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At the conclusion of the Year for Priests

2010/15

TO THE WHOLE SOCIETY

Dear brothers in Christ,

On 18 June 2009, the eve of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated a year of reflection and prayer on the gift of the priesthood in the Church. As our participation in the Year for Priests, I invited you “to take time for prayer, reflection and conversation” regarding priesthood in the Society of Jesus. The purpose of my invitation to the universal Society was to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation among Jesuits of an essential aspect of our charism as a sacerdotal religious community. The personal and communal reflections that have taken place throughout this year have accomplished my purpose in many encouraging ways. I am particularly grateful for the work of the small group that gathered here in Rome to help me study the reflections I received from the Provinces and Regions. Through this letter, I wish to thank the Society for its generous response to my original invitation and to offer some remarks and questions that might lead to further reflection among individuals and communities.

It is clear from the responses sent to me that one cannot reduce the lived experience of priesthood in the Society of Jesus to a single theological formulation. This comes as no surprise for we exercise our priestly ministry in such varying cultures and situations, which naturally influence our perspectives and thinking. But this is always the way it has been in the Society. Because the Church has sent us and continues to send us “to the frontiers,” priesthood in the Society has always been exercised in various ways, in response to the rich range of missions that the Church has entrusted to the Society. We are blessed to have so many excellent models of Jesuit priests: Matteo Ricci and Robert de Nobili, Robert Bellarmine and Roch Gonzales, Rupert Mayer and Alberto Hurtado, to name but a few. Possibly one of the most important challenges for us Jesuits is to accept gratefully and creatively this great diversity of forms of living the priesthood, welcoming and respecting the ways of our brothers that may differ from ours, without seeking to diminish their priestly identity through any kind of ideological reductionism.

While there is no single way of living the priesthood in the Society, there are common elements uniting us Jesuits that might be considered as a “distinctive style” of living the priesthood. Ignatius and his first companions saw themselves as “reformed priests,” refusing all benefices, dignities and offices in order to be poor and humble preachers of a Christ who was poor and humble. They were also learned priests, priests possessed of a solid intellectual and theological formation that allowed them to serve with depth. They lived as an apostolic body, dedicated to particular works and discerning together about matters that concerned

their common life and mission. They placed themselves at the service of the vicar of Christ because of their passionate desire “to be sent” wherever there was greater need or difficulty, wherever there was hope of more universal good. They engaged in a variety of forms of ministries, spiritual and temporal, motivated only by the desire to serve the greater glory of God and to “help souls” under the banner of the Cross. The Eucharist, celebrated with much reverence and devotion, was the center of their lives and their most profound source of consolation and enlightenment for mission. And “as the need for help in carrying out the mission led Ignatius to accept into the body of the Society a diversity of members, priests and brothers,” (GC 34, Decree 7, No. 3) the same essential style of life was shared by these diverse members, albeit in different ways.

I think that one can see the elements of this Jesuit priestly style in all the different models of Jesuit priesthood mentioned earlier, diverse as they are. The question for us Jesuits today is: to what extent do we and those who know us see these elements in our lives? Therefore, we may ask ourselves: in what concrete ways, in whatever ministry to which we are sent, do we live as “reformed priests”

- poor and humble like Christ;
- solid and deep in our reflection;
- living and working in communion with our brother Jesuits and our collaborators;
- open to universal mission, especially as expressed by the Holy Father;
- ready to be sent to whatever service can help people follow Christ, while transforming this world into a world of love and justice?

Some other questions might also help us examine our experience of priesthood. How does our way of understanding and living the priesthood – especially those of us ordained to the presbyterate – keep us from succumbing to temptations to clericalism, privilege, or differences that underline power or social positions of preference? What are the ways in which we manifest joyful lives of simple service that imitate Jesus’ washing of the feet? How central, reverent, and transformative is the celebration of the Eucharist in our daily lives? Where do we need to grow? Where do we need to reform ourselves?

There is surely need for reform among us Jesuits. As the Holy Father pointed out in his moving homily at the close of the Year for Priests, “in this very year of joy for the sacrament of the priesthood, the sins of priests came to light.” We Jesuits must in all humility admit our guilt when we have contributed to the terrible wounds the Holy Father refers to. We Jesuits must do what we can to promote healing and reconciliation in situations where we are involved. We Jesuits must also take the steps we can to prevent abuse in the future. The priesthood of Jesus was lived in his total self-giving, to the end, on the Cross. Every person he met was blessed by the encounter with his self-giving love. The Society’s priestly character, a participation in the priesthood of Christ, should bless and give life by self-donation. Therefore, every encounter with a Jesuit, whether ordained or not, should lead to grace, blessing and life. Thus, there is a need for us as individuals and communities to reflect conscientiously on how all of us are being called, in very concrete ways, to humility, purification and renewal, so that our lives may be more truly a sign of the self-giving priesthood of Jesus.

Ignatius and the first companions intensely desired to be consecrated to God: to put themselves completely into God’s hands so that they could be transformed into God’s instruments. They were keenly aware of their weaknesses; yet they experienced even more

powerfully that they were called by the Eternal Lord of all things to be his companions in mission. We thank the Lord then for this gift of a unique style of living the priesthood in the Church, and we pray that, by seeking to be more faithful to this gift, we Jesuits may deepen our consecration and become more joyful and effective instruments of God's love for the world of today.

Fraternally yours in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Nicolás S.I.", written in a cursive style.

Adolfo Nicolás, S.I.
Superior General

Rome, 9 September 2010

Saint Peter Claver

(Original: English)