

Priest to preach to Pope Benedict on the priestly vocation

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI has invited a Salesian priest, an expert in early Christianity, to lead his annual Lenten retreat.

Salesian Father Enrico dal Covolo was to offer 17 talks and meditations on priesthood in the 21st century Feb. 21-27 during the retreat for the pope and top Vatican officials.

The retreat is held in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel of the Apostolic Palace and all the pope's public activities, including his Wednesday general audience, are suspended during the week.

Father dal Covolo, who also is an expert on the Christian catacombs, is the first priest invited by Pope Benedict to lead the retreat. The pope's previous four Lenten retreats were led by cardinals.

The 2010 retreat was to focus on "Lessons from God and the Church on Priestly Vocations," the Vatican said.

The weeklong spiritual exercises were to begin with vespers, an introductory meditation and Eucharistic exposition Sunday evening. The next five days would include prayer from the Divine Office, three reflections each day by Father dal Covolo, and eucharistic adoration and benediction each evening. The retreat was to finish Feb. 27 with morning prayer.

The theme chosen for the retreat was connected to the current celebration of the Year for Priests, and each talk was designed to look at a specific concern of modern priests, such as promoting vocations, missionary work and penitential practices.

Father dal Covolo's reflections were to include separate talks on St. John Vianney, patron of parish priests; a reflection using the fictional parish priest from Georges Bernanos' novel, "The Diary of a Country Priest"; and one looking at the priestly example of Pope John Paul II.

Father dal Covolo, 59, has been a professor in the department of Christian and classical literature at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome since 1986. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1979.

He is the postulator for the causes of saints of the Salesian order and for the canonization cause of Pope John Paul I, a fellow Venetian and a family friend. He recently was named to the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, which oversees the care of the ancient Christian catacombs throughout Italy.

He is a member of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences and a consultor for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He also serves as a member of the commission concerned with dispensations from priestly obligations in his role as a consultor for the Congregation for the Clergy.