

## SHRINES A TOOL FOR EVANGELIZATION

*Letter of the Prefect for the Congregation for Clergy, Mauro Cardinal Piacenza, to the rectors of Shrines in the Church.*



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Reverend and Dear Rector,

I would like to convey my cordial greetings to each one of you, which I willingly extend to all those who assist you in the pastoral care of Shrines, along with an expression of my sincere gratitude for the attentive dedication with which you come to the assistance of the pastoral needs of the pilgrims who approach the places of Worship entrusted to your care in ever greater numbers from every part of the world.

With this letter I allow myself to reflect above all on the sentiments of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, who considers the presence of Shrines to be of great importance and to be a great treasure in the life of the Church. This is so because, as places of pilgrimage, they “summon and bring together a growing number of pilgrims and religious tourists, some of whom are in complicated human and spiritual situations, somewhat distant from living the faith and with a weak ecclesial affiliation” (Letter on the Occasion of the II World Congress on the Pastoral care of Pilgrims and Sanctuaries, Santiago di Compostella, 27-30 September 2010). Blessed John Paul II declares, “Christian Sanctuaries have always and everywhere have been or have sought to be signs of God, of his entering into human history” (Allocution to Rectors of Sanctuaries, 22 January 1981). Shrines are then “a sign of the living Christ among us, they recognize in this sign the initiative of the love of the living God for mankind” (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, The Sanctuary, Memory, Presence and Prophecy of the Living God, 8 May 1999, n.5).

Conscious, therefore, of the particular value that Shrines hold in the experience of faith of every Christian, the Congregation for the Clergy, competent in the material (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, 28 June 1988, art. 97, 1°) would like to offer for your consideration some reflections directed towards renewal and a more effective motivation of the ordinary activities of the pastoral work that is carried out there. In a climate of widespread secularism, the Shrine continues to be, even to our day, a privileged place in which the human person, a pilgrim here on earth, experiences the loving and saving presence of God. He finds there a fruitful space, away from daily distractions, where he can recollect himself, gather his thoughts and reacquire the spiritual health to re-embark upon the journey of faith with greater ardour. It is there too that he can find space to seek, find and love Christ in his ordinary life, in the midst of the world.

What is the heart of the pastoral activity of Shrines? The canonical rule with regard to these places of worship sees, with great theological wisdom and ecclesial experience, that in them, “the means of salvation are to be supplied more abundantly to the faithful by the

diligent proclamation of the word of God, the suitable promotion of liturgical life especially through the celebration of the Eucharist and of penance, and the cultivation of approved forms of popular piety. can. 1234, §1 CIC). The canonical norms trace a valuable synthesis of the pastoral undertaking particular to Shrines and provides an interesting point of departure to reflect briefly on some fundamental elements that characterise the office that the Church has entrusted to you.

### **1. The Proclamation of the Word, Prayer and Popular Piety.**

The Sanctuary is a place in which the Word of God resounds with unique power. The Holy Father Benedict XVI, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010) underlines that “the Church is built upon the Word of God; she is born from and lives by that Word” (n.3). She is the house” (cf. *Ibidem*, n.52) in which the divine Word is heard, meditated upon, announced and celebrated (cf. *Ibidem*, n. 121). What the Pontiff says about the Church can be said, by way of analogy, also of Shrines.

The proclamation of the Word has an essential role in the pastoral life of Shrines. The sacred pastors have the task of preparing such a proclamation, in prayer and in meditation, filtering the content of that proclamation through the help of spiritual theology at the school of the Magisterium and the saints. The principle source for the proclamation will be, of course, the Sacred Scriptures and the Liturgy (cf. Second Vatican Council Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963, n.35), to which is joined the greatly valued Catechism of the Catholic Church and its Compendium. The ministry of the Word, exercised in various forms in accord with the revealed Deposit, will be all the more effective and close to the soul the more it is born from the heart in prayer and expressed in a language which is at once beautiful and accessible that is capable of showing the perennial immediacy of the eternal Word.

