



The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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THE YEAR FOR PRIESTS

This year's feast of the Sacred Heart on June 19 marked the beginning of the *annus sacerdotalis*, the "year for priests," announced by Pope Benedict. The feast of the Sacred Heart has traditionally been a day of prayer for the sanctification of the clergy, and so the pope picked that feast to launch this special year of prayer for and with the priests of the Church. He chose 2009-10, he said, because it is the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, the Curé of Ars, who is the worldwide patron saint of parish priests. The day before the solemn inauguration in Rome of this Year for Priests, the pope issued a letter addressed to all of his brother priests in which he presented the reasons and hopes behind such a celebration. In what follows, everything in italics is from this letter of Pope Benedict.

The pope begins by saying that this year is *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.* This is the single most important theme in the letter: the vital link between the priest's spiritual, inner life and his public, ministerial proclamation of the gospel. For all of the talk and efforts aimed at enhancing the priest's professional competence and effectiveness, necessary as that may be, the priesthood is not a job that can be done irrespective of what is going on in the heart of the doer. No one sees into another's heart, but the heart matters, and the pope insists that the heart of the priest matters, and that unless the priestly heart undergoes a profound renewal the world will not have the powerful and penetrating evangel-

ical witness that it so desperately needs. The renewal of the priest's heart happens as it is conformed more and more to the Sacred Heart of Jesus himself, and so the pope quotes (for the first of many times in this letter) a favorite saying of the Curé of Ars: "The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus."

The heart of Christ is not whole and entire, but pierced by the soldier's lance, and in many popular images of the Sacred Heart, it is also surrounded by a crown of thorns. The wound and the thorns, the signs of pain and suffering, lead the pope to think *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.*

It is 2009, and no mention can be made of the pain endured by priests without honestly addressing the suffering inflicted on the Church by priests who were not faithful to their calling and who hideously abused their position of trust by sexual misconduct. The pope deals with this in one of the letter's longer paragraphs. The world rightly finds in such behavior grounds for scandal and rejection. The Church must respond to this scandal with *not only a frank and complete acknowledgement of the weakness 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, of religious afire with love for God and for souls, and of insightful, patient spiritual guides.*

The renewal in the Church of the realization of the gift of the priesthood is also one of Pope

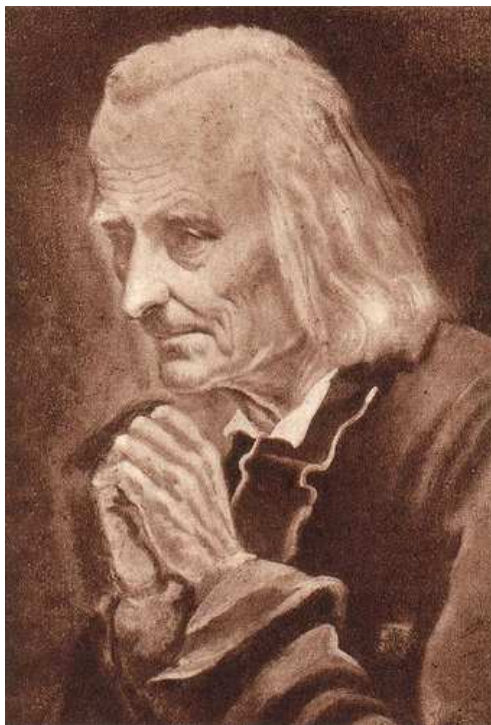
Benedict's goals for this special year. The abuse inflicted by unfaithful priests is so awful and damaging precisely because the reality of the priesthood is so great. The pope quotes St. John Mary Vianney at length in his praise and wonder at the priesthood. Such words, the pope concedes, *might sound excessive* to the modern ear, but they indicate both the esteem this saint had for the priesthood and his *boundless sense of responsibility* that he fulfill its demands in all charity and honor.

