

QUALITIES OF THE RELEVANT PRIEST



Jaime N. Boquiren, O.P.

To be able to measure up to the correct demands of modern society as well as to resist the wrong demands of the same, the priest must have certain qualities which are by no means easy to acquire. They are qualities which will enable him to climb the "narrow path" which leads to eternal life and avoid the "broad and easy way" which leads to perdition. All these qualities are built on one foundation: *the priestly holiness.*

Mystical Body of Christ Explained

The basic quality of priests will be better understood if we start by explaining the paulinian doctrine of the "Mystical Body of Christ". There are many ways of explaining this doctrine. But I choose to explain it by comparing the same to living bodies like the tree and the human body and human society itself.

Living bodies have three characteristics which make them different from natural non-living bodies like minerals. These characteristics are heterogeneous parts, organization, and interdependence. The tree has heterogeneous parts, namely, the root, the trunk, the branches, the leaves, the flowers, the fruits. Yet they are organized into one tree for which reason living bodies are also called organic bodies. And these organized different parts need one another. The fruit needs the branch to hang on. And the branch needs the trunk. And the trunk needs the roots to get the life giving substance from mother earth.

The human body, too, has different parts, namely, the feet, the hands, the mouth, the teeth, the tongue, the stomach, etc. Yet these are organized into one human body. And they have interdependence. The stomach needs the hand, mouth, teeth and tongue for food. And these need the stomach to provide them with the calories and nourishment needed.

These three characteristics which we find in the plant, in animals, and in the human body, are also found in human society. For, after, human societies are but groups of several living human beings.

In the family, for instance, we have the different members — the father, the mother, the children, the household helps. These are organized into one family. And they need one another. In the nation we have different members — the civil officials whether legislative, executive or judicial, and the ordinary citizens. Different as they are, they are organized into one body politic, one nation. And they are interdependent. Even in international society, we have different nations organized into one "United Nations". And they too have interdependence.

These characteristics are found also in the spritual society, the Church or the Mystical Body of Christ. We know from our theology that there are three main branches in this Church — the Church Triumphant composed of the blessed souls already in heaven; the Church Suffering made up of the souls in Purgatory; and the Church Militant, namely, we on earth. These three parts differ from one another. Yet they form one Mystical Body of Christ, One Church. And they have interdependence. The saints in heaven can and do help us pilgrims on earth and that is why we pray to them. And the souls in Purgatory can be helped by us. That is why we pray and sacrifice for them. This is the basis of the article in the Creed "I believe in the Communion of Saints."

In the Church Militant itself these characteristics are very evident. We have the different parts: the clergy and the laity. They are organized into one church Militant. And they need one another. This interdependence may be explained thus. The faithful know that their main spiritual concern in this life is to sanctify themselves and thus save their souls. And what have they to do to accomplish that lofty goal? Keep the Commandments. Is it easy to observe the Ten Commandments? No.

We need God's special assistance which is Grace. And how does God give His grace? Through the Sacraments. And who administers the Sacraments? The Priest. So in the ordinary providence of God the faithful will not be saved without the priest. The faithful need the priest. But the priest would not be needed if there were no people. Ordinarily he cannot even maintain the parish Church all by himself. He also needs the people. There is interdependence between them.

Two Corollaries

From this interdependence among the heterogeneous parts of a living body arise two characteristics of living bodies. *First, the condition of a part affects the other parts and the whole. Second, the strong and healthy parts assist the weak and sickly ones.*

In the tree as well as in the human body and in society whether civic or spiritual, it is an admitted fact that defective parts contaminate others and the whole, while the health of a part redounds to the health of the rest. Also that in moments of need the parts or members that are well come to the assistance of the afflicted ones.

It is, therefore, the obligation of every member of the living body to be in good health and to avoid disease as well as to help the other parts or members in need of assistance. And applying these ideas to the priest's life, as well as that of every man, there is an obligation to strive after personal holiness (health) and to be active and zealous in the apostolate (assistance to others).

The Holiness of the Priest

The sanctity or holiness of the priest, just like that of any other man, consists in being in the state of Sanctifying Grace. This implies doing good and avoiding evil, most of all, mortal sins. To this end, just like others, the priest has to use the means given by God such as the Sacraments, the Acts of Piety and asceticism which help him in that task.

Sanctifying grace implies that the priest possess the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, and the four

cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance and all the moral virtues which proceed therefrom.

However, in view of the special mission of the priest some virtues deserve special attention. To fulfill his mission to teach the priest must have eminent Faith, wisdom and learning, and culture; to sanctify, he must be holy and zealous for souls; to govern, he must have outstanding prudence and the ability to have good relations. All of these must be animated by Charity.

