

# 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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**This Month's reading:**

## *Saint John Chrysostom*

Dear Father,

This month we will read some extracts of a text which belongs to one of the most, if not the most, important preachers of the first centuries of the Church. We are talking about St. John Chrysostom and his famous book *Treatise on the Priesthood*, written in the year 390 or 391. This treatise is composed of four books and contains an account of his early years and a defense of his flight from ordination, and then the work proceeds to expound on his exalted understanding of the priesthood.

The phrase with which he starts the text should make us tremble: "The

priestly office is indeed discharged on earth, but it ranks among heavenly ordinances." God, he recalls, did not chose Archangels or Angels to be his ministries but us mere humans. "Wherefore the consecrated priest ought to be as pure as if he were standing in the heavens themselves in the midst of those powers."

The priesthood is a gift which should be received with a thankful heart and a humble spirit. We should thank God for it, because in His great mercy, He chose us and gave to us the greatest gift on earth. But at the same time, we should be humble and recognize that

we are sinners and unworthy, because our dignity excels that of the angels and archangels. We live surrounded by temptations and difficulties, and many times, our hands, the very hands with which we hold Jesus in the Mass, get dirty because of our sins.

This is what St. John Chrysostom wants to tell us in this bulletin, and this is what we should fight to obtain: a pure heart, clean of sin, worthy of this great gift.

God bless you!

Fr. Tomás Ravaioli, IVE

*LCI Director*

## Author: Saint John Chrysostom

St. John, named Chrysostom (golden-mouthed) on account of his eloquence, came into the world of Christian parents, about the year 344, in the city of Antioch. His mother, at the age of 20, was a model of virtue. He studied rhetoric under Libanius, a pagan, the most famous orator of the age.

In 374, he began to lead the life of an anchorite in the mountains near Antioch, but in 386 the poor state of his health forced him to return to Antioch, where he was ordained a priest.

In 398, he was elevated to the See of Constantinople and became one of the greatest lights of the Church. But he had enemies in high places and some were ecclesiastics, not

the least being Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria, who repented of this before he died. His most powerful enemy, however, was the empress Eudoxia, who was offended by the apostolic freedom of his discourses. Several accusations were brought against him in a pseudo-council, and he was sent into exile.

In the midst of his sufferings, like the apostle, St. Paul, whom he so greatly admired, he found the greatest peace and happiness. He had the consolation of knowing that the Pope remained his friend, and did for him what lay in his power. His enemies were not satisfied with the sufferings he had already endured, and they banished him still further, to Pythius, at the very extremity of the Empire. He died on his way there on September 14, 407.



# The Glory of the Priesthood

By Saint John Chrysostom

For the priestly office is indeed discharged on earth, but it ranks among heavenly ordinances; and very naturally so: for neither man, nor angel, nor archangel, nor any other created power, but the Paraclete Himself, instituted this vocation, and persuaded men while still abiding in the flesh to represent the ministry of angels. **Wherefore the consecrated priest ought to be as pure as if he were standing in the heavens themselves in the midst of those powers.**

Fearful, indeed, and of most awful import, were the things which were used before the dispensation of grace, as the bells, the pomegranates, the stones on the breastplate and on the ephod, the girdle, the mitre, the long robe, the plate of gold, the holy of holies, the deep silence within. But if any one should examine the things which belong to the dispensation of grace, he will find that, small as they are, yet are they fearful and full of awe, and that what was spoken concerning the law is true in this case also, that "*what has been made glorious has no glory in this respect by reason of the glory which excels.*" (2 Corinthians 3:10)

For when you see the Lord sacrificed, and laid upon the altar, and the priest standing and praying over the victim, and all the

worshippers empurpled with that precious blood, can you then think that you are still among men, and standing upon the earth? Are you not, on the contrary, straightway translated to Heaven, and casting out every carnal thought from the soul, do you not with disembodied spirit and pure reason contemplate the things which are in Heaven? **Oh! What a marvel! What love of God to man! He who sits on high with the Father is at that hour held in the hands of all, and gives Himself to those who are willing to embrace and grasp Him.** And this all do through the eyes of faith! Do these things seem to you fit to be despised, or such as to make it possible for any one to be uplifted against them?

## The Power of the Priest Surpasses all the Figures of the Old Testament

Would you also learn from another miracle the exceeding sanctity of this office? Picture Elijah and the vast multitude standing around him, and the sacrifice laid upon the altar of stones, and all the rest of the people hushed into a deep silence while the prophet alone offers up prayer: then the sudden rush of fire from Heaven upon the sacrifice:—these are marvellous things,

charged with terror. Now then pass from this scene to the rites which are celebrated in the present day; they are not only marvellous to behold, but transcendent in terror. **There stands the priest, not bringing down fire from Heaven, but the Holy Spirit:** and he makes prolonged supplication, not that some flame sent down from on high may consume the offerings, but that grace descending on the sacrifice may thereby enlighten the souls of all, and render them more refulgent than silver purified by fire. Who can despise this most awful mystery, unless he is stark mad and senseless? Or do you not know that no human soul could have endured that fire in the sacrifice, but all would have been utterly consumed, had not the assistance of God's grace been great.

### **The Power of the Priest Surpasses the Angels**

For if any one will consider how great a thing it is for one, being a man, and compassed with flesh and blood, to be enabled to draw near to that blessed and pure nature, he will then clearly see what great honor the grace of the Spirit has vouchsafed to priests; since by their agency these rites are celebrated, and others nowise inferior to these both in respect of our dignity and our salvation. For they who inhabit the earth and make their abode

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there are entrusted with the administration of things which are in Heaven, and **have received an authority which God has not given to angels or archangels.** For

it has not been said to them, "*Whatsoever*

*you shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven.*"

(Matthew 18:18)

They who rule on earth have indeed authority to bind, but only the body:

whereas this binding lays hold of the soul and penetrates the heavens; and what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the sentence of his servants. For indeed what is it but all manner of heavenly authority which He has given them when He says, "*Whose sins ye remit they are remitted, and whose sins ye retain they are retained?*" (John 20:23)

What authority could be greater than this? "*The Father has committed all judgment to the Son?*" (John 5:22) But I see it all put into the hands of these men by the Son. For they have been conducted to this dignity as if they were already translated to Heaven, and had transcended human nature, and were released from the passions to which we are liable.

### **The Power of the Priest Surpasses all Human Authorities**

Moreover, if a king should bestow this honor upon any of his subjects,

authorizing him to cast into prison whom he pleased and to release them again, he becomes an object of envy and respect to all men; but he who has received from God an authority as much greater as heaven is more precious than earth, and souls more precious than bodies, seems to some to have received so small an honor that they are actually able to imagine that one of those who have been entrusted with these things will despise the gift. Away with such madness! For transparent **madness it is to despise so great a dignity, without which it is not possible to obtain either our own salvation**, or the good things which have been promised to us. For if no one can enter into the kingdom of Heaven except he be regenerate through water and the Spirit, and he who does not eat the flesh of the Lord and drink His blood is excluded from eternal life, and if all these things are accomplished only by means of those holy hands, I

mean the hands of the priest, how will any one, without these, be able to escape the fire of hell, or to win those crowns which are reserved for the victorious?

These verily are they who are entrusted with the pangs of spiritual travail and the birth which comes through baptism: by their means we put on Christ, and are buried with the Son of God, and become members of that blessed Head. Wherefore they might not only be more justly feared by us than rulers and kings, but also be more honored than parents; since these begot us of blood and the will of the flesh, but the others are the authors of our birth from God, even that blessed regeneration which is the true freedom and the sonship according to grace.

The Jewish priests had authority to release the body from leprosy, or, rather, not to release it but only to examine those who were already released, and you know how much the office of priest was contended for at that time. But our priests have



received authority to deal, not with bodily leprosy, but spiritual uncleanness — not to pronounce it removed after examination, but actually and absolutely to take it away. Wherefore they who despise these priests would be far more accursed than Dathan and his company, and deserve more severe punishment. For the latter, although they laid claim to the dignity which did not belong to them, nevertheless had an excellent opinion concerning it, and this they evinced by the great eagerness with which they pursued it; but these men, when the office has been better regulated, and has received so great a development, have displayed an audacity which exceeds that of the others, although manifested in a contrary way. For there is not an equal amount of contempt involved in aiming at an honor which does not pertain to one, and in despising such great advantages, but the latter exceeds the former as much as scorn differs from admiration. What soul then is so sordid as to despise such great advantages? None whatever, I should say, unless it were one subject to some demoniacal impulse.