John Mary Vianney arrived at Ars under no illusions as to the condition of his new parish. The bishop had warned him, "There is little love of God in that parish; you will be the one to put it there." He began to pray for his parish at once, and offered any sufferings or difficulties he would encounter for the cause of its conversion. The pope writes, *Dear brother priests, let us ask the Lord Jesus for the grace to learn for ourselves something of the pastoral plan of St. 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 decided to work to mesh the holiness of the priesthood with his life as a priest by virtually living in his church. He went into the church before sunrise and remained

there until the evening Angelus at 6 p.m. Whenever anyone needed him, they knew exactly where to find him if, that is, he was not on one of his frequent sick calls or missions of charity to the poor. He instituted patronal feast celebrations, renovated the parish church, provided for the education of the parish's children, and all along the way he founded confraternities to assist in this work and enlisted lay people to work alongside him. In doing so, the pope points out, the Curé was doing much more than tapping into an available source of labor for the work of the Church. He was, rather, revealing the truth that in the Church of Christ *priests and laity together make up the one priestly people.*

Working with his parishioners, John Mary Vianney also taught them, and did so primarily by the witness of his life. He prayed constantly,



often stopping before the tabernacle for a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and they learned to do the same. "We know that Jesus is there in the tabernacle," he told them, "Let us open our hearts to him, let us rejoice in his sacred presence. That is the best prayer." The whole of his life of prayer – and theirs, as it more and more came under his influence – was directed to the Mass. Every chance he got, he urged them to attend Mass and to prepare themselves to receive the communion worthily and frequently. "Come to communion, my brothers and sisters, come to Jesus," he

said. "Come to live from him in order to live with him... Of course you are not worthy of him, but you need him!"

From the reports of his parishioners, we know that they believed him because of the way he conducted himself in the celebration of the Eucharist. He did not simply lead them in worship, he himself worshipped, and did so fervently. "He gazed upon the Host with immense love," a woman of Ars remembered. *He was*

convinced that the fervor of a priest's life depended entirely upon the Mass: "The reason why a priest is lax [in his living] 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!"

For the Curé of Ars, the axis of his life and ministry ran from the altar to the confessional. A mistaken view of the state of religion in France in the first half of the nineteenth century might make us think that this was an age remote from ours, but the pope is quite clear on this: *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."* In his work in the confessional the Curé knew full well who was the primary mover, as 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... This good Savior is so filled with love that he seeks us everywhere."

Pope Benedict has clearly not given up on the sacrament of confession, and one of his hopes for this Year for Priests is that those parish priests who have given up on it – and many certainly have – will go deep within themselves to see again the example of the patron of parish priests and to learn from it. *From St. John Mary Vianney we can learn to put our unflinching trust in the Sacrament of Penance, to set it once more at the center of our pastoral concerns, and to*

take up the "dialogue of salvation" which it entails. For this to happen, the parish and the parish priest will have to do a lot more than just offer the sacrament for a half hour on Saturday afternoons, even as St. John Mary Vianney did a lot more to revive interest in confession than just hang around the church building waiting for the penitents to come. It will have to be taught and preached, and here the example and leadership of the parish priest is indispensable.

An authentic priestly life, Benedict writes, a life that is believable and that provides the required infrastructure for all priestly ministry, is marked by an austere realistic asceticism that is centered on simplicity of life and the evangelical counsels. True, he says, priests do not take the vows of religious, but they must live poverty, chastity and obedience nonetheless in a way suited to their priestly state. In this way their manner of living will reveal a heart of love, a heart like Christ's own, which is not centered on self but which gives itself to others. Quoting the apostle Paul, the pope writes: *The Apostle to the Gentiles... 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." 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" (II Cor 5:14-15). Could a finer program be proposed to any priest resolved to advance along the path of Christian perfection?*

To be borne by the flow of grace out beyond the boundaries of our little self into the infinite depths of the love of God is the Christian mystery. The priesthood, called by the Curé of Ars "the love of the heart of Jesus," serves that mystery and the holy people on the earthly pilgrimage into it. In the often vehemently partisan and frankly political arguments over the priestly vocation of the past four decades this most basic fact of the priesthood has at times disappeared from view. Pope Benedict's Year for Priests and his selection of the profoundly counter-cultural St. John Mary Vianney as its central figure are meant to recall this forgotten truth for all of us.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
 as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*