

# **"Our Holy Father ... Knows the Importance of Holiness"**

By Cardinal Justin Rigali

POPE Benedict XVI has declared a "Year of the Priest," which will begin on June 19. Since this will be a time of special prayer by and for our priests, this week we will dwell on this topic given to us by our Holy Father.

## ***Saint John Vianney***

Saint Pius X (1903-1914) was the first Pope to be photographed regularly. Some of the photographs show him giving an instruction on the Gospel to the faithful of Rome, which he liked to do each Sunday. Others show him explaining the catechism to children, which was also a favorite apostolate of his. Some photographs show him seated at his desk in the Vatican.

Looking at the photographs of the Pope at his desk, we see something quite interesting. On his desk, along with the crucifix, is a large statue. It is not an image of one of the Apostles or of a great Doctor of the Church. It is a statue of John Marie Vianney, a humble French parish priest, whom Pius X beatified in 1905. It was another Pope, Pius XI (1922-1939) who declared Saint John Vianney the Patron of Parish Priests throughout the world.

This year is the 150th anniversary of Saint John Vianney's death in 1859 and Pope Benedict is using this occasion to declare a Year dedicated to the mission of the priest. It is interesting to note that Pope Benedict XVI, who is universally acknowledged as one of the greatest minds of our time, has brought such attention to Saint John Vianney, a priest who came very close to never being ordained because of his poor marks in the Seminary. This is because our Holy Father not only possesses intellectual knowledge but also knows the importance of holiness, especially for the priest. Saint John Vianney is a great model and example of that holiness and that is why all the popes of this century have called attention to him as a model for priests. This includes Saint Pius X, who had been a parish priest himself, and Pope Benedict XVI, who never served in a parish on a regular basis.

Saint John Vianney was born at a very unfortunate time in the history of his native France. Three years after his birth in 1786, the French Revolution broke out. The spirit of this Revolution was filled with a hatred for the Church. Many French

churches were destroyed and bishops, priests and Religious Sisters were massacred. He received his First Holy Communion in secret as the public celebration of the Mass by loyal priests was forbidden. When he first expressed his desire to be a priest, his father would not allow it because young John was needed to work on the farm. He was twenty when he was finally able to pursue his studies for the priesthood, under the direction of a priest who ran a small school.

Once the Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars were over, he eventually was able to enroll in a seminary. He found the studies very difficult and, although the authorities recognized his goodness and made special provision for his slowness in learning, after doing poorly in his studies, he was about to be dismissed from the seminary. The Vicar General of the Diocese allowed his studies to continue by asking the Rector: "Is Monsieur Vianney good?" The Rector replied: "He is a model of goodness." The Vicar General said: "Let him be ordained. The grace of God will do the rest." Later, at John Vianney's ordination in 1815, the same Vicar General said: "The Church wants not only learned priests but, even more, holy ones."

In 1817, young Father Vianney was sent to the small town of Ars, whose parish consisted of 230 people. He took upon himself a life of great penance and prayer as one of the means of drawing the people of his village away from sin and closer to God. He became a great apostle of the confessional and his fame for sanctity and for being a wise but challenging confessor eventually made it necessary for him to spend upward of eighteen hours a day in the confessional. The little town of Ars became famous throughout France and, eventually, throughout the world because of the holiness of its Pastor. It is this necessity for priestly holiness that Pope Benedict wants to draw attention to during this Year of the Priest.

### *The Heart of Jesus*

It is appropriate that Pope Benedict will begin the Year of the Priest on June 19 which, this year, is the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Saint John Vianney said: "The Priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus," and so we see the intimate connection among these concepts of the Sacred Heart, the Priesthood and Saint John Vianney. The love of the Heart of Jesus culminates in the events of the Last Supper and the Death of Jesus. With great anxiety, Jesus approaches His "hour," as He calls it. He says to His Apostles: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15).

The Gospel of Saint John tells us that Jesus "loved His own in the world and he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). His love overflowed when He gave to

the Apostles, and to all of us, the gift of His very self in the Holy Eucharist. This reminds us that the love of Jesus is not a static love. It is living and enduring. Likewise, we are reminded that we do not believe only in a book or in a set of rules, nor do we believe only in an institution. We believe above all in a Person, Jesus who loves us with an everlasting love and asks that we love Him in return with an individual and personal love. We love His words, His commandments and His Church because they are an extension of Him.

Since the love of Jesus is living and perduring, it must continue in the world until the end of time. The Eucharist is the ongoing gift of the love of Jesus. According to God's plan, the Eucharistic Presence is brought about through the Priesthood. Jesus chose a marvelous means to give us His love in the Holy Mass, in Holy Communion and in the Tabernacle. He makes use of human instruments, imperfect men, whom He calls to continue the role and mission of the Apostles, to do what He did. For two thousand years, this "gift and mystery," as Pope John Paul II called the priesthood, has been transmitted to those whom God mysteriously calls so that His love may be known in the world through His Word and through the Word made Flesh in the most Blessed Sacrament.

### ***The priest in relation to Christ and the Church***

The theme of the Year of the Priest, according to the wishes of our Holy Father, is: "Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of Priests." In this way, the ongoing love of Christ and His fidelity to His promises, which are manifested in the Eucharist, given to us through the Priesthood, are also seen as a challenge to the priest to live a life worthy of the calling to which he has received (cf. Ephesians 4:1). The Year of the Priest is not a "pep rally" for individuals or groups; it is a loving challenge to follow the example of Saint John Vianney, whose intense love for Jesus expressed itself in his zealous and faithful living out of his priestly vocation.

In announcing this special year, Pope Benedict explained what it means for the priest to live out his vocation in the midst of and at the service of, the Church. He said: "The priest's mission is carried out 'in the Church.' This ecclesial, communal, hierarchical and doctrinal dimension is absolutely indispensable to every authentic mission and alone guarantees its spiritual effectiveness. The four aspects mentioned must always be recognized as intimately connected: the mission is 'ecclesial' because no one proclaims himself in the first person. Every priest must be well aware that he is bringing to the world Another, God himself. God is the only treasure which people ultimately desire to find in a priest. The mission is 'communal' because it is carried out in unity and communion (with the Church). Moreover, these derive essentially from that divine intimacy in which the priest is

called to be an expert, so that he may be able to lead the souls entrusted to him humbly and trustingly to the same encounter with the Lord. Lastly, the 'hierarchical' and 'doctrinal' dimensions suggest reaffirming the importance of discipline, doctrinal training and theological and continuing formation" (Address to the members of the Congregation for the Clergy announcing the Year of the Priest, 16 March 2009).

Throughout this year, the priests and bishops of the Archdiocese, along with me, will reflect more deeply on the calling to which we have been called. We will make use of the example of Saint John Vianney and attempt to follow his example of prayer, penance, humility and apostolic zeal in the service of Jesus and you, our people. At the same time, we ask you to pray for us. As Cardinal Claudio Hummes, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, recently wrote in reflecting on this upcoming Year of the Priest: "May this year be an occasion for a period of intense appreciation of the priestly identity, of the theology of the Catholic priesthood, and of the extraordinary meaning of the vocation and mission of priests within the Church and in society with the warm participation of our Catholic people who undoubtedly love their priests and want to see them happy, holy and joyous in their daily apostolic labors."

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