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REFLECTIONS ON THE YEAR OF THE PRIESTS

By Fr. Jan Larson, North Bend, WA

I read the pope's letter to priests beginning the special Year, and his audience talks around the topic. He is clearly excited about St. John Vianney, whose piety and approach to pastoral ministry I won't be adopting any time soon. His "hear confessions till you drop" spirituality is an insult to anything we believe today about healthy ministry, and his famous dialogues with the Devil excludes him from my personal list of inspirational priests. Give me Oscar Romero any day.

I suggest that 'The year of the Priest' include a symposium to help priests face the problem issues of today's priesthood. Retreats and trips to France are nice ideas, but are really distractions from the critical, even life threatening, issues that confront the contemporary priesthood and healthy ministry. Ten issues, as I identify them:

1. The shortage of priests, said to be irreversible. The band-aid solutions (inviting often unequipped foreign priests to the U.S. and raising retirement age, etc.) are not the answer. We can't continue to keep mandatory celibacy unchallenged, which by every measure is doing much more harm to the church and to individuals than it is doing good. Ordination of deacons must be discussed, as well as ordination of married men, and the reality that many resigned priests are willing to exercise their priesthood for the good of the church.

2. That many priests do not perceive themselves to be the closest collaborators with their bishops that they are supposed to be. The last time a bishop sincerely asked my opinion about anything was in 1997.

3. The feeling that we priests have been betrayed by our bishops by their knee-jerk passage of the Dallas Charter. Now priests who commit even the slightest offense are treated the same as a serial rapist. Why didn't we learn from the way the religious orders handled this mess? They begin their investigation process with charity, while the bishops begin with the appearance of presumed guilt and immediate removal from ministry. Meanwhile many accused religious order priests continue their ministry in some form. They are not automatically banished, because the gospels and charity would not allow this.

So many priests are also discouraged to see that many bishops who were responsible for silence and cover-ups are not held accountable. Why doesn't the Dallas charter apply to bishops? The Vatican remains silent, and, of course, the bishops refuse to demand accountability from their fellow bishops. Bishops owe us an apology in The Year of the Priest.

4. The growing rift between the "Vatican II priests and the "John Paul priests." We even ritually celebrate this rift at Priests' Days. When we gather for the eucharist, the "orthodox" priests are ritually set aside so they can stand out. What is not seen are the hidden resentments on both sides. Seeing this sort of division in the assembly, St. Paul could well insist that we are guilty of abusing the eucharist, beginning with the bishop who could end this, but prefers to remain silent.

5. The problems and challenges that necessarily accompany the increasingly disproportionate gay priesthood. In particular the heterosexual candidates who feel dislocated in largely gay seminary structures, and who consequently leave. This elephant in the room, as well as some of the other elephants I list, is so well treated by Fr. Donald Cozzens in his *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. It is unfortunate that his excellent book was not made the topic of Priests' Days when it was published nearly ten years ago. Another missed opportunity.

6. The return of clericalism. There is more to this than a fascination with cassocks and birettas and using antiquated rituals and vestments. The insidious side appears when it infects preaching, and when priests

begin to ignore the parish consultative structures that are supposed to be in place in every parish. The "Father knows best" days are returning with a gallop.

7. The evangelization problem. Many baptized people don't bother going to church, as our last Priests' Days speakers explained, because their experiences with the institutional church are negative. I know many of these people. The baptized will continue to leave and go to church elsewhere as long as there is the nasty perception that the church treats women as second class citizens, gays as second class citizens, divorced people as second class citizens, and anyone who dissents about any church teaching or policy is crushed with a heavy hand. Also many former practicing Catholics are convinced that the church is preoccupied with sex, which, of course, it is. (see some of St. John Vianney's obsessions below, as described in one of his wonderful biographies.)*

8. Resigned priests. These people, by Vatican policy, are treated like traitors. But they are an obvious answer to our prayers for more priests in our parishes. During The Year of the Priest the pope and bishops who are mean to these people should apologize and set up dialogue structures so that the ministry of these priests can be used for the good of the church.

9. Confidence in bishops. Under the last two popes the bishops have assumed the pre-Vatican II role as puppets of the Vatican. They seem to many priests to be frightened men who dare not speak out about anything other than abortion. They are the taillights of the church, instead of the headlights. And everyone else suffers the consequences. For instance, the bishops, with tails between their legs, voted to impose an even more mediocre translation of the words we use to pray together at liturgy. They should have raised hell, and vigorously protested the power grab instigated by Vatican bureaucrats. They should have refused to be emasculated by meddling committees of largely non-Americans.

10. So many older priests are heard saying, "I can't wait for retirement." Why do they say this? Why this sense of surrender, of hopelessness?

St. John Vianney

* The Saint on the dangers of women: "Alas, my dear brethren, how little purity is known in the world; how little we value it; what little care we take to preserve it; what little zeal we have in asking God for it, since we cannot have it of ourselves.

No, my dear brethren, it is not known to those notorious and seasoned libertines who wallow in and trail through the slime of their depravities, whose hearts are roasted and burned by an impure fire [sentence incomplete - Trans.] Alas, very far from seeking to extinguish it, they do not cease to inflame it and to stir it up by their glances, their desires, and their actions. What state will such a soul be in when it appears before its God! Purity!

"No, my dear brethren, this beautiful virtue is not known by such a person whose lips are but an opening and a supply pipe which Hell uses to vomit its impurities upon the earth and who subsists upon these as upon his daily bread. Alas! That poor soul is only an object of horror in Heaven and on earth! No, my dear brethren, this gracious virtue of purity is not known to those young men whose eyes and hands are defiled by glances and [sentence incomplete - Trans.] Oh God, how many souls does this sin drag down to Hell! No, my dear brethren, this beautiful virtue is not known to those worldly and corrupt girls who make so many preparation s and take so many cares to draw the eyes of the world towards themselves, who by their affected and indecent dress announce publicly that they are evil instruments which Hell makes use of to ruin souls -- those souls which cost so much in labors and tears and torments to Jesus Christ!

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"Look at them, these unfortunates, and you will see that a thousand devils surround their heads and their breasts. Oh, my God, how can the earth support such servants of Hell? An even more astounding thing to understand is how their mothers endure them in a state unworthy of a Christian! If I were not afraid of

going too far, I would tell those mothers that they are worth no more than their daughters.

"Alas! This sinful heart and those impure eyes are but sources of poison which bring death to anyone who looks at or listens to them. How do such monsters of iniquity dare to present themselves before a God Who is so holy and so set against impurity! Alas! Their poor lives are nothing but an accumulation of fuel which they amass to increase the flames of Hell through all eternity..."

On the dangers of dancing: "Even more strenuous, if possible, were his efforts in bringing about a suppression of dancing-an amusement to which the people were passionately addicted but which the Saint knew only too well to be a very hotbed of sin." The Cure of Ars (St. Jean Marie Baptiste Vianney), by Dom Enest Graf

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