

**Dr. Robert Zollitsch: President of the German Bishops' Conference and Archbishop of Freiburg, Germany**

**Address to the diocesan priests of Enugu (Nigeria) on the occasion of a day of contemplation referring to the Year for Priests on Sunday, 30 August 2009**

Dear Brother Priests,

On 16 March of this year, the eve of his journey to Africa, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI surprised us when he announced to proclaim a *Year for Priests*. Such a Year for Priests is of great importance for the Church of today. We are at the beginning of the third millennium and we witness manifold changes and rapid developments in a world, where people are networked, interlinked and interdependent in many different ways. As priests we are placed into this world to help the people with all their joys and sorrows, grieves and fears. Dear Brothers in Christ, I would like to invite you to take a look at our priestly ministry and to draw inspiration from the reflections of our Holy Father on the Year for Priests.

**The intention of the Year for Priests**

As he emphasized in his letter of 16 June proclaiming the Year for Priests, Pope Benedict XVI wants "to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel in today's world". At all times, my dear brothers in Christ, we are called to be true witnesses to the Gospel, reliable witnesses to life in fullness. As messengers of the Gospel we have to bear witness in our words and deeds to show that living with God makes us free and fulfilled. This is how Pope Benedict describes the nature and effect of the ordination to priesthood reminding us that most of all it is a *gift*, allowing the priest to participate in the ministry of the only priest, Jesus Christ. What we achieve as priests is not primarily attributed to our own efforts but to the gift we received with our vocation and ordination. "*I give what I myself cannot give; I do something that is not my work; I am on a mission and have become the bearer of that which another has committed to my charge*", says the Pope. So the Year for Priests is first of all an invitation to us as priests to rediscover our own vocation and ordination and to deepen our bond and relationship to Jesus Christ.

If we think of the grace of our ordination we may compare this to receiving other gifts: the more we make these gifts our own, the more our joy and gratitude will grow. Of course as priests we remain individuals with strengths and some weaknesses. But people clearly recognize whether our way of living corresponds to the gift of our ordination. I think this is the secret of the saintly Curé of Ars whom the Holy Father declared patron of the Year for Priests: he lived what he preached. The motto of the Year for priests "faithfulness of Christ, faithfulness of priests" wants to point out this connection: We have become priests by God's grace, by his benevolence and faithfulness. But we have to respond to His call and we have to strive incessantly to meet Jesus Christ and to draw the strength for all our activities from Him.

The Year for Priests has not only been inaugurated exclusively for the priests but for the whole church. The gift of priesthood is a gift for the whole Church, a gift for all people, for the great universal community of the faithful. "*The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for*

you”, says the saintly Curé of Ars. So the Year for Priests invites everybody to a deeper understanding for the vocation and the mission of the priest in the church and society of today.

### **The challenges of the Year for Priests**

Our Church today experiences a period of manifold changes. In Germany as well as in many other countries, the standing and status of priests in the public have considerably changed. In Europe, we Christians today often are in a minority position. As a consequence, priests lose the support they used to enjoy. I am thinking of a life in large communities of the faithful, the firm faith and attachment to the Church of many people, their understanding for his celibate life, the Church’s recognition in society, etc. Not to forget that in not a few countries priests are exposed to massive pressure, or are even persecuted, threatened and killed because of their faith.

In Germany as well as in many other European countries the changes mentioned above lead to a decline in the number of priestly vocations. Many families have only one or two children, and if the only son wants to become a priest, this quite frequently meets with the family’s opposition. Often the young men do not find any understanding or approval for their choice of career in their own family or among their friends. In a society where the church does no longer enjoy a high standing it is not easy for young people to chose a way of life based on religion.

Worldwide the standing of priests has suffered considerable damage by the reprehensible behaviour of some ministers who violated and abused the dignity of children and adolescents. We are all affected by the transgressions of our confreres which cast a shadow on our ordination and on our credibility as priests.

But these shadows must not cover up the work done by priests day by day all over the world when they preach the Gospel, serve to build the Kingdom of God and contribute to a beneficial coexistence of all members of the human family. From countless meetings and talks I had while working for 20 years as a personnel manager, then as Archbishop I know and I learn it every day: Truly faithful to Christ and to the Church priests devote themselves to being “Teachers of the Word, Ministers of the Sacrament and Leaders of the Community”.

### **Priestly identity**

#### **Preach the Gospel in our lives and activities**

In his letter proclaiming the Year for Priests Pope Benedict XVI sharpens our view for the essential: *“In today’s world, as in the troubled times of the Curé of Ars, the lives and activity of priests need to be distinguished by a determined witness to the Gospel.”* With this words he goes back to what the Second Vatican Council described as the heart of the priestly ministry: *“The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God, which is quite rightly sought from the mouth of priests. For since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men. In this way they carry out the Lord’s command ‘Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature’ and thus set up and increase the People of God.”* (PO 4) In talks with priests I hear again and again that they wish for exactly this: they want to preach the Gospel to the people, they want to help people to find God in their lives; they want to accompany single persons or groups practising their faithbeliefs, they want to develop missionary initiatives and projects, they want to prepare and celebrate the Sacraments appropriately and finally they want to have time for spiritual reading and for personal prayer. This is why priests often want and

have to be relieved of other tasks in the fields of administration and organisation.

