

Pastoral Letter from the Bishop of Lismore to the Clergy and Faithful of the Diocese on “The Year of the Priest”

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ:

It was with joy that I heard Pope Benedict’s announcement last March of a special “Year of the Priest” to be celebrated throughout the Church worldwide. It will be observed from Friday, 19th June, 2009, the Feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and continue to the same date in 2010.

The theme which the Holy Father has selected for the Year is “The Faithfulness of Christ, the Faithfulness of the Priest.” It is an invitation to priests themselves to strive with greater reliance on God’s grace for that Christian perfection proper to their calling upon which the effectiveness of their ministry depends. It is an invitation to every Catholic to discover anew, and to reflect upon, the beauty and importance of the Priesthood in the Church, and to support and encourage the priests they know in their great vocation and calling to holiness for the service of God’s people.

The figure of St John Vianney, the famous French parish priest of the nineteenth century, will be prominent during the Year of the Priest. He was canonised in 1925 and named the patron saint of priests. His feast day on 4th August will be specially observed as it is the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his death.

The Wonder and Gift of the Priesthood

Our experience and knowledge of the priesthood comes to us most personally through the priests who have ministered to us over the course of our lives up to the present. I was not long among you as bishop before I began to hear the stories of the long procession of well-remembered priests of the Diocese of Lismore. Since 1887 some one hundred and thirty of them have gone before us after lifetimes of service. Our present priests stand in a great tradition. The twenty-seven who are active in our parishes today share with half a million Catholic priests worldwide a lineage which goes back in time to the Last Supper and Calvary, to the great High Priest Himself.

There is always a danger that we can take familiar things for granted. It often happens in human relationships, such as within a marriage, and results in a failure to appreciate the value, the uniqueness, and the beauty of those closest to us. The Year of the Priest can help us recapture and appreciate the wonder of the gift of the Priesthood within the family of the Church, and the immediate family of the parish, and to find new ways of showing our gratitude.

Appreciating the Priesthood should begin with an appreciation of what it means for each of us individually to have been consecrated as members of a common Christian priesthood through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Being this priestly people enables us to offer the greatest return of love, and the highest worship, to the One, True God, our heavenly Father. This has become possible

only through Jesus Christ. He is the one and eternal Priest of the New Covenant, and it was His idea to remain present with us until the end of time in the persons of men whom He would choose from the priestly people to be like Him, His 'other Christs.' Like the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation for everyone, the Sacrament of Holy Orders imprints an indelible character on the soul of a priest. He is a priest for ever.

The Priest: 'Christ among us'

When we are present at Mass, that is how we look at our priest. We know him as Father John or Father Bill, but the vestments of his sacramental ordination clothe him as 'Christ among us.' He stands at the lectern proclaiming not his own word but Christ's gospel. At the altar, while he may be facing us, he is Christ facing His Father to make present in this Eucharist the sacrifice of that Body broken and that Blood poured out which He offered once and for all upon the Cross. So it is made possible for us, the priestly people, to offer ourselves 'through Him, with Him and in Him'. Here and now, Sunday by Sunday, even day by day, we can receive the benefits of Christ's unique action for the world and for ourselves.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we confess our sins to the Lord who is rich in mercy, present in the priest who by ordination has received the power of Christ's command: 'those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven.' The same power of healing flows through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick; it is Christ who is anointing at the hands of his priest.

The Church has always valued the priesthood as a most precious gift, and stood in awe of the wonder that God has entrusted so much of Himself into human hands. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes St Gregory of Nazianzus, writing in the fourth century: "Who then is the priest? He is the defender of truth, who stands with angels, gives glory with archangels, causes sacrifices to rise to the altar on high, shares Christ's priesthood, refashions creation, restores it in God's image, recreates it for the world on high and, even greater, is divinized and divinized." Closer to our own time are the words of St John Vianney: "The priest continues the work of redemption on earth . . . If we really understood the priest on earth, we would die not of fright but of love: the Priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus." (CCC 1589).

