

Excerpt from
Christmas Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia
December 22, 2006

DOMINUS PARS HEREDITATIS MEAE ET CALICIS MEI

Paul calls Timothy – and in him, the Bishop and in general the priest – “man of God” (I Tim 6:11). This is the central task of the priest: to bring God to men and women. Of course, he can only do this if he himself comes from God, if he lives *with* and *by* God. This is marvelously expressed in a verse of a priestly Psalm that we – the older generation – spoke during our admittance to the clerical state: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup, you hold my lot” (Ps 16:5).

The priest praying in this Psalm interprets his life on the basis of the distribution of territory as established in Deuteronomy (cf. 10:9). After taking possession of the Land, every tribe obtained by the drawing of lots his portion of the Holy Land and with this took part in the gift promised to the forefather Abraham.

The tribe of Levi alone received no land: its land was God himself. This affirmation certainly had an entirely practical significance. Priests did not live like the other tribes by cultivating the earth, but on offerings. However, the affirmation goes deeper. The true foundation of the priest’s life, the ground of his existence, the ground of his life, is God himself.

The Church in this Old Testament interpretation of the priestly life – an interpretation that also emerges repeatedly in Psalm 119 – has rightly seen in the following of the Apostles, in communion with Jesus himself, as the explanation of what the priestly mission means. The priest can and must also say today, with the Levite: “*Dominus pars hereditatis meae et calicis mei*”. God himself is my portion of land, the external and internal foundation of my existence.

This theocentricity of the priestly existence is truly necessary in our entirely function-oriented world in which everything is based on calculable and ascertainable performance. The priest must truly know God from within and thus bring him to men and women: this is the prime service that contemporary humanity needs. If this centrality of God in a priest’s life is lost, little by little the zeal in his actions is lost. In an excess of external things the center that gives meaning to all things and leads them back to unity is missing. There, the foundation of life, the “earth” upon which all this can stand and prosper, is missing.

Celibacy, in force for Bishops throughout the Eastern and Western Church and, according to a tradition that dates back to an epoch close to that of the Apostles, for priests in general in the Latin Church, can only be understood and lived if it is based on this basic structure.

The solely pragmatic reasons, the reference to greater availability, is not enough: such a greater availability of time could easily become also a form of egoism that saves a person from the sacrifices and efforts demanded by the reciprocal acceptance and forbearance in matrimony; thus, it could lead to a spiritual impoverishment or to hardening of the heart.

The true foundation of celibacy can be contained in the phrase: *Dominus pars* – You are my land. It can only be theocentric. It cannot mean being deprived of love, but must mean letting oneself be consumed by passion for God and subsequently, thanks to a more intimate way of being with him, to serve men and women, too. Celibacy must be a witness to faith: faith in God materializes in that form of life which only has meaning if it is based on God.

Basing one’s life on him, renouncing marriage and the family, means that I accept and experience God as a reality and that I can therefore bring him to men and women. Our world, which has become totally positivistic, in which God appears at best as a hypothesis but not as a concrete reality, needs to rest on God in the most concrete and radical way possible.

It needs a witness to God that lies in the decision to welcome God as a land where one finds one’s own existence. For this reason, celibacy is so important today, in our contemporary world, even if its fulfillment in our age is constantly threatened and questioned.

A careful preparation during the journey towards this goal and persevering guidance on the part of the Bishop, priest friends and lay people who sustain this priestly witness together, is essential. We need prayer that invokes God without respite as the Living God and relies on him in times of confusion as well as in times of joy. Consequently, as opposed to the cultural trend that seeks to convince us that we are not capable of making such decisions, this witness can be lived and in this way, in our world, can reinstate God as reality.