

# *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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## *On the Manner of Preaching*

**By Saint Alphonsus Liguori**

[From the book *Complete Works, Volume 15, Preaching*]

By preaching, the faith has been propagated, and by the same means God wishes it to be preserved: *“Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of Christ.”* (Rom 10:17) But for a Christian, it is not enough to know what he is obliged to do; it is, moreover, necessary for him, by hearing the divine word from

time to time, to be reminded of the importance of eternal salvation, and of the means which he ought to adopt in order to secure it. Hence the following command of St. Paul to Timothy: *“Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season; reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine.”* (2 Tim 4:2)

And the same command God had long before given to the Prophets Isaias and Jeremias. To the former

he said: *“Cry, cease not to lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show My people their wicked doings.”* (Is 58:1)

To the latter: *“Behold, I have given My words in thy mouth: lo, I have set thee this day over the nations, and over kingdoms, to root up and to pull down, ... to build and to plant.”* (Jer 1:9) The same command he has also imposed on his priests; for preaching is one of their principal duties. *“Going, therefore, teach ye all nations, ... to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”* (Mt 28:19) And should a sinner be damned through

the fault of him who preaches the divine word, God will demand an account of the priest who could have announced the truths of salvation to that lost soul. *“If, when I say to the wicked thou shalt surely die, thou declare it not to him; ... the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but I will require his blood at thy hand?”* (Ez 3:18)

But, to save souls, it is not enough to preach: it is, as I have already said, necessary to preach in a proper manner. In the first place, in order to preach well learning

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Bishop, Doctor of the Church, and the founder of the Redemptorist Congregation. He was born on September 27, 1696, near Naples, Italy. Educated at the University of Naples, Alphonsus received his doctorate at the age of sixteen. By age nineteen he was practicing law, but he saw the transitory nature of the secular world, and after a brief time, retreated from the law courts and his fame. Visiting the local Hospital for Incurables on August 28, 1723, he had a vision and was told to consecrate his life solely to God. In response, Alphonsus dedicated himself to the religious life, even while suffering persecution from his family. He finally agreed to become a priest but to live at home as a member of a group of secular missionaries. He was ordained on December 21, 1726. Alphonsus founded the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer on November 9, 1732. Alphonsus was preaching missions in the rural areas and writing. He refused to become the bishop of Palermo but in 1762 had to accept the papal command to accept the see of St. Agatha of the Goths near Naples. For thirteen years Alphonsus fed the poor, instructed families, reorganized the seminary and religious houses, taught theology, and wrote. His austerities were rigorous. He died peacefully on August 1, 1787. He was beatified in 1816 and canonized in 1839. In 1871, Alphonsus was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius IX. His writings on moral, theological, and ascetic matters had great impact and have survived through the years, especially his Moral Theology and his Glories of Mary.

and study are necessary. He who preaches at random will do more injury than service to religion. In the second place, an exemplary life is necessary. The sermons of the man whose conduct excites contempt shall be despised, says St. Gregory.

And St. John Chrysostom writes: “How is it possible for a priest to persuade by his words, when his acts are in opposition to his doctrine?” The preaching of such a man shall serve only for his condemnation; for according to St. Paul, he who reproves in others what he does himself, condemns himself: *“Thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest. For wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself.”* (Rom 2:1) Justly, then, did Father John d’Avila say to a person who asked what rule he should follow in order to preach well, that the best



means of preaching well was to love Jesus Christ ardently. “He -says St. Gregory- who is not on fire does not inflame.”

**How is it possible for a priest to persuade by his words, when his acts are in opposition to his doctrine?**

The divine love must first burn in the preacher, that he may afterwards kindle it in others. St. Francis de Sales used to say that the heart speaks to the heart. He meant, that words alone speak to the ears, but do not enter the soul. He only who speaks from the heart, that is, he who feels and practises what he preaches, shall speak to the heart of others, and shall move them to the love of God. Hence, according to the words of the Redeemer, that which ye hear in the

ear, preach ye on the housetop (Mt 10:27) The preacher must have an affection for mental prayer, in which he may excite the sentiments that he will afterwards communicate to others. Mental prayer is the blessed furnace in which sacred orators are inflamed with divine love. *"In my meditation -says David- a fire shall flame out."* (Ps 38:4) Here they form the fiery darts that afterwards wound the hearts of their hearers. It is necessary to preach with a good intention, that is, not for temporal interest, but for the glory of God not to attract empty praises, but to procure the salvation of souls.

Empty words and sounding periods are, says St. Francis de Sales the pest of sermons. First, because God does not cooperate with vain preaching. Secondly, because the persons who are present at sermons are generally rude and illiterate, and incapable of understanding flowery discourses. What a pity, sometimes, to see so many of the poor going to the

sermon, and afterwards leaving the church afflicted and wearied, without having understood almost any part of the discourse. Justly has Father John d'Avila said, that they who preach in a lofty style, not intelligible to the audience, are traitors to Jesus Christ; and that, though sent by him to procure his glory, they seek only their own exaltation. Justly,

too, has Father Caspar Sanzio said, that such preachers are at the present day the greatest persecutors of the Church, because by their sermons they are the cause of the perdition of many souls that would be saved by exhortations composed in a simple and apostolic style.

