

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
PROCLAIMING A YEAR FOR PRIESTS
ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE "DIES NATALIS"
OF THE CURÉ OF ARS

Dear Brother Priests,

On the forthcoming Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, Friday 19 June 2009 – a day traditionally devoted to prayer for the sanctification of the clergy –, I have decided to inaugurate a “Year for Priests” in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the “*dies natalis*” of John Mary Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests worldwide.[1] This Year, meant to deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world, will conclude on the same Solemnity in 2010. “*The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus*”, the saintly Curé of Ars would often say.[2] This touching expression makes us reflect, first of all, with heartfelt gratitude on the immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself. I think of all those priests who quietly present Christ’s words and actions each day to the faithful and to the whole world, striving to be one with the Lord in their thoughts and their will, their sentiments and their style of life. How can I not pay tribute to their apostolic labours, their tireless and hidden service, their universal charity? And how can I not praise the courageous fidelity of so many priests who, even amid difficulties and incomprehension, remain faithful to their vocation as “friends of Christ”, whom he has called by name, chosen and sent?

I still treasure the memory of the first parish priest at whose side I exercised my ministry as a young priest: he left me an example of unreserved devotion to his pastoral duties, even to meeting his own death in the act of bringing viaticum to a gravely ill person. I also recall the countless confreres whom I have met and continue to meet, not least in my pastoral visits to different countries: men generously dedicated to the daily exercise of their priestly ministry. Yet the expression of Saint John Mary also makes us think of Christ’s pierced Heart and the crown of thorns which surrounds it. I also think, therefore, of the countless situations of suffering endured by many priests, either because they themselves share in the manifold human experience of pain or because they encounter misunderstanding from the very persons to whom they minister. How can we not also think of all those priests who are offended in their dignity, obstructed in their mission and persecuted, even at times to offering the supreme testimony of their own blood?

There are also, sad to say, situations which can never be sufficiently deplored where the Church herself suffers as a consequence of infidelity on the part of some of her ministers. Then it is the world which finds grounds for scandal and rejection. What is most helpful to the Church in such cases is not only a frank and complete acknowledgment of the weaknesses of her ministers, but also a joyful and renewed realization of the greatness of God’s gift, embodied in the splendid example of generous pastors, religious afire with love for God and for souls, and insightful, patient spiritual guides. Here the teaching and example of Saint John Mary Vianney can serve as a significant point of reference for us all. The Curé of Ars was very humble, yet as a priest he was conscious of being an immense gift to his people: “A good shepherd, a pastor after God’s heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a

parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy”.[3] He spoke of the priesthood as if incapable of fathoming the grandeur of the *gift* and *task* entrusted to a human creature: “O, how great is the priest! ... If he realized what he is, he would die... God obeys him: he utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host...”.[4] Explaining to his parishioners the importance of the sacraments, he would say: “Without the Sacrament of Holy Orders, we would not have the Lord. Who put him there in that tabernacle? The priest. Who welcomed your soul at the beginning of your life? The priest. Who feeds your soul and gives it strength for its journey? The priest. Who will prepare it to appear before God, bathing it one last time in the blood of Jesus Christ? The priest, always the priest. And if this soul should happen to die [as a result of sin], who will raise it up, who will restore its calm and peace? Again, the priest... After God, the priest is everything! ... Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is”.[5] These words, welling up from the priestly heart of the holy pastor, might sound excessive. Yet they reveal the high esteem in which he held the sacrament of the priesthood. He seemed overwhelmed by a boundless sense of responsibility: “Were we to fully realize what a priest is on earth, we would die: not of fright, but of love... 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... What use would be a house filled with gold, were there no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door: he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of his goods ... Leave a parish for twenty years without a priest, and they will end by worshiping the beasts there ... The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you”.[6]

He arrived in Ars, a village of 230 souls, warned by his Bishop beforehand that there he would find religious practice in a sorry state: “There is little love of God in that parish; you will be the one to put it there”. As a result, he was deeply aware that he needed to go there to embody Christ’s presence and to bear witness to his saving mercy: “[Lord,] grant me the conversion of my parish; I am willing to suffer whatever you wish, for my entire life!”: with this prayer he entered upon his mission.[7] The Curé devoted himself completely to his parish’s conversion, setting before all else the Christian education of the people in his care. Dear brother priests, let us ask the Lord Jesus for the grace to learn for ourselves something of the pastoral plan of Saint John Mary Vianney! The first thing we need to learn is the complete identification of the man with his ministry. In Jesus, person and mission tend to coincide: all Christ’s saving activity was, and is, an expression of his “filial consciousness” which from all eternity stands before the Father in an attitude of loving submission to his will. In a humble yet genuine way, every priest must aim for a similar identification. Certainly this is not to forget that the efficacy of the ministry is independent of the holiness of the minister; but neither can we overlook the extraordinary fruitfulness of the encounter between the ministry’s objective holiness and the subjective holiness of the minister. The Curé of Ars immediately set about this patient and humble task of harmonizing his life as a minister with the holiness of the ministry he had received, by deciding to “*live*”, physically, in his parish church: As his first biographer tells us: “Upon his arrival, he chose the church as his home. He entered the church before dawn and did not leave it until after the evening Angelus. There he was to be sought whenever needed”.[8]

The pious excess of his devout biographer should not blind us to the fact that the Curé also knew how to “live” actively within the entire territory of his parish: he regularly visited the sick and families, organized popular missions and patronal feasts, collected and managed funds for charitable and missionary works, embellished and furnished his parish church, cared for the orphans and teachers of the “*Providence*” (an institute he founded); provided for the education of children; founded confraternities and enlisted lay persons to work at his side.

His example naturally leads me to point out that there are sectors of cooperation which need to be

opened ever more fully to the lay faithful. Priests and laity together make up the one priestly people^[9] and in virtue of their ministry priests live in the midst of the lay faithful, “that they may lead everyone to the unity of charity, ‘loving one another with mutual affection; and outdoing one another in sharing honour’” (Rom 12:10).^[10] Here we ought to recall the Second Vatican Council’s hearty encouragement to priests “to be sincere in their appreciation and promotion of the dignity of the laity and of the special role they have to play in the Church’s mission. ... They should be willing to listen to lay people, give brotherly consideration to their wishes, and acknowledge their experience and competence in the different fields of human activity. In this way they will be able together with them to discern the signs of the times”.^[11]

Saint John Mary Vianney taught his parishioners primarily by the witness of his life. It was from his example that they learned to pray, halting frequently before the tabernacle for a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.^[12] “One need not say much to pray well” – the Curé explained to them – “We know that Jesus is there in the tabernacle: let us open our hearts to him, let us rejoice in his sacred presence. That is the best prayer”.^[13] And he would urge them: “Come to communion, my brothers and sisters, come to Jesus. Come to live from him in order to live with him...^[14] “Of course you are not worthy of him, but *you need him!*”^[15] This way of educating the faithful *to the Eucharistic presence and to communion* proved most effective when they saw him celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Those present said that “it was not possible to find a finer example of worship... He gazed upon the Host with immense love”.^[16] “All good works, taken together, do not equal the sacrifice of the Mass” – he would say – “since they are human works, while the Holy Mass is the work of God”.^[17] He was convinced that the fervour of a priest’s life depended entirely upon the Mass: “The reason why a priest is lax is that he does not pay attention to the Mass! My God, how we ought to pity a priest who celebrates as if he were engaged in something routine!”^[18] He was accustomed, when celebrating, also to offer his own life in sacrifice: “What a good thing it is for a priest each morning to offer himself to God in sacrifice!”^[19]

This deep personal identification with the Sacrifice of the Cross led him – by a sole inward movement – from the altar to the confessional. Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this sacrament. In France, at the time of the Curé of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion. Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence. He thus created a “*virtuous*” circle. By spending long hours in church before the tabernacle, he inspired the faithful to imitate him by coming to visit Jesus with the knowledge that their parish priest would be there, ready to listen and offer forgiveness. Later, the growing numbers of penitents from all over France would keep him in the confessional for up to sixteen hours a day. It was said that Ars had become “a great hospital of souls”.^[20] His first biographer relates that “the grace he obtained [for the conversion of sinners] was so powerful that it would pursue them, not leaving them a moment of peace!”^[21] The saintly Curé reflected something of the same idea when he said: “It is not the sinner who returns to God to beg his forgiveness, but God himself who runs after the sinner and makes him return to him”.^[22] “This good Saviour is so filled with love that he seeks us everywhere”.^[23]

