

Priestly Sanctity

In order to lead a truly priestly life, it is above all important to have a right idea of priestly sanctity. If we lack conviction on this point, we will not take the necessary means to live in conformity with our vocation, because we will not clearly see the degree of sanctification to which we must strive. The more this degree is elevated, the more difficult it is to achieve, and we will not strive effectively if our convictions are not sufficiently formed. Therefore, let us look at what we are by our state, and what we must be through virtue. In order to better know the nature of priestly sanctity, let us consider the priest: in comparison with Jesus Christ.

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In comparison with Jesus Christ

We are His ministers, His ambassadors, as St. Paul expresses it: "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers, and the dispensers of the mysteries of God" (Cor. IV, 1). Our mission is to continue His work, which is a work of love. During His entire life, Jesus has shown the benefits of His charity, instructing the ignorant, healing the sick, converting sinners, consoling the afflicted, opening to everyone the prospect of the kingdom of heaven. He consummated his sacrifice by a supreme act of love. And when the hour had come to ascend to His Father, He chose a minister of whom he would make an heir of His spirit: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me," and whom He would send in His place.

This minister, this "alter Christus," is the priest. Upon him, Jesus concentrates His benefits. All that which He has of charity for souls, He directs first on the priest, so that in turn, the priest may cause souls to feel the salutary effects. To him Our Lord reserves a greater intimacy. "I will not now call you servants, but my friends" (St. John XV, 15).

To him, He confers powers which are wholly divine: powers to teach with authority, to command in His name, to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross, to forgive sins, to cause divine blessings to descend upon men. It is entirely the mission

of Christ which is confided to the priest. And for him to be able to accomplish this effectively, Jesus unites Himself intimately to him through a divine character which arrays him with His authority. He communicates to him in abundance the gifts of the Holy Ghost; He causes him to live separate from the world, so that animated with His charity, he would be in a state to fulfill the sublime mission towards men, to which he is responsible.

Let us endeavour therefore to understand that which our priesthood requires of us, so that we will be able to respond fully to the designs of God in spite of our weakness. That which He demands above all is holiness of life, to which we must strive with all the energies of our soul, aided by the grace from on High.

Tendency to sanctity

The priest has a tendency towards sanctity; everyone agrees to this. But where there is less agreement, is to know the degree of sanctity to which he is obliged.

There is a minimum of sanctity, which consists in simply the habitual state of grace. But the habitual state of grace may subsist with habits of venial sin, with attachments, probably slight, but that we do not wish to break, in short, with a very harmful and dangerous state of lukewarmness. Priestly sanctity would not know how to

adapt to all these weaknesses; it demands that we work to overcome them and that we tend towards perfection. The Code of Canon Law sums up on this question the doctrine of the Church in this very significant sentence: "The clergy must lead a life, both exterior and interior, more holy than the laity, and excel in virtue and in good actions so as to be an example to them" (CIC 1917, can. 124).

Therefore, let us try to really convince ourselves of the necessity of a holiness of life that would not be ordinary, but that would reach a high degree of perfection. It is our duty: first to Our Lord whom we represent, then to the obligations for which we are responsible, and finally to the souls that we must save.

As we have already mentioned above, Jesus has given us the distinguished honour of making us participants of His priesthood. He has called us therein through a special vocation. He has preserved us from the contagion of the century, and directed us into the paths of which He alone knows the secret; He has invested us, through the sacred rite of ordination, with His character and with His powers. Through these, He wishes to show us the intimate union which He wants to have with us. What sentiments must arise in our souls from such exalted prerogatives! May this consideration inspire us with an attitude of profound thanksgiving to the divine mercy who has called us, in spite of our unworthiness, to such a sublime and eminent vocation. But with all these truly extraordinary graces which He has granted to us, have we not an obligation to lead a holy life, and of a holiness that would not be common? "I will not now call you servants, but My friends..." When

Jesus calls us His friends, does He not want that there be between Him and us an entire agreement of opinions? Without that, the friendship would not be perfect, because, either it imagines the resemblance, or else it must procure it. It is of great necessity, then, that we be animated by the Spirit of Our Lord, if we wish to be entitled to the singular affection of His Heart.

