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August 4, 2009
Memorial of St. John Marie Vianney, the Cure of Ars
150th Anniversary of his Death
Year of the Priest proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI

Dear Brother Priests:

From June 19, 2009 until June 29, 2009, we simultaneously celebrated the end of the Year of Saint Paul and the beginning of the Year of the Priest with its special focus on St. John Marie Vianney, the patron of all priests.

During this period, I often wondered and prayed about what connection we could make between the life, mysticism and missionary spirit of Saint Paul in the first century and the heroic interior life and pastoral charity of the Cure of Ars in the 19th century.

Then while re-reading Trochu's biography of the Cure of Ars in early July, I came upon these words: "*Thus for countless souls the road to Ars became the road to Damascus.*" The road to the confessional of the Cure of Ars led many in France to the road to deep and lasting conversion.

The same road exists today in our confessionals and reconciliation rooms when we generously make ourselves available to the faithful. We pray daily for our parishioners that they will make frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as we ourselves are called to do. We remember too that our own experience of being sincere and humble penitents prepares us to be wise and compassionate confessors. And we rely on the intercession of both St. John Marie Vianney and St. Paul to help us.

Pope Benedict emphasizes that the Year of the Priest should shine a spotlight on the life and priestly example of St. John Marie Vianney, the Cure of Ars on the 150th anniversary of his death, August 4, 2009. He himself will offer a series of catecheses on the life and ministry of this priest that I ask all of us to read and to pray deeply. He is not alone in this emphasis.

As he lay on his death bed in 1890, Cardinal Newman, whose theological and literary contribution anticipated so much of the Second Vatican Council and

whose beatification was recently announced, did not ask for a volume of theology but simply asked that a life of the poor Cure be read to him.¹

Pope St. Pius X beatified the Cure d’Ars in 1905. Present at that Mass was a newly ordained young Italian priest Fr. Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope Blessed John XXIII, who would one day write the classic work of priestly spirituality *The Journal of a Soul*.

In his August 1, 1959 encyclical on Saint John Vianney *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*, released almost seven months after he announced that a Second Vatican Council would be convened (January 25, 1959), Pope John XXIII reflected on the formative influence on his own priesthood of the Cure of Ars: “When we think of the first days of Our priesthood, which were so full of joyous consolations, We are reminded of one event that moved Us to the very depths of Our soul: the sacred ceremonies that were carried out so majestically in the Basilica of St. Peter’s on January 8, 1905, when John Marie Baptist Vianney, a very humble French priest, was enrolled in the lists of the Blessed in Heaven. Our own ordination to the priesthood had taken place a few short months before, and it filled Us with wonder to see the delight of Our predecessor of happy memory, St. Pius X (who had once been the parish priest of the town of Salzano), as he offered this wonderful model of priestly virtues to all those entrusted with the care of souls, for their imitation. Now as We look back over the span of so many years, We never stop giving thanks to Our Redeemer for this wonderful blessing, which marked the beginning of Our priestly ministry and served as an effective heavenly incentive to virtue.”

The power of heroic holiness in the priesthood never ceases to inspire. As a young man and a young priest, John XXIII drew inspiration from the life and priestly example of St. John Marie Vianney. As an older man, priest and Pope, he had the long view of the Cure’s influence on him. His 1959 encyclical is as relevant to the real demands of the priesthood in 2009 as it was in 1959. The relationship of St. John Marie Vianney to Blessed John XXIII shows that the Cure of Ars’ piety is not an obsolete ecclesial period piece. The Holy Fathers from Pius X to Benedict XVI teach us that the Cure of Ars is a priest for all seasons and for all centuries. Pope Pius XI canonized Vianney in 1925 and declared him the patron saint of parish priests in 1929.

Pope John Paul II’s 1986 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests also focused on the Cure of Ars in commemoration of the second centenary of his birth: “Together, we wish to thank Christ, the Prince of Pastors, for this extraordinary model of

¹ Cf. George William Rutler, *The Cure d’Ars Today: St. John Vianney* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 81.

priestly life and service which the saintly Cure of Ars offers to the whole Church, and above all to us priests. How many of us prepared ourselves for the Priesthood, or today exercise the difficult task of caring for souls, having before our eyes the figure of Saint John Marie Vianney! His example cannot be forgotten. More than ever we need his witness, his intercession, in order to face the situations of our times when, in spite of a certain number of hopeful signs, evangelization is being contradicted by a growing secularization, when spiritual discipline is being neglected, when many are losing sight of the Kingdom of God, when often, even in the pastoral ministry, there is a too exclusive concern for the social aspect, for temporal aims. In the last century the Cure of Ars had to face difficulties which were perhaps of a different kind but which were no less serious. By his life and work he represented, for the society of his time, a great evangelical challenge that bore astonishing fruits of conversion. Let us not doubt that he still presents to us today that great evangelical challenge. I therefore invite you now to meditate on our Priesthood in the presence of this matchless pastor who illustrates both the fullest realization of the priestly ministry and the holiness of the minister.”²