We priests should feel that the following words, which he put on the lips of Christ, are meant for each of us personally: “I will charge my ministers to proclaim to sinners that I am ever ready to welcome them, that my mercy is infinite”.^[24] From Saint John Mary Vianney we can learn to put our unfailing trust in the sacrament of Penance, to set it once more at the centre of our pastoral concerns, and to take up the “dialogue of salvation” which it entails. The Curé of Ars dealt with different penitents in

different ways. Those who came to his confessional drawn by a deep and humble longing for God's forgiveness found in him the encouragement to plunge into the "flood of divine mercy" which sweeps everything away by its vehemence. If someone was troubled by the thought of his own frailty and inconstancy, and fearful of sinning again, the Curé would unveil the mystery of God's love in these beautiful and touching words: "The good Lord knows everything. Even before you confess, he already knows that you will sin again, yet he still forgives you. How great is the love of our God: he *even forces himself to forget the future*, so that he can grant us his forgiveness!"[25] But to those who made a lukewarm and rather indifferent confession of sin, he clearly demonstrated by his own tears of pain how "abominable" this attitude was: "I weep because you don't weep"[26] he would say. "If only the Lord were not so good! *But he is so good!* One would have to be a brute to treat so good a Father this way!"[27] He awakened repentance in the hearts of the lukewarm by forcing them to see God's own pain at their sins reflected in the face of the priest who was their confessor. To those who, on the other hand, came to him already desirous of and suited to a deeper spiritual life, he flung open the abyss of God's love, explaining the untold beauty of living in union with him and dwelling in his presence: "Everything in God's sight, everything with God, everything to please God... How beautiful it is!"[28] And he taught them to pray: "My God, grant me the grace to love you as much as I possibly can"[29]

In his time the Curé of Ars was able to transform the hearts and the lives of so many people because he enabled them to experience the Lord's merciful love. Our own time urgently needs a similar proclamation and witness to the truth of Love: *Deus caritas est* (1 Jn: 4:8). Thanks to the word and the sacraments of Jesus, John Mary Vianney built up his flock, although he often trembled from a conviction of his personal inadequacy, and desired more than once to withdraw from the responsibilities of the parish ministry out of a sense of his unworthiness. Nonetheless, with exemplary obedience he never abandoned his post, consumed as he was by apostolic zeal for the salvation of souls. He sought to remain completely faithful to his own vocation and mission through the practice of an austere asceticism: "The great misfortune for us parish priests – he lamented – is that our souls grow tepid"; meaning by this that a pastor can grow dangerously inured to the state of sin or of indifference in which so many of his flock are living.[30] He himself kept a tight rein on his body, with vigils and fasts, lest it rebel against his priestly soul. Nor did he avoid self-mortification for the good of the souls in his care and as a help to expiating the many sins he heard in confession. To a priestly confrere he explained: "I will tell you my recipe: I give sinners a small penance and the rest I do in their place"[31] Aside from the actual penances which the Curé of Ars practised, the core of his teaching remains valid for each of us: souls have been won at the price of Jesus' own blood, and a priest cannot devote himself to their salvation if he refuses to share personally in the "precious cost" of redemption.

In today's world, as in the troubled times of the Curé of Ars, the lives and activity of priests need to be distinguished by a *determined witness to the Gospel*. As Pope Paul VI rightly noted, "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"[32] Lest we experience existential emptiness and the effectiveness of our ministry be compromised, we need to ask ourselves ever anew: "Are we truly pervaded by the word of God? Is that word truly the nourishment we live by, even more than bread and the things of this world? Do we really know that word? Do we love it? Are we deeply engaged with this word to the point that it really leaves a mark on our lives and shapes our thinking?"[33] Just as Jesus called the Twelve to be with him (cf. Mk 3:14), and only later sent them forth to preach, so too in our days priests are called to assimilate that "new style of life" which was inaugurated by the Lord Jesus and taken up by the Apostles.[34]

It was complete commitment to this "new style of life" which marked the priestly ministry of the Curé of Ars. Pope John XXIII, in his Encyclical Letter *Sacerdotii nostri primordia*, published in 1959 on the first centenary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney, presented his asceticism with special reference

to the “three evangelical counsels” which the Pope considered necessary also for diocesan priests: “even though priests are not bound to embrace these evangelical counsels by virtue of the clerical state, these counsels nonetheless offer them, as they do all the faithful, the surest road to the desired goal of Christian perfection”.^[35] The Curé of Ars lived the “evangelical counsels” in a way suited to his priestly state. His *poverty* was not the poverty of a religious or a monk, but that proper to a priest: while managing much money (since well-to-do pilgrims naturally took an interest in his charitable works), he realized that everything had been donated to his church, his poor, his orphans, the girls of his “*Providence*”,^[36] his families of modest means. Consequently, he “was rich in giving to others and very poor for himself”.^[37] As he would explain: “My secret is simple: give everything away; hold nothing back”.^[38] When he lacked money, he would say amiably to the poor who knocked at his door: “Today I’m poor just like you, I’m one of you”.^[39] At the end of his life, he could say with absolute tranquillity: “I no longer have anything. The good Lord can call me whenever he wants!”^[40] His *chastity*, too, was that demanded of a priest for his ministry. It could be said that it was a chastity suited to one who must daily touch the Eucharist, who contemplates it blissfully and with that same bliss offers it to his flock. It was said of him that “he radiated chastity”; the faithful would see this when he turned and gazed at the tabernacle with loving eyes”.^[41] Finally, Saint John Mary Vianney’s *obedience* found full embodiment in his conscientious fidelity to the daily demands of his ministry. We know how he was tormented by the thought of his inadequacy for parish ministry and by a desire to flee “in order to bewail his poor life, in solitude”.^[42] Only obedience and a thirst for souls convinced him to remain at his post. As he explained to himself and his flock: “There are no two good ways of serving God. There is only one: serve him as he desires to be served”.^[43] He considered this the golden rule for a life of obedience: “Do only what can be offered to the good Lord”.^[44]

In this context of a spirituality nourished by the practice of the evangelical counsels, I would like to invite all priests, during this Year dedicated to them, to welcome the new springtime which the Spirit is now bringing about in the Church, not least through the ecclesial movements and the new communities. “In his gifts the Spirit is multifaceted... He breathes where he wills. He does so unexpectedly, in unexpected places, and in ways previously unheard of... but he also shows us that he works with a view to the one body and in the unity of the one body”.^[45] In this regard, the statement of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* continues to be timely: “While testing the spirits to discover if they be of God, priests must discover with faith, recognize with joy and foster diligently the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, whether these be of a humble or more exalted kind”.^[46] These gifts, which awaken in many people the desire for a deeper spiritual life, can benefit not only the lay faithful but the clergy as well. The communion between ordained and charismatic ministries can provide “a helpful impulse to a renewed commitment by the Church in proclaiming and bearing witness to the Gospel of hope and charity in every corner of the world”.^[47] I would also like to add, echoing the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of Pope John Paul II, that the ordained ministry has a radical “*communitarian form*” and can be exercised only in the communion of priests with their Bishop.^[48] This communion between priests and their Bishop, grounded in the sacrament of Holy Orders and made manifest in Eucharistic concelebration, needs to be translated into various concrete expressions of an effective and affective priestly fraternity.^[49] Only thus will priests be able to live fully the gift of celibacy and build thriving Christian communities in which the miracles which accompanied the first preaching of the Gospel can be repeated.

The Pauline Year now coming to its close invites us also to look to the Apostle of the Gentiles, who represents a splendid example of a priest entirely devoted to his ministry. “The love of Christ urges us on” – he wrote – “because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14). And he adds: “He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for

him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor 5:15). Could a finer programme be proposed to any priest resolved to advance along the path of Christian perfection?

Dear brother priests, the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney (1859) follows upon the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Lourdes (1858). In 1959 Blessed Pope John XXIII noted that “shortly before the Curé of Ars completed his long and admirable life, the Immaculate Virgin appeared in another part of France to an innocent and humble girl, and entrusted to her a message of prayer and penance which continues, even a century later, to yield immense spiritual fruits. The life of this holy priest whose centenary we are commemorating in a real way anticipated the great supernatural truths taught to the seer of Massabielle. He was greatly devoted to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin; in 1836 he had dedicated his parish church to Our Lady Conceived without Sin and he greeted the dogmatic definition of this truth in 1854 with deep faith and great joy.”^[50] The Curé would always remind his faithful that “after giving us all he could, Jesus Christ wishes in addition to bequeath us his most precious possession, his Blessed Mother”.^[51]

To the Most Holy Virgin I entrust this Year for Priests. 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 Curé of Ars. It was his fervent prayer life and his impassioned love of Christ Crucified that enabled John Mary Vianney to grow daily in his total self-oblation to God and the Church. May his example lead all priests to offer that witness of unity with their Bishop, with one another and with the lay faithful, which today, as ever, is so necessary. Despite all the evil present in our world, the words which Christ spoke to his Apostles in the Upper Room continue to inspire us: “In the world you have tribulation; but take courage, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). Our faith in the Divine Master gives us the strength to look to the future with confidence. Dear priests, Christ is counting on you. In the footsteps of the Curé of Ars, let yourselves be enthralled by him. In this way you too will be, for the world in our time, heralds of hope, reconciliation and peace!

With my blessing.

From the Vatican, 16 June 2009.

BENEDICTVS PP. XVI

[1] He was proclaimed as such by Pope Pius XI in 1929.