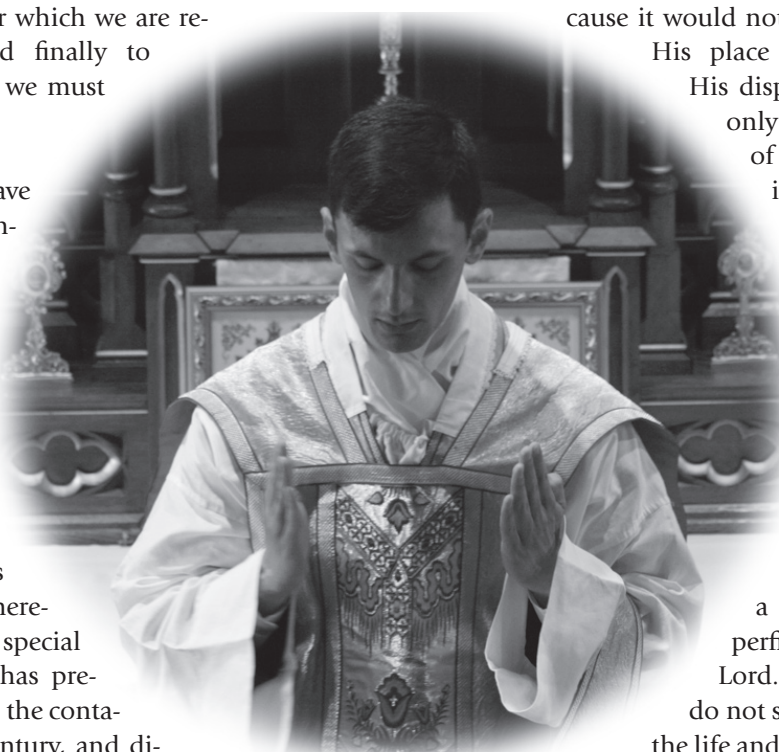
Not only does Jesus call us His friends, but what is more, He sends us as His ministers and His ambassadors. We take His place here below and we represent Him to the eyes of the faithful. On this account, we are obliged to make His life and His virtues shine in ourselves, because it would not be right to take

His place without having His dispositions, and to only show to the eyes of the faithful the image of a Christ weakened, imperfect, would have nothing, so to speak, in common with Him whom we represent.

The faithful today have only a vague and superficial idea of Our Lord. Therefore if we do not show in ourselves the life and virtues of our divine model, how will they have a veritable idea? What is more, how can we worthily carry out His work? For, an ambassador does not act in his own name, but in the name of he who has sent him. He must, therefore, set aside his own tastes and his inclinations, in order to take up the interests of his master. Therefore, if we do not have the spirit of Our Lord, how will we be in the state to carry out His work of the salvation and the sanctification of souls?

Saints because of our functions

Secondly, the nature of our functions calls for a great sanctity. There must be a true conformity between the dignity of life and the ministries that we have to fulfill. Now, the duties of



the priest are altogether supernatural and holy. Destined to produce grace in souls, they require a great spirit of faith, a strong feeling of religion, a perfect purity; all things which are not compatible with a life of routine and of lukewarmness. God, in the Old Law, gave the priests the obligation to lead a holy life, because they carried the vessels of the Lord. How much more would He demand this priestly sanctity for the New Testament, of which the Old Testament was just a figure?

And is not this what the Pontifical repeats in all its forms in the ceremonies of ordination? For the minor orders, it points out that being higher than the faithful, and carrying in their hands the lighted candle, they must shine with a holy life, in order to bring light by their example to the Church of God. What virtues are not demanded of those who receive the major Orders! The bishop multiplies the formulas, he employs the most strong expressions. He makes the prayers the most ardent, for these new ministers, so that they lead a life conforming to the sanctity of the orders received.

This necessity for a holy life appears most especially in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice. The Pontiff, in the ceremony of ordination, informs the ordinands: "Be well aware of that which you do, and depict in your life that which you accomplish at the altar. For, you renew therein each day the mystery of the death of Jesus. Therefore, put to death in yourselves, the vices and the concupiscences." Consequently, before the priest ascends to the altar, the Church adorns him with symbolic vestments, emblems of purity and of charity. At the foot of the altar, She stipulates that he make the humble avowal of his unworthiness. All during the Mass, She multiplies on his lips expressions of humility, obliges him to strike his breast, to bow his head, to often make a genuflection, so that he will understand that, in order to assist Jesus by his ministry of sanctifier, he must take part in the sentiments of the divine Victim, and have pure hands, holy lips and an immaculate heart.

Saints because of the souls

Finally, sanctity is essential for us in order to procure the salvation of souls. Of all works, this is the most difficult. It's a matter of changing the wills which are naturally inclined to evil, the

souls which are drugged by the world, the souls which sometimes have lived for a long while in sin, which are under the influence of bad habits, which have lost all resort, and which feel their faith diminishing; it's a matter of changing these wills and of returning them towards the good. How can they be convinced, how can they be influenced? For this, there must be zeal, but a zeal which is expressed by a convincing word, by an ardent exhortation, by patient action, and sometimes even followed by a sort of battle. It's not enough to show a sinner a better way, so that he will follow it. The exhortations, the efforts, are often not enough to help a soul abandon a dangerous occasion, to break a bad habit. What self sacrifice and what patience, to bring back to the faith, to the practice of religion, the hardened sinners. But the priest who is not holy will not have the zeal of the good shepherd who runs after the lost sheep.

