia and the United States. My particular greeting goes to the Catholic educators participating in the annual Rome Seminar sponsored by the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas. I also greet the many student groups present. Upon all of you I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the sick and the *newlyweds*. Today we are celebrating the Feast of the birth of St John the Baptist, sent by God to bear witness to the light and to prepare a people well disposed to the Lord. I hope that you, dear *young people*, may find in friendship with Jesus the necessary strength always to be equal to the responsibilities that await you. I urge you, dear sick people, to consider your suffering and daily trials as an opportunity that God offers you to cooperate in the salvation of souls. And I ask you, dear *newlyweds*, to express the Lord's love in reciprocal faithfulness and in generous openness to life.

I now address a cordial welcome to the Delegation led by the Undersecretary of the United Nations Organization and Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict. In expressing to you and to those who accompany you my deep appreciation of your work in defense of children, the victims of violence and weapons, I am thinking of all the world's children, especially those exposed to fear, neglect, hunger, abuse, illness and death. The Pope is close to all these small victims and always remembers them in his prayers.

On 24 June 150 years ago the idea was conceived of a far-reaching mobilization in aid of war victims, which was subsequently to acquire the name of the "Red Cross". As the years have passed, the values of

universality, neutrality and independence in service have inspired the adherence of millions of volunteers in every part of the world, forming an important bulwark of humanity and solidarity in numerous contexts of war and conflict, as well as in many emergencies. In expressing the hope that the human person, in his dignity and in all his dimensions may always be the centre of the humanitarian work of the Red Cross, I encourage young people especially to undertake practical work in this praiseworthy institution.

I make the most of this opportunity to request the release of all those who have been kidnapped in war zones and ask once again for the liberation of Eugenio Vagni, a Red Cross worker in the Philippines. ■

SOURCE:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20090624_en.html



LETTER FROM THE PREFECT
OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY
ON THE YEAR FOR PRIESTS

CLÁUDIO CARDINAL HUMMES
ARCHBISHOP EMERITUS OF SÃO PAULO

Dear Priests,

The Year for Priests, announced by our beloved Pope Benedict XVI to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the death of the saintly Curé of Ars, St. John Mary Vianney, is drawing near. It will be inaugurated by the Holy Father on the 19th June, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests. The announcement of the Year for Priests has been very warmly received, especially amongst priests themselves. Everyone wants to commit themselves with determination, sincerity and fervour so that it may be a year amply celebrated in the whole world – in the Dioceses, parishes and in every local community – with the warm participation of our Catholic people who undoubtedly love their priests and want to see them happy, holy and joyous in their daily apostolic labours.

It must be a year that is both positive and forward looking in which the Church says to her priests above all, but also to all the Faithful and to wider society by means of the mass media, that she is proud of her priests, loves them, honours them, admires them and that she recognises with gratitude their pastoral work and the witness of their life. Truthfully priests are important not only for what they do but also for who they are. Sadly, it is true that at the present time some priests have been shown to have been involved in gravely problematic and unfortunate situations. It is necessary to investigate these matters, pursue judicial processes and impose penalties accordingly. However, it is also important to keep in mind that these pertain to a very small portion of the clergy. 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 fulfilment 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.

May this year be an occasion for a period of intense appreciation of the priestly identity, of the theology of the Catholic priesthood, and of the extraordinary meaning of the vocation and mission of priests within the Church and in society. This will require opportunities for study, days of recollection, spiritual exercises reflecting on the Priesthood, conferences and theological seminars in our ecclesiastical faculties, scientific research and respective publications.

The Holy Father, in announcing the Year in his allocution on the 16th March last to the Congregation for the Clergy during its Plenary Assembly, said that with this special year it is intended “to encourage priests in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends”. For this reason it must be, in a very special way, 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. The Eucharist is, in this perspective, at the heart of priestly spirituality. Thus Eucharistic adoration for the sanctification of priests and the spiritual motherhood of religious women, consecrated and lay women towards priests, as previously proposed some time ago by the Congregation for the

Clergy, could be further developed and would certainly bear the fruit of sanctification.

May it also be a year in which the concrete circumstances and the material sustenance of the clergy will be considered, since they live, at times, in situations of great poverty and hardship in many parts of the world.

May it be a year as well of religious and of public celebration which will bring the people – the local Catholic community – to pray, to reflect, to celebrate, and justly to give honour to their priests. In the ecclesial community a celebration is a very cordial event which expresses and nourishes Christian joy, a joy which springs from the certainty that God loves us and celebrates with us. May it therefore be an opportunity to develop the communion and friendship between priests and the communities entrusted to their care.

Many other aspects and initiatives could be mentioned that could enrich the Year for Priests, but here the faithful ingenuity of the local churches is called for. Thus, it would be good for every Dioceses and each parish and local community to establish, at the earliest opportunity, an effective programme for this special year. Clearly it would be important to begin the Year with some notable event. The local Churches are invited on the 19th June next, the same day on which the Holy Father will inaugurate the Year for Priests in Rome, to participate in the opening of the Year, ideally by some particular liturgical act and festivity. Let those who are able most surely come to Rome for the inauguration, to manifest their own participation in this happy initiative of the Pope.

God will undoubtedly bless with great love this undertaking; and the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of the Clergy, will pray for each of you, dear priests. ■

SOURCE:

http://www.annussacerdotalis.org/clerus/dati/2009-05/22-13/The_Year_for_Priests.html



Photo courtesy of the UST Central Seminary



DECREE

Granting Special Indulgence on the Year for Priests

During the Year for Priests established by the Holy Father on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, the gift of special indulgences is granted.

Shortly the day will come on which will be commemorated the 150th anniversary of the pious departure to Heaven of St John Mary Vianney, the Curé d'Ars. This Saint was a wonderful model here on earth of a true Pastor at the service of Christ's flock.

Since his example is used to encourage the faithful, and especially priests, to imitate his virtues, the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI has established that for this occasion a special Year for Priests will be celebrated, from 19 June 2009 to 19 June 2010, in which all priests may be increasingly strengthened in fidelity to Christ with devout meditation, spiritual exercises and other appropriate actions.

This holy period will begin with the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a day of priestly sanctification on which the Supreme Pontiff will celebrate Vespers in the presence of the holy relics of St John Mary Vianney, brought to Rome by the Bishop of Belley-Ars, France.

The Most Holy Father will likewise preside at the conclusion of the Year for Priests in St Peter's Square, in the presence of priests from across the world who will renew their fidelity to Christ and the bond of brotherhood.

May priests commit themselves, with prayer and good works, to obtaining from Christ the Eternal High Priest, the grace to shine with Faith, Hope, Charity and the other virtues, and show by their way of life, but also with their external conduct, that they are dedicated without reserve to the spiritual good of the people, something that the Church has always had at heart.

The gift of Sacred Indulgences which the Apostolic Penitentiary, with this Decree issued in conformity with the wishes of the August Pontiff, graciously grants during the Year for Priests will be of great help in achieving the desired purpose in the best possible way.

A. Truly repentant priests who, on any day, devoutly recite at least morning Lauds or Vespers before the Blessed Sacrament, exposed for public adoration or retained in the tabernacle, and who, after the example of St John Mary Vianney, offer themselves with a ready and generous heart for the celebration of the sacraments, especially Confession, are mercifully granted in God the *Plenary Indulgence*, which they may also apply in suffrage to their deceased brethren, if, in conformity with the current norms, they receive sacramental confession, participate in the Eucharistic banquet and pray for the Supreme Pontiff's intentions.

Furthermore the *Partial Indulgence* is granted to priests, who may likewise apply it to their deceased confreres, every time that they devoutly recite the prayers duly approved so as to lead a holy life and to carry out in a holy manner the offices entrusted to them.

B. The *Plenary Indulgence* is granted to all the faithful who are truly repentant who, in a church or in a chapel, devoutly attend the divine Sacrifice of Mass and offer prayers to Jesus Christ the Eternal High Priest, for the priests of the Church, and any other good work which they have done on that day, so that he may sanctify them and form them in accordance with His Heart, as long as they have made expiation for their sins through sacramental confession and prayed in accordance with the Supreme Pontiff's intentions: on the days in which the Year for Priests begins and ends, on the day of the 150th anniversary of the pious passing of St John Mary Vianney, on the first Thursday of the month or on any other day established by the local Ordinaries for the benefit of the faithful.