[2] “*Le Sacerdoce, c’est l’amour du cœur de Jésus*” (in *Le curé d’Ars. Sa pensée – Son cœur*. Présentés par l’Abbé Bernard Nodet, éd. Xavier Mappus, Foi Vivante, 1966, p. 98). Hereafter: *NODET*. The expression is also quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1589).

[3] *NODET*, p. 101.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 183.

[8] *MONNIN, A., Il Curato d’Ars. Vita di Gian.Battista-Maria Vianney*, vol. I, ed. Marietti, Turin,

1870, p. 122.

[9] Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

[10] *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9.

[11] Ibid.

[12] “Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me’: this is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to his holy Curé about his prayer before the tabernacle” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2715).

[13] NODET, p. 85.

[14] Ibid., p. 114.

[15] Ibid., p. 119.

[16] MONNIN, A., op. cit., II, pp. 430ff.

[17] NODET, p. 105.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 104.

[20] MONNIN, A., op. cit., II, p. 293.

[21] Ibid., II, p. 10.

[22] NODET, p. 128.

[23] Ibid., p. 50.

[24] Ibid., p. 131.

[25] Ibid., p. 130.

[26] Ibid., p. 27.

[27] Ibid., p. 139.

[28] Ibid., p. 28.

[29] Ibid., p. 77.

[30] Ibid., p. 102.

[31] Ibid., p. 189.

[32] *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41.

[33] BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Chrism Mass*, 9 April 2009.

[34] Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy*, 16 March 2009.

[35] P. I.

[36] The name given to the house where more than sixty abandoned girls were taken in and educated. To maintain this house he would do anything: “*J’ai fait tous les commerces imaginables*”, he would say with a smile (NODET, p. 214).

[37] NODET, p. 216.

[38] Ibid., p. 215.

[39] Ibid., p. 216.

[40] Ibid., p. 214.

[41] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 112.

[42] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 82-84; 102-103.

[43] Ibid., p. 75.

[44] Ibid., p. 76.

[45] BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for the Vigil of Pentecost*, 3 June 2006.

[46] No. 9.

[47] BENEDICT XVI, *Address to Bishop-Friends of the Focolare Movement and the Sant'Egidio Community*, 8 February 2007

[48] Cf. No. 17.

[49] Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 74.

[50] Encyclical Letter *Sacerdotii nostri primordia*, P. III.

[51] NODET, p. 244.

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Encyclical of His Holiness Pope John XXIII

SACERDOTII NOSTRI PRIMORDIA

Promulgated 1 August 1959

(100th Anniversary of the Death of St. John M. Vianney, Curé of Ars)

To Our Venerable Brethren, the Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction.

When We think of the first days of Our priesthood, which were so full of joyous consolations, We are reminded of one event that moved Us to the very depths of Our soul: the sacred ceremonies that were carried out so majestically in the Basilica of St. Peter's on January 8, 1905, when John Mary Baptist Vianney, a very humble French priest, was enrolled in the lists of the Blessed in Heaven. Our own ordination to the priesthood had taken place a few short months before, and it filled Us with wonder to see the delight of Our predecessor of happy memory, St. Pius X (who had once been the parish priest of the tiny town of Salzano), as he offered this wonderful model of priestly virtues to all those entrusted with the care of souls, for their imitation. Now as We look back over the span of so many years, We never stop giving thanks to Our Redeemer for this wonderful blessing, which marked the beginning of Our priestly ministry and served as an effective heavenly incentive to virtue.

2. It is all the easier to remember, because on the very same day on which the honors of the Blessed were attributed to this holy man, word reached Us of the elevation of that wonderful prelate, Giacomo M. Radini-Tedeschi, to the dignity of Bishop; a few days later, he was to call Us to assist him in his work, and We found him a most loving teacher and guide. It was in his company that, early in 1905,

We made Our first pious pilgrimage to the tiny village called Ars, that had become so famous because of the holiness of its Cure.

3. Again, We cannot help thinking that it was through a special design of God's providence that the year in which We became a Bishop--1925--was the very one in which, toward the end of May, the Supreme Pontiff of happy memory, Pius XI, accorded the honors of sainthood to the humble Cure of Ars. In his talk on that occasion, the Supreme Pontiff chose to remind everyone of "the gaunt figure of John Baptist Vianney, with that head shining with long hair that resembled a snowy crown, and that thin face, wasted from long fasting, where the innocence and holiness of the meekest and humblest of souls shone forth so clearly that the first sight of it called crowds of people back to thoughts of salvation." [1] A short while after, this same predecessor of Ours took the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his own ordination to the priesthood to designate St. John Mary Vianney (to whose patronage St. Pius X had previously committed all of the shepherds of souls in France) as the heavenly patron of all "pastors, to promote their spiritual welfare throughout the world." [2]

4. We have thought it opportune to use an Encyclical Letter to recall these acts of Our Predecessors that are so closely bound up with such happy memories, Venerable Brethren, now that We are approaching the 100th anniversary of the day--August 4, 1859--on which this holy man, completely broken from forty years of the most tireless and exhausting labors, and already famous in every corner of the world for his holiness, passed on most piously to his heavenly reward.

5. And so We give thanks to God in His goodness, not only for seeing to it that this Saint would twice cast the brilliant light of his holiness over Our priestly life at moments of great importance, but also for offering Us an opportunity here at the beginning of Our Pontificate to pay solemn tribute to this wonderful shepherd of souls on this happy 100th anniversary. It will be easy for you to see, Venerable Brethren, that We are directing this letter principally to Our very dearest sons, those in sacred orders, and urging each and every one of them--especially those engaged in pastoral ministry--to devote all their attention to a consideration of the wonderful example of this holy man, who once shared in this priestly-work and who now serves as their heavenly patron.

6. The Supreme Pontiffs have issued many documents reminding those in sacred orders of the greatness of their priestly office, and pointing out the safest and surest way for them to carry out their duties properly. To recall only the more recent and more important of these, We would like to make special mention of the Apostolic Exhortation of St. Pius X of happy memory entitled "Haerent Animo," [3] issued early in Our priesthood, which urged Us on to greater efforts to achieve a more ardent devotion, and the wonderful encyclical of our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XI, that began with the words "Ad catholici sacerdotii," [4] and finally the Apostolic Exhortation "Menti Nostrae" [5] of Our immediate predecessor, along with his three allocutions on the occasion of the canonization of St. Pius X that give so clear and complete a picture of sacred orders. [6] Undoubtedly you are familiar with all of these documents, Venerable Brethren. But permit Us also to mention a few words from a sermon published after the death of Our immediate predecessor; they stand as the final solemn exhortation of that great Pontiff to priestly holiness: "Through the character of Sacred Orders, God willed to ratify that eternal covenant of love, by which He loves His priests above all others; and they are obliged to repay God for this special love with holiness of life. . . So a cleric should be considered as a man chosen and set apart from the midst of the people, and blessed in a very special way with heavenly gifts--a sharer in divine power, and, to put it briefly, another Christ. . . He is no longer supposed to live for himself; nor can he devote himself to the interests of just his own relatives, or friends or native land. . . He must be aflame with charity toward everyone. Not even his thoughts, his will, his feelings belong to him, for

they are rather those of Jesus Christ who is his life."[7]

7. St. John Mary Vianney is a person who attracts and practically pushes all of us to these heights of the priestly life And so We are pleased to add Our own exhortations to the others, in the hope that the priests of Our day may exert every possible effort in this direction. We are well aware of their devoted care and interest, and well acquainted with the difficulties they face each day in their apostolic activity. And even though We regret the fact that the surging currents of this world overwhelm the spirit and courage of some and make them grow tired and inactive, We also know from experience how many more stand firm in their faith despite many hardships, and how many constantly strive to stir up an ardent zeal for the very highest ideals in their own souls. And yet, when they became priests, Christ the Lord spoke these words so full of consolation to all of them: "I no longer call you servants but friends." [8] May this encyclical of Ours help the whole clergy to foster this divine friendship and grow in it, for it is the main source of the joy and the fruitfulness of any priestly work.

8. We have no intention, Venerable Brethren, of taking up each and every matter that has any reference to the life of a priest in the present day; as a matter of fact, following closely in the footsteps of St. Pius X, "We will not say anything that you have not already heard before, nor anything that will be completely new to anyone, but rather We will concentrate on recalling things that everyone ought to remember." [9] For a mere sketch of the qualities of this Heavenly soul, if done properly, is enough to lead us readily to a serious consideration of certain things that are, it is true, necessary in every age, but which now seem to be so important that Our Apostolic office and duty force Us to put special emphasis on them on the occasion of this centenary.

9. The Catholic Church, which elevated this man in sacred orders, who was "wonderful in his pastoral zeal, in his devotion to prayer and in the ardor of his penance" [10] to the honors of the saints of heaven, now, one hundred years after his death, offers him with maternal joy to all the clergy as an outstanding model of priestly asceticism, of piety, especially in the form of devotion to the Eucharist, and, finally, of pastoral zeal.

