St John Mary Vianney's Pastoral Ministry to the Family: An Example for the Priests of Today

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Introduction

St John Baptist Mary Vianney (8 May 1786 – 4 August 1859), a French parish priest, is venerated in the Catholic Church as the patron saint of all priests especially for the diocesan priests. He is often referred to as the *Curé d'Ars*. He became internationally notable for his priestly and pastoral work in his parish because of the radical spiritual transformation of the community and its surroundings. Catholics attribute this transformation to his saintly life, mortification, his persevering ministry in the sacrament of confession, and his ardent devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Philomena. In 1959, Pope John XXIII issued *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*, an encyclical on Vianney. Pope John Paul II himself visited Ars in 1986 at the 200th anniversary of John Vianney's birth and referred to the great saint as a "rare example of a pastor acutely aware of his responsibilities and a sign of courage." In honour of the 150th anniversary of Vianney's death, Pope Benedict XVI declared a year for priests, 2009-2010.[1] Frere Athanase exclaimed, "How beautiful he was while saying Mass. I thought

I was beholding another St Francis de Sales." And his confessor, the Abbe Louis Beau said, "While the servant of God saying mass, it seemed to me as if the angel stood at the altar."[2] In the Homily of Benedict XVI for the inauguration of the Year for Priests on the 150th Anniversary of the death of St John Mary Vianney, on 19 June 2009, he says,

> "Nothing makes the Church, the Body of Christ, suffer more than the sins of her pastors, especially the sins of those who are transformed into 'a thief and a robber' of the sheep? (Jn 10:1ff). Dear priests, the call to conversion and recourse to Divine Mercy also applies to us, and we must humbly address a heartfelt and ceaseless invocation to the Heart of Jesus to keep us from the terrible risk of harming those whom we are found to save."[3]

Pope Benedict XVI said, "Man is not perfect in himself, man has a need of relation and he is a being in relation. He needs to listen to the other, above all the *other* who is God. Only in this way does he know himself, only in this way does he become himself."

1. Relationship with Others

1.1. Apostolic Life

His attraction for solitude however was balanced by his apostolic life. By a divine permission, his heart fluctuated forever between these opposites. He was certainly terrified at the responsibility attached to the care of souls. According to Mme. Des Garets, he should have convinced himself once for all that he was made for that kind of work. As the multitude subsided, he looked sad and made novenas for them to come back. Without taking rest, he would say, "It would not be right to detain those poor people who had come from so far

and who spent whole nights waiting for their turn to go to Confession. The good God should give me the faculty He bestowed on several of the saints, that of being in more than one place at a time. If I already had my foot in Heaven and were told to return to earth to work for the conversion of one sinner, I would gladly return and to obtain it if it were necessary for me to remain here till the world's last day, to get up at midnight and to suffer all that I now suffer, I would agree to it with all my heart."[4] Due to the lack of priests and the Revolution, the faith was so weak in the neighbouring villages. So whenever the pastors invited him to their parishes to preach at their missions or at their forty hours devotions to arouse the faith of their people, he was always willing to help them.[5] Since his father died on July 8, 1819, with a small legacy from his father, he started the foundation of a girls' school. He who suffered much from a lack of education set out to remedy such a lack in others.[6]

1.2. Family Visit

"Pope John XXIII approves the statement of Mgr Guerry, Archbishop of Cambray, that the Cure d'Ars converted crowds because he was uniquely, simply and totally a priest."[7] He began his duties as the new pastor by taking a census. About noon, when children and parents were certain to be at table, he made his visits. He asked the questions about the crops, the children, and the relatives. Always he finished his brief visit with a word about God and His Church. Day by day, he picked up not only a full acquaintance with each family, but also a full picture of the morality of his parish and he found the picture blurred and scarred and in great need of restoration.[8]

1.3. Visiting the Sick

He had always loved to visit the sick. From 1845 he had handed over to his assistant all external parochial activities, with the exception of this one. By the sick we must understand not only those of Ars, but likewise the strangers who though obliged to keep to their beds in the hotels or in private houses, were yet anxious to hear and see the saint. Among them there frequently happened to be persons already grievously stricken.[9]

2. Challenges for the Spirituality of Diocesan Priests Today

2.1. Relationship with Others

The priest is like a city on a hill. He cannot remain hidden. His actions and his whole behaviour lie open to the scrutiny of others. People have sharp eyes and a delicate sense of appreciation for the good and noble traits of a priest's character, but also more so for his defects.[10] As he himself radiates no warmth, he receives no warmth in return. He moves among his flock awakening no affection, confidence or thanks. So the people try to avoid his presence and his absence is not missed. He is on the lips of none, in the thoughts of none. So he loses all joy in his calling. Thus he becomes a bad example for the people.[11] Many try to escape from others and take refuge in the comfort of their privacy or in a small circle of close friends, renouncing the realism of the social aspect of the Gospel. For just as some people want a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross, they also want their interpersonal relationships provided by sophisticated equipment, by screens and systems which can be turned on and off on command.[12]

2.2. Lack of Hope

Our priesthood itself will hardly survive and remain vigorous and life-giving if we do not have hope and we'll certainly be of no substantial service to our people if we can't give them that hope they crave.[13] In our priestly life, we cannot hope in big salaries, signs of favour from our bishop or superior, plush assignments, ecclesiastical preferment, and wide acclaim.[14] Jesus, and he alone, is the ultimate source of our hope.[15]