The Cure of Ars had been warned that the spiritual life of the parish in Ars was at an all time low and that he would face almost insurmountable challenges. We may at times feel the same way about the pastoral challenges we face. St. John Vianney’s example thus stirs our hope. His priestly virtue, holiness and humility conquered Ars and sent apostolic vibrations through Europe and the rest of the world that last to this day. Our cooperation with God’s plan for our ongoing conversion as priests can lead to the same inspirational results in our parishes.

In an excerpt from the catechetical instructions of Saint John Marie Vianney from the Liturgy of the Hours for his memorial on August 4, he writes: “Prayer is nothing else but union with God. When one has a heart that is pure and united with God, he is given a kind of serenity and sweetness that makes him ecstatic, a light that surrounds him with marvelous brightness. In this intimate union, God and the soul are fused together like two bits of wax that no one can ever pull apart. This union of God with a tiny creature is a lovely thing. It is a happiness beyond understanding.”

As I reflect on the seasons of my own priesthood, it is clear that priests have to sacrifice deeply to pray deeply and to serve deeply. How often during the day do we make time management decisions that affect the spiritual and pastoral tone of our ministry?

A priest’s prayer life cannot be left to whim. It must be at the same time disciplined, sacrificial, steady, consistent and appropriately flexible in light of

² Pope John Paul II, 1986 *Holy Thursday Letter to Priests* (available on the Vatican website).

pastoral emergencies and demands. Pope Benedict XVI affirms: “Thus, spending time in God's presence in prayer is a real pastoral priority; it is not an addition to pastoral work: being before the Lord is a pastoral priority and in the final analysis, the most important.”³

The Congregation for the Clergy's 1994 *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* explains the demanding daily plan of life for prayer that a priest is called to live: “It is necessary, therefore, that the priest program his life of prayer in a manner which embraces: the daily Eucharistic celebration, with adequate preparation and thanksgiving; frequent confession and spiritual direction already practiced in the seminary; the complete and fervent celebration of the liturgy of the hours, on a daily basis; examination of conscience; mental prayer; divine readings; the prolonged moments of silence and prayer, above all in periodical Spiritual Exercises and Retreats; the affectionate expression of Marian devotions, like the Rosary; the ‘Via Crucis’ and other pious exercises; and the fruitful reading on lives of the saints.”⁴

These different dimensions of a priest's prayer life are interdependent and directly influence the quality of his pastoral charity. And they all converge and are grounded in the priest's daily, prayerful and reverent celebration of the Mass as well as his frequent prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

In his 1979 Holy Thursday letter, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Strive to be ‘artists’ of pastoral work. There have been many such in the history of the Church. They speak to each of us, for example, St. Vincent de Paul, St. John of Avila, the holy Cure of Ars, St. John Bosco, St. Maximilian Kolbe, and many, many others. Each of them was different from the others, was himself, was the son of his own time and was ‘up to date’ with respect to his own time. But this ‘bringing up to date’ of each of them was an original response to the Gospel, a response needed precisely for those times; it was the response of holiness and zeal.”⁵ So many of you over the course of many years have served our parishes and our people with humility, charity, pastoral intelligence, grace and finesse. You are the pastoral artists, both young and old, to whom John Paul refers.

Living in a culture that equates productivity with hyperactivity, we priests know from experience and from our Catholic mystical tradition that only pastoral ministry that is stoked and directed by calm, silent, substantial prayer produces fruit in the souls it hopes to influence. The more we have received from the

³ Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Clergy of Rome, May 13, 2005.

⁴ Congregation for the Clergy, 1994 *Directory of the Life and Ministry of the Priests* 39.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, 1979 *Holy Thursday Letter to Priests* (available on the Vatican website).

Father, Son and Holy Spirit in silence, the more we give in action.⁶ The more we go intimately to Our Lady and ask her to assist us in the expansion of our capacity for silence and contemplative concentration, the more effectively we will lead people to her Son.

The priest's interior life is the force and the flame of his pastoral ministry and missionary spirit. But on the other hand, his pastoral ministry and missionary spirit stimulate his spiritual life, helping to make it deeper and more creative. The desire to serve the People of God well in challenging pastoral situations and challenging times always drive us to our knees. The priest's desire to live pastoral charity leads him to greater generosity in prayer, virtue and sacrifice.⁷

Hyperactivity in the priesthood is most often a sign of *acedia*⁸ or lukewarmness in the spiritual life. We can easily fall into the illusion that because we are frenetically busy we are effective in our ministry.