It will be most appropriate, in cathedral and parish churches, for the same priests who are in charge of pastoral care to publicly direct these exercises of devotion, to celebrate Holy Mass and to hear the confession of the faithful.

The *Plenary Indulgence* will likewise be granted to the elderly, the sick and all those who for any legitimate reason are confined to their homes who, with a mind detached from any sin and with the intention of fulfilling as soon as possible the three usual conditions, at home or wherever their impediment detains them, provided that on the above-mentioned days they recite prayers for the sanctification of priests and confidently offer the illnesses and hardships of their lives to God through Mary Queen of Apostles.

Lastly, the *Partial Indulgence* is granted to all the faithful every time they devoutly recite five *Our Fathers*, *Hail Marys* and *Glorias*, or another expressly approved prayer, in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to obtain that priests be preserved in purity and holiness of life.

This Decree is valid for the entire duration of the Year for Priests. Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given in Rome, at the Offices of the Apostolic Penitentiary on 25 April, the Feast of St Mark the Evangelist, in the year of the Incarnation of our Lord 2009.

Cardinal James Francis Stafford

Major Penitentiary

+ Gianfranco Girotti, O.F.M. Conv.

Titular Bishop of Meta, Regent

SOURCE:

http://www.annussacerdotalis.org/clerus/dati/2009-06/06-13/Bollettino_en.html



Prayer for the Year for Priests

Lord Jesus,

In Saint John Mary Vianney you have deigned to give the Church a living image of yourself and a personification of your pastoral charity.

Help us during this Year for Priests to live good lives by being close to him and his example.

Grant that we may learn from the saintly Curé of Ars how to rest contentedly before the Holy Eucharist; to know that only your Word enlightens us each day; to know how tender is the love with which you welcome repentant sinners; how consoling is the confident abandonment to the care of the Holy and Immaculate Mother; how necessary is the ever-vigilant battle against Evil.

Grant, O Lord Jesus, that from the example of the holy Curé our young men may once again realise how necessary, humble and glorious is the priestly ministry which you wish to entrust to those who open themselves to your call.

Grant also to our communities – as once your did at Ars – those wonders of grace which you bring about when a priest knows to “make his parish a place of love”.

Grant that our Christian families may find their home to be within the Church – where your ministers may always be found – and that they may enrich the domestic hearth with the beauty of the Church.

Grant that the Charity of our pastors may enliven and enkindle the Charity of all the faithful, so that every vocation and every charism, given by your Holy Spirit, may be welcomed and honoured.

But above all, O Lord Jesus, bestow upon us the ardour and truth of the heart that we may come before your Heavenly Father, making our own the same words that St. John Mary Vianney prayed to Him:

I love You, O my God and my sole desire is to love You until the last breath of my life.

I love You, O infinitely lovable God and I prefer to die loving You than live one instant without loving You.

I love You, O my God, and I do not desire anything but heaven so as to have the joy of loving You perfectly.

I love You, O my God, and I fear hell, because there will not be the sweet consolation of loving You.

O my God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love You, I want my heart to say it in every beat.

Allow me the grace to suffer loving You, to love you suffering and one day to die loving You and feeling that I love You.

And as I approach my end, I beg you to increase and perfect my love of You.

AMEN.

SOURCE:

http://www.annussacerdotalis.org/clerus/dati/2009-06/17-13/preghiera_as_en.html



The Laity Share in the Priesthood of Christ

*General Audience
December 15, 1993*

HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

In the preceding catecheses on the laity we have alluded several times to their service of praising God and to the other duties of worship that are their responsibility. Today we wish to develop this theme more directly, taking as our starting point the texts of the Second Vatican Council, where we read: "The supreme and eternal priest, Christ Jesus, since he wills to continue his witness and service also through the laity, vivifies them in this Spirit and increasingly urges them on to every good and perfect work" (LG 34).

Under this impulse of the Holy Spirit, the laity come to share in the priesthood of Christ, in the form we earlier defined as common to the

whole Church, in which everyone, lay people included, are called to give God spiritual worship. “For besides intimately linking them to his life and his mission, he also gives them a sharing in his priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. For this reason the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them” (LG 34).

We note that the Council does not merely describe the laity as sharing in the “priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ” (LG 31), but specifies that Christ himself continues to exercise his priesthood in their lives. Hence their participation in the common priesthood of the Church occurs through the commission and action of Christ, the one eternal high priest.

Moreover, this priestly action of Christ in the laity takes place through the Holy Spirit. Christ “vivifies them with his Spirit.” This is what Jesus had promised when he stated the principle that the Spirit gives life (cf. Jn 6:63). He who was sent on Pentecost to form the Church has the perennial task of developing Christ’s priesthood and priestly activity in the Church, including the laity, who are fully-fledged members of the *Corpus Christi* by virtue of Baptism. With Baptism, Christ’s presence and priestly activity is initiated in every member of his body, in whom the Holy Spirit instills grace and on whom he impresses the character. This enables the believer to have a vital share in the worship given by Christ to the Father in the Church. In Confirmation he confers the ability to be committed adults in the faith, actively involved in the Church’s mission of giving witness to and spreading the Gospel [1].

By virtue of this sharing in his priesthood, Christ gives all his members, laity included (cf. LG 34), the capacity of offering in their lives that worship which he himself called “worshipping the Father in Spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23). By carrying out this worship the faithful, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, share in the incarnate Word’s sacrifice and in his mission as high priest and universal Redeemer.

According to the Council, in this transcendent priestly reality of Christ’s mystery the laity are called to offer their whole lives as a spiritual

sacrifice, thus cooperating with the entire Church in the Redeemer's continual consecration of the world. This is the laity's great mission: "For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne – all these become 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God" (cf. LG 34; CCC 901).

Spiritual worship implies the laity's participation in the Eucharistic celebration, the center of the whole network of relationships between God and human beings in the Church. In this regard, "the lay faithful [too] are sharers in the priestly mission, for which Jesus offered himself on the cross and continues to be offered in the celebration of the Eucharist for the glory of God and the salvation of humanity" (CL 14). In the Eucharistic celebration the laity share actively by offering themselves in union with Christ, priest and victim. Their offering has ecclesial value by virtue of the baptismal character that equips them to give the official worship of the Christian religion to God with Christ and in the Church [2]. Sacramental participation in the Eucharistic banquet motivates and perfects their offering, instilling in them the sacramental grace that will help them to live and work in accord with the demands of the offering made with Christ and the Church.

At this point we must stress the importance of participating in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist prescribed by the Church. For everyone it is the highest act of exercising the universal priesthood, as the sacramental offering of the Mass is for priests in exercising the ministerial priesthood. For everyone, participation in the Eucharistic banquet is a condition for vital union with Christ, as he himself said: "Let me solemnly assure you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53). The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds all the faithful of the importance of participating in Sunday Mass (cf. CCC 2181-2182). Here I would like to conclude with the well-known words from the First Letter of Peter, which describe the image

of the laity as sharers in the Eucharistic-ecclesial mystery: “You too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit, into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). ■

NOTES:

[1] cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, q. 63, a 3; q. 72, aa. 5-6

[2] cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 63, a. 3

SOURCE:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19931215en.html

HISTORY SECTION

The Journey that Was: *Prelatura Libmanan, 1989-2008*

A PRAELATURA TERRITORIALE AD DIOECESEM

HOMILY DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF THE
CANONICAL ERECTION OF LIBMANAN AS A DIOCESE

19 June 2009

MOST REV. JOSE R. ROJAS, JR., DD, PhD, STD
FIRST DIOCESAN BISHOP OF LIBMANAN

Barely eleven months after I took canonical possession of the See of Libmanan as its second Bishop-Prelate, at this very same Cathedral of St. James, on July 2, last year 2008, we are gathered once more to witness another important and this time decidedly historic event in the life of the Local Church of Libmanan – its elevation to the rank and dignity of a diocese, that is, after almost twenty long years in existence. The day this great blessing dawned upon us was on the *Feast of the Annunciation*, the *25th of March 2009*. On this day, at the Vatican, an announcement was made:

Il Santo Padre ha elevato al rango di diocesi la prelatura territoriale di Libmanan (Filippine), con la medesima denominazione e configurazione territoriale, rendendola suffraganea della chiesa metropolitana di Caceres.