10. You cannot begin to speak of St. John Mary Vianney without automatically calling to mind the picture of a priest who was outstanding in a unique way in voluntary affliction of his body; his only motives were the love of God and the desire for the salvation of the souls of his neighbors, and this led him to abstain almost completely from food and from sleep, to carry out the harshest kinds of penances, and to deny himself with great strength of soul. Of course, not all of the faithful are expected to adopt this kind of life; and yet divine providence has seen to it that there has never been a time when the Church did not have some pastors of souls of this kind who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, did not hesitate for a moment to enter on this path, most of all because this way of life is particularly successful in bringing many men who have been drawn away by the allurements of error and vice back to the path of good living.

11. The wonderful devotion in this regard of St. John Vianney--a man who was "hard on himself, and gentle with others" [11] was so outstanding that it should serve as a clear and timely reminder of the important role that priests should attribute to the virtue of penance in striving for perfection in their own lives. Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, in order to give a clear picture of this doctrine and to clear up the doubts and errors that bothered some people, denied that "the clerical state--as such, and on the basis of divine law--requires, of its very nature or at least as a result of some demand arising from its nature, that those enrolled in it observe the evangelical counsels," [12] and justly concluded with these words: "Hence a cleric is not bound by virtue of divine law to the evangelical counsels of

poverty, chastity, obedience."[13]

12. And yet it would undoubtedly be both a distortion of the real mind of this same Supreme Pontiff (who was so interested in the sanctity of the clergy) and a contradiction of the perpetual teaching of the Church in this matter, if anyone should dare to infer from this that clerics were any less bound by their office than religious to strive for evangelical perfection of life. The truth is just the opposite; for the proper exercise of the priestly functions "requires a greater interior holiness than is demanded by the religious state."[14] And even if churchmen are not commanded to embrace these evangelical counsels by virtue of their clerical state, it still remains true that in their efforts to achieve holiness, these counsels offer them and all of the faithful the surest road to the desired goal of Christian perfection. What a great consolation it is to Us to realize that at the present time many generous-hearted priests are showing that they realize this; even though they belong to the diocesan clergy, they have sought the help and aid of certain pious societies approved by Church authorities in order to find a quicker and easier way to move along the road to perfection.

13. Fully convinced as they are that the "highest dignity of the priesthood consists in the imitation of Christ,"[15] churchmen must pay special attention to this warning of their Divine Master: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me."[16] It is recorded that "the holy parish priest of Ars often thought these words of the Lord over carefully, and determined to apply them to his own actions."[17] He made the resolution readily, and with the help of God's grace and by constant effort, he kept it to a wonderful extent; his example in the various works of priestly asceticism still points out the safest path to follow, and in the midst of this example, his poverty, chastity and obedience stand forth in a brilliant light.

14. First of all, you have clear testimony of his poverty. The humble Cure of Ars was careful to imitate the Patriarch of Assisi in this regard, for he had accepted his rule in the Third Order of St. Francis and he carefully observed it.[18] He was rich in his generosity toward others but the poorest of men in dealing with himself; he passed a life that was almost completely detached from the changeable, perishable goods of this world, and his spirit was free and unencumbered by impediments of this kind, so that it could always lie open to those who suffered from any kind of misery; and they flocked from everywhere to seek his consolation. "My secret"--he said--"is easy to learn. It can be summed up in these few words: give everything away and keep nothing for yourself."[19]

15. This detachment from external goods enabled him to offer the most devoted and touching care to the poor, especially those in his own parish. He was very kind and gentle toward them and embraced them "with a sincere love, with the greatest of kindness, indeed with reverence."[20] He warned that the needy were never to be spurned since a disregard for them would reach in turn to God. When beggars knocked at his door, he received them with love and was very happy to be able to say to them: "I am living in need myself; I am one of you."[21] And toward the end of his life, he used to enjoy saying things like this: "I will be happy when I go; for now I no longer have any possessions; and so when God in his goodness sees fit to call me, I will be ready and willing to go."[22]

16. All of this will give you a clear idea of what We have in mind, Venerable Brethren, when We exhort all of Our beloved sons who share in the priesthood to give careful thought to this example of poverty and charity. "Daily experience shows"--wrote Pius XI, with St. John Mary Vianney specifically in mind--"that priests who live modestly and follow the teaching of the Gospel by paying little attention to their own interests, always confer wonderful benefits on the Christian people."[23] And the same Supreme Pontiff issued this serious warning to priests as well as to others in the course of a discussion

of the current problems of society: "When they look around and see men ready to sell anything for money and to strike a bargain for anything at all, let them pass right through the midst of these attractions of vice without a thought or care for their own desires; and let them in their holiness spurn this base pursuit of wealth, and look for the riches of souls rather than for money, and let them long for and seek God's glory rather than their own." [24]

17. It is very important for these words to sink deep into the mind of every priest. If someone owns things that are rightfully his, let him be careful not to hang on to them greedily. Instead he should remember that the prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law dealing with church benefices make it clear that he has a serious obligation "to use superfluous income for the poor or for pious causes." [25] May God grant that no one of Us ever lets that terrible sentence that the parish priest of Ars once used in rebuking his flock fall on him: "There are many people keeping their money hidden away while many others are dying of hunger." [26]

18. We know very well that at the present time there are many priests living in great need themselves. When they stop to realize that heavenly honors have been paid to one of their own who voluntarily gave up all he had and asked for nothing more than to be the poorest of all in his parish, [27] they have a wonderful source of inspiration for devoting themselves carefully and constantly to fostering evangelical poverty. And if Our paternal interest can offer any consolation, We want them to know that We are very happy that they are serving Christ and the Church so generously with no thought of their own interests.

19. However, even though We praise and extol this wonderful virtue of poverty so much, no one should conclude that We have any intention of giving Our approval to the unbecoming indigence and misery in which the ministers of the Lord are sometimes forced to live, both in cities and in remote rural areas. In this regard, when St. Bede the Venerable explained and commented on the words of the Lord on detachment from earthly things, he excluded possible incorrect interpretations of this passage with these words: "You must not think that this command was given with the intention of having the saints keep no money at all for their own use or for that of the poor (for we read that the Lord himself . . . had money-boxes in forming his Church . . .) but rather the idea was that this should not be the motive for serving God nor should justice be abandoned out of fear of suffering want." [28] Besides, the laborer is worthy of his hire, [29] and We share the feelings of Our immediate predecessor in urging the faithful to respond quickly and generously to the appeals of their pastors; We also join him in praising these shepherds for their efforts to see to it that those who help them in the sacred ministry do not lack the necessities of life. [30]

20. John M. Vianney was an outstanding model of voluntary mortification of the body as well as of detachment from external things. "There is only one way"--he used to say--"for anyone to devote himself to God as he should through self-denial and the practice of penance: that is by devoting himself to it completely." [31] Throughout his whole life, the holy Cure of Ars carried this principle into practice energetically in the matter of chastity.

21. This wonderful, example of chastity seems to have special application to the priests of our time who--as is unfortunately the case in many regions--are often forced by the office they have assumed to live in the midst of a human society that is infected by a general looseness in morals and a spirit of unbridled lust. How often this phrase of St. Thomas Aquinas is proved true: "It is harder to lead a good life in the work of caring for souls, because of the external dangers involved." [32] To this We might add the fact that they often feel themselves cut off from the society of others and that even the faithful

to whose salvation they are dedicated do not understand them and offer them little help or support in their undertakings.

22. We want to use this letter, Venerable Brethren, to exhort, again and again, all of them, and especially those who are working alone and in the midst of very serious dangers of this kind, to let their whole life, so to say, resound with the splendor of holy chastity; St. Pius X had good reason to call this virtue the "choicest adornment of our order." [33]

23. Venerable Brethren, do all you can and spare no effort to see to it that the clergy entrusted to your care may enjoy living and working conditions that will best foster and be of service to their ardent zeal. This means that every effort should be exerted to eliminate the dangers that arise from too great an isolation, to issue timely warnings against unwise or imprudent actions, and last of all to check the dangers of idleness or of too much external activity. In this regard, you should recall the wise directives issued by Our immediate Predecessor in the Encyclical *Sacra virginitas*. [34]

24. It is said that the face of the Pastor of Ars shone with an angelic purity. [35] And even now anyone who turns toward him in mind and spirit cannot help being struck, not merely by the great strength of soul with which this athlete of Christ reduced his body to slavery, [36] but also by the great persuasive powers he exercised over the pious crowds of pilgrims who came to him and were drawn by his heavenly meekness to follow in his footsteps. From his daily experiences in the Sacrament of Penance he got an unmistakable picture of the terrible havoc that is wrought by impure desire. This was what brought cries like these bursting from his breast: "If there were not very innocent souls to please God and make up for our offenses, how many terrible punishments we would have to suffer!" His own observations in this regard led him to offer this encouragement and advice to his hearers: "The works of penance abound in such delights and joys that once they have been tasted, nothing will ever again root them out of the soul.... Only the first steps are difficult for those who eagerly choose this path." [37]

25. The ascetic way of life, by which priestly chastity is preserved, does not enclose the priest's soul within the sterile confines of his own interests, but rather it makes him more eager and ready to relieve the needs of his brethren. St. John Mary Vianney has this pertinent comment to make in this regard: "A soul adorned with the virtue of chastity cannot help loving others; for it has discovered the source and font of love--God."

