



Why We Must Pray for Priests

*When people want to destroy religion they begin by attacking
the priest; for when there is no priest, there is no sacrifice:
and when there is no sacrifice, there is no religion.*⁸

—St. John Vianney

In 2009, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, celebrated on June 19 that year, marked two significant events: the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney (August 4, 1859), the patron saint of priests, and the start of the Year for Priests. The Year for Priests was declared by Pope Benedict XVI and was intended to “deepen the commitment of all priests to *interior renewal* for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world.”⁹ I was present for the inaugural Mass of the Year for Priests at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., celebrated by His

⁸ Quoted in Abbé Alfred Monnin, *Life of the Curé d’Ars* (Baltimore: Kelly & Piet, 1865), 281.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Inaugural Letter for the Year for Priests*, 2009.

Praying for Priests

Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick and 130 other priests. It was a glorious liturgy, in which the cardinal elaborated on the gift of ministerial priesthood, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the necessity of asking God to renew priests each day. He implored the laity to celebrate the Year for Priests *with* priests and *for* priests so that God might bless them and they might do what God wanted them to do in the year designated *for* priests. He also praised the priesthood of St. John Vianney, who famously described the priesthood as “the love of the heart of Jesus.”

The cardinal reminded the priests that no one merits the great gift of God’s love, which chose them for priesthood; that from the womb they were called to be transformed into God’s love for the Church. He invited priests to thank Jesus for *breaking* His Heart for them. He shared how priests have seen the glory of God in a newly baptized baby, in an old dying nun, in the face of a soldier in battle, in Catholic parents open to life (children), in the prisoner and in the wonder of mercy, in pronouncing the words of the Consecration over bread and wine, when they raise their hand in absolving sins, when a little girl receives her first Holy Communion and whispers, “I love You so much, Jesus.” Priests see the glory of divine love in the wonder of the sacrifice of their lives as *alteri Christi* (“other Christs”).

That Mass was a perfect precursor to the next day, the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, when, at the same basilica, I had the honor of attending the priestly ordination of a dear friend who became my prayer partner during his years in a seminary in Rome. During his ordination, I perceived the mystical union of this *alter Christus* to his Bride, the Church. By making a total gift of himself to God and His Church, he would discover the embrace of a divine love that would bring him utmost fulfillment and fecundity. It was a great privilege to see the culmination of

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

his many years of formation. The Scripture passage “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11), came to mind during his ordination. I experienced the maternal love of Mary and rejoiced in the making of another priest!

The Importance of the Priest

We desperately need more holy priests to reflect the light of Christ, reveal the tenderness of His Sacred Heart, radiate the beauty of His Holy Face, proclaim the truth of His Word, and extend the power of the seven sacraments. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes sacramental priesthood in this way: “Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time: thus it is the sacrament of apostolic ministry.”¹⁰ And St. John Vianney put it even more succinctly: “Without the Sacrament of Holy Orders we would not have the Lord.”¹¹ Sometimes we do not realize the importance of the priest until we experience the need for God’s help. We then look to His minister to aid us. At all times, the priest is vitally necessary to the life of the Church and the salvation of souls.

The Lord has graciously brought many priests and seminarians into my life, beginning with a small group of priests who gathered at our home to pray the Rosary each week during the early to mid-nineties. Since 1992, I have had the honor of serving in the leadership of Magnificat, A Ministry to Catholic Women, an apostolate based on the Visitation (Luke 1:39-51)

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], no. 1536.

¹¹ Quoted by Pope Benedict XVI in his Inaugural Letter for the Year of Priests, 2009.

Praying for Priests

and dedicated throughout eighty international chapters to proclaiming Mary's *Magnificat* hymn of praise. Through this apostolate, I have traveled extensively and crossed paths with many priests. Twelve years ago, a group of priests invited me to join the healing and deliverance team of my diocese. Through these experiences, God and His servants taught me much about the spirituality of ministerial priesthood and, I believe, confirmed me in the charism¹² of intercessory prayer for priests.

In 2004, I published the first of several books dealing with themes such as suffering, the Eucharist, prayer, and the Rosary. I was later invited to attend annual training conferences on healing and deliverance at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois. I met more bishops, priests, and seminarians and eventually was invited to speak at seminaries in both America and Europe. In 2012, the national director of Radio Maria asked me to host a weekly radio program to interview priests, bishops, and lay leaders.

I am now blessed to be the “prayer partner” of a group of priests and seminarians, and it is an undeserved joy to have them in my life. In my travels to seminaries and priest conferences, I have met many heroes, because priests and seminarians are men of brave heart in a world that increasingly rejects the gospel.

