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Pray for our Holy Father, our priests and vocations to the priesthood

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On July 1, the universal Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests. The faithful of the Church are asked to pray for her priests and their growth in holiness, as well as to pray for vocations to the priesthood.

This year on the solemnity, we are asked to remember in prayer Pope Benedict XVI as he celebrates his 60th Anniversary of Ordination on June 29. On July 1, too, I will have the privilege to celebrate the ordinations to the ministerial priesthood of Deacons Neil Pfeifer and Christopher Markman.

In 2002, Blessed John Paul II designated the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as an annual day of prayer for priests. He desired the entire Church to pray for the holiness of priests, and most especially that their hearts would be conformed to the heart of Christ. As we move toward this day of prayer, it is good for us to reflect on the Sacrament of Holy Orders as we prepare to pray for our priests and Pope Benedict XVI and celebrate the ordination of two new priests for the Diocese of Fargo.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) teaches us that "In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts in persona Christi Capitis (in the person of Christ the Head): It is the same priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself" (CCC 1548).

The Catechism further teaches that there are three degrees of the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

"The divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in different degrees by those who, even from ancient times, have been called bishops, priests and deacons. Catholic doctrine, expressed in the liturgy, the Magisterium, and the constant practice of the Church, recognizes that there are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them. For this reason, the term sacerdos (priest) in current usage denotes bishops and priests but not deacons. Yet Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of priestly participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called 'ordination,' that is, by the sacrament of Holy Orders" (CCC 1554).

For all three degrees, the sacrament is conferred by the laying on of hands and a prayer for a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the man to be ordained.

For bishops, "Episcopal consecration confers, together with the office of sanctifying, also the offices of teaching and ruling. . . . In fact . . . by the imposition of hands and through the words of the consecration, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given, and a sacred character is impressed in such wise that bishops, in an eminent and visible manner, take the place of Christ himself, teacher, shepherd and priest, and act as his representative" (CCC 1558).

The bishop receives the fullness of Holy Orders, is a Vicar of Christ, is entrusted with the pastoral care of a particular Church, becomes a successor of the apostles, and belongs to the college of bishops in union with the Bishop of Rome, the Holy Father (CCC 1557, 1559-60).

Priests share in the mission of their bishop in a subordinate degree; their ministry depends on the bishop and they are co-workers with the bishop (CCC 1562). ". . . [P]riests by the anointing of the Holy Spirit are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head" (CCC 1563).

Priests "are consecrated . . . to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful as well as to celebrate divine worship as true priests of the New Testament" (CCC 1564). Priests, too, "are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood, but in a special way they form one priestly body in the diocese to which they are attached under their own bishop" (CCC 1568).

Finally, deacons are ordained "not unto the priesthood, but unto ministry" (CCC 1569).

Deacons are configured to Christ the Servant, who entered the world not to be served but to serve (CCC 1570 and Matthew 20:28). Their ministry depends on the bishop and the bishop alone lays hands on those to be ordained deacons, signifying their special attachment to the bishop (CCC 1569).

In preparation for the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests, I encourage you to prayerfully read the entire section of the Catechism on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, Nos. 1536- 1600.

If you have never attended the ordination of a priest, I invite you to attend the ordination Mass at the Cathedral on July 1 at 4:30 p.m.

On that day, I ask that you pray for Pope Benedict XVI, that the Lord may bless, protect and strengthen him in his apostolic ministry to the universal Church as our Holy Father and the successor of Peter.

Between now and July 1, I encourage you to make a Holy Hour where you pray for our Holy Father and for the two men to be ordained priests that day for the Church of Eastern North Dakota. (Deacons Neil Pfeifer and Christopher Markman).

Pray for all bishops, priests and deacons throughout the world that we may have the heart and mind of Christ, be faithful to Christ and the Church in our ministry, and be courageous in proclaiming the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ no matter what the cost.

Continue to pray regularly for holy priests and for vocations to the priesthood. Heed the words of Jesus in the Gospel to pray to the harvest master to send out laborers for his harvest (Matthew 9: 37-38).

May you have a blessed summer!