26. What great benefits are conferred on human society by men like this who are free of the cares of the world and totally dedicated to the divine ministry so that they can employ their lives, thoughts, powers in the interest of their brethren! How valuable to the Church are priests who are anxious to preserve perfect chastity! For We agree with Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XI, in regarding this as the outstanding adornment of the Catholic priesthood and as something "that seems to Us to correspond better to the counsels and wishes of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, so far as the souls of priests are concerned." [38] Was not the mind of John Mary Vianney soaring to reach the counsels of this same divine charity when he wrote this lofty sentence: "Is the priesthood love of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus?" [39]

27. There are many pieces of evidence of how this man was also outstanding in the virtue of obedience. It would be true to say that the fidelity toward his superiors in the Church which he pledged at the time he became a priest and which he preserved unshaken throughout his life drove him to an uninterrupted immolation of his will for forty years.

28. All his life he longed to lead a quiet and retired life in the background, and he regarded pastoral duties as a very heavy burden laid on his shoulders and more than once he tried to free himself of it. His

obedience to his bishop was admirable; We would like to mention a few instances of it in this encyclical, Venerable Brethren: "From the age of fifteen on, he ardently desired a solitary life, and as long as this wish was not fulfilled, he felt cut off from every advantage and every consolation that his state of life might have offered":[40] but "God never allowed this aim to be achieved. Undoubtedly, this was God's way of bending St. John Mary Vianney's will to obedience and of teaching him to put the duties of his office before his own desires; and so there was never a time when his devotion to self-denial did not shine forth";[41] "out of complete obedience to his superiors, John M. Vianney carried out his tasks as pastor of Ars, and remained in that office till the end of his mortal life.[42]

29. It should be noted, however, that this full obedience of his to the commands of his superiors rested on supernatural principles; in acknowledging and duly obeying ecclesiastical authority, he was paying the homage of faith to the words of Christ the Lord as He told His Apostles "He who hears you, hears me.[43] To conform himself faithfully to the will of his superiors he habitually restrained his own will, whether in accepting the holy burdens of hearing Confessions, or in performing zealously for his colleagues in the apostolate such work as would produce richer and more saving fruits.

30. We are offering clerics this total obedience as a model, with full confidence that its force and beauty will lead them to strive for it more ardently. And if there should be someone who dares to cast doubt on the supreme importance of this virtue--as sometimes happens at the present time--let him take to heart these words of Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, which everyone should keep firmly in mind: "The holiness of any life and the effectiveness of any apostolate has constant and faithful obedience to the hierarchy as its solid foundation, basis and support.[44]

31. For, as you well know, Venerable Brethren, Our most recent predecessors have often issued serious warnings to priests about the extent of the dangers that are arising among the clergy from a growing carelessness about obedience with regard to the teaching authority of the Church, to the various ways and means of undertaking the apostolate, and to ecclesiastical discipline.

32. We do not want to spend a lot of time on this, but We think it timely to exhort all of Our sons who share in the Catholic priesthood to foster a love in their souls that will make them feel attached to Mother Church by ever closer bonds, and then to make that love grow.

33. It is said that St. John M. Vianney lived in the Church in such a way that he worked for it alone, and burned himself up like a piece of straw being consumed on fiery coals. May that flame which comes from the Holy Spirit reach those of Us who have been raised to the priesthood of Jesus Christ and consume us too.

34. We owe ourselves and all we have to the Church; may we work each day only in her name and by her authority and may we properly carry out the duties committed to us, and may we be joined together in fraternal unity and thus strive to serve her in that perfect way in which she ought to be served.[45]

35. St. John M. Vianney, who, as We have said, was so devoted to the virtue of penance, was just as sure that "a priest must be specially devoted to constant prayer." [46] In this regard, We know that shortly after he was made pastor of a village where Christian life had been languished for a long time, he began to spend long and happy hours at night (when he might have been resting) in adoration of Jesus in the Sacrament of His love. The Sacred Tabernacle seemed to be the spring from which he constantly drew the power that nourished his own piety and gave new life to it and promoted the effectiveness of his apostolic labor to such an extent that the wonderful words that Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, used to describe the ideal Christian parish, might well have been applied to the town of Ars in the time of this holy man: "In the middle stands the temple; in the middle of the

temple the Sacred Tabernacle, and on either side the confessionals where supernatural life and health are restored to the Christian people." [47]

36. How timely and how profitable this example of constant prayer on the part of a man completely dedicated to caring for the needs of souls is for priests in Our own day, who are likely to attribute too much to the effectiveness of external activity and stand ready and eager to immerse themselves in the hustle and bustle of the ministry, to their own spiritual detriment!

37. "The thing that keeps us priests from gaining sanctity"--the Cure of Ars used to say-- "is thoughtlessness. It annoys us to turn our minds away from external affairs; we don't know what we really ought to do. What we need is deep reflection, together with prayer and an intimate union with God." The testimony of his life makes it clear that he always remained devoted to his prayers and that not even the duty of hearing confessions or any other pastoral office could cause him to neglect them. "Even in the midst of tremendous labors, he never let up on his conversation with God." [48]

38. But listen to his own words; for he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of them whenever he talked about the happiness or the advantages that he found in prayer: "We are beggars who must ask God for everything"; [49] "How many people we can call back to God by our prayers!" [50] And he used to say over and over again: "Ardent prayer addressed to God: this is man's greatest happiness on earth!" [51]

39. And he enjoyed this happiness abundantly when his mind rose with the help of heavenly light to contemplate the things of heaven and his pure and simple soul rose with all its deepest love from the mystery of the Incarnation to the heights of the Most Holy Trinity. And the crowds of pilgrims who surrounded him in the temple could feel something coming forth from the depths of the inner life of this humble priest when words like these burst forth from his inflamed breast, as they often did: "To be loved by God, to be joined to God, to walk before God, to live for God: O blessed life, O blessed death!" [52]

40. We sincerely hope, Venerable Brethren, that these lessons from the life of St. John M. Vianney may make all of the sacred ministers committed to your care feel sure that they must exert every effort to be outstanding in their devotion to prayer; this can really be done, even if they are very busy with apostolic labors.

41. But if they are to do this, their lives must conform to the norms of faith that so imbued John Mary Vianney and enabled him to perform such wonderful works. "Oh the wonderful faith of this priest"--one of his colleagues in the sacred ministry remarked "It is great enough to enrich all the souls of the diocese!" [53]

42. This constant union with God is best achieved and preserved through the various practices of priestly piety; many of the more important of them, such as daily meditation, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, recitation of the Rosary, careful examination of conscience, the Church, in her wise and provident regulations, has made obligatory for priests. [54] As for the hours of the Office, priests have undertaken a serious obligation to the Church to recite them. [55]

43. The neglect of some of these rules may often be the reason why certain churchmen are caught up in the whirl of external affairs, gradually lose their feeling for sacred things and finally fall into serious difficulties when they are shorn of all spiritual protection and enticed by the attractions of this earthly life. John Mary Vianney on the contrary "never neglected his own salvation, no matter how busy he may have been with that of others." [56]

44. To use the words of St. Pius X: "We are sure of this much . . . that a priest must be deeply devoted to the practice of prayer if he is to live up to his rank and fulfill his duties properly. . . For a priest must be much more careful than others to obey the command of Christ: You must always pray. Paul was only reaffirming this when he advised, as he did so often: Be constant in prayer, ever on the watch to give thanks; pray without ceasing."[57] And We are more than happy to adopt as Our own the words that Our immediate predecessor offered priests as their password at the very beginning of his pontificate: "Pray, more and more, and pray more intensely."[58]

45. The devotion to prayer of St. John M. Vianney, who was to spend almost the whole of the last thirty years of his life in Church caring for the crowds of penitents who flocked to him, had one special characteristic--it was specially directed toward the Eucharist.

46. It is almost unbelievable how ardent his devotion to Christ hidden beneath the veils of the Eucharist really was. "He is the one"--he said--"Who has loved us so much; why shouldn't we love Him in return?"[59] He was devoted to the adorable Sacrament of the altar with a burning charity and his soul was drawn to the sacred Tabernacle by a heavenly force that could not be resisted.