I am aware of the challenge that priests face as they strive toward the goal of living like Christ. They acknowledge their individual powerlessness but say yes to God's power working in

¹² *Charism* in this sense is defined as “a spiritual gift or talent granted by God to the recipient not primarily for his own sake but for the benefit of others” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “charism,” accessed December 3, 2013, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3407702279/charism.html>).

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

them. They become burden-bearers for Christ and His people. In presenting themselves for the sacrament of Holy Orders, they step out in faith and into something much greater than themselves. Their good example helps the people of God to do the same.

The science of love taught by Christ consists of sacrificial love for God and neighbor, perfected in missionary zeal. It should only be for love that a priest agrees to follow Jesus in the ministerial priesthood. God help him if it is for any other reason. He is able to make a total gift of himself to Christ because he has experienced a love that is more powerful than anything else.

Here I am reminded of the famous words of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J.:

Nothing is more practical than finding God, i.e., than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.¹³

Falling in love with Christ creates an inner dynamism of the heart that spurs us selflessly to serve the Beloved. A person in love with God will do amazing things because *nothing* is more

¹³ Quoted by Fr. James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 219.

Praying for Priests

dynamic than a love that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). Love is like a fire in the soul. It can be a resting flame that, when God gives the word, ignites into a roaring fire that zealously proclaims, “Jesus is Lord!” Love is the essence of Christ’s priesthood.

The ordained priest pours himself out as a beloved son of the Father, a chaste spouse of the Church, a spiritual father of souls, a spiritual physician, a head and shepherd within the Church.¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI reflects upon the notion of priesthood radiating “the love of the heart of Jesus”: “The expression of St. John Vianney also makes us think of Christ’s pierced Heart and the crown of thorns which surrounds it. I also think, therefore, of the countless situations of suffering endured by many priests, either because they themselves share in the manifold human experience of pain or because they encounter misunderstanding from the very persons to whom they minister.”¹⁵

Here we clearly see that the heart of a priest pulses with love that is sacrificial in nature. Self-renunciation endures only when the human will remains docile in order to ascend to union with God’s will. Then one lays down his life for the beloved and allows his heart to be pierced, as was the Lord’s. This means the priest must possess a kind of availability of spirit, as Pope Benedict XVI eloquently expresses: “Day after day it is necessary to learn that I do not possess my life for myself. Day by day I must learn to abandon myself; to keep myself available for whatever he, the Lord, needs of me at a given moment, even if other things seem

¹⁴ Cf. *Priestly Formation Faculty Manual* (Omaha: The Institute for Priestly Formation, 2012), 16.

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Inaugural Letter for the Year for Priests*, 2009.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

more appealing and more important to me: this means giving life, not taking it.”¹⁶

A loving heart is also a sensitive heart. Every vocation requires a heart that sees the needs of others. We learn this through the gift of family. A spiritually sensitive heart perceives Christ’s presence in the other. The ordained priest marries the family of the entire Church. That is why Christ gives priests His Sacred Heart with which to love God’s family. Ven.¹⁷ Archbishop Fulton Sheen writes about the sensitive disposition of the heart of a true priest:

Every true priest has the same heart-tearing pity as he flies over a great city such as Paris, New York or London. Down below he sees with Christ’s eyes millions of souls unfed by the Eucharist, unhealed by penance, living in houses built on sand because they know not the Rock. He sees in them what Our Lord saw when he looked at the multitudes—danger of eternal loss! Here are countless acres ripe for harvesting, but how few the laborers to gather! Our Lord indicates that this harvest of souls is convertible. He is enthusiastic about the prospects of winning souls, and his words are intended to project that enthusiasm to his priests. He made a similar expression of confident anticipation when the crowds streamed out of Samaria to hear his words, “Why, lift up your eyes, I

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at the Ordination Mass for Fifteen deacons of the Diocese of Rome, in Rome, May 7, 2006.

¹⁷ Ven. is the abbreviated form of the title *Venerable*, which is designated to a person declared to be “heroic in virtue” by the Church and signifies a particular stage in the canonization process, which ends in the proclamation of that person as a Catholic saint. This title succeeds Servant of God and precedes Blessed.

Praying for Priests

tell you, and look at the fields, they are white with the promise of harvest already” (John 4:35).¹⁸

A loving heart is a vulnerable heart and therefore capable of being wounded, just as the Lord’s Sacred Heart was pierced for the salvation of souls. The priest’s heart is particularly vulnerable because of his *unique priestly victimhood* with Jesus. For the priest who lives the reality of his human weakness and carries in his heart the pain and suffering of his flock, the cross becomes the right place and perfect provision of God where he can place himself and his people. The priest is above all a victim of divine love; one who has been captured for love. He mysteriously becomes the victim of his own intercession on the cross.