Having to make the same announcement myself on the same day and at the same time in the new diocese, I made sure my priests were there to share with me the joy of such happy news. I gathered them, clueless as they were for any reason for the gathering whatsoever due to the imposed information embargo, at the Parish of our patron, St. Joseph the Patriarch, in Bahay, Libmanan. There, almost as immediately after I made the announcement, we celebrated a mass of thanksgiving, overwhelmed and overjoyed.

My dear brothers and sisters, we, from the Diocese of Libmanan, are naturally moved by a sense of profound gratitude for such a tremendous grace, yet equally never forgetful of our humble beginnings. We were born almost twenty years ago a struggling and poor Church and to this day we remain to be so, though this time with a difference. Yes, we are a poor Church, but rich in faith and only so blessed because of the graciousness and mercy of God.

Our story tells it all why in spite of such lowly beginnings we are gathered today to celebrate the birth of this new diocese. Let me tell you succinctly part of this story, if only to refresh a bit our memory and appreciate more the significance of our gathering today. Twenty years ago, we were born from the vast ecclesiastical territory of the Metropolitan Church of Caceres. On January 12, 1989, the Archbishop of Caceres, Leonardo Legaspi, still in our midst today, petitioned the Holy Father then, Pope John Paul II, saying,

....because of the great number of people to be served in the present Archdiocese of Caceres, the large area of ecclesiastical territory, complicated by the great lack of roads and means of communication, I most humbly wish to request Your Holiness, to create a new ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the form of a Prelature taken from the present Archdiocese of Caceres, of which I am its humble Pastor.

Seeing enough justification for Archbishop Legaspi's request, given such persuasive and convincing argument, the Holy Father could not but agree. On December 9, 1989, he dutifully issued the bull *Philippinis*

in insulis, causing the creation of a Territorial Prelature, designating Libmanan as its seat, at the same time effecting its separation from the Metropolitan Church of Caceres, and finally appointing *Prospero Arellano* as the Bishop-Prelate to head the new ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Spread out in nine towns of the first district of Camarines Sur, and one town in the second district, the new Prelature had but 16 parishes, and served by only 19 diocesan priests including the new bishop himself.

One would expect that such an event would be greeted with joy and jubilation, the same feeling that surrounds the birth of new life into this world. The Catholic faithful of Libmanan must have welcomed the separation in this way. But no, there was also a pervading sense of helplessness and gloom especially among the clergy, though for the most part they may have chosen to keep such feeling muted and subdued. But indeed, many of them felt forsaken and abandoned, even rejected. It was very natural for them to feel that way because most of them were strangers to the new territory, who ended up incardinated to it not because they chose to but because they were simply caught on that side of the divide by the unexpected separation.

But I guess they felt more so because of the daunting task ahead, that of building up the new local Church in a situation of deprivation and poverty. They were least prepared for this eventuality. They were very few to begin with, a measly nineteen of them in the presbyterium, and the resources at hand were too scarce. The dowry that came from the Mother Church, in some measure already sizable at that time, did very little to provide the much-needed comfort. But move on they must as there was hardly anything they could do to reverse the situation.

At first, they had no choice but to depend on the resources of the mother diocese. For one thing, the Prelature had no pastoral program of its own. Most of what was done in the parishes simply had to follow and replicate the WESTY structure and framework in Caceres. Its priests and Church personnel had to be enrolled into the Health Insurance System of the diocese of origin since it was not just possible to set up its own. Indeed, during those first few years of existence, the Prelature could not quite separate itself completely from the mother diocese.

It was, however, becoming clear that the Prelature had to establish its own identity as a local Church. It had to set up its own organizational structure and make it function efficiently according to the norms of Canon Law. It had to determine and harness its own resources to ensure stability in its operations. Most importantly, it must find a way of carrying out the work of evangelization on its own and provide the means to support its various apostolate.

At first, it looked as though this was going to take a long time. But a breakthrough came. On January 20 to February 17, 1991, only a year or so after the Prelature was established, the Philippine Hierarchy convened the historic *Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* in Manila. It gave the Prelature occasion to conduct consultations and conferences in the parishes aimed at obtaining an adequate picture of the situation of the local Church. The exercise yielded the conclusion that a different situation was slowly evolving in the Prelature, with its own peculiar needs and problems that were quite distinct from those of the Mother Church. When the Prelature's delegates came back from the Council, they brought home with them an insight that would turn out to determine the future agenda in the life and mission of the local Church of Libmanan, that is, the Council's delineation of the image of the Church in the Philippines as a "*Community of Disciples*" and a "*Church of the Poor*".

Inspired by such insight, and wanting to give it concrete expression, Bishop Arellano called for a pastoral consultation that further evolved into what is now called the *First Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan*. The most significant accomplishment of this gathering was that for the first time in its existence, the Prelature was able to define its own identity around a *vision* of its being a local Church and formulate its own *mission statement*. According to such vision, the local Church of Libmanan aspired to become "*a renewed Church characterized by an evangelized and evangelizing Community of Disciples, journeying with Christ in the Poor, for the total transformation of creation.*" This was to be realized through a commitment to "*holistic, integral and inculturated evangelization, participative ministry to witnessing small faith communities and the responsible stewardship of creation.*"

Obviously, this was only the first step. The hard part was how to give flesh to such vision and mission. While efforts were initiated and pursued towards this end, the bishop undertook the strenuous task of pastoral visitation of the parishes. His purpose was not only canonical. He wanted to see if the parishes were moving along the direction set forth by the Pastoral Assembly and if a pastoral program was in place in every parish. But if there was one thing that these visits generated, it was the realization on the part of the bishop that pastoral services could be improved if there were more parishes in the Prelature. And so it was that he started creating new parishes in 1994 so that by 2008, the number of parishes has already increased from the 16 pioneering parishes to the present 27, or an additional of 11 parishes within the last 20 years.

Quite providentially, vocations to the priesthood have also increased. By 2008, the number of priests in the Prelature rose to 32 from the original 19 who initially served the Prelature, making it possible to sustain the trend of creating new parishes, and this was so, not counting those who opted to leave and serve in other dioceses as missionaries.

But while creating new parishes ensured improvement in pastoral services and the administration of the sacraments, this was obviously only half of the entire picture of what the life and mission of the local Church should entail according to its vision and mission. More important to ask was whether the faithful truly had the sense of being Church and of being community, and the sense of belonging that this required, and whether this sense of being Church was rooted in the gospel.

This was the question that the *Second Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan*, convened on March 15-18, 1994, had to address. During the assembly, the participants expressed their disappointments and frustrations in the way pastoral initiatives were being carried out. But then all these generated yet another breakthrough in the history of the Church of Libmanan, the formulation of the five-year *Comprehensive Pastoral Development Program*. The participants were one in urging that the Prelature must always project the image of a renewed Church in its life and mission. Finally, they all expressed the desire of having as end product of all their efforts the formation of small Christians communities in all the parishes, what was going to be called the *Saradit na Kristianong*

Komunidad or the SKK as they are now more expediently called. From now on, it was the SKK that would give concrete “*face*” to the Church of Libmanan. From now on, it was the SKK that would give flesh to the “*Renewed Church*” that the Prelature had always dreamt of becoming one day.