The moral virtues or qualities which must be outstanding in the priest due to his special task in society may be enumerated in another way. The Document "Basic Norms for Priestly Formation" no. 51 lists them thus:

1. sincerity
2. justice
3. good manners
4. fidelity to his word
5. controlled and kind in his conversation
6. spirit of fellowship
7. service and readiness to work
8. ability to work with others
9. ability to form right relationships with men of different sorts
10. ability to treat all men with great reverence, filled with human charity.

Christ's Concept of a Priest

As we have noted before, the features and the demands, correct or wrong, of modern society are such that the priest can easily make a wrong step. The greatest mistake would be if he gives in to the wrong demands of society. Less grave mistakes would be to make adaptations "in modo" (in manner) imprudently. Such less grave mistakes can lead to the greatest mistake, and to great harm, because a small error in the beginning becomes very big in the end.

It would be good then to present here Christ's concept of the priest. This will serve as a guideline for the priest in his delicate task of adaptation or *aggiornamento*.

The basic concept of Christ of the Priest is this: *the priest is a man in the world, but not of the world.* (Jn. 17: 14-17)

Christ chose and called his disciples. He distinguished them and separated them from the ordinary way of life and asked them to leave many things in order to follow Him. We read in the Bible: "Then Peter spoke. What about us? He said to Him. We have left everything and followed you. What are we to have then? Jesus said to him, I tell you solemnly, when all is made new and the Son of Man sits on his throne of glory, you will yourselves sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses, brothers and sisters, father, mother, children or land for the sake of my name will be repaid a hundred times over, and also inherit eternal life." The priest is the "*salt of the earth*" and "*light of the world.*"

With this concept of Christ, can the priest be an authentic "salt of the earth" and "light of the world"; can the priest be an authentic disciple and apostle of Christ and minister of the Gospel, if in his way of social life he is completely like others who are not priests?

The purpose of the adaptation or *aggiornamento* envisioned by the Vatican II is *effectiveness*. Will he be more effective if he is "like any other, in dress, in secular profession, in going to places of entertainment, in social and political commitment, in the formation of a family of his own with renunciation of holy celibacy"? Yes, he can be poor like others; a brother for others; a servant of others; perhaps a victim for others. But are all the modes of adaptation of his life proposed by modern society compatible with his special spiritual function in that society? (Paul VI, *Questo annuale incontro*)

We noted before that the priesthood of the priest differs from the general priesthood of the faithful in that it is hierarchical, sacramental, ministerial. *If he forgets this and adopts a mode of life which is totally like that of any lay man, will not that wipe out his efficacy — "wiped out in the esteem and confidence of the people, and by the practical necessity of dedicating to secular occupations and human affections"?*

These questions have to be studied and answered. And they are being studied by the Pope and the Bishops in Synods. But in the meantime that they are being studied and the definite answer is not yet available, there must be exercise of

great prudence on the part of the priest. It must further be taken into account that there is still a vast portion of the people of God which is not sold out to certain social adaptations and which would want their priests "to be in the world but not of the world." The "sensus fidelium" has its value.

Vatican II and Priestly Holiness

This treatise would be incomplete without the doctrines of the Vatican II's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests which has been considered by some as the most important document of the Council and the "key to open up the treasures and riches of Vatican II."

The doctrine of this Vatican II Decree may be summed up thus:

1. By Baptism, like all Christians, priests received a grace whereby they can and must pursue perfection according to the Lord's words: "You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt. 5:48)
2. By Holy Orders, priests have a special claim and obligation to strive for this spiritual perfection. And since every priest represents the person of Christ Himself, he is also enriched with special grace.
3. While it is true that God can complete the work of salvation of the people even through unworthy priests, yet ordinarily He manifests His wonders through those priests who are holy. Hence, the priests have to strive to be holy so as to become increasingly useful instruments of God in sanctifying His people.
4. Priests will attain the sanctity proper to them if they exercise their offices sincerely and tirelessly in the Spirit of Christ. Thus:

A. As Teachers of the divine doctrines, they must also read and listen to the Word which they preach to others, for in so doing they will save both themselves and their hearers. And they must search for better ways of sharing with others the fruits of their contemplation and use them always in union with Christ for it is the Lord who opens the hearts of men.

B. As Dispensers of the Sacraments, specially the Holy Eucharist, they should see to it that every part of their being

is dead to evil habits and desires. They should celebrate Mass every day even if there are no people in attendance, for thus they are offering themselves every day to God. They should always be willing and ready to administer the sacrament of Penance to those reasonably requesting it, for thus they are joined with the intention and love of Christ.