When priests possess hearts that are unwilling to sacrifice and be vulnerable, they can veer off the path that Christ intends for them. Pope Francis provided a warning regarding this in a homily at a Chrism Mass early in his pontificate:

Those [priests] who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers. We know the difference: the intermediary, the manager, “has already received his reward,” and since he doesn’t put his own skin and his own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks. This is precisely the reason for the dissatisfaction of some, who end up sad—sad priests—in some sense becoming collectors of antiques or novelties, instead of being shepherds living with “the odor of the sheep.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Fulton Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 80.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Homily at Chrism Mass, given at St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome, March 28, 2013.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

The words of Pope Francis are repeated very often and seem to have struck a chord in the hearts of priests and laity alike. They remind us of the communal life of the Church and serve as an important warning against isolation. Sometimes the smell of the sheep is unpleasant, but the Good Shepherd never leaves them. He lays down His life for the flock. He chases after the least of them, and so should priests.

When we see a priest, we behold an ordinary man, but there is much more than meets the eye. A priest elicits certain aspirations within us since most people expect to perceive something of God in him. He also remains a mystery to most people, sometimes even to himself. This should not be cause for concern. The things of God tend to draw us up into beautiful mysteries worth pondering. God's mysteries are not to be solved, but they are embraced in faith. God, the source of all holiness and mystery, desires to remain with us through the person of the priest.

When we perceive holiness, we not only respond with appreciation, but we also desire to have it for ourselves. Peter said, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

Archbishop Sheen expresses well the role of the priest in the sanctification of God's people:

As the shepherd, so the sheep; as the priest, so the people. Priest-victim leadership begets a holy Church. Every worldly priest hinders the growth of the Church; every saintly priest promotes it. If only all priests realized how their holiness makes the Church holy and how the Church

Praying for Priests

begins to decline when the level of holiness among priests falls below that of the people!²⁰

Perhaps, more than we realize, the lay faithful take a cue from a priest's commitment to God. If we perceive authentic fervor, we are inspired. But if fervor seems lacking, we can try to excuse our own mediocrity. Yet it's also true that "holy Christians guarantee holy priests."²¹ If we want to be inspired by our priests, we need to be people who inspire them.

Writing to his brother priests about their effect on others, Archbishop Sheen offers more insight: "Every slightest failing on our part brings the community under the judgment of God. Every least increase of priestly virtue brings it blessing."²² I'd like to relate a story of how the presence of a priest brought God's blessing to a family. Not long ago, a priest friend called and asked me to join him at the hospital and pray for a family in dire need of a miracle. In a hospital room I found the priest and the patient's extended family in a circle of prayer around their loved one, a married man and father of two young sons, who had been diagnosed with a life-threatening disease. Hospital staff had told his wife that she should take him home and try to enjoy the time she had left with him. Unable to accept that prognosis, she called her parish priest, who led us in prayers imploring God's healing upon his parishioner. The priest's ardent supplications reflected his profound confidence in God's healing power. His priestly presence changed the atmosphere in that hospital room. Where a death sentence had been pronounced, this priest was now *pronouncing life* and reminding us that God is the Divine

²⁰ Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own*, 76-77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 83.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

Physician and Master of Life. God alone would have the final say. The beleaguered family drank in the priest's faith and love as they hung on his words of hope. The priest and my family continued to support him and his family through the highs and lows of different medical treatments for years. His wife championed his cause, always seeking the best. This young father was ultimately given a successful bone-marrow transplant. As a result of brain surgery, he is now legally blind, but he is alive and thriving. His family has also returned to the practice of their faith, filled with gratitude to God for this miracle and for their priest, who helped them carry a heavy cross all the way to resurrection. A priest's availability and fatherly care make all the difference.

If the priest is to remain completely available to God and His people and willing to embrace suffering, *he needs perennial renewal*. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, as a very young priest, had this to say about the interior renewal of the priest:

We must begin by purifying ourselves before others; we must be instructed to be able to instruct, become light to illuminate, draw close to God to bring him close to others, be sanctified to sanctify, lead by the hand and counsel prudently. I know whose ministers we are, where we find ourselves and to where we strive. I know God's greatness and man's weakness, but also his potential. Who then is the priest? He is the defender of truth, who stands with angels, gives glory with archangels, causes sacrifices to rise to the altar on high, shares Christ's priesthood, refashions creation, restores it in God's image, recreates it for the world on high and, even greater, is divinized and divinizes.²³

²³ Quoted in CCC, no. 1589.

