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Pope to seminarians: abuse crisis can't discredit priesthood

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- In a letter to the world's seminarians, Pope Benedict XVI said that in the face of widespread religious indifference and the recent moral failings of clergy, the world needs priests and pastors who can serve God and bring God to others.

The pope encouraged seminarians to overcome any doubts about the value of the priesthood and priestly celibacy that may have been prompted by priests who "disfigured" their ministry by sexually abusing children. He said that "even the most reprehensible abuse cannot discredit the priestly mission."

The papal letter, released at the Vatican Oct. 18, was an unexpected postscript to the Year for Priests, which ended in June. The text began on a remarkably personal note, with the pope recalling the development of his own vocation during World War II.

"When in December 1944 I was drafted for military service, the company commander asked each of us what we planned to do in the future. I answered that I wanted to become a Catholic priest. The lieutenant replied: 'Then you ought to look for something else. In the new Germany priests are no longer needed,'" the pope recalled.

"I knew that this 'new Germany' was already coming to an end, and that, after the enormous devastation which that madness had brought upon the country, priests would be needed more than ever," he wrote.

Today, he said, many people are no longer aware of God and instead seek escape in euphoria and violence. The priesthood is again viewed as outmoded, yet priestly ministry is crucial in helping people see God's presence in the world, he said.

The pope said the sex abuse scandal shed a light on the need for the seminary to help form "the right balance of heart and mind, reason and feeling, body and soul" among future priests.

"This also involves the integration of sexuality into the whole personality," he said. "When it is not integrated within the person, sexuality becomes banal and destructive."

"Recently we have seen with great dismay that some priests disfigured their ministry by sexually abusing children and young people. Instead of guiding people to greater human maturity and setting them an example, their abusive behavior caused great damage for which we feel profound shame and regret," he said.

"As a result of all this, many people, perhaps even some of you, might ask whether it is good to become a priest; whether the choice of celibacy makes any sense as a truly human way of life. Yet even the most reprehensible abuse cannot discredit the priestly mission, which remains great and pure," he said.

He expressed gratitude for the many exemplary priests who demonstrate that ordained ministers can live a life of celibacy and give witness to an "authentic, pure and mature humanity." At the same time, he said that in the wake of sex abuse cases, the church must be "all the more watchful and attentive" in evaluating vocations.

Growth in human maturity was one of several elements the pope underlined in priestly formation. The others were:

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-- Developing a personal relationship with Christ. The priest is first and foremost a "man of God," the pope said, and added: "For us, God is not some abstract hypothesis; he is not some stranger who left the scene after the 'big bang.' God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ."

In that sense, he said, the priest "is not the leader of a sort of association whose membership he tried to maintain and expand. He is God's messenger to his people."

-- Dedication to the Eucharist and to knowing and understanding the church's liturgy.

-- The importance of the sacrament of penance in their lives, which can help priests resist the "coarsening of our souls" and develop a tolerance toward the failings of others.

-- Appreciation for popular piety which, although it tends toward the irrational, cannot be dismissed and is indeed "one of the church's great treasures."

-- The seminary as a place of study. The pope said today's priest must be familiar with Scripture, the writings of church fathers, the teachings of the councils, canon law and the various branches of theology.

-- The seminary as community. Because priestly vocations today arise in very disparate situations -- after secular professions, in Catholic lay movements, following deep personal conversions -- candidates for the priesthood "often live on very different spiritual continents." It is important that the seminary draw such experiences together, advancing "above and beyond differences of spirituality," he said.

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