While everything looked bright on paper, the real challenge remained: how to make the SKK a living reality. Things had to start somehow, somewhere. It was a courageous parish priest in *Cabusao* who had the audacity to make the first bold step. He started organizing his parishioners around traditional activities and events that could keep them together every month during the whole year, and only then introduce into these gatherings values formation, evangelization and catechesis. To his surprise, people started gravitating around these monthly activities until such time that he was able to eventually form them into smaller communities. He grouped together families into “*clusters*” and chose cluster leaders who were given the responsibility of coordinating their group’s activities. Easy as all this may sound to be, it required utmost *commitment, hard work and dedication* on the part of the parish priest. But soon the experience paid off as communities of families began to take shape in the various villages in the parish. Soon enough, these communities became more and more involved in the life of the parish.

Successful as this pioneering effort might have been, the other priests, even the bishop himself, continued to have doubts if the *Cabusao* experience could be duplicated in the other parishes of the Prelature. The strategy worked in *Cabusao*, they thought, because it was small and manageable. There were thus nagging fears that the same strategy might not just work if it were to be implemented in larger parishes. Such skepticism, however, would eventually be proven wrong. When the SKK was introduced here at *St. James Parish* (Libmanan), unmistakably one of the largest parishes in the Prelature, it was such a resounding success. And then, there was *Lupi*, a parish different from both *Cabusao* and Libmanan in that it had a different terrain, many of its villages being remotely and inaccessibly situated in the mountainous areas of the parish. But here, too, the SKK flourished.

From these three pioneering experiences, however tentative and experimental they might have been, the priests of the Prelature must have learned their lesson. Each one of them eventually had a change of heart as the message was loud and clear. If only they would commit themselves with dedication, enthusiasm and zeal to such pastoral undertaking, then there was really nothing that proved to be insurmountable. Such conversion in the clergy's perspective marked the beginning of the phenomenal growth of the SKK in the Prelature. By 2007, 3,765 clusters of families have been formed in various parishes, and their number continues to rise to this day.

When the *Third Pastoral Assembly of the Prelature of Libmanan* was convened on September 4-7, 2000, everyone in the assembly recognized that "*basic ecclesial communities*" such as the SKK were the "life and hope for a renewed Church in the third millennium."

While all these were taking place, very few people outside the Prelature knew that something significant here was taking place. For one thing, few people knew that the Prelature has had three pastoral assemblies, a feat which by no means could just be belittled considering that in many ways they measured up to the scope and importance of synodal gatherings. Few people knew that as a result, a culture of evangelism was slowly evolving within the local Church, the tangible manifestation of which is the emergence of small Christian communities, the SKK. For all we knew, we woke up one day to realize that the SKK has become *a new way of being Church* in this part of the Bicol Church. The SKK has become a byword. It has become our identifying mark as a local Church.

There is no reason why we should bask with self-indulgent pride and now feel complacent at this turn of events for there is yet obviously much to do, and neither can we claim in the first place all the credit for ourselves. But this gives us unavoidably some feeling of satisfaction in the sense that the vision we have so nurtured in our dreams is slowly taking tangible form. At least we can say that there is now a concrete semblance in our local Church of what PCP II has called the "*Community of Disciples*" and the "*Church of the Poor*". If only because of this, one can truly say that the local Church of Libmanan has grown, yes, in a different and perhaps unconventional yet I should say significant way, and few people from without had an inkling to even take notice.

I could see the inspiration of our Patron, *St. Joseph*, at work in all these. Like St. Joseph, who worked and built up his family in the silence of his heart, the clergy and the faithful of Libmanan worked *silently* as well to build up the local Church and its small faith communities. One might be tempted to ask whether this was out of a sense of inferiority – for after all, to rephrase Nathaniel’s cynical question to Philip in the gospel (Jn 1,46), “*can something good come from the Church of Libmanan*” – it being just a tiny speck in this part of the Catholic world, or whether this was rather out of the spirit of humility, borne out of the conviction that this was God’s work after all and that nothing good, in fact, could ever be accomplished without him?

Whatever the disposition was, the fruit of their efforts slowly became tangible for everyone to see, as if from nowhere. Perhaps far from everyone’s mind, the Church of Libmanan, though poor as it always has been, was now keeping a treasure, a pearl of great price – that is, the faith of its people, faith that is lived out in small Christian communities. What more, indeed, can make this Church more vibrant, more enlivened by the gospel Jesus preached to the world? What more can truly make it a *Community of Disciples* and a *Church of the Poor*?

My dear brothers and sisters, the lessons that we learn from this story are already familiar, but they are certainly worth mentioning again today. *First*, poverty is not an obstacle to growth. It is not a hindrance to the spread of the gospel. In fact, it is a condition that spawns growth itself. Material poverty, in particular, is a predisposition to poverty in the spirit which is the ferment of growth. Poverty, in fact, is a key to blessedness as Jesus so ardently preached, for it makes us realize our own utter helplessness and thus the need to put our trust in God. It makes us completely detached from things, knowing that things have not got it in them to bring happiness or real security. Yet it also makes us completely dependent on God, knowing that God alone can bring us help, and hope and strength. To the poor, things mean nothing; and God means everything as he must mean everything to us. Thus, the poor does not rely on material wealth, neither on sheer human capacity, but rather foremost on the power and mercy of God. If ever the Diocese of Libmanan has grown to be what it is now – a local Church that is truly alive in its thriving small Christian

communities – it has done so notwithstanding poverty, because of the love and mercy of God.

Second, reliance on God, however, does not take away the role and the value of human effort. As far as the story of Libmanan is concerned, grace has been abundant. But this was also harnessed by human effort, that of the clergy and that of the faithful. And this was human effort that was characterized by docility and resilience, patience and perseverance, courage and hope. The journey was never easy as it never would be. There were thorns along the way and they hurt as they were sharply pointed and piercing. There were stones all over, constantly obstructing the way, and a stumbling block they have indeed become. And there were potholes everywhere, making the journey more frustrating and insufferable as they were literally huge and deep. But the local Church, strengthened by God's grace, was armed by the determination of all those who took part in this journey, from the bishop of old and the clergy, down to the faithful of the most far-flung village, to move forward and realize their vision of what they wanted to be as a local Church. We are gathered today to reap the reward of this great effort. My dear priests and faithful of Libmanan, our celebration today, it is true, is all about the benevolence and generosity of God. But it is as much about you. It is about your faith in God. It is about your sense of communion. It is about your sense of being Church.

Finally, there are times when we feel abandoned and forsaken. Times when we think God is nowhere to be found when we need Him most. That was how our priests felt in the beginning. The separation from the Archdiocese of Caceres was truly hard and painful. At that time, the future looked dim, there seemed to have been no light in the horizon. The challenge was enormous and seemed to exceed human capacity. But slowly the sun rose and the light it gave were never again to be extinguished. Yes, it does fade at sunset, but we are assured that it will shine again at dawn. The lesson is, God is always there only that we do not easily find him because perhaps we are looking the other way. And one thing is sure, when God wills it, it shall come to pass and there is no stopping him. That is exactly the story of the Diocese of Libmanan, a story of how God intervened and continues to do so and make his presence felt in this part of the world. ■



CANON LAW SECTION

Some Parish Matters

JAVIER GONZALEZ, OP

A. Imposition of ecclesiastical penalties by a parish priest on his parishioners

QUESTION:

Who can impose or declare a penalty? In canon 1341 it is said that the Ordinary "is to start a judicial or an administrative procedure for the imposition or the declaration of penalties when he perceives that neither by fraternal correction or reproof, nor by any method of pastoral care, can the scandal be sufficiently repaired, justice restored and the offender reformed." I would like to know if the same could be said of parish priests, that is, if a parish priest can impose a penalty (such as an interdict) to one of his parishioners who has, for example, publicly uttered blasphemy or gravely harmed public morals, in accordance with canon 1369. Please give me some guidance. God bless.

ANSWER:

This inquiry, which reached me via email a few days ago, is about the power of parish priests on penal matters: *Can a parish priest impose a penalty on any of his parishioners in accordance with the Code of Canon Law?* The question could actually have been formulated in a more comprehensive way by asking: *What faculties or powers on penal matters do parish priests have with regard to their parishioners in accordance with the Code of Canon Law?*

It might be surprising, but the correct answer to the latter question is “none”; and consequently “no” would be the right answer also to the question of the inquiry on whether a parish priest can impose a canonical penalty on his parishioners.