Praying for Priests

Interior renewal for a priest who is *with Christ*, the head of the Body, is costly to him. It takes him to a place of extreme humility. Considering that Jesus was born in a manger and died on a cross, the priest learns what St. John Vianney meant when he said, “God has given each of us our own work to do. It for us to pursue our road, that is to say, our vocation. . . . When God gives us such a vocation, he bestows upon us at the same time his grace to fulfill it.”²⁴ The priest is called to fulfill the mission of carrying the cross, *but God never ordained that he do this alone.*

The Lord requests that *we make sacrifices* in order to bring about a renewal of the priesthood. He wants His flock to have the shepherd close to them, to feed and protect them on the steep path that leads to heaven. God mandates mutual charity because *He makes it possible to love.*

In a beautiful book called *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Spouse and Victim*, Fr. Cliff Ermatinger explains: “But what God asks of us is not simply to love him with all our heart, but through the dynamic of theological virtue, to love him with *his heart*; that is, with his own divine charity present in our hearts.”²⁵ Even as a little child, Thérèse perceived during a trip to Rome that priests need prayer. Probably because of her spiritual childhood, she could be sensitive to the needs of priests. She later entered religious life with the Carmelites and became one of the famous saints whose lives were offered up as an oblation for priests.

The vocation of all believers to love and serve cannot be “turned off.” The divine love first poured into our hearts at baptism is always “on” so that we might be animated to “do whatever

²⁴ Quoted in *Priestly Formation Faculty Manual*, p. 19.

²⁵ Cliff Ermatinger, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Spouse and Victim* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2010), 35.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

he tells you” (John 2:5). Love is the one thing necessary that compels us to pray and sacrifice for priests, and priests are worthy of receiving the firstfruits of our prayers and sacrifices.

Despite our personal experiences with different priests, we can ask Mary to help us to see them with her eyes, since “for her, a priest is always a priest, a living image of her Son, and if that image is disfigured by sin, she only has a more ardent desire to give him back that resemblance to Christ, for she sees him as God sees him.”²⁶

The Importance of Praying for Priests and Vocations

The apostle John writes, “And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him” (1 John 5:14-15). Holy Scripture, life experience, and the testimonies of laypeople and clergy have convinced me that prayer is always effective!

The power of prayer should never be underestimated. Christ and His Church have always taught the fundamental importance of communal and personal prayer. St. John Vianney addresses the primacy of prayer:

Prayer is the source of all graces, the mother of all virtues, the efficacious and universal way by which God wills that we should come to him. He says to us: “Ask, and you shall receive.” None but God could make such promises and keep them. He says to us, “If you ask the Father anything in my name, he will give it to you.” ... Ought not this

²⁶ Fr. Marie Dominique Philippe, O.P., quoted in *Magnificat Year for Priests Companion* (New York: Magnificat, 2009), 51.

Praying for Priests

promise [to] fill us with confidence, and to make us pray fervently all the days of our poor life? Within the reach of the ignorant, enjoined to the simple and to the enlightened, prayer is the virtue of all mankind; it is the science of all the faithful! Everyone on earth who has a heart, everyone who has the use of reason ought to love and pray to God.²⁷

I have been blessed to cross paths on a few occasions with Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., who has served as the Preacher to the Papal Household since 1980, and I am always edified by his joyful presence and his prophetic preaching. He perceives a present movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church that is calling growing numbers of faithful to pray and sacrifice to support the holiness of priests:

It is true that laypeople contribute to the support of the clergy, but their contribution to the kingdom and to the priests should not stop there. The Lord today is calling the faithful in ever-growing numbers to pray, to offer sacrifices, in order to have holy priests. A concern, a passion, for holy priests has spread as a sign of the times throughout today's Church. Mother Teresa of Calcutta continued to repeat this need. Having heard the cry of the poor in the world, whenever she found herself addressing priests she conveyed that cry (as she did once before the synod of bishops), saying, "They told me to tell you that they need holy priests."

The royal and universal priesthood of believers has found a new way of expressing itself: contributing to the

²⁷ Quoted in *Magnificat Year for Priests Companion*, 28.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

sanctification of ministerial priesthood. Such vocations are extending out more and more beyond the walls of the cloistered monasteries, where they have been hidden, and are reaching the faithful. This vocation is becoming widespread, a call that God addresses to many. Through prayer, people are supporting the proclamation of the word and increasing its effectiveness and its fruitfulness. I share with you my time, my study, and the understanding that I acquired from the treasure house of the Church, but others, who are unknown, have contributed the most precious thing: prayer and suffering.²⁸

Here, Fr. Cantalamessa clearly acknowledges the hidden offering of prayer and suffering for priests by the laity as a precious gift. And when Mother Teresa refers to the plea of the poor for more holy priests, it reminds us of the dire needs of the poor and their longing to see Christ in a priest who is present to their suffering. The wealthy also possess this longing, for Mother Teresa referred often to the spiritual poverty of wealthy nations. Praying for priests is increasingly important for everyone.

