

Pontiff's Message for Vocation Prayer Day

Theme for 2010: "Witness Awakens Vocations"

VATICAN CITY, FEB. 16, 2010 - Here is Benedict XVI's message for the 47th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, to be celebrated on Good Shepherd Sunday, which falls on April 25 this year. The message was signed by the Pope on Nov. 13, and released today by the Vatican press office.

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Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters!

The 47th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, to be celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Easter -- Good Shepherd Sunday -- 25 April 2010, gives me the opportunity to offer for your meditation a theme which is most fitting for this Year for Priests: Witness Awakens Vocations. The fruitfulness of our efforts to promote vocations depends primarily on God's free action, yet, as pastoral experience confirms, it is also helped by the quality and depth of the personal and communal witness of those who have already answered the Lord's call to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life, for their witness is then able to awaken in others a desire to respond generously to Christ's call. This theme is thus closely linked to the life and mission of priests and of consecrated persons. Hence I wish to invite all those whom the Lord has called to work in his vineyard to renew their faithful response, particularly in this Year for Priests which I proclaimed on the 150th anniversary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney, the Curé of Ars, an ever-timely model of a priest and a pastor.

In the Old Testament the prophets knew that they were called to witness by their own lives to the message they proclaimed, and were prepared to face misunderstanding, rejection and persecution. The task which God entrusted to them engaged them fully, like a "burning fire" in the heart, a fire that could not be contained (cf. Jer 20: 9). As a result, they were prepared to hand over to the Lord not only their voice, but their whole existence. In the fullness of time, Jesus, sent by the Father (cf. Jn 5: 36), would bear witness to the love of God for all human beings, without distinction, with particular

attention to the least ones, sinners, the outcast and the poor. Jesus is the supreme Witness to God and to his concern for the salvation of all. At the dawn of the new age, John the Baptist, by devoting his whole life to preparing the way for Christ, bore witness that the promises of God are fulfilled in the Son of Mary of Nazareth. When John saw Jesus coming to the river Jordan where he was baptizing, he pointed him out to his disciples as "the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). His testimony was so effective that two of his disciples, "hearing him say this, followed Jesus" (Jn 1:37).

Similarly the calling of Peter, as we read in the Evangelist John, occurred through the witness of his brother Andrew, who, after meeting the Master and accepting his invitation to stay with him, felt the need to share immediately with Peter what he discovered by "staying" with the Lord: "We have found the Messiah (which means Christ). He then brought him to Jesus" (Jn 1:41-42). This was also the case for Nathanael, Bartholomew, thanks to the witness of yet another disciple, Philip, who joyfully told him of his great discovery: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (Jn 1:45). God's free and gracious initiative encounters and challenges the human responsibility of all those who accept his invitation to become, through their own witness, the instruments of his divine call. This occurs in the Church even today: the Lord makes use of the witness of priests who are faithful to their mission in order to awaken new priestly and religious vocations for the service of the People of God. For this reason, I would like to mention three aspects of the life of a priest which I consider essential for an effective priestly witness.

A fundamental element, one which can be seen in every vocation to the priesthood and the consecrated life, is friendship with Christ. Jesus lived in constant union with the Father and this is what made the disciples eager to have the same experience; from him they learned to live in communion and unceasing dialogue with God. If the priest is a "man of God", one who belongs to God and helps others to know and love him, he cannot fail to cultivate a deep intimacy with God, abiding in his love and making space to hear his Word. Prayer is the first form of witness which awakens vocations. Like the Apostle Andrew, who tells his brother that he has come to know the Master, so too anyone who wants to be a disciple and witness of Christ must

have "seen" him personally, come to know him, and learned to love him and to abide with him.

