

Alter Christus

*“As an **alter Christus** (another Christ) the priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ... Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation” (Pope Benedict XVI)*

Monthly bulletin dedicated to all the Priests of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

This Month’s reading:

Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori

Dear Father,

As a new year begins, it’s always good to renew the promises made to Jesus on the day of our ordination, and ask Him to help and assist us during the next months. Among the promises, we have made, we promised Jesus to work with generosity in the path of holiness and do our best to avoid sin.

In the last two bulletins, we read about the dignity of our ministry and how compelled we are to work on our own holiness. For this reason, this month we selected a text of Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori titled “Grievousness and chastisement of sin in a priest.”

This text belongs to his famous work “Dignity and duties of the priest,” published for the first time in 1760. In this text, the Doctor of the Church will help us to recall how great is our dignity as priests, and how terrible are our sins in the eyes of God. “The malice of the sins of a priest is increased by his ingratitude to God, by whom he has been so highly exalted,” he says.

By experience, we know our weakness and how easy it is for us to fall into temptation and commit sin. And so it can help us to read these pages in which the saint will speak to us as a father speaks to his son, using the

authority of the Sacred Scripture and many Saints and Fathers of the Church. Among them, Saint Bernard and Saint Jerome are worthy to be quoted in this introduction. The first said, “The greater the height to which God has raised them, the more precipitous and ruinous shall be their fall.” And the latter warns

us, “Let us, who are priests, rejoice at our elevation to so great a height, but let our fear of falling be proportioned to our exaltation.”

God bless you!

Fr. Tomás Ravaoli, IVE

LCI Director

Author: Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori

Bishop, Doctor of the Church, and the founder of the Redemptorist Congregation. He was born on September 27, 1696, near Naples, Italy. Educated at the University of Naples, Alphonsus received his doctorate at the age of sixteen. By age nineteen he was practicing law, but he saw the transitory nature of the secular world, and after a brief time, retreated from the law courts and his fame. Visiting the local Hospital for Incurables on August 28, 1723, he had a vision and was told to consecrate his life solely to God. In response, Alphonsus dedicated himself to the religious life, even while suffering persecution from his family. He finally agreed to become a priest but to live at home as a member of a group of secular missionaries. He was ordained on December 21, 1726, and he spent six years giving popular missions throughout Naples. Alphonsus founded the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer on November 9, 1732. Alphonsus was preaching missions in the rural areas and writing. He refused to become the bishop of Palermo but in 1762 had to accept the papal command to accept the see of St. Agatha of the Goths near Naples. Here he discovered more than thirty thousand uninstructed men and women and four hundred indifferent priests. For thirteen years Alphonsus fed the poor, instructed families, reorganized the seminary and religious houses, taught theology, and wrote. His austerities were rigorous,

and he suffered daily the pain from rheumatism that was beginning to deform his body. He died peacefully on August 1, 1787. He was beatified in 1816 and canonized in 1839. In 1871, Alphonsus was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius IX. His writings on moral, theological, and ascetic matters had great impact and have survived through the years, especially his Moral Theology and his Glories of Mary.



Grievousness and Chastisement of Sin in a Priest

By Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori

I - Grievousness of Sin in a Priest

The sin of a priest is very grievous, because he sins in view of the light: in consenting to sin he knows well what he does. On this account St. Thomas says, “that the sin of a Christian is more grievous than the sin of an infidel: because he knows the truth.” But the light of a secular, though a Christian, is very different from that of a priest. The priest is so well instructed in the divine law that he teaches it to others. *“The lips of the priest shall keep knowledge, and they shall seek the law of his mouth.”* (Mal 2:7) Hence St. Ambrose says, “that the sins of those who know the law are very grievous, because they are not excused by ignorance.”

