

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

Parish Priests: The Dignity and Sanctity of the Pastor

By Saint John of Avila

[From the Book *Treatise on Priesthood*]

Many things are required to fulfill well the obligation of the office of pastor of souls. Looking at the priestly dignity attached to the office, it is fitting to have fervent and efficacious prayer, and also sanctity, according to what has been said above. All of this will be more advantageous in the parish priest

in light of the greater and more particular obligation he has of giving good example to his parishioners and interceding for them before the divine majesty. He must do this with the affection of a father and a mother for their children, since he is called father of his parishioners. The many diverse occupations that his office demands indicate how much the priest needs prayer. It is not easy to have prayer and devotion

in the midst of many occupations, even if they are good. For the same reason, it becomes necessary that his sanctity be very firm. For there are in his office many occasions for losing sanctity, as reason and experience show. St. John Chrysostom ponders this, and St. Augustine is amazed that those in this office have any virtue left standing.

Sanctification in the Ministry

Apart from the obligation he has to be a good priest and to keep watch

over his own conscience, the parish priest also has the office of helping and teaching the souls of the faithful. As St. Gregory says, this requires no less sanctity than to offer the holy sacrifice of the altar. Pondering this, St. Chrysostom remarks that the one entrusted with souls has been entrusted with the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, so that he might care for it and strengthen it. He must make it beautiful with such virtues that it may be worthy of being called the body of such a head as Jesus Christ is. St. Paul says the same, in a

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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.

sentence in these words, “For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” (2 Cor 11:2)

It is a great task for a man to be charged with teaching the spouse of such a great king, instructing her in customs that will give joy to the king. This is especially so, since she is weak in virtue, without much prudence, and not very obedient to her mentor.

Thus, the Lord commands the pastors of the rational sheep that they strengthen what is weak and heal what is sick, that they bind up what is broken and bring back the outcast, and that they seek the lost (cf Ez 34:4). For this, many and very good qualities are necessary. With reason did St. Gregory say that the direction of souls is the art of arts. Much prudence is needed to know

how to take medicine to such diverse people and to give what is suitable to each one. A lot of patience is

needed to suffer the importunities of sheep, both wise and unwise. May God give him, as He gave to Jeremiah, a face as strong as diamond and flint so that he may not be overcome by the threats and evil deeds of those who do not want to be drawn away from their sins or reprimanded for them, and do not want priests to carry out their office. It is good to be like the prophet who says, “I am filled with the strength of the Lord, that I might declare to Jacob his sin.” (Mi

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3:8) Fortitude is very necessary for those who hold public offices, but rarely possessed, because there are few untouched, more or less, by the desire to please their friends and the fear of displeasing their ene- mies.

Preaching and Study

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As St. Paul says, "All Scripture, inspired by God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice"

(2 Tm 3:16) Thus, it is fitting that the parish priest should know Sacred Scripture - if not the difficult parts, then at least what is simple and straightforward.

The holy doctors were men enlightened by God and experienced in the care of spiritual infirmities. They have written many things useful for the diagnosis and healing of

such infirmities, and many salutary prescriptions to preserve the health arrived at and to teach and persuade the people in the way of God. Therefore, it is good that the priest be well read in the moral teaching of the saints. Without it, he will not understand the Scriptures with certainty. He will also make many errors in the care of souls through not making use of the advice of the physicians God gave us.

Orientation and Direction

The priest is not only a physician and teacher; he is also a judge. To give sentences by which, in conformity

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with God's will, he opens and closes the kingdom to those in his charge, it is suitable for him also to have knowledge of particular things of conscience, treated in Councils, Canon

Law, and summaries by men learned in this field. To fulfill his obligations well, much favor from the Lord is necessary and much diligence on the part of the curate. For, as the saints say, the same conditions that the

Apostle demands of one who would be a good bishop, are demanded of one who would perform well the office of pastor, even if not with the same degree of perfection.

For this reason, the priest has to be very mature in every virtue. This is especially so in the use of the holy sacrament of penance, for which he needs much prudence, charity, chastity, efficacy in word and fervent prayer. Above all, it is good for the priest to have true love for our Lord Jesus Christ. This love will cause the priest to have zeal so fervent that it will consume his heart with pain that God is offended. He will try to remove such offenses, so that God may be as honored

and revered exteriorly in divine worship as interiorly in his heart. Toward God he has the heart of a faithful son, and toward his parishioners, the heart of a true father and a true mother. Christian priests should be such that they do not need someone else to watch out for their souls because, as St. Gregory says, “Those for whom help from others is still necessary, are not to be promoted to the position of helping others.”

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The Ministry of Confession

The ministry of physician of souls, which is incumbent upon the priest, is very close to that of confessors, even if they are not parish priests. This ministry must be carried out well. It is so important for the

good of the Church, for if there were good confessors, a large part of the road toward reform of the Church would be covered. Sooner or later, all the faithful go to confession. If they should fall into the hands of ministers who have the art of treating souls and zeal for their salvation, it is certain that the Christian people would walk at a very different pace than they are now walking.

The qualities the confessor must have, whether he is a parish priest or not, are set forth in the Clementine Dudum de sepulturis in these words, “Let them take care to choose persons who are able, suitable, of proven character,

discreet, modest, and skillful to carry out such a salutary ministry and office.” In this holy sacrament, not only are infirm souls cured, but the dead are raised. As St. Bernard says, “The revival of the soul is a great sacrament.” Many times it turns out to be quite difficult to place the penitent in a reasonable disposition, so that he may be ready for the fruit of sacramental absolution. Therefore, the confessor needs much prudence, patience, and above all, charity, which make him groan and pray to the Lord and do penance, so that through his ministry he may give light and grace to his penitent.

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