

Orans – Mary Guides Women in Prayer for Priests

We are a “Eucharistic People.” During this 25th anniversary year of the Diocese of Palm Beach, we celebrate as a diocesan family the gift of the Eucharist with great joy and gratitude to God. In his homily at the opening Mass of the Diocese’s silver jubilee, Bishop Gerald Barbarito described the Eucharist as “the sacrament of love,” bringing us “into the depths of the love of God himself.”

On that same occasion, Bishop Barbarito acknowledged another great gift we have received – the priests of our diocese who enable us to be a Eucharistic People. Little did we know then that Pope Benedict XVI would establish a special “Year for Priests” in honor of the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, the Universal Patron of Priests. It is that Saint, known as the Cure of Ars, who said that “the Priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.” How fitting it is that we celebrate these two gifts of Jesus’ love together, for as Bishop Barbarito said in his homily, “Without priests there would be no Eucharist.”

Commemorating the Eucharist and the Priesthood brings us back to the very life of Christ and to another tradition – that of women praying and sacrificing for Jesus himself and for the Apostles. In his Gospel Saint Luke tells us about the Galilean women who journeyed with Jesus and the Twelve, providing for them out of their resources. They accompanied Mary as she prayed for Jesus to bear the weight of the cross on the way to Calvary, and they shared her grief at the death and burial of Jesus. When they went to the tomb on Easter morning, these women became the first witnesses to the Resurrection.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes the first Christian community in Jerusalem. Returning to the upper room after the Ascension of Jesus, the Apostles “devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” Pope John Paul II spoke of this group as “the prelude to the birth of the Church.” The Holy Spirit responded to their prayer on the day of Pentecost, when he bestowed his gifts on all those present, transforming each one according to the specific mission each would have in the new Church. The outpouring of the Spirit led Mary to exercise the spiritual motherhood which Jesus had granted her from the cross. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles began their mission to make disciples of all nations. It would be appropriate for us to believe that the call to a life of prayer was the mission given to the women present at Pentecost.

While this is the last time that Mary is mentioned in Scripture, we may assume that she was present at early celebrations of the Eucharist – the breaking of the bread in the homes of the first Christians. In addition to Luke, St. Paul writes about women whose houses were churches, and who sacrificed so much to assist him and other disciples of Jesus. What an inspiration it is for the women of our Diocese to read in Scripture about these women who followed the example of Mary in their dedication to Jesus, the Eucharist, and the Apostles.

The art in the Roman catacombs of the first and second-century Christians provides another beautiful heritage for us. Frescoes show the image of a female figure praying with extended arms and open palms, known as the Orans. Mary is depicted in some of these frescoes as the Orans, the woman of prayer, indicating that these early Christians recognized Mary’s role as spiritual mother and as intercessor to her Son. The

Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that Mary is the perfect Orans, a figure of the Church. As members of the Church, we accept Mary as our own mother, praying with her and to her, for Mary's prayer supports the prayer of the Church.

Mary particularly encourages us to pray for the Priesthood and for priests. There is only one priesthood – the Priesthood of Jesus Christ – and each priest acts *in persona Christi* – “in the person of Christ.” How dear to the heart of Mary are the prayers of intercession and the sacrifices offered for the eternal Priesthood of her Son, and for those who consecrate their lives to God for our salvation. Their self-sacrifice is the means by which the person of Christ is made truly present to us in each celebration of Eucharist. Here, too, Mary is with us, just as she was present at Pentecost and at the breaking of the bread in the homes of the early Christians.

As women, we reflect upon the great blessings that we have received in our Diocese, and we are moved to respond to Mary's request. We look to the example of the Galilean women who accompanied Jesus, and realize that we can accompany our priests in prayer and provide for them out of our resources – that is, our sacrifices and offerings. These can be performed in the context of our daily routines, yet they are truly precious to Jesus when they are gifts of love on behalf of his priests. Simple acts such as foregoing a dessert or offering to the Lord a difficult task can bring much grace to a priest striving to grow in holiness. The loneliness endured by a shut-in may well sustain a priest in the difficulties of his vocation. The possibilities are endless, and we can be sure that Mary will intercede for us, presenting each of our gifts to her Son.

Like the women in the upper room, we too have been given a mission. With Mary as our model, each of us can be an Orans, devoting ourselves with one accord to

prayer with and for the priests of our Diocese. The prayer distributed to the laity for the Year for Priests provides the perfect means to do so, for it corresponds to the priests' own prayer. With them we pray that Mary will wrap her mantle around our priests, and that they be holy, seeking nothing but God's greater glory and the salvation of souls.

