

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

The Eucharist is at the Heart of the Priest’s Spirituality

By Saint John Paul II

General Audience, June 9, 1993

The catecheses which we are developing on the spiritual life of the priest especially concern presbyters, but they are addressed to all the faithful. It is indeed good that everyone should know the Church’s doctrine on the priesthood and what she desires of those who, having received it, are conformed to the sublime image of Christ, the

eternal priest and most pure victim of the salvific sacrifice. That image is developed in the Letter to the Hebrews and in other texts of the apostles and evangelists, and it has been handed on faithfully in the Church’s Tradition of thought and life. Today too it is necessary for the clergy to be faithful to that image, which mirrors the living truth of Christ the priest and victim.

The reproduction of that image in priests is attained primarily through their life-giving participation in the Eucharistic mystery, to which the Christian priesthood is essentially ordered and linked. The Council of Trent emphasized that the bond between the priesthood and sacrifice comes from the will of Christ, who conferred upon his ministers “the power to consecrate, to offer and to distribute his Body and his Blood” (cf. DS 1764). In this there is a

mystery of communion with Christ in being and doing, which must be translated into a spiritual life imbued with faith in and love for the Eucharist.

The priest is quite aware that he cannot count on his own efforts to achieve the purposes of his ministry. Rather, he is called to serve as an instrument of the victorious action of Christ whose sacrifice, made present on the altars, obtains for

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Karol J. Wojtyła, known as John Paul II since his October 1978 election to the papacy, was born on May 18, 1920. On July 4, 1958, he was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Cracow by Pope Pius XII, and was consecrated on September 28, 1958. On January 13, 1964, he was nominated Archbishop of Cracow by Pope Paul VI, who made him a cardinal June 26, 1967. His principal documents include 14 encyclicals, 13 apostolic exhortations, 11 apostolic constitutions and 42 apostolic letters.



On May 1, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI beatified Pope John Paul II, and Pope Francis canonized Saint John Paul II alongside Saint John XXIII on April 27, 2014.

“Everyone knows John Paul II: his face, his characteristic way of moving and speaking; his immersion in prayer and his spontaneous cheerfulness. Many of his words have become indelibly engraved in our memories, starting with the passionate cry with which he introduced himself to the people at the beginning of his pontificate: ‘Open wide the doors to Christ, and be not afraid of him!’ Or this saying: ‘No one can

live a trial life; no one can love experimentally.’ An entire pontificate is condensed in words like these. It is as though he would like to open the doors for Christ everywhere and wishes to open up to people the gate that leads to true life, to true love.” (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI)

humanity an abundance of divine gifts. However, he also knows that, in order worthily to pronounce the words of consecration in the name of Christ—"This is my Body.... This is the cup of my Blood"—he must be profoundly united to Christ and seek to reproduce Christ's countenance in himself. The more intensely he lives in Christ, the more authentically he can celebrate the Eucharist.

The Second Vatican Council recalled: "Priests act especially in the person of Christ as ministers of holy things, especially in the Sacrifice of the Mass" (PO 13) and that without a priest there can be no Eucharistic sacrifice. However, it emphasized that those who celebrate this sacrifice must fulfill their role in intimate spiritual union with Christ, with great humility, as his ministers in the service of the community. "They are asked to take example from that with which they

deal, and inasmuch as they celebrate the mystery of the Lord's death they should keep their bodies free of wantonness and lusts" (PO 13). In offering the Eucharistic sacrifice, presbyters must offer themselves personally with Christ, accepting all the renunciation and sacrifice required by their priestly life—again and always, with Christ and like Christ, sacerdos et hostia.

The bond between the priesthood and sacrifice comes from the will of Christ, who conferred upon his ministers "the power to consecrate, to offer and to distribute his Body and his Blood". In this there is a mystery of communion with Christ in being and doing, which must be translated into a spiritual life imbued with faith in and love for the Eucharist.

