

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY
ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR PLENARY ASSEMBLY**

*Consistory Hall
Monday, 16 March 2009*

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,*

I am glad to be able to welcome you at a special Audience on the eve of my departure for Africa, where I am going to present the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second Special Assembly of the Synod for Africa that will be held here in Rome next October. I thank Cardinal Cláudio Hummes for the kind words with which he has interpreted the sentiments you share and I thank you for the beautiful letter you wrote to me. With him, I greet you all, Superiors, Officials and Members of the Congregation, with gratitude for all the work you do at the service of such an important sector of the Church's life.

The theme you have chosen for this Plenary Assembly "The missionary identity of the priest in the Church as an intrinsic dimension of the exercise of the *tria munera*" suggests some reflections on the work of these days and the abundant fruit that it will certainly yield. If the whole Church is missionary and if every Christian, by virtue of Baptism and Confirmation *quasi ex officio* (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1305), receives the mandate to profess the faith publicly, the ministerial priesthood, also from this viewpoint, is ontologically distinct, and not only by rank, from the baptismal priesthood that is also known as the "common priesthood". In fact, the apostolic mandate "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole of creation" (Mk 16: 15) is constitutive of the ministerial priesthood. This mandate is not, as we know, a mere duty entrusted to collaborators; its roots are deeper and must be sought further back in time.

The missionary dimension of the priesthood is born from the priest's sacramental configuration to Christ. As a consequence it brings with it a heartfelt and total adherence to what the ecclesial tradition has identified as *apostolica vivendi forma*. This consists in participation in a "new life", spiritually speaking, in that "new way of life" which the Lord Jesus inaugurated and which the Apostles made their own. Through the imposition of the Bishop's hands and the consecratory prayer of the Church, the candidates become new men, they become "presbyters". In this light it is clear that the *tria munera* are first a gift and only consequently an office, first a participation in a life, and hence a *potestas*. Of course, the great ecclesial tradition has rightly separated sacramental efficacy from the concrete existential situation of the individual priest and so the legitimate expectations of the faithful are appropriately safeguarded. However, this correct doctrinal explanation takes nothing from the necessary, indeed indispensable, aspiration to moral perfection that must dwell in every authentically priestly heart.

Precisely to encourage priests in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends, I have decided to establish a special "Year for Priests" that will begin on 19 June and last until 19 June 2010. In fact, it is the 150th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé d'Ars, John Mary Vianney, a true example of a pastor at the service of Christ's flock. It will be the task of your Congregation, in agreement with the diocesan Ordinaries and with the superiors of religious institutes to promote and to coordinate the various spiritual and pastoral initiatives that seem useful for making the importance of the priest's role and mission in the Church and in contemporary society ever more clearly perceived.

The priest's mission, as the theme of the Plenary Assembly emphasizes, is carried out "in the Church". This ecclesial communal, hierarchical and doctrinal dimension is absolutely indispensable to every authentic mission and, alone guarantees its spiritual effectiveness. The four aspects mentioned must always be recognized as intimately connected: the mission is "ecclesial" because no one proclaims himself in the first person, but within and through his own humanity every priest must be well aware that he is bringing to the world Another, God himself. God is the only treasure which ultimately people desire to find in a priest. The mission is "communional" because it is carried out in a unity and communion that only secondly has also important aspects of social visibility. Moreover, these derive essentially from that divine intimacy in which the priest is called to be expert, so that he may be able to lead the souls entrusted to him humbly and trustingly to the same encounter with the Lord. Lastly, the "hierarchical" and "doctrinal" dimensions suggest reaffirming the importance of the ecclesiastical discipline (the term has a connection with "disciple") and doctrinal training and not only theological, initial and continuing formation.

Awareness of the radical social changes that have occurred in recent decades must motivate the best ecclesial forces to supervise the formation of candidates for the ministry. In particular, it must foster the constant concern of Pastors for their principal collaborators, both by cultivating truly fatherly human relations and by taking an interest in their continuing formation, especially from the doctrinal and spiritual viewpoints. The mission is rooted in a special way in a good formation, developed in communion with uninterrupted ecclesial Tradition, without breaks or temptations of irregularity. In this sense, it is important to encourage in priests, especially in the young generations, a correct reception of the texts of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, interpreted in the light of the Church's entire fund of doctrine. It seems urgent to recover that awareness that has always been at the heart of the Church's mission, which impels priests to be present, identifiable and recognizable both for their judgement of faith, for their personal virtues as well as for the habit, in the contexts of culture and of charity.

As Church and as priests, we proclaim Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ, Crucified and Risen, Sovereign of time and of history, in the glad certainty that this truth coincides with the deepest expectations of the human heart. In the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, that is, of the fact that God became man like us, lies both the content and the method of Christian proclamation. The true dynamic centre of the mission is here: in Jesus Christ, precisely. The centrality of Christ brings with it the correct appreciation of the ministerial priesthood, without which there would be neither the Eucharist, nor even the mission nor the Church herself. In this regard it is necessary to be alert to ensure that the "new structures" or pastoral organizations are not planned on the basis of an erroneous interpretation of the proper promotion of the laity for a time in which one would have "to do without" the ordained ministry, because in that case the presuppositions for a further dilution of the ministerial priesthood would be laid and possible presumed "solutions" might come dramatically to coincide with the real causes of contemporary problems linked to the ministry.

I am certain that in these days the work of the Plenary Assembly, under the protection of the *Mater Ecclesiae*, will be able to examine these brief ideas that I permit myself to submit to the attention of the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, while I invoke upon you all an abundance of heavenly gifts, as a pledge of which I impart a special, affectionate Apostolic Blessing to you and to all your loved ones.