47. This is how he taught his faithful to pray: "You do not need many words when you pray. We believe on faith that the good and gracious God is there in the tabernacle; we open our souls to Him; and feel happy that He allows us to come before Him; this is the best way to pray."[60] He did everything that there was to be done to stir up the reverence and love of the faithful for Christ hidden in the Sacrament of the Eucharist and to bring them to share in the riches of the divine Synaxis; the example of his devotion was ever before them. "To be convinced of this--witnesses tell us--all that was necessary was to see him carrying out the sacred ceremonies or simply to see him genuflect when he passed the tabernacle."[61]

48. As Our predecessor of immortal memory, Pius XII, has said--"The wonderful example of St. John Mary Vianney retains all of its force for our times."[62] For the lengthy prayer of a priest before the adorable Sacrament of the Altar has a dignity and an effectiveness that cannot be found elsewhere nor be replaced. And so when the priest adores Christ Our Lord and gives thanks to Him, or offers satisfaction for his own sins and those of others, or finally when he prays constantly that God keep special watch over the causes committed to his care, he is inflamed with a more ardent love for the Divine Redeemer to whom he has sworn allegiance and for those to whom he is devoting his pastoral care. And a devotion to the Eucharist that is ardent, constant and that carries over into works also has the effect of nourishing and fostering the inner perfection of his soul and assuring him, as he carries out his apostolic duties, of an abundance of the supernatural powers that the strongest workers for Christ must have.

49. We do not want to skip over the benefits that accrue to the faithful themselves in this way, as they see the piety of their priests and are drawn by their example. For, as Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, pointed out in a talk to the clergy of this dear city: "If you want the faithful who are entrusted to your care to pray willingly and well, you must give them an example and let them see you praying in church. A priest kneeling devoutly and reverently before the tabernacle, and pouring forth prayers to God with all his heart, is a wonderful example to the Christian people and serves as an inspiration."[63] The saintly Cure of Ars used all of these helps in carrying out his apostolic office, and without a doubt they are suitable to all times and places.

50. But never forget that the principal form of Eucharistic prayer is contained in the holy Sacrifice of the Altar. It is Our opinion that this point ought to be considered more carefully, Venerable Brethren,

for it touches on a particularly important aspect of priestly life.

51. It is not Our intention at this time to enter upon a lengthy treatment of the Church's teaching on the priesthood and on the Eucharistic Sacrifice as it has been handed down from antiquity. Our predecessors Pius XI and Pius XII have done this in clear and important documents and We urge you to take pains to see to it that the priests and faithful entrusted to your care are very familiar with them. This will clear up the doubts of some; and correct the more daring statements that have sometimes been made in discussing these matters.

52. But We too hope to say something worthwhile in this matter by showing the principal reason why the holy Cure of Ars, who, as befits a hero, was most careful in fulfilling his priestly duties, really deserves to be proposed to those who have the care of souls as a model of outstanding virtue and to be honored by them as their heavenly patron. If it is obviously true that a priest receives his priesthood so as to serve at the altar and that he enters upon this office by offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice, then it is equally true that for as long as he lives as God's minister, the Eucharistic Sacrifice will be the source and origin of the holiness that he attains and of the apostolic activity to which he devotes himself. All of these things came to pass in the fullest possible way in the case of St. John Vianney.

53. For, if you give careful consideration to all of the activity of a priest, what is the main point of his apostolate if not seeing to it that wherever the Church lives, a people who are joined by the bonds of faith, regenerated by holy Baptism and cleansed of their faults will be gathered together around the sacred altar? It is then that the priest, using the sacred power he has received, offers the divine Sacrifice in which Jesus Christ renews the unique immolation which He completed on Calvary for the redemption of mankind and for the glory of His heavenly Father. It is then that the Christians who have gathered together, acting through the ministry of the priest, present the divine Victim and offer themselves to the supreme and eternal God as a "sacrifice, living, holy, pleasing to God." [64] There it is that the people of God are taught the doctrines and precepts of faith and are nourished with the Body of Christ, and there it is that they find a means to gain supernatural life, to grow in it, and if need be to regain unity. And there besides, the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, grows with spiritual increase throughout the world down to the end of time.

54. It is only right and fitting to call the life of St. John Vianney a priestly and pastoral one in an outstanding way, because he spent more and more time in preaching the truths of religion and cleansing souls of the stain of sin as the years went by, and because he was mindful of the altar of God in each and every act of his sacred ministry!

55. It is true of course that the holy Cure's fame made great crowds of sinners flock to Ars, while many priests experience great difficulty in getting the people committed to their care to come to them at all, and then find that they have to teach them the most elementary truths of Christian doctrine just as if they were working in a missionary land. But as important and sometimes as trying as these apostolic labors may be, they should never be permitted to make men of God forget the great importance of the goal which they must always keep in view and which St. John Vianney attained through dedicating himself completely to the main works of the apostolic life in a tiny country church.

56. This should be kept in mind, in particular: whatever a priest may plan, resolve, or do to become holy, he will have to draw, for example and for heavenly strength, upon the Eucharistic Sacrifice which he offers; just as the Roman Pontifical urges: "Be aware of what you are doing; imitate what you hold in your hands."

57. In this regard, We are pleased to repeat the words used by Our immediate predecessor of happy

memory in the Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Menti Nostrae*: "Just as the whole life of Our Savior was pointed toward His sacrifice of Himself, so too the life of the priest, who must reproduce the image of Christ in himself, must become a pleasing sacrifice with Him and through Him and in Him. . . And so it is not enough for him to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice, but in a very deep sense, he must live it; for in this way, he can draw from it the heavenly strength that will enable him to be profoundly transformed and to share in the expiatory life of the Divine Redeemer himself..."[65] And again: "The soul of the priest must refer what takes place on the sacrificial altar to himself; for just as Jesus Christ immolates Himself, his minister must immolate himself along with Him; just as Jesus expiates the sins of men, so too the priest must tread the lofty path of Christian asceticism to bring about his own purification and that of his neighbors."[66]

58. This lofty aspect of doctrine is what the Church has in mind when, with maternal care, she invites her sacred ministers to devote themselves to asceticism and urges them to celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice with the greatest possible interior and exterior devotion. May not the fact that some priests fail to keep in mind the close connection that ought to exist between the offering of the Sacrifice and their own self-dedication be the reason why they gradually fall off from that first fervor they had at the time of their ordination? St. John Vianney learned this from experience and expressed it this way: "The reason why priests are remiss in their personal lives is that they do not offer the Sacrifice with attention and piety." And he, who in his lofty virtue, was in the habit of "offering himself as an expiation for sinners"[67] used to weep "when he thought of the unhappy priests who did not measure up to the holiness demanded by their office."[68]

59. Speaking as a Father, We urge Our beloved priests to set aside a time to examine themselves on how they celebrate the divine mysteries, what their dispositions of soul and external attitude are as they ascend the altar and what fruit they are trying to gain from it. They should be spurred to do this by the centenary celebrations that are being held in honor of this outstanding and wonderful priest, who drew such great strength and such great desire to dedicate himself "from the consolation and happiness of offering the divine victim."[69] May his prayers, which We feel sure they will have, bring a fullness of light and strength down upon Our beloved priests.

60. The wonderful examples of priestly asceticism and prayer that We have proposed for your consideration up to now, Venerable Brethren, also point clearly to the source of the pastoral skill and of the truly remarkable heavenly effectiveness of the sacred ministry of St. John M. Vianney. In this regard, Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, gave a wise warning: "The priest should realize that the important ministry entrusted to him will be more fruitfully carried out, the more intimately he is united with Christ and led on by His spirit."[70] As a matter of fact, the life of the Cure of Ars offers one more outstanding argument in support of the supreme rule for apostolic labor that was laid down by Jesus Christ Himself: "Without me, you can do nothing."[71]

61. We have no intention of trying to make a list of all the wonderful things done by this humble Cure of a country parish, who drew such immense crowds to the tribunal of Penance that some people, out of contempt, called him "a kind of nineteenth-century rabble-rouser";[72] nor do We see any need of going into all of the particular ways in which he carried out his duties, some of which, perhaps, could not be accommodated to our times.

62. But We do want to recall this one fact--that this Saint was in his own times a model of pastoral devotion in a tiny community that was still suffering from the loss of Christian faith and morals that occurred while the French Revolution was raging. This was the mission and command received just,

before taking over his pastoral office: "You will find love of God in that parish; stir it up yourself." [73]

63. He proved to be a tireless worker for God, one who was wise and devoted in winning over young people and bringing families back to the standards of Christian morality, a worker who was never too tired to show an interest in the human needs of his flock, one whose own way of life was very close to theirs and who was prepared to exert every effort and make any sacrifice to establish Christian schools and to make missions available to the people: and all of these things show that St. John M. Vianney reproduced the true image of the good shepherd in himself as he dealt with the flock entrusted to his care, for he knew his sheep, protected them from dangers, and gently but firmly looked after them.

64. Without realizing it, he was sounding his own praises in the words he once addressed to his people: "Good shepherd! O shepherd who lives up to the commands and desires of Jesus Christ completely! This is the greatest blessing that a kind and gracious God can send to a parish." [74]

65. But there are three things in particular of lasting value and importance that the example of this holy man brings home to us and it is to these in particular that We would like to direct your attention, Venerable Brethren.

66. The first thing that strikes Us is the very high esteem in which he held his pastoral office. He was so humble by disposition and so much aware through faith of the importance of the salvation of a human soul that he could never undertake his parish duties without a feeling of fear.

