

# *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

## **This Month's Reading:**

### *Pope Benedict XVI*

Dear Father,

This month, I would like to share with you some extracts of a book called *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, written by Pope Benedict XVI and Robert Cardinal Sarah. It was written less than two years ago, in September 2019.

In the first part of the book, the Pope studies three texts of the Bible which talk about priesthood. In few words, he wants to highlight the fact that for us, priests, God is (or should be) our only possession. We did not become priests in order to obtain worldly profits or honors, but only to serve him. And because of that, God gives himself entirely to us, so we should

live only by him and for him. The Pope says: “Priests, because they are radically consecrated to God, renounce marriage and family. (...) To enter the clergy means to renounce a self-centered life and to accept God alone as the support and guarantee of one’s own life.”

In the Eucharistic Prayer II, we find the following words: “We offer you, Lord, the Bread of life and the Chalice of salvation, giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you.” These words, taken from the Book of Deuteronomy, define the two duties of the priest: we were chosen to be always in God’s sight,

and to do His will. The Pope continues: “The priest must be an upright person, vigilant, a person who remains standing. Service is then added to all this. In the Old Testament text this word has an essentially ritualistic meaning. (...) To serve means to draw near, but above all it also means obedience. The servant is

under the word: ‘not my will, but thine, be done’.”

May God grant us the Grace’s to ever more deeply love our priesthood and to lead pure lives worthy of standing in His presence.

Fr. Tomás Ravaioli, IVE

*LCI Director*

## Author: Pope Benedict XVI

Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Joseph Ratzinger, was born on April 16, 1927 in Marktl am Inn, Germany. He was ordained a priest on June 29, 1951. From 1946 to 1951, the year in which he was ordained a priest and began to teach, he studied philosophy and theology at the University of Munich and at the higher school in Freising.

In 1962 he was already well known when, at the age of 35, he became a consultant of the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Joseph Frings, at the Second Vatican Council.

In March 1977, Pope Paul VI named Fr. Ratzinger Archbishop of Munich and Freising and on May 28, 1977 he was consecrated -the first diocesan priest in 80 years to take over the pastoral ministry of the large Bavarian diocese. Paul VI elevated him to the College of Cardinals in the consistory of June 27, 1977.

On November 25, 1981, he was nominated by John Paul II to be Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Vice Dean of the College of Cardinals on November 6, 1998. On November 30, 2002, he was elected as Dean of the College of Cardinals.

He served as President of the Commission for the Preparation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and after 6 years of work, he presented the New Catechism to the Holy Father in 1992.

Following the death of John Paul II on April 2, 2005, and his funeral on April 8, Cardinal Ratzinger presided over the conclave to elect a new pope as dean of the College of Cardinals. The conclave opened on April 18 and Cardinal Ratzinger was elected as the 265th Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church on April 19, 2005. He chose the name "Benedict" and became Pope Benedict XVI.



# From the Book

## *From the Depths of Our Hearts*

By Pope Benedict XVI

### **The Catholic Priesthood**

Given the lasting crisis that the priesthood has been going through for many years, it seemed to me necessary to get to the deep roots of the problem. I had started a work of theological reflection, but age and a kind of weariness led me to abandon it.

#### **Three texts that clarify the Christian notion of priesthood**

##### *Psalm 16:5-6:*

##### *the words used for admission to the clerical state before the council*

First I would like to interpret the words of verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 16, which, before Vatican Council II, were used during the tonsure ceremony that marked entrance into the clergy. These words were recited by the bishop, then repeated by the candidate, who in this way was welcomed into the clergy of the Church: *“The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yes, I have a goodly heritage”* (Ps 16:5-6). Indeed, the psalm expresses exactly, in the Old Testament, what it signifies later on in the Church: acceptance into the priestly community. This passage recalls that all the tribes of Israel, as well

as each family, represented the heritage of God’s promise to Abraham. This was expressed concretely in the fact that each family obtained as its inheritance a portion of the Promised Land, of which it became the owner. Possession of a part of the Holy Land gave to each family the certainty that it was sharing in the promise. In concrete terms, it assured them a livelihood. Each man had to obtain as much land as he needed in order to live. The story of Naboth (1 Kings 21:1-29), who absolutely refused to give his vineyard away to King Ahab, even though the latter said that he was willing to reimburse him completely, clearly shows the importance of this concrete share of the heritage. For Naboth, the vineyard was more than a valuable plot of land: it was his share in the promise that God made to Israel.

Whereas each Israelite had at his disposal a tract of land that assured him of what he needed in order to live, the tribe of Levi had a peculiar feature: it was the only tribe that did not possess land as its heritage. The Levite remained without land and was therefore deprived of an immediate subsistence derived from the land. He lived only by God and for God. In practice, this implies that he had to live, according to precise norms, on the sacrificial offerings that Israel set aside for God.

This Old Testament prefiguration is fulfilled in the priests of the Church in a new and deeper way: **they must live only by God and for him.** Saint Paul clearly spells out what this implies concretely. The apostle lives on what people give him, because he himself

gives them the Word of God that is our authentic bread and our true life. In the Old Testament, the Levites renounce the possession of land. In the New Testament, this privation is transformed and renewed: **priests, because they are radically consecrated to God, renounce marriage and family.** The Church interpreted the word “clergy” in this sense. To enter the clergy means to renounce a self-centered life and to accept God alone as the support and guarantee of one’s own life.

The true foundation of the life of a priest, the salt of his existence, the earth or “land” of his life, is God himself. Celibacy, which applies to bishops throughout the Church, in both East and West, and, according to a tradition going back to a time close to that of



the apostles, to priests in general in the Latin Church, can be understood and experienced definitively only on this foundation. I had meditated for a long time on this idea during the retreat that I had preached in Lent 1983 for John Paul II and the Roman Curia:

“There is no need to make any great transposition [of the psalm] in our own [priestly] spiritual life. Fundamental parts of the priesthood are something like the status of the Levites, exposed, not having land, wholly dependent on God. The account of vocation in Luke 5,1-11, which we considered first, ends not without reason with the words: *“They left everything and followed him”* (v. 11). Without such a forsaking on our part there is no priesthood. The call to follow is not possible without this sign of freedom and renunciation of any kind of compromise. I think that from this point of view celibacy acquires its great significance as a forgoing of a future earthly home and the leading of one’s own life in chosen and familiar surroundings, and that thus it becomes truly indispensable, in order that being given over to God may remain fundamental and become truly realized. This means, it is clear, that celibacy imposes its demands in whatever setting

up of one’s life. Its full significance cannot be attained if for everything else we follow the rules of property and of life’s game as commonly accepted today.

**It is above all not possible for celibacy to have stability if we do not make remaining close to God the center of our life.**

Psalm 16, like Psalm 119, is a strong pointer to the necessity for continual meditation to make the word of God our own, for only so can we become at home with it and can it become our home. The community aspect of liturgical prayer and worship necessarily connected with this comes out here, where Psalm 16 speaks of the Lord as ‘my cup’ (v. 5). In accordance with the language usual in the Old Testament this reference is to the festive cup which would have been passed round from hand to hand at the sacrificial meal, or to the fatal cup, the cup of wrath or salvation. The New Testament priest who prays the psalm can find indicated here in a special way that chalice by means of which the Lord in the deepest sense has become our land, our inheritance: the Eucharistic Chalice, in which he shares himself with us as our life. The priestly life in the presence of God thus takes on actuality in our life

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in virtue of the Eucharistic mystery. In the most profound sense, the Eucharist is the land which has become our portion and of which we can say: *“The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage”* (v. 6).

I still have a vivid memory of the day when, on the eve of receiving the tonsure, I meditated on this verse of Psalm 16. I suddenly understood what the Lord expected of me at that moment: he wanted to have my life completely at his disposal, and, at the same time, he entrusted himself entirely to me. Thus I could consider that the words of this psalm applied to my whole destiny: *“The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yes, I have a goodly heritage”* (Ps 16:5-6).

***The Book of Deuteronomy  
10:8 and 18:5-8).***

***The words incorporated into  
Eucharistic Prayer II:  
the role of the tribe of Levi  
reinterpreted for the priests of the  
Church***

Secondly, I would like to analyze a passage taken from Eucharistic Prayer II of the Roman Liturgy after the reform of Vatican Council II. The text of Eucharistic Prayer II is generally attributed to Saint Hippolytus (died around 235). In any case, it is very old. In it we find the following words:

“We offer you, Lord, the Bread of life and the Chalice of salvation, giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you.” This sentence does not mean, as some liturgists would have us believe, that even during the Eucharist Prayer the priests and the faithful ought to stand and not kneel. We can deduce the correct understanding of this sentence if we consider that it is taken literally from Deuteronomy 10:8 and from Deuteronomy 18:5-8, where the essential cultic role of the tribe of Levi is mentioned: *“At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister to him and to bless in his name”* (Deut 10:8). *“For the LORD your God has chosen him out of all your tribes, to stand and minister in the name of the LORD, him and his sons for ever”* (Deut 18:5).

In Deuteronomy, **the words “stand before God and serve him” serve to define the essence of the priesthood.** They were later incorporated into the Eucharistic Prayer of the Church of Jesus Christ to express the continuity and the newness of the priesthood in the New Covenant. What was said formerly about the tribe of Levi and concerned it exclusively applies now to the priests and the bishops of the Church. Based on a notion inspired by the Reformation, one might be tempted to say that we are looking



here at a step backward in relation to the newness of the community of Jesus Christ. One would be tempted to see in it a relapse into a cultic priesthood that was outmoded and should be rejected. Quite the contrary, it is precisely the step forward of the New Covenant, which takes up into itself and at the same time transforms the Old Covenant by elevating it to the height of Jesus Christ. Priesthood is no longer linked with membership in a family; rather, it is open to humanity on a vast scale. It no longer coincides with the administration of the sacrifice in the Temple; rather it gathers humanity in the love of Jesus Christ, which embraces the whole world. Worship and the critique of worship, liturgical sacrifice and the service of love for neighbor are now one. Consequently, the words “to be in your presence and minister to you” do not envisage an exterior attitude. On the contrary, they represent a profound point of unity between the Old and the New Testament, and they describe the very nature of the priesthood. In the final analysis, these words remind us of the fact that we all stand before God. I tried to interpret this text in a homily given in Saint Peter’s in Rome on Holy Thursday 2008; I cite here an excerpt from it:

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*“At the same time Holy Thursday is an occasion for us to ask ourselves over and over again: to what did we say our ‘yes’? What does this ‘being a priest of Jesus Christ’ mean? The Second Canon of our Missal, which was probably compiled in Rome already at the end of the second century, describes the essence of the priestly ministry with the words with which, in the Book of Deuteronomy (18:5-7), the essence of the Old Testament priesthood is described: ‘to stand and minister in the name of the Lord’. There are therefore two duties that define the essence of the priestly ministry: in the first place, ‘to stand in the Lord’s presence’. In the Book of Deuteronomy this is read in the context of the preceding [regulation], according to which priests do not receive any portion of land in the Holy Land, they live of God and for God. They did not attend to the usual work necessary to sustain daily life. Their profession was to ‘stand in the Lord’s presence’, to look to him, to be there for him. Hence, ultimately, the word indicated a life in God’s presence, and with this also a ministry of representing others. As the others cultivated the land, from which the priest also lived, so he kept the world open to God, he had to live with his gaze on him. Now if this word is found in the Canon of the Mass immediately after the*

consecration of the gifts, after the entrance of the Lord in the assembly of prayer, then for us this points to being before the Lord present, that is, it indicates the Eucharist as the center of priestly life. But here too, the meaning is deeper. During Lent the hymn that introduces the Office of Readings of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Office that monks once recited during the night vigil before God and for humanity, one of the duties of Lent is described with the imperative: we must be even more intensely alert. In the tradition of Syrian monasticism, monks were described as 'those who remained standing'. This standing was an expression of vigilance. What was considered here as a duty of the monks, we can rightly see also as an expression of the priestly mission and as a correct interpretation of the word of Deuteronomy: the priest must be on the watch. He must be on his guard in the face of the menacing powers of evil. He must keep the world awake for God. He must be the one who remains standing: upright before the trends of time. Upright in truth. Upright in the commitment for good.

