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Year aims to boost the priesthood

by Jason Petosa



Fr. Ronald D. Witherup (CNS/Robert Bunch)

Pope Benedict XVI promulgated a "Year for Priests" last June, saying its aim is "to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a more forceful and incisive witness to the Gospel in today's world."

It began on the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 19, and is to conclude on that feast day in June 2010.

In announcing the Year for Priests, the pope said he wanted to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, the Curé of Ars, the patron saint of parish priests.

"May this Year of the Priest bring all priests to identify themselves totally with Jesus, crucified and risen," the pope said during a general audience held in St. Peter's Square.

To get a better handle on the meaning and purpose of the Year for Priests, NCR interviewed Sulpician Superior General Fr. Ronald D. Witherup. The mission of the Sulpicians, who are headquartered in Paris, is to provide formation of priests. Technically, the Sulpicians are not a religious order, but rather a group of diocesan priests banded together for a particular ministry and approved by Rome.

NCR: With all that is going on in the church and the world, why institute a Year for Priests now?

Witherup: Many Vatican officials, among others, and some priests themselves, feel that the priesthood has been under a cloud -- the horrific pedophilia scandal in particular. The actions of a small percentage of priests have tarnished the whole group.

Also, for decades we have been dealing, in the wake of Vatican Council II, with what some feel is an insecure identity of the priesthood. Almost anyone would acknowledge that the council did not produce an adequate theology of the priesthood. ...

It seems a little strange that there would be any doubt as to what the corporate identity of a priest is. The emphasis on corporate identity, I think, is the desire for a proper understanding of the priesthood so there is no confusion between the priesthood of the laity -- the common priesthood of all the baptized -- and the ordained priesthood.

During the '70s and into the '80s, I think some people got carried away with the notion of many forms of ministry. And some priests felt insecure because of that. In the '90s, though, I think this imbalance has been addressed and is not particularly prevalent today.

However, in different countries and cultures a uniform understanding of priesthood is not there. Especially in areas where you have strong ministries of catechists, deacons and the like in the absence of priests -- people can get the wrong idea. That is not in any way to denigrate the important ministry of catechists and deacons, but they are not exercising the same ministries as priests.

Is this special 'Year of the Priest' also meant to be a heavy-duty marketing effort to attract men to the priesthood -- and to really address the priest shortage?

Even the Holy See indicates there is a shortage despite the fact that the number of priests has grown to about 408,000 today. This is still not enough to keep pace with the worldwide growth of the Catholic population. So I wouldn't be surprised that this will be a year to promote the vocation of priesthood to young men. I think the year will also be used to boost the morale and the image of priests in the church.

Isn't it a responsibility of bishops to provide the sacraments for their people? Given the drastic shortage of priests -- which is worsening -- shouldn't we call out the bishops, at least to acknowledge the situation and to be accountable?

It is true that not all bishops are doing as much as they should. For some bishops, it is not their highest priority -- they have other priorities as shepherds. But it is a mistake for any organization not to promote future generations of leaders, because that is the future. But I think we are also up against an increased secularization of the world, especially the Western world. That is an enormous obstacle to overcome. Frankly, the vocation of priesthood is not necessarily attractive to young men today. They may be career-oriented. Some do not have a lot of stability in their lives. The idea of making a lifelong commitment and then being required to be celibate on top of it -- this is a countercultural message.

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Do you think some effort will be made to fashion some kind of reconciliation with the 10,000 or so priests in the U.S. who left to get married -- given that would be a pretty quick and substantial

resource to help with the shortage?

I don't see anything so far to indicate that this is a direction the Vatican is going to take. ... I don't see the Vatican reaching out to those who have gone down another path, for the most part, because of celibacy questions.

Last year there was a Vatican-initiated visitation of U.S. seminaries. What was that all about?

First of all, it is important to note that the general conclusion of the visitation's report was positive. There were some critical comments on centers of formation run by religious communities. ... There were concerns about some faculty members who were thought not to be adequately faithful to the magisterial teaching of the church. Two areas singled out were moral theology and the theology of priesthood, but the report said that these concerns were satisfactorily addressed.

There was a fear that the visitation would be a witch-hunt and that it particularly sought a "smoking gun" to explain why the pedophilia scandal happened. Some eagerly awaited blame to be put on the modern seminary formation system. The visitation found no such blame.

In fact, the reasons for the scandal are not fully understood at present, nor has a thorough study of the complex reasons for it been concluded. But at least one cannot say that seminaries were wholly to blame.

Are today's seminarians strong candidates?

Sometimes there are weaker candidates and this was pointed out in the report. Once in a while, seminaries are pressured into taking candidates who really aren't very strong. Seminaries should resist pressure from bishops to do that, but this is easier said than done.

That happens because there is a big shortage of vocations?

Exactly, and therefore bishops and vocation directors are grasping at straws and trying to open the gates a little wider than perhaps is wise.

What do you think some of today's seminarians find attractive about going back to the 1950s and resurrecting old clerical stuff -- like birettas and cassocks out in public -- that most people thought was gone for good?

Some seminarians, I think, are really enamored of what seems a very secure, unchanging lifestyle. They yearn for the time when everything was defined clearly in black and white. ... I think there is a bit of nostalgia for that. And some, no doubt, like the built-in respect for authority that often went with the role of the priest.

Some younger seminarians think that if we put the trappings of the priesthood back in place, especially the clerical side of it, the rest of the Catholic ethos will come with it.

I think that is a naive expectation. There's no going back. On the other hand, this is a generation of people, perhaps a couple of generations, who are looking for some kind of still point in a very shifting and fluctuating world. They have experienced such rapid change, and so many things seem to be in flux, that they are looking for stability. They see the church and the priesthood as providing that sort of stability.

And in conclusion?

This year will be a great opportunity for the church, and especially for priests. I hope that people will embrace it as a way to support priests and their ministry -- a ministry that is also respectful of the diverse ministries that exist in the church. This should not be a time to re-clericalize the priesthood or put it on a false pedestal, but to place it again on its firm spiritual foundations that rest in Jesus Christ, the great high priest.

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