Treasure in Earthen Vessels

In considering these beautiful realities, we are also aware that shadows, some of them dark and distressing, have been cast upon the Priesthood in recent times by the sins and weaknesses of a few. Sadly, this is nothing new. Indeed, from the beginning the Church got off to a bad start — the betrayal by Judas, the triple denial of Peter, and the desertion by all but one — all within the space of a few hours of the Eucharistic mystery of faith being placed in their hands. We too have been humbled into remembering that we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, and that, as the same St Gregory says, "we must purify ourselves before purifying others, become light to illuminate, be sanctified in order to sanctify, draw close to God to bring Him close to others." The words of heartfelt sorrow expressed by Pope Benedict in Sydney last July to the victims of abuse will long

be echoed among us with the resolve to keep the Church always a place of goodness and trust for young and old alike.

A new Springtime

Today the Church and her priests are looking to a new springtime. God's Spirit is not deterred in calling the young to His service, men challenged by a vocation to be, like the Master, poor, chaste, and obedient, co-workers with the bishops, and modelled on the Lord who by love made himself the least and the servant of all. Again, I commend to your prayers the eleven men who are responding to the call and preparing for priestly service in our diocese.

In commending the Year of the Priest for celebration in every parish, I call especially on Parish Councils and other groups to take up practical initiatives. The parish schools in particular have an opportunity to highlight the Priesthood in the consciousness of students. Attached to this Letter are a number of proposals for implementation.

I send my greetings and assurances of prayer and every blessing to all of you, Christ's faithful, and especially to the priests of the diocese in appreciation of your service and loyalty, and your generous collaboration in my own ministry.

Yours devotedly in Christ,
+ Geoffrey Jarrett
Bishop of Lismore,
24th May, 2009.

Proposals for the Year of the Priest

The following proposals for celebrations and projects are put forward to all communities in the Diocese:

- **The Feast of the Sacred Heart:** In every parish Friday, 19th June, is to be observed as a day of special prayer for priests, for God's continued blessing on their vocation and service, and for their growth in holiness. A well-prepared Mass, at a time when the greatest number of parishioners can be present, should be celebrated. For the schools, a time of solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament should enable students, suitably catechised and prepared beforehand, to spend some time in silent prayer for priests and vocations to the priesthood.
- **The feast of St John Vianney:** Tuesday, 4th August, is to be highlighted. Students in our schools should be encouraged to do project work on the saint in preparation for school Masses appropriately arranged for the Feast.
- **Prayer for Priests:** Groups of parishioners who gather to pray for vocations should be encouraged and expanded, developing ongoing circles of prayer for all priests, in our diocese and beyond. This is a practical way of continuing the Church's own lead in the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests associated with the Feast of the Sacred Heart each year.

- **Ordination anniversaries:** during 2009-2010 parish communities might find ways to mark the anniversary of their priest(s) with special greetings and events, including social occasions. A listing of the dates of priests' anniversaries of Ordination will be available from the Diocesan Chancery. Similarly, on Father's Day in September, a focus could be made on the spiritual fatherhood of priests, with suitable intercessions and other observances in appreciation of your priest(s).

- **Notable clergy in the history of the parish:** The Year of the Priest provides an opportunity for commemoration of former parish priests and the recalling of their contribution to the spiritual and material growth of the parish. School students may also research the story of the priests of their parish.

In the Month of November, the names of deceased clergy of the parish should be included in the Prayer of the Faithful. A special November Mass for them could be celebrated, and visits made to the graves of those buried locally.

- **In our Schools:** Catholic schools and colleges should be places of special welcome for our priests, as leaders in the Church and teachers of the Faith. Co-ordinators of Religious Education and RE classroom teachers should acquaint themselves particularly with the teaching of the Church on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and questions relating to the Priesthood as given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Article 6, paragraphs 1536-1600. During the Year for Priests this teaching on the Priesthood should be highlighted at all levels, according to the capacities of the children. In classroom discussion it is a fair question, among others, for students to ask why only men can be priests. Teachers should be prepared to uphold and explain why the Church is unable to depart from the choice made by the Lord Himself in calling his Apostles, which binds their successors, and point to the many ways of vocation and ministry in the Church that require the gifts that women uniquely bestow. A preeminent Australian example is to be found in Blessed Mary MacKillop, the centenary of whose death is also celebrated on 8th August this year.

- **The Chrism Mass** on the Monday of Holy Week, 2010, will be celebrated centrally in the diocese at St Augustine's, Coffs Harbour. This could be the focus of an even larger celebration with wide participation and support for our priests when they renew their Promises of Ordination during the Year of the Priest.

END