

Pope says roles of priest, laity should not be blurred

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy - The special role of priests should be kept distinct from that of lay people even in parts of the world where there is a shortage of ordained clergy, Pope Benedict XVI told Brazilian bishops.

Meeting Sept. 17 with bishops from the poor and arid northeastern area of Brazil, the pope said the role of the priest "is essential and irreplaceable in announcing the word and celebrating the sacraments."

"It is necessary to avoid the secularization of the clergy and the clericalization of the laity," the pope told the bishops at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, south of Rome.

Dioceses in many areas of Brazil have come to rely on substantial involvement of lay ministers and other lay people to mitigate a shortage in ordained priests.

"It is not a lack of priests that justifies a more active and consistent participation of the laity," the pope said. Rather, lay faithful should live more fully their own responsibilities and appreciate the "specific and inimitable role of the priest as pastor of the entire community," he said.

Catholics should express and live their faith fully in daily life, including in politics, the pope said, warning against participation in politics by priests.

"Priests must stay away from a personal involvement in politics, in order to foster unity and communion of all the faithful and to be a point of reference for everyone," he said.

Brazilian bishops must continue their efforts to encourage vocations and not assume that the present priest shortage is the usual state of affairs, the pope said.

“It’s important that the current situation, in which many of you are forced to organize church life with few priests, is not considered normal or typical of the future,” he said.

The clergy in the various dioceses should help each other out so that the faithful in all areas can have qualified ordained ministers to guide them, he said.

The bishops were meeting with Pope Benedict and Vatican officials for their “ad limina” visits, required of heads of dioceses every five years to brief the pope on the situation in their home territories.