

Homily for the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (Year for Priests)

This Tuesday will be the feast of St. John Vianney, the cure of Ars, the great example of holy priesthood and the patron saint of priests. In fact it is the 150th anniversary of his death, and the Pope has decided to celebrate this anniversary by holding a year for priests, which began in June and continues until June next year. I thought that this might be a good opportunity just to reflect with you on what a priest is, and what the priesthood is about. I need hardly say that a brief Sunday homily can only begin to scratch the surface, but that is worth doing all the same.

In an address to some clergy in Warsaw in 2006 Pope Benedict said:

"The faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God".

I've found this little quotation incredibly helpful, because rather like the gospels themselves it offers on the one hand a certain comfort, and on the other hand a challenge. It is very liberating to be reminded that this is the soul of the priestly life. As long as I bear this in mind I am less likely to become a sort of holy bureaucrat, an administrator, a property manager. There are some inevitable bits of administration that I need to do, of course, and indirectly they do contribute to promoting the encounter between man and God: I do need to sit at my desk and plan what I want to teach to people thinking of becoming Catholics, for example, or planning some of the liturgies we celebrate, or even thinking about ways to improve our buildings so that they are better able to speak to people about the divine. Other things are just too remote, however. When a fire emergency plan needs to be drawn up, and that is certainly an important thing to do, I have to ask 'does this involve promoting the encounter between man and God', and if it doesn't then I feel I am right to pass it on to somebody else. This is very liberating because the mundane administration has a corrosive effect on priests, it stops them thinking about spiritual matters and promotes the illusion, even for the priest, that the physical, visible world is all that matters. Once even the priests lose sight of the spiritual, they lose the capacity to keep their peoples eyes on heaven. As Geoffrey Chaucer said: "If gold rust, what shall iron do?"

But this priestly mission statement is a challenge as well. It would be quite easy to go through life on a fairly trivial sort of level, visiting plenty of people, perhaps even cheering up the sick with a few comforting words and some company, but after every encounter I try to challenge myself now with the question: did I do anything there to promote the encounter between man and God? It can be quite easy to shy away from this for fear of embarrassment, or rejection. As an example, I prepare lots of couples for marriage, and we talk about the practicalities of married life as well as the Church's vision of what marriage entails, but this year I have started to feel I need to do more to try and draw these young people closer to the Lord, so now I will suggest to all the Catholics planning to marry here that before their wedding day they should go to confession. For some of them this is not easy - for some this will be their second confession; but it is a chance to encounter the Lord at a very special moment in life, a chance to leave behind a lot of baggage before starting out on a new life. That little

phrase of the Pope's has helped me realise I need to do more to encourage people to come close to the Lord.

It is one thing, of course, to decide that I must make it my priority to promote encounters between people and God, but the practical question then follows: just how does a priest go about doing this? There are two elements to this: what he does, and what he is. Perhaps it is easiest to begin with what a priest does. He celebrates the sacraments, he preaches the gospel, he studies, he prays and he cares for his people. In all of these the priest is directly involved in promoting the encounter between God and man. Every sacrament is an encounter with Christ, and most of the sacraments depend on the presence of a priest. This is nothing to do with priestly power, and everything to do with priestly service. It does not make the priest think 'wow, I am powerful'; it makes the priest think 'my goodness, this is something so awesome and I am so weak, and poor, and unworthy of it'. Similarly, when the priest preaches the gospel, he is not giving his personal opinion (or he should not be). The words the priest speaks from the pulpit must be carefully chosen, because we speak as Christ himself. There may be other times when we are having a debate or a discussion about some disputed issue, when it is right for us to express an opinion. Sometimes it may even be appropriate for us to talk about our difficulties and problems with aspects of Catholic faith and practice: but when we preach we are speaking for Christ, and every word must be weighed carefully against the Catholic tradition. We may well look for new and imaginative ways of proclaiming the truth, but beneath all that what we proclaim must always be the Christian gospel, not our opinions.

Pope Benedict has also said that "the core of the priesthood is being friends with Jesus Christ" (Chrism Mass Homily 2006). That is why the priest's celebration of mass, his prayer, and his study are so important. Sometimes it can be quite tempting to put these things to one side, or see them as a sort of self-indulgence, not real work, but this is very dangerous. We are not being paid to be active and productive, running round looking busy; our job is not about busyness and productivity; in fact it is not really a job at all. We are here to be experts in promoting the encounter between man and God.

That brings me on to the second part of how the priest achieves this goal. It is achieved not just by what he does, but also by what he is. He is primarily a bridge, a link, between God and his people. Part of the time he is presenting God to the people, through his preaching and his sacramental celebrations, but then he turns and presents the people to God through his prayer. In a world that is busy, demanding, challenging, and often very distracting and confusing, the priest has to be a constant reminder of the things of Heaven. Once more let me quote the Pope, who says "...the priest must be on the watch. He must be on his guard in the face of the imminent powers of evil. He must keep the world awake for God" (Chrism Mass Homily 2008). As today's readings remind us, it is easy to be led astray by 'illusory desires' and 'the bread that cannot last'. So many people live hectic, busy lives, distracted by the demands of work and family, but the priest's role is to stand in the presence of the Lord and to remind those who are forgetful of him. This can be difficult, because some people will want to forget God, or even to pretend he is not there, but the prophetic role of the priest (and, in fact, of The Church) is to keep piping up "Don't forget God". Bishop O'Donoghue recently wrote that the Cure d'Ars saw the priest's role as being to help each person see that they were destined for glory, but were damaged and held back by

sin, so that Christ's help is needed to reconcile our damaged selves with our glorious destiny. As the Catechism says, we are 'called to beatitude, but wounded by sin' (CCC 1949).

By his way of life, the priest is to ensure God's presence is never forgotten; to make sure that our eyes do not become dulled to the spiritual truths of the inner life, not restricted to the mere physical world; to remind us, again and again, that we are destined for glory, but wounded by sin, and only God can help us overcome the gap between what we are and what we might become.

Being a priest is a wonderful role, because it sets us at the same time close to the heart of God, and also close to the heart of his people. But it isn't always easy, and sometimes it can be tempting to settle for less than the best, to offer something less challenging, less demanding, less threatening than 'goodness and holiness of the truth' as St Paul writes in today's readings. The purpose of the year for priests is to pray for priests, that they may stay faithful to Christ, and in doing so may lead others to Christ.