

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI PROCLAIMING A YEAR FOR PRIESTS

In today's world, as in the troubled times of the Cure of Ars, the lives and activity of priests need to be distinguished by a determined witness to the Gospel. As Pope Paul VI rightly noted, "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses". Lest we experience existential emptiness and the effectiveness of our ministry be compromised, we need to ask ourselves ever anew: "Are we truly pervaded by the word of God? Is that word truly the nourishment we live by, even more than bread and the things of this world? Do we really know that word? Do we love it? Are we deeply engaged with this word to the point that it really leaves a mark on our lives and shapes our thinking?". Just as Jesus called the Twelve to be with him (cf. Mk 3:14), and only later sent them forth to preach, so too in our days priests are called to assimilate that "new style of life" which was inaugurated by the Lord Jesus and taken up by the Apostles.

It was complete commitment to this "new style of life" which marked the priestly ministry of the Cure of Ars, Pope John XXIII, in his Encyclical Letter *Sacerdotii nostri primordial*, published in 1959 on the first centenary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney, presented his asceticism with special reference to the "three evangelical counsels" which the Pope considered necessary also for diocesan priests: "even though priests are not bound to embrace these evangelical counsels by virtue of the clerical state, these counsels nonetheless offer them, as they do all the faithful, the surest road to the desired goal of the Christian perfection". The Cure of Ars lived the "evangelical counsels" in a way suited to his priestly state. His poverty was not the poverty of a religious or a monk, but that proper to a priest: while managing much money (since well-to-do pilgrims naturally took an interest in his charitable works), he realized that everything had been donated to his church, his poor, his orphans, the girls of his "Providence", his families of modest means. Consequently, he "was back". At the end of his life, he could say with absolute tranquility: "I no longer have anything. The good Lord can call me whenever he wants!". His chastity, too, was that demanded of a priest for his ministry. It could be said that it was chastity suited to one who must daily touch the Eucharist, who contemplates it blissfully and with that same bliss offers it to his flock. It was said of him that "he radiated chastity"; the faithful would see this when he turned and gazed at the tabernacle with loving eyes". Finally, Saint John Mary Vianney's Obedience found full embodiment in his conscientious fidelity to the daily demands of his ministry. We know how he was tormented by the thought of his inadequacy for parish ministry and by a desire to flee "in order to bewail his poor life, in solitude". Only obedience and a thirst for souls convinced him to remain at his post. As he explained to himself and his flock: "There are no two good ways of serving God. There is only one: serve him as he desires to be served". He considered this the golden rule for a life of obedience: "Do only what can be offered to the good Lord". In this context of spirituality nourished by the practice of the evangelical counsels, I would like to invite all priests, during this Year dedicated to them, to welcome the new springtime which the Spirit is now bringing about in the Church, not least through the ecclesial movements and the new communities. "In his gifts the Spirit is multifaceted... He breathes where he wills. He does so unexpectedly, in unexpected places, and in ways previously unheard of... but he also shows us that he works with a view to the one body and in the unity of the one body".[45] In this regard, the statement of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* continues to be timely: "While testing the spirits to discover if they be of God, priests must discover with faith, recognize with joy and foster diligently the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, whether these be of a humble or more exalted kind".