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Standing before the Lord must always also include, at its depths, responsibility for humanity to the Lord, who in his turn takes on the burden of all of us to the Father. And it must be a taking on of him, of Christ, of his word, his truth, his love. The priest must be upright, fearless and prepared to sustain even insults for the Lord, as referred to in the Acts of the Apostles: they were 'rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name' of Jesus (5:41). Now let us move on to the second word that the Second Canon repeats from the Old Testament text 'to stand in your presence and serve you'. The priest must be an upright person, vigilant, a person who remains standing. Service is then added to all this. In the Old Testament text this word has an essentially ritualistic meaning: all acts of worship foreseen by the Law are the priests' duty. But this action, according to the rite, was classified as service, as a duty of service, and thus it explains in what spirit this activity was supposed to take place. With the use of the word 'serve' in the Canon, the liturgical meaning of this term was adopted in a





*certain way, in keeping with the novelty of the Christian cult. What the priest does at that moment, in the Eucharistic celebration, is to serve God and men. The cult that Christ rendered to the Father was the giving of himself to the end for humanity. Into this cult, this service, the priest must insert himself. Thus, the word 'serve' contains many dimensions. In the first place, part of it is certainly the correct celebration of the liturgy and of the sacraments in general, accomplished through interior participation. We must learn to understand increasingly the sacred liturgy in all its essence, to develop a living familiarity with it, so that it becomes the soul of our daily life. It is then that we celebrate in the correct way; it is then that the ars celebrandi, the art of celebrating, emerges by itself. In this art there must be nothing artificial. If the liturgy is the central duty of the priest, this also means that prayer must be a primary reality, to be learned ever anew and ever more deeply*

*at the school of Christ and of the saints of all the ages. Since the Christian liturgy by its nature is also always a proclamation, we must be people who are familiar with the Word of God, love it and live by it: only then can we explain it in an adequate way. 'To serve the Lord', priestly service also means precisely to learn to know the Lord in his Word and to make it known to all those he entrusts to us.*

*Lastly, two other aspects are part of service. No one is closer to his master than the servant who has access to the most private dimensions of his life. In this sense 'to serve' means closeness, it requires familiarity. This familiarity also involves a danger: when we continually encounter the sacred, it risks becoming habitual for us. In this way, reverential fear is extinguished. Conditioned by all our habits, we no longer perceive the great, new and surprising fact that he himself is present, speaks to us, gives himself to us. We must ceaselessly struggle against this becoming*

*accustomed to the extraordinary reality, against the indifference of the heart, always recognizing our insufficiency anew and the grace that there is in the fact that he consigned himself into our hands. To serve means to draw near, but above all it also means obedience. The servant is under the word: "not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk 22:42). With this word Jesus, in the Garden of Olives, has resolved the decisive battle against sin, against the rebellion of the sinful heart. Adam's sin consisted precisely in the fact that he wanted to accomplish his own will and not God's. Humanity's temptation is always to want to be totally autonomous, to follow its own will alone and to maintain that only in this way will we be free; that only thanks to a similarly unlimited freedom would man be completely man. But this is precisely how we pit ourselves against the truth. Because the truth is that we must share our freedom with others and we can be free only in communion with them. This shared freedom can be true freedom only if we enter into what constitutes the very measure of freedom, if we enter into God's will. This fundamental obedience that is part of the human being,*

He, who as Son of God was and is the Lord, has willed to become that Servant of God. He has willed to be the Servant of all. He has portrayed the whole of his high priesthood in the gesture of the washing of the feet.