Poor seculars sin, but they sin in the midst of the darkness of the world, at a distance from the sacraments, badly instructed in spiritual things, and immersed in worldly business; they have but little knowledge of God, and consequently they see but imperfectly the evil that they do in consenting to sin. To use the words of David, *they shoot in the dark.* (Ps 10:3) But priests are so full of light that they are

the luminaries by which the people are enlightened: *“You are the light of the world”*. (Mt 5:14) They are well instructed by so many books that they have read, by so many sermons that they have heard, by so many considerations that they have made, by so many admonitions that they have received from Superiors. In a word, to priests is given to know the mysteries of God. Hence they well understand the claims that God has to our love and service, the malice of mortal sin, which is an enemy so opposed to God that were he capable of destruction a single mortal sin would, as St. Bernard says, destroy him; and in another place the saint says: “Sin, as far as in it lies, aims at the destruction of God.” Thus, according to St. Chrysostom, the sinner, as far as his will is concerned, puts God to death. Hence Father Medina writes that mortal sin does so much dishonor, and gives so much displeasure to God, that were he capable of grief, sin would make him die through pure sorrow. All this the priest understands well: he has also a perfect knowledge of his obligations by which as a priest, whom the Lord has so highly favored, he is

bound to serve and love God. The more perfectly, then, he sees the enormity of the injury that he does to God by committing sin, the more grievous the malice of his sin, says St. Gregory.

Every sin of a priest is a sin of malice; it is like the sin of the angels that sinned in view of the light, says St. Bernard, speaking of a priest; hence he adds, "He has become an angel of the Lord, and sinning as a priest he sins in heaven." He sins in the midst of light, and therefore his sin, as has been said, is a sin of malice: he cannot allege ignorance, for he knows the great evil of mortal sin: he cannot plead weakness, because he knows the means by which, if he wishes, he can acquire strength; if he is unwilling to adopt the means, the fault is entirely his own. He would not understand that he might do well. According to St. Thomas, the sin of malice is that which is committed with knowledge. And in another place he says: "Every sin committed through malice is against the Holy Ghost." We know from St. Matthew that the sin against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven, neither in this world nor in the world to come. (Mt 12:32) That is, on account of the blindness caused by sins of malice they shall be pardoned only with great difficulty.

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Our Saviour prayed on the cross for his persecutors, saying, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" (Lk 23:34) But for bad priests this prayer was a source rather of condemnation than of salvation: for they know what they do. Jeremias said with tears, "*How is the gold become dim, the finest color is changed*". "The gold which has been obscured," says Cardinal Hugo, "is the sinful priest who ought to shine forth with divine love; but by committing sin he becomes black, and an object of horror even to hell, and becomes more hateful to God than other sinners."

St. John Chrysostom says that the Lord is not so much enraged against any sinner as against him who, while he shines with the splendor of the sacerdotal dignity, insults the divine majesty. The malice of the sins of a priest is increased by his ingratitude to God, by whom he has been so highly exalted. St. Thomas teaches that the grievousness of sin increases in proportion to the ingratitude of the sinner. "We ourselves," says St. Basil, "are not so indignant at any offence as at that which we receive from a friend and familiar acquaintance." For this reason priests are called by St. Cyril the most intimate friends of God. What greater exaltation can God give to a man than by raising him to the dignity of his

own priest? “Enumerate all the honors, all the dignities,” says St. Ephrem; “the priest surpasses them all.” What greater honor, what more exalted rank, could God confer upon him than that of being his own representative, his coadjutor, the sanctifier of souls, and the dispenser of his sacraments? Priests are called by St. Prosper “Dispensers in the royal house.” The Lord has chosen the priest from among so many men for his own minister to offer to him in sacrifice his own very Son. He chose him, says the Holy Ghost, out of all men living to offer sacrifice to God. He has given him power over the body of Jesus Christ, he has placed in his hands the keys of paradise, he has raised him above all the kings of the earth, and above all the angels in heaven; in a word, he has made him, as it were, a God on earth. *“What is there that I ought to do more to my vineyard that I have not done?”* (Isa 5:4) (Here God appears to speak only of priests.) How horrible, then, the ingratitude of the priest whom God has loved so tenderly, and who insults the Lord in his own very house? What is the meaning, says Jeremias, that my beloved hath wrought much wickedness in my house? Hence St. Gregory weeps and says, “Alas! my Lord God, those that should govern Thy Church persecute you more than the rest.”