2.3. Disobedience and Pride

It is precisely in obedience, the priest of today is most countercultural. For we live in a world that divinizes the will, holding that true happiness comes only when you have the license to do what you want, when you want, with whom and to whom you want, how you want, where you want, and that any restraint based on obedience to any higher authority is unjust, oppressive and to be defied. There is no 'higher authority' than my own wants, needs and will.[16] Some priests claim externally they want to be obedient in accepting an assignment from their bishop or superior, but internally are angry, thinking they have been mistreated. They childishly say, "I'll show him! I'll go, but I'm not going to do anything." The people of course, are the ones who then suffer. Obedience is not only accepting an assignment, but doing it well. As St Bernard preached, "If you begin to grieve at your assignment, to judge your superior, to murmur in your heart, even though you outwardly fulfil what is commanded, this is not obedience, but a cloak over your malice.[17]

In the Rule of St Augustine, pride can enter even good works. "For this is the peculiar feature of pride, that whereas every other kind of wickedness is exercised in the

accomplishment of bad deeds, pride creeps stealthily in and destroys even good deeds."[18] St Thomas Acquinas says that any minor responsibility can bring about holiness, so long as done with great love for God. He reminds us, "To strive after ambitious objects is contrary to humility when it issues from confidence in your own abilities, not from confidence in divine help, especially since the more one humbles oneself before God, the more one is lifted up before him. Quite often the inspiration and the thrust is not from divine love but a very familiar kind of self-love wanting to appropriate a virtue for its own sake in order to feel good, and perhaps to gloat over one's neighbour's lack".[19] Isidore notes that a man is said to be proud because he wills to appear higher than he is.[20] Some priests fall into this trap by wanting to do better works without the requisite talents or because the superiors who appointed them merely project their own talents. He says it is an inordinate appetite for one's own superiority.[21] Pride leads to boasting about 'qualities one does not possess' or thinking profoundly about some aspect of reality is a gift from God, 'believing one deserves it'. These all can cause the bad habit of 'looking down on others and wishing to appear singularly good'. How often have priests wanted to become bishops and superiors for all these wrong reasons. Pride ultimately becomes a kind of 'contempt of God' either by not relying on his help or eventually hating God in some way.[22] When pride rules, prayer becomes less and less operative in one's life. Self-reliance becomes more dynamic than striving for the grace to do God's will. Pride is the sin of presumption! It gives the basis for this sin in persons who actively lobby for positions of higher authority falsely thinking they are capable of heroic deeds.[23] The pride that once sought the first place, now seeks the last place in order to be more noticed or to evoke sympathy.

Pride used to reside in the undue exaltation of 'I am a priest', now it is in the public proclamation by undress and boorishness, 'I am the non-priest'. The older sacerdotal pride was jealous of those above; the new pride is jealous of those below.[24] Up front at worship, arrayed in colourful robes, all eyes are on the priests, their amplified words taken to possess a wisdom and power beyond those of others. They pray at wedding anniversaries and at school boards. They will have advised countless individuals and directed hundreds of groups. And this will please them.[25]

The exaggerated insistence on 'my rights, my prerogatives' ultimately leads to a dangerous spiritual and emotional malady, that of feeling sorry for myself. This self-centred licking of wounds, rehearsing the ways we have been overlooked, taken for granted, unappreciated.[26] The people complain the priests walk by them without a word of greeting, they do not return a salutation, they will not initiate an introduction, and they are snobbish and rude.[27] Clericalism is a curse of the Church. It means priests believe they deserve special treatment. It is evident when priests think they are exempt from normal rules of courtesy, like responding to invitations and showing up when they are expected.[28] St Thomas Aquinas says glory is vain and enters into a person's character in a disordered way when he "seeks glory for a non-existent thing, or an object unworthy of glory," or seeks glory from someone who is of "unsound judgement".[29] The vice of vainglory can be moderately to gravely dangerous to one's salvation, because as Thomas asserts, it "easily leads to man's eternal destruction inasmuch as it causes him to place his trust in himself. The priest can fail to teach the full truth about human sexuality because he fears losing the

esteem of the people who may not want to hear the correct teaching of the Church. He may also fear his collections will go down. Therefore he might speak only about a vague love of neighbour and being merciful like the Sacred Heart of Jesus without mentioning the other 'hard truths'".[30] Being in charge of a diocese or office can lead one to feel he is doing a great job and needs to be given an unreasonable amount of adulation. He can begin to act with such a mean spirit that his approach will be motivated by a personal desire for glory and not for the good of the people under him. He may begin with the small desire for recognition for his talents and ultimately be consumed by the desire to be seen as most outstanding. When he does not receive this degree of recognition, he will retaliate against his subordinates, criticizing them as a means to boost his own self-esteem. It is evident that liturgical abuses are frequently perpetrated so that some clergy can feel admired for their creativity and receive attention from both their flocks and from other clergy as being 'progressive'.[31] Boasting about one's various achievements as if they were not modest but nearly heroic is another way of drawing attention to oneself because it exaggerates any good actually done, and forgets that all good works are primarily done by God as the primary cause.[32] The parishioners expect the parish priest to be a role model for others, and so do their families and friends. Wanting to be admired is a very deep and automatic drive. When we stare in the mirror, our interest is not in how we look to ourselves. We look so as to imagine how those we meet might see us. They savour the adjectives by which people describe what they like in us.[33]

2.4. Envy

Thomas pertinently remarks that a man does not envy the people who are out of reach in place or time or style of life. One envies "the people near him, he wants equality with them or even to outdo them, since it goes against the grain to have them of better repute than he is".[34] Thomas would certainly affirm that people who reject the readily available means for growing in holiness, such as daily prayer and frequenting the sacraments, suffer from a 'pettiness of mind'. The fear of failure coupled with a false appraisal of his talents and gifts results in the small-minded person falsely "holding back from the greatness of which he is worthy".[35] 'Backbiting' or 'calumny' attempts to injure another's character by belittling someone in secret causing others to have a 'bad opinion of the person about whom he is spreading his secret tales' so as to take away another's reputation. One can do this either by lying about a person's character, exaggerating his weaknesses, telling his secrets, accusing him of bad intentions in his good deeds, denying his good qualities when he is being verbally attacked, or being silent in a malicious way about his good qualities.[36]

2.5. Avarice, Gluttony and Lust

Material things are goods necessary for living good life of virtue. Like the emotions, the possession and use of material things can get out of hand. Instead of utilizing them for the glory of God, the human person can become the slave to things, thinking that the more he has the better a person he will become.[37] CCC 2424 warns, "The disordered desire for money cannot but produce perverse effects. It is one of the causes of the many conflicts which disturb the social order."[38] Thomas admits the most difficult desire to regulate is that

for pleasure, especially natural and necessary pleasures associated with daily life such as food and drink and sex without which human life cannot stay in existence or be passed on to future generations. Not the quantity of food per se is at the heart of sin but an inordinate 'desire'.[39] If one has not learned to curb one's desires for the pleasures of the palate, then living alone or in a wealthy parish can produce a series of problems in this area of life. Since priests do not have families, the meal can take on a certain undue importance. A priest can come to expect nothing but the best cuisine whether in terms of quantity, expense, or the best of condiments to give the food a special relish. It can also set up a problem with one's prayer life as the desire for pleasure can weaken the desire for prayer or contemplation.[40] Eight effects of lust are blindness of mind, thoughtlessness, inconstancy, temerity, self-love, hatred of God, love of the present world and despair of the future world.[41] Plunging into sexual sins leads one to seek self, be preoccupied with self and judge relationships in terms of what will be gained for self, namely sexual pleasure.[42]

2.6. Lack of Priestly Zeal

Some priests sleep too much i.e., *devotion* to 'our lady of the Pillow' is very popular among priests. They miss the appointments, postpone the obligations. They become reclusive, stay in their rooms behind closed doors, avoid others lest they bother them, flee from people and responsibilities.[43] They become too wrapped up in books, computer and TV, and a hobby. They drink more than usual, and they have too many lunches and dinners out. A humble self-knowledge reveals shortcomings they have that need to be worked on – may be a bad temper. Perhaps a lack of promptness, could be an arrogant

attitude, might be a shyness and aloofness that keep people from approaching them, may be it's external, like sloppy dress or an unkempt appearance, or lack of proper hygiene, perhaps it's an inappropriate sense of humour or a habit of talking too much. We all have such traits that can hinder their evangelical effectiveness and threaten their zeal.[44]

2.7. Hypocrisy

The problem with the Pharisees was not in what they professed – their attention to the law, ritual, worship, doctrine and morality was commended by Jesus – but with their lives, their words and deed so far from what they professed that they were seen as hallow and cynical. The priests claim to be men of faith, prayer, love, simplicity, chastity, fidelity, honour, and generosity – and often they are not. Our promises, our preaching and our worship can all become 'lip services' unless we are men of genuine integrity. Priests without integrity are Pharisees, scribes, and hypocrites of today.[45] A priest who lacks integrity, who lies, deceives, is unreliable, hypocritical, and prompts fear and suspicion instead of trust, evidently lacks an inner serenity and purity of heart. A priest who preaches a principle but then compromises it, a priest who vows love but is selfish, a priest who speaks of faith but is filled with doubt and cynicism, a priest who claims simplicity but spends, consumes and hoards, a priest who promises obedience but craves independence and calling his own shots, a priest who pledges chastity but is leading a double life, such a priest cannot be a man of integrity.[46] An ongoing genital relationship with another person, man or woman, or a tendency to look for such in our relationships, an inability to speak of sexual matters in a calm, mature manner, an inclination to view others with lust, as objects to gratify one's

sexual desires, constant fantasizing leading to frequent masturbation, use of pornography or so-called 'cruising' for sexual partners or even prostitutes, or an attraction to young boys or girls add more to one's hypocrisy.[47]

2.8. Impatience

The priests are to love the people of their parish and to tend the flock with generous pastoral care, but they can become just as infected with expectancy and fearful worry as any parent. They are nagging their people for not being more dedicated to stewardship, or for not being more punctual to Mass, or for not coming to confession, or for lacking the right kind of devotion at Mass.[48] Some priests could not take responsibility for their actions, and would always blame someone else for faults. 'This parish priest is lousy'. 'These priests are unappreciative'. When we are unable to accept the responsibility for our own lives with calmness, humility, and trust in Providence, we become catty, petty, and vindictive. We begin to fudge on principle and lose the noble principles and convictions that firm up our honour and character. We get huffy and easily bruised, quick to find fault in others, easily aggrieved, and childishly feeling everyone is picking on us.[49] There is the impatience with the time it takes for God to answer our prayers. Padre Pio says, "He has promised us that he will answer every prayer, but he has not told us how or when." We the priests as the ambassadors of Christ, who is love and compassion incarnate. We preach the providence of God, a God who loves and cares for his people, who never abandons them, who holds them in the palm of his hand and then we come face-to-face with suffering, especially of the innocent, and we are tempted to lose patience with him.[50] When we confront the evil and immortality of the world, the

stubborn refusal of people to accept God's saving invitation, the blatant disregard for his law, the apathy and lethargy of our people toward their faith, we grow impatient with God, and find ourselves like the apostles asking him to rain down fire, or like the crowds begging for a sign to convince people.[51] We are ripe for the temptation to become impatient with ourselves when we fail to measure up, as we almost always do. Impatience with self leads to a discouragement that can deaden us. We fail to meet our goals so we retreat to our rooms, or get crabby, or stay in bed, or begin to drink or find solace in the arms of an understanding woman.[52]

2.9. Lack of Simplicity

A life of ease, comfort, luxury, and accumulating material things distracts us from God and tempts us to think that true happiness can come from what we have and not who we are, namely children of God, made in his image, redeemed by the precious blood of his Son, destined to love him and live with him forever.[53] We need enough clothes to be clean, presentable, comfortable, and healthy. We handle sacred objects, we are present at the most important events in people's lives, so we owe it to them to be clean and presentable. The Talmud teaches that "poverty does not mean dirt." Do not mistake simplicity in dress with sloppiness and unkemptness. People will give us a lot of clothes as priests, and we gratefully accept them. The real danger is not in the dress but in the expectation they have from us. Be careful too about overly expensive vestments. Every parish should have beautiful solemn vestments, usually one set for Sundays and feast days, another for weekdays. I think every priest is entitled to a special vestment for his first Mass, that he then might use for special occasions the rest of his priesthood. Every priest

deserves a vacation now and then. Many priests give scandal not only by how many vacations they take, but by how luxurious and exotic they are. In one way, a fine meal out at a nice restaurant with good friends is perfectly acceptable. It is a legitimate, healthy source of relaxation and enjoyment for us. The problem comes if we do it too often, and if we begin to prefer the expensive places.[54] They are in constant need of upgrading VCR's, TV's, stereos, elaborate computers. The technology that was supposed to save our time so we can better serve God's people devours our time and becomes a distraction to the simplicity of life we long for. Money ruined more good priests than booze or sex. We can become money-hungry selfish bachelors. A cultivation of the proper use of money is a necessity for a priest.[55] Cardinal O'Connor warns, "Even poverty can become a cause of pride, of arrogance, of vanity. 'I am poorer than you are, and so I must be holier than you are'".[56]

2.10. No Joy

The major reason for the decline in vocations is simply that we priests have turned into crabs, worried about the future, overwhelmed by work, complaining about everything, fretting about our lives, feeling sorry for ourselves, and taking ourselves way too seriously.[57] One could start to feel sorry for oneself as a priest, to become burdened, to wonder why one ever got into this, to think of ourselves as martyrs, being taken for granted, worked to death, unappreciated. Put Jesus first, then others, then yourself, and therein is joy. Self-pity, of course, inverts that and puts the self first. Worry is a sin against faith, and can destroy joy. Sometimes priests act like they have the weight of the world on their shoulders. They can't take any time off, they can't relax, they can't go on

retreat, because there are just so many things to get done.[58] Joy does not depend on acclaim, advancement, promotion, recognition, fame, prestige, or power. Joy can never come from without – it can only come from the Lord, who plants it deep inside. If our joy is contingent upon affirmation, success, or career, it is planted in sand and will never endure.[59] Priests have to be 'people persons'. We are enlivened by people, we see God's image in them, we enjoy their company, and they are attracted to us because we exude a joy, a serenity.[60]

Thus so many challenges and the difficulties the diocesan priests of today face inside and outside. Jesus gives us two commandments to love God wholeheartedly and to love others as we love ourselves. St Teresa of Avila says that without loving God, we cannot love ourselves and others. Thus, since the diocesan priests of today do not have a very good relationship with God through their prayer life, they are not able to have a good relationship with themselves and others.

3. Solutions to the Challenges for the Priests Today

The definitive empowerment by Christ supports each important action of the priest and creates total devotion to the Lord. Undoubtedly ordained ministers are placed at the service of their people and act in their best interests. Christ alone is the root cause that supports the presbyter's sanctifying work. Being a presbyter receives its decisive quality not in the activities he performs as part of his ministry, but in the priest's subordination to Christ. The priests have twofold relationship – a relationship to Christ and a relationship to their fellow people. This relationship is schematized according to the threefold nature of the priest's ministry: priests as ministers of God's Word (*PO*, 4), Priests

as Ministers of the Sacraments and the Eucharist (*PO*, 5), and priests as rulers of God's People (*PO*, 6). As servants of Christ in the office of prophecy, they must preach the Word of the living God, and testify to His Gospel, not their own. As servants of Christ in worship, they must administer the sacraments and thus make his act of redemption present anew. As representatives of Christ as Head, they must act in his name, not in their own, insofar as the mission priests perform is not theirs but Christ's.[61] The Lord came into Jerusalem on an ass and He can do it again. God did not choose angels as His ministers, nor did He choose anyone because he was better than the rest of the people. On the contrary, every priest knows tens of thousands of laity who would be more worthy instruments of Christ. God's love is blind too, otherwise He would not have loved some of us weak vessels, enough to pour into us His treasure of grace. Mary gave God a human nature through which He taught, governed, and sanctified. A priest gives Christ his human nature saying, "Here am I; I am the Lord's servant as you have spoken, so be it" (Lk 1:38). A priest continues Christ's teaching, His governing and His sanctification. Every priest in his own way represents the person of Christ Himself.

I propose some means to win over the challenges in the spiritual life of the diocesan priests today. Like St John Mary Vianney, they can develop their intimate relationship with God through their prayer life, love for the Sacraments especially to Holy Eucharist, confession and the thirst for the Word of God. And by their priestly sanctity and asceticism they can feel at home with themselves and as a result they can be in good terms with others through their pastoral charity and good communion with all.

3.1. Pastoral Charity

For a noble hearted pastor it is sweet reward to experience understanding and grateful affection from his flock. He sees his words bring peace to the restless, calm to the tormented, light to those who have gone astray. He can feel the direct contact he has made with hearts. He can feel that the Holy Spirit is with him, that his words are falling on fruitful soil. This gives him fresh zest and renewed joy.[62] From 1830 to 1835 except for five days of the annual retreat and one week of repose with his family in 1843, St John Mary Vianney never left the village. He completely dedicated himself to the parish. He himself taught catechism to the children, grown-ups and the pilgrims. He was very adjustable. As the children worked in the fields, he conducted the catechism class at 6 A.M. He encouraged the children by giving a holy card to the best student and a prize to the first arriving student for the catechism class. He taught the importance of the priesthood to them. He said without priesthood, we won't have Our Lord in the form of Eucharist. Everything comes to us through Mary. All happiness, all graces, all heavenly gifts come to us through the priest and next to God, priest is everything. He bought precious vessels and vestments and brought many statues from different places to the church. He founded an orphanage for the destitute girls 'The Providence'. He collected money for his charities and for food for his orphans.

Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *SNP* says, St Vianney was ready to endure anything to make the sheep entrusted to him come back to a good way of life. For them he put up with all sorts of calumnies, prejudices and opposition, without complaint. For them he brought his body into subjection through

voluntary mortification.[63] All priests should gain an adequate knowledge of human affairs and a thorough knowledge of sacred doctrine in keeping with their abilities. Vianney tried hard to overcome his difficulties and obstacles in learning and to strengthen his memory through practice. Up to the time of his blessed death, Vianney exercised his office of teaching the faithful.[64] In *The Ministerial Priesthood* by Synod of Bishops, 30 November 1971, we see by their vocation and ordination, priests are set apart within the midst of God's people and at the same time totally dedicated to their ministry. Though the celebration of the Eucharist, the priests are in communion with Christ, the Head and are leading others to this communion. Priests are sent to all people and their mission must begin with the preaching of God's word. The sacraments are celebrated in conjunction with the proclamation of the Word of God. Unity between evangelisation and sacramental life is always proper to the ministerial priesthood and must carefully be kept in mind by every priest.[65] *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*, Instruction by the Congregation for the Clergy, 4 August 2002, says the parish priest should make every effort to know the faithful entrusted to his care. He exercises his ministry in an integral way as a man of God, seeking out the faithful, visiting their families, and sharing in their needs and joys. He corrects with prudence. He cares for the aged, the weak, the abandoned, the sick, and the dying. He devotes particular care to the poor and the afflicted. He strives for the conversion of sinners. He encourages all in the fulfilment of the duties of their states of life and promotes the Christian life among families.[66]

Letter of Benedict XVI on proclaiming a 'Year for Priests' 16 June 2009, says that St John Mary Vianney went to Ars where religious practice was in a sorry state to embody Christ's presence and to bear witness to his saving mercy. The *Cure* devoted himself completely to his parish's conversion, setting before all else the Christian education of the people in his care. According to the pope, first thing that we need to learn from the saint is his complete identification with his ministry. According to the biographers of St John Mary Vianney, he chose the church as his home where he went before dawn and did not leave it until after the evening Angelus. The Pope describes how St John Mary Vianney was active within the entire territory of his parish. He regularly visited the sick and families, organized popular missions and patrons' feasts, collected and managed funds for charitable and missionary works, embellished and furnished his parish church, cared for the orphans provided the education for the children through 'Providence' and founded confraternities.[67] In the Homily of the pope on opening the 'Year for Priests', while Speaking of St John Mary Vianney, he says that he had a heart that blazed with divine love and experience amazement at the thought of the dignity of the priest. The pontiff urges his fellow priests to cultivate this same amazement in order to carry out their ministry with generosity and dedication.[68] Additionally he says that a priest should clearly define his vision, goals and priorities. If a priest is appointed to a rural parish or mission station where most of the people are uneducated and unemployed, his vision should be to enhance education and employment. To fulfil the vision he should have some specific goals like starting schools and small scale industries. After setting his goals he should define the

priorities in dialogue with the people and with their cooperation. Jesus took time to listen to people. A pastor may not be able to solve all the problems of his people. But he can show his compassion through patient listening. A leader should be in constant contact and communication with his people. He should develop a sense of belonging among the people and allow them the freedom to express ideas and opinions. He should admit his mistakes and apologize sincerely when things go wrong and never blame the people for his failure.[69] In every society there must be authority and subordination. But the authority must be exercised in sacrificial love for those who do not have that authority. Jean de Rougemant says, "If my neighbour is stronger than I, I fear him; if he is weaker, I despise him; if we are equal, I resort to subterfuge." The answer to this dilemma, is for the strong man to recognize his moral weakness in the light of faith; and for the weak man to recognize his moral strength through the grace of God. As Paul Tournier puts it, "The martyrs were not, in the main, 'strong' by nature, and yet they faced persecution and death with indomitable courage."[70]

3.2. Prudence and Patience

St Thomas Aquinas describes that prudence is the intellectual virtue that allows us to recognize the good and evil possibilities in any situation and to act correctly, in accord with God's will.[71] Our people look to their priests to be wise, holy, prudent men. Often, to our consternation, they will seek our assistance in settling disputes or in making tough choices in life. The people look to the priests to act with prudence, not to be silly, indiscreet, irresponsible fools. They expect them to act with probity, sobriety, and care: prudence in their choices, prudence in their behaviour.[72] Prudence is the ability

to choose well between two goods, or at least two possibilities both morally neutral.[73] We never, ever, act in anger. The prudent man will never make a decision while angry; he will 'sleep on it' or put it aside or postpone it until he can weigh things calmly and coolly. A wise man is not afraid to admit, 'I am too angry right now to make a decision'. We never, ever, make a choice in lust. How many priests have rashly left their vocation because they acted in lust. The prudent man will again step back, and give himself space and distance, before allowing himself to be ruled by lust. We never, ever, act while discouraged. The fact of having suffered a failure, having fallen to sin, or having made a stupid move, discourages us. That's not the time to make a decision.[74] We never, ever, act in haste. While a priest must be able to make decisions confidently, he will never do so rashly. He will weigh options, consult, pray, reflect, take a reasonable amount of time, and then act.[75] The balanced approach to life avoids excess. Exercise is important, but can be overdone; sleep is essential, but can be disproportionate; food and drink necessary, but can be abused; recreation and time off needed, but can be exaggerated. Even prayer can be misused.[76] Prudence helps us keep our goals clear and in focus, thus keeping our lives well-ordered and purposeful. He realizes he has his own duties and need not get excited over other people. The parish priests must concentrate on their assignment. When in a parish, that becomes your priority. You will be avalanched with invitations to say Mass elsewhere, to give days of recollection and retreats outside, to become chaplain of this group and that group – but prudence keeps us focused. Yes, I can accept other duties but only if they do not interfere with my first responsibility.[77]

"The virtue of patience is the one which most assures us of perfection", writes St. Francis de Sales in his classic *Introduction to the Devout Life.* St Teresa says, "Let nothing disturb you, Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing. God alone does not change. Patience achieves everything. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices."[78] The sterility, dryness, and tedium we experience in our prayer life, lead us to a discouragement that tempts us to give up. [79]Father Faber wrote, "We must wait for God, long, meekly, in the wind and the wet, in the thunder and lightning, in the cold and the dark. Wait, and he will come. He never comes to those who do not wait."[80] We priests need to listen to what Pope John Paul II said to young people at the first World Youth Day: "I should like to ask you, dear young people, for a favour: be patient with the Church. The Church is always a community of weak and imperfect individuals. But God has placed his work of salvation in human hands. This is indeed a great risk but there is no other Church than the one founded by Christ. He wants us human beings to be his collaborators in the world and in the Church with all our deficiencies and shortcomings."[81] Listen again to St Francis de Sales, "Be patient with everyone, but above all with yourself. Do not be disturbed with your imperfections, and always rise up bravely from a fall." Be as patient with ourselves as the Lord is with us to realize his grace is more powerful than our weakness, and to admit that most of our priestly life is patiently stumbling along with his help. So, the greatest tragedy is not in our falling but in our not getting back up. Fulton Sheen says, Jesus fell three times on the road to Golgotha because three represents infinity, and so there is no end to the number of times we may fall under the weight of our own crosses. We

especially lose patience with ourselves in our struggle with inclinations to sin, especially to sins of the flesh. Thus, we lose patience in our battle with sin, whether it be chastity, temper, laziness, drink, a tongue. Evelyn Underhill writes, "Patience with ourselves means patience with a growing creature whom God has taken in hand and whose perfection he will complete in his own time and way."[82] The mystic Julian Norwich recorded, "I was left to myself in depression, weary of my life and irked with myself, so that I kept the patience to keep going only with difficulty, but immediately after this our Lord again gave me comfort and rest of soul in delight and certitude." We will not be patient with others if we are not patient with the Lord and with ourselves first. Young priests have some problems being patient with people. Quickly become impatient with the bishop, with diocesan structures, with the pastor, with the parish ministers, with the teachers at school.[83] You will at times have to be very firm, to correct abuses, to speak up to preserve the truth, your self-respect, and your peace of mind. It is always more laudable, preferable, and more effective if we do so calmly, reasonably, and patiently. At times the parish priest is called to heroic patience. Hours in confessional with no one coming, days spent in preparation for a homily and no one listening may irritate us. Some of your brother priests may criticize you as too pious, too traditional, too Roman, without even giving you a chance. Some brother priests may forbid you to do anything new or creative in the parish. We can rant, rave, threaten, cajole, and demand a transfer, or we can be patient, do our best, win their trust, and make a difference.[84]

3.3. Altruistic Ministry

In nearly every generation, the young are the passionate revolutionaries and dedicated soldiers, the zealous monks and inventive professionals. Altruists believe that something extraordinary is possible, and for that they are willing to lose themselves. Altruists consequently do not believe in half measures. Each priest should aim at being as spiritual as Thomas Merton, as dedicated as Dorothy Day. The parish priest should get to know all our parishioners and we would love them unconditionally. The 'reach out' retreats with other youths, the homilies that entertained, the small groups of married couples who came together for spiritual discussions, all those conspicuous things that would make it clear that they were part of a new spirit. They should turn out to be exactly what their parishioners wanted then in newly ordained priests. They were the ones who went over to the school, gathered the youth into service projects, and stayed after Mass to greet the people. They took the time to prepare their homilies and stayed after the baptisms as long as there was a photo left to take. They did not mind celebrating a number of Masses in a day or baptizing thirty babies at a crack. Bishops loved and still love such men, for they can be talked into difficult assignments, which they take and about which they do not complain. They will work long hours.[85]

3.4. Preferential Option for the Poor

For a fruitful pastoral ministry in liberation, human development and justice, priests should strive to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Church's social doctrine, guidelines and pastoral options. They should be close to their people,

when they are oppressed by the rich and the powerful, with bonds of solidarity, and unity; 'conscientizing' them so that they do not submit passively to situations of social injustice. Priests should not give up in the face of the difficulties inherent in this type of work. The grave phenomenon of refugees from war or natural disasters, should also be remembered. The sufferings of flight, separation of families, isolation and extreme poverty, often lead to the collapse of ideals, discouragement and despair. Religious faith is a precious support in rebuilding one's life. The priest is often the first to feel the impact of such situations. The Church reaffirms its preferential love or option for the poor and asks priests to be true to this. 'The poor' is meant not only those without money, but all the oppressed, the marginalized and those in serious difficulty, such as the handicapped, the unemployed immigrants, refugees, drug addicts etc. Priests should be close to these brothers and sisters, sharing their problems and sufferings, and seeing in them the suffering face of Christ (cf. Mt 25:40).[86]

3.5. Friend and Guide of the Youth

The young are a living and active force in the Church, and are at the centre of its interest and love; they are its *hope*. Convinced that youth is precious in itself, and that young people have a key role in the construction of society, the Church entrusts them to the preferential care of priests, who should help them become men and women of strong human and Christian personality. Priests should make use of young people in the work of evangelization. The attitude of priests towards the young should be characterized by sincere love and great availability. First of all, one should allow oneself to become involved in their exuberance, even at the cost of

personal inconvenience, sharing their ideals, their way of looking at things, their problems and activities. Priests should be close to young people to enlighten them and guide them through these dangers, helping them to grow in confidence, to overcome certain contradictions that are often found in them, and to take right decisions and stick to them. They should try to see with the eyes of the young, and be prepared to give up a lot of time to them, sharing their interests and having friendly relations with them, engaging also in spiritual direction, which can have such an influence for good in the years of adolescence. Priests should bear in mind that the Church has a lot to say to the young, and the young have a lot to say to the Church. It is also necessary to bring young people together in groups of boys or girls or mixed, making the most of school structures, associations and movements, or encouraging the formation of spontaneous groups. Priests should familiarize themselves, therefore, with group dynamics and train leaders of youth groups.[87]

3.6. Apostolate of the Family

St John Mary Vianney took the census of the parish to mingle with the parishioners very fast. During his family visit, he asked about them, crops, Word of God and the Church. After coming to know the blurred and scarred picture of morality of his parish, he started intensify his ministry. The family is 'the first and vital cell of society' and 'the domestic sanctuary of the Church'. Care for the families in the parish is one of the principal duties of a parish priest. Priests should see that couples are carefully prepared for marriage, meeting them individually and in groups, paying attention especially to the meaning of the sacrament, its sanctity and the duties inherent in the state. In the liturgical celebration of marriage,

the spouses signify and participate in the mystery of union and fruitful love between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:32). Thus, as far as possible, its sacramental celebration should be solemn, preferably on festive days or on those indicated in the diocesan programme, with the active participation of the community. Priests should care for newly established families, helping them to make use of the grace of the sacrament, to be grateful in a Christian spirit for times of happiness and to accept and overcome the difficulties and above all to accept children with love, taking on themselves joyfully the responsibility of helping them to grow as human beings and as Christians.[88]

3.7. At the Side of the Sick and the Aged

Priests should have a sympathetic concern for the sick, and should consider them a precious part of their flock. They should follow them closely and continually, helping them to understand the infinite love of the heart of Christ (cf. Mt 11:28), the solidarity of Christians and the mysterious supernatural meaning of the Cross. They should encourage them to find strength and hope in prayer and in offering their own suffering for the redemption of the world, in union with the passion of Jesus. Frequent reception of the Eucharist is the best gift and help that the priest can offer to the sick and the aged. A special moment in the pastoral care of the sick and the aged is the administration of the sacraments of reconciliation and the anointing of the sick.[89]

3.8. Communion with the Faithful

St John Mary Vianney did not even pat the head of the little girls and never allowed them to touch his hands. With women he spoke briefly and kept modesty of his eyes. He

allowed a devout woman to clean his rectory when he is outside. In the lecture to the Congregation for the Clergy, 24 October 1995, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger says about Ministry and Life of Priests: Undoubtedly communion with his fellow Christians becomes for the priest a reliable support for his service and for his own sanctification. The experience of the Christian community, and of the exchange of faith with members of the parish and of lay associations, has indeed become so precious for many presbyters.[90] Priests exercise the office of father and teacher among and for the People of God. Priests must sincerely acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity by willingly listening to them.[91] *Ministerial Priesthood* of Synod of Bishops, 30 November 1971, urges priests to entrust the laity duties in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. It also demands a pastoral council to be established in each diocese.[92] *DMLP* by the Congregation for the Clergy, 31 January 1994, says a priest can't express his love for Jesus and his bride the Church without transmitting it in a real and unconditional love for Christians who are the object of his pastoral care. The priest must present himself as an expert in humanity, a man of truth and of communion. The priest is a witness of the love, care and concern of the only Shepherd for each and every member of the flock.[93] Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *EG* says, the way to relate to others which truly heals instead of debilitating us, is a *mystical* fraternity, a contemplative fraternity. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly

Father does.[94] Jozef Cardinal Tomko in the *PGDP* says, communion with the faithful means that priests must consider themselves as part of the People of God, dedicated to the growth of the community, with genuine *pastoral charity,* because they have been taken from the people and appointed to act for them in their relations with God (cf. Heb 5:1). They should constantly, therefore, pray for their people, recommending them to the love of the Father (cf. 2 Thess 1:11); they should try to get to know them in the situations of their daily life, as a shepherd knows his own flock (cf. Jn 10:14); they should live among them as 'brothers among brothers and sisters'; they should accompany them on their journey of faith, going ahead of them with their example (cf. Jn 13:15); they should carefully avoid anything that might give scandal (cf. 2 Cor 6:3).[95] Thus like St John Mary Vianney, when the priests feel the presence of God and Christ everywhere and in everybody through their prayer life, through the love for the sacraments especially for Holy Eucharist and Confession, through living the Word of God, and through the devotion to Mother Mary and saints, they can be intimate to God. And through their closeness with God, they can purify and sanctify themselves with the human virtues such as humility, simplicity, integrity and asceticism. This gives them the strength for their pastoral ministry and the interpersonal celibate relationship. They completely surrender themselves to work in the vineyard of the Lord.

Conclusion

"Jesus went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted and they came to him and he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to

cast out demons" (Mk 3:13-15). Thus by becoming one with the Father in the mountain only, he calls apostles to be with him and with the people by their ministry. "All mine are yours, and yours are mine. They may be one, as we are one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn 17:10-11, 21). As Father and Jesus, the son are one, Jesus wants his disciples also to be one with him. The priesthood is a call from Christ to live a relationship with him by serving his people. It is an extension and continuation of the work of Christ in the world today. Pope Benedict XVI in the Letter on proclaiming a Year of Priests, 16 June 2009, says like Vianney, let us ask the Lord Jesus for the grace to learn for ourselves something of the pastoral plan of St John Mary Vianney. The first thing we need to learn is the complete identification of the man with his ministry. In Jesus, person and mission tend to coincide.[96] And he leaves no doubt that priests have to seek communion with the Father in their fundamental devotion to Jesus Christ.

We have tried to look into the pastoral ministry of St John Mary Vianney. He was able to balance his contemplative life and the pastoral life. He had a love for Holy Eucharist and concern for the conversion of the people through the confession. He got the strength from his prayer life to do not only spiritual activities but also social activities. Though there were so many difficulties he was able to overcome them with the help of God through the intercession of Mother Mary and St Philomena.

We have made a moderate attempt to see the challenges and dangers in the spiritual life of the diocesan priests. We find sometimes sluggish attitude towards religious acts. Because of too many commitments, too many administrative

tasks they less promote the cultivation of spiritual life. Due to lack of reading divine, pious books, some of them are not able to win over worldly darkness. Without faith, there will be a crisis in the life due to loneliness, sickness and sufferings. While the faithful are devotional during the Mass, the priests are devoid of religious feeling and lack of reverence and respect. The homily does not touch the hearts and influence the lives of the faithful. The priest does not help the penitent properly. The penitent goes away as poor and empty as when he went in. Since some are self-centred, their pastoral work looks secondary. Some others allow the devil to convince them that they are right when they are wrong. Some think there is no higher authority than my own wants, needs and will. There is a wrong thinking that the obedience to any authority is unjust and oppressive.

We have discussed the solutions to win over the challenges for the spirituality of the priests today after the model of St John Mary Vianney. They should have the desire to prayer. They have to have a special love for Eucharist. They have to visit the eternal priest morning and night. The holy sacrifice of the Mass carries a wealth of divine grace not only to others but in the foremost place to the priest. If the priest himself seeks the opportunity to confess, he will create opportunities for the faithful. The priest has to be familiar with the Word of God and he has to live what he preaches. The priests have to learn simplicity from Mother Mary and they have to promote Marian devotion in the parishes. The priest should be the light of the world and salt of the earth. Since they are ambassadors and friends of Jesus, they should be holy, innocent and undefiled. They should have direct contact with the faithful through family visits. As priest is a

human being, he shares the same flesh and blood with the rest of men who are consequently his brothers and sisters. Compassion is necessary for the communion with others.

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Endnotes

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