

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 15 Spiritual Diseases of Priests

By Pope Francis

[Extracts from an address of Pope Francis to the Roman Curia, 22/12/2014]

I would like to mention some probable diseases and temptations which weaken our service to the Lord. I think a “listing” of these diseases – along the lines of the Desert Fathers who used to draw up such lists – will help us to prepare for the sacrament of Reconciliation.

1. **The disease of thinking we are “immortal”, “immune” or downright “indispensable”,** neglecting the need for regular check-ups. A Curia which is not self-critical, which does not keep up with things, which does not seek to be more fit, is a sick body. A simple visit to the cemetery might help us see the names of many people who thought they were immortal, immune and indispensable! It is the

disease of the rich fool in the Gospel, who thought he would live forever (cf. Lk 12:13-21), but also of those who turn into lords and masters, and think of themselves as above others and not at their service. It is often an effect of the pathology of power, from a superiority complex, from a narcissism which passionately gazes at its own image and does not see the image of God on the face of others, especially the weakest and those most in need. The antidote to this plague is the grace of realizing that we are sinners and able to say heartily: “We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty” (Lk 17:10).

2. Another disease is the “Martha complex”, excessive busy-ness. It is found in those who immerse themselves in work and inevitably

neglect “the better part”: sitting at the feet of Jesus (cf. Lk 10:38-42). Jesus called his disciples to “rest a while” (cf. Mk 6:31) for a reason, because neglecting needed rest leads to stress and agitation. A time of rest, for those who have completed their work, is necessary, obligatory and should be taken seriously: by spending time with one’s family and respecting holidays as moments of spiritual and physical recharging. We need to learn from Qohelet that “for everything there is a season” (3:1-15).

3. Then too there is the disease of mental and spiritual “petrification”. It is found in those who have a heart of stone, the “stiff-necked” (Acts 7:51-60), in those who in the course of time lose their interior serenity, alertness and daring, and hide under



Pope Francis

Francis, also called Francis I, original name Jorge Mario Bergoglio, (born December 17, 1936, Buenos Aires, Argentina), the bishop of Rome and the leader of the Roman Catholic Church (2013–). He was the first pope from the Western Hemisphere, the first from South America, and the first from the Jesuit order.

a pile of papers, turning into paper pushers and not men of God (cf. Heb 3:12). It is dangerous to lose the human sensitivity that enables us to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice! This is the disease of those who lose “the sentiments of Jesus” (cf. Phil 2:5-11), because as time goes on their hearts grow hard and become incapable of loving unconditionally the Father and our neighbour (cf. Mt 22:34-35). Being a Christian means “having the same sentiments that were in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5), sentiments of humility and unselfishness, of detachment and generosity.

4. The disease of excessive planning and of functionalism. When the apostle plans everything down to the last detail and believes that with perfect planning things will fall into place, he becomes an accountant or an office manager. Things need to be prepared well, but without ever falling into the temptation of trying to contain and direct the freedom of the Holy Spirit, which is always greater and more flexible than any human planning (cf. Jn 3:8). We contract this disease because “it is always more easy and comfortable to settle in our own sedentary and unchanging ways. In truth, the Church shows her fidelity to the Holy Spirit to the

extent that she does not try to control or tame him... to tame the Holy Spirit! He is freshness, imagination, and newness”.

5. The disease of poor coordination. Once its members lose communion among themselves, the body loses its harmonious functioning and its equilibrium; it then becomes an orchestra which produces noise: its members do not work together and lose the spirit of fellowship and teamwork. When the foot says to the arm: “I don’t need you”, or the hand says to the head, “I’m in charge”, they create discomfort and scandal.

6. There is also a “spiritual Alzheimer’s disease”. It consists in losing the memory of our personal “salvation history”, our past history with the Lord and our “first love” (Rev 2:4). It involves a progressive decline in the spiritual faculties which in the long or short run greatly handicaps a person by making him incapable of doing anything on his own, living in a state of absolute dependence on his often imaginary perceptions. We see it in those who have lost the memory of their encounter with the Lord; in those who no longer see life’s meaning in “deuteronomic” terms; in those who are completely caught up in the present moment, in their

passions, whims and obsessions; in those who build walls and routines around themselves, and thus become more and more the slaves of idols carved by their own hands.

7. The disease of rivalry and vainglory. When appearances, the colour of our clothes and our titles of honour become the primary object in life, we forget the words of Saint Paul: “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). This is a disease which leads us

to be men and woman of deceit, and to live a false “mysticism” and a false “quietism”. Saint Paul himself defines such persons as “enemies of the cross of Christ” because “they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil 3:19).

8. The disease of existential schizophrenia. This is the disease of those who live a double life, the fruit of that hypocrisy typical of the mediocre and of a progressive spiritual

emptiness which no doctorates or academic titles can fill. It is a disease which often strikes those who abandon pastoral service and restrict themselves to bureaucratic matters, thus losing contact with reality, with concrete people. In this way they create their own parallel world, where they set aside all that they teach with severity to others and begin to live a hidden and often dissolute life. For this most serious disease conversion is most urgent and indeed indispensable (cf. Lk 15:11-32).

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9. The disease of gossiping, grumbling and back-biting. I have already spoken many

times about this disease, but never enough. It is a grave illness which begins simply, perhaps even in small talk, and takes over a person, making him become a “sower of weeds” (like Satan) and in many cases, a cold-blooded killer of the good name of our colleagues and confrères. It is the disease of cowardly persons who lack the courage to speak out directly, but instead speak behind other people’s backs. Saint Paul admonishes us to do all things without grumbling



or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent” (Phil 2:14-15). Brothers, let us be on our guard against the terrorism of gossip!

10. The disease of idolizing superiors.

This is the disease of those who court their superiors in the hope of gaining their favour. They are victims of careerism and opportunism; they honour persons and not God (cf. Mt 23:8-12). They serve thinking only of what they can get and not of what they should give. Small-minded persons, unhappy

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and inspired only by their own lethal selfishness (cf. Gal 5:16-25). Superiors themselves could be affected by this disease, when they court their collaborators in order to obtain their submission, loyalty and psychological dependency, but the end result is a real complicity.

11. The disease of indifference to others.

This is where each individual thinks only of himself and loses sincerity and warmth of human relationships. When the most knowledgeable person

does not put that knowledge at the service of his less knowledgeable colleagues. When we learn something and then keep it to ourselves rather than sharing it in a helpful way with others. When out of jealousy or deceit we take joy in seeing others fall instead of helping them up and encouraging them.

12. The disease of a lugubrious face.

Those glum and dour persons who think that to be serious we have to put on a face of melancholy and severity, and treat others – especially those we consider our inferiors – with rigour, brusqueness and arrogance. In fact, a show of severity and sterile pessimism are frequently symptoms of fear and insecurity. An apostle must make an effort to be courteous, serene, enthusiastic and joyful, a person who transmits joy everywhere he goes. A heart filled with God is a happy heart which radiates an infectious joy: it is immediately evident! So let us not lose that joyful, humorous and even self-deprecating spirit which makes people amiable even in difficult situations. How

beneficial is a good dose of humour! We would do well to recite often the prayer of St. Thomas More. I say it every day, and it helps.

13. The disease of hoarding. When an apostle tries to fill an existential void in his heart by accumulating material goods, not out of need but only in order to feel secure. The fact is that we are not able to bring material goods with us, since “the winding sheet does not have pockets”, and all our earthly treasures – even if they are gifts – will never be able to fill that void; instead, they will only make

it deeper and more demanding. To these persons the Lord repeats: “You say, I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. So be zealous and repent” (Rev 3:17, 19). Accumulating goods only burdens and inexorably slows

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down the journey! Here I think of an anecdote: the Spanish Jesuits used to describe the Society of Jesus as the “light brigade of the Church”. I remember when a young Jesuit was moving, and while he was loading

a truck full of his many possessions, suitcases, books, objects and gifts, an old Jesuit standing by was heard to say with a smile: And this is “the light brigade of the Church”? Our moving can be a sign of this disease.

14. The disease of closed circles,

where belonging to a clique becomes more powerful than belonging to the Body and, in some circumstances, to Christ himself. This disease too always begins with good intentions, but with the passing of time it enslaves its members and becomes a cancer which threatens the harmony of the Body and causes immense evil – scandals – especially to our weaker brothers and sisters. Self-destruction, “friendly fire” from our fellow soldiers, is the most insidious danger. It is the evil which strikes from within; [16] and, as Christ says: “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste” (Lk 11:17).

15. Lastly: the disease of worldly profit, of forms of self-exhibition.

When an apostle turns his service into power, and his power into a commodity in order to gain worldly

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profit or even greater power. This is the disease of persons who insatiably try to accumulate power and to this end are ready to slander, defame and discredit others, even in newspapers and magazines. Naturally, so as to put themselves on display and to show that they are more capable than others.

This disease does great harm to the Body because it leads persons to justify the use of any means whatsoever to attain their goal, often in the name of justice and transparency! Here I remember a priest who used to call journalists to tell – and invent – private and confidential matters involving his confrères and parishioners. The only thing he was concerned about was being able to see himself on the front page, since this made him feel “powerful and glamorous”, while causing great harm to others and to the Church. Poor sad soul!

We need to be clear that it is only the Holy Spirit who can heal all our infirmities. He is the soul of the Mystical Body of Christ; as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

says: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life”. It is the Holy Spirit who sustains every sincere effort at purification and in every effort at conversion. It is he who makes us realize that every member participates in the sanctification of the Body and its weakening. He is the “promoter of harmony”, as Saint Basil says. Saint Augustine tells us that “as long as a member is still part of the body, its healing can be hoped for. But once it is removed, it can be neither cured nor healed”.

Healing also comes about through an awareness of our sickness and of a personal and communal decision to be cured by patiently and perseveringly accepting the remedy.

Dear brothers!

I read once that priests are like planes: they only make news when they crash, even though so many of them are in the air. Many people criticize,

and few pray for them. It is a very touching, but also very true saying, because it points to the importance and the frailty of our priestly service, and how much evil a single priest who “crashes” can do to the whole body of the Church.

Therefore, so as not to fall in these days when we are preparing ourselves for Confession, let us ask the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, to heal the wounds of sin which each of us bears in his heart, and to sustain the Church and the Curia so that they can be healthy and health-giving; holy and sanctifying, to the glory of her Son and for our salvation and that of the entire world. Let us ask her to make us love the Church as Christ, her Son and our Lord, loves her, to have the courage to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of his mercy, and not to fear surrendering our hands into her maternal hands.



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