This short answer, however, may satisfy only those who seek just a “yes” or “no” answer. But in canon law such kind of answers need normally some further clarifications, technical precisions, or at least some sort of justification. That is why I add here some basic notions on Church’s penal law that may expand the brief answer already advanced.

1. What are the ecclesiastical penalties we are referring to?

All the penalties in the Church are grouped into three different categories, namely:

- a. Medicinal sanctions or censures* (excommunication, suspension, interdict), the aim of which is primarily the correction of the offender;
- b. Expiatory penalties*, (removal from office, deprivation of power, etc.), whose aim is to repair the damage caused in the ecclesial community; and
- c. Penal remedies* (admonitions, rebukes), whose purpose is to prevent offences or scandal; and *penances* (works of piety or charity), imposed together with the penalty or in lieu of it.

These ecclesiastical penalties may be considered as “punishment” for offences committed, since they involve a privation of a spiritual or

temporal good. Obviously, such privation concerns only the goods and rights that are possessed in the Church, not those of civil society.

The aim, however, of the ecclesiastical sanctions is not primarily “to punish,” but rather to attain the reform of the lawbreaker, the repair of scandal and the restoration of the social order disturbed by the transgression. This is why the absolution of any censure requires the delinquent’s previous repentance of the offence committed as well as his or her disposition to repair the damage or scandal caused (can. 1347 §2).

The subjects to ecclesiastical sanctions are those who “deliberately violated a law or precept established in the Code of Canon Law.” The violation has to be external and gravely imputable by reason of malice or of culpability (can. 1321).

Sanctions in the Church are considered *a last resort* to which to have recourse only when all the other possible pastoral means available have been exhausted. In fact canon 1341 states that “the Ordinary is to start a judicial or an administrative procedure for the imposition or the declaration of penalties only when he perceives that neither by fraternal correction or reproof, nor by any methods of pastoral care, can the scandal be sufficiently repaired, justice restored, and the offender reformed.”

2. How are ecclesiastical penalties applied?

There are two ways or channels through which the imposition of penalties may take place, namely, the *judicial* trial and the *administrative* process. Penal remedies and penances, however, may also be applied by a decree, when the normal process cannot be followed, although with certain limitations (cf cc. 1341-1342).

The Code of Canon Law gives certain discretionary powers to the judge or Ordinary in the application of penalties. They are limited by the circumstances of the guilty person and the gravity of the offence. Accordingly, the imposition of penalties may be tempered or even be substituted by penances, if the law or precept leaves to the authorities the determination of the penalties and/or the option to apply them.

However, there are some penalties, called *latae sententiae*, which one automatically incurs by the very fact of having committed the

offence or directly cooperated in it. The penalty applies to the offender with no need for a previous process, sentence or decree. The decree or the declaration could be promulgated afterwards to determine if the behavior of the accused merited the penalty.

3. What is the role of parish priests on these matters?

The answer is to be found in the sixth book of the Code (“Sanctions in the Church”), particularly in its titles V and VI, which deal with the application of penalties and the cessation of penalties respectively. Yet, going over the canons (cc. 1311-1399), one notices that the figure of the parish priest is not even mentioned there.

In fact, the “parish priest” does not appear in the list of ecclesiastical authorities with power to *impose* a penalty: the list is limited to the “legislator,” the “judge,” and the “Ordinary.” And since the canons related to penal matters require strict interpretation, they are to be understood “according to the proper meaning of the words considered in their text and context” (c.17). It happens that in canon law parish priests are neither legislators nor judges nor Ordinaries... Thus the competencies assigned to the Ordinaries, for example, in this field cannot be claimed by parish priests, even if as a matter of principle they share in the Bishops’ threefold functions/powers of teaching, sanctifying and governing.

Neither are parish priests mentioned in the canons dealing with the *remission* of penalties. According to the Code, those who can remit a penalty are: the Holy See, the authority who has determined the offence, the Ordinary who has inflicted it (by judgment or decree), and the Ordinary of the place in which the delinquent is found; also their delegates: for example, the penitentiary. (It should be noted that any penitent in danger of death can be absolved from any sin and censure by any priest: the salvation of souls is the supreme law of the Church!)

My conclusion, then, taken from this silence of the Code on the matter, is that parish priests do not have the power to impose ecclesiastical penalties on their parishioners. The nearest thing perhaps that they can do, apart from informing the Bishop, is “to correct the faithful prudently if in certain matters they are found wanting” (cf c. 529 §1).

B. Valid Administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation by a Priest

QUESTION:

I am a priest assisting in a parish. On one recent occasion I was delegated by my parish priest to administer the sacrament of Baptism to an adult. Following the instructions of the Ritual, I also administered the sacrament of Confirmation to him. After the conferral was noted in the parish register, the validity of that Confirmation was challenged by a close relative of the adult baptized on the ground that I did not have the power to administer the sacrament of Confirmation. On my part, I justified my action by keeping with the provisions of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, which enjoins the administration of Confirmation in the same ceremony (immediately after the conferral of Baptism), presupposing the authorization by the Church to the officiating minister (Bishop or priest) to confer said sacrament on the occasion of the Baptism of adults.

My question then is: Can we find support in the Code of Canon Law in favor of the validity of such Confirmation? I know that the norm of the Code regarding the minister of Confirmation is that the ordinary minister of Confirmation is a Bishop. But it adds that "A priest can also validly confer this sacrament if he has the faculty to do so, either from the general law or by way of a special grant from the competent authority" (c. 882). Is this provision applicable to the case in question? Thank you.

ANSWER:

This pastoral question falls within the range of liturgical, sacramental law. Its author, a priest, is actually seeking for canonical support for the validity of his action (the administration of the sacrament of Confirmation in the course of the conferral of Baptism to an adult).

I must say that before penning down my opinion on the matter, I sounded off with some other priests – parish priests included – and the general sentiment confirmed my own in favor too of the validity of such conferral of the sacrament of Confirmation.

But since the question is to produce support from the Code of Canon Law, I shall go straight to it.

1. Can Priests Validly Administer the Sacrament of Confirmation in Accordance with the Code?

Yes. Priests are indeed given the faculty to validly administer the sacrament of Confirmation in some particular instances, granted them either by the universal law of the Church or by delegation from the competent authority. The canonical norm quoted above in the inquiry expressly attests to it. Let me quote it again: *“A priest can also validly confer this sacrament [of Confirmation] if he has the faculty to do so, either from the general law or by way of a special grant from the competent authority”* (c. 882). This provision is the continuation of the initial statement of the same canon which states literally, *“The ordinary minister of Confirmation is a Bishop.”*

Thus it is clear that the ordinary minister of the sacrament of Confirmation is the Bishop, who by his episcopal consecration has by divine law this faculty. A priest, however, can validly administer this sacrament whenever he has been given the power to do so either *by the universal law or by special concession of the competent authority.*

The logical question now is to know who are specifically those priests enjoying such power, first, by the universal law; and, second, by special concession of the competent authority. The Code of Canon Law has the answer:

a. Granted by law:

The following have the faculty to administer Confirmation, apart from those who in law are equivalent to a diocesan Bishop:

“1° within the confines of their jurisdiction, those who in law are equivalent to a diocesan Bishop; 2° in respect of the person to be confirmed, the priest who by virtue of his office or by mandate of the diocesan Bishop baptized an adult or admits a baptized adult into full communion with the Catholic Church; 3° in respect of those in danger of death, the parish priest or indeed any priest.” (c. 883).

