

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOLINESS OF PRIEST'S LIFE - A MORAL AND SPIRITUAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The priest's mission is first of all to help people to understand with their hearts, the fact that their true self-fulfillment consists only in active participation in God's holiness through His uncreated energies, that is, through God's grace. Having this purpose, the priest duty is to put into practice the sanctifying divine commandments firstly in his own life, and then, through the example of his sanctified life, to help the faithful to walk on the peace-bringing path of holiness. Following the research, I discovered that in the vision of Saint John Chrysostom, the sanctity of the priest's life is a sine-qua-non condition for a successful spiritual ministry.

Keywords: Lord Jesus Christ; holiness of priest's life; prayer; Holy Liturgy;

INTRODUCTION

Through the model of his holy and humble life, as well as through his theological works resulting from the experience of his own closeness *with* God and living *in* God, Saint John Chrysostom offers the model of the priest who lives in the image of Christ, to all generations that came after him. Through the example of his holy life, Saint John Chrysostom was an example of a spiritual shepherd whose pastoral activity brought many fruits in Christ's field, delivering thousands of sermons¹ through which he comforted, rebuked and taught people, with a zeal like the Holy Apostles².

Being a desirous of spiritual asceticism, he joined the elder Carterie from Antioch, who in that city, within a Christian house of ascetics, formed a community of spiritual workers (a prototype of the later monasteries). Being under Carterie's spiritual obedience, Saint John lived four years of communal cenobitic life, followed by another two years of hermitage in a cave, like other previous and later spileotian Saints³.

1. THE PRIEST IS A DOCTOR FOR SOULS

Regarding the priest's mission as a *doctor for the soul*⁴ Saint John Chrysostom states that penitence or the canon must be given with great skill, with great discernment, and according to the spiritual state of the penitent: *"Men who are weak in spirit, inclined into an easy life and much attached to the pleasures of the world, being also proud of their lineage and their high offices, if they are turned from their sins by kind words and little by little, they can be saved, if not completely, at least in part; but if they are suddenly given a canon, however small, they cannot be corrected. Because a soul, when it has been forced to lose all shame, falls into insensibility; he is no longer swayed by kind words or threats, and he is no longer moved by God's favors, but becomes much worse than the city that the prophet*

reprimands, saying: «and though you had a harlot's forehead, you refused to be ashamed» (Jeremiah 3: 3)''⁵.

This exhortation is very current with regard to the spiritual ministry of contemporary priests. From an early age, people are used to the fact that they have to become better than others, precisely in order *to succeed* in life. This is not necessarily bad in itself, as long as we do not see an adversary in our neighbour, but a fellow man whom we have the duty to love as ourselves, in Christ's likeness.

Pride easily sneaks into people's souls, having negative consequences both in relation to others, but also in their own spiritual lives. When I refer to the negative consequences that fall on their spiritual life, I strictly refer to the fact that the man who is not increased in spiritual work, hardly accepts useful advice from those more experienced than him. This happens because in the soul of a self-sufficient man, a man full of himself, there is no more room for Christ – our authentic *fulfilment*. The solution is to make a sustained effort of personal self-humbling, based on prayer, in this regard.

In order to have results in the process of cleansing his spiritual sons, it is necessary that first the priest, as a shepherd of souls, should himself be cured of any passion. Then, with much discernment and examining the believer's soul in detail, let him offer the appropriate advice: *"That's why the shepherd of souls needs a lot of skill and a thousand eyes, to see from all sides the state of the sinner's soul."*⁶ *And just as many people become dizzy and lose hope of salvation, because they cannot endure too harsh canons, so there are some who, because they were not given a canon commensurate with their sins, become careless, become much worse than before and commit even greater sins. It is necessary, however, that the priest does not leave any of these unexamined; but to search well and give the canon according to the state of mind of each sinner, so that his work will not be in vain."*⁷

Unfortunately, in contemporary times *the canon* received from the priest has been unfairly likened to a *punishment*. Things are not like that, because neither God nor the priest punishes. Man, alone is punished by the negative consequences of sins committed, if these sins are not atoned for by sincere repentance⁸ embodied in spiritual weeping for sins, confession of sins at the Sacrament of Confession, Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ, acts of physical and spiritual charity, and not lastly, persistent prayer for oneself and others in need.

2. The priest must not be discouraged by temptations

The priest must be an example of sacrificial giving in favor of the salvation of others, Saint John Chrysostom, comparing the Priesthood with any other form of helping people (understanding here any form of social assistance), comes to the conclusion that the priesthood is superior in all respects, because it is a continuous sacrifice for the guidance of the lost one, on the Path to the Heavenly Kingdom and his salvation. The priest's courage and thrust must be like a torch that always burns and illuminates the path of the faithful.

