

Year for Priests: Pies, prayers not enough; clergy need love, support

VATICAN CITY -Each and every one of the world's 408,000 priests should feel loved, respected, valued and supported in his vocation to bring the Gospel to an increasingly secular - but still open - world, said Cardinal Claudio Hummes.

The Brazilian cardinal, prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, said the 2009-2010 Year for Priests, which begins June 19, must recognize the new challenges and possibilities Catholic priests face.

Pope Benedict XVI called for the special year to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, who was famed for his priestly ministry.

The aim, however, is not to organize a historical commemoration, but to look realistically at the world in which priests live and work and to recognize that the horrible abuse perpetrated by some priests has harmed the reputation of all priests, Cardinal Hummes said.

"Many priests in the world have been wounded by what has happened in recent times - pedophilia and other crimes that the media has publicized and that are true and extremely serious, especially pedophilia in which the victims are minors whose lives often are damaged forever," Cardinal Hummes told Catholic News Service in early June.

"These are terrible crimes that must be judged and punished," he said.

But justice also requires people to recognize that the vast majority of the world's priests have never been involved in any kind of abuse, and instead give their lives to Jesus and to serving the church and humanity, he said.

"We must say to priests that we are proud of them and that we recognize they are a group that is very special for the church and society," the cardinal said. "We must recognize who they are and what they do and tell them that we love them and want to be alongside them to support them."

Cardinal Hummes is not looking for a yearlong commitment to baking pies for priests or smiling at them more than usual; he's looking for study and discussions and meetings and laypeople rolling up their sleeves to work alongside their priests.

And he's definitely not looking for some 1950s style of keeping the celebration in the church or the parish hall, avoiding the wicked world outside.

"The post-modern, urban, relativistic, secularized culture is the dominant culture," he said, and the temptation is to say, "Oh, it is impossible to engage this society. We should remain in our corner, with our little group, closing ourselves into a ghetto," the 74-year-old cardinal said.

But the world still is the place where priests are called to live with joy and "to evangelize with the certainty that it is possible to bring the Gospel to this new society and not demonize it, not ignore it and not be discouraged by it," he said.

Cardinal Hummes is convinced that men and women still are looking for the love of God and salvation in Jesus, but "maybe not with an approach that starts with doctrine and morals."

Once people meet Jesus, he said, "then come doctrine and morality as a form of following that Jesus who attracted me, enchanted me, enlightened me. It is then that you begin talking about what it means to follow Jesus in practice; that's morality."

Cardinal Hummes said that showing support for priests includes sharing responsibility with them for parish life and for mission.

"Sometimes laypeople help their priests, but think that if things don't go well, it's the priest's responsibility - it's his church. But, no, the church is all of ours," he said.

Obviously, any discussion about the world's priests includes talk about the priest shortage, a situation the cardinal insists is not exaggerated.

"We have too few priests," he said. "Several countries face a very worrying, very difficult future because the number of priests has fallen so drastically."

Vatican statistics have reported an increase in the number of priests in the world in

the past few years, but that increase has not kept pace with the increased number of Catholics in the world, not to mention the world's growing population.

The Statistical Yearbook of the Holy See, recently released with figures gathered Dec. 31, 2007, reported that there were 408,024 priests in the world. Five years earlier, the number was 405,058.

The yearbook also provided tables illustrating Cardinal Hummes' point about the increased number of priests not keeping up with the increasing population. According to the yearbook, there were 2,810 Catholics for each priest in the world at the end of 2007, while there were only 2,642 Catholics per priest at the end of 2002.

While the significant growth in the number of priests in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe may mean some of those men would be available to minister in Western Europe and North America, Cardinal Hummes said local communities should give rise to local vocations.

"A local church having its own priests is a sign of vitality," he said.