

A Franciscan Looks At Priest's Day

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(Transcribed and formatted by Valerie Pajerski)

Holy priest are the most urgent need of the hour. Opportunities for spiritual good are more numerous today than ever before. The world-wide economic and political unrest is but the covering of a deep-seated hunger after the higher things of life, of a yearning for the lasting and satisfying values of the soul. Only a whole-hearted return to God and His law, to Christ, and His Gospel, will bring universal peace to the war-conscious nations of the earth. Priests are the ministers of this Gospel, the ambassadors of Christ, the interpreters of the divine law to the people.

Pope Pius XI has written beautifully and forcibly of the dignity, the power, the responsibility of the Catholic Priesthood in his encyclical of December 20, 1935. Repeatedly the Holy Father stresses the necessity of sanctity in the priest. He tells us: "It is quite true that so holy an office demands holiness in him who holds it. A priest should have a loftiness of the office he holds...The priest must, therefore, approach as close as possible to the perfection of Him whose vicar he is, and render himself ever more and more pleasing to God, by the sanctify of his life and of his deeds; because more than the scent of incense, or the beauty of churches and altars, God loves and accepts holiness." (The Catholic Mind, XXXIV [February 8, 1936], pp. 52-53.) Towards the end of this letter the Holy Father says: "If, however, your work is to be blessed by God and produce abundant fruit, it must be rooted in holiness of life. Sanctity, as We said above, is the chief and most important endowment of the Catholic priest. Without it other gifts will not go far; with it, even supposing other gifts be meager, the priest can work marvels." (Ibid. , p.76).

Some time before he wrote his encyclical on the Catholic priesthood Pope Pius XI is reported to have said: "God in Heaven and I on earth, we desire nothing more than prayer and sacrifice for priests... Let us beg God to send us holy priests,. If we have these, everything else will follow; but if these are wanting, nothing else will help." (Die Schildwache, 23 [February 2, 1935], p 142.) Whenever the Holy Father considers the welfare and the needs of the Church at large he directs his attention to priests and clerical students. He wrote his letter on the priesthood as a mark of his loving interest in priests and their work; to assist the faithful to appreciate more fully the sublimity of the sacerdotal office; "above all, that those who are themselves called may have still deeper understanding and esteem of their vocation." (The Catholic Mind, XXXIV [February 8, 1936], pp. 42.)

Priests are commissioned by Christ to be "the salt of the earth" (Mt.,5:13) and the "light of the world" (ib., 5:14). Next to God the salvation of men depends upon them. As clerics they have cast their lot with the Lord. Consecrated to the sole service of God, priests must devote their whole life, all their talents and energy, to the promotion of the glory of God and good of souls in that part of the vineyard of the Lord to which obedience has assigned them. Priests have not so much chosen Christ, as Christ has chosen them. The Holy Father's letter calls attention to the definition of the priest as given by St. Paul: "For every high priest taken from among men, is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Hebr. , 5:1). (Op. Cit., p 44.) These "things that appertain to God" require the various virtues mentioned by the Holy Father in the second part of his letter.

By his very calling the priest is obliged to lead a life of Christian perfection. This duty has been instilled into his mind and heart during his seminary days. On the day of his ordination and on the day

of his first solemn Mass he was possessed by the strong desire to become a holy priest of God. No matter how far he may stray from the path of priestly perfection, he cannot efface from his conscience the feeling of guilt because he is not striving to be a saint.

The faithful know that the priest must be holy. To them the “things that appertain to God” are sacred and demand sanctity on the part of the ministers to whose care they are entrusted. They admire, they love, they obey a saintly priest. The mere preaching of the doctrines of Christ and the Church will not bring about a more intimate relationship between the law of God and the individual conscience of the people. Men and women wish to see their religion lived first of all by the priests who preach the faith. Like Jesus who “began to do and to teach” (Acts, 1:1) His priests must make the Gospel of Christ known and loved and lived first by example then by word of mouth. Today as ever before the power of the priest lies in his holiness of life, and not in any other natural equipment of personal achievement.