There must not be any shadow of doubt or despair in the priest, he must *"have a big and courageous soul, so as not to be discouraged, not to despair of the salvation of the lost."* *They must think and say constantly like this: «Perhaps God will give them repentance to know the truth and escape from the devil's trap»* (2 Timothy 2: 25-26). *That is why the Lord said to His Disciples: «Who is the faithful and wise servant? »* (Matthew 24: 45). *The man who cares only for his own salvation, limits the benefit of his effort to himself alone; but the shepherd of souls extends the benefit of his efforts to all the people. The man who gives*

money to the needy, or the man who otherwise helps the wronged, is also of some use to those around him, but much less than the priest; the difference between one and the other is as great as the difference between soul and body. So, the Lord rightly said that caring for His flock is a sign of love for Him.”⁹ As part of the priestly pastoral-missionary activity, the priest will encounter temptations, that is, opposition from the cunning one who does not want the salvation of the righteous people.

In the face of these temptations, it is imperative that the priest pray both for himself and for those he helps spiritually. It is useful for the faithful to pray for their shepherd, because it is well known that where there are two or three people gathered in prayer for the fulfillment of a thing they ask from God, there He will also be in their midst, according to the words of the Lord who testifies: “if two of you shall agree on earth as regarding anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them by My Father in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.” (Matthew 18: 19-20).

The priesthood is performed on earth, but it has a heavenly origin and order, and the priest as its performer, must have a pure and deified soul, like the heavenly Powers¹⁰: “The priesthood is performed on earth, but it has the order of the heavenly Powers. And very rightly, because this service was not ordained by a man or an angel or an archangel or any other power created by God, but the Comforter Himself. The Holy Spirit ordained that the priests, while still in the body, bring to God the same service that the angels bring in heaven.”¹¹ That is why the priest must be so clean, as if he were standing in Heaven, among the angelic powers.”¹²

It must be known that from the point of view of service, a Priest who carries out his mission with a clear conscience is greater before God than an Angel. On the other hand, the Priest has the gift from God to bind and loose people's sins, to make them partakers of the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, to serve the Holy Mysteries and to sanctify nature through the Holy Services, which no Angel can do them. The service brought by the priest to Christ is much higher than the one once brought to the Temple of the Old Law.

Comparing the priest of Christ with St. Elijah the Tervitean who with a strong prayer brought down fire from Heaven and *locked* the sky for three and a half years so that it would not rain, St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the greatness of the Priesthood as a gift from Christ – the Priest (the great Hierarchy), *But* who perfects the “*shadow of the Law*”¹³: “Imagine that you see Elijah the prophet and that countless people are standing around him; the sacrifice is placed on the stones and all the others sit still, in deep silence, only the prophet Elijah prays; then suddenly you see that the flame descends from Heaven over the sacrifice, (3 Kings 18: 18- 36). Wonderful are these sightings and full of wonder! But move now with your mind from those performed by St. Elijah, to those performed by the priest on the Holy Table. You will see not only wonderful deeds, but deeds that surpass all wonder. The priest stands in front of the Holy Table; he does not call fire down from Heaven, but calls the Holy Spirit; he prays for a long time, not that a flame may come down from above to consume what was put before, but that grace may come down upon the sacrifice, to kindle with it, the souls of all and make them brighter than silver reddened in the fire.”¹⁴

From these statements we understand that the Priesthood instituted by Christ is current today and will be current until the end of time, being superior to the Old Testament Priesthood which was only a shadow (a foreshadowing) of the Priesthood of Christ. According to what was said above, the Priest must not be discouraged by the temptations that will stand in his way in his pastoral effort to save the faithful, because he must be aware that

he is not, first of all, the one who performs the duties of the Priesthood of Christ, but Christ Himself performs His work of saving the world, through priests, not by force, but only by virtue of the freedom of the priests, who willingly left the easy things of the world and take up Christ's *Cross*, daily.

In regards to the greatness of the power and honor that priests enjoy, the great Saint and hierarch, John Chrysostom, said: *"If you could think what a great thing it is that, being a man, and still clothed in flesh and blood, you could approach of the blessed and immortal nature of the Godhead, then you could understand well with what honor the grace of the Holy Spirit has made priests worthy. Through priests, the Holy Sacrifice and other Services in nothing inferior to the Holy Sacrifice, are performed, in regards to priestly worthiness and in regards to our salvation."*¹⁵

The two great gifts that God left on earth to men are first of all the Sacrament of the Priesthood, without which man's salvation cannot be conceived; and secondly (the second Gift) being the Mother of God, the One through whom the Incarnate Son of God was born. She is the only one who gave birth to Christ (the High Priest and Hierarch), according to human nature, making that through this *"in her (the Mother of God) we have a Mother's heart in Heaven"*¹⁶. In Saint John Chrysostom's theological conception, *"the priest is a messenger of God, a prophet, a parent, friend and brother, appointed and confirmed by the Holy Spirit"*¹⁷. St. John connects the sublimity of the Sacrament of the Priesthood with the greatness of holiness (*agiotita*) to which we must all reach in this life. As such, it goes without saying that priests must strive for their own shunning of passions and that of their flock. The degree of shunning of passions of a man also conditions the spiritual impact he can exert on another. In this sense, if a priest leads a pure life *in Christ* in the most authentic way, his pastoral-missionary result can only be positive and fruitful.

3. MORE ARE THE WAVES (TEMPTATIONS) THAT DISTURB THE PRIEST'S SOUL, THAN THE WINDS THAT STIR THE SEA!

Through the power entrusted to him, the priest, loose people's souls from their sins, and God strengthens in Heaven what the priest, in virtue of *steward of God's Mysteries*, does on earth: *"People who live on earth and dwell on it, have received permission to administer heavenly matters and have a power that God did not give to angels or archangels. It was not said to angels, but to people: «Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven» (Matthew 18: 18). The rulers of the earth also have the power to bind; but binds only the bodies. The binding power of the priests, however, binds souls and traverses the heavens; God strengthens Up in Heaven what the priests did down on earth; The master reinforces the decision given by the slaves. What else has God given the priests but all heavenly power? The Lord said: «Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven, and whose sins you retain, they are retained» (John 20: 23). What power can be greater than this? The Lord said again: «The Father has given all judgment to the Son» (John 5: 22). But I see that all this power was entrusted by the Son to the priests."*¹⁸

The power or influence of the Orthodox clergy has historically been a humble one, like Christ, our Lord. The priest does not primarily have the mission of stewarding those of his age, although the advice of priests must also be sought regarding worldly matters.

The apostles were entrusted by Christ with the conversion and evangelism of pagan peoples, a mission that the priests of the new Law also took on themselves. If for a man, what is most precious to him is his immortal soul, and if the priests are meant to *polish* this

immaterial odor to make him fit for salvation, it means that the priests have a great role in the eternal destiny of people. The canonically ordained priest has the power to administer the forgiveness of sins that comes from God. Of course, the grace of the forgiveness of sins comes from God, but not directly as is believed in some confessions, but only through the priest (or hierarchy) as *the image* of Christ in the Church.

According to St. John, the greatest office is the spiritual office that priests have. The priest is the spiritual father of his sons in Christ. In this sense, he must have a holy and moral life and conduct worthy of a parent, knowing that it is in the nature of sons to imitate their fathers in behaviour. *"Priests are the ones entrusted with our spiritual conception; they are the ones who were entrusted, to give birth to us through Baptism. Through priests we put on Christ (Galatians 3: 15). Therefore, it is right that the priests should be for us not only more frightening¹⁹ than the great dignitaries and then the emperors, but more honest and more loved even than our parents."*²⁰ Of course, St. John recommends that spiritual sons listen to their priests and put into practice everything they teach them, for the salvation of their immortal and precious souls. All priests must be honored, by virtue of the fact that through them (regardless of their moral condition) God works the salvation of men. They are *the hands* through which God works on earth.

However, St. John's statement by which he testifies that priests can be loved more than parents according to the body, we understand this in terms of the spiritual connection between the spiritual (father) priest and the spiritual disciple. From a spiritual point of view, spiritual paternity is more precious than bodily paternity, because spiritual *birth* is one that favors our *birth* into the Kingdom of God, while bodily birth is a biological and worldly fact. Of course, this does not reject respect for physical parents. How can this be rejected as long as we know that the Lord Christ Himself obeyed perfectly His Mother, but also Saint Joseph, up to the moment of reaching the age of the perfect man, but also after that if we remember the fact that at the Wedding in Cana of Galilee, the Lord turned water into wine at the prayer of His Mother (John 2), although initially this miracle was not in his plan of salvation.

The servant of Christ must be adorned with great qualities, such as discernment or right judgement, courage, self-control, love of God and fellowmen, a sacrificial soul, to love prayer and contemplation of God and be mindful of one's own spiritual life, but also to blossom others towards salvation. Thus, *"the priest must be like the valiant soldiers on the battlefield, who fight with courage and fall with manliness (...) to have self-control, be watchful, to be attentive, because he lives not only for himself, but also for so many people."*²¹ By the statement that the priest does not live only for himself, but for others, we understand that, if necessary, the priest must sacrifice himself in a spiritual way, in favor of the salvation of his parishioners. In other words, if the situation demands it, the priest, like a doctor, must be available 24 hours a day for the spiritual needs of his spiritual sons.

The holiness of the priest is reflected by his sacrificial character, through which he does not spare himself when it comes to the service of God and his fellowmen. In this sense, a priest who services in the image of Christ – the High Priest and Hierarchy, must work with and without time in the spiritual field of God, showing all care for the salvation of those entrusted to him for shepherding. The priest's courage and manliness must be shown in the time of temptations that beset his spiritual sons, praying for them to pass well through the trials inherent in the authentic spiritual life. Also, the self-control that the priest must show must be both *physical*, materialized by observing and keeping all the fasts over the year and

those that the bishop can establish in exceptional situations; but also, a *spiritual* or unseen fast, materialized by guarding the thoughts and the heart from sinful feelings or ideas.

In regards to living *according* to God, the priest must have “*an all-encompassing self-control (restraint)*”²² desiring only Christ in this life and not caring about human things, but caring only about pleasing Christ, for Whom he must be able to *die spiritually* every day, as Saint Simeon the New Theologian testifies²³, thus producing the *Consensus Patrum* or *Simphonia Pateron*, together with St. John Chrysostom on the vision of the priesthood. It is absolutely necessary for the priest to strive to lead a life as holy as possible, without sin, because the sins of priests, however small, bring great spiritual damage to their flock, if they are not strengthened in the spiritual life, and especially if they have the passion of judging the sins of their neighbor: “*the beauty of the priest's soul must shine in all the circumstances of his life, so that he can, at the same time, rejoice and enlighten the souls of those who look at him. The sins of ordinary believers, as if they were committed in the dark, destroy only their perpetrators, while the sin of a man of wisdom and known to many, such as the priest, harms everyone; he makes the weak even weaker for the toils of virtue, and those who want to be more mindful of themselves, those who perform some deeds of virtue, he makes them proud*”²⁴ and this happens because “*everyone measures sin not by the size of the sin committed, but by the authority of the one who commits the sin.*”²⁵

Therefore, the possible sins of the priests harm the souls of the believers who in turn avoid sins, the latter being proud of their apparent *worthiness* or *righteousness* compared to the priests, thus committing a sin in their turn, that is, the sin of pride. On the other hand, the mistakes of the priests (even the simple or *humanly ones*) in turn bring confusion and discouragement to the believers who are *new beginners* in the spiritual life, causing them, indirectly, to lose their courage in the spiritual struggle that everyone who wants to be saved must assume. The sins of the priests, even if they are minor, like those of many people, yet they are perceived as *great* before the common people.

In the framework of his priestly and hierarchical activity, which were a model for his contemporaries but also for future generations until the end of the ages, Saint John Chrysostom addressed both monks and laity, teaching them all without distinction.²⁶ To him, all people were equally precious, which made him carry everyone in his heart. In this sense, “*for St. John Chrysostom there is not a double spirituality or two spiritualities, one for the monks and the other for the Christians in the world, but only one spirituality*”²⁷ the evangelical one, the only that is redeeming, which he preached with devotion until the last moment of his martyred life.

Last but not least, it must be stated that for St. John Chrysostom, the priest is par excellence a *liturgist*, as one who brings the bloodless Sacrifice for the forgiveness of personal sins and for the sin of the people. In order to perform the church services without condemnation, and especially the Holy Liturgy, it is required that the priest himself *sacrifices* (cleanses) himself through asceticism, his needs thus becoming a good spiritual fragrance received by God.

The priest's soul must always be righteous in view of a worthy liturgical service, given the fact that “*the holiness of the priest's life is claimed first of all by his quality as a liturgist, that is, as a doer of the holy things, because if his soul will not be pure, how will he dare to approach the Holy Altar*”²⁸?

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, summarizing what was presented by Saint John Chrysostom in his capacity as a teacher of the whole world²⁹, we understand that the priest must have a life as holy as possible to be able to carry out his mission as an apostle of Christ, in any historical period would live. His life must be transparent, in order to see through it the deeds of virtue and the longing for God, embodied in deeds worthy of a shepherd of souls, such as: comprehensive self-control (restraint), prayer – theologizing (understood as a conversation *with* God, doubled by a conversation *about* God). According to St. John Chrysostom who theologized in consensus with all the other Holy Fathers, we understand that the priest must strive to acquire the grace of the Holy Spirit and never lose it.

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