I know many people who have fervent and fruitful prayer lives. But for a greater number of people, the art of prayer is an abandoned one. The Lord is calling His Church to be *first and foremost a house of prayer*. Prayer is paramount to discipleship because prayer connects us with the Sacred Heart of Jesus and His priestly intentions.

Recently I gave a parish mission outside of my diocese. The parish was without a priest, and the temporary solution was to

²⁸ Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., *Sober Intoxication of the Spirit, Part Two: Born Again of Water and the Spirit* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2012), 60-61.

Praying for Priests

appoint a lay administrator. The poor parishioners missed their priest very much. Their desolation from not having a pastor was evident. I was edified to discover that a group of women at the parish had begun to pray the Rosary before the tabernacle each week to intercede for the return of a priest to their parish.

We each have a responsibility to work in the vineyard of the Lord and to ask the Lord of the harvest to send more laborers (cf. Matt. 9:38). Pope John Paul II articulates the vital role of the lay faithful in his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*.²⁹ I encourage all laypeople seeking a deeper understanding of their role in the universal Church to read this document, which is accessible on the Internet. Historically, the laity have called down showers of grace for the needs of the Church, and recent popes have enthusiastically encouraged the faithful to serve the Lord in this way.

Fr. John Hardon, S.J., compellingly expresses both the urgency and the primacy of praying for priests:

Having taught priests over 30 years, having lived with priests, and having labored for them, loving them and suffering with them—no words I can use would be too strong to state that the Catholic priesthood needs prayer and sacrifice as never before since Calvary. . . .

²⁹ An apostolic exhortation is a formal type of communication from the Holy Father that can be addressed to one or more groups and often reinforces a Church teaching. In *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II lays out a mission for how the laity can live out their baptism and the values of the gospel in communion with the Church in today's world. You can find the document online on the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

But the pressures are experienced by priests with a violence and a virulence such as no one else but a priest can understand. One saint after another has declared that the devil's principal target on earth is the Catholic priest. Priests need, Lord, how they need, special graces from God. We ask, why pray, then, for priests? We should pray for priests and bishops because this has been the practice of the Church since apostolic times. It's a matter of revealed truth. It is a divine mandate.³⁰

Fr. Hardon articulates the reality of the spiritual attacks against the ministerial priesthood and the special graces they need from God. He also reminds us of the divine mandate to pray for clergy. And the Holy Spirit is inspiring new spiritual initiatives, all of which are meant to move the New Evangelization forward with priests on the front lines.

In 2007, then again in 2012, the Congregation for the Clergy made an urgent plea to the universal Church, asking the faithful to engage in Eucharistic intercession³¹ for priests and vocations to the priesthood. Acknowledging that the “soul of every apostolate is divine intimacy,” the Congregation continues to hope that through this spiritual endeavor of prayer, the faithful will have “a greater awareness of the ontological³² link between the Eucharist

³⁰ Fr. John Hardon, S.J., “The Value of Prayer and Sacrifice for Priests,” *The Real Presence Association: Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., Archives*, 1998, accessed November 20, 2013, http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Prayer/Prayer_014.htm.

³¹ Eucharistic intercession means to pray for others in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, such as during a Holy Hour or adoration.

³² *Ontological* is a term used in metaphysics concerning the nature and relations of being.

Praying for Priests

and the Priesthood.” Mauro Cardinal Piacenza, then the prefect of the same Congregation, addressed “all those devoted to the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus” when he wrote:

Throughout her over two thousand year history, the Catholic Church, established by Our Lord as the instrument of salvation for mankind, suffered countless crises precipitated by the weakness of its members. Priests, in particular, face many challenges, striving to do the will of God at every moment of their lives, yet confronted with the countless temptations of modern life. These temptations are best overcome with prayer and penance, their own, and the prayers of others on their behalf. Indeed spiritual writers through history have explained the necessity of prayer for the fruitful ministry of priests.³³

The cardinal’s statement reflects the real condition of a priesthood that requires a continuous commitment of prayer “for the fruitful ministry of priests.” The Holy See asks that we pray particularly for the *sanctification* of priests. We depend upon priests for sacramental grace, without which our eternal salvation would be in danger. Priests also depend upon the consistent, ardent prayers of God’s people, as expressed by Pope Paul VI in 1965: “The Christian faithful, for their part, should realize their obligations to their priests. . . . Sharing their cares, they should help their priests by prayer and work insofar as possible so that their priests might more readily overcome difficulties and be able

³³ Mauro Cardinal Piacenza, quoted in Congregation for the Clergy, *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity* (Fort Collins, CO: Roman Catholic Books, 2013), 8.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

to fulfill their duties more fruitfully.”³⁴ Like the Eternal High Priest, every priest needs a Simon of Cyrene to help him carry his cross. It is God’s design that we need one another to reach the summit of Calvary and, ultimately, resurrection. The priest can ascend Calvary only with the help of the faithful who support him. This is why we laypeople *must* pray for priests.