Prayer is the human response to a fruitful proclamation of the Word of God: “For pilgrims seeking living water, shrines are special places for living the forms of Christian prayer “in Church.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 11 October 1992, n. 2691). The life of prayer develops in various ways, amongst which we find forms of popular piety that always “give due space to the proclamation and hearing of God’s word; “popular piety can find in the word of God an inexhaustible source of inspiration, insuperable models of prayer and fruitful points for reflection” (*Verbum Domini*, n. 65). The Directory for Popular Piety and Liturgy (Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, 9 April 2002) dedicates an entire chapter to Shrines and pilgrimages, where it augurs “a correct relationship between liturgical action and pious practices” (. 261). Popular piety is of great importance for the faith, culture and Christian identity of many peoples. It is the expression of the faith of the people, a “true treasure of the People of God” (*Ibidem*, n.9) in and for the Church. To appreciate this one has only to imagine the great poverty that would result for the history of the Christian spirituality of the West were it to lack the Rosary, the Via Crucis and processions. These are but three examples but sufficient to show the invaluable contribution of such practices.

In carrying out your ministry in the Shrine you often have the opportunity to observe the pious gestures, as particular as they are expressive, with which the pilgrims visibly express the faith that gives them life. The multiple and varied forms of devotion, frequently deriving from intense feeling and cultural traditions, bear witness to a fervent intensity of the spiritual life nourished by constant prayer and the intimate desire to belong ever more closely to Christ.

The Church, always conscious of the intimate meaning of such religious manifestations in the spiritual life of the faithful, has always recognized their value and has respected the genuine expression of them. Indeed, through the teachings of the Roman

Pontiffs and the Councils, She has recommended and favored them. At the same time, however, wherever She has noticed attitudes and ways of thinking that are not consistent with a sound religious sense, She has found the need to intervene, purifying such acts from unwanted elements and providing timely reflections, courses and lessons. In fact only if it is rooted in a Christian tradition for its origin can popular piety be a locus fidei, a fruitful instrument of evangelization and a place in which elements of the indigenous cultural environment can be welcomed and find their dignity in a consistent manner.

You have then the task, as those responsible for the pastoral care of Shrines, to instruct pilgrims of the absolutely preeminent character that the liturgical celebration must assume in the life of every believer. The personal practice of expressions of popular piety is in no way to be absolutely rejected or hindered, indeed it is to be encouraged, but it cannot replace participation in liturgical worship. Such expressions of faith instead of contrasting with the centrality of the sacred liturgy must be placed alongside it and be always oriented to it. The celebration of the liturgy of the Sacred Mysteries expresses the common faith of the whole Church.

## **2. The Mercy of God in the Sacrament of Penance**

Remembering the love of God, which is rendered present in preeminent fashion at Shrines, leads to the seeking of pardon for sins and a desire to implore the gift of fidelity to the deposit of faith. The Shrine is the place of the permanent actualization of the mercy of God. It is an hospitable place in which to have a real encounter with Christ, experiencing the truth of his teaching and his pardon so as to draw close in a dignified and fruitful way to the Eucharist.

To this end it is necessary to bring about and to intensify, where possible, the constant presence of priests who, with a humble and welcoming soul, give themselves generously to the hearing of sacramental confessions. In administering the sacrament of Pardon and Reconciliation, let confessors, who act as “the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner” (CCC, n.1465), help penitents to experience the tenderness of God, to perceive the beauty and greatness of His goodness and to rediscover in their own hearts the intimate desire for sanctity, the universal vocation and ultimate goal for every believer (cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy*, 9 March 2011, n.22).

Let confessors, by enlightening the conscience of penitents, make clear as well the strict bond that ties sacramental confession with a new way of existence, oriented towards a definitive conversion. Let them exhort the faithful, then, to approach this sacrament with frequency, regularity and fervent devotion, sustained by the grace it bestows, they may constantly nourish their faithful undertaking of belonging to Christ, progressing thus in evangelical perfection.

Let ministers of Penance be available and willing, cultivating within themselves an attitude that is understanding, welcoming and encouraging (cf. *The Priest Minister of Divine Mercy*, n. 51-57). In order to respect the freedom of every member of the faithful and also to allow for their complete and sincere honesty in the sacramental forum, it is suitable that there be confessionals with a fixed grille found in suitable places (such as, for example, a Chapel of Reconciliation). As Blessed Pope John Paul II says in his Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei* (7 April 2002): “confessionals are regulated by the norms issued by the respective Episcopal Conferences, who shall ensure that confessionals are located “in an open area” and have “a fixed grille”, so as to permit the faithful and confessors themselves who may wish to make use of them to do so freely” (n. 9b; cf. Can. 964, §2; Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, *Responsa ad propositum Dubium: de loco excipiendi sacramentales confessiones* [7 July 1998]: AAS 80 [1998] 711; *The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy*, n.41).

