

The Year for Priests

Pope Benedict XVI recently declared June 2009 to June 2010 as the Year for Priests in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the death of John Mary Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests.

Father Vianney is considered a true example of a pastor at the service of Christ's flock. He was appointed pastor of the parish of Ars, a remote town in France, following the French Revolution. The revolution had resulted in religious ignorance caused by many years of the destruction of the Catholic Church. He felt that it was his calling to bring the people back to God and the Church. As Father Vianney began preaching his sermons each Sunday, the people of Ars became, once again, committed to the Catholic faith. "The people noticed that he prayed with great recollection and celebrated the Divine Liturgy with deep devotion. They noticed too, his mortified way of life, his love for the poor and the sick, his mild words to everyone. Very soon he had won the hearts of all" (*John Cooper*). In his later years, tens of thousands of people would gather to listen to the humble parish priest speak. Father Vianney's [life](#) was filled with works of charity and love, making him an inspiration to priests worldwide. Not only is this occasion in remembrance of John Mary Vianney meant to deepen the commitment of priests, but it is also a time for us laity to reflect. We are given the opportunity to learn more about the priesthood, to encourage religious vocations, as well as to recognize and support the priests in our lives.

"The priesthood is not an institution that exists alongside the laity or above it. The priesthood of bishops and priests, as well as the ministry of deacons, is for the laity, and precisely for this reason it possesses a ministerial character, that is to say, one of service" (*Pope John Paul II*).

A priest's life is spent helping others and is filled with self-sacrifice. A priest must endure the world's incomprehension, indifference, and even rejection of God. He strives to restore and strengthen the relationship between the Church and God, which is not always an easy task. However unattainable this mission may seem at times, they remain undaunted, finding security and comfort in prayer. Priests live to serve the God and Saviour they have devoted their lives to by teaching the Word of God. "The word of God is the nourishment that the human being needs. Making God's word ever present and new and thereby giving nourishment to people is the task of the righteous Pastor. And he must also know how to resist the enemies, the wolves. He must go first, point out the way, preserve the unity of the flock" (*Pope Benedict XVI*). Priests provide us with hope through their preaching, their compassion, and above all their lifelong commitment to the Church.

There is an undeniable shortage of priests within our world. In Canada, the number of Catholics per priest is approximately 1,653. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for one person to reach out to so many people. The Church is in great need for young men and women to join the vocation, not only as priests, but as religious brothers and sisters as well.

We are invited by God to share our gifts and talents, who calls to each of us saying, "Come and follow me," just as Jesus said to His disciples. The present shortage of priests and religious in the world is a challenge to be met with determination and courage. It is certain that Jesus Christ, who during his earthly

life called many to consecrated life, is still doing so in today. Knowing the Church's needs, Jesus continues to extend the invitation, especially to young people, calling them to a life of total dedication. It is up to us to listen to the urging of the Holy Spirit, calling us to a devout and pious life. God is offering us the gift of religious vocation, and we should accept it.

We must also recognize our priest's need for the Church's help and support. Prayer is always appreciated and helps to sustain the priest and religious spiritually, but there is more that the people within the Church can do. The Church belongs to us all, not just the priest. It is not the priest's responsibility alone to look after the welfare of the Church. We must use our gifts and talents to help our parish to grow and prosper. Volunteers are essential for the benefit of the Church. We must be willing to give of ourselves and our time to assist our priests. We should also express our gratitude and encouragement for the priests within our lives, as they do so much for each of us. When we show recognition for what they do, our priests will realize how appreciated they truly are and will know that they are doing the job they set out to do. What we do for the benefit of our priests, we are also doing for Christ, for it is said in the bible, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me," (Matthew 25:40). It is not enough to simply watch the priest take care of the Church on his own; we must be willing to work alongside our priests.

The Year for Priests is not only an opportunity for our priests to grow, but for us to grow as well. We need to acknowledge that the number of priests in comparison to parishioners is declining, and the few priests we have left need our help and support. God has blessed us with priests to guide us on our path to becoming better people. "A good pastor, a pastor after God's heart, is the greatest treasure the good Lord can give a parish" (*Pope Benedict XVI*).

As we enter into the Year for Priests, may we truly realize what our priests do for our benefit and strive to help them, not only for the upcoming year, but also for the rest of our lives.