C. And as Rulers of the Community, they grow in holiness by renouncing their own conveniences, always seeking what is profitable for the many and not for himself, so that the many may be saved.

5. Priestly holiness contributes greatly to a fruitful fulfillment of the ministry, and the sincere and tireless work in the ministry greatly nourishes priestly holiness.

6. Should the priests be burdened by a heavy load of many obligations and problems so that they are sometimes in danger of scattering their energies in many directions, they can transform all these into tools of priestly sanctification and, thus, acquire unity of energies, by uniting themselves to Christ and be, like him, the Good Shepherd towards the flock committed to them. (Jn. 3:16)

7. To achieve this unity of energies, so important for the preservation and increase of holiness, the priests should subject all their undertaking to the test of God's will, meaning that these projects conform to the laws of the Church. He must therefore be in communion with the Bishop and his brother priests and be loyal to them, for loyalty to Christ and loyalty to the Church are just the two sides of the same coin.

8. The priests must cultivate the special virtues which help so much in the development of his holiness, such as HUMILITY, OBEDIENCE to the duly constituted authority, HOLY CELIBACY, and the SPIRIT OF POVERTY.

This, in brief, is the majestic doctrine of the Church on the holiness of her priests.

The Priest and "Odium Populi"

The priest who gives in to the wrong demands of modern society will incur the dislike of the people of God who still have a very high regard of their priests. Similarly, the priest who is firm in the moral principles and does not give in to

the wrong or doubtful demands of modern society will very likely be ostracized and branded as old fashioned and irrelevant. Here we come to the problem of "odium populi" or hatred of the people which can be a cause for the relief of a priest from a parish.

What is "Odium Populi" ? It means hatred or dislike of the people. It may have three causes, namely :

1. defects of the priest
2. defects of the people
3. defects of the environment or circumstances

Defect of the Priest

The priest can become persona non grata in a parish or institution due to his own defects, specially moral defects. The functions of the priest are to teach, to sanctify, to govern. He may be a very good teacher, an accomplished preacher. Yet somehow he does not reach the will of the people because of a mental barricade built by his own moral defects. He deserves to be ostracized. And Canon Law has provisions about such priests. They have to be transferred because their presence in a place is harmful to souls and to the Church herself.

Defect of the People

But not all "odium populi" is due to the defect of the priest. He can be hated because of the defects of the people themselves. When the people are drunkards, adulterers, usurers, etc., and the priest is true to his duty of preaching the word of God "in season and out of season" his presence and his life and words are a rebuke to their way of life. And they hate him. *To the sick eyes light is intolerable. To the indisposed palate the most delicious food is unwelcome.*

This can happen when the priest rejects the wrong demands of modern society, when he refuses to change the doctrines of Faith and Morals to suit the life and likes of a people. What should be done in this case? Should the priest be removed? Then there will be continuous removal of good priests. Surely, he should look for the best strategy to win

them over to God. A life of holiness and prayer like that of St. John Vianney can be the answer. But he must be firm in rejecting the wrong demands.

At a conference with the UST Seminarians when this topic was discussed, they were of the stand that by no means must we water down the doctrines of the Church to suit a capricious people. But then the alternative would be the hatred of the people and perhaps martyrdom, as was the case with Christ and John the Baptist. The seminarians' answer was: "Let it be martyrdom!" Are we ready for that?

Defect of the Environment

It can happen also that while the priest is good, and the catholic population is also good, and yet the catholic population somehow would want him to go somewhere else. This happens, for instance, when there is a group of anti-catholics or anti-clerics who find in a particular priest a strong opponent of their interests. So they cause trouble in the whole community.

Again, the priest cannot modify the christian doctrine to suit these militant groups. Neither can the catholic community compromise on the same doctrines. What has to be done?

All these cases point out to one thing: *there is a need for a saintly priest highly gifted with the human virtues to be able to stand firm in the face of so much pressure from modern society, while at the same time being understanding to the frailties of men.*

Special Aids for Priestly Holiness

Of great help to priests in this task of preserving holiness are the fellow priests and the Bishop himself. Vatican II says of Bishops: "Therefore, on account of this communion in the same priesthood and ministry, the bishop should regard priests as his brothers and friends. As far as in him lies, he should have at heart the material and especially the spiritual welfare of his priests. *For above all, upon the bishops rests the responsibility for the sanctity of his priests. Hence, he should exercise the greatest care on behalf of the continual formation of his priests. He should gladly listen to them, indeed, consult them, and have discussions with them about those matters*

which concern the necessities of pastoral work and the welfare of the diocese." (Dec. Presbyterorum Ordinis, no. 7)