67. "My friend"--these are the words he used to open his heart to a fellow-priest--"you have no idea of how fearful a thing it is for a priest to be snatched away from the care of souls to appear before the judgment seat of God." [75]

68. Everyone knows--as We have already pointed out--how much he yearned and how long he prayed to be allowed to go off by himself to weep and to make proper expiation for what he called his miserable life; and We also know that only obedience and his zeal for the salvation of others got him to return to the field of the apostolate when he had abandoned it.

69. But if he felt the great weight of this burden to be so heavy that it sometimes seemed to be crushing him, this was also the reason why he conceived his office and its duties in so lofty a fashion that carrying them out called for great strength of soul. These are the prayers he addressed to heaven as he began his parochial ministry: "My God, make the sheep entrusted to me come back to a good way of life. For all my life I am prepared to endure anything that pleases you." [76]

70. And God heard these fervent prayers, for later our saint had to confess: "If I had known when I came to the parish of Ars what I would have to suffer, the fear of it would certainly have killed me." [77]

71. Following in the footsteps of the great apostles of all ages, he knew that the best and most effective way for him to contribute to the salvation of those who would be entrusted to his care was through the cross. It was for them that he put up with all sorts of calumnies, prejudices and opposition, without complaint; for them that he willingly endured the sharp discomforts and annoyances of mind and body that were forced upon him by his daily administration of the Sacrament of Penance for thirty years with almost no interruption; for them that this athlete of Christ fought off the powers of hell; for them, last of all, that he brought his body into subjection through voluntary mortification.

72. Almost everyone knows his answer to the priest who complained to him that his apostolic zeal was bearing no fruit: "You have offered humble prayers to God, you have wept, you have groaned, you have

sighed. Have you added fasts, vigils, sleeping on the floor, castigation of your body? Until you have done all of these, do not think that you have tried everything."[78]

73. Once again Our mind turns to sacred ministers who have the care of souls, and We urgently beg them to realize the importance of these words. Let each one think over his own life, in the light of the supernatural prudence that should govern all of our actions, and ask himself if it is really all that the pastoral care of the people entrusted to him requires.

74. With firm confidence that the merciful God will never fail to offer the help that human weakness calls for, let sacred ministers think over the offices and burdens they have assumed by looking at St. John M. Vianney as if he were a mirror. "A terrible disaster strikes us Cures"--the holy man complained--"when our spirit grows lazy and careless"; he was referring to the harmful attitude of those pastors who are not disturbed by the fact that many sheep committed to them are growing filthy in the slavery of sin. If they want to imitate the Cure of Ars more closely, who was so "convinced that men should be loved, so that we can do good to them,"[79] then let these priests ask themselves what kind of love they have for those whom God has entrusted to their care and for whom Christ has died!

75. Because of human liberty and of events beyond all human control, the efforts of even the holiest of men will sometimes fail. But a priest ought to remember that in the mysterious counsels of Divine Providence, the eternal fate of many men is bound up with his pastoral interest and care and the example of his priestly life. Is not this thought powerful enough both to stir up the lackadaisical in an effective way and to urge on to greater efforts those who are already zealous in the work of Christ?

76. Because, as is recorded, "he was always ready to care for the needs of souls,"[80] St. John M. Vianney, good shepherd that he was, was also outstanding in offering his sheep an abundant supply of the food of Christian truth. Throughout his life, he preached and taught Catechism.

77. The Council of Trent pronounced this to be a parish priest's first and greatest duty and everyone knows what immense and constant labor John Vianney expended in order to be equal to carrying out this task. For he began his course of studies when he was already along in years, and he had great difficulty with it; and his first sermons to the people kept him up for whole nights on end. How much the ministers of the word of God can find here to imitate! For there are some who give up all effort at further study and then point too readily to his small fund of learning as an adequate excuse for themselves. They would be much better off if they would imitate the great perseverance of soul with which the Cure of Ars prepared himself to carry out this great ministry to the best of his abilities: which, as a matter of fact, were not quite as limited as is sometimes believed, for he had a clear mind and sound judgment.[81]

78. Men in Sacred Orders should gain an adequate knowledge of human affairs and a thorough knowledge of sacred doctrine that is in keeping with their abilities. Would that all pastors of souls would exert as much effort as the Cure of Ars did to overcome difficulties and obstacles in learning, to strengthen memory through practice, and especially to draw knowledge from the Cross of Our Lord, which is the greatest of all books. This is why his Bishop made this reply to some of his critics: "I do not know whether he is learned; but a heavenly light shines in him."[82]

79. This is why Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, was perfectly right in not hesitating to offer this country Cure as a model for the preachers of the Holy City: "The holy Cure of Ars had none of the natural gifts of a speaker that stand out in men like P. Segneri or B. Bossuet. But the clear, lofty, living thoughts of his mind were reflected in the sound of his voice and shone forth from his glance, and they came out in the form of ideas and images that were so apt and so well fitted to the thoughts

and feelings of his listeners and so full of wit and charm that even St. Francis de Sales would have been struck with admiration. This is the kind of speaker who wins the souls of the faithful. A man who is filled with Christ will not find it hard to discover ways and means of bringing others to Christ." [83]

80. These words give a wonderful picture of the Cure of Ars as a catechism teacher and as a preacher. And when, towards the end of his life on earth, his voice was too weak to carry to his listeners, the sparkle and gleam of his eyes, his tears, his sighs of divine love, the bitter sorrow he evidenced when the mere concept of sin came to his mind, were enough to convert to a better way of life the faithful who surrounded his pulpit. How could anyone help being moved deeply with a life so completely dedicated to Christ shining so clearly there before him?

81. Up to the time of his blessed death, St. John M. Vianney held on tenaciously to his office of teaching the faithful committed to his care and the pious pilgrims who crowded the church, by denouncing evil of every kind, in whatever guise it might appear, "in season, out of season" [84] and, even more, by sublimely raising souls to God; for "he preferred to show the beauties of virtue rather than the ugliness of vice." [85] For this humble priest understood perfectly how great the dignity and sublimity of teaching the word of God really is. "Our Lord"--he said--"who Himself is truth, has as much regard for His word as for His Body."

82. So it is easy to realize what great joy it brought Our predecessors to point out an example like this to be imitated by those who guide the Christian people; for the proper and careful exercise of the teaching office by the clergy is of great importance. In speaking of this, St. Pius X had this to say: "We want especially to pursue this one point and to urge strongly that no priest has any more important duty or is bound by any stricter obligation." [86]

83. And so once again We take this warning which Our predecessors have repeated over and over again and which has been inserted in the Code of Canon Law as well, [87] and We issue it to you, Venerable Brethren, on the occasion of the solemn celebration of the centenary of the holy catechist and preacher of Ars.

84. In this regard We wish to offer Our praise and encouragement to the studies that have been carefully and prudently carried on in many areas under your leadership and auspices, to improve the religious training of both youngsters and adults by presenting it in a variety of forms that are specially adapted to local circumstances and needs. All of these efforts are useful; but on the occasion of this centenary, God wants to cast new light on the wonderful power of the apostolic spirit, that sweeps all in its path, as it is exemplified in this priest who throughout his life was a witness in word and deed for Christ nailed to the cross "not in the persuasive language devised by human wisdom, but in a manifestation of spiritual power." [88]

85. All that remains for Us to do is to recall at a little greater length the pastoral ministry of St. John M. Vianney, which was a kind of steady martyrdom for a long period of his life, and especially his administration of the sacrament of Penance, which calls for special praise for it brought forth the richest and most salutary fruits.

86. "For almost fifteen hours each day, he lent a patient ear to penitents. This work began early in the morning and continued well on into the night." [89] And when he was completely worn out and broken five days before his death and had no strength left, the final penitents came to his bed. Toward the end of his life, the number of those who came to see him each year reached eighty thousand according to the accounts. [90]

87. It is hard to imagine what pain and discomfort and bodily sufferings this man underwent as he sat to hear Confessions in the tribunal of Penance for what seemed like endless periods of time, especially if you recall how weakened he was by his fasts, mortifications, sicknesses, vigils and lack of sleep.

88. But he was bothered even more by a spiritual anguish that took complete possession of him. Listen to his mournful cries: "So many crimes against God are committed"--he said-- "that they sometimes incline us to ask God to end this world! . . . You have to come to the town of Ars if you really want to learn what an infinite multitude of serious sins there are. . . Alas, we do not know what to do, we think that there is nothing else to do than weep and pray to God."