Although “ordained for men in the things that appertain to God,” the priest is nevertheless “taken from among men. “He is frail and subject to all the weaknesses of human nature as the remainder of men. The priest is well aware of this fact, and the good lay people make due allowance for it. Religious priests enjoy a greater degree of protection against the distracting influences of the modern world than the secular priests, who live in the very midst of its corrupting atmosphere. All priests however, religious and secular, are in need of the grace of God to persevere in their holy vocation. For this reason the Holy Father toward the end of his encyclical urges the priests to be faithful to the “spiritual exercises” and adds: “It is not enough to withdraw to the sacred seclusion of the Spiritual Exercises only at the intervals and in the exact measure prescribed by ecclesiastical law but you should enter into retreat more often and for longer periods, as far as possible to you, and you should consecrate, in addition, a day of each month to more fervent prayer and greater recollection, according to the practice of priest of great zeal.” (*Ib.*, p.77.)

Priests need prayer. Before Jesus chose His apostle He prayed. “And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and he passed the whole night in the prayer of God. And when day was come, he called unto him his disciples: and he chose twelve of them (whom also he named apostles.)” (Luke, 6:13, 14.) How touching are the words which Jesus addressed to Peter after the last supper. “And the Lord said: Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren” (Luke, 22:31, 32.) No doubt Peter often recalled the words: “Simon, I have prayed for thee.” What an inspiration and a source of strength this assurance of the prayer of Jesus must have been to the prince of the Apostles. The priests of today are no less fortunate. When Jesus prayed for the disciples at the last supper He also prayed for them. “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them whom thou hast given me: because they are thine” (Jn., 18:9). Again Jesus said: “Holy Father, keep them in thy name whom thou hast given me; that they may be one, as we also are” (ibid., V.11).” It is holiness above all that Jesus asks of His heavenly Father for His disciples, for His priests: “ I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from evil. They are not of the world, as I also am not of the world. Sanctify them in truth. Thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for them do I sanctify myself that they also may be sanctified in truth’ (*ib.*, vv. 115, 19).

Who, next to Jesus, was more interested in the holiness of the apostles and the disciples of Christ than His Blessed Mother Mary? St. John concludes his gospel with these words: “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written. (21:25). Is it too far-fetched to believe that one of these unwritten things is Christ’s recommendation of His disciples to the constant prayer of

Mary His Mother? Under the cross of Jesus stood the mother of the Savior and the disciple whom He loves. "He saith to his mother: Woman, behold thy son. After that, he saith to the disciple: Behold thy mother. And from that hour, the disciple took her to his own." (Jn, 19:26, 27.). What a consolation the Mother of God must have been to the apostles in their early struggles against Judaism and Paganism; what a source of courage and comfort the prayers of Mary must have been in their sufferings and trials. The "Queen of the Apostles" became the "Regina Cleri" the Queen of the Clergy." The Holy Father pleads for true piety in the priest: "This piety should primarily be directed towards God our Father in Heaven: yet it should be extended also to the Mother of God. The priest even more than the faithful should have devotion to Our Lady, for the relation of the priest to Christ is more deeply and truly like that which Mary bears to her Divine Son." (The Catholic Mind, XXXIV [February 8, 1936], p. 56.).

Mary, the Queen of the Clergy, has become the center of a new movement to foster the prayers of the faithful for the sanctification of the priesthood. This movement is known as Priest's Day. It originated in Germany, has the approval of the Holy Father, and is supported by the Bishops of Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, France, Switzerland, and other countries. The first Thursday of the month of the first Saturday of the month is dedicated to the priesthood. The faithful offer all their prayers and good works of the entire day, their sacrifices, Masses, communions, sufferings, and joys, through the pure hands of Mary, the Mother of Priests, to Jesus, the "Supreme and Eternal Priest," for the sanctification of priests and candidates for the priesthood. Parishioners are asked to pray especially for their parish clergy. If Jesus prayed for His Apostles; if the Mother of God prayed for them; why should not our Catholic people pray for their successors, the Pope, the Bishops, and the priests?

