

The Priest, Vital for Church's life

by Fr Cuthbert Alexander

How important is the priest's role within the parish community today? The Vatican Instruction, **The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community**, offers some points of reflection. The Instruction, published by the Congregation of the Clergy, is at one with an earlier letter of the Congregation, *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium, Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Community*, in seeking to help the

priest fulfill his particular role in this third millennium.

Even as it gives greater clarity to the "essential and vital" differences between the common or baptismal priesthood and the ordained priesthood, the Instruction, dated August of last year, provides a proper understanding of priestly identity and the sacramental dimension of the ordained minister. Its underlying purpose, it states, is to direct "particular affection towards those priests who carry out their

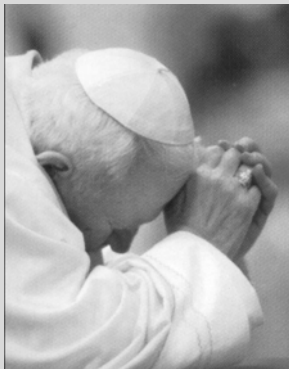
precious office as parish priests and who, though beset by many challenges, are always in the midst of their people."

The first part of the two-part document begins by drawing attention to the immensity of Christ's mission of love, a "mystery of love", to which the priest has been called to minister. Whatever difficulties may arise in fulfilling this mission, it states, "the Lord's ministers should always be mindful of the victory that overcomes the world: our faith" (cf. 1John 5:4).

In outlining the differences between the ministerial and
...continued on page 3

Eucharist, the beating heart -- Pope John Paul II.

Without Eucharistic worship as its beating heart, the parish dries up. ...I wrote in the Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini*, "Among the many activities of a parish, none is as vital or as community-forming as the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and His Eucharist. Nothing will ever be able to replace it. The Liturgy of the Word by itself, when it is really impossible to ensure the Sunday presence of a priest, is praiseworthy to keep the faith alive, but it must always keep the regular celebration of the



Eucharist as the goal to be achieved.

Where a priest is lacking one must ask the Lord with faith and insistence, to raise up numerous and holy laborers for His harvest. In *Pastores dabo vobis* I repeated that "today the prayerful expectation of new vocations should become an ever more continual and widespread habit within the entire Christian community and in every one of its parts."

The splendor of the priestly identity, the integral exercise of the pastoral ministry united to the

efforts of the whole community in prayer and personal penance, are the irreplaceable elements for an urgent pastoral activity to recruit vocations. It would be a fatal mistake to be resigned to present difficulties and act as if we should prepare ourselves for a Church of tomorrow that some imagine as being almost without priests. In this way, the measures adopted to remedy the present scarcity, in spite of all good will, would be seriously harmful for the Ecclesial Community (*from the Address of John Paul II to the plenary session of the Congregation for the Clergy, Friday 23 November 2001*).

Dear Friends of the Priesthood

EPISCOPAL ADVISORS

Bishop Sam Jacobs
Alexandria, LA

Bishop Paul Bemile
Wa, Ghana

Bishop Gilbert Sheldon
Steubenville, OH

Bishop Donald Wuerl
Pittsburgh, PA

Bishop John Myers
Newark, NY

DIRECTORS

Msgr. John Allard
Chairman

Rev. Tim Graff
Newark, New Jersey

Rev. Ray Ratzenberger
Tucson, AZ

Rev. Cuthbert Alexander
Port of Spain, Trinidad

Rev. Bob Giardina
Providence, Rhode Island

Editor's Box:

Please send all articles, comments and photos to the editor, Fr. Cuthbert Alexander, cutfyal@yahoo.com or fax to 868-633-0836.

The co-editor of the newsletter, Fr. Bill Cosgrove, can also be reached via e-mail at frbill@optonline.com or fax to 845-227-3951.

Newsletter material from all Fraternity members is gratefully accepted!

I teach a weekly scripture class and recently we studied the prophet Habakkuk (how'd you'd like to have a handle like that?). He prophesied at the time of the Babylonian invasion of Israel just prior to Jerusalem's destruction in 587 B.C.

In 597 B.C. there had been the first siege of the city which resulted in the exile of the upper echelons of Jewish society, including the king and his retinue. The poor remained and suffered.

With the second siege the city was leveled, the glorious Temple was destroyed, and the remaining civilians were then exiled to the four corners of the Babylonian Empire.

The prophet is reacting to the devastation and brokenness all around him. He wonders how this can be since the Jews were God's special chosen and covenanted people. He wrestles with the horror all around him. Remember, the belief in an afterlife and heaven came later in the evolution of Jewish revelation. The idea of being rewarded in another life was not something Habakkuk could fall back on. At a time when people were falling away from faith and belief in a God who loved them, the prophet's resolution was unswerving faith in God—no matter what. Note this beautiful passage at the end of his prophecy:

For though the fig tree blossom not nor fruit
be on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive fail and the
terraces produce no nourishment,
Though the flocks disappear from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
Yet will I rejoice in the Lord and exult in
my saving God.
God, my Lord, is my strength; he makes my
feet swift as those of hinds
and enables me to go upon the heights.
(Hab.3.17-19)

What a bold stand of absolute faith!
We are within the holy season of Lent
when we Christians celebrate the great
salvific acts of Jesus which enabled us to
have a home with our eternal Father.
Because of Jesus' death and resurrection

you and I have eternal life. Poor Habakkuk didn't know all this and still he trusted in God. You and I have been blessed in so many tremendous ways; we are the very sons and daughters of God. How critical it is that we trust our Father unswervingly.

Lent challenges us to think and reflect on the great price that was paid for our salvation. "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son..." (Jn.3.16).

