

Letter Of The Major Archbishop To His Brother Priests In The Syro-Malabar Church On The Occasion Of The Celebration Of The Year For Priests 2009-2010

My dear Priests!

On the occasion the Church celebrates the year for priests, I am happy to share with you some thoughts regarding the great gift of priesthood. Your vocation as priests gives you a decisive role in the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The same is true about me and my brothers in episcopacy who are called by God for leadership ministry in the Church. We are co-workers of God (1 Cor. 3:8). Jesus chose the twelve apostles to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the Good News and gave them the power to cast out demons. This is true also with regard to Bishops who are successors of the apostles and priests who received the order of priesthood by the imposition of hands of the bishops.

It is this faith of the people of God that enables them to consider priesthood as a great gift of God. It is the same faith that motivates the priests to engage passionately in pastoral ministry. You are able to love thousands of persons with the love of Jesus in your heart and bring help and consolation to many who are sinners, afflicted and helpless. For how many lives your prayer and loving presence and encouragement have become the cause of divine blessing! My dear priests, I pray that you are able to understand and experience the uniqueness and the joy of priesthood and to fulfill your ministry to the people of God with greater zeal. Let me jot down here some of my hopes and convictions about you.

It is beyond doubt that priesthood is a radical and hazardous vocation that demands total dedication (Lk 9:2). We are called to live dreaming about the establishment of the kingdom of God. It is not the whims and fancies of the world, nor its expectations that lead our lives. You are priests who fulfill the duties entrusted to you with great dedication, however much burdensome the duties may be. The Syro-Malabar Church has a great priestly tradition. Our priests have always sustained a style of work characterized by hard work, sense of commitment and deep spirituality. The manifold ministries themselves carried out in various parts of India by the Catholics who form only one and a half percent of the total population bear witness to this fact.

Some of you, especially those working in the mission fields are working in very dangerous situations. The fact that all the apostles chosen by Jesus for evangelization, except St. John, embraced martyrdom has been a great source of enthusiasm and marvelous courage to all those who have been called to the ministry of the Kingdom of God down the centuries. The great passion with which St. Paul preached the gospel ever remains as an excellent example in the field of evangelization. I pray that you may be able to carry out your priestly ministry with great dedication, however much difficult it is and is devoid of any recognition from anyone.

I am sure all of you have read the life-history of St. John Maria Vianney, the heavenly patron of priests. The attitude, style of functioning and approaches he adopted made him a world renowned spiritual father, even though he lived one hundred and fifty years ago. He began his ministry to the people of Ars whose faith had been cooled off, committing himself to the Lord who called him. He firmly believed God would work wonders through his humble hands. Historians testify that he spent long hours in prayer to achieve this goal. This should help us realize the truth that we are insignificant instruments in the hands of the Lord. We shall always keep in our mind the verse of the Psalmist: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1).

St. John Maria Vianney might have kept in his mind every day the words of Jesus: "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name" (Jn 15:16). He went ahead with his pastoral ministry with the deep conviction that Jesus who wrought miracles through His humble disciples was by his side. The result of his ministry was astounding. Only when we have this deep faith experience, our ministry will be fruitful according to the mind of God. I exhort you to make every effort to make this faith experience your own in this year for priests.

The field of activity of each one of us is determined according to the mind and plan of Jesus. We are commissioned to establish the Kingdom of God in the places and situations where we are sent.

Therefore, we have to discern and decide in prayer and see how each programme that we ourselves plan and execute is in harmony with the kingdom of God. We have to doubt whether some of our programmes are acceptable in the sight of God due to our craze for fame and glory. There is no doubt that the fruitfulness of our priestly ministry is very much dependent on the purity of intention with which we do it. The life of Blessed Thevarparambil Kunjachan who lived and died in this age is a shining example for us in this field. He had nothing to his credit according to the standards of the world. The only thing he did was to serve long forty-nine years as an assistant parish priest. His ministry was for the poorest of the poor and the destitute. His life reveals the truth that man's assessment is entirely different from that of God.

We must take care that worldly considerations and spirit of competition do not get into our fields of activity. The establishment of the Kingdom of God depends on the success we make in this attempt. We should remember that everything that could be counted and measured are transitory. Only those activities that are not infected by pride and selfishness and are purified with good intentions will be ultimately acceptable in the sight of God. They alone are capable of contributing to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. This is the irrefutable truth that St. John Maria Vianney and Blessed Kunjachan teach us.

In this year for priests we should make as the topic of our special meditation the words spoken by Jesus to the apostles during the last supper: "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn.15:5). Then only will we be able to attain the spiritual renewal that is expected of us in this year for priests.

Prayer and meditation on the Word of God are the great means by which we can abide in the Lord and the Lord in us. All the renowned Spiritual Fathers in the Church teach that it is prayer life that strengthens and revitalizes the priestly ministry. It is certain that if you can lead a life keeping the presence of God always in your mind and meditating daily on the Word of God, then the people who approach you will experience a divine spirit in you and in what you say and in what you do. You being persons acting in the place of Christ, I need not draw your attention to this fact that the people of God expect a divine spirit from you. There are deeper meanings to the greeting "Praise be to Jesus Christ", with which the people of God greet priests, with their folded hands. For them priest is one who stands in the place of Jesus Christ.

This places a great challenge before us to make our own the attitudes and style of functioning of Jesus. Only when your hearts are transformed into the likeness of the love-filled heart of Jesus, can you claim the uniqueness of priesthood. People should feel the nearness of God when the sacrament of reconciliation is administered. Priesthood and priestly ministry are continuation of the love and compassion of God to His people. We partake in the priesthood of Christ who is the personification of the love of God. A priest who imbibes the spirit of the Eucharist and becomes the sacrifice of the Lord to the people is the incarnation of Divine Love.

The great example of humility that Jesus taught us by washing the feet of the apostles should be deeply imprinted on our minds. In this year for priests, we should take special care to manifest our love and recognition to all, especially to the helpless and the destitute. The comportment of Jesus is to be the model for us in this regard.

Priests, as co-workers of the Bishops, who are successors of the apostles are bound to nurture filial love and obedience to them. This relationship is of a sacramental nature. The statement of St. Paul that the Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20) is always pertinent. The centrality that Jesus accords to the apostles and to their successors in the Church is based on the very nature of the Church. It is only when you work along with your bishops and according to their directions that your priestly ministry becomes fruitful. There is a touching incident in the life of blessed Thevarparambil Kunjachan. He collected a good amount of money to construct a church for the Dalit Catholics. When he approached Bishop Sebastian Vayalil for permission to construct the Church, permission was denied and the Bishop directed him to hand over the money for the construction of a hospital. Very happily he did what the Bishop requested him to do. We see a heroic virtue in this act of obedience. It shows that he had the strong support of his deep faith to see God in the person of the Bishop.

I would like to draw your attention to the transformation that occurred in the apostles when they were anointed by the Holy Spirit. Their narrow minds were broadened to embrace the whole of humanity and they became capable of aiming at and working for the salvation of all. This large-heartedness

prompted them to go and preach the Word of God in different parts of the world. God has given the same large-heartedness to you also when you were ordained priests. The concerns about your own parish and diocese should not narrow down your minds. We should be transformed to have the mind of Jesus. While engaged in the ministry entrusted to us, we should have concern for the Universal Church and for all peoples. In the near future, the Holy Father may entrust the Syro-Malabar Church with the mandate of evangelization with definite structures in different parts of India. If that happens, we should be able to find persons and means for the same. I pray that you may be able to imbibe the zeal and large-heartedness of the apostles.

Let me share with you a personal matter. When His Holiness John Paul II appointed me head and father of the Syro-Malabar Church, one thing that he specially commissioned me was to create a better atmosphere of love and communion in our Church. The Holy Father did it at a time when there was a great psychological divide among the different sections of the church on the basic ideas regarding the renewal of Liturgy. By the Grace of God, we were able to rise above this division to a certain extent. You as priests have a great share in this accomplishment and I thank you for the same. You are well aware that the liturgical reform and the growth in communion we have hoped for, have not yet reached its perfection. In this year for priests, we must seek the means to grow as the people of God with one heart and soul. I entreat each one of you to make every effort to attain this goal with the openness of the heart that the Holy Spirit gives you. I will be happy to receive your suggestions in this regard.

There is an observation that the number of priests with wider reading and deeper knowledge is decreasing. The saying that 'knowledge is power' is ever more pertinent today than at any other time. The knowledge-explosion in the field of science and technology are beyond our comprehension. Therefore, the sphere of knowledge has become one of specializations. We should become specialists in the field of spiritual wisdom. We should deepen our knowledge in Biblical Studies, Theology, Philosophy, Church History, Psychology, etc. We should also make every effort to learn the documents of the Church published from time to time and to teach them to the people of God.

Let me here refer to a matter that causes great anguish to you and to me. In recent years there is a decline in the exalted position and recognition that the priests used to receive traditionally in the Church and Society. There may be several reasons for this. The not-so-ideal manner of living of a few priests, their conduct and conversations not in tune with the dignity of priesthood, and above all their lack of spiritual life, may have contributed to this situation. The unprincipled and non-transparent activities of some priests also may have paved the way for it. All of you, both as individuals and as a community of priests, must consider this issue seriously. All must take care to make adequate amendments through mortification and self-discipline. All of us have the obligation to pray for and counsel compassionately any brother-priest living quite contrary to the expectations of the Church. In this year for priests I invite all of you to take a firm resolution that you will not in any way be a cause to diminish the radiance of priesthood.

The year for priests is not merely an occasion for conducting some programmes, but it is a time for each priest to discover the uniqueness of his priesthood, to grow in the priestly communion, and to deepen the relation with one's own Bishop. The Holy Father has invited the people of God for a year long meditation on God's gift of priesthood and for greater care to nourish vocations to priesthood. All the eparchies have already chalked out an action plan in this regard. I exhort all of you to take great care to faithfully implement them. I pray that you may be able to grow and work according to the great expectations of the Lord who called you. I invoke God's blessing on each one of you.

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