Let ministers also take care to bring about an understanding of the spiritual fruits that flow from the remission of sins. The sacrament of Penitence, in fact, "brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God" (CCC, n.1468). Considering the fact that Shrines are places of true conversion, it would be opportune to see attention given to the formation of confessors for the pastoral care of those who have not respected human life from conception to its natural end.

Priests, in dispensing divine mercy, should conscientiously carry out this special ministry by adhering with fidelity to the authentic teaching of the Church. Let them be well formed in doctrine and let them not neglect to bring themselves up to date every so often concerning those questions that pertain especially to the sphere of morals and bioethics (cf. CCC, n. 1466). In the matrimonial area too let them respect what the ecclesial Magisterium teaches authoritatively. Let them avoid setting out private doctrines in the sacramental seat - personal opinions and arbitrary estimations that do not conform to that which the Church believes and teaches. It will be useful for their ongoing formation to encourage them to take part in specialised courses, such as those that might be organised, for example, by the Apostolic Penitentiary and by some Pontifical Universities (cf. The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy, n. 63).

### **3. The Eucharist, Source and Summit of the Christian Life.**

The Word of God and the celebration of Penance and intimately united to the Holy Eucharist, the central mystery in which, "contains the entire spiritual boon of the Church, that is, Christ himself, our Pasch" (Second Vatican Council, Decree Presbyterorum Ordinis, 7 December 1965, n.5). The Eucharistic celebration constitutes the heart of the sacramental life of the Shrine. IN it the Lord gives himself to us. Pilgrims who come to the Shrines ought to be made aware that, if they trustingly welcome the Eucharistic Christ in their most intimate being, He offers them the possibility of a real transformation of their entire existence.

The dignity of the Eucharistic celebration ought also to be placed in evidence by the use of Gregorian chant, polyphony and popular sacred music (cf. Sacrosanctum Concilium, nn. 116 & 118). This is also achieved by selecting adequately both the most noble musical instruments (pipe organs and the like, cf. *ibidem*, n. 120), and the vestments that are worn by the sacred ministers as also by the sacred utensils and furnishings employed in the sacred Liturgy. They should be marked by reference to the rules of nobility and sacredness. In the case of concelebration, care should be taken to provide a Master of Ceremonies, who is not one of the concelebrants, and every effort should be made so that each celebrant might wear a chasuble as the proper vestment of a priest who celebrates the divine mysteries.

The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI wrote in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007) that "the best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well" (n.64). In Holy Mass, then, let the ministers faithfully respect all that has been established by the norms of the Liturgical Books. The rubrics are not, in fact, discretionary suggestions for the celebrant but rather obligatory prescriptions that he must observe accurately and with fidelity in each gesture and sign. There is a underlying theological meaning, in fact, to each norm that cannot be dismissed or misunderstood. A style of celebrating that introduces arbitrary liturgical innovations other than generating confusion and division amongst the faithful harms the venerable Tradition and the very authority of the Church, as it does also ecclesial unity.

The priest who presides at the Eucharist is not, however, the mere executor of ritual rubrics. Rather, the intense and devout interior participation with which he will celebrate the

divine mysteries, accompanied by an appropriate evaluation of the established liturgical signs and gestures, will transform not only his praying soul but will also show itself to be fruitful for the Eucharistic faith of the believers who take part in the celebration with their *actuosa participatio* (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n.14).

As a fruit of His gift in the Eucharist, Jesus Christ remains under the sign of bread. Celebrations in the form of Eucharistic Adoration outside of Holy Mass, by the exposition and benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament, manifest that which is at the heart of the celebration: Adoration, or union with Christ the Host. Pope Benedict XVI teaches in this regard that “in the Eucharist, the Son of God comes to meet us and desires to become one with us; Eucharistic adoration is simply the natural consequence of the eucharistic celebration, which is itself the Church’s supreme act of adoration (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n.66), further adding, “the act of adoration outside Mass prolongs and intensifies all that takes place during the liturgical celebration itself” (ivi).

Accordingly, let there be notable importance given to the place of the tabernacle in the sanctuary (or also in a chapel set aside exclusively for the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament) because in itself this is a beckoning, invitation and stimulus to prayer, adoration, meditation and intimacy with the Lord. The Supreme Pontiff in the aforementioned Apostolic Exhortation underlines that “the correct positioning of the tabernacle contributes to the recognition of Christ’s real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Therefore, the place where the Eucharistic species are reserved, marked by a sanctuary lamp, should be readily visible to everyone entering the church” (ibidem, n.69).