For I return once more to the point from which I started: not in the way of chastising only, but also in the way of benefiting, God has bestowed a power on priests greater than that of our natural parents. The two indeed differ as much as the present and the future life. For our

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natural parents generate us unto this life only, but the others unto that which is to come. And the former would not be able to avert death from their offspring, or to repel the assaults of disease; but these others have often saved a sick soul, or one which was on the point of perishing, procuring for some a milder chastisement, and preventing others from falling altogether, not only by instruction and admonition, but also by the assistance wrought through prayers. For not only at the time of regeneration, but afterwards also, they have authority to forgive sins. *“Is any sick among you? it is said, let him call for the elders of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up: and if he have committed sins they shall be forgiven him”*. (James 5:14-15) Again: our natural parents, should their children come into conflict with any men of high rank and great power in the world, are unable to profit them: but priests have reconciled, not rulers and kings, but God Himself when His wrath has often been provoked against them.

### **The Priest Should Tremble for Such a Great Power**

Well! After this will any one venture to condemn me for arrogance? For my part,

after what has been said, I imagine such religious fear will possess the souls of the hearers that they will no longer condemn those who avoid the office for arrogance and temerity, but rather those who voluntarily come forward and are eager to obtain this dignity for themselves. For if they who have been entrusted with the command of cities, should they chance to be wanting in discretion and vigilance, have sometimes destroyed the cities and ruined themselves in addition, how much power think you both in himself and from above must he need, to avoid sinning, whose business it is to beautify the Bride of Christ?

### Example of Saint Paul

No man loved Christ more than Paul: no man exhibited greater zeal, no man was counted worthy of more grace: nevertheless, after all these great advantages, he still has fears and tremblings concerning this government and those who were governed by him. *“I fear,”* he says, *“lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity which is in Christ”*. (2 Corinthians 11:3) And again, *“I was with you in fear and in much trembling;* (1 Corinthians 2:3) and this was a man who had been caught up to the third Heaven, and made partaker of the unspeakable mysteries of God, (2 Corinthians 12:4) and had endured as many deaths as he had lived days after he became a believer — a man, moreover, who would not use the authority given him from Christ lest any of his converts should be offended. If,

then, he who went beyond the ordinances of God, and nowhere sought his own advantage, but that of those whom he governed, was always so full of fear when he considered the greatness of his government, what shall our condition be who in many ways seek our own, who not only fail to go beyond the commandments of Christ, but for the most part transgress them? *“Who is weak,”* he says, *“and I am not weak? Who is offended and I burn not?”* (2 Corinthians 11:29) Such an one ought the priest to be, or, rather, not such only: for these are small things, and as nothing compared with what I am about to say. And what is this? *“I could wish,”* he says, *“that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”* (Romans 9:3) If any one can utter such a speech, if any one has the soul which attains to such a prayer, he might justly be blamed if he took to flight: but if any one should lack such excellence as much as I do, he would deserve to be hated, not if he avoided the office, but if he accepted it. For if an election to a military dignity was the business in hand, and they who had the right of conferring the honor were to drag forward a brazier, or a shoemaker, or some such artisan, and entrust the army to his hands, I should not praise the wretched man if he did not take to flight, and do all in his power to avoid plunging into such manifest trouble. If, indeed, it be sufficient to bear the name of pastor, and to take the work in hand hap-hazard, and there be no danger in this, then let whoever pleases accuse me of vainglory; but if it behooves one who undertakes this care to have much understanding,

and, before understanding, great grace from God, and uprightness of conduct, and purity of life and superhuman virtue, do not deprive me of forgiveness if I am unwilling to perish in vain without a cause.

### **Difficulties and Temptations of the Ministry**

Do not thus, I pray and beseech you. I know my own soul, how feeble and puny it is: I know the magnitude of this ministry, and the great difficulty of the work; for more stormy billows vex the soul of the priest than the gales which disturb the sea.

**And first of all is that most terrible rock of vainglory**, more dangerous than that of the Sirens, of which the fable-mongers tell such marvellous tales: for many were able to sail past that and escape unscathed; but this is to me so dangerous that even now, when no

necessity of any kind impels me into that abyss, I am unable to keep clear of the snare: but if any one were to commit this charge to me, it would be all the same as if he tied my hands behind my back, and delivered me to the wild beasts dwelling on that rock to rend me in pieces day by day. Do you ask what those wild beasts are? They are wrath, despondency, envy, strife, slanders, accusations, falsehood, hypocrisy, intrigues, anger against those who have done no harm, pleasure at the indecorous acts of fellow ministers, sorrow at their prosperity, love of praise, desire of honor (which indeed most of all drives the human soul headlong to perdition), doctrines devised to please, servile flatteries, ignoble fawning, contempt of the poor, paying court to the rich, senseless and mischievous honors, favors attended with danger both to those who offer and those who accept them, sordid fear suited only to the basest of slaves, the abolition





of plain speaking, a great affectation of humility, but banishment of truth, the suppression of convictions and reproofs, or rather the excessive use of them against the poor, while against those who are invested with power no one dare open his lips.

