

Pope: There's an Answer to Empty Confessionals

Explains St. John Vianney's "Virtuous Circle" Secret

VATICAN CITY, JUNE 18, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Benedict XVI is urging priests to not become resigned to empty confessionals, but to help people rediscover the beauty of the sacrament by deepening their understanding of the Eucharist.

The Pope stated this in a letter to the priests of the world, on the occasion of the Year for Priests, which begins Friday in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, the Curé d'Ars.

The saint "taught his parishioners primarily by the witness of his life," the Pontiff affirmed. "It was from his example that they learned to pray, halting frequently before the tabernacle for a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament."

He taught them about the Eucharist, but it was "most effective when they saw him celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass," the Holy Father said.

He added that the saint "was convinced that the fervor of a priest's life depended entirely upon the Mass" and "was accustomed, when celebrating, also to offer his own life in sacrifice."

This identification with the sacrifice of the Cross led him from the altar to the confessional, Benedict XVI affirmed.

He continued: "Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this sacrament. In France, at the time of the Cure of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion.

"Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the Sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence.

"He thus created a 'virtuous' circle."

Hospital for souls

The Pope explained that St. John Mary spent long hours in church before the tabernacle, inspiring the faithful "to imitate him by coming to visit Jesus with the knowledge that their parish priest would be there, ready to listen and offer forgiveness."

Over time, he said, penitents started coming from all over the country, and the priest would be in the confessional for up to 16 hours a day.

Thus, the Pontiff said, his parish became known as "a great hospital of souls."

He quoted the saint who said: "It is not the sinner who returns to God to beg his forgiveness, but God himself who runs after the sinner and makes him return to him."

The Holy Father urged priests to learn from St. John Mary Vianney to "put our unfailing trust in the Sacrament of Penance, to set it once more at the center of our pastoral concerns, and to take up the 'dialogue of salvation,' which it entails."

He noted that "those who came to his confessional drawn by a deep and humble longing for God's forgiveness found in him the encouragement to plunge into the 'flood of divine mercy' which sweeps everything away by its vehemence."

"He awakened repentance in the hearts of the lukewarm by forcing them to see God's own pain at their sins reflected in the face of the priest who was their confessor," Benedict XVI stated.

He continued, "To those who, on the other hand, came to him already desirous of and suited to a deeper spiritual life, he flung open the abyss of God's love, explaining the untold beauty of living in union with him and dwelling in his presence."

The Pope affirmed: "In his time the Cure of Ars was able to transform the hearts and the lives of so many people because he enabled them to experience the Lord's merciful love.

"Our own time urgently needs a similar proclamation and witness to the truth of love."

He affirmed that the saint "sought to remain completely faithful to his own vocation and mission," lamenting that "a pastor can grow dangerously injured to the state of sin or of indifference in which so many of his flock are living."

The Pontiff noted the priest's sacrifices on behalf of the souls who came to him in confession, quoting his words to another confrere: "I will tell you my recipe: I give sinners a small penance and the rest I do in their place."

"Souls have been won at the price of Jesus' own blood," the Holy Father stated, "and a priest cannot devote himself to their salvation if he refuses to share personally in the 'precious cost' of redemption."

--- --- ---

On ZENIT's Web page: