

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

How to Lead a Good Life

By Saint John of Avila

[From the book *The Letters of Blessed John of Avila*]

**Letter to one of his disciples,
teaching him how to lead
a good life**

I have received your letter, and to tell you the truth, if my many occupations did not often prevent me from answering you, I should

ask you to write very frequently, as it is always a great pleasure to receive news of yourself and your family. But as I owe you so much already, let me add this debt to the score, and our Lord will repay you all.

You ask me to tell you how to become a good Christian, and I am most glad to hear your question, for to wish to be a good Christian is to have already started well on the road.

But take care not to resemble the many, whose knowledge of God's will, as it does not make them follow it, only condemns them to more severe punishment; for, as Christ tells us, *"That servant who knew the will of his lord, and did not according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes."* (Lk 13:47)

Therefore, to ask to be shown the way of God is to lay oneself under no small obligation, but as I believe you wish to learn it with the full intention of practising all that it involves, it is my duty to direct you in it.

Good works are of two kinds. Some are exterior, such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving; abstaining from swearing, falsehood and murmuring; avoiding injuring or annoying people and other things of a similar kind. Some also are purely spiritual or interior, such as fervent love for God and our neighbour, an intense realisation of our own unworthiness, deep gratitude for the Divine mercies, and such a profound reverence for the Almighty that we realise our own nothingness in the sight of

Author: 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.

His greatness. There are also many other religious sentiments which cannot be enumerated. Corporal good works are the easiest to perform, and a man is much to blame if he omits these, for can any one be careful in greater matters who neglects lesser ones? If we cannot restrain our tongue, or control our bodies and employ them in good works, can we complain that God does not call us to higher things?

The Temple of God in Jerusalem had one gate for the people and further on another through which none but the priests might pass. So, to hear Mass, to honour ones elders, to abstain from speaking or acting wrongly, and other duties of the same kind, are common to all Christians, whether they be the friends of God or not; but a heart full of faith and charity is the special gift of His friends, and is the distinguishing mark between the sons of perdition and of salvation. As the Jews had to walk through the first portal to reach the second, so Christians pass by

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good actions to purity of heart. Not that these works in themselves make the heart holy, which can only be effected by the gift of God's grace: but this, by His great merey, He bestows on those who do their best to serve Him, as far as their weakness will allow them. What we need, above all other things, is a new heart, but this is the last thing

we should think ourselves capable of obtaining by our own power. No man has faith who does not believe that he has received his being from God; neither has he faith, who thinks that any other than the Almighty can give him strength to become good, for holiness is a higher gift than mere existence. Those who imagine they can attain to holiness by any wisdom or strength of their own, will find themselves after many labours, and struggles, and weary efforts, only the farther from possessing it, and this in proportion to their certainty that they of themselves have gained it.

Humility and self-contempt will obtain our wish far sooner than will stubborn pride. Though God is so

exalted, His eyes regard the lowly, both in heaven and on earth, and we shall strive in vain to please Him in any other way than by abasing ourselves. The Son of God came down from heaven and taught us by His life and words the way to heaven, and that way is humility, as He said: *“He that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”* (Lk 18:14)

Therefore, if you wish God to give you a new heart, you must first of all amend your deeds, and then lament your faults and accuse yourself of your sins. Do not extenuate your defects, but judge yourself justly; let not your self-love blind you, but when conscience accuses you of wrong, do not forget it, but keep it before your eyes and manifest it to Jesus Christ, your Saviour and Physician. Weep for it before Him, and He will comfort you without fail. No force can prevail with a Father like the tears of his child, nor is there anything which so moves God to grant us,

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not justice, but mercy, as our sorrow and self-accusation. Call upon the Almighty, for He will not be deaf to your cries; show Him your wounded soul: for you have not to deal with One Who is blind; speak to Him of all your miseries for He is merciful and will heal them. Go to confession and Holy Communion, and when you are united to your Saviour, your soul will melt with devotion, and you will say: *“How great is the multitude of thy sweetness O Lord, which thou hast hidden for them that fear thee.”* (Ps 30:20)

Be sure too, to show to your neighbour the same love which God has shown towards you. If you are harsh to others, you will find God harsh to you, for you know His fixed decree: *“With what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again.”* Do not be niggardly, then, to other people, lest God treat you in the same way. He will pardon you many crimes for the one offence you forgive your neighbour;

He will be long-suffering with you in return for a little patience shown towards others; He will reward you with abundant riches for the small alms you bestow. Strive earnestly, therefore, to keep the law of charity, for in that is your life.

In these few words you see the rule by which you must live: watch carefully over your words and actions. Practise prayer, and beg Christ to grant you a newness and singleness of heart: do nothing to injure others, but rather do them all the good you can by word and deed, and thus you will fulfil your duty both to God, your neighbour and yourself. *"This do and thou shalt live."* Know, however, that if you are to be a friend of God, you must prepare yourself for trials, for without them all your virtue is like an unwallied city, which falls at the first onslaught. Patience is the guardian of all the other virtues,

and, if it fail, we may lose in one moment the labour of many days.

Our Master and Redeemer tells us: *"In your patience you shall possess your souls."* (Lk 21:19) Without it, we lose control over ourselves, because anger, like wine, robs us of our reason.

No force can prevail with a Father like the tears of his child, nor is there anything which so moves God to grant us, not justice, but mercy, as our sorrow and self-accusation. Call upon the Almighty, for He will not be deaf to your cries; show Him your wounded soul: for you have not to deal with One Who is blind; speak to Him of all your miseries for He is merciful and will heal them.

Brace up your heart to suffer afflictions, for without the battle there is no victory, and the crown is only for the conqueror.

Think not that your burden is heavy; it is very light, compared with what you deserve to have to bear and with what Jesus Christ our Lord bore for your sake; it is slight indeed in comparison to the reward it will bring you.

Remember, that we shall soon quit this world, and then all the past will seem to

us like a short dream, and we shall see that it is better to have laboured than to have rested here. Learn how to profit by your sorrows, for they bring great riches to the soul. They

cleanses it from past sin; what fire is to gold, that tribulation is to the just man, whose heart it purifies. Trials only injure the wicked, for instead of being grateful to God, they murmur against Him. Their punishment does them no good, because they turn their sufferings into sins, and so lose where they might have gained, earning hell by painful labour. Do not imitate them, but let your courage increase with your trials. God proves His sons by sorrow, and no one will be crowned but he that has been through the combat. St. James says: *“Blessed is the man who endureth temptation, for when he hath been proved, he shall receive the crown of life”* (James 1:4) which God promises to those who love Him. If only we realised the value

of this crown, how gladly should we now suffer afflictions! Would that we understood how blessed, both now and hereafter, are the tears we shed in this life. We should abase ourselves to the dust here, so that we might stand high in heaven, and should despise all earthly pleasures, were they given us, in comparison with the heavenly joys for which we hope. Soon the vanity of this world will be unmasked, and the kingdom of God will be revealed. Live here as a stranger your body on earth, but your heart above so that when our Lord calls you, He may not find you sleeping, but ready to go with Him, and to hear the sweet words: *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”* (Mt 25:21)

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