

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

The Dignity and Sanctity of the Parish Priest

By Saint John of Avila

Many things are required to fulfill well the obligation of the office of pastor of souls. Looking at the priestly dignity attached to the office, it is fitting to have fervent and efficacious prayer, and also sanctity, according to what has been said above. All of this will be more advantageous in the parish priest in light of the greater and more particular obligation he has of giving good example to his parishioners

and interceding for them before the divine majesty. He must do this with the affection of a father and a mother for their children, since he is called father of his parishioners. The many diverse occupations that his office demands indicate how much the priest needs prayer. It is not easy to have prayer and devotion in the midst of many occupations, even if they are good. For the same reason, it becomes necessary that his

sanctity be very firm. For there are in his office many occasions for losing sanctity, as reason and experience show. St. John Chrysostom ponders this, and St. Augustine is amazed that those in this office have any virtue left standing.

Sanctification in the Ministry

Apart from the obligation he has to be a good priest and to keep watch over his own conscience, the parish priest also has the office of helping and teaching the souls of the faithful.

As St. Gregory says, this requires no less sanctity than to offer the holy sacrifice of the altar. Pondering this, St. Chrysostom remarks that the one entrusted with souls has been entrusted with the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, so that he might care for it and strengthen it. He must make it beautiful with such virtues that it may be worthy of being called the body of such a head as Jesus Christ is. St. Paul says the same, in a sentence in these words: *For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ* (2 Cor

Saint John of Avila

He was born in January 1499. After John's parents died and left him as their sole heir to a considerable fortune, he distributed his money to the poor. In 1527, he traveled to Seville, hoping to become a missionary in Mexico. The archbishop of that city persuaded him to stay and spread the faith in Andalusia. During nine years of work there, he developed a reputation as an engaging

preacher, a perceptive spiritual director, and a wise confessor.

Because John was not afraid to denounce vice in high places, he was investigated by the Inquisition but was cleared in 1533.

He was friends with Saints Francis Borgia, Ignatius of Loyola, John of God, John of the Cross, Peter of Alcantara, and Teresa of Avila. John's mystical writings have been translated into several languages.

He was beatified in 1894, canonized in 1970, and declared a doctor of the Church on October 7, 2012. St. John of Avila's liturgical feast is celebrated on May 10.



11:2). It is a great task for a man to be charged with teaching the spouse of such a great king, instructing her in customs that will give joy to the king. This is especially so, since she is weak in virtue, without much prudence, and not very obedient to her mentor.

Thus, the Lord commands the pastors of the rational sheep that they strengthen what is weak and heal what is sick, that they bind up what is broken and bring back the outcast, and that they seek the lost (cf Ez 34:4). For this, many and very good qualities are necessary. With reason did St. Gregory say that *the direction of souls is the art of arts*.

Much prudence is needed to know how to take medicine to such diverse people and to give what is suitable to each one. A lot of patience is needed to suffer the importunities of sheep, both wise and unwise. May God give him, as He gave to Jeremiah, a face as strong as diamond and flint so that he may not be overcome by the threats and evil deeds of those who do not want to be drawn away

from their sins or reprimanded for them, and do not want priests to carry out their office. It is good to be like the prophet who says, *I am filled with the strength of the Lord, that I might declare to Jacob his sin* (Mi 3:8). Fortitude is very necessary for those who hold public offices, but rarely possessed, because there are few untouched, more or less, by the desire to please their friends and the fear of displeasing their enemies.

Preaching and Study

The doctor must have knowledge of medicine in order to teach. What the pastor has to teach is the faith and Christian customs. In the beginning of the Church, it was the office of the deacon to catechize those who would become Christians, instructing them in the articles of the faith and purging them of the evil and worldly customs in which they had been raised as Gentiles.

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After they were baptized, it was the responsibility of the priest to enlighten them in the knowledge

of the holy sacraments, as St. Dionysius says, and to instruct them with wise admonitions for life, as Pope St. Clement said. But now that the office of deacons has ceased, it is the responsibility of the priest to teach the parishioners what they need to know to work for their salvation. In order that this be done fruitfully, the priest must be fairly learned in the law of God contained in His Sacred Scriptures, for in them is found what is useful for bringing about these effects. As St. Paul says, *All Scripture, inspired by God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice* (2 Tm 3:16). Thus, it is fitting that the parish priest should know Sacred Scripture—if not the difficult parts, then at least what is simple and straightforward.

The holy doctors were men enlightened by God and experienced in the care of spiritual infirmities. They have written many things useful for the diagnosis and healing of such infirmities, and many salutary prescriptions to preserve the health arrived at and to teach and persuade the people in the way of God. Therefore, it is good that

the priest be well read in the moral teaching of the saints. Without it, he will not understand the Scriptures with certainty.

He will also make many errors in the care of souls through not making use of the advice of the physicians God gave us.

Orientation and Direction

The priest is not only a physician and teacher; he is also a judge. To give sentences by which, in conformity with God's will, he opens and closes the kingdom to those in his charge, it is suitable for him also to have knowledge of particular things of conscience, treated in Councils, Canon Law, and summaries by men learned in this field. To fulfill

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his obligations well, much favor from the Lord is necessary and much diligence on the part of the curate. For, as the saints say, the same conditions that the Apostle demands of one who would be a good bishop, are demanded of one who would perform well the office of pastor, even if not with the same degree of perfection.

The office of watchman is also suitable for the priest, and for this reason, St. Paul called the priests of Ephesus bishops (cf Acts 20:28; 1 Tm 3; Ti 1:5f). They are also called pastors, and against them are directed the threats of the Lord against the shepherds who do not do what they should. Particularly, the apostle St. Peter speaks to them saying, *Let the elders who are among you...* (Acts 20:17, 28; cf Eph 4:11); or, according to the Greek, *presbyteros*, etc. In part, these run a greater risk than the bishops themselves do, because they have closer dealings with persons of different kinds. The closer the relationships are, the more vehement are the dangers they cause. For this reason, the priest has to be very mature in every virtue. This is especially so in the use of the holy sacrament of penance, for which he needs much prudence, charity, chastity, efficacy in word and fervent prayer. Above all, it is good for the priest to have true love for our Lord Jesus Christ. This love will cause the priest to have zeal so fervent that it will consume his heart with pain that God is offended. He will try to remove such offenses, so that God may be as honored and revered exteriorly in divine worship as interiorly in his heart. Toward God he has the

heart of a faithful son, and toward his parishioners, the heart of a true father and a true mother. Christian priests should be such that they do not need someone else to watch out for their souls because, as St. Gregory says, *Those for whom help from others is still necessary, are not to be promoted to the position of helping others.*

The Ministry of Confession

The ministry of physician of souls, which is incumbent upon the priest, is very close to that of confessors, even if they are not parish priests. This ministry must be carried out well. It is so important for the good of the Church, for if there were good confessors, a large part of the road toward reform of the Church would be covered. Sooner or later, all the faithful go to confession. If they should fall into the hands of ministers who have the art of treating souls and zeal for their salvation, it is certain that the Christian people would walk at a very different pace than they are now walking.

The qualities the confessor must have, whether he is a parish priest or not, are set forth in the Clementine *Dudum de sepulturis* in these words: *Let them take care to choose persons*

who are able, suitable, of proven character, discreet, modest, and skillful to carry out such a salutary ministry and office. In this holy sacrament, not only are infirm souls cured, but the dead are raised. As St. Bernard says, *The revival of the soul is a great sacrament.* Many times it turns out to be quite difficult to place the penitent in a reasonable disposition, so that he may be ready for the fruit of sacramental absolution. Therefore, the confessor needs much prudence, patience, and above all, charity, which make him groan and pray to the Lord and do penance, so that through his ministry he may give light and grace to his penitent. To carry out this office well, the Clementine decretal very justly requires the conditions already mentioned, and none of them is excessive.

Renewal

A comparison of the conditions required for good use of the ministry of parish priests and confessors,

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with the conditions of those who now exercise these ministries, causes deep sorrow. Amazingly, there may be someone who has them all. But many lack most of them, and others lack all of them. The good life required to exercise this ministry has been so lacking that it has been necessary to bring to the Inquisition things that happen between confessors and penitents. This has not been without cause. For experience has shown that such a crowd of people goes to bring charges about this to the judges of the faith, as usually are found at a great solemnity or great jubilee in a land of devout people. The judges have been informed of very ugly things, unworthy of being mentioned, and sufficient to provoke the wrath of God and to punish His people with severe blows. From this, it is possible to deduce the grave errors and intolerable havoc that such ministers have caused in souls, and the less they come forth to exterior judgment, so that they can be cured, the more dangerous they are.



**"Withdraw your heart from the world
before God takes your body from it."**

St. John of Avila



The Root of the Evil

If we consider the knowledge that these ministers are supposed to have, we have to say that there is none, as can be seen even by the blind. The prelates see this very thing. But if someone asks why they consent to such ministers, they respond, "You give us better ones and we will take them. We do not have others; we take the least bad ones of those we find." It appears as if the prelates have no obligation to educate good ministers (concerning which we will speak of later), and things being as they are, it is no wonder that we have the ministers we have. They have no formation and education and no preparation to attain virtue.

With the same freedom as they lived before they were ordained, they live after they are ordained. Where are they going to be taught cases of conscience and of moral conscience? There is no instruction in such things in the seven or more universities in the kingdoms of Castile. For this purpose, it is of little benefit that they instruct in Theology and Canon Law, for those who exercise the offices of parish priest and confessor are unwilling to undertake such long studies. Many lack the possibility of maintaining themselves in these universities, and if someone does have the means, he does not want to undertake the labors. If he does want to undertake the labors and comes out [of the university], he seeks to fly

to greater gains. He does not want to lower himself to the work of parish priests and of the confessional, unless it is to claim for himself some parish with a fat stipend, with as little fruit for the parishioners as comes from others who have no learning. In this way, just as Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the altar is treated most unworthily by His ministers, so His holy Mystical Body, which is the souls of the faithful, is badly shattered and deformed through the fault of evil ministers. Those who were supposed to be shepherds turn themselves into wolves and make

carnage of the souls of those they were supposed to bring to life.

They take care of their own comfort and interests and give of themselves very little for the benefit of their sheep. *And they took care of the wound of the daughter of my people disgracefully, saying, 'Peace, peace' and there was no peace* (Jer 6:14). They absolve one whom God does not absolve and with that *they strengthen the hands of the most wicked* (Jer 23:14). Thus, the office of caring for souls in confession and outside it, is carried out without fruit and provokes the wrath of God against His people.



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