Fr. Cantalamessa also highlights a special role that women can play in spiritually assisting priests: “God calls some souls to the even higher task of atoning for priests. . . . Only men can be priests, but the wisdom of God has kept aside a task for women, an even higher task in a certain sense, which the world does not understand and thus rejects with disdain: that of forming priests and of contributing to raising the quality, not the quantity, of Catholic priesthood.”³⁵ This insight is a crucial theme in this book and is an echo of what Jesus Himself expressed to Ven. María Concepción (Conchita) Cabrera de Armida (1862-1937), a Mexican wife and mother of nine. Jesus’s words to Conchita express the complementarity of the common and ministerial priesthood in a mutual act of *agape* love³⁶:

There are souls, who through ordination receive a priestly anointing. However, there are . . . also priestly souls who do not have the dignity or the ordination of a priest, yet

³⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 9.

³⁵ Cantalamessa, *Sober Intoxication of the Spirit, Part Two*, 60.

³⁶ *Agape* love “expresses selfless care and concern for the well-being of the other. In its Christian context it refers to God’s deep and active love for the world, expressed in His desire to save it from the power and consequences of sin and death” (Peter M.J. Stravinskis, ed., *Our Sunday Visitor’s Catholic Encyclopedia* [Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1991], 48-49).

Praying for Priests

have a priestly mission. They offer themselves united to me ... these souls help the Church in a very powerful spiritual way ... You will be the mother of a great number of spiritual children, yet they will cost your heart the death of a thousand martyrs. Bring yourself as an offering for the priests. Unite your offering with my offering, to obtain graces for them ... I want to come again into this world ... in my priests. I want to renew the world by revealing myself through the priests. I want to give my Church a powerful impulse in which I will pour out the Holy Spirit over my priests like a new Pentecost. The Church and the world need a new Pentecost, a priestly Pentecost, an interior Pentecost.³⁷

I will entrust to you a different martyrdom; you will suffer what the priests undertake against me. You will experience and offer up their infidelity and wretchedness.³⁸

Conchita was truly a heroic model of spiritual martyrdom and love for priests. There are some in the Church, Fr. Cantalamessa among them, who see her as a very important example of faith for the renewal of the Church, and the Congregation for the Clergy itself asserts that “she will be of great importance for the universal Church.”³⁹ In chapter 2, I will explore the connection between intercessory prayer and the New Evangelization, which our recent popes have highlighted.

Spiritual martyrdom of love can be understood in light of Scripture: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,

³⁷ Jesus to Conchita, quoted in *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity*, 28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24-25).

God always desires fruitfulness. Ordinary people are called to sacrificial love that bears fruit. When the soul is aflame with divine love, the sacrifice becomes sweet. Praying for priests is both a *necessary* act of charity and a *duty* of discipleship and should not be relegated to convents and monasteries only. If we *all* take up the mission of praying for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon priests, the Spirit will surely grant the Church a new infusion of much-needed love, a new Pentecost, a new springtime of faith.

The Virgin Mary and the saints do much to inspire us to support the priesthood through our prayers (in chapter 3, I will discuss in detail the relationship between Mary and priests, and in chapter 4, I will share inspiring stories of heroines of intercessory prayer for priests).

The faithful are called to pray not only for ordained priests but also for vocations. In front of an audience of priests and deacons in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted the importance of putting prayer into action and attracting others to our joy in God:

We stir the heart of God. But our prayer to God does not consist of words alone; the words must lead to action so that from our praying heart a spark of our joy in God and in the Gospel may arise, enkindling in the hearts of others, a readiness to say “yes”. As people of prayer, filled with his light, we reach out to others and bring them into our prayer and in the presence of God, who will not fail to do his part. In this sense we must continue to pray the Lord

Praying for Priests

of the harvest, to stir his heart, and together with God touch the hearts of others through our prayer.⁴⁰

Archbishop Sheen points to the *only* specific request that Jesus made about stimulating vocations:

There is no priest who does not go through the motions of urging the faithful to pray for vocations. But, too often, the phrases are formal. They are what is expected of one. In the priest's mind, they are part of the announcements, on a level with the card party for the Ladies' Auxiliary or the Catholic Youth Organization skating meet.