If the priest "hears" this truth proposed to him and to all the faithful as the voice of the New Testament and Tradition, he will grasp the Council's earnest recommendation: "The daily celebration of Mass is strongly urged, since even if there cannot be present a number of the faithful, it is still an act of Christ and of the Church" (PO 13). The tendency to celebrate the Eucharist only when there was an assembly

of the faithful emerged in those years. According to the Council,

although everything possible should be done to gather the faithful for the celebration, it is also true that, even if the priest is alone, the Eucharistic offering which he performs in the name of Christ has the effectiveness that comes from Christ and always obtains new graces for the Church. Therefore I, too, recommend to priests and to all the Christian people that they ask the Lord for a stronger faith in this value of the Eucharist.

The 1971 Synod of Bishops took up the conciliar doctrine, declaring: “Even if the Eucharist should be celebrated without participation of the faithful, it nevertheless remains the center of the life of the entire Church and the heart of priestly existence” (cf. *Ench. Vat.*, 4, 1201).

This is a wonderful expression: “The center of the life of the entire Church.” The Eucharist makes the Church, just as the Church makes the Eucharist. The presbyter, having been given the charge of building the Church, performs this task essentially

through the Eucharist. Even when the participation of the faithful is lacking, he cooperates in gathering people around Christ in the Church by offering the Eucharist.

The Synod speaks further of the Eucharist as the “heart of priestly existence.” This means that the presbyter, desiring to be and remain personally and profoundly attached to Christ, finds him first in the Eucharist, the sacrament which brings about this intimate union, open to a growth which can reach the heights of mystical identification.

At this level, too, which is that of so many holy priests, the priestly soul is not closed in on itself, because in a particular way in the Eucharist it draws on

the love of him “who gives himself as food to the faithful” (PO 13). Thus he feels led to give himself to the faithful to whom he distributes the Body of Christ. It is precisely in being nourished by this Body that he is impelled to help the faithful to

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(Presbyterorum Ordinis 13).**

open themselves in turn to that same presence, drawing nourishment from his infinite charity, in order to draw ever richer fruit from the sacrament.

To this end the presbyter can and must provide the atmosphere necessary for a worthy Eucharistic celebration. It is the atmosphere of prayer: liturgical prayer, to which the people must be called and trained; the prayer of personal contemplation; the prayer of sound Christian popular tradition, which can prepare for, follow and to some extent also accompany the Mass; the prayer of holy places, of sacred art, of sacred songs, of sacred music, (especially on the organ). This is incarnated as it were in the formulas and rites, and continually inspires and uplifts everything so that it can participate in giving praise to God and in spiritually uplifting the Christian people gathered in the Eucharistic assembly.

To priests the Council also recommends, in addition to the daily

celebration of the Mass, personal devotion to the Holy Eucharist, and especially that “daily colloquy with Christ, a visit to and veneration of the Most Holy Eucharist” (PO 18). Faith in and love for the Eucharist cannot allow Christ’s presence in the tabernacle to remain alone (cf. CCC 1418). Already in the Old Testament we read that God dwelt in a “tent” (or “tabernacle”), which was called the “meeting tent” (Ex 33:7). The meeting was desired by God. It can be said that in the tabernacle of the Eucharist too Christ is present in view of a dialogue with his new people and with individual believers. The presbyter is the first one called to enter this meeting tent, to visit Christ in the tabernacle for a “daily talk.”

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Lastly, I want to recall that, more than any other, the presbyter is called to share the fundamental disposition of Christ in this sacrament, that is, the “thanksgiving” from which it takes its name. Uniting himself with Christ the priest and victim, the presbyter shares not only his offering,

but also his feelings, his disposition of gratitude to the Father for the benefits he has given to humanity, to every soul, to the priest himself, to all those who in heaven and on earth have been allowed to share in the glory of God. *Gratias agimus tibi propter agnam gloriam tuam...*

Thus, to counter the expressions of accusation and protest against God—which are often heard in the world—the priest offers the chorus of praise and blessing, which is raised by those who can recognize in man and in the world the signs of an infinite goodness.



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