

Rock and a hard place: Pope says laity can't fill priest vacuum

Posted by David Gibson

Benedict XVI today announced a "Year for Priests"—a fine idea, though one that apparently also comes with a tough message for lay people dealing with a shortage of priests, and the Eucharist.

First, the announcement. According to the Vatican press release:

"Benedict XVI highlighted the 'indispensable struggle for moral perfection which must dwell in every truly priestly heart. In order to favour this tendency of priests towards spiritual perfection, upon which the effectiveness of their ministry principally depends, I have', he said, 'decided to call a special 'Year for Priests' which will run from 19 June 2009 to 19 June 2010'. This year marks 'the 150th anniversary of the death of the saintly 'Cure of Ars', Jean Marie Vianney, a true example of a pastor at the service of Christ's flock'.

The news release ends, however, with this paragraph, in full:

"The centrality of Christ leads to a correct valuation of priestly ministry, without which there would be no Eucharist, no mission, not even the Church. It is necessary then, to ensure that 'new structures' or pastoral organisations are not planned for a time in which it will be possible to 'do without' ordained ministry, on the basis of an erroneous interpretation of the promotion of the laity, because this would lay the foundations for a further dilution in priestly ministry, and any supposed 'solutions' would, in fact, dramatically coincide with the real causes of the problems currently affecting the ministry".

That seems like a pretty direct admonishment to lay reform groups, such as Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) on this side of the Atlantic, or Wir sind Kirche (We are Church) in Europe—or to the many individual Catholics or groups who are trying to cope with a growing shortage of priests, and of parishes and of the Eucharist.

A couple of thoughts: I don't think one should necessarily conflate lay initiatives for reform or simply lay-led ministries in the absence of a priest as intentional or even unintentionally undermining the role of the priest. Many if not most of these groups value the priesthood. And some argue that the women's ordination movement itself reflects a kind of clericalism!

Obviously the laity in the post-Vatican II age of a "priesthood of all believers" and a vocations crunch has contributed to an intense debate over the role of the priest and that of the laity. With or without the vocations shortage there would still be a debate, I believe, about the servant-leader and what is often called the cultic or iconic model of priesthood. (And most will respond, "both/and, not either/or...")

But the vocations "crisis" (scare-quotes are used to denote doubt about the term—some will see it as a good thing, perhaps, others as non-existent) has also forced the church on the ground into new arrangements—lay people as pastors, even women as pastors, the ordination of married converts, and of course overworked, overstressed circuit rider priests who are used as sacramental machines rather than pastors, and with parts wearing down and no replacements.

The pope rightly stresses the centrality of the Eucharist, but without offering (it seems) viable remedies to the absence of the Eucharist for so many people. Priests are central to the church—I support anything that

supports them, as this Year of Priests is designed to do. But the Eucharist is also not just for priests.

So what do we do? Reasserting clerical privilege doesn't cut it, as the reality on the ground is what it is. Cardinal Egan even raised a discussion of optional celibacy (<http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/?p=2909>). There are other options, all of which would not undermine the priestly office. I think it would be good to discuss options now before the crisis gets even worse.

The full text here, in Italian, of the pope's talk today to the Congregation for Clergy in which he made the announcement: http://212.77.1.245/news_services/bulletin/news/23540.php?index=23540&lang=en

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