

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

Humility, Pride and the Perfect Love of God

By Saint John of Avila

Saint John of Avila

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.

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TO A DEVOUT PERSON, TREATING OF HUMILITY,
PRIDE, AND THE PERFECT LOVE OF GOD.

MAY God bless you during this Lent, and grant that you may receive the ashes upon your forehead at the beginning of this holy season with such fitting dispositions as to constantly preserve that holy humility in your heart which they betoken. He to whom God gives light to understand and to sorrow for the state he was in while he lived apart from his Creator, is delivered from the fatal blindness of pride, and is made capable of receiving all fitting spiritual graces. The Holy Scriptures say: "Pride is the beginning of all sin: he that holdeth it shall be filled with maledictions, (Ecclus. XI. 15.) that is to say, "vices." For as a king is rarely seen alone, so, many other sins usually accompany pride, and neither does humility keep solitary state; for, as St. James tells us (IV. 6.): "God giveth grace to the humble," and grace is the mother of all the virtues.

Pride seeks after honours and is grieved when it is despised; humility is averse to being treated well and rejoices in contempt, which it knows that it deserves, and its own uprightness renders it desirous that justice should be done. Pride never has what it wants, for whatever it possesses, or has given to it, it considers that it deserves still more; while humility always thinks it has more than enough, for it believes that it is unworthy to walk the earth, and that hell itself is not sufficient punishment for its sins. Pride can live in peace with no one, not even with itself, while humility agrees with all men, for it abases itself before everyone and bears patiently with them, believing with all its heart that they are better than itself. Pride finds it insupportable to submit to others, whether to God, or a mortal creature, but humility gives way and bows down, so that it is able to pass through the "narrow gate" of obeying the will of God and man.

Great are the blessings which come to us with the ashes of humility; let no man be without it, lest he be without God also, for, as St. Augustine exclaims: "Behold how high Thou art, O Lord, and yet dost dwell with the lowly of heart!" The prophet also says: "To whom shall I have respect but to him that is poor and little, and that trembleth at my words?" (Isaias, LXVI. 2.) Humility, which makes a man think basely of himself, is yet no base thing, nor is it a fruit which springs from this

one think how little he has mortified his passions, and how he resists the reign of God's love within him, and he will see that he does not love God with all his soul. Our Lord commands us to love Him with all our strength, and indeed we ought to beg His pardon for our weakness in this respect; our energies are given to our own interests, and the concupiscence which dwells within us makes us fail to serve God diligently, and love Him fervently. Saint Augustine says that, as charity grows, concupiscence diminishes, and that no evil desires can exist with perfect charity. By the word "desires," he means the immoderate self-love we all bear towards ourselves. Now, as, with the exception of Jesus Christ our Lord, and His most holy Mother, no member of the race of Adam has ever been altogether without some degree of this inordinate self-love, so none but they have ever been perfect in divine love. If selfishness has killed the love of God, then we are in a state of mortal sin ; while if the love of God lives and reigns in our souls, making them resolute not to offend Him mortally, they are in a state of grace. If, however, self and creatures usurp an undue place in our affections, our charity is not perfect. Our works are imperfect if this virtue is defective, since it is that which gives them life. When we do not love God as we should, we are wanting also in the love of our neighbours, for we neither feel compassion for the sorrow nor joy at the

happiness of those who are very near and dear to God, and who were made His adopted children in Baptism. We do not behave towards them with due charity, because we are imperfect in our love for Him Who said: "As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." (St. Matth. XXV. 40.)

Although many of our actions may be not only free from sin, but good in themselves, and, being done in a state of grace, may merit eternal life, yet for want of this two-fold charity, which is the root of all good, these works may have many defects. If you would be truthful and humble, you must give God glory for all the good you do, and thank Him for having aided your free-will to choose rightly, and for giving you the power to merit by using the grace He has mercifully bestowed on you. Nevertheless, you must examine the faults you have committed in these actions, for it is safer to think of our failings than of our virtues. Be sure that, however strict your search may be, enough evil will still escape your notice to give you cause to cry with contrition to God: "From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord." (Ps. XVIII. 14.) This is the reason that we do not love our neighbours in the way God wishes, nor as much as He desires, and that we do not bear patiently with them and try to avoid annoying them. In fact, this is the origin of all the shortcomings which pollute our soul like a festering wound. Our sins are greater than the human intellect

can realise, and only our Creator, who sees to the bottom of our heart, knows all its weakness; for often that which seems perfect to us is very evil in His sight.

