



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

OPENING OF THE YEAR FOR PRIESTS
ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH
OF SAINT JOHN MARY VIANNEY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Saint Peter's Basilica

Friday, 19 June 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In a little while we shall sing in the antiphon to the *Magnificat*: “The Lord has drawn us to his heart—*Suscepit nos Dominus in sinum et cor suum*”. God’s heart, as the expression of his will, is spoken of twenty-six times in the Old Testament. Before God’s heart men and women stand judged. His heartfelt pain at sins of mankind makes God decide on the flood, but then he is touched by the sight of human weakness and offers his forgiveness. Yet another passage of the Old Testament speaks of God’s heart with absolute clarity: it is in the eleventh chapter of the book of the Prophet Hosea, whose opening lines portray the Lord’s love for Israel at the dawn of its history: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1). Israel, however, responds to God’s constant offer of love with indifference and even outright ingratitude. “The more I called them”, the Lord is forced to admit, “the more they went from me” (v. 2). Even so, he never abandons Israel to the power of its enemies, because “my heart”—the the Creator of the universe observes—“recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender” (v. 8).

The heart of God burns with compassion! On today’s solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus the Church presents us this mystery for our contemplation: the mystery of the heart of a God who feels compassion and who bestows all his love upon humanity. A mysterious love, which in the texts of the New Testament is revealed to us as God’s boundless and passionate love for

mankind. God does not lose heart in the face of ingratitude or rejection by the people he has chosen; rather, with infinite mercy he sends his only-begotten Son into the world to take upon himself the fate of a shattered love, so that by defeating the power of evil and death he could restore to human beings enslaved by sin their dignity as sons and daughters. But this took place at great cost—the only-begotten Son of the Father was sacrificed on the Cross: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (cf. Jn 13:1). The symbol of this love which transcends death is his side, pierced by a spear. The Apostle John, an eyewitness, tells us: “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (cf. Jn 19:34).

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for responding to my invitation and coming in great numbers to this celebration with which we inaugurate the [Year for Priests](#). I greet the Cardinals and Bishops, in particular the Cardinal Prefect and the Secretary of the [Congregation for the Clergy](#), together with the officials of that Congregation and the Bishop of Ars. I greet the priests and seminarians from the various seminaries and colleges in Rome; the men and women religious and all the lay faithful present. In a special way I greet His Beatitude Ignace Youssef Younan, the Patriarch of Antioch of the Syrians, who has come to Rome to meet me and to recognize publicly the *"ecclesiastica communio"* which I have granted him.

Together let us pause to contemplate the pierced heart of the Crucified One. Just now we heard once again, in the brief reading from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, that “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4-6). To be “in” Jesus Christ is already to be seated in heaven. The very core of Christianity is expressed in the heart of Jesus; in Christ the revolutionary “newness” of the Gospel is completely revealed and given to us: the Love that saves us and even now makes us live in the eternity of God. As the Evangelist John writes: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). God’s heart calls to our hearts, inviting us to come out of ourselves, to forsake our human certainties, to trust in him and, by following his example, to make ourselves a gift of unbounded love.

While it is true that Jesus’ invitation to “abide in my love” (cf. Jn 15:9) is addressed to all the baptized, on this feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the day of prayer for the sanctification of priests, this invitation resounds all the more powerfully for us priests. It does so in a special way this evening, at the solemn inauguration of the Year for Priests which I have proclaimed to mark the 150th anniversary of the death of the saintly Curé of Ars. A lovely and touching saying of his, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, comes immediately to mind: “the priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus” (n. 1589). How can we fail to be moved when we recall that the gift of our priestly ministry flows directly from this heart? How can we forget that we priests were consecrated to serve, humbly yet authoritatively, the common priesthood of the faithful? Ours is

an mission which is indispensable for the Church and for the world, a mission which calls for complete fidelity to Christ and constant union with him. To abide in his love entails constantly striving for holiness, as did Saint John Mary Vianney.

