

## PASTORAL LETTER

VARKEY CARDINAL VITHAYATHIL, the Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church, to the Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Men and Women Religious and Lay Faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church, blessings and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dearly beloved in the Lord,

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI declared the year 2009-2010 as the year for priests. On this occasion when the Church celebrates the year for priests, I am happy to share with you some thoughts regarding priests and the good the entire human race receives through the ministry of priests. Priests and their ministry have a distinct role to play in the plan of salvation that Jesus Christ accomplished on earth. Jesus chose and appointed the twelve apostles to be with him to continue his salvific mission and to be sent out to proclaim the message of salvation. Priests are persons called and designated by God to render service to the society as the co-workers of Bishops, the successors of the apostles, in the onward march of the Church built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as its cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

Even though the whole people of God through baptism and confirmation participate in the priesthood of Christ, priests are appointed as priests, teachers and shepherds to protect and nourish the Church, the Body of Christ, through their ministry. Priests who are appointed to sanctify, teach and shepherd the people of God participate in these triple office of Christ. Priests, who through the sacred ordination receive the ministerial priesthood of Christ, sanctify themselves by fulfilling these offices faithfully. It is by the ministry of priests that the people of God in every stage of their life, from birth to death, grow up and are nourished and strengthened in their faith life. We have a tradition that gives great importance to the ministry of priests both in the life of every individual and in the society. We give a similar position of a father in a family to our priests who are the heads of the larger family that is the parish community. In the same way we recognize the preeminent position of the Bishops at the apex level of the Diocesan structures.

One of the purposes of the declaration of the year for priests is the renewal and sanctification of the life of priests the world over. To achieve this, both the priests and the entire people of God must attain the wisdom regarding priesthood as an ineffable gift of God. Priesthood is a great gift that God gives to the human race. We consider the ordained Bishops and priests as persons standing in the place of God and believe that we obtain the experience of God's presence through them. That is the meaning of greeting a priest when we meet him, saying "praise be to Jesus Christ". Our priests are persons working tirelessly in different realms of the society both for the spiritual and material growth and development of the human person. We can be proud of this fact. In particular, the Syro-Malabar priests are making remarkable contributions in the mission fields in India and abroad. Besides working as spiritual fathers in the pastoral field, our priests are rendering commendable service in the field of education and social work. I congratulate the priests for the wonderful priestly ministry they exercise in the Church as another Christ and thank the Lord for the same.

The whole people of God must pray for priests that they be strengthened to continue their priestly ministry with steadfastness in their vocation and that through their selfless lives they may be faithful to the Lord who called them. Jesus chose the apostles after long hours of prayer (Mk.3: 13-19). Jesus has requested us to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Mt. 9:38). God accomplishes today through frail human persons, the priests, the same mission of Jesus Christ who, fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel that the Lord God himself will search and find Shepherds of his mind to shepherd his people, incarnated himself as the good shepherd. Priests require constant help from God. All of us are obliged to pray daily for priests. The people of God must acknowledge in their hearts the words of Jesus: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn.15:5).

The context that occasioned the declaration of the year for priests is the one hundred and fiftieth death anniversary of St. John Maria Vianney, who was the vicar of Ars'. St. John Maria Vianney who died in the year 1859 was considered the patron of all parish priests. Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the

celebration of the year for priests declared him patron of all priests. The year for priests that began on the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 2009 will conclude on the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 2010. The feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is also a day of sanctification of priests. When St. John Maria Vianney was appointed parish priest of Ars, it was a parish where the Love of God was at a low ebb. God wrought wonders there through the saint. He became a humble instrument of the merciful love of God. Another shining example for diocesan priests is Thevarparambil Kunjachan from our Syro-Malabar Church who was recently declared Blessed. Humble as he was, he was a saintly person who reached the highest level of sanctity through his humble service.

We are known for keeping a tradition of loving and respecting priests and co-operating with the leadership they give to the community. The laity has a definite role in the Church as co-workers of priests, in establishing the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced. The celebration of the year for priests should help in deepening the personal relationship between priests and laity. At the same time priests as persons dedicated to God and the Church they must equip themselves for a more fruitful service through their selfless commitment. Let us pray that Jesus who said, "you did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16) and promised, "I am with you always to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20), may protect and guide us. Let us commend all our priests to the Blessed Virgin Mary, queen of priests and our mother, for her protection and intercession. I invoke God's blessing on each one of you.

Given at Kakkannad from the Major Archiepiscopal Curia of the Syro-Malabar Church at Mount St Thomas on 4 November 2009.

Cardinal Mar Varkey Vithayathil  
Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church

---

*N.B: This pastoral letter is to be read out during the Holy Mass on December 6, 2009 in all churches and chapels of the Syro-Malabar Church where there is Sunday Mass for the public.*