*"My preaching -says*

*the Apostle- was not in the persuasive words of human wisdom, but in showing of the spirit and power."* (1 Cor 2:4)

In the lives of the saints who were employed in saving souls I find many praised for preaching in simple and popular language, but I have not found one eulogized for having

**In the first place, in order to preach well learning and study are necessary.**

**He who preaches at random will do more injury than service to religion. In the second place, an exemplary life is necessary.**

preached in a labored and flowery style. It will be useful to abridge, in this place, what the learned and celebrated Muratori has written in his golden little treatise entitled Popular Eloquence.

There are, he says, two sorts of eloquence: the sublime, and the popular. The sublime eloquence directs us in the composition of discourses which treat of lofty subjects, contain ingenious reflections, select language, and turned periods.

With the aid of the popular eloquence the eternal truths are expounded nakedly, subjects easily understood are explained in a simple and familiar style, so that each person present may understand the entire instruction. In sermons, we address not only the learned, but also the uninstructed, and these ordinarily form the greater part of the audience. Hence it is always expedient to preach in a simple, popular style, not only in the missions and spiritual exercises, but also in all sermons addressed to the people. In the sight of God, the souls of the learned and unlearned are equally precious; and, according to the words of the Apostle: *“To the wise and to the unwise I am a debtor.”*



(Rom 1:14) The preacher is obliged to seek the sanctification of the latter as well as of the former. Besides, even to the learned, sermons composed in a simple and familiar style are more profitable than discourses written in lofty and florid language. For in sublime discourses the mind stops to admire and criticise (and this frequently happens); but the will is left without food, and derives no profit from the sermon. Father Paul Segneri, Junior, by preaching in a popular manner ravished the hearts even of the learned. The same was the result of the sermons of St. John Francis Regis.

He who wishes to preach, not for the purpose of acquiring praise, but

of gaining souls to God, should not seek to hear others say: "Oh, what beautiful thoughts! What a splendid speaker! What a great man!" But he should desire to see all going away with their heads bowed down, weeping over their sins, resolved to change their lives, and to give themselves to God. The end of true rhetoric is to persuade and move the audience to practise what is inculcated in the discourse. Even in popular eloquence, preachers avail themselves of the art of rhetoric, of figures, of the arrangement of the arguments, of the language, of the peroration. But all must be done simply and without show of art, in order to reap not applause, but fruit. If in such sermons the audience are not delighted by elegant language and ingenious reflections, they shall certainly be pleased to find themselves enlightened and moved to attend to what alone is important their eternal salvation.

And what has been said is, according to Muratori, applicable

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to sermons preached in cities, where the audience consists of the ignorant and the learned; but he adds, that in addressing the common people or the inhabitants of the villages the preacher must adopt the most popular and lowest kind of eloquence, in order to accommodate his instruction to their weak understanding. He must imagine himself to be one of them,

and that another is anxious to instruct him in some duty and to persuade him to fulfil it. Hence his language ought to be popular and common, the periods short and unconnected, imitating the very mode of reasoning that such persons

usually adopt among themselves. In a word, the whole study of the preacher should be to make the audience understand all he says, and to move his hearers most effectually to do what he exhorts them to practise. And as the preacher should adopt a familiar style, so he should also select subjects easily understood; omitting scholastic points and

ingenious interpretations of Scripture, which though intelligible will be unprofitable to the poor and illiterate. The great object should be to explain nakedly and simply the eternal truths, the importance of salvation, and to lay before the people the illusions of the devil, the dangers of perdition, and the means to be adopted in some particular cases that may occur. In this consists the breaking of bread to the little ones, which the Lord demands of preachers, and of the general neglect of which he complains: *“The little ones have asked for bread, and there was none to break it unto them.”* (Lam 4:4) In speaking to the uninstructed, it is also very useful to ask questions

from time to time, and to reply to them. It is useful to bring forward examples of the saints, or examples of punishments inflicted on sinners. But above all, it is useful to inculcate things which are practical, and to repeat them several times, that they may remain impressed on the weak understanding of the poor.

Such the doctrine of Muratori, which I have here abridged in order to show that the sacred orators who preach in a high and florid style to the poor, who generally compose the audiences in our churches, receive even from the learned censure rather than praise.

This is enough on preaching the divine word.

He who wishes to preach, not for the purpose of acquiring praise, but of gaining souls to God, should not seek to hear others say: “Oh, what beautiful thoughts! What a splendid speaker! What a great man!” But he should desire to see all going away with their heads bowed down, weeping over their sins, resolved to change their lives, and to give themselves to God.



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