

Vocations thrive in parishes with 'spiritual soil,' pope says

VATICAN CITY - Parish communities with a real sense of obligation to spread the Gospel are places where vocations to be missionary priests and religious thrive, said Pope Benedict XVI.

"Vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life can only flourish in a spiritual soil that is well cultivated," he said in his message for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

The papal message for the day of prayer, which will be observed April 13 in most countries, was released Feb. 22 at the Vatican. The 2008 theme is "Vocations at the Service of the Church on Mission."

In his message, Pope Benedict insisted that the task of explicitly proclaiming the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ is still at the heart of the vocation of every Christian.

In following Jesus, the pope said, some men are called to the priesthood to carry out the missionary task in a special way by preaching and teaching, caring for the poor, sick and weak, and administering the sacraments.

In addition, in following Jesus who sacrificed everything to bring salvation to humanity, some Christians are called to leave their homelands and set off to bring the message of God's love to a wider audience, he said.

"To respond to the Lord's call means facing in prudence and simplicity every danger and even persecutions, since 'a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master,'" the pope said, quoting the Gospel of St. Matthew.

"There have always been in the church many men and women who, prompted by the action of the Holy Spirit, choose to live the Gospel in a radical way, professing the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience," he said.

Pope Benedict said that those on the front lines of the church's work in missionary territories almost always are the priests and religious women and men who consecrate their whole lives to serving God and humanity.

All Christians have an obligation to support the missionaries, materially and with their prayers, he said, and to pray for more vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

"Furthermore, so that the church may continue to fulfill the mission entrusted to her by Christ and not lack promoters of the Gospel so badly needed by the world, Christian communities must never fail to provide both children and adults with constant education in the faith," he said.

"It is necessary to keep alive in the faithful a committed sense of missionary responsibility and active solidarity with the peoples of the world," the pope wrote.