Therefore, as Job says, we should “fear all our works,” (IX. 28.) and however right they may seem to us, we must not be contented with them, nor allow ourselves a secret complacency in them. The self-contented conscience does not content God; and that man alone is just before Him, who knows that all justice and grace proceed from the divine mercy. Nothing so offends its Creator as a self-satisfied heart, because it contains no empty vessel into which He can pour the riches of His mercy. It will remain in its natural poverty, for it can offer no place into which the waters of grace may flow, to make it live happily with God, and bring forth much fruit, like a well-watered garden.

All things that we possess proceed from God, and if anyone thinks he can so much as say “the Lord Jesus!” of his own power, he puts himself in God’s place, for he attributes to himself what his Creator alone can do. God gives Himself to us on the condition that we confess the truth, that in Him and from Him, and not from ourselves, comes all that we have. The greater the good we possess, the deeper is our debt towards the Almighty, and the stronger reason have we to blame ourselves for not corresponding to such signal mercies by more generous service, and to greater graces with

a warmer gratitude. He who is taught by divine truth attributes nought to himself save his sins and his own nothingness. If all that God gave us at our creation, and which by His power He daily sustains, were withdrawn from us, there would remain only nothingness and we should return to the nothingness from which we were formed. And if God took from us the grace which He bestows on us for the sake of Jesus Christ, what would the most holy amongst us be, but what Peter was when he denied our Lord, or Paul when he persecuted his Redeemer? We know but too well what we were before God touched our souls, and taking from us our old hearts gave us new ones in their stead.

Justification is nothing but the resurrection of a soul which was dead in sin, and henceforth exists by the life which God infuses into it through the death of His Blessed Son. It would be madness if the body attributed its animation and power of motion to itself and not to the spirit which dwells in it and quickens it; and the soul is as blind which thinks that its good works come from its own abilities, and not from the supernatural life divinely bestowed on it. Sometimes such presumption draws down chastisement from heaven, and the gifts possessed by the soul are withdrawn, so that it finds itself unable to see, to hear, to take pleasure in religious matters, or to perform the good actions it was wont to do. Thus the

Christian soul discovers that it was another Being Who gave it the spiritual life which it did but receive, and that without the grace of Jesus Christ it is like a corpse from which animation has fled. You see, then, my friend, that your defects are all you can attribute to yourself, for you possess nothing else of your own. If our Lord afflict you, think how weak and faulty you must be, to show so little resignation at His just punishment. If He send you consolations, be confused at the want of humility you manifest in the way you accept them, for the more God honours you and treats you as if you were righteous, the more should you abase yourself, and be ashamed of your short-comings. Remember how little you profit by the inspirations and promptings you receive from God, and how often, when He urges you again and again to do something for Him, you forget His wish almost at once, and do not carry it out. Surely His every word should remain imprinted in your memory for life, without need for Him to repeat it. Think how often your faulty heart lets the precious grace which our Lord pours into it become wasted, instead of carefully preserving it.

When God gives us spiritual sweetness, we should prepare our souls to receive it again by withdrawing more from earthly joys, and by keeping our minds closed against them and more recollected and given to God; yet it sometimes happens that these very graces only

cause our souls to be more given to external things than ever, because of the levity of our natures. An examination of our failings must make us confess that we do nothing well, and that we have more cause to blush for the many defects in all our actions, than to think for a moment that we have done anything praiseworthy.