Let the tabernacle, the Eucharistic treasury, occupy a preeminent place in the sanctuary, and in the same fashion, calling to mind the relationship between art, faith and celebration, let there be attention given to “the unity of the furnishings of the sanctuary, such as the altar, the crucifix, the tabernacle, the ambo and the celebrant’s chair” (ibidem, n.41). The correct positioning of these eloquent signs of our faith, in the architecture of the places of worship, undoubtedly fosters, especially in Shrines, the correct priority that is to be given to Christ, the living stone, prior to any salutation directed to the Virgin or to the Saints who are quite properly venerated in those places, thus giving the opportunity to popular piety to show its truly Eucharistic and Christian roots.

#### **4. A new Dynamism for Evangelization.**

Finally, it gives me great pleasure to note how even today Shrines maintain an extraordinary attraction for the faithful, shown by the growing number of pilgrims that go to them. Frequently one finds men and women of every age and condition, with complex human and spiritual situations, sometimes removed from a sound life of faith or with a fragile sense of ecclesial belonging. To visit a Shrine can be for them a valuable opportunity to encounter Christ or to rediscover their sense of baptismal vocation and to hear its saving call.

I exhort each of you to direct your sights to these persons in a particularly welcoming and attentive manner. Even in this regard nothing should be taken for granted. With evangelical wisdom and with a generous sensitivity, it would serve as an example to make oneself the companion the journey with pilgrims and visitors, seeking to identify the reasons of the heart and the expectations of the spirit that have brought them there. In giving this service the collaboration of people with specific abilities, characterized by a welcoming humanity, spiritual insightfulness and theological intelligence, will help in introducing the pilgrims to the Shrine as an event of grace, a place of religious experience and of rediscovered joy. In this context it would be opportune to consider the possibility of facilitating spiritual appointments in the evening or at night as well (nocturnal adoration, prayer vigils etc.) wherever the flow of pilgrims shows itself to be considerable or

permanent.

Your pastoral charity will be able to build a provident opportunity and a strong stimulus so that in their heart the desire to set out upon a serious and intense journey of faith may take the first steps. Through the various forms of catechesis you can bring them to understand that the faith, far from being a vague and abstract religious sentiment, is concretely tangible and expresses itself always in love and justice between one another. Thus, in Shrines the teaching of the Word of God and of the doctrine of the Church through preaching, catechesis, spiritual direction and retreats constitutes an excellent opportunity to welcome God's pardon in the Sacrament of Penance and the active and fruitful participation in the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Altar.

Eucharistic Adoration, the pious practice of the Way of the Cross and the christological and marian prayer of the Holy Rosary will be, along with sacramentals, votive blessings, will be examples of human piety and walking with Jesus towards the merciful love of the Father in the Spirit. In this way too the pastoral work of the family will be reinvigorated and the prayer of the Church will be richly fruitful that "the Lord of the Harvest send labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9, 38): numerous and holy vocations to the priesthood and to special forms of consecration.

Moreover, let Shrines not forget, faithful to their glorious tradition, to be engaged in works of charity and assistance, human development, protecting the rights of the human person, the challenge of justice, all according to the social doctrine of the Church. It would also be good if there developed around them cultural initiatives, such as congresses, seminars, exhibitions, shows, and artistic events on religious themes. In this way Shrines will also become promoters of culture, both high and popular, contributing to the cultural project directed in the Church's Christian understanding.

In this way the Church, under the direction of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Star of the New Evangelization, through whom Grace itself communicates itself to humanity in need of redemption, prepares herself in every part of the world for the coming of the Savior. Shrines, those places where we go to seek, to hear, to pray will become mysteriously places in which we will really be touched by God through His Word, the sacraments of Reconciliation and of the Eucharist, the intercession of the Mother of God and of the saints. Only in this manner, moving through the swells and tempests of history, challenging the pervasive sense of relativism that currently reigns, will Shrines become places that facilitate a renewed dynamism directed towards the greatly desired new evangelization. In thanking each Rector once more for the dedication and pastoral charity with which they carry out their ministry, so that each Sanctuary may become an ever more loving sign of the presence of the Incarnate Word, may you be assured of the most cordial closeness of the Lord, under the gaze of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

*From the Vatican, 15 August 2011  
Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

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