

THE PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS
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On June 19, 2009 Pope Benedict XVI will officially inaugurate The Year for Priests. The opening of this special year takes place on the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, the patron of parish priests. As the president-rector of St. Mary's Seminary and University, the first Catholic seminary in the United States, it is a privilege for me to write the first article in a twelve part series on the priesthood.

The document devoted to the priesthood at the Second Vatican Council entitled *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, states that priests, "are configured to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ." As Catholics we root our understanding of this priesthood of Christ in the teaching of the New Testament. It is in The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament that we find a description of the priesthood of Jesus in inspiring detail under three headings.

First Jesus is priest because he is God's Son and shares in God's divine nature. As Son he is completely faithful to God, His Father. Second, Jesus is priest because he is one like us in all things but sin. Hebrews speaks eloquently of the humanity of Jesus, the priest, who learned obedience from what he suffered and became the source of eternal life for us. Jesus as a human is able to help those who are tested because he too was tested through what he suffered. Third, Jesus, the Priest as mediator forms a bridge between God and human beings. He is the one who offered the one, perfect sacrifice for all people and now intercedes before God for us all.

This threefold picture of Jesus forms a model for each priest who is called in his ordination to model his life on the life of Christ himself. The priest then must be a man of God. His life must be grounded in the Spirit of God and he must cultivate a life of prayer and virtuous living so that he reflects Christ in whose name and person he acts. The priest must also, like Christ himself, be a brother and servant to all. In his words and actions he must form a bridge between God and others. While fully human and aware of his own limitations and sins the priest must identify with the joys and sufferings, the hopes and sorrows of his sisters and brothers. He must also understand the depths of the human experience. The priest offers the one perfect sacrifice of Christ when he celebrates the Eucharist. He speaks and acts in the person of Christ. At the same time, he must offer his whole life as a sacrifice through his service to God and God's people.

As we begin this Year for Priests we root ourselves first of all in the teaching of the Scriptures about the priesthood of Jesus who is the model for all priests. Let us also pray to Jesus, the High Priest that he may strengthen and bless those who now serve as priests in his name and for the sake of all of his people.