### **Set up the church as a community**

The Second Vatican Council, dear brothers in Christ, took up a word of the early Church to describe the community of the priests arising from ordination and mission: *“All priests ... are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood; but in a special way they form one priestly body in the diocese...For even though they may be assigned different duties, yet they fulfil the one priestly service for people. Indeed all priests are sent to cooperate in the same work. This is true whether the ministry they exercise be parochial or supra-parochial; whether their task is research or teaching [...] They all contribute to the same purpose, namely the building up of the body of Christ, and this, especially in our times, demands many kinds of duties and fresh adaptations. For this reason it is of great importance that all priests, whether diocesan or regular, should help each other, so that they may be fellow-helpers of the truth.”*<sup>1</sup> Thus we are not priests just for ourselves. By the Holy Sacrament of ordination we are bound together in the Holy Spirit to a lasting sacramental brotherhood, the *communione fidei*. Jesus called His disciples personally but not as isolated individuals. It is not without reason that we call each other brothers in Christ!

In his letter proclaiming the Year for Priests Pope Benedict XVI mentions a “radical communitarian form” as part of the ordained ministry. This ministry can only be exercised in the communion of priests with their bishop. This communion does not develop from itself but it has to be lived and shaped. So what we need today is a spiritual cooperation enabling the priest to fulfil his tasks belonging to the „communitarian form“ of his ministry in an existential and pastoral way.

Our experiences in Germany show that today more than ever before priests have to cooperate with many other vocations, professions, charisms and services in the church. I am referring to the revived office of the deacon, to the catechists and to the many women and men working for the church full-time or as volunteers. The Holy Father stresses that priests should also cooperate with the lay faithful. Spiritual cooperation includes to welcome and support the „radical communitarian form“ of the ministry, to estimate employees and colleagues, to let others participate in the planning and organisation of the church’s pastoral duties and to grant them access to all necessary means, such as information, funds, meeting places, etc.

Cooperation with the many other vocations, orders and missions in the church can reduce our workload. There are quite a number of tasks which can be fulfilled by other members of the church. It is the duty of the priest to unite the many services and tasks in a way that reveals the communion with Jesus Christ and bears witness to Jesus Christ as the Lord of all people.

### **Open heaven and keep it open for the people**

*“God is the only treasure which ultimately people desire to find in a priest”*, says the Holy Father when proclaiming the Year for Priests on March 16, 2009. This corresponds to the experience we have gained in Germany. When they reach a central turning point in their life, such as birth, marriage, life crisis and death, many people call a priest, even if they did not have any contact to the church before. They hope that the priest will open heaven and keep it open for

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, Presbyterorum Ordinis 8

them. They want the priest to establish a contact between themselves and God and the World of the Spiritual.

More than ever the world of today needs the priest as a “man of God” (1 Tim 6,11), who knows how to open the world for what is holy and to make it visible to the world. We can only fulfil our ministry appropriately if we strive constantly to establish a personal relationship to God’s holy one, as Jesus Christ is also called in the Gospel (Jn 6,69; Mk 1,24), and to live a life following the example of the Lord.

As a “man of God”, and as a “servant of Christ” (1 Cor 4,1) the priest will then be able to make the voice of the Gospel heard in the search for a fairer and more peaceful social order. Not only individuals but also societies in our countries need this prophetic ministry of the priest. The theme of the special assembly for Africa of the synod of bishops in October, “the church at the service of reconciliation, justice and peace” illustrates the challenges you, my dear brothers in Christ, are facing in your country. Of course autonomy of the individual nation and its specific responsibility have to be respected. Moreover, it is not the priest’s task to exercise a political mandate. This will be the task of faithful women and men who provide evidence of their Christian belief in their political work.

Dear brother priests, meeting you today gives me the opportunity to express my sincerest thanks for your commitment and your witness to the Gospel here in Nigeria. The Church in Nigeria is rich in vocations to faith and to priesthood. This encourages us in Germany to trust in the Lord’s promise not to leave us, his servants, alone. And don’t we become aware of His promise when the local churches from different continents share and exchange their riches? Whoever may feel the Lord’s consolation in the mutual brotherly encouragement and comfort, can join in the words of Saint Paul: “*I rejoice because I trust you utterly*” (2 Cor 7,16). May the Lord strengthen this trust in Him and among the big community of faith as a source to gain our strength for the daily exercise of our priestly ministry. In this communion I will include you and the Church in Nigeria in my prayers.

May the Triune God, the + Father, the + Son and the + Holy Spirit bless you all.