

Pope thanks God for gift of priesthood, but also recognizes failures

VATICAN CITY - The Catholic Church must acknowledge that some priests have done great harm to others, but it also must thank God for the gifts the majority of priests have given to the church and the world, Pope Benedict XVI said.

In the face of scandal, “what is most helpful to the church ... 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” of the priesthood, the pope said in his letter for the Year for Priests.

Coinciding with the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, patron of parish priests, the yearlong focus on priestly ministry was to begin June 19.

Pope Benedict’s letter to the world’s priests marking the occasion was released by the Vatican June 18.

He said he hoped priests would use the year and its special events to deepen their commitment to their own renewal “for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world.”

The year also is an occasion to thank the many priests who selflessly give their lives to serving the church and alleviating human suffering and to recognize the sacrifice of priests who courageously minister under the threat of persecution, the pope said.

Pope Benedict asked people to keep in mind “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.”

At the same time, he said, “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.”

Pope Benedict encouraged priests to use St. John Vianney as a model for their priesthood, recognizing Holy Orders as an incredible gift of God that calls for a renewed commitment each day to living a holy life.

While the sacraments a priest celebrates are valid independently of his personal holiness or worthiness, the pope said, priests cannot overlook the fact that the closer they draw to Christ and to living as he did, the more effective their ministry will be.

The pope specifically asked the world’s priests to focus on learning from St. John Vianney’s devotion to the Eucharist and his conviction about the importance of the sacrament of penance.

St. John 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,” the pope said.

His success in teaching his people the importance of praying before the Eucharist was not so much the result of preaching or catechesis, but what they observed when they saw him celebrating Mass, he said.

His focus on Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of the world naturally led to an emphasis on teaching people the importance of confession, the pope said.

“Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this sacrament,” Pope Benedict wrote.

In St. John Vianney’s France, “confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day,” but the saint insisted that the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist demanded that people be reconciled with God and he made sure he was in the church for long hours each day in case someone came wanting to confess their sins, he said.

The pope said St. John Vianney knew how to encourage the fearful and sorrowful to open themselves to God’s love and mercy through the sacrament.

“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,’ he would say,” the pope wrote.

Pope Benedict also said priests must support and encourage each other because only in that way “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 pope entrusted the Year for Priests to the Blessed Virgin Mary and asked 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.”

“Despite all the evil present in our world,” he said, Jesus’ victory over sin and death “gives us the strength to look to the future with confidence.”

The text of the pope’s letter in English is available online at:

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

The text of the letter in Spanish is available online at:

https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20090616_anno-sacerdotale_sp.html.