Three instances are mentioned here in which the Church bestows on priests the faculty to administer the sacrament of Confirmation, namely,

- i. on the occasion of baptism of adults: to the priest who “by virtue of his office or by mandate of the diocesan Bishop” baptizes one who is no longer an infant. The expression “by virtue of his office” limits the category of priests who enjoy the faculty to confirm. Those who qualify include: a parish priest (cf c. 530, 2°), a parochial administrator (cf c. 540 §1), each of the priests jointly entrusted with the care of a parish (cf. c. 543 §1), an assistant priest who takes the place of the parish priest in his absence or pending the appointment of a parochial administrator (cf cc. 541 §1, 549). Another who would qualify would be an episcopal Vicar for Confirmation, if such a priest were appointed for this ‘specific type of activity’ (cf can. 476). The understanding is that the Confirmation is done immediately after the Baptism;
- ii. on the occasion of admission of a baptized adult into the Church; and
- iii. in danger of death: To prevent that a person who has not been confirmed should die without this sacrament because the Bishop is not available, the M.P. *Spiritus Sancti Munera* in 1946 gave parish priests the power to confirm in danger of death and this power was later extended, with some limitations, to other priests. The present canon 883 gives some preference to parish priests, but grants the power to confirm in danger of death to all priests without restriction.

b. *Granted by special concession:*

The diocesan Bishop in general, and the priests endowed by law or by special concession with the faculty to confirm, in individual cases, may extend to others the faculty to administer the sacrament of Confirmation.

The precise canonical norm, formulated in canon 884, is the following:

§1 The diocesan Bishop..., if necessity so requires, may grant to one or several specified priests the faculty to administer the sacrament.

§2 For a grave reason the Bishop, or the priest who by law or by special grant of the competent authority has the faculty to confirm, may in individual cases invite other priests to join with him in administering the sacrament.

It is worth noting that while the Code requires “a grave reason” in order that the Bishop or priest endowed by law or by special concession with the faculty to confirm may be helped by other priests in particular cases, in conferring Confirmation, the Roman Ritual does not require expressly a grave reason. This apparent discrepancy indicates perhaps the mind of the legislator clearly in favor of limiting the cases when priests administer the sacrament of Confirmation.

2. Are these provisions applicable to the case in question?

I think so, particularly the provision of canon 883, 2°, by virtue of which those priests canonically competent to administer the sacrament of Baptism to an adult [parish priests are among them] enjoy automatically the faculty, granted them by the law, to administer also the sacrament of Confirmation. It is worth noting the insistence of the Church that adults should be confirmed *immediately* after receiving baptism (cf c. 866; *Rites*, 232).

Accordingly, in providing in its rubrics that “when the bishop is not present, the priest who conferred baptism is authorized to confirm” (n. 232) or, in another place, “If the bishop is not present, the celebrant who confers baptism confers confirmation” (n. 363), the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults does not really empower the minister of Baptism to administer the sacrament of Confirmation, but it rather presupposes the existence of such empowerment.

Similarly, a parish priest who duly authorizes another priest to administer the sacrament of Baptism to an adult does not really “grant” him the power to administer the sacrament of Confirmation (in the same ceremony immediately after Baptism), but it is something the administering priest enjoys by virtue of the law on these particular instances (cf c. 883, 2°), in the same way that any priest has the faculty to administer Confirmation to those in danger of death by virtue of canon 883, 3°.

Applying this to the concrete case in question, it is my conviction

that the action of the priest in administering Confirmation in that particular context was valid. The canonical support seems to me quite solid, based on two main reasons:

- a. *The fact that he was duly delegated by his parish priest to administer the sacrament of Baptism to an adult:* This is something the parish priest could do since he is endowed with ordinary power (“by virtue of his office”) to administer it (cf c. 137 §3). And, as it has been repeated several times, any priest duly authorized to administer the sacrament of Baptism to an adult enjoys *by concession of the law* (c. 883, 2°) the faculty to administer the sacrament of Confirmation;
- b. *The further application of the “Ecclesia supplet” principle:* Were the previous argument not enough, there is another canonical provision applied to this case. The law states that “in common error, whether of fact or of law, and in positive and probable doubt, whether of law or of fact, *the Church supplies* executive power of governance for both the external and the internal forum” (c. 144 §1). [N.B. By supplying the corresponding missing power, the Church *does not validate certain acts invalidly performed*; instead, what she actually does is *to give validity from the beginning to certain acts which otherwise, by themselves, would have been invalid*, due to lack of administrative power in the person or persons who performed them. In other words, this supplying of power must not be understood as a convalidation of an invalid act.] Although in the present case the power of governance is not involved, canon 144 §2 explicitly extends the norms concerning the supplying of power in cases of common error and positive doubt to the administration of the sacrament of Confirmation (cc. 882-883). Therefore, taking for granted that actions were taken in good faith, the priest in question acted validly when administering the sacrament of Confirmation, even in the case that the faculty to administer the sacrament might have been lacking on account of other grounds.

This is my view on the matter, which I uphold *salvo meliore iudicio*. ■



HOMILIES

SEP 6

23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Is 35:4-7a; Jas 2:1-5; Mk 7:31-37

The Passion for Life: The Joy of Self-Giving

ENRICO GONZALES, O.P.

The proverbial three monkeys were not enough for Jesus to remedy the defective use of our senses. To see no evil, to speak no evil, to see no evil may be worthwhile only for a time but if done endlessly may even lead to suspicion that the doer is lifeless. For being motionless, he may be mistaken not for a living body but for a cadaver. Senses are gifts to us as bodily creatures and they are meant for us to enjoy. To enjoy them, we must use them and not suppress them. But again, we must make a clear distinction between using them and abusing them. The reason why the three monkeys became popular icons of controlling our senses owes to the fact that there is a pervasive abuse of the senses going on in our contemporary lifestyle. Abuse of the senses has led us to a culture of indulgence so systemic the kind of which even the Epicureans had never witnessed during their time. No wonder we do not appreciate ascetic practices, penance and mortification today. They are for us ways to kill

the body and not healthy forms of discipline which are more effective and cheaper than liposuction and cosmetic surgery.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus healed the senses. The deaf and dumb started hearing the right thing and talking about the right thing and since then, no one could stop him from doing so. The restoration of his senses gave back to him one power more important than his senses: his passion. The people who knew him as once deaf and dumb could not believe what they were seeing: a recent convert of Jesus preaching with all his might his saving encounter with God, and fearless of the consequences – ridicule and mockery, or even social and physical persecution from his own countrymen. His senses restored to health, they had become the powerful elements to enflame his passion. And passion is no more no less than his will to live and the will to share that life with others. And what a life! When he encountered Jesus, tasted the spittle and heard his ensuring word "*Ephpheta*" ("Be opened"), life had never been the same for him. From then on, life was to live for Jesus and for others, for the sake of Jesus. What a passion! We hope and pray that we too may have the same passion for life. ■

SEP 13

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Is 50:5-9a; Jas 2:14-18; Mk 8:27-35

Love: A Mystery Stronger than Evil

ENRICO GONZALES, O.P.

World literature about Satan and his legion always pictures them as primary sources of scandal. Scandal in its original literal meaning signifies a stumbling block, an obstacle to pedestrians who intend to walk straight. Satan is the paragon of scandal for obvious reason; he is the stumbling block, the obstacle *par excellence* for every person seeking the path of righteousness. No doubt Peter was one of those who in spite of his personal weakness desired a righteous life. Yet, wonder of wonders, what made Jesus called him "Satan" in this particular episode in today's

Gospel reading remains a mystery to us all. Certainly, Jesus did not mean to identify Peter with the Prince of Darkness. How could he? He himself had chosen Simon the Fisherman, changed his name into Peter the Rock, to become the leader of his apostles. If Peter and Satan were one, then Jesus condemned his Church into failure right from the start. No, Jesus called Peter “Satan” simply because in his misguided sentimentality Peter was preventing Jesus from fulfilling the will of the Father. For this reason, Peter served Jesus as a stumbling block, an obstacle, a scandal! Jesus predicted – not once but several times (Mk 9:30-32) – that in doing the will of the Father, he would undergo enormous pain and suffering, and the reaction of Peter? – protest, rejection, denial. Peter could not bring himself to accept that in the will of God, there was room for suffering for the innocent, and most especially in this particular case, for the person whom he believed to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God (Mt 16:16). Before the Spirit of Pentecost enlightened the heart and mind of Peter, this apostle was one among many who could not believe that pain and suffering could have a part in the providence of God. If God were indeed good, how could he permit the innocent to suffer? If God were indeed powerful, why could he not create a world so perfect that it would not have a room for pain and suffering? Questions of this sort have bugged the evolution of thinking in human history, and instilled varying reactions ranging from an attitude of suppressing the question altogether, to the attitude of condemning God as the originator itself of this problem. For those who stopped asking the question altogether, they entered into heroic despair of just facing the inevitable, convinced that there is no answer to this question. They are now ready to just bite the bullet no matter how lethal it might be and finally, die courageously. Others indeed died courageously with their fist raised against heaven in defiance, rejecting God until the end for his worst crime against humanity: letting the innocent to suffer and die while the wicked thrive and enjoy their earthly life fully and relentlessly.