For all these wild beasts, and more than these, are bred upon that rock of which I have spoken, and those whom they have once captured are inevitably dragged down into such a depth of servitude that even to please women they often do many things which it is well not to mention.

### The Improper use of the Gifts Given by God

And let not any one suppose that I subject all to the aforesaid charges: for there are some, yea many, who are superior to these entanglements, and exceed in number those who have been caught by them. Nor would I indeed make the priesthood responsible for these evils: far be such madness from me. For men of understanding do not say that the sword is to blame for murder, nor wine for drunkenness, nor strength for outrage, nor courage for foolhardiness, but they lay the blame on those who make an improper use of the gifts which have been bestowed upon them by God, and punish them accordingly. Certainly, at least, the priesthood may justly accuse us if we do not rightly handle it. For it is not itself a cause of the evils already mentioned, but we, who as far as lies in our power have defiled it with so many pollutions, by

entrusting it to commonplace men who readily accept what is offered them, without having first acquired a knowledge of their own souls, or considered the gravity of the office, and when they have entered on the work, being blinded by inexperience, overwhelm with innumerable evils the people who have been committed to their care. This is the very thing which was very nearly happening in my case, had not God speedily delivered me from those dangers, mercifully sparing his Church and my own soul. For, tell me, whence do you think such great troubles are generated in the Churches? I, for my part, believe the only source of them to be the inconsiderate and random way in which prelates are chosen and appointed. For the head ought to be the strongest part, that it may be able to regulate and control the evil exhalations which arise from the rest of the body below; but when it happens to be weak in itself, and unable to repel those pestiferous attacks, it becomes feebler itself than it really is, and ruins the rest of the body as well. And to prevent this now coming to pass, God kept me in the position of the feet, which was the rank originally assigned to me. For there are very many other qualities, besides those already mentioned, which the priest ought to have, but which I do not possess; **and, above all, this one:—his soul ought to be thoroughly purged from any lust after the office:** for if he happens to have a natural inclination for this dignity, as soon as he attains it a stronger flame is kindled, and the man being taken completely captive will endure innumerable evils in order to keep

a secure hold upon it, even to the extent of using flattery, or submitting to something base and ignoble, or expending large sums of money. For I will not now speak of the murders with which some have filled the Churches, or the desolation which they have brought upon cities in contending for the dignity, lest some persons should think what I say incredible. But I am of opinion one ought to exercise so much caution in the matter, as to shun the burden of the office, and when one has entered upon it, not to wait for the judgment of others should any fault be committed which warrants deposition, but to anticipate it by ejecting oneself from the dignity; for thus one might probably win mercy for himself from God: but to cling to it in defiance of propriety is to deprive oneself of all forgiveness, or rather to kindle the wrath of God, by adding a second error more offensive than the first.

### Fortitude required to Be a Priest

And do not be surprised if, in connection with such endurance, **I seek another test of fortitude in the soul.** For to be indifferent to food and drink and a soft bed, we see is to many no hard task, especially at least to such as are of a rough habit of life and have been brought up in this way from early youth, and to many others also; bodily discipline and custom softening the severity of these laborious practices: but insult, and abuse, and coarse language, and gibes from inferiors, whether wantonly or justly uttered, and rebukes vainly and idly spoken both by rulers and the

ruled — this is what few can bear, in fact only one or two here and there; and one may see men, who are strong in the former exercises, so completely upset by these things, as to become more furious than the most savage beasts. Now such men especially we should exclude from the precincts of the priesthood. For if a prelate did not loathe food, or go barefoot, no harm would be done to the common interests of the Church; but a furious temper causes great disasters both to him who possesses it, and to his neighbours. And there is no divine threat against those who fail to do the things referred to, but hell and hell-fire are threatened against those who are angry without a cause. (Matthew 5:22) As then the lover of vainglory, when he takes upon him the government of numbers, supplies additional fuel to the fire, so he who by himself, or in the company of a few, is unable to control his anger, but readily carried away by it, should he be entrusted with the direction of a whole multitude, like some wild beast goaded on all sides by countless tormentors, would never be able to live in tranquillity himself, and would cause incalculable mischief to those who have been committed to his charge.

