

# *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

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## *The Priest Devoted to Mary (2nd part)*

**By Saint Joseph Cafasso**

It would be a great omission and at the same time a grave want of duty in a family, if the sons when about to leave and separate did not invite their mother to be present among them and if each one, filled with that affection that is proper in a son, did not vie with the others in showing his most ardent love, his most lively gratitude and his acknowledgment of his obligations, towards her. Forgetfulness to do so on the part of the sons would be regarded

as hardness of heart, ingratitude, or at very least, inexplicable thoughtlessness. I leave you to imagine what sorrow, what a painful wound, such an unexpected parting, such a want of delicacy and affection would cause in the mother's heart. Such it would be for us, sons, and in a certain manner for our good Mother, around Whom we have been gathered as one family during these holy days [this article is a conference given by the Saint for priests in 1860, the year

he died in the odor of sanctity], if we departed today without saying a word to her, without bidding her adieu, without saluting her and thanking her for all that she has done for us. In order then to fulfill so sacred and sweet a duty, I call her this evening, I invite her in the name of us all, to descend and remain among us, in order that she may deign to accept our most respectful salutation and to strengthen us with the assurance of her efficacious protection, so that we may one day be able to pay her our homage in person in the dear land of Paradise.

It is impossible to imagine a good, docile, obedient and respectful son,

a son who is a consolation and help in a house, without being at the same time truly affectionate towards his own mother, because this may be said to be what characterizes a good son and gives the clearest indication of all his virtues. If you see that a son is all heart, all love for his mother, really to make any sacrifice to please her, and resolved not to give her the least displeasure for all the good in the world, I am sure that without any further inquiry or investigation you will conclude immediately that he is a rare and virtuous son. The same can, it appears to me, be said in our case; and it has been said repeatedly by many

## Saint Joseph Cafasso

St Joseph Cafasso lived in the city of Turin, Italy, in the 19th century, and was known as a model of priestly life. He is famous for his pastoral care of criminals, especially those condemned to death. He stood by their side as they were led to the execution, bringing them to repentance by showing them the mercy and compassion of God. While working in the ecclesiastical college in the city, which was dedicated to forming diocesan priests, among



his students was another future saint, John Bosco, whom he had known from childhood. St Joseph was also known for guiding his flock with kindness and serenity. His fellow citizens had such high regard for this devout priest that they suggested he take a place in the legislative assembly. He refused, however, saying, "In the day of judgment, the Lord will ask me if I was a good priest, not a good deputy." His legacy can be seen in the deep devotion to the Saint, who died in Turin on June 23, 1860, at the age of 49.

others. Not only would it be a rare and difficult thing, but it would be almost impossible to imagine a good, virtuous, devoted priest, a priest who serves God, the Church and souls, without a tender affection for this beloved Mother; a priest who, according as this love goes on increasing in him, will at the same time make progress in the whole series of the other virtues, becoming more detached from the world, more zealous, patient, humble and pure. Therefore, whenever you happen to hear of a priest who is devoted to Mary, you need not inquire further, you may be sure then he cannot be otherwise than good, and perhaps of rare goodness too; but if, on the contrary, you come to know that a priest is cold and insensible in affection towards this Mother and to the sound of her name, you need not hope for much from him, for if he has not much affection for the Mother, he will not have much love for the Son, or much zeal for His glory, or for the salvation of souls. From this each one can see the obligation, the propriety, the importance and the necessity of speaking on this subject.

We shall therefore dwell this evening on this most sweet and consoling subject: on Mary, the most tender of mothers, the friend, the companion, the guide and confidant of the priest. And in order to know better and to savor with you this sweet and important material, I shall divide it into two parts:

in the first, we shall seek to find out who among priests are those who are devoted to Mary; and in the second, we shall see how happy and blessed the priest is who is truly devoted to Mary. It gives me great pleasure to speak of this great Lady; for what son does not take pleasure in, does not delight in speaking of his mother? My only grief is that my words are not equal to the merits and the heart of this Mother. Do you, my dear Fathers, supply for my want by adding your love and pious devotion, so that when concluding this retreat, I may not have to reproach myself with having rather obscured than exalted and amplified the honor and glory of a Mother to Whom I protest myself a debtor for all that I have received, or hope to receive from the Lord in time or eternity.

### **First Condition for True Devotion to Mary: an Exalted Idea of Her Greatness**

An essential condition which is required, and which forms the first step the priest must take in order to become truly devoted to Mary is that he should seek and endeavor to conceive and form for himself the most sublime and exalted idea possible of this great Mother, for it is impossible for a person to have a truly great affection for another without having also a great esteem.

### **The Devotion of the Laity to Mary**

Among the simple faithful are found many times good souls who have such an exalted idea of Mary that they experience towards her the greatest possible transport of devotion and fervor imaginable. For them, Mary is an object to which nothing can stand comparison, to which everything in creation is inferior. They know well that God is above everything, but as if not daring to treat with Him about domestic matters they turn their eyes to Mary and they attribute to her all that is great, beautiful, amiable and holy that they are able to express or imagine; from this comes the transport of lively warm-hearted affections towards her, the promptness and confidence with which they have recourse to her in every trouble and difficulty; from this source comes the eagerness and joy to celebrate all her feasts, to take part in all the practices that redound to her honor and glory.

### **The Priest's Devotion to Mary should Exceed That of the Laity**

If such is the case with the simple faithful, what should be the esteem and veneration of Mary by the priest who is the first and most beloved of her children? Is the disciple to be superior to the master, will the priest have to learn from the laity, the first born from

the youngest children? That must not be, my dear Fathers; it would be too humiliating a position, too opprobrious for a son of honor and character, such as the priest should be towards Mary, to be thus outdone by the laity. But what in the simple faithful is the fruit of pure faith and filial affection, must be in us priests something more; it must be the effect and the fruit of intimate and sincere conviction, so that our appreciation and esteem of Mary will not only make ourselves devoted and affectionate to her, but will put us in a position to confirm and strengthen in that devotion those who have it already, to inspire with it those who do not possess it; and, if occasion should arise, to uphold it and defend it against the ignorant and the proud who may scorn it or hold it up to ridicule or mockery. We have in the prayer of the great servant of Mary, St. Alphonsus Liguori, the first requisite of true devotion to Mary: "I pray Thee my Lady, that I may have true knowledge worthy of Thee." This is the first step the priest must take towards acquiring this devotion: to conceive lofty sentiments worthy of her, *De te vera et digna sapiam*, and to make his words and deeds conformable to his sentiments: *Vera et digna loquar, vera et digna diligam*.

### **The Exalted Dignity of Mary**

It is not given to us to grasp here below

who Mary is or to comprehend the loftiness of her vocation, the sublimity of her state, the eminent degree of her virtue, the greatness of her glory, the power of her arm. It would be necessary to know Who God is, in order to know what God has operated in Mary. This great Lady is a mystery, and God alone Who was the Author of her can comprehend her and praise her in a worthy manner: *Deus solus potest illam pro meritis laudare, qui mira . . . fecit in illa.* Let it suffice to say that, outside God Himself, there is not either on earth, or in Heaven, either among men, or among Saints, either among the Angels or the Seraphim, a being who, in greatness, power, prerogatives, virtue and merit, I will not say, surpasses her, but even equals her or comes near her. She is so great that the great Doctor, St. Bonaventure, goes as far as to say that not even God could go further and make her greater: *Majorem mundum, facere potest Deus, majus coelum, majorem matrem quam Matrem Dei non posset facere.* He gives the following reason for this: the position of Mother is relative to the quality of son, and hence to have a greater mother we should have a greater son, which in the case of Mary is not only impossible, but intrinsically repugnant. The Angelic Doctor, the most severe critic of all inaccurate expressions, confirms this when he says: "The Blessed Virgin, from the fact that she is Mother of God, has a certain

infinite dignity from the Infinite Good which God is; and from this aspect nothing greater can be made."

This quality of Mother of God it was that inspired those prophecies and figures by which she was foreshadowed and delineated by the Prophets; this was what inspired the praises and eulogies with which the Fathers and Doctors of all ages exalted and magnified her; this was the origin of all those eminent and glorious titles and names with which the Church invokes her and proposes her for the devotion of the faithful; this, in fine, is the foundation for all the manifestations of honor and homage which peoples of all countries and all ages have vied with one another in offering to this great Mother. And will the priest, the first born among her children, be the only one to stand idle and unconcerned in the midst of such manifestations of heart-felt affection? Will the priest be the only one to stand looking on coldly and indifferently to this rivalry of the people without doing anything himself? Such an attitude, my dear Fathers, would be too opprobrious for a son, and too painful for a mother. The name, the sight, the thought of this Mother should be for us, after God, the object of all our esteem and veneration, the focus of all our attention. So long as we are here below, it will not be given to us to arrive at understanding the greatness of Mary; only when we go to Heaven, shall we see and study and

admire this wonder of Divine power, this mystical ark of infinite wisdom. But in the meantime, till we get there, let us raise our voices in unison with that of our Mother to praise and glorify God Who has been pleased to exalt her so much: Magnificat anima mea Dominum... Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est.

### **Fruits of Devotion to Our Blessed Lady**

What shall I say to you about the happiness of a priest who is devoted to Mary? I do not intend to draw a picture of all that is reserved on earth for a son devoted to Mary, for it is impossible to conceive here below what things the maternal heart of Mary is capable of doing for her sons; only in Heaven will it be given to us to see and to measure her goodness and power. I shall merely recall to you that the help and intercession of Mary is not merely a pious belief, the effect of excessive, ill-directed piety, but is, as you know, a dogma of faith. [Emphasis added.] The authority of the Church, the unanimous consent of the Fathers, the voice of all the ages leave not the slightest doubt on this point; those mighty helps of Mary can therefore not only be hoped for but can be counted upon, specially by us priests, as a thing that is certain and unfailling, so long as we do nothing to deprive ourselves of them. This

being certain, I shall mention for our consolation and comfort three special favors that we priests should expect from Mary, which are: the spirit of our ministry, a blessing on our labors and a great crown in Heaven proportioned to the love and zeal which we have had for her on earth.

### **1- The True Spirit of the Priestly Vocation**

It happens often that a priest is assailed and troubled by the fear of having been mistaken about his vocation, especially when his ministry, whether through his own fault or the fault of others, has been useless and sterile. There is no denying that this is a terrible thought. I shall therefore speak more willingly on the point and say that we may banish every kind of uneasiness and lay aside all fear, if we are truly devoted to Mary, for we may be certain that we have not made a mistake, since devotion to Mary is one of the first and essential signs of a sacerdotal vocation. The spirit of Mary is the same as that of her Divine Son; whoever belongs to her cannot therefore be far from Him. Even if it should happen that a priest entered the ministry without a vocation, if he sets himself to become a true child of Mary and succeeds in doing so, you may be certain that this good Mother of mercy will obtain from her Divine Son that which he had not; that spirit, those gifts,

in a word, that combination of graces which will make him a true minister of the Lord, just as if he had been really called from the beginning. Although he may have lost his way, although he may have been tossed about on a stormy sea, if he has recourse to Mary, he will reach the port and be saved: He that shall find me shall find life; I love them that love me. And what has a good priest to fear or dread when in every difficulty, in every trouble, in every embarrassment, he can say and repeat to himself: I am a son of Mary, it is God Who has placed me in her hands, she has made me secure and I am certain that I shall be saved.

## **2- Assistance and Blessing in all our Labors**

The second special fruit of our devotion to Mary is her assistance and blessing in all our labors in our ministry.

What heart was there ever in the world more zealous than the heart of Mary which cooperated in everything that her Divine Son wrought for the good of souls, and which itself felt at the foot of the Cross that ardor, that thirst with which He burned as He died. Ah! with what heart, with what promptness she will give her assistance to her son who demands it! You know better that I do the wonders and miracles of zeal that so many holy priests have wrought with the aid of Mary. The best fishers of souls have been always devoted to Mary, and it

can be said frankly that the fruit of their sweat and labor increased in proportion to their devotion to Mary. How many accounts of conversions of sinners do we not find recorded in history to have been operated through Mary! And if we ourselves have sometimes done a little good, if we have gained some souls for her Son, if we only reflect a little, we will see the hand of Mary in it. A feast, a sermon on Mary, some pious practice in her honor, a grace received, sometimes just a look at her image may have been what enticed her and won her assistance. It has happened to ourselves more than once in the ministry that we expended both energy and time in vain to snatch from the hands of persons objects either evil or dangerous; that we found their hearts impervious to every reason and adamant against every loving attempt; but when the help of Mary was invoked and they were asked to give the object as a gift to her and not to refuse it to their good Mother, that they immediately yielded and surrendered. Let the priest therefore take Mary as his inseparable companion in his whole ministry; in the confessional with Mary, with her in the church and out of the church, in the house and out of the house, with people in health and with the sick; in fine, let him never give the signal of battle without invoking the aid of Mary. Let an Ave Maria, an aspiration, or even a look with faith towards an image of Mary, be the signal of combat, the first shot

of the battle, and then let him not fear. She who has already conquered so many times, who already counts nineteen centuries of victories and triumphs, will never allow anyone who trusts in her to lose the battle.

### 3- A Special Crown in Heaven

Finally, the priest devoted to Mary will have a special crown in Heaven proportioned to what he has done for her on earth: “He that honoreth his mother is as one that layeth up a treasure.” If such is the merit of a son who honors his earthly mother that he is compared by the Holy Spirit to a person who accumulates riches and treasures, what are we to say of a priest, of that son of Mary who spends and consumes his own life for her honor and glory? What treasures, what riches, what joys in Heaven! Every word said, every step taken, every labor endured for this good Mother will be remunerated, everything will get its reward in Heaven: “They that explain me shall have life everlasting.”

My dear Fathers and brothers in Christ, I shall conclude with this consoling thought: If you wish to walk securely and be certain of your salvation, if you aspire to a great crown in Heaven that will never fade, love and honor Mary, and strive to make her known, loved and honored by others. A son who has honored Mary will never perish. Let us cherish all those pious practices, those ways of paying her homage, which the Church approves and recommends in her honor. Let us speak often of her and from our hearts; let us show all the way to honor her, so that every heart on earth and every tongue will have an affection, a word of praise to offer to this Mother. Happy the priest and happy the people who are devoted to Mary. I shall finish with the beautiful words of the devout author of *Vita Sacerdotalis*: *Beatus ille sacerdos qui servus est Mariae, ipsique servos congregat! Beatus Populus qui illam colit! O Maria, serviant tibi populi; honorant te tribus Det mihi Dominus ut cullum tuum quocunque dilatate possim et hostes tuos debellare.* Amen.



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