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As priests rally to defend pope, pope defends celibacy

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 10, 2010 NCR Today

tThough it wasn?t exactly drawn up this way, the closing ceremonies in Rome this week for the Vatican?s ?Year of Priests? has the feel of a massive rally in support of Pope Benedict XVI, who has faced significant criticism in recent months for his handling of the Catholic sexual abuse crisis.

tA vigil service this evening in St. Peter?s Square drew an estimated 15,000 priests from 91 countries ? which, assuming the count is accurate, would represent just under four percent of the total number of Catholic priests in the world. According to Vatican Radio, this was the first time a pope has invited priests from around the world to come to Rome for a celebration of the priesthood.

tWhen Benedict XVI entered the square at roughly 9:30 pm Rome time, the crowd erupted into loud and sustained applause. Earlier, applause also greeted Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, when he said that the priests wanted to express their ?support and sincere affection? for the pope.

tThe pope returned the favor, telling the crowd that he wanted to offer ?a great thank you? to the priests of the world.

?I know that so many priests give everything they have to evangelize the world and to make Christ present through the Eucharist and the other sacraments," he said.

tBenedict XVI never directly addressed the sexual abuse crisis tonight ? offering only one passing reference to the ?insufficiencies and sins? of priests as a source of scandal. The pontiff may speak on the crisis in a homily tomorrow morning as part of the closing Mass for the ?Year of Priests.?

tThe centerpiece event tonight was a 45-minute question and answer session with Benedict XVI, as the pope took five questions from priests from different parts of the world. None raised the sexual abuse crisis. Instead, topics included:

?tIncreasing demands on priests, especially in parts of the world where the number of priests is in decline
?tA perceived split between academic theology and spirituality
?tThe logic for priestly celibacy in the face of mounting criticism
?tThe dangers of clericalism
?tHow to promote vocations to the priesthood

tBenedict?s most interesting reflections may have come in defense of celibacy, where he didn?t invoke the customary Biblical argument (that Christ wasn?t married) or more practical considerations (that priests without families can be more available to their parishes) or even the usual spiritual explanation (that priests have a spousal relationship with the church.)

Instead, Benedict offered an ?eschatological? argument: That a priest is drawn into the life of Christ, including

Christ?s condition after the resurrection, so celibacy is an ?anticipation of this new world ... in which we are beyond matrimony.?

tThrough the priestly life of celibacy, Benedict argued, ?the future breaks into today.?

tCelibacy seems difficult to understand, Benedict argued, in ?an agnostic world in which God doesn?t enter the picture,? in which ?we no longer think of a future with God, because the present of this world seems sufficient.?

Yet celibacy, the pope said, keeps the door open to this ?great truth of the faith,? by ?living the future as if it already is the present.?

tIn a rare flash of sarcasm that drew smiles and laughter in St. Peter's Square, Benedict said that in some ways he finds post-modern criticism of celibacy surprising, since today ?it?s becoming ever more fashionable not to marry.?

tThe pope went on to argue, however, that the tendency to avoid marriage is at bottom a ?no? to commitment, while priestly celibacy is the direct opposite ? a definitive ?yes? to ?giving one?s life completely to God.?
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tOn a more practical front, Benedict encouraged priests to realistically accept that none of them can do everything one might expect a priest to accomplish these days.

He advised priests to set clear priorities, including celebration of the sacraments, proclamation of the Word of God, and charity. He also counseled them not to ?neglect your own soul,? saying that priests can?t encourage others to prayer and holiness if they don?t pursue those qualities themselves.

tIn a line that drew laughter and applause, Benedict also advised priests to have the ?humility and courage? to take time for rest.

tIn response to the question about theology and spirituality, Benedict distinguished between two kinds of theology: A theology based on ?the arrogance of reason,? which tries to ?make God an object of study rather than a subject who speaks to us?; and a theology ?stimulated by love, and a desire to know the beloved better.?

tThe latter, Benedict suggested, is the kind of theology the church needs.

tStriving to strike a positive note, the pontiff said that while there are occasional abuses, he wanted to thank ?so many theologians who help make the faith present to us today.?

tA former theology professor himself, Benedict said he?s old enough to have seen three generations in the field. The ?new theology? of several decades ago, he said, which saw the discipline in strictly scientific terms, today ?is itself old... and frankly seems almost ridiculous.?

tWarning theologians against being seduced by the fashions of their time or passing majorities of opinion, the pope said: ?The true majority in the church is the saints, and they are the ones who should orient us.?

tBenedict also recommended study of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and loyalty to the magisterium, meaning the teaching authority of the bishops in communion with the pope. He counseled priests to be ?critical? in their approach to various theological currents.

tOn the subject of promoting vocations, Benedict said the seeming urgency of addressing priest shortages can encourage a desire to ?take the problem in hand ourselves,? with the risk of transforming the priesthood into ?just another job, a profession.?

tInstead, Benedict urged ?insistent and determined? prayer for vocations, without compromising the ?novelty and distinctiveness? of the identity of a Catholic priest.

tOn a more practical note, Benedict advised priests to offer ?convincing? examples of priestly life, to speak openly with young people about vocations, and to create environments in parishes and elsewhere in which young people can be ?surrounded by faith and the love of God.?

tPrior to Benedict?s arrival in St. Peter?s Square, the crowd watched priests from different parts of the world tell their stories via satellite TV connections. One was from the United States: Monsignor Antonio Cacciapuoti, pastor of Christ the King Parish in Hollywood, California.

tIn keeping with the pep rally feel of the evening, Caccipuoti, speaking in English, set off cheers when he said: ?We want to assure the Holy Father that we love him very much, we pray for him always, and we are very loyal to him.?

tBenedict XVI chose the past twelve months as a ?Year for Priests? in part because 2009 marked the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney. Known as the Curé d?Ars, Vianney was a 19th century French pastor and confessor who is today the patron saint of parish priests.

An update to this story is here: **Pope sees the Devil behind timing of sex abuse crisis** [1].

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