For nothing clouds the purity of the reason, and the perspicuity of the mental vision so much as undisciplined wrath, rushing along with violent impetuosity. For wrath, says one, destroys even the prudent. For the eye of the soul being darkened as in some nocturnal battle is not able to distinguish friends from foes, nor the honorable from the unworthy,

but handles them all in turn in the same way; even if some harm must be suffered, readily enduring everything, in order to satisfy the pleasure of the soul. For the fire of wrath is a kind of pleasure, and tyrannizes over the soul more harshly than pleasure, completely upsetting its healthy organization. For it easily impels men to arrogance, and unseasonable enmities, and unreasonable hatred, and it continually makes them ready to commit wanton and vain offenses; and forces them to say and do many other things of that kind, the soul being swept along by the rush of passion, and having nothing on which to fasten its strength and resist so great an impulse.

### **The Priest Should Excel in Virtue**

The souls therefore of men elected to the priesthood ought to be endued with such power as the grace of God bestowed on the bodies of those saints who were cast into the Babylonian furnace. (Daniel 3) Faggot and pitch and tow are not the fuel of this fire, but things far more dreadful: for it is no material fire to which they are subjected, but the all-devouring flame of envy encompasses them, rising up on every side, and assailing them, and putting their life to a more searching test than the fire then was to the bodies of those young men. When then it finds a little trace of stubble, it speedily fastens upon it; and this unsound part it entirely consumes, but all the rest of the fabric, even if it be brighter than the sunbeams, is scorched and blackened by the smoke. For as long as the life of the priest is well regulated in

every direction, it is invulnerable to plots; but if he happens to overlook some trifle, as is natural in a human being, traversing the treacherous ocean of this life, none of his other good deeds are of any avail in enabling him to escape the mouths of his accusers; but that little blunder overshadows all the rest. And all men are ready to pass judgment on the priest as if he was not a being clothed with flesh, or one who inherited a human nature, but like an angel, and emancipated from every species of infirmity. And just as all men fear and flatter a tyrant as long as he is strong, because they cannot put him down, but when they see his affairs going adversely, those who were his friends a short time before abandon their hypocritical respect, and suddenly become his enemies and antagonists, and having discovered all his weak points, make an attack upon him, and depose him from the government; so is it also in the case of priests. Those who honored him and paid court to him a short time before, while he was strong, as soon as they have found some little handle eagerly prepare to depose him, not as a tyrant only, but something far more dreadful than that. And as the tyrant fears his body guards, so also does the priest dread most of all his neighbours and fellow-ministers. For no others covet his dignity so much, or know his affairs so well as these; and if anything occurs, being near at hand, they perceive it before others, and even if they slander him, can easily command belief, and, by magnifying trifles, take their victim captive. For the apostolic saying is reversed, "*whether one member*

*suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it;*" (1 Corinthians 12:26) unless indeed a man should be able by his great discretion to stand his ground against everything.

Consider, then, what kind of man he ought to be who is to hold out against such a tempest, and to manage skillfully such great hindrances to the common welfare; for he ought to be dignified yet free from arrogance, formidable yet kind, apt to command yet sociable, impartial yet courteous, humble yet not servile, strong yet gentle, in order that he may contend successfully against all these difficulties. And he ought to bring forward with great authority the man who is properly qualified for the office, even if all should oppose him, and with the same authority to reject the man who is not so qualified, even if all should conspire in his favor, and to keep one aim only in view, the building up of the Church, in nothing actuated either by enmity or favor. Well, do you now think

that I acted reasonably in declining the ministry of this office? But I have not even yet gone through all my reasons with you; for I have some others still to mention. And do not grow impatient of listening to a friendly and sincere man, who wishes to clear himself from your accusations; for these statements are not only serviceable for the defense which you have to make on my behalf, but they will also prove of no small help for the due administration of the office. For it is necessary for one who is going to enter upon this path of life to investigate all matters thoroughly well, before he sets his hand to the ministry. Do you ask why? Because one who knows all things clearly will have this advantage, if no other, that he will not feel strange when these things befall him. Would you like me then to approach the question of superintending widows, first of all, or of the care of virgins, or the difficulty of the judicial function. For in each of these cases there is a different kind of anxiety, and the fear is greater than the anxiety.



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