To save souls there must be the example. The more sinners are withdrawn from God, the more they need, in order to bring them back, the example of exalted virtue. What is it that causes the spiritual conquest of the world? What is it that brings about, even today, the great works of conversion? It is the brilliant virtues of the apostles, of the missionaries, of the holy priests. There must always be, in a shepherd, a higher degree of perfection than that which he wishes to obtain from the people. A superior virtue in the shepherd, will only obtain from the flock an average virtue. A mediocre virtue will have almost no effect. Thus, if we would like to lead the wayward to their duties, to pull away from the heart of the miser the passion of riches, to make the proud bow down their heads, then let us first cause the contrary virtues to be resplendent in ourselves. "A priest," says the "Imitation of Christ", "must be adorned with all the virtues. His life must not be like to that of the common people, but like to that of the angels in heaven and of the perfect men on earth."

Finally, to save souls, there must be prayer. Saint Bernard puts it in the first place: "Three things are left," he said, "the word, the example, and the prayer; the greatest of these three is the prayer." Without doubt, it must not be a mediocre prayer, but that which is prompted by all the proper dispositions to assure it of its effectiveness. Now the priest who is not a saint, hardly

ever prays, and he prays poorly. He celebrates the Mass with tepidity, says his breviary as a matter of routine, and omits most of his exercises of devotion. And because his prayer is without life, it is deprived of the greatest part of its virtue. How different is the prayer of the holy priest, who, in the ardour of his zeal, intercedes for sinners, multiplies his supplications, and strives to storm heaven in order to obtain mercy.

Let us conclude, then, that in order to save souls, holiness of life is necessary for the priest, and that, without it, he could not be a perfect image of Jesus Christ, nor fulfill excellently his august functions. And this sanctity must not be understood as a common and average virtue, but as a high degree of perfection.

In a position to effect the sanctity

After having contemplated the nature of priestly sanctity, after having meditated on the obligation of sanctity for the priest we could be tempted by discouragement to say: "God does not demand the impossible." To this, I respond with Saint Paul: "That which is impossible to men is possible to God." It is then with the grace of God that we will be in a position to effect that which is humanly impossible to our fallen nature. Let us penetrate entirely these other words of the apostle to the gentiles: "With the grace of God, I can do all things." The works of God never miss their goal through the fault of God. If they miss it, it is our cooperation that has made them fail. Both the Old and the New Testaments abound with examples in testimony of this truth. A sufficient grace is given to arrive at sanctity, as is shown by this response of Our Lord to Saint Paul: "My grace is sufficient." Let us then be convinced that God gives to His ministers the necessary means for the requirements and the greatness of their vocation. These means may be commonly called the exercises of piety, or yet doctrine and piety, or the wise: "Ora et labora". The exercises of piety are not sanctity itself, but they are an indispensable condition for a holy life: it is proven by the authority and by experience.

Our Lord, teaching His apostles, enjoined them to watch and pray. Saint Paul, writing to his disciple Timothy, exhorted him to excel in the exercises of piety. The Holy Fathers have but one voice for exhorting the ministers of

Our Lord to attend to the exercises of piety. The Church echoes their teaching, when, in speaking of the holiness of ecclesiastics in general, She prescribes as a means to achieve it a certain number of exercises of piety, namely: the daily meditation, the Holy Mass, the breviary, the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, the reading of pious books, above all the divinely inspired books and the necessity to live from them, the examination of conscience, confession, retreats, community life and the devotion to the Blessed Virgin. To these we may add the practical counsels given by the popes, according to the epoch, to render these exercises of piety easier.

Nourishment for the soul

Experience has shown it to us. Our nature is feeble, naturally inclined towards evil. The exercises of piety are for the soul that which food is to the body, or yet, that which armour is for the soldier. From the time that we neglect them, the faith languishes, the opinions of the Christian truths become weakened, our hearts are made lukewarm and become frozen, because we have neglected the food which must maintain in us the doctrine and the piety.

What is more, we have some very difficult virtues to practice, some numerous and burdensome duties of state; these require effort, constancy and renouncement. Left to ourselves, we would not have the will, the energy, and the necessary perseverance. But with the exercises of piety we shall arrive at the end, because they unceasingly place before our eyes our obligations and the reasons that we have for being faithful to them, because they reawaken every day our good will and they revive our resolutions, and finally because they obtain for us the grace of faithfulness and of perseverance. In conclusion, let us say with the spiritual authors that the exercises of piety are like the oil that maintains the unction of piety, the live coals that light up the hearth of charity, and the canal that brings to the soul the waters of divine grace.

Quite far from us is the claim to have exhausted, through this modest article, the mystery of the priesthood. Let us humbly thank Our Lord for having shown us the priestly ideal by the nature and the obligations of priestly sanctity, of having placed at our disposal, by His grace, the infallible means to obtain this sanctity.