*a person cannot be merely for and by himself, becomes still more concrete in the priest: we do not preach ourselves, but him and his Word, which we could not have invented ourselves. We proclaim the Word of Christ in the correct way only in communion with his Body. Our obedience is a believing with the Church, a thinking and speaking with the Church, serving through her. What Jesus predicted to Peter also always applies: 'You will be taken where you do not want to go.' This letting oneself be guided where one does not want to be led is an essential dimension of our service, and it is exactly what makes us free. In this being guided, which can be contrary to our ideas and plans, we experience something new, the wealth of God's love.*

*'To stand in his presence and serve him': Jesus Christ as the true High Priest of the world has conferred on these words a previously unimaginable depth. He, who as Son of God was and is the Lord, has willed to become that Servant of God which the vision of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah had foreseen. He has willed to be the Servant of all. He has portrayed the whole of his high*

*priesthood in the gesture of the washing of the feet. With the gesture of love to the end he washes our dirty feet, with the humility of his service he cleanses us from the illness of our pride. Thus, he makes us able to become partakers of God's banquet. He has descended, and the true ascent of man is now accomplished in our descending with him and toward him. His elevation is the Cross. It is the deepest descent and, as love pushed to the limit, it is at the same time the culmination of the ascent, the true 'elevation' of humanity. 'To stand in his presence and serve him': this now means to enter into his call to serve God. The Eucharist as the presence of the descent and ascent of Christ thus always recalls, beyond itself, the many ways of service through love of neighbor. Let us ask the Lord on this day for the gift to be able to say again in this sense our 'yes' to his call: 'Here am I! Send me' (Is 6:8). Amen.*

***John 17:17: the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, interpretation of priestly ordination***

To conclude, I would like to reflect for another moment on several words taken from the high-priestly prayer of Jesus (Jn 17) that, on the eve of my priestly ordination, were particularly engraved on my heart. While the Synoptic Gospels report essentially the preaching of Jesus in Galilee, John, who seems to have had relations of kinship with the Temple aristocracy, relates chiefly

the proclamation of Jesus in Jerusalem and mentions questions concerning the Temple and worship. In this context, Jesus' high-priestly prayer takes on a particular importance.

I do not intend to repeat here the various elements that I analyzed in volume 2 of my book on Jesus. I would like to limit myself only to verses 17 and 18, which especially struck me on the eve of my priestly ordination. Here is the text: "*Consecrate them [sanctify them] in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*" The word "holy" [saint, root of sanctity] expresses God's particular nature. He alone is the Holy One. Man becomes holy insofar as he begins to be with God. **To be with God is to put aside what is only me and to become one with God's whole will.** Nevertheless, this liberation from myself can prove to be very painful, and it is never accomplished once and for all. However, we can also understand the term "to sanctify" to mean in a very concrete way priestly ordination, in the sense in which it implies that the living God radically claims a man in order to make him enter into his service. When the text says, "*Sanctify [in some translations: consecrate] them in the truth*", the Lord is asking the Father to include the Twelve in his mission, to ordain them priests.

"*Sanctify [consecrate] them in the truth.*" Here, it seems also that there is a discreet

reference to the rite of priestly ordination in the Old Testament: the ordinand was in fact physically purified by a complete washing before putting on the sacred vestments. These two elements considered together mean that, in this way, the one sent becomes a new man. But what is a symbolic figure in the ritual of the Old Testament becomes a reality in the prayer of Jesus. The only washing that can really purify man is the truth, is Christ himself. And he is also the new garment to which the exterior cultic vestment alludes. "*Sanctify [consecrate] them in the truth.*" This means: immerse them completely in Jesus Christ so that what Paul noted as the fundamental experience of his apostolate might prove

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true for them: "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*" (Gal 2:20).

Thus, on that eve of my ordination, a deep impression was left on my soul of what it means to be ordained a priest, beyond all the ceremonial aspects: it means that we must continually be purified and overcome by Christ so that he is the one who speaks and acts in us, and less and less we ourselves.

It appeared to me clearly that this process, which consists of becoming one with him and renouncing what belongs only to us, lasts a whole lifetime and continually includes liberations and painful renewals.

In this sense, the words of John 17:17 pointed out to me the way that I have walked throughout my life.

Benedict XVI

Vatican City,  
Mater Ecclesiae Monastery  
September 17, 2019



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**Goroka**

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