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It appears, also, that it was of bad priests that God complained when he called on heaven and earth to witness the ingratitude with which he was treated by his own children. *“Hear, O ye heavens, and give ear, O earth... I have brought up children and exalted them, but they have despised me.”* (Isa 1:12) And who are these children but priests who, after being raised by God to such an elevation, and nourished at his table with his own flesh, dare to despise his love and his grace? Of this he also complained by the mouth of David: *“If my enemy had reviled me I would verily have borne it”.* (Ps 54:13) Were my enemy, were an idolater, a heretic, or a worldling to offend me, I would bear with him, but how can I bear to see myself insulted by you, my priest, who are my friend and fellow-guest? But thou, a man of one mind, my guide and my familiar, who didst take sweetmeats together with me. The Prophet Jeremias weeps and exclaims: *“They that were fed delicately... they that were brought lip in scarlet, have embraced the dung.”* (Lam 4:5) Oh! what a misery, what a horrible thing, to see the man that fed on celestial food and was clad in purple wearing the sordid garment of sin, and feeding on filth and dung!

II - Chastisement of the Sinful Priest

But let us now see the chastisement that awaits the sinful priest a chastisement proportioned to the grievousness of his sin. *“According to the measure of the sin shall the measure also of the stripes be.”* (Deut 25:2)

St. John Chrysostom gives up as lost the priest that commits a single mortal sin after his elevation to the priesthood. Terrible in deed are the threats that the Lord has pronounced, by the mouth of Jeremias, against priests who fall into sin. *“For the prophet and the priest are defiled, and in my house I have found their wickedness, saith the Lord. Therefore, their way shall be as the slippery way in the dark ; for they err and fall therein!”* (23:11)

What hope of life would you give to him who, without light to guide his steps, should walk on a slippery way along the brink of a precipice, and who should from time to time be violently assailed by enemies endeavoring to cast him down the precipice? This is

the miserable state into which a priest who commits mortal sin has brought himself. The slippery way in the dark. By sin the priest loses light and becomes blind. *“It had been better for them not to have known the way of justice, than after they had known it, to turn back.”* (2 Pet 2:21) How much better would it be for the priest that falls into sin to have been a poor uninstructed peasant, who had never known the law! For, after so much knowledge learned from books, from sermons, from directors, and after so many illuminations received from God, the miserable man, by yielding to sin and trampling under foot all the graces that God had bestowed upon him, shall make all the lights received serve to increase his blindness, and to keep him in the state of perdition.

“Greater knowledge is followed by greater punishment,” says St. John Chrysostom. And the saint adds: “The sin to which the priest consents may be committed by many seculars, but his chastisement shall be far more severe, because his blindness shall be far greater than theirs.” He shall receive

the punishment threatened by the Prophet: *“That seeing they may not see, and hearing may not understand”* (Isa 6:9) “And this,” says the same St. John Chrysostom, “we know from experience that a secular after committing sin is easily induced to do penance.” A secular who falls into sin, if he attends a mission, or is present at a sermon in which



he hears some eternal truth regarding the malice of sin, the certainty of death, the rigor of the divine judgment, or the pains of hell, easily enters into himself and returns to God; “because” says the saint, “these truths are new to him, and fill him with terror.” But what impression can the eternal truths and the menaces of the holy Scriptures make on a priest that has trampled on the grace of God, and on all the lights and knowledge that he has received? “All that is contained in Scripture,” continues the holy Doctor, “appears to him as something obsolete and worthless, for everything terrible has by use lost its power.” Hence he concludes that there is nothing more impossible than to reform a person who sins with a perfect knowledge of the law.

“Great indeed,” says St. Jerome, “is the dignity of priests, but great also is their perdition, if in the priesthood they turn their back on God.” “The greater the height,” says St. Bernard, “to which God has raised them, the more precipitous and ruinous shall be their fall.” He that falls on level ground is seldom severely hurt, but the man that falls from a great height is said not to fall, but to be precipitated, and therefore his fall is mortal. “As when we fall on a plain, we do ourselves rarely any harm,” says St. Ambrose, “so when we fall

from a height, we not only fall, but are precipitated, and the fall becomes more dangerous.”

“Let us who are priests,” says St. Jerome, “rejoice at our elevation to so great a height, but let our fear of falling be proportioned to our exaltation.” It is to the priest that the Lord appears to speak by the Prophet Ezechiel, when

he says, *“I set thee on the holy mountain of God, and thou hast sinned; and I cast thee out from the mountain of God and destroyed thee”* (28:14) O priests! says the Lord, I have placed you on my holy mountain, and have made you the luminaries of the world: *“You are the light of the world. A city seated on a mountain cannot be hid.”* (Mt 5:14)

Justly, then, has St. Laurence Justinian said

that the greater the grace that God has bestowed on priests, the more severe the chastisement that their sins deserve; and the more elevated the state to which he has raised them, the more disastrous shall be their fall. He that falls into a river sinks deeper in proportion to the height from which he has fallen, says Peter de Blois. Beloved priest, remember that in elevating you to the sacerdotal state God has raised you up to heaven, by making you a man no longer earthly, but altogether celestial: If you sin, you fall from heaven. Consider, then, how ruinous and destructive shall be your

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fall. "What is higher than heaven?" says St. Peter Chrysologus; "he therefore falls from heaven that mingles sin with heavenly functions." Your fall, according to St. Bernard, shall be like that of a thunderbolt, which rushes headlong with vehement impetuosity. That is, your destruction is irreparable. In your unhappy soul is verified the threat of the Lord against Capharnaum: *"And thou, Capharnaum, which art exalted unto heaven, thou shalt be thrust down to hell."* (Lk 10:15)

Such the chastisement that the priest that falls into sin merits on account of his infinite ingratitude to God. He owes more gratitude to God than others, because he has received greater favors, says St. Gregory. The ungrateful, as a learned author says, deserve to be deprived of all the favors that they have received. Jesus Christ has said: *"To every one that hath, shall be given, and he shall abound; but from him that hath not, that also which he seemeth to have shall be taken away."* (Mt 25:29) Upon those that are grateful to God he shall pour his graces more abundantly; but the priest who after so many lights and so many Communion turns his back on God, despises all his favors, and renounces his grace, shall be justly deprived of all. The Lord is liberal to all, but not to the ungrateful. "Ingratitude,"

says St. Bernard, "dries up the sources of divine favors." Hence St. Jerome justly says, "There is not in the whole world a monster to be compared with a priest in the state of sin, for the unfortunate man will not bear with correction."

"Great indeed is the dignity of priests, but great also is their perdition, if in the priesthood they turn their back on God"
(St. Jerome)

And St. John Chrysostom, or the author of the "Imperfect Work," writes: "When lay persons sin, they easily amend. As for priests, once bad, they are incorrigible." To priests that fall into sin, we may, with St. Peter Damian, apply in a special manner the words of the Apostle:

"It is impossible for those that were once illuminated, have tasted also the heavenly gift, and were made, partakers of the Holy Ghost, and are fallen away, to be renewed again to penance." (Heb 6:4) Who has been more enlightened than the priest? Who has tasted more frequently the heavenly gifts, and partaken more abundantly of the Holy Ghost? St. Thomas says that the rebel angels remained obstinate in sin, because they sinned in view of the light; and St. Bernard writes that God shall treat the sinful priest in a similar manner, that is, "the priest having become an angel of the Lord, must expect either the reward or the reprobation of an angel."

Our Lord said to St. Bridget: "I see on earth pagans and Jews, but I see none so wicked as priests; they are guilty of

the same sin that Lucifer committed.” And let it be observed in this place, that, according to Innocent III, “many things are venial sins in seculars that are mortal in ecclesiastics.”

To priests we may also apply what St. Paul says in another place: *“The earth that drinketh in the rain which cometh often upon it, and bringeth forth thorns and briers, is reprobate and very near unto a curse, whose end is to be burnt.”* (Heb 6:11) What showers of grace has the priest continually received from God! And, after all, he brings forth briers and thorns instead of fruit. Miserable man! he is on the point of being reprobated, of receiving the final malediction, and of being sent in the end, after so many favors from God, to burn forever in the fire of hell. But what dread has the priest that turns his back on God of the fire of hell? Priests who fall into sin lose light, and lose also the fear of God. Behold, the Lord himself assures us of this. If I be a master, where is My fear, saith the Lord of Hosts, to you, O Priests, that despise My name? St. Bernard says that priests falling from on high remain so immersed in their malice, that they forget God, and disregard the divine threats to such a degree that the danger of their damnation has no longer any terror for them. But why should that excite our wonder, since by committing

sin the priest falls from an immense height into a deep pit, in which he is bereft of light, and therefore despises all things; verifying in himself the words of the Wise Man: *“The impious, when he has arrived within the depths of sin, thinks little of it. But ill repute and disgrace follow him.”* (Prov 18:3) The wicked man: this wicked man is the priest that sins through malice: into the depth; by a single mortal sin, the priest sinks to the depth of misery and remains in blindness; contemneth; and thus he despises chastisements, admonitions, the presence of Jesus Christ who is near him on the altar: he despises all, and

blushes not to surpass in malice Judas, the betrayer of Jesus Christ.

Of this our Lord complained to St. Bridget: “Such priests are not my priests, but they are real traitors.” Yes, real traitors, who avail themselves of the celebration of Mass to outrage Jesus Christ by sacrilege. But what shall be the unhappy end of such priests? Behold it: *“In the land of the saints*

he hath done wicked things, and he shall not see the glory of the Lord.” (Isa 26:10)

The end shall be, first, abandonment of God, and then the fire of hell. But, Father, some may say, this language is too terrific. Do you, they ask, wish to drive us to despair? I answer with St. Augustine, “being myself frightened,

““The greater the height to which God has raised them, the more precipitous and ruinous shall be their fall”

(St. Bernard)

I frighten others.” Then a priest who has offended God since his ordination may ask, Is there no hope of pardon for me? Yes, there is hope, if he repents and entertains a horror for the evil he has done.

Let such a priest, then, thank the Lord with his whole heart if he, too, finds himself aided by divine grace; but he must instantly give himself to that God who calls him. “Let us listen to the Lord,” says St. Augustine, “while he is calling us, lest he may turn a deaf ear to us when he judges us.”

III - Exhortation

From this day forward, let us, dearly beloved priests, learn to esteem our noble elevation, and regarding ourselves as ministers of a God, let us blush to become the slaves of sin and of the devil, says St. Peter Damian. Let us not imitate the folly of seculars that think only of the present. *“It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.”* (Heb 9:27) We must all appear at this judgment: We must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the proper things of the body, according as he hath done. To each of us the Judge shall say: Give an account of thy stewardship. That is, of your priesthood; how have you

exercised it? for what end have you exercised it?

Dearly beloved priest, were you now to be judged, would you feel satisfied and content with the manner in which you have discharged your ministry? Or would you not say: When he shall examine, what shall I answer him? When the Lord chastises a people, the chastisement begins with the priest, for he is the cause of the sins of the people, either by his bad example, or by his negligence in attending to their sanctification. Hence the Lord says,

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(St. Jerome)

“The time is that judgment should begin at the house of God.” (1 Pet 4:17) In the slaughter described by Ezechiel, God wished the priests to be the first victims of his vengeance: *“Begin ye at my sanctuary.”* (9:6) That is, says Origen, “with the priests.” A most severe judgment, says the Wise Man, for them that bear rule.

“And unto whom,” says Jesus Christ, *“much is given, of him much shall be required.”* (Lk 12:48) The author of the “Imperfect Work” says, “On the day of judgment the secular will receive the priestly stole, but the sinful priest will be deprived of the priestly dignity, and ranked among infidels and hypocrites.” *“Hear ye this, O priests!”* says the Prophet Hosea, *“for there is judgment against you.”* (Hos 5:1)

And as the judgment of priests is most rigorous, so also shall their damnation be most miserable. *“With a double destruction destroy them,”* says Jeremias (17:18). A Council of Paris repeats these words of St. Jerome, already cited: “Great is the dignity of priests, but if they happen to fall into sin, very great will also be their ruin.” And St. John Chrysostom says, “If a priest were to commit only the sins of which the simple faithful become guilty, he would incur not a similar but a more rigorous chastisement.” It was revealed to St. Bridget that priests who are sinners “will find themselves deeper in hell than all the other damned.” Oh! how great the rejoicing of the devils when a priest enters hell? All hell is in confusion to meet the priest who comes. *“Hell below,”* says Isaias, *“was in an uproar to meet thee at thy coming... All the princes of the earth have risen from their thrones.”* All the princes of that land of woe rise up to give the first place of torment to the damned priest. *“All, continues the prophet, shall answer and say to thee: Thou also art wounded as well as we, thou art become like unto us.”* (Isa 14:9.10) O priest, you once ruled over us, you have so often made the Incarnate Word descend on the altars,

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you have delivered so many souls from hell, and now you have become like us, miserable and tormented as we are: Thy pride is brought to hell. Your pride, by which you have despised God and your neighbor, has in the end brought you to this land of misery, *“Your arrogance has been dragged down to Hell. Your body has fallen dead. The moths will be strewn beneath you, and the worms will be your covering.”* (Isa

14:11) As a king you shall have a royal couch and a purple robe: behold, fire and worms shall forever corrode your body and your soul. Oh! how shall the devils then scoff at all the Masses, sacraments, and sacred functions of the damned priest!

Be attentive, dearly beloved priests, for the devils tempt one priest more than a hundred seculars; because a priest that is lost brings with him many seculars to

hell. St. Chrysostom says, “To take away the shepherds is to scatter the flocks.” In a work that is found among the works of St. Cyprian we read this very just remark: “In war, the combatants endeavor first of all to kill the enemy’s commanders.” St. Jerome adds: “The devil does not go in search of infidels and those that are outside” (that is, who are outside of the sanctuary); he looks for booty in the Church of Christ, for according to

Habacuc they are his choice food.” To the devils, the souls of ecclesiastics are the most delicious food.

**[What follows may serve
to supply motives of compunction
in the act of contrition]**

Dearly beloved priests, the Lord appears to say to you what he said to the Jewish people: What have I done to thee? Or in what have I grieved thee? Answer me? Tell me, what evil have I done you: have I not, on the contrary, bestowed many favors upon you?

I brought thee out of the land of Egypt. I have drawn you out of the world, I have selected you from among so many seculars, to make you my priest, my minister, my familiar: thou hast prepared a cross for thy Saviour : and you, for a miserable interest, for a vile pleasure, have again nailed me to the cross.

I fed thee with manna in the desert : in the wilderness of this earth I have fed you every morning with the celestial

manna, that is, with my divine flesh, and with my blood : and thou hast beaten me with buffets and stripes.

What more should I have done to thee, and have not done? I have planted thee for my most beautiful vineyard; and thou hast proved very bitter to me. I have destined you for the vineyard of my delight, planting in you so many lights and so many graces, that they might produce sweet and precious fruits; and you have given me only fruits of bitterness.

I gave thee the royal sceptre. I have made you a king, and have exalted you above all the kings of the earth: and thou hast given me a crown of thorns, by the bad thoughts to which you have consented.

I raised thee on high. I have raised you to the dignity of my representative, and have given you the keys of heaven ; I have, in fine, made you, as it were, a God on earth: And thou hast hanged me on the gibbet of the cross, I and you have despised all my graces, my friendship, nailing me again to the cross, etc.



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