These other activities are, of course, not to be sneered at. They too foster a Christian life and therefore stimulate vocations. But can we put them in the same category as prayer? Out of hundreds of possible ways of fostering vocations, *prayer* was the *single* one Our Lord specified.⁴¹

I know several young priests who are assigned to two or more parishes, and this is, of course, hard on everyone. Many parishes rely on priests from other parishes to serve them. Laypeople are not happy in these situations, and many complain about not having a priest available. That makes it all the more urgent and necessary to enlist *all the faithful* in the work of interceding for vocations to the priesthood. We are grateful for the good work of apostolates such as the Serra Club and the many religious communities who intercede for priests daily, but *all the lay faithful* should petition God for holy priests and vocations—not occasionally, but *always*. St. John Vianney reminded his parishioners

⁴⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, meeting with priests and deacons of Bavaria, Freising, Germany, September 14, 2006.

⁴¹ Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own*, 79, emphasis added.

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

that the priest is not a priest for himself; he is priest for the people of God—for you and me!

The Congregation for the Clergy's initiative and other Church documents invite intercession for priests through family prayer in the home, the formation of prayer groups within parishes or homes, and individual prayer. Every person can respond according to his or her situation. The key is to *engage in the mission of praying*.

Two powerful methods of interceding for priests that are highly recommended by the Congregation for the Clergy include offering a Holy Hour and praying the Rosary. I devote chapter 5 to the splendors of encountering Jesus in the Holy Hour and chapter 6 to the power and beauty of the Rosary, as well as its connection not only to intercessory prayer and priests but also to the Eucharist.

The priest's responsibility is awesome, and he is held to a higher standard that requires a continuous offering of prayer, from him and others. Praying for our beloved priests assumes a deep appreciation for the grandeur of the priestly office and a magnanimous response to Jesus, who exhorts us to ask the Lord to send laborers into His harvest (cf. Matt. 9:38).

Inspiration at Calvary

When some priest friends invited me to join them for a private retreat in the Holy Land in early 2013, I did not hesitate to accept. The Holy Land had become very meaningful to me ever since I had been invested into the Equestrian Order of the Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem.⁴²

⁴² This papal order is the only lay institution of the Vatican State charged with the task of providing for the needs of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and for "all the initiatives which are

Praying for Priests

There is nothing in the world that compares to experiencing the living Gospel in the Holy Land. Its spiritual effect abides in the human heart and brings the Scriptures to life. On the airplane to the Holy Land, I recorded these petitions:

1. The grace to be forgetful of self
2. The grace never to refuse Jesus anything so as always to console His Sacred Heart
3. The grace to be like Mary in all things

On January 31, we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and made a point of praying as long as possible at the Rock of Calvary. I prayed fervently for the sanctification of my family, all priests, and everyone who had asked me to leave their prayer petitions at Calvary. It was not crowded inside, so I was able to rest my head on the Rock of Calvary for a long time and contemplate the perfect sacrifice of my Savior. My heart overflowed with unspeakable gratitude, and I ardently recommitted my life to the Lord through an act of oblation. How could I do otherwise in the place where Jesus had spilled His Precious Blood and covered me in the crimson cloak of redemption?

Later that evening, during private adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the Garden of Gethsemane, the monstrance was placed on an altar in front of an exquisite mosaic depicting the scene in the garden where Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. I was reminded of Judas's kiss of betrayal and how priests share closely in the Lord's agony, and I recalled today's rampant forms of infidelity that wound the Sacred Heart and also the human heart.

necessary to support the Christian presence in the Holy Land"
(<http://www.holysepulchre.net/history/structure.html>).

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

On the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, a small group of us was permitted to remain inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre after all the visitors had left and the doors had been locked. It was a very chilly, rainy night; even inside the church, it was extremely cold. I sat as close as possible to the Rock of Calvary and prayed in reparation for my sins and for those of the whole world.

I asked Jesus, “If I had been present at the Crucifixion, would I have run away like the other disciples, or would I have stayed with You and Mary and St. John?” He left that inquiry hanging. I prayed, “Lord, I have crucified You through so many small and big infidelities. Please have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Then the Holy Spirit reminded me that my spiritual director had just given me the new and expanded edition of *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity*. I pondered the contents of the Congregation’s booklet and prayed fervently that the Holy See’s program would ignite a widespread fervor of prayer for holy priests and more vocations.