During his earthly life, Jesus had left the question of evil still a mystery. Peter for one had never understood completely Jesus’ thought on the matter. Otherwise, he would not be persistent in insisting his way over and above God’s way. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter was the foremost defender of a kingdom resting on power protected by human machinations – yes, even by the force of violence, by the strength of the

sword. (Jn 18:10) That night in the Garden must be very painful for Jesus for there he discovered his beloved students who accompanied him day and night, still failing to understand his teachings. What remained was the ultimate lesson in action: the crucifixion. There, at the cross, Jesus showed the absolute answer to the question of evil. Love alone is the answer to this question. In the presence of love, even evil finds its meaning. There, in love, even the innocent as pure and holy as the Son of God did not suffer without purpose, without meaning. This was a lesson so vividly graphic that even a Roman centurion – inured to violence and impervious to faith – could proclaim “This is indeed the Son of God!” (Mk15:39) The suffering of Jesus is indeed a difficult lesson to understand. It is a lesson which only has meaning in the plan of God where life is love and love is life. In the face of the crucifix, even a heart as hard as the centurion’s will burst into a proclamation of faith: “This is love. This is indeed the Son of God.” Suddenly, the problem of evil melts down in the presence of God’s invincible mercy. ■

SEP 20

25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Wis 2:12, 17-20; Jas 3:16-4:3; Mk 9:30-37

The Perfect Nanny

ENRICO GONZALES, O.P.

All of a sudden, we have a practical answer to the last Sunday’s question: Why Jesus has to suffer? To Peter and the rest of the apostles, the answer from this Sunday’s Gospel reading is quite simple: Jesus is a leader; so, he has to suffer. In a sense, to call Jesus the Suffering Servant is to be repetitious. When one chooses to be a servant, he must be ready for suffering. This was evidently a far cry from what the apostles were thinking. They all aspired to be the master for the wrong reason: to dominate. They were indeed lusting for leadership in their mistaken belief that being a master would bring others under them. As a result, those under them – their subjects – would be at their beck and call, completely

obedient to their whims and caprices. At the snap of their fingers, servants would appear to heed their commands. They would be walking like peacocks towering over the rest of men simply because those under them were carrying them on their shoulders. Pomp and glory! When one is a leader, privileges and perks come with the territory. To their dismay, the opposite happened to Jesus. The Master served: from washing their feet (Jn 13:1-11) to obeying the will of God even unto death, death on the cross. (Phil 2:8) Well, to initiate the apostles to servant-leadership, Jesus introduced them to the most basic of human service: child-care. He called a child and enjoined the ambitious apostles to serve him. It might not even be ridiculous to think that Jesus in explaining the meaning of true leadership to the apostles, might have the service of good nannies in mind. To be a good nanny means to undergo all the inconveniences of child care: from changing diapers to preparing baby food, from spending sleepless nights keeping watch on the sleeping child, or putting him to sleep in case he cannot. Paradoxically, however, in serving the child – the lowliest and the most helpless of men – the nanny assumes the utmost of power. After all, do not the hands that rock the cradle possess the greatest power that rules the world?

God must be the perfect nanny. He died caring for us all. ■

SEP 27

26TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Nm 11:25-29; Jas 5:1-6; Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

Free but not Cheap

ENRICO GONZALES, O.P.

The Kingdom of God is free but not cheap. Free, because it is open to everyone, available and accessible to everybody. One does not need to be a political kingpin to lay claim on this Kingdom, or to be a royal blood, to be a big celebrity – nothing of this sort serves as a currency to buy one's passage to the Kingdom. There are no special reservations to enter the Kingdom. There is a space for everybody: come one, come

all! So there is no need to push your way around. Strange, it is the only precious thing that defies the law of the market forces, the law of supply and demand. The one and the only thing that matters and yet, the Kingdom does not stir stiff competition. Imagine: one can get it for a cup of water! (Mt 10:42) – with just one condition – that this is done for the love of God. Well, that makes the Kingdom free but expensive. Love is free all right but paradoxically, it is for this same reason that it is expensive. Love demands that we are ready to give up everything for the one we love. For the misers like us, that is a demand next to impossible to fulfill. The only wealth we recognize is cash and we are willing to give up our good name, our moral integrity, honesty, chastity and all if only we enjoy the fruits of this world. What about the fruits of the Holy Spirit? Hah! What are you talking about?! These are things we cannot see, we cannot spend, and store in the banks.

What is their worth?

Sad, sad, sad! Jesus must be in pain watching then and now people bartering the Kingdom of God for material goods. Well, they think they can make a bargain just like ordinary trading when they go to heaven. But heaven is not a market, it is not for shopping. Nobody can have both God and mammon at the same time. (Mt 6:24) The Kingdom of God is never on a promotional sale: buy one, take one. The Kingdom of God is an exclusive offer: take it all or lose it all. If we prefer our hands more than the Kingdom, we will indeed go to hell whole and entire – and what a body for fuelling fire! If we prefer our eyes more than the Kingdom, go to hell with both eyes wide open, grimacing in pain. You say heavenly justice looks bizarre? To a people like us who live in a country where people can steal, kill, and rape and still be addressed “Your Honor” or “Your Excellency”, God’s justice indeed looks bizarre.

Funny, isn’t it? But it hurts when we laugh. ■

OCT 4

27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gen 2:18-24; Heb 2:9-11; Mk 10:2-16

Of Women and Men, Of Adults and Children

ENRICO GONZALES, O.P.

Filipino women must take pride for being Filipino. We have seen nowhere else in the world but in the Philippines women taking such great stride in promoting themselves as truly human by their equality with men. They have proven themselves as efficient as men in all fields – indeed, from economics to politics. Based on recent surveys, not even the developed nations beat the Philippines in the number of women who entered the corporate world and rose to the top of the echelon. And just as we have the greatest number of presidents in business corporations, so, do we have in our very own government. We have two, thus far, while the mightiest of democracy like USA has none! But here is the irony of it all: while women are gaining their strength in the evolution of the sexes, men are losing their ground. Women, Filipino women most especially, are fast becoming the stronger sex. And Filipino men? They have become so insecure that the only field they seem to dominate is, of all things, sex! And even here, their showing seems to be more hubris than genuinely record breaking. So, they keep on claiming that they have conquered women because of their macho prowess and where have they gone? The lifestyle of the bees: they move from flower to flower! And they claim this is perfectly normal. After all, their hero and authority on the matter – Yul Bryner as the King of Siam in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s immortal musical *The King and I* – said: “While it is normal for bees to fly from flower to flower, it is not normal for flowers to move from bee to bee.” Jesus in today’s Gospel reading debunks this claim with simple logic: Men, no matter how sexually dynamic, are not bees and women no matter how dainty, are not flowers. By all means, they are human! For this reason, they get married. Bees and flowers don’t. Bees and flowers stay together only during the

lust month of May while men and women live together in season and out of season. Why? Because man and woman, husband and wife are human. Humans get married and they get married for life.