The first Priest's Day was established in the cathedral of St. Hedwig in Berlin, on September 8, 1934, by Dr. Nicholas Bares, Bishop of that city, who died on March 1, 1935. God chose a little child, Bertha Baumann, lame all her life, to announce this far reaching apostolate to the modern world. A victim of her powerful idea, she was called into eternity by the Eternal High Priest on the feast of the Purification of Mary, 1935, her first Priest's Day, as she had requested of almighty God. Before departing from this life as a victim for priests, she beheld in a vision crowds of God's anointed in glory. Immediately after her death she began her mission for the salvation of priests. The Salvatorian Fathers suggested the idea of a Priest's Day to Bishop Bares, and met with a hearty approval. He told them: I am in sympathy with the thoughts expressed in this movement, because to me the sanctification of our priests appears to be the indispensable condition for the sanctification and renewal of the world. "He was the first bishop to approve and recommend the movement. "With great joy," he said, "I greet this salutary thought of a Priest's Day, for if a holy priest is the greatest gift of heaven to earth, then the pleading to God we in our own way work at the realization of the prayer of the Eternal High Priest and His Blessed Mother, the Queen of the Clergy, that the Church may shine with a deeply believing, humble, and strong priesthood, so much needed and desired in these grave times. Therefore, I recommend and bless this work most cordially.."

On November 21, 1934, the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, the General of the Salvatorians, P. Pancratius Pfeiffer, in a private audience with the Pope, presented the idea of the Priest's Day to His Holiness, Pius XI. The Holy Father was very favorably impressed and said in conclusion: "We heartily praise and bless the work; we repeat: the idea pleases Us very much: We heartily praise and bless it."

A few days after the death of Bertha Baumann, Bishop Bares said in an address: "Christian people, you know it. You stand with your priests. And I say to you. You also fall with your priests. Therefore, pray and make sacrifices for them." In his letters to his friends and penitents he always added the final petition "Oremus pro invicem" - "Let us pray for each other."

Priest's Day will appeal to the aged and the sick, the many shut-ins, who often feel as if their lives were useless. Their prayers and sufferings will become a mighty force for good in the Church of God. Together with the children these chosen souls will form the second line of defense in the battle of the Church against the enemies of salvation. Not all can go to the front and fight in the ranks: the majority must remain at home and help furnish the supplies and the weapons used in the first line of defense. Religious actively engaged will be glad to join their sisters behind cloister walls in emulating the Little Flower of Jesus in her work for priests. The most ardent enthusiasts for this movement ought be the priests themselves, the very beneficiaries of the apostolate for apostles. "Oremus pro invicem" should be their slogan for Priest's Day. In one of his jubilee sermons Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich cried out: "Who in all the world should be willing to make sacrifices, if not the priests, who daily ascend the altar of sacrifice and kiss the relics of the martyrs in the sepulcher of the altar-stone? (Cf. Pfarrer, Dr. Franzmathes. "Ubung priesterlicher Heiligung," Sanctificatio Nostra. VI [Juni 1936], pp 262-265). The Holy Father expects the priest to be a leader of his people in "that crusade of expiation and penance to which We have invited all men of good will. For there is need of reparation for the blasphemies, wickedness and crimes which dishonor humanity today, and age perhaps unparalleled in its need for the mercy and pardon of God." (The Catholic Min, XXXIV, [February 8, 1936], p.43).

Mary, the Mother of the Priest of priests, to whom so many priests owe their very vocation, cannot be indifferent to the pleadings of the faithful. What a change this movement to foster sanctity among priests and clerical students, will produce, once it becomes widespread in America as it is in certain countries of Europe today. If priests and the candidates for the sacred ministry take an active part in this crusade, not only by making it known and encouraging it among the laity, but by adding their own prayers and sacrifices for one another, the drive for greater sanctity among priests will produce untold good in an abundant harvest of souls. There have been some individual efforts in this direction in the United States, but as yet the movement has not been launched on a national scale. Who is interested in making holiness of priests a national issue?

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