I was reminded of the Eternal High Priest, who tenderly engaged Simon Peter: “‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter . . . said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep’” (John 21:17). I considered the love of Jesus for Peter and for all priests in the continuous apostolic line. I rejoiced in the intimacy of the unique love that binds the priest to Jesus. I also reflected on the sheep that need the food that only the priest can give—the Eucharist. My hunger for the Bread of Heaven increased, and my soul gave thanks to the Lord for His perfect sacrifice on Golgotha.

After praying for an extended time near the Rock of Calvary, I moved to the right to pray in front of an icon of the Sorrowful Mother with a sword piercing her heart. I pondered and wept.

Praying for Priests

Mary experienced perfect sorrow at the Crucifixion of her Son. Her heart was pierced so that our thoughts would be laid bare before God and His divine thought could be received into our hearts (cf. Luke 2:35).

In prayer before the icon of Mary's pierced maternal heart, I offered to console the Sorrowful Mother all the days of my life to the best of my ability, with the help of God's grace. In that noble atmosphere at Calvary, during hours of prayer, Mary impressed upon me her maternal intention to pray for priests because there is so much that she wants to do for God's people through her priest-sons. This is what I recorded in my prayer journal then:

There are priests who have long ago ceased to pray, and even ceased to believe. They are like dry bones withering in the desert heat. They go through the motions bereft of love. Other priests console God because their hearts are pure, their intentions are good, and they persevere to do the will of the Father for love of Jesus. Continue to pray for the conversion of sinners and for the sanctification of the shepherds. Upon the priests rests a heavy weight that must be supported by the increasing prayers of the faithful.

Over the remainder of our two weeks in Jerusalem, I prayed and conferred with my priest companions at the holy sites where Jesus had walked. We asked the Lord to show us if there was a way we might further the Congregation for the Clergy's initiative for the sanctification of priests. We each felt called to do what we could.

After returning home, I consulted with several priest counselors. With their encouragement, I wrote a letter to the prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy outlining a proposal for a media campaign, a book, and, most importantly, an ecclesial

Why We *Must* Pray for Priests

movement that would help spread its initiative of prayer for priests, vocations, and spiritual maternity. On May 31, 2013, I received a letter from Mauro Cardinal Piacenza, then prefect, graciously thanking me for the proposal letter and encouraging me to advise my bishop and move forward. I did so, and on September 13, 2013, I received a letter from my bishop, lending his support for the book and for a new apostolate, the Foundation of Prayer for Priests.

Its mission statement declares:

With explicit support from the Holy See, the **Foundation of Prayer for Priests** is a Eucharistic and Marian apostolate of intercessory prayer and catechesis aimed at obtaining graces for the sanctification of priests and fostering vocations to the priesthood. Affirming the indispensability of priests standing at the forefront of the Church and following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Icon of Spiritual Motherhood,⁴³ we invite all Catholics to join us in this global mission of prayer and sacrifice for the New Evangelization.

This is not the work of one individual but of an approved team of priests and laity working in conjunction with an ecclesial advisory group to make as fruitful as possible the Holy See's initiative for priests. Through this new apostolate, we hope to unite laity, religious, clergy, and seminarians throughout the Church

⁴³ I intend *icon* here to mean an image or model that is worthy of emulation. In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the icon can be considered a sacred object that provides a means of veneration. This is very meaningful to me, given my profound experience while praying before the icon of Mary at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Praying for Priests

in a great crusade of intercessory prayer for priests. Appendix 3 of this book has more information on the apostolate and its objectives and explains how to join your prayers and sacrifices for priests with those of many other Catholics around the world.

The priests who are in the sanctuary are vulnerable without a vestment of prayer woven for them by the faithful. May the following words of Jesus to Ven. Conchita stir us all to action and open our hearts to the workings of divine grace!

The Holy Spirit is He who blows, and moves hearts, and lifts them from the earth, and carries them to celestial horizons, and communicates to them the thirst for the glory of God. He is the one who will give them His light and His fire for inflaming the entire earth. Thus I want priests, possessed of the Holy Spirit and forgetful of themselves, all for God, all for souls.

Let them ask for this reaction, this new Pentecost, for my Church needs holy priests through the Holy Spirit.

The world collapses, because faithful priests are lacking who would draw it out of the abyss in which it finds itself; priests of light who would illuminate the paths of goodness; pure priests who would rescue so many hearts from the mire; priests on fire who would fill up the whole universe with divine love.

Ask, cry out to heaven, offer the Word so that all things may be restored in me, through the Holy Spirit, and through Mary.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Quoted in Concepción Cabrera de Armida, *A Mis Sacerdotes* (Mexico City: Editorial La Cruz, 1997), 95 (text translated by John Nahrgang).