

# *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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## *Being a Priest as a Gift of God*

**By Saint John of Avila**

Among all the works that the Divine Majesty accomplishes in the Church through the ministry of men, the priestly office holds the primacy of excellence and obliges the greatest thanksgiving and esteem. Through the priestly ministry, bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. His divine person is then present through a real presence under the same appearances of bread as were there before the

consecration. It is very good to recognize this favor in order to give thanks to the Lord who accomplishes it, and also in order to use it well. As St. Ambrose says, this cannot be done unless the favor is first recognized. But who will have vision keen enough to fix his eyes on the abyss of the splendor of God, from whose heart such a work proceeds? So full of marvels is this work and so revelatory of His ineffable knowledge, immense power,

and infinite goodness, that it is called the *glory of God*, to use the expression of the glorious St. Ignatius.

If we try to compare the incomparable sublimity of the priestly office, it will be like comparing a courtier of the king's chamber, who deals with the king's own person, with a peasant who needs the help of this favorite of the king. The peasant kneels before the courtier, kissing his hands and humbly begging his intercession with the king with whom the courtier deals. If we want to compare priests with kings—even though they are

monarchs—they exceed them to the same degree as gold exceeds lead, as St. Ambrose puts it.

### **The Opinion of the People of God**

Earthly men, whether of low or high station, whose power is over bodies and bodily things, should not be offended by being surpassed by the priests of God, whose power is over souls. They have the power to open or close heaven to souls and, what is more, they have power over God himself. They bring Him to the altar and to their hands.

## **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.



Even the angels of heaven, including the highest of the seraphim, recognize the advantage of men on earth who are ordained as priests. These angels acknowledge that, even though they are higher in nature and blessed with the vision of God, they do not have power to consecrate God as the poor priest has.

When in the hands of the priest they see the very Son of God whom they adore and praise in heaven with profound humility and much trembling, they are amazed at the divine goodness that so extends itself. Rejoicing greatly in the happiness of priests, once and many times, with deep desire, they say, *Priests of the Lord, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever* (Dan 3:84). Seeing priests so honored by God, the angels also honor them and hear with trembling the holy words that come from their mouths. They adore their very King and Lord in the priest's hands, as once and many times they adored Him in the arms of the Virgin Mary. Understanding this, who will not exclaim with the Prophet David, *Who will declare the powers of the Lord? Who will set forth all his praises?* (Ps 106:2). Who will not say, *Come and see the works of God, who is most kind and gracious towards His priests* (Ps 45:9)? Through the ministry of priests, God

is not content to convert *the sea into dry land* (Ps 65:6), as He did through the hand of His servant Moses. Rather He converts bread and wine into the body and blood of God himself. Oh, great goodness of God that so exalts priests and *raises them up from the dust and the dunghill* (cf Ps 112:7). He gives them power, not only like the princes of His people, but even more, so that they may do what princes cannot do!

### Mary and the Priestly Ministry

What more remains when a poor worm of a man can be so lifted up from the earth? The only thing that remains is to compare him with the Blessed Virgin, Mother of the Lord, who is placed higher than angels and men. We shall find that, although in some things the Virgin surpasses priests, in others they are equal to her, and in still others, they surpass her. Who will not be ecstatic at this favor that is beyond the human being's capacity to understand? The Blessed Virgin Mary gave the Word of God His being as man, begetting Him from her most pure blood and becoming His true natural mother. In this no one was, is, or will be her equal. But the sacramental being which the priest gives to God made man, through so exalted a means,

is similar to what Mary gave. It is a being that at first the Word did not have. Therefore, the priest is not called the father or mother of God, but a minister of a new being that the Lord previously lacked.

But there is an advantage in which the priest surpasses the Holy Virgin.

Only once did she give Him His human being, whereas the priest gives Him His sacramental being every day and as many times as he wants, whenever he does what must be done to consecrate validly. She begot Christ possible, mortal and who came to live in poverty, humility and scorn. Priests consecrate Christ in glory, radiant, immortal and impassible. Having completed the time of His arduous pilgrimage

and His work of serving men, He ascended to heaven and is now reigning over every creature, adored and revered by all. Being on a throne of such Majesty, He returns to the hands of the priest through the

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words of consecration to be enclosed within the small host. Despite the brief space of time in which the Mass is said, it fulfills that honorable word said of the day in which Joshua commanded the sun and the moon not to move and they obeyed. They did it in this way: God obeyed the

word of the man, and so it turned out that that day was much longer than all the others were.

The moment of the consecration is brief, if we consider the time it takes. But if we look at the work that God accomplishes through the hands of man, the time is much longer than that other day and even than a thousand other days. There creatures obeyed the word of Joshua (Jos 10:13-14), because God commanded them to obey it. But

here, the Lord Himself is the one who comes at the call of the priest. He is present in the consecrated host with such firmness that He will consent to the destruction of heaven and earth rather than be

absent from the consecrated host. This is because He holds the truth of His word in higher esteem than the value of creatures. So great a truth is this that if the body of the Lord were not "in the nature of the things," and the words of consecration were said by that very fact, His body and blood would be made again, because the truth of God's words is not lacking. His words accomplish what they signify.

### **In the Mystery of Christ**

These and other considerations were in the mind of St. Gregory when he said: *O venerable dignity of priests in whose hands, as in the womb of the Virgin, the Son of God is incarnate. O sacred and heavenly mystery, which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit celebrate through us! In one and the same moment, the same God who presides in heaven is in our hands in the Sacrament of the altar. Heaven looks on in wonder; earth gazes with admiration; man reveres; hell looks in horror; the devil begins to tremble; and the angelic height venerates with all its strength.* There are also the words of St. Bernard: *O venerable sanctity of these*

*hands; O happy exercise; O truly the joy of the world! Christ the priest deals with Christ, the Son of God, who delights to be with the children of men. Who has seen anything like this? "He who created me without me, is created through me".* Let us go no farther into such a deep ocean. For it is intolerable to remain silent, and yet impossible to speak in

accord with the dignity of this grace. Honoring it more than investigating it, and raising the heart to God, let us say many times, Praised be God; blessed be God! Let many thanks be given to God because He has given such great power to men! Such words are very appropriate for this sacred mystery since it is called a sacrifice of praise, a mystical blessing, and Eucharist, a word that means the action of thanksgiving. For when the Lord instituted this admirable mystery, He blessed and gave thanks to the Father, because He knew that men could not give thanks, or rather could not give the thanks that were suitable. Therefore, knowing the value of the grace, He gave thanks. He exercised His pontifical office, to which it pertains to intercede with the Father for us for what we need, and to give thanks to the Father for what

comes to us through His prayer. *To Him be glory forever. Amen.* (Rv 1:6)

### The Dignity of Serving

Those who look superficially at high offices without a deeper consideration of the obligations they involve, are deceived and more than that, they are greatly harmed. Dazzled by the exterior splendor which attracts the eye, they throw themselves without reflection into what appears from the outside to be so greatly honored, delightful and certain. But afterwards, it turns out to be very dangerous for them and a cause of grave condemnation, because they have accepted an obligation for which they have neither merit nor strength. The sweeter it was for them to accept the office, the more bitter is the cost. Although too late, they come to understand how much greater care and presence it takes for one who walks on the heights to avoid falling. They also understand how much more serious it is to fall from a height than to fall while

Oh, how quickly we pass over this business and how little we feel the obligation it demands of us! How little fear we have of placing ourselves into such an office and how little care for carrying it out well once we have it!

walking on level ground. It would be good for anyone who receives a high office to consider the strict accounting to be rendered. Because, the higher the station of the wife, the greater the responsibility of the husband in fulfilling his obligations to her.

### Priestly Sanctity: Living What We Are

The priestly office is very high, as has been said. St. Ambrose expresses this: *Nothing in this world is more excellent than the priesthood. But as he also says: What we are by profession, let us demonstrate in action rather than by name. Let the name be appropriate to the action, and let the action correspond with the name. Do not let the name be an empty word and an immense crime; do not let it be a sublime honor and a deformed way of life. Do not let it be a deifying profession and an illicit action; do not let it be a religious covering and an irreligious fruit. Do not let it be the highest grade and ugly excess; do not let the seat be*

*very sublime and the conscience of the priest be found to be base. Finally, high office is a monstrous thing in the unworthy; also monstrous are a high station and a low life, as St. Bernard says, A monstrous thing is the highest degree when the spirit is the lowest, the highest place and the lowest way of life.*

If the priest wants to know the wealth of virtue necessary for fulfilling well the obligations of such a high and holy office, let him hear the Holy Church in the Offertory of the Mass of the Blessed Sacrament: *The priests of the Lord offer incense and bread to God; therefore they shall be holy to their God.* The Church took these words from what the Lord said to the priests of the Old Law, *You shall be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy* (Prv 21:14). If we hear these words with the faith and reverence due to them and consider our great weakness, they will cause us great confusion. For we see what great sanctity is asked of us, and it may be that we do not even possess average goodness. Oh, how quickly we pass over this business and how little we feel the obligation it demands of us!

It is fitting for the priest to pray because he is a mediator between God and men. So that his prayer may not be without fruit, he offers the gift that calms God's anger, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

How little fear we have of placing ourselves into such an office and how little care for carrying it out well once we have it! May it please God that at some point we feel compunction and supply with tears for what we lack of the required sanctity.

Some may think that too much holiness is asked of priests. But if they hear the reason for it, perhaps they will see that even if such sanctity were not demanded, it could justly be demanded.

### **Facing God and Men: Prayer and Sacrifice**

Do you ask, Mother Church, that we, your priests, be holy? Why impose a burden so great that even hearing about it makes one tremble? She declares the answer, saying, *The priests offer incense and bread to God.* Is it such a great thing to incense the altar and place the loaves of proposition upon the table of the temple? O God, give me strength! Who would think that God would require holiness in His ministers to do something for which an average

purity seems enough? But it is as with other things of Old Testament times. Externally they appeared to be of little importance, but, within themselves, they were carrying very precious mysteries. So the incense and bread were pointing to the priestly ministry of the New Law. This ministry consists in offering to the Lord the incense of pleasing and efficacious prayer to calm His anger, and in consecrating and offering the bread that came down from heaven, Our Lord Jesus Christ. As far as the heavens are above the earth, and much more than that, He exceeds the bread and sacrifice of the Old Law.

O God, give me strength! What a great business are holy prayer and consecration and offering the body of Jesus Christ! The holy Church joins them together because for actions

and beings of such worth to be done well, they have to go together.

It is fitting for the priest to pray because he is a mediator between God and men. So that his prayer may not be without fruit, he offers the gift that calms God's anger, Jesus Christ, our Lord. To him apply the words, *a hidden gift extinguishes wrath*. The priest has the obligation to pray, not in any way he wants, but with great quiet and a fragrance delightful to God, as physical incense is to men. Since this obligation is so neglected, and even unknown, as though it did not exist, it will be helpful to speak about it at some length. If we do this with light drawn from the Word of God and the sayings of His saints, our blindness will be enlightened and, recognizing our obligation, we will then be moved to ask the Lord for strength to accomplish it.



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