Another aspect of the consecration belonging to the priesthood and the religious life is the complete gift of oneself to God. The Apostle John writes: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and therefore we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn 3:16). With these words, he invites the disciples to enter into the very mind of Jesus who in his entire life did the will of the Father, even to the ultimate gift of himself on the Cross. Here, the mercy of God is shown in all its fullness; a merciful love that has overcome the darkness of evil, sin and death. The figure of Jesus who at the Last Supper, rises from the table, lays aside his garments, takes a towel, girds himself with it and stoops to wash the feet of the Apostles, expresses the sense of service and gift manifested in his entire existence, in obedience to the will of the Father (cf. Jn 13:3-15). In following Jesus, everyone called to a life of special consecration must do his utmost to testify that he has given himself completely to God. This is the source of his ability to give himself in turn to those whom Providence entrusts to him in his pastoral ministry with complete, constant and faithful devotion, and with the joy of becoming a companion on the journey to so many brothers and sisters, enabling them too to become open to meeting Christ, so that his Word may become a light to their footsteps. The story of every vocation is almost always intertwined with the testimony of a priest who joyfully lives the gift of himself to his brothers and sisters for the sake of the Kingdom of God. This is because the presence and words of a priest have the ability to raise questions and to lead even to definitive decisions (cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 39).

A third aspect which necessarily characterizes the priest and the consecrated person is a life of communion. Jesus showed that the mark of those who wish to be his disciples is profound communion in love: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). In a particular way the priest must be a man of communion, open to all, capable of gathering into one the pilgrim flock which the goodness of the Lord has entrusted to him, helping to overcome divisions, to heal rifts, to settle conflicts and misunderstandings, and to forgive offences. In July 2005, speaking to the clergy of Aosta, I noted that if young people see priests who appear distant and sad, they will hardly feel encouraged to follow their

example. They will remain hesitant if they are led to think that this is the life of a priest. Instead, they need to see the example of a communion of life which can reveal to them the beauty of being a priest. Only then will a young man say, "Yes, this could be my future; I can live like this" (Insegnamenti I, [2005], 354). The Second Vatican Council, in speaking of the witness that awakens vocations, emphasizes the example of charity and of fraternal cooperation which priests must offer (cf. Decree Optatum Totius, 2).

Here I would like to recall the words of my venerable Predecessor John Paul II: "The very life of priests, their unconditional dedication to God's flock, their witness of loving service to the Lord and to his Church – a witness marked by free acceptance of the Cross in the spirit of hope and Easter joy – their fraternal unity and zeal for the evangelization of the world are the first and most convincing factor in the growth of vocations" (Pastores Dabo Vobis, 41). It can be said that priestly vocations are born of contact with priests, as a sort of precious legacy handed down by word, example and a whole way of life.

The same can be said with regard to the consecrated life. The very life of men and women religious proclaims the love of Christ whenever they follow him in complete fidelity to the Gospel and joyfully make their own its criteria for judgement and conduct. They become "signs of contradiction" for the world, whose thinking is often inspired by materialism, self-centredness and individualism. By letting themselves be won over by God through self-renunciation, their fidelity and the power of their witness constantly awaken in the hearts of many young people the desire to follow Christ in their turn, in a way that is generous and complete. To imitate Christ, chaste, poor and obedient, and to identify with him: this is the ideal of the consecrated life, a witness to the absolute primacy of God in human life and history.

Every priest, every consecrated person, faithful to his or her vocation, radiates the joy of serving Christ and draws all Christians to respond to the universal call to holiness. Consequently, in order to foster vocations to the ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life, and to be more effective in promoting the discernment of vocations, we cannot do without the example of those who have already said "yes" to God and to his plan for the life of each individual. Personal witness, in the form of concrete existential choices,

will encourage young people for their part to make demanding decisions affecting their future. Those who would assist them need to have the skills for encounter and dialogue which are capable of enlightening and accompanying them, above all through the example of life lived as a vocation. This was what the holy Curé of Ars did: always in close contact with his parishioners, he taught them "primarily by the witness of his life. It was from his example that the faithful learned to pray" (Letter Proclaiming the Year for Priests, 16 June 2009).

May this World Day once again offer many young people a precious opportunity to reflect on their own vocation and to be faithful to it in simplicity, trust and complete openness. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, watch over each tiny seed of a vocation in the hearts of those whom the Lord calls to follow him more closely, may she help it to grow into a mature tree, bearing much good fruit for the Church and for all humanity. With this prayer, to all of you I impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 13 November 2009

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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