89. And this holy man could have added that he had taken on himself more than his share of the expiation of these sins. For he told those who asked his advice in this regard: "I impose only a small penance on those who confess their sins properly; the rest I perform in their place."[91]

90. St. John M. Vianney always had "poor sinners," as he called them, in his mind and before his eyes, with the constant hope of seeing them turn back to God and weep for the sins they had committed. This was the object of all his thoughts and cares, and of the work that took up almost all his time and efforts. [92]

91. From his experience in the tribunal of Penance, in which he loosed the bonds of sin, he understood just how much malice there is in sin and what terrible devastation it wreaks in the souls of men. He used to paint it in hideous colors: "If we"--he asserted--"had the faith to see a soul in mortal sin, we would die of fright."[93]

92. But the sufferings of souls who have remained attached to their sins in hell did not add to the strength and vigor of his own sorrow and words as much as did the anguish he felt at the fact that divine love had been carelessly neglected or violated by some offense. This stubbornness in sin and ungrateful disregard for God's great goodness made rivers of tears flow from his eyes. "My friend"--he said--"I am weeping because you are not."[94]

93. And yet, what great kindness he displayed in devoting himself to restoring hope to the souls of repentant sinners! He spared no effort to become a minister of divine mercy to them; and he described it as "like an overflowing river that carries all souls along with it"[95] and throbs with a love greater than that of a mother, "for God is quicker to forgive than a mother to snatch her child from the fire."[96]

94. Let the example of the Cure of Ars stir up those who are in charge of souls to be eager and well-prepared in devoting themselves to this very serious work, for it is here most of all that divine mercy finally triumphs over human malice and that men have their sins wiped away and are reconciled to God.

95. And let them also remember that Our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, expressed disapproval "in the strongest terms" of the opinion of those who have little use for frequent confession, where it is a matter of venial sins; the Supreme Pontiff said: "We particularly recommend the pious practice of frequent confession, which the Church has introduced, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, as a means of swifter daily progress along the road of virtue."[97]

96. Again, We have complete confidence that sacred ministers will be even more careful than others in faithfully observing the prescriptions of Canon Law,[98] which make the pious use of the Sacrament of Penance, which is so necessary for the attainment of sanctity, obligatory at certain specified times; and that they will treat those urgent exhortations which this same predecessor of Ours made "with a sorrowful soul" on several occasions[99] with the supreme veneration and obedience they deserve.

97. As this Encyclical of Ours draws to a close, We want to assure you, Venerable Brethren, of the high hopes We have that these centenary celebrations will, with the help of God, lead to a deeper desire and more intensive efforts on the part of all priests to carry out their sacred ministry with more ardent zeal and especially to work to fulfill "the first duty of priests, that is, the duty of becoming holy themselves." [100]

98. When We gaze from this height of the Supreme Pontificate to which We have been raised by the secret counsels of Divine Providence and turn Our mind to what souls are hoping for and expecting, or to the many areas of the earth that have not yet been brightened by the light of the Gospel, or last of all to the many needs of the Christian people, the figure of the priest is always before Our eyes.

99. If there were no priests or if they were not doing their daily work, what use would all these apostolic undertakings be, even those which seem best suited to the present age? Of what use would be the laymen who work so zealously and generously to help in the activities of the apostolate?

100. And so We do not hesitate to speak to all of these sacred ministers, whom We love so much and in whom the Church rests such great hopes--these priests--and urge them in the name of Jesus Christ from the depths of a father's heart to be faithful in doing and giving all that the seriousness of their ecclesiastical dignity requires of them.

101. This appeal of Ours draws added force from the wise and prudent words of St. Pius X: "Nothing is needed more to promote the kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world than the holiness of churchmen, who should stand out above the faithful by their example, their words and their teaching." [101]

102. And this fits in perfectly with the words that St. John M. Vianney addressed to his bishop: "If you want the whole diocese to be converted to God, then all of the Cures must become holy."

103. And We especially want to commend these most beloved sons to you, Venerable Brethren, who bear the chief responsibility for the holiness of your clergy, so that you will be careful to go to them and help them in the difficulties sometimes serious ones--that they face in their own lives or in carrying out their duties.

104. What is there that cannot be accomplished by a bishop who loves the clergy entrusted to his direction, who is close to them, really knows them, takes great care of them and directs them in a firm but fatherly way?

105. It is true that your pastoral care is supposed to extend to the whole diocese, but you should still take very special care of those who are in sacred orders, for they are your closest helpers in your work and are bound to you by many sacred ties.

106. On the occasion of this centenary celebration, We would also like to exhort paternally all of the faithful to offer constant prayers to God for their priests, so that each in his own way may help them attain holiness.

107. Those who are more fervent and devout are turning their eyes and their minds to the priest with a great deal of hope and expectation. For, at a time when you find flourishing everywhere the power of money, the allure of pleasures of the senses, and too great an esteem for technical achievements, they want to see in him a man who speaks in the name of God, who is animated by a firm faith, and who gives no thought to himself, but burns with intense charity.

108. So let them all realize that they can help sacred ministers a great deal to achieve this lofty goal, if only they will show due respect for priestly dignity, and have proper esteem for their pastoral office and

its difficulties, and finally be even more zealous and active in offering to help them.

109. We cannot help turning our paternal spirit in a special way to young people; We embrace them with a warm love and remind them that, in them, the Church rests great hopes for the years to come.

110. The harvest indeed is great, but the laborers are few.[102] How many areas there are where the heralds of the Gospel truth are worn out by their labors and waiting eagerly and longingly for those to come who will take their place! There are peoples who are languishing in a miserable hunger for heavenly food more than for earthly nourishment. Who will bring the heavenly banquet of life and truth to them?

111. We have complete confidence that the youngsters of our time will be as quick as those of times past to give a generous answer to the invitation of the Divine Master to provide for this vital need.

112. Priests often find themselves in difficult circumstances. This is not surprising; for those who hate the Church always show their hostility by trying to harm and deceive her sacred ministers; as the Cure of Ars himself admitted, those who want to overthrow religion always try in their hatred to strike at priests first of all.

113. But even in the face of these serious difficulties, priests who are ardent in their devotion to God enjoy a real, sublime happiness from an awareness of their own position, for they know that they have been called by the Divine Savior to offer their help in a most holy work, which will have an effect on the redemption of the souls of men and on the growth of the Mystical Body of Christ. So let Christian families consider it one of their most sublime privileges to give priests to the Church; and so let them offer their sons to the sacred ministry with joy and gratitude.

114. There is no need to dwell on this point, Venerable Brothers, since what We are urging is very close to your own hearts. For We are sure that you understand perfectly Our interest in these things and the forceful expression We are giving to it, and that you share it. For the present, We commit this matter of immense importance, closely bound up with the salvation of many souls, to the intercession of St. John M. Vianney.

115. We also turn Our eyes to the Mother of God, immaculate from the very beginning. Shortly before the Cure of Ars, filled with heavenly merits, completed his long life, She appeared in another part of France to an innocent and humble girl, and through her, invited men with a mother's insistence to devote themselves to prayers and Christian penance; this majestic voice is still striking home to souls a century later, and echoing far and wide almost endlessly.

116. The things that were done and said by this holy priest, who was raised to the honors of the Heavenly Saints and whose 100th anniversary We are commemorating, cast a kind of heavenly light beforehand over the supernatural truths which were made known to the innocent girl at the grotto of Lourdes. For this man had such great devotion to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mother of God that in 1836 he dedicated his parish church to Mary Conceived Without Sin and greeted the infallible definition of this truth as Catholic dogma in 1854 with the greatest joy and reverence.[103]

117. So there is good reason for Us to link together this double centenary, of Lourdes and of Ars, as We give proper thanks to the most high God: each supplements the other, and each does honor to a nation We love very much and which can boast of having both of these most holy places in its bosom.

118. Mindful of the many benefits that have been received, and trusting confidently that still more will come to Us and to the whole Church, We borrow the prayer that sounded so often on the lips of the

Cure of Ars: "Blessed be the most holy and immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God. May all nations praise, all lands invoke and preach your Immaculate Heart!"[104]

119. Confident that this centennial celebration of St. John M. Vianney throughout the world will stir up the pious zeal of priests and of those whom God is calling to take up the priesthood, and will make all the faithful even more active and interested in supplying the things that are needed for priests' life and work, with all Our heart We impart the Apostolic Blessing to each and every one of them, and especially to you, Venerable Brethren, as a consoling pledge of heavenly graces and of Our good will.

120. Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, on August 1, 1959, the first year of Our Pontificate.

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92. Cf. *ibid.*, v. 227, p. 18.
93. Cf. *ibid.*, v. 227, p. 290.
94. Cf. *ibid.*, v. 227, p. 999.
95. Cf. *ibid.*, v. 227, p. 978.
96. Cf. *ibid.*, v. 3900, p. 1554.
97. Encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis*, AAS 35 (1943) 235.
98. C.I.C. canon 125, section 1.
99. Cf. encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis*, AAS 35 (1943) 235; encyclical letter *Mediator Dei*, AAS 39 (1947) 585; apostolic exhortation *Menti Nostrae*, AAS 42 (1950) 674.
100. Apostolic Exhortation *Menti Nostrae*, AAS 42 (1950)
101. Cf. epistle "La ristorazione," *Acta Pii X*, 1, p. 257.
102. Cf. Matt. 9:37.
103. Cf. *Archiv. Secret. Vat.*, v. 227, p. 90.
104. Cf. *ibid.*, v. 227, p. 1021.

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