

June 28, 2009

Earlier this month on the Feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI opened a Year of the Priest. He will close this Jubilee Year on June 19, 2010, the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, with a meeting of priests in St. Peter's Square. While St. John Vianney is already considered the patron saint of parish priests, Pope Benedict XVI will proclaim the Cure of Ars the patron saint of all priests during this Jubilee Year. This 19th-Century saint is an inspiring example of a priest totally dedicated to the service of his people.

St. John Vianney drew thousands of Catholics to his confessional in the small village of Ars. He heard confessions for many hours each day. He was also known for visiting his people and teaching them in his own simple, but effective, way about the mysteries of God.

We now live in a time of great social upheaval when the forces of secularization are eroding the Christian vision of life. While it is important for all of us to keep our priorities straight and to strive to grow in union with Jesus, it is particularly important for priests to model for their people lives centered in Christ and to proclaim zealously His reconciling Gospel of life, love, and peace.

Every baptized Catholic is called to hold Jesus at the center of his or her heart and to witness to Jesus' love in their families, workplaces, and beyond. Ordained priests are further called to share in the apostolic ministry given to the apostles and carried on by the bishops in collaboration with their co-workers, the priests. Thus, the vocation of a priest involves not just discipleship, but leadership. They are to bring Jesus' call to discipleship to others and to teach all of the baptized how to live their lives as followers of Jesus.

As co-workers with the bishop, priests are ordained to preach the Gospel and teach the faith, to shepherd the faithful in their life together, and to celebrate divine worship.

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical on the Eucharist, described the priesthood as born from, living in, and working and bearing fruit from the Holy Eucharist. There can be no Eucharist without the priesthood, just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist. The priest acts in the person of Christ. The Holy Spirit, who causes the bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Christ through the words and actions of the priest, is at work throughout the ministry of the priest.

The high point of the priest's life each day is to bring about the Eucharistic Sacrifice in the person of Christ and offer it to God in the name of all the people. So, too, does the priest act in the person of Christ as he extends the forgiving and healing touch of the Savior to the faithful in the other sacraments.

The purpose of this Jubilee Year of Priests is to encourage priests to strive for an authentically priestly heart, to foster an evermore intense union with the Lord Jesus Himself. It is to help priests re-discover their proper identity, to appreciate more deeply their own presbyterate and their sacramental relationship with their bishop.

I strongly encourage each of you to say at least a Hail Mary each day during this year for the continuing sanctification of myself and our priests in this diocese. I also encourage your prayers for our seminarians that they might be formed after the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pray also that the Lord will bless our diocese with an increase of generous young men who respond to the call to the priesthood for service in our diocese.