

“Ministers of your Joy”, *Pope Benedict XVI on the Priesthood*

Summary

The article examines the nature of priesthood and the reflections of Pope Benedict XVI on this theme during the first year of his Pontificate.

The first part of the essay deals with the debate on the nature of priesthood. According to the traditional Christocentric, ontological and sacramental understanding, the priesthood is rooted in the being of the man who ministers. In the 1960s a more social and functional view came to the fore, which describes the priesthood in terms of a ministry to the congregation within the social institution called the Church. Joseph Ratzinger developed his own theological understanding of the priesthood in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, at a time when the very meaning of what it means to be a priest was hotly debated. In line with the Council's teaching, he renews the traditional Christocentric conception of the priesthood, centred on the celebration of the sacraments, by incorporating what is valid in more recent approaches, particularly the emphasis on preaching God's word and guidance of the community.

The second part touches upon the priesthood as the continuation of the mission of Christ. The saving mission of Jesus Christ, the divine Son, is the basis for Joseph Ratzinger's theological reflection on the priesthood. Christ's whole being is mission and relationship. To emphasise the Christological and sacramental nature of the apostolic ministry, Joseph Ratzinger refers to St Paul's priestly and liturgical description in Rom 15:15-16. A second text is 1 Pet 5:1-4 which Ratzinger describes as a kind of "mirror of priests".

Part three examines the Christological basis of the priesthood which has consequences for the priest's personal spirituality and his manner of carrying out his ministry. To avoid the degeneration of priestly life into mere activism, Joseph Ratzinger emphasises the importance of prayer and contemplation which, apart from restoring our joy in the Lord, are the most important of truly pastoral activities. At the personal level, Joseph Ratzinger stresses the need for the priest to cultivate a relationship of friendship with Christ. This friendship, accompanied by obedience to Christ's will is, in fact, the secret of holiness.

The fourth part looks upon the priest as a man of truth and joy. By living in accordance with the truth, in fidelity to God and to his revealed law, man "comes to experience himself as loved by God and discovers joy in truth and in righteousness – a joy in God which becomes his essential happiness".