In praying about the message of this letter, I received Lk.5.38: "But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins." To really contain the new wine of God's Spirit and very life, to contain all that our Father wants to give us, we cannot settle for being old wineskins. We must be transformed by God's grace so as to contain this new wine. And this is where Lent really challenges us—to repent and reform (form again). This is what renewal is all about—I am supposed to change. As the vessel is renewed, deeper trust becomes reality, because now I am more and more like Christ, the ideal TRUSTER of the Father. Prayer, penance, sacrifices and almsgiving all work together toward my becoming a new wineskin.

The Fraternity of Priests has seen this process as key since its inception. Our goal has always been to assist and help bring about the restoration of the priesthood, "to gather priests to Christ and to one another..." Herein lies our trust and our hope.

In Christ,



Fr. John



continued from page 1...

common priesthood, the Instruction homes in on the sacramental character of the ministerial priesthood which ensures that the presence and ministry of the ordained—linked in a special way to the first Apostles—is “unique, indispensable and irreplaceable.” It says: “The presence of an ordained minister is an essential condition for the Church’s life and not merely for effective organization.”

The common priesthood, the document states, “is a consequence of the fact that the Christian people has been chosen by God as bridge with mankind and involves every believer who has been inserted into this people” but, “the ministerial priesthood is the fruit of being chosen ...the fruit of a specific vocation: ‘(Jesus) called his disciples, and chose from them twelve’ (Luke 6: 13-16).” Indeed, the ministerial priesthood makes “the faithful aware of their common priesthood” and serves to actualize it” (cf. Eph 4: 11,12).

Clearly much confusion can arise where the identities of the two priesthoods are misunderstood, resulting in the “underestimation of the specific mission of the laity to sanctify the structures of society from within.”

Turning to unity of life, the unity between the spiritual life and ministerial activity, the Instruction states that growth in this is “founded on pastoral charity and promoted by a solid prayer life so much so that the priest becomes, at one and the same time, a witness to charity and a master of the spiritual life.”

Priests have a “further reason to strive for holiness” which is not to say that their holiness is somehow greater than that to which the laity is called. “Holiness is always the same”, however, the priest “is motivated to strive for holiness for a different reason: so as to be worthy of that new grace which has marked him so that he can represent the person of Christ, Head and Shepherd, and thereby become a living instrument in the work of salvation.”

The document frowns on the idea of a “retired” priest and recalls: “the priest is a full-time bearer of an ontological consecration. His basic identity has to be sought in the character which has been conferred on him by the Sacrament of Holy Orders and from which pastoral grace derives.”

The second part of the Instruction addresses the duty of the parish priest. He is not a “functionary” providing services to those who request them. The priest “exercises his ministry in an integral way as a man of God, seeking out

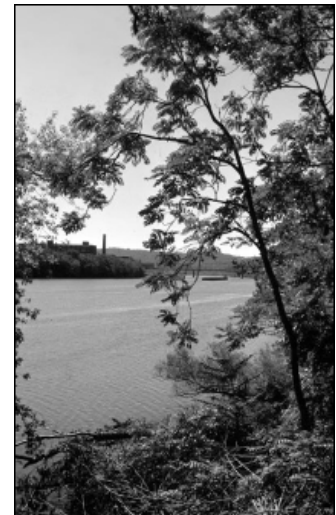
the faithful, visiting their families, sharing in their needs and in their joys. He corrects with prudence, he cares for the aged the weak, the abandoned, the sick and the dying. He devotes particular care to the poor and the afflicted. He strives for the conversion of sinners and those in error. He encourages all in the fulfillment of the duties of their states of life and promotes the Christian life among families.”

An important part of the parish priest’s duty, says the Instruction, is to help the laity to witness to the Gospel in their daily tasks, “quickening and perfecting the temporal order”, as it were, “with the spirit of the Gospel.” It also sees a particular role for the parish priest in nurturing vocations for the priesthood. It says, he “is particularly bound, zealously to promote, sustain and follow vocations.”

The Instruction, which the Holy Father ordered to be published, originates from his address to the plenary session of the Congregation in November 2001 (*see box*).

Save This Date!!

Fraternity Conference 2003!
Cardinal Spellman Retreat House, overlooking the Hudson River, New York, is the venue for this year’s Fraternity Conference, taking place from August 3 to 8. Brothers don’t miss out on this time of prayer, fellowship and relaxation!



Please send us your prayer intentions: _____

THANK YOU FOR PRAYING FOR A PRIEST EACH DAY!

A PRAYER FOR PRIESTS

Jesus, Eternal High Priest, live in (name of priest), act in him, speak in and through him. Think your thoughts in his mind, love through his heart. Give him your own disposition and feelings. Teach, lead and guide him always. Correct, enlighten and expand his thoughts and behavior. Possess his soul, take over his entire personality and life. Replace him with yourself. Incline him to constant adoration and thanksgiving; pray in and through him. Let him live in you and keep him in this intimate union always.

Mary, Immaculate Conception, Mother of Jesus and Mother of priests, pray and intercede for (.....). Amen.

Please cut and return this form with your donation

Fraternity of Priests, Inc.
Franciscan University
Steubenville, OH 43952-9671
Phone: (740) 283-4400
Fax: (740) 283-3622
Email: contact@fraternityofpriests.org
<http://www.fraternityofpriests.org>



Do you know anyone who would like to receive our Newsletter?
(Please print legibly)

Name _____
Street _____
City, State and Zip _____

The Fraternity of Priests pledge of financial accountability: We take very seriously the trust you put in us when you send a gift. We stand accountable before God and you to honor that trust. We pledge: **To use your gift carefully and wisely, and not to ask for money that is not needed.**

Dear Father John Allard,
This donation is to help the Fraternity of Priests in continuing their work of ministering to priests.
 \$10 \$25 \$50 \$100 Other \$ _____