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Alternate thoughts for this Year for Priests

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Pope Benedict XVI declared this a Year for Priests, beginning on June 19, the feast of the Sacred Heart, and ending next June with an international gathering of priests in Rome. The pope named St. Jean Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, as universal patron of priests to mark the 150th anniversary of his death.

As part of the year-long observance there will be an international priests' retreat in Ars, France, sponsored by the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy, from September 27 to October 3, and a symposium on the "faithfulness" of priests at The Catholic University of America Oct. 6-7.

Undoubtedly, the pious thing for most priests to do is to get fully into the spirit of this Year for Priests and for lay people to renew their appreciation for the good work that so many priests have done and continue to do in the life of the church.

But there is a more realistic dimension to this Year for Priests, and it is one that never sees the light of day in most of the diocesan papers in the United States and Canada because bishops will not permit any discordant opinions to be expressed.

One such voice, that of a priest ordained almost 40 years, has expressed the views of fellow priests -- not *all*, perhaps not even *most*, but definitely *many*.

Apart from this week's column, his views and theirs have heretofore not been heard, much less taken into serious account by the Vatican or by many bishops in this "Year for Priests."

My priest-correspondent has identified 10 issues that priests need help in facing -- help that will not be forthcoming at symposia on the "faithfulness" of priests, nor at international retreats in France.

1. The shortage of diocesan priests cannot be addressed by band-aid solutions, like inviting priests from foreign countries to engage in sacramental ministry in dioceses with sharply declining numbers of domestic vocations. There needs to be

a public discussion, involving priests themselves, concerning obligatory celibacy and its pastoral ramifications.

2. Many priests do not perceive themselves to be close collaborators with their bishops, as Vatican II envisioned them to be (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, n. 7). Too few bishops reach out to their priests to ask for their honest opinions about anything that seriously affects the life of the church and the priesthood.

3. Many diocesan priests still feel betrayed by their bishops with the passage in 2002 of the Dallas Charter. Priests who have been accused by anyone of any sexual impropriety whatever with minors have been summarily removed from the active ministry. At the same time, no bishop, other than one cardinal-archbishop, has been forced to resign because of his mishandling of the sexual-abuse scandal.

4. There is a growing rift between so-called "Vatican II priests" and so-called "John Paul II priests," which is painfully evident in some dioceses when priests gather for the Eucharist at retreats and other diocesan events.

5. There is a concomitant return to clericalism in the priesthood, involving not only a fascination with cassocks and birettas and a preference for antiquated vestments and devotions, but also a negative, censorious tone to preaching and a cavalier dismissal of consultative structures that are supposed to be in place in every parish.

6. At the same time, the Vatican and the bishops have failed to address concerns raised by the *disproportionate* number of gays in seminaries and the priesthood, including also the hierarchy. It is the elephant in the living room, as pointed out almost 10 years ago in Fr. Donald Cozzens's *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. Yet how many priests' retreats and clergy conferences have used that book as a basis for discussion?

7. There has been a substantial attrition of Catholics -- women, gays and lesbians, divorced people, critics of official teachings on sexuality and reproduction -- from active membership in the church, to the point where fully one-tenth of the U.S. population now consists of ex-Catholics. What is being done about it?

8. Resigned priests are treated like traitors. To be sure, some bishops welcome them back at clergy reunions, but others boycott such gatherings as a sign of their contempt.

9. Appointments to the hierarchy since the pontificate of Paul VI have been of a certain type. Those who do not fit the official profile are excluded from consideration or are harassed by Vatican officials if they are already bishops.

10. So many senior priests say to their friends, "I can't wait for retirement." Why this sense of discouragement over the present state of the Church, bordering sometimes on hopelessness?

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