As Filipino men and women are waging their battle of the sexes, children keep on rotting wherever they are. Amazingly, they are no longer at home. They are either thrown into the highways as street children or into the trashcans as aborted embryos. Well, children have become nothing but a scapegoat. They get blamed for everything. When, the adults cannot find job, children stop playing and look for employment. The roads become their corporate world where they ply their trade: from begging to selling their own little bodies! Ask them why they are working and not their parents and the ready answer: "Well, they told us we're no longer kids. We're adults." We rub our eyes to find out whether our vision is still normal while exclaiming in disbelief: "These kids, adults?!" Better believe it, they are. We even accuse them of being responsible for the fall of our economy. We are getting poorer as a nation because allegedly we have many children. We reduce the children into statistics and therefore, regard them as number. When there is more, we subtract. Because there are an increasing number of children, we kill them. That's easy. Children are number. When they add to the population, we subtract them – as plain as a mathematical process! So, where have all the children gone? To the streets or to the trashcans!

Today's Gospel reading is a wake up call to reality. Men are not just bees. Women are not just flowers. Children are not just number. Men, women, and children are by all means what they are: human and children of God all! ■

OCT 11

28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Wis 7:7-11; Heb 4:12-13; Mk 10:17-30

Money Cannot Buy Everything

ENRICO GONZALES, O.P.

Who said that money can buy everything? So many Filipinos seem to believe this common saying that they hope to win the lotto thinking that by hitting the jackpot all their problems will disappear. Why not? They will have money and money can buy everything!

Jesus in today's Gospel reading belies this common saying. Money cannot buy everything. If it were so, it can buy all goods, even God himself. But is this the case? Absolutely not. In reality only God is good. (Mk10:18) Money although not evil, is not the ultimate good because money at times can become occasion of sin. How many persons have sold their soul for the sake of money? If money is absolutely good, all rich people will automatically become good. Is this the case?

It is hard for the rich to become good as Jesus himself has indicated in his earthshaking warning: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!"(Mk 10:25) The only way that they will be successful in entering the Kingdom is to accept the opposite of what so many people are claiming: "Money can buy everything." They have to accept that there is only one good: God. Jesus pointed this out to the rich young man: "No one is good but God alone." But being good, does this mean that God will buy for us everything? Have you ever heard of a case where God bribed any man for his love?

To pay for someone else's love destroys the nature itself of love. We have heard of stories where Satan promised someone all the wealth in the world in exchange of his soul. Why would Satan propose such a deal? Simple: the very exchange will destroy love. And to destroy love is to destroy God himself. For God is love. (1Jn 4:8) Once, Satan dared Jesus to fall into this tempting offer. (Mt 4:1-11) He failed miserably.

Why would Jesus exchange his soul for the world? He would be betraying himself. He is love, and offering such love for auction is preposterous.

Is it impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God? “Of course not!” Jesus would have replied. As he once said: “Nothing is impossible with God.” (Mk 10:27) That is Jesus himself speaking. And Jesus is God. And God is love. If there is nothing impossible with God, so, everything is possible with love.

Yes, Mommy Dionisia, with love, even the rich can get to heaven.

OCT 18

29TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Is 53:10-11; Heb 4:14-16; Mk 10:35-45

The Inescapable Cup

ENRICO GONZALES, O.P.

Now we realize why not only Peter but the rest of the apostles did not really understand the predictions of Jesus regarding his suffering. They had no idea at all of the “cup” Jesus had to drink to fulfill the will of his Father. (Mk 10:38-39) Much less were they thinking that drinking that “cup” with Jesus was a necessary requisite to participate in his Kingdom. They only knew the power of this world – the power that would give them the right to rule and to dominate, the power to be a master. Jesus would dramatize in the Last Supper that this was not the case. Washing the feet of the apostles themselves, he graphically portrayed that in his Kingdom the master has to serve. “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (Jn13:14) Washing the feet was during that time the most abject task of domestic slaves. In assuming this duty, Jesus had revolutionized the concept of power. Jesus taught the apostles – and all of us – that in his Kingdom there is only one power: the power to serve.

Politics need not be condemned as something evil. Politics if

understood well and practiced right can be a boon to effective governance. Even the pagan Philosopher, Aristotle, defined politics as no less than the art of good government, the art of serving the people well. That politics has become nowadays the art “to divide in order to conquer” is certainly Machiavellian style. Machiavelli – this Italian political thinker – in his effort to “modernize” the role of politics in the present society made everything a fair game to the aim of acquiring power. Never mind morality, never mind God. If in the plan of attaining power, one has to ask God to vacate his throne and install a purely human regime, so be it. To him there was nothing wrong in politics: only efficient or otherwise. If it works, then, implement it. If besides being efficient, the strategy is moral, well, the politician is simply lucky. But morality is beside the point. Power is absolute and that is all there is to politics.

The apostles certainly had never heard of Machiavelli but they did not realize that they were already drinking his poison. Politics – good moral politics, that is – will never divide a group, much less destroy it. But the apostles seemed to be slow learners. It would even take a Pentecost for the apostles to understand the meaning of power in Jesus’ context. On Pentecost, the “cup” which Jesus drank to the last drop became as lucid as a summer’s day. Crucifixion stood before them no longer as a moment of torture, a celebration of death. It was on the cross that Jesus ruled the world. There, Jesus ruled the world because there, also, he served mankind to the utmost. On the cross, Jesus lifted himself up and with him all of us to his Father. (Jn 3:14-15). What an offering! What a sacrifice! The lesson of crucifixion had never left the apostles since the Pentecost. They then understood fully why Jesus left them the “cup” to drink. Once, they aspired to rule the world and quarreled among themselves as to who would hold the scepter. They were very wrong. Jesus promised them no scepter at all but just a cup, a bitter cup: suffering – even death – for the sake of loving service to God and humanity.

From this cup, we too are not exempted. ■

OCT 25

30TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Jer 31:7-9; Heb 5:1-6; Mk 10:46-52

Privacy: The Right to be Blind?

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There is no explicit reason provided by the Gospel reading for today why the people should be scolding Bartimaeus. We could just guess that perhaps they were such an audience who could easily be distracted from what they were doing even with a simple grating sound of a mouse walk. If this were so, they must have mistaken the silence of the womb for the silence of the tomb. The womb is silent because there is a budding life waiting inside to burst out. The tomb is silent because there is nothing inside except rotting flesh and dead bones. The cemetery that was Jesus' majority listeners must have wanted to condemn Bartimaeus to eternal silence and be one of them: a tomb. But Bartimaeus would not listen. He was blind but he was not dead. Finding hope in Jesus' mercy, he would like to enjoy his life to the full.

A lot of people are like Bartimaeus' crowd: killjoy. For them, despair is a form of heroism. Accept your fate, it is heaven's design, and there is nothing anyone can do to change it. Biting the bitter bullet is a display of machismo but who needs a brave man who condemns himself to an endless near-death experience when there is someone who could easily save him even from the grave? Bartimaeus believed in Jesus. Although blind, he saw Jesus perform miracles to anyone who had genuine faith: the lepers, the deaf and mute, the paralytic, and the blind like him. Jesus even resurrected people from death. If Jesus could perform miracles to them, why not to him? Was he not also a son of Israel? That might be true, but the crowd must be thinking that they must also have a right to their peace – call it sepulchral if you please – still, it was their right and nobody, much less a miserable blind man like Bartimaeus, could take it away from them. Privacy was very much a prime value once upon a time as it is in the present society. Privacy is often used, or should we say abused, as an alibi for our indifference to injustice committed in our presence but which

we try to ignore. Neighbors are killing each other just a door away from us and why bother? We would rather opt to shut our windows, switch on the TV and adjust its volume to the maximum in order to desensitize our ears from hearing the commotion outside. Concrete forms of injustice are perpetrated left and right in our society, committed by all kinds of citizens, or alas, by our government itself, and we play dumb like a snake who in order to save its skin play dead in the presence of its would be predator. In the long run, we realize that it was not Bartimaeus who was blind. It was the people who kept on preventing him from approaching Jesus. They were a scandal to society – literally, an obstacle to someone else’s salvation. They could have helped Bartimaeus to find his redemption and instead, they preferred to enjoy their silence – their privacy. Alas, we are not really far from Bartimaeus’ time. We hear babies screaming for their lives, hungry people crying out for bread, war victims agonizing in pain, and we choose to keep quiet.

Privacy, privacy, privacy – sometimes, that’s all it takes to be blind! ■