In the [Letter which I wrote to you for this special Jubilee Year](#), dear brother priests, I wished to highlight some essential aspects of our ministry by making reference to the example and teaching of the Curé of Ars, the model and protector of all priests, especially parish priests. I hope that my Letter will prove a help and encouragement to you in making this Year a graced opportunity to grow ever closer to Jesus, who counts on us, his ministers, to spread and build up his Kingdom, and to radiate his love and his truth. As I invited you at the conclusion of [my Letter](#): “in the footsteps of the Curé of Ars, let yourselves be enthralled by Christ. In this way you too will be, for the world in our time, heralds of hope, reconciliation and peace!”.

To be completely enthralled by Christ! This was the goal of the entire life of Saint Paul, to whom we looked throughout the Pauline Year now ending; this was the goal of the entire ministry of the Curé of Ars, whom we shall invoke in particular during this Year for Priests; may it also be the primary goal for each and every one of us. Certainly, to be ministers at the service of the Gospel, study and careful, ongoing pastoral and theological formation are useful and necessary, but even more necessary is that “knowledge of love” which can only be learned in a “heart to heart” encounter with Christ. For it is he who calls us to break the bread of his love, to forgive sins and to guide the flock in his name. And for that reason we must never step back from the source of love which is his heart, pierced on the Cross.

Only in this way can we cooperate effectively in the mysterious “plan of the Father” which consists in “making Christ the heart of the world”! This plan is accomplished in history as Jesus gradually becomes the Heart of human hearts, beginning with those called to be closest to him: namely his priests. We are reminded of this constant commitment by the “priestly promises” that we made on the day of our ordination and which we renew yearly on Holy Thursday during the Chrism Mass. Even our shortcomings, our limitations and our weaknesses ought to bring us back to the heart of Jesus. If it is true that by contemplating Christ sinners learn from him the “sorrow for sins” needed to bring them back to the Father, this is even more the case for sacred ministers. How can we forget, in this regard, that nothing causes more suffering for the Church, the Body of Christ, than the sins of her pastors, especially the sins of those who become “thieves and robbers” of the sheep (cf. Jn 10:1 ff.), lead them astray by their own private teachings, or ensnare them in the toils of sin and death? Dear priests, the summons to conversion and to trust in God’s mercy also applies to us; we too must humbly, sincerely and unceasingly implore the heart of Jesus to preserve us from the terrifying risk of endangering the very people we are obliged to save.

A few moments ago, in the Choir Chapel, I was able to venerate the relic of the saintly Curé of Ars: his heart. A heart that blazed with divine love, experienced amazement at the thought of the dignity of the priest, and spoke to the faithful in touching and sublime tones, telling them that “after

God, the priest is everything! ... Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is” (cf. *Letter for the Year for Priests*, p. 3). Dear brothers, let us cultivate this same amazement, in order to carry out our ministry with generosity and dedication, and to maintain the true “fear of God” in our hearts: the fear, that is, that we can deprive of so much good, by our negligence or fault, the souls entrusted to our care, or that—God forbid—we can do them harm. The Church needs holy priests; ministers capable of helping the faithful to experience the Lord’s merciful love, and convinced witnesses of that love. In the Eucharistic Adoration which is to follow our celebration of Vespers, let us ask the Lord to set the heart of every priest afire with that “pastoral charity” which can make him one in heart and mind with Jesus the High Priest, and thus to imitate Jesus in complete self-giving. May the Virgin Mary, whose Immaculate Heart we shall contemplate with lively faith tomorrow, obtain this grace for us. The Curé of Ars had a filial devotion to Mary, a devotion so profound that in 1836, in anticipation of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, he dedicated his parish to Mary “conceived without sin”. He frequently renewed this offering of the parish to the Blessed Virgin, teaching his parishioners that “to be heard it is enough to speak to her”, for the simple reason that she “desires above all else to see us happy”. May the Blessed Virgin, our Mother, accompany us during the Year for Priests which we begin today, so that we can be wise and steady guides of the flock which the Lord has entrusted to our pastoral care. Amen!

© Copyright 2009 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana