

# *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 and the Tabernacle*

**By Father Segundo Llorente, SJ**

[Four excerpts from the book *Memoirs of a Yukon Priest*]

**First excerpt.** After all left, I was alone in the building. The blessed Sacrament was in the tabernacle. The Lord and I were left there to ourselves. That was my initiation to the many years ahead for the two of us living alone under the same roof, with only one wall separating us day and night.

For those who think that this was an ideal situation, let me inform them

that living alone with the Lord, staying with the Lord, spending time in silence before the tabernacle, meditating or contemplating in silence without reading a book or saying the rosary, is the hardest occupation under the sun. Digging ditches under a hot sun is preferable to meditating in silence in an empty church. For one thing, the Lord does not talk back. If He does, it is to let the soul see herself as God sees her: ignorant, weak, blind, sinful. This view of self is anything but pleasing.

The temptation is to look at the wrist watch, figure that one has been there long enough, stand up, and leave. There are few souls like St. John of the Cross who would go to the garden at 3:00 A.M. under a starry sky and sit on the grass till the sun got too hot for his bald head to bear.

Another important thing when one is living under the same roof with the Lord -not like in a great monastery or a convent but in a small, frame building with but one thin wall between the two- is this: Be careful how you deal with the Lord. There is a great danger of losing respect for Him and going about with a type of familiarity that

breeds contempt, or at least disregard. If the soul allows herself to go down this far, she is running the serious risk of eventually losing her faith.

When the tabernacle means next to nothing, the state of the soul is alarmingly dangerous. One has to bear in mind at all times that the tabernacle contains the true God, and one has to act accordingly. It calls for slow and reverential genuflections, ejaculations that are like darts sent to the very heart of Christ, tender and affectionate looks that tell the Lord worlds in a flash, short prayers, and so on. One has to unite great reverence with great intimacy. I

### **Author: Father Segundo Llorente, SJ**

Segundo Llorente Villa, S.J. (November 18, 1906 - January 26, 1989) was a Spanish Jesuit, philosopher and author who spent 40 years as a missionary among the Yup'ik in the most remote parts of Alaska. During his novitiate years, Llorente's devotion to his chosen career solidified. Young and passionate, he became obsessed with the Territory of Alaska which, by his own accounts, was considered the most isolated, difficult, and challenging of all Catholic missions. Finally in 1930, at age 24, he received



permission to go to Alaska due to his determination and persistence. Fr. Llorente returned to Spain only once, in 1963, on a trip designed to encourage vocations in the priesthood. He wrote twelve books about Alaska throughout his life, all but one in Spanish, although he was perfectly fluent in English. Llorente wrote hundreds of deeply moving and engaging essays with unusual cheerfulness about his challenging religious vocation in extremely frigid and difficult conditions. In letters and articles, he described the day-to-day lives and stories of Eskimo peoples that were published in mission journals, mainly in the now defunct "Century Mission." Selected articles were later compiled, which led to the publication of autobiographical books in both Spanish and English.

learned that early in my solitary life in the Alaskan wilderness.

**Second excerpt.** Saint John of the Cross, another doctor of the church, would come with a strong pitch for long visits to the blessed Sacrament. The question was how much time we religious in our active life could afford to spend kneeling or sitting in the chapel.

In the first place, unless a person is almost burning with love for Christ, there will always be one thousand and one excuses to stay away. It is almost certain that when confronted with an alternative, the Lord will lose out. There are always so very many things that can be done. We may not actually do them. But if an inspiration comes to go to the chapel to stay with the Lord, then those things pop out and scream and we cave in and leave the chapel to do them.

The question also was what to do in the chapel once alone, if the imagination was taking us millions of miles away. Saint Teresa complained that the imagination was the “the crazy one” inside our being.

How about saying rosaries? Or how about reading a spiritual book? But that was not the point. The point was to sit in the pew, rest our hands comfortably on or near our knees, put ourselves at ease, take full possession of ourselves, close the eyes, or look at the floor or at the altar, and be immersed in the presence of God. Should the

imagination do too much mischief, then just tell yourself that you are there on guard duty; you are standing at the door of the palace of the King in the tabernacle as a sentinel guarding the entrance.

But again, no one can expect to walk into the church with a worldly mentality, almost a stranger to God, and kneel down and hope that God will pour over him Niagaras of graces and heavenly delights. It is against nature to go

from ice boxes to hot ovens, back and forth between the two. To relish the presence of God before the tabernacle, the soul has to live that presence normally throughout the day.

The whole purpose of our comments on this was to avoid like venom the idea that one can hear Mass, say the

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rosary, receive holy Communion, say some vocal prayers, and that is all. A priest could be saying Mass without any personal contact with Christ. A nun could go through the spiritual exercises of the day without once meeting the eye of Christ. But lengthy visits before the Blessed Sacrament could heal wounds and restore the soul to a healthy spiritual life, a life of intimacy with Christ. Then Christ will act through that person in a marvelous way. That person would thus become an apt instrument in God's hands to do wonders.

**Third excerpt.** I arrived in Nunakhock in the last days of September and was there exactly eighty-six days with their nights. The village numbered 175 people, all Eskimos and all Catholic. ten were the living room or living quarters for the priest.

As soon as I arrived, we set the order of the day. School in the morning and

afternoon, five days a week. Mass every day at 7:30. Rosary and sermon every evening at 7:30. It worked beautifully. Bear in mind that those people had no entertainment whatsoever other than their native dances at night. Every afternoon I would go to the little school room and teach both English and catechism, with some music to break the monotony.

After supper people trooped into the church and filled it. They had eaten seal oil, so the smell of seal oil permeated the very walls, floor, and ceiling. That smell in the air could be cut with a knife. After the rosary in Eskimo, there would follow a rather long explanation of the Catholic faith. I was fortunate to have with me William Tyson, a former Akulurak pupil who without any doubt became the best interpreter in the land. He was so good that while he spoke the eyes of the people were fixed on him as though he were an

apparition from heaven. Now and then we would add benediction with the blessed Sacrament. The burning incense helped dispel somewhat the odor of seal oil - for me, that is, because for them seal oil was a delicacy, almost a necessity.

Next morning at the sound of the church bell, most of them came in well wrapped in their fur parkas. There were prayers and songs in Eskimo,

After they left, I had my own breakfast and sat to read or type. People would come with their little problems. There were baptisms and even some weddings. When I felt like it, I would dress up and take a walk on that infinite vastness of nothing somewhere between a gray sky and the permafrost. That was the real Alaska, no doubt about it. We were always three -

God, the guardian angel, and myself. What conversation there was had to be among us three, and I loved it. As usual I did all the talking. When I was some distance away, I would take a close look at the village. All I could see were cabins lined up alongside the bank of the river. There was a silence that always intrigued me. Total silence all around, one day after another, forever silence. Well, not quite. Whenever a

dog team would come near the village, all the dogs took up the howl to let the people know that someone was coming. Then silence again.

Saint John of the Cross would have loved to be the pastor of that village. Perhaps that would have helped him to reach even higher in his reach for the Divinity. There I spent eighty-six days without mail, newspapers, or news of any sort.

Gradually, I began to take possession of myself and to find things within me that had escaped me up to that time. God and my guardian angel were telling me things that the soul alone heard. Every night, after the people left the church, I was left alone with the Lord. Not having anyone to talk to, and sensing the need to talk to someone, I decided to talk to the Lord in the

church. To save fuel and light, I would dress up as though I were outdoors and walk into the church with a flashlight to guide my steps. The only light was that of the sanctuary. The world then became still and the Lord and I were all alone. First it would be the stations of the cross, with no time limit for any station. Then I would kneel till I was tired and walked back and forth or sat down.

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The main question was what to do with all the time I had on my hands. Without a vocation to be a missionary, a priest in a situation like that would crack and run. But, with a clear vocation from God, everything fits into place. I simply loved that situation and began to feel sad at the thought that some day it would come to an end. When God calls, he gives whatever it takes to carry it through.

I was told of a priest in the Bavarian Alps who was sent by his bishop to a town lost in the woods, with people characterized by lack of polish and refinement. In time he became so depressed that he knelt before the tabernacle and said: "Lord, I can't take it any longer. This is not for me" But then the Lord wanted to be heard and said in an audible voice: "But, son, I love this place and this people. What is good for Me, shouldn't it be good for you also?"

**Fourth excerpt.** My idea of going to Carrot Island was to tell the Lord that here was a whole week when I had absolutely nothing to do except listen to Him. In our daily lives we have time for everything except for prayer. The Lord is forever waiting till His turn comes, but it seldom comes because there is always something else for us to do. Here was a whole week. "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening" Usually, the Lord waited till He had me pacing the beaten trail

on the beach. There it was where His divine inspirations were the loudest and the toughest. To be another Christ is to carry the cross.

All too often Christ is a stranger to us; we see the Lord as distant, like an abstract being lost somewhere in the clouds. This explains why some priests say Mass daily and end up leaving the priesthood and in some cases losing their faith. There is no knowledge of Christ, no attempt to study Him more closely, no effort to attain to a close intimacy with Him. In other words, Christ and the priest are not personal friends.

The fault naturally is with the priest who lives immersed in worldly matters from morning till night. I invite every priest to spend one whole week in solitude with the Lord in a spirit of faith and humility. The Lord will fill him with divine light so he may see things the way God sees them. Perhaps one of the first changes the priest will see is the disorder that rules his life. He will see that he must detach himself from every manner of tyranny: tobacco, booze, TV programs, trashy reading, fancy food, and traveling. Give the Lord a chance. Keep silence. Meditate at the foot of the altar. God will do the rest.

In Carrot Island -if I may say it- I dared to put the Lord to the test. "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening", as the boy Samuel was instructed to answer when he heard the voice of God calling to him.

The power of God manifests itself in talking to the soul without words. God bathes the soul in light. The soul sees, comprehends, understands, and at the same time feels divine strength coming to her rescue. This is accompanied by deep interior peace. The soul realizes that this is good for her and becomes insatiable, wanting more and more of it. But she also notices that the Lord will not be manipulated in any way. He is the boss; He is in full charge and no nonsense. If the soul turns to her former, worldly pastimes, she finds herself again poor, ignorant, blind, weak, and she then realizes that the fault is all hers. She must go down on her knees again and beg like the Prodigal Son. This is the reason for yearly retreats where the soul assesses her losses and gains.

Christ will tell the priest that he -Christ- expects him to aspire to total transformation into Him. Only then will God the Father perform through the priest the works He performed

through His divine Son. In God's plan there is but one Priest, the High Priest Jesus, and every other priest on earth must become one with Jesus. When God the Father looks at Jesus, he sees all other priests in Him; and when he looks at the priests, any priest, He sees Jesus in him. God said over the waters of the Jordan that He was well pleased with His Son, Jesus. He will be likewise pleased with each priest in proportion to the likeness of Jesus he bears within himself.

Those priests to whom Christ is a total stranger are a contradiction in terms -something like a policeman who is in cahoots with the burglars. One thing we must bear in mind: Being another Christ means poverty, much suffering, being lonely, being misunderstood, being persecuted, bearing pain, and being disgraced. Souls are bought with suffering, and not with any suffering, but suffering supernaturally united to the sufferings of Christ. From this come redemption

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and salvation. Having a good time is hardly a Christian way of life. Priests must not be of this world while they cannot escape being in this world.

God understands that priests, being human, will throw a tantrum now and then; it is the nature and character of the tantrum, for there are tantrums and tantrums, just as there are passing tantrums and there is

rancor, bitterness, protracted egotism, and finally open rebellion. Christ in Gethsemane screamed with bloody tears, begging the eternal Father to spare Him much of what was coming. But He squelched any semblance of rebellion by adding: "Not My will, but Yours be done." This is the program for every priest when the going is rough. This is the recipe for saving souls.



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