If a page does not show due respect to the king he waits on, if he answers not immediately when he is spoken to, or if he be slow in delivering any message, he will certainly be punished. So too, those we serve are not content at our merely doing their bidding, but, unless we do it well, we shall be blamed and disgraced. Which of us can say that he treats God with the reverence He deserves? Or whose soul trembles within him while he adores that ineffable Majesty as, we are told in the holy Mass, "the Powers tremble?" Where is the shame we should feel before that infinite Wisdom, Who knows what we are, and sees all that is within us? Where can obedience be found such as needs no second bidding? Where a prudence that shows the soul how best to serve and please the Almighty? Have Christians a fitting gratitude for His numberless and unspeakable benefits, or do they give such a mighty God and Master that service of soul and body which is His due? If any one truthfully judge himself, he will see how deeply sunk he is in sin and misery. At night when the

time comes to examine his conscience as to the actions of the past day, he will find that all his words and works, his thoughts and deeds, are full of faults, and that he has left undone much good that he might have done, because he has not rightly loved God or his neighbour; he will recognise his ingratitude towards God, and his impatience in bearing with others; and he will discover that he has omitted to practise innumerable other virtues. If, by the divine help, he have performed any good works, they are either stained with pride, vain glory, or tepidity, or he has not fully corresponded to divine grace. In short, God's light will show him a thousand blemishes in his conduct, and he will feel sure that there are as many more he has failed to discover; understanding the weakness of his nature, he will suspect that he knows not half the worst. The humble Christian thinks his own wickedness as inconceivable as is God's goodness. Should any divine favours be shown him, far from attributing them to any merit of his own, he blames himself for not corresponding to them, and profiting by them as he ought. Thus he sincerely gives God his due, which is all that he possesses which is good and unsullied by any admixture of evil. Convinced of this truth, as revealed by God Himself, the lowly spirit rising above itself, ceases to depend upon such a broken reed as itself and leans for support on Him Who upholds all things. Looking within his soul,

the Christian sees cause only for repentance, and so lifts his eyes to his Creator, in Whose loving kindness he can trust without fear of being forsaken. God is so faithful that He never abandons those who have recourse to Him; His love is so tender that far sooner will the sea run dry, or the sun cease shining, than the heavenly Father lack pity for His own. Therefore do they run and fly because God carries them; they stumble not, for He upholds them; they err not, for He is their guide, and never will they be condemned, for He gives His kingdom to those who "become as little children."

Take heed to yourself then, since our Lord so urgently demands it of you ; give glory to God for what is praiseworthy, but impute to yourself all that deserves blame and dishonour. Place all your hopes of perseverance in the right way in our Lord, Who did not set you in it with the intention of deserting you half way, but seeks to lead you by it into the company of His spouses in Paradise. There He will heap honours upon you, so do not seek for honours here. With a celestial feast in prospect, you should not satiate yourself with the filth of this world : nothing can please the palate which has once tasted of that heavenly banquet. Turn away from all that you will so soon be forced to leave, and set not your heart on aught so transitory. You would be bearing little enough for God, if you alone had to endure all possible

sufferings. Think of the hell your sins have deserved, and of the Paradise our Lord means you to enjoy, since He has put you in the road that leads to it. Contemplate the pains Christ bore for your sake, and you will deem all that you do or may suffer for Him unworthy of a second thought. God should be so precious to you that nothing He costs you should seem worth considering ; even if you purchased Him with your life, so small a price should count as nothing. In Heaven you will realise what an advantageous exchange you made, and how foolish those poor wretches were who set their hearts on the transitory good, and gave themselves up to pleasure, oblivious of God's promises. What fervent thanks you will render to Divine Providence, for having enlightened you when you were deceived as they are, and drawn your thoughts above this earth. You were the slave of vanity when our Heavenly Father adopted you for His son : you were living without thought of God's promised mercies, when He placed you where you now are, and so gave you the right to trust that He will be your succour both in life and in death.

Then after this exile is ended, He will set you in the land of the living, in the clear fruition of the Beatific Vision. What your joy will be God alone can tell, as He alone is able and willing to bestow it. This will He do, not for your own merits but because "He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever," (Ps. CV.I.) and

to him be glory and praise for all, and from all,
and in all, for ever and ever. Amen.