Of priests, Vatican II says "Hence no priest can in isolation or singlehandedly accomplish his mission in a satisfactory way. He can do so only by joining forces with other priests under the direction of Church authorities. (No. 7)

"Hence it is very important that all priests, whether diocesan or religious, always help one another to be fellow workers on behalf of truth. Each one therefore is united by special bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and brotherhood with the other members of this presbytery . . . *Inspired by a fraternal spirit, priests will not neglect hospitality, but cultivate kindness and share their goods in common. They will be particularly solicitous for priests who are sick, afflicted and overburdened with work, lonely, exiled from their homeland, or suffering persecution. They will readily and joyfully gather together for recreation . . .*

"Furthermore, in order that priests may find mutual assistance in the development of their spiritual and intellectual lives, that they may be able to cooperate more effectively in their ministry and be saved from the dangers which may arise from loneliness, let there be fostered among them some kind or other of community life. Such a life can take on several forms according to various personal or pastoral needs: *for instance, a shared roof where this is feasible, or a common table, or at least frequent and regular gatherings.*

"Worthy too of high regard and zealous promotion are those associations whose rules have been examined by competent Church authority, and which foster priestly holiness in the exercise of the ministry through an apt and properly approved rule of life and through brotherly assistance . . .

"Finally . . . priests should realize that they have special obligations toward *priests who labor under certain difficulties.* They should give them timely help and also, if necessary, admonish them prudently. Moreover, they should always treat with fraternal charity and magnanimity those who have failed in some way, offering urgent prayers to God for them and continually showing themselves to be true brothers and friends." (No. 8)

THE BISHOPS

The Bishop, in the mind of Vatican II, plays a very important role in the spiritual life of the priest. In this regard the following may be mentioned:

1. *brotherly and friendly relation* — Nothing is more discouraging for a priest than to have a superior with whom his relationship is hostile. This can drive a priest to despair and to all the evils to which despair lead, such as indifference and even the desire to destroy. On the other hand, a happy relation with ones superior bolsters ones morale which is good for spiritual life.

2. *care for his material needs* — A certain degree of material sufficiency is needed for the proper development of spiritual life. For Bishops it is not hard to have all the necessary things in life specially in the Philippines where the people naturally gravitate to where the power is. It can be said that the Bishop will never die of want. Not so with the priest. The people will not be as generous to him as to their Bishop. Hence, the Bishop should use his higher position and his power and influence to work for the security of his priests. He should help them with Insurance, Foundations, etc., for which even investments are justified.

3. *care for the spiritual welfare* — An example of this is the easy granting by the Bishop of dispensation from the recitation of the Breviary whenever the priest has done so much work for the spiritual care of the people. There are times when a priest has to celebrate three Masses on Sundays. These, plus the homilies, baptisms, confessions, etc. leave him in no frame of mind to pray his Breviary. The Bishop and the Vicar General for diocesan priests, and the Major Religious Superior for the religious can give dispensation. (cf. B.E., March, 1971, p. 220).

4. *recognition of their human dignity* — the priest, just like others of this age, is aware of his human dignity which includes the right to speak freely, and to participate in the planning of things that affect his life and work and the development of the community in which he lives. The Bishop recognizes this by establishing the "Senate of Priests" as well as by frequent group or individual dialogues with his priests.

The Priests

After the Bishop, the priest finds the greatest external aid to his spiritual life in his fellow priests. A priest is a help to another priest:

1. *when the relationship is open and fraternal* — Enormous harm is done by those who do not care for others. This attitude causes doubt and pessimism especially in a struggling priest.

2. *when their charity is effective* — Priests in times of sickness and other afflictions need a comforting hand from their brother priests. Well off priests who refuse to lend a helping hand to their fellow priests in need provoke hatred. And where hatred creeps in, spiritual life suffers.

3. *when there is comradeship* — The priest remains a human being. He needs affective outlets. If he cannot find joy in the company of his fellow priests, he will be forced to look for it elsewhere. That is why frequent fraternal gatherings are very valuable among priests. Loners are easy victims of spiritual decadence. And those priests whose attitude have caused another to develop this attitude are responsible for any spiritual decadence. Therefore, associations such as the Unio Cleri or the Philippine Priests, Inc., properly oriented, can be of immense value.

WE MUST PRAY

"We cannot remain christians unless we have our own deep, continued inward life of prayer, of faith, of charity, without that we cannot participate usefully and wisely in the rebirth and reflowering of Liturgy; we cannot give evidence of that christian authenticity about which we hear so much; we cannot think, breathe, act, suffer and fully hope with the living pilgrim Church. We must pray."

— Pope Paul VI