While the Year for Priests was inaugurated by Pope Benedict to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal, Father Yves Francois, Director of Vocations for the Diocese of Palm Beach, emphasizes that priests continually need spiritual and emotional support from the people of God whom they serve. The ongoing prayer and sacrifice of the laity are essential if priests are to be holy, faithful, and happy in their vocation. As they reflect these qualities in their ministry, they will also be excellent role models for young men, witnessing to the joy of dedicating one's life to God and to the Church.

How fitting it is that the Year for Priests began on the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, for the Eucharist and the Priesthood are gifts from His loving heart. As a Eucharistic People, we are so blessed to commemorate these gifts together during our Diocesan Anniversary Year and the Year for Priests. We know that the Eucharist and the Priesthood are the fruits of sacrifice – the sacrifice of the Cross and the self-sacrifice of each priest who serves us. St. John Vianney related these so well when he said, “Without the priest, the passion and death of our Lord would be of no avail. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth.”

Father Francois invites us, the women of the Diocese of Palm Beach, to participate in these sacrifices through prayer and offerings on behalf of our priests. Placing ourselves under the patronage of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, the Patroness of

our Diocese, we ask her to help each of us to be an Orans – a woman of prayer – interceding for those who have dedicated their lives to bring Christ, her Son, to us. In so doing, we accompany Pope Benedict in his request to the Most Holy Virgin, to whom he entrusted this Year for Priests. In his letter to his brother priests, the Holy Father wrote: “I ask her to awaken in the heart of every priest a generous and renewed commitment to the ideal of complete self-oblation to Christ and the Church which inspired the thoughts and actions of the saintly Cure of Ars.”

If we, like the women in the upper room, feel a call to prayer, let us also respond with dedication and generosity. All that we need to enable us to do so is available on our Diocesan web site (.diocesepb.org), which has dedicated a special section to the Year for Priests. Here we can find the Prayer for Priests suggested by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as a suggested Rosary for the Year for Priests. In addition, monthly calendars give us the name of a priest of the Diocese of Palm Beach to be prayed for particularly each day. Since our commitment to pray and sacrifice with and for our priests will be ongoing, such calendars will become a permanent part of our web site.

The commitment that is asked of us consists of a promise to pray the Prayer for Priests daily – if possible, for the specific priest for that day – and to perform sacrifices and offerings in accordance with each woman’s conscience and ability. A woman who is drawn to a more intensive commitment should spend time in prayer and reflection, discerning whether she is being called to become a spiritual mother to a priest in our Diocese. A woman of any age – even a student – and of any state in life – religious, married, or single – may be a spiritual mother to a priest. While the vocation to be a

spiritual mother for priests is largely unknown, it is meant to transmit spiritual life. This is a special mission in the Church, and it is centered in the Eucharist. A spiritual mother to a priest will commit to one weekday Mass per month, one hour in Eucharistic Adoration each month, one Rosary weekly, and the daily Prayer for Priests. She will also ask Mary, the Mother of Priests, to guide her in her sacrifices and offerings for the soul of the priest. While the identity of the priest for whom she is praying and sacrificing will not be known to her, the Lord will certainly create a special relationship between the spiritual mother and the priest. We see this reflected in the words of Jesus on the cross to His Mother, “Woman, behold, your son,” and to John, “Behold, your mother.” With these words, Mary became the spiritual mother of all of us, and of priests in a particular way.

If you feel called to commit to prayer and sacrifice with and for the priests of our Diocese, respond to the invitation of Father Yves Francois by sending an email to the Vocations Office at @diocesepb.org. Please include your name, parish, and email address. If you wish to be a spiritual mother to a priest, also specify that in your email.

The word *Eucharist* means “thanksgiving,” and as a Eucharistic People we are moved to give thanks to God for His gifts of love to the Diocese of Palm Beach. We also consider the self-giving love of each of our priests, expressed so well in the words of the Cure of Ars: “The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you.” May the women of our Diocese respond with our own gifts of love – our prayers and sacrifices for the priests of our Diocese. Father Francois speaks for all of them when he says, “The greatest gift that someone can give to us is to pray for us.”

Additional information on the Year for Priests can be found on the Diocesan web site, [.diocesepb.org](http://diocesepb.org), and the web site of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, [.usccb.org/yearforpriests](http://usccb.org/yearforpriests). Accounts of spiritual motherhood for priests are available on the Congregation of the Clergy web site, [.clerus.org](http://clerus.org).