In *The Edge of Sadness*, the American novelist Edwin O'Connor, portrays an elderly priest, Fr. Hugh Kennedy, who was talented and promising as a younger priest and then fell into alcoholism in middle age. He then goes to the Southwest to a treatment facility and diagnoses what had led him onto this road and how he could be faithful in his recovery. In discussing his own experience and fall, Kennedy issues one of the finest pieces of fraternal correction to priests in the United States today: "And since these are precisely the moments which are necessary for all of us, in which spiritually we grow, in which, so to speak, we maintain and enrich our connection with God, then the loss of such moments is grave and perilous. Particularly so for a priest – particularly for a priest who suddenly finds that he can talk more easily to a parish committee than he can to God. Something within him will have atrophied from disuse; something precious, something vital. It will have gone almost without his knowing it, but one day, in a great crisis, say, he will reach for it – and it will not be there. And then...then he may find that the distance between the poles is not so great a distance after all..."⁹

The interior life nourished in consistent periods of silence in which the priest invests his mind, heart, imagination and priestly life results in interior peace. The solid peace that radiates from a priest's face, a face that contemplates the face

⁶ Cf. Spiritual Theologian Ernest Hello as quoted in Fr. Gaston Courtois, *Before His Face [Vol.1]*, [New York: Herder and Herder], 3.

⁷ Cf. Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, *Divine Intimacy*, 971.

⁸ For a helpful analysis of *acedia* in the life of the priest, see Basil Cole, OP *The Hidden Enemies of the Priesthood: The Contributions of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Staten Island, NY: The Society of Saint Paul/Alba House), Chapter 14, 215-231.

⁹ Cf. (with the quotation from the novel) John O. Barres, "Rooted in Prayer" in *Church* magazine Winter '96, 15-17.

of Christ in silence, in Word and in Sacrament, moves hearts and reflects a heart ablaze with love. The peace on a dedicated priest's face naturally evangelizes.

With every Pope of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I too invite you to meditate on the theology and spirituality of the priesthood in our own challenging times through the lens of the life of the Cure of Ars.

A Priest's To-Do List for the Year of the Priest:

1) Invest and engage in Diocesan celebrations of the Year of the Priest

2) In keeping with the Holy Father's title for the Year of the Priest "The Faithfulness of Christ, The Faithfulness of the Priest,"¹⁰ pray, make an examination of conscience, and discuss in spiritual direction those dimensions of a priest's spiritual and pastoral life discussed above with special emphasis on:

>Fidelity to a Plan of Life for Daily Prayer

>Fidelity to Pastoral Charity that goes the extra mile and manifests itself in a missionary spirit.

>Fidelity to consistent spiritual direction and Frequent Use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and a Generous Availability to Penitents.

>Fidelity to a Holy Thursday spirit of fraternally washing the feet of brother priests and magnanimously letting go of any grudges or hurts involving brother priests

>Fidelity to recommitting ourselves to ongoing conversion and ongoing formation in the priesthood

3) As priests, we consider ourselves associate vocation directors in our entire sphere of influence and encourage and motivate the laity to be proactive in vocation awareness and promotion.

4) Read, Study and Pray again:

>The Second Vatican Council's *Presbyterorum Ordinis*

¹⁰ Claudio Cardinal Hummes, Prefect, Congregation for the Clergy, April 3, 2009 Letter to Bishops around the world.

>Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (and other documents catalogued on the special section on the Vatican website focused on "The Year of the Priest")

>The upcoming letters, catecheses and books that will be part of the Year of the Priest (see the special section on the Vatican website focused on "The Year of the Priest")

>Classic and contemporary works on the theology and spirituality of the priesthood

5) Increase our appreciation and devotion to St. John Marie Vianney, the Cure of Ars by:

>Reading and Praying Blessed Pope John XXIII's encyclical on St. John Vianney *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia* (August 1, 1959)

> Pope John Paul II's 1986 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests on St. John Vianney

>Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming catecheses on the life, prayer and pastoral charity of St. John Vianney

>The Cure of Ars' own writing and sermons

>Classic biographies on the Cure of Ars by Abbe Trochu, Fr. George Rutler and others

Know that I will be praying for all our priests, diocesan and religious, during the Year of the Priest, that each of us may be open to the very personal graces that the Holy Spirit wants to give us. St. John Vianney, Patron Saint of Priests, Icon of Prayer, Eucharistic Devotion and Pastoral Charity, Exemplary Confessor and Parish Priest for all seasons and centuries, pray for us!

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend John O. Barres, D.D.
Bishop of Allentown