



CONGREGATIO PRO CLERICIS

December 2009

Dear Priests,

Prayer necessarily occupies a central place in the life of the Priest. This is not hard to understand, since prayer fosters the disciple's intimacy with his Master, Jesus Christ. We all know that when prayer lessens faith is weakened and the ministry loses content and meaning. The essential consequence of this is that the priest will have less joy and less happiness in his daily ministry. It is as if, following Jesus along the road, the Priest, who walks along with many others, were to begin to lag behind bit by bit and so distance himself from the Master, even losing sight of him on the horizon. From that moment he will find himself lost and uncertain.

St. John Chrysostom, in a homily commenting on the First Letter of St. Paul to Timothy, observes wisely: "The devil attacks the shepherd [...]. In fact, if by killing the sheep the flock is reduced, by instead eliminating the shepherd he will destroy the entire flock". This statement makes one think about many contemporary situations. Chrysostom warns us that the lessening of the shepherds will and does make the number of the faithful and of communities decrease. Without shepherds our communities will be destroyed!

But here I would like above all to talk about the needfulness of prayer so that, as Chrysostom might say, the shepherds can defeat the devil and so that they are not lessened. Truly, without the vital food of prayer the Priest becomes sick, the disciple does not find the strength to follow the Master, and thus dies of hunger. As a consequence his flock is scattered, and dies in its own turn.

In fact every Priest finds an essential reference point in the ecclesial community. He is a very special disciple of the Lord who called him and who, by the sacrament of Order, configured him to Himself as Head and Shepherd of the Church. Christ is the one Shepherd, but he has deigned to make the Twelve and their Successors partake in His Ministry, amongst whom Priests also participate in this sacrament, albeit in a lower grade, in such a way that they also take part in the ministry of Christ, Head and Shepherd. This carries with it an essential bond between the Priest and the ecclesial community. He cannot do any less than his duty, since without a shepherd the

community withers. Rather, following the example of Moses, he must be found with his arms raised to Heaven in prayer so that the people will not perish.

It is for this reason that the Priest, if he is to remain faithful to Christ and faithful to the community, must be a man of prayer, a man who lives close to the Lord. Moreover, he needs to be strengthened by the prayer of the Church and of every Christian. Let the sheep pray for their shepherd! When the shepherd becomes aware that his life of prayer is weakening, it is time for him to turn to the Holy Spirit and to beseech like the poor of heart. The Spirit will rekindle the fire in his heart. He will rekindle the passion and the enchantment of the Lord, who is ever present and wishes to eat with him.

We wish to pray with and for priests in this Year for Priests with perseverance and great love. To this end, the Congregation for the Clergy celebrates a Eucharistic-Marian Hour for and with priests, at 4pm in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, Rome, each first Thursday of the month during the Year for Priests. Many people joyfully come to pray with us.

Dear Priests, the nativity of Jesus Christ draws near. I wish to express my best and heartfelt good wishes to you for a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year 2010. The Child Jesus lying in the manger invites us to renew this closeness with him of a friend and disciple, so as to send us out again as his evangelisers.

Cardinal Cláudio Hummes

Archbishop Emeritus of São Paulo

Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy