

## Holy Orders

### Comments by Pope Benedict XVI

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) was interviewed by Peter Seewald over the course of 3 days. Excerpts from this conversation on the sacrament of Holy Orders follow. (Taken from: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. *God and the World*. Ignatius Press, 2002.)

**Seewald:** Every world religion has men who are particularly designated to be responsible in society for the rites and the rules of that faith. In what way is a Catholic priest different from these others?

**Benedict:** Well, first of all, the Catholic priest is there in response to the mission of Jesus Christ, in the authoritative pattern of the apostles. So he is not the figure of priesthood as seen in the general history of religions. The standard for this class, if we may call it that, derives from the figure of the apostle, as created by Christ. Christ gives him the task of proclaiming his Word, proclaiming himself, proclaiming the promise he has given us. And within the framework of this proclamation—which is always a task of love, of building up the body of Christ, of service to the poor—the proclamation of his death, which we call the Eucharist and which is a sacrament, is central.

**Seewald:** If they have been called by Christ himself, why are there bad priests? Why are there even bad bishops? In the case of some of those he has chosen the Lord obviously seems to have made a mistake.

**Benedict:** It certainly can happen that people slip through, as it were, without really having received a call. But there are also “failed callings”, that is, callings that are not truly lived out. The strange thing is, as we have already discussed, that God entrusts himself to such fragile vessels. That he has taken such a horrible risk with the Church. He has put himself into hands that betray him time and again. And he has left us the opportunity of falling and of being corrupted, so that he still has to support the Church himself again and again through these very tools that have proved unsuitable. It is a consolation, on one hand, that the Lord is stronger than the sins of men, but, on the other hand, a great challenge for all those who have turned toward this calling and who believe they have received it to let it truly mature in fellowship with Christ.

**Seewald:** Jesus Christ commanded his apostles: “Go out into all the world and preach the gospel to all creatures.” And just as the apostles regarded the office of preaching as one of their chief tasks, so again and again great men of the religious orders gathered vast crowds around them... It is said of Augustine that his sermons became ever shorter; each sentence was charged with power and went to the root of the matter; every word had weight and meaning. “He took no rest from this”, one of his biographers wrote, “until sheer applause, or the tears in everyone’s eyes, allowed him to believe that the last element of resistance against truth and grace had been broken down in the souls of his hearers.”

**Benedict:** Being able to preach is a gift, a special grace, and Saint Augustine always had great respect for the simple pastors who need a book in order to work out what to say in a sermon. He said: It is not originality that is important, but humble service. If another person's book helps someone to preach the Word to men, that's very good. We will be thankful when God raises up a great preacher, but we should also learn to be humble enough to listen to a lesser preacher.

Recently a parish priest in a large German city told me that he had come to his vocation by the particular priest who was actually bereft of all exterior gifts. He was a hopeless preacher, a dreadful singer, and so on, and yet under his care the parish really blossomed. In the end four or five priestly vocations were awakened in this city parish, something that happened neither under his predecessor nor under his successor, both of whom were far more capable. We can see here how the humble witness of someone who does not have the gift of persuasive speech can itself become a sermon, and how we should thank God for the variety of gifts.

