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THE MEDIATOR

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"Mediator between God and men, and High Priest who has gone before us into heaven, Jesus the Son of God quite clearly had one aim in view when He undertook the mission of mercy which was to endow mankind with the rich blessings of supernatural grace. Sin had disturbed the right relationship between man and his Creator; the Son of God would restore it. The children of Adam were wretched heirs to the infection of original sin; He would bring them back to their heavenly Father, the primal source and final destiny of all things. . . . He gave Himself besides in prayer and sacrifice to the task of saving souls, even to the point of offering Himself, as He hung from the cross, a Victim unspotted unto God, to purify our conscience of dead works, to serve the living God. . . . But what is more, the divine Redeemer has so willed it that the priestly life, begun with the supplication and sacrifice of His mortal body, should continue without intermission down the ages in His Mystical Body which is the Church. That is why He established a visible priesthood to offer everywhere the clean oblation which would enable men from East to West, freed from the shackles of sin, to offer to God that unconstrained and voluntary homage which their conscience dictates."¹

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THE FUNCTIONS OF A MEDIATOR

St. Thomas tells us that the functions of a mediator are to bring divine things to the people, to offer to God the prayers of the people, and make satisfaction to Him for their sins.

As God's mediator, the priest brings down upon us the blessings of God by the means decreed by God Himself—the Sacraments. They are the ordinary means by which we are

¹ Encyclical *Mediator Dei* (The America Press, New York, 1948), pp. 13, 14.

brought to eternal life. "Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (*John* 3, 5). "... Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink of His blood, you shall not have life in you." (*John* 6, 54). Yet in the words of St. John Chrysostom, "all these things are ministered only by the consecrated hands of the priest."²

As man's mediator, the priest offers to God a sacrifice as satisfaction for sin. The first time we find mention of sacrifice—that of Cain and Abel—in the Scriptures is after the fall of Adam (*Gen.* 4, 3-4). The history of the Patriarchs and Prophets is filled with the mention of sacrifice. The Law given to Moses by God Himself had very definite proscriptions concerning the different kinds of sacrifices and the sins for which they were to make atonement.

In the New Testament, God perfected all previous signs and figures by giving us the perfect offering and the perfect sacrifice—the sacrifice of the Body and Blood of His Son for the sins of the world on the altar of the cross. This sacrifice alone was capable of satisfying for all the malice and injury brought about by the sin of Adam and of all his posterity. It alone was of infinite value in repairing an infinite injury.

This is the sacrifice which priests offer daily on all the altars of the world—an infinite sacrifice capable in itself of satisfying for all the sins of men. Men continue to sin, therefore it is fitting that continually there be offered to the Divine Majesty satisfaction for their sins. Yet all this depends on the priest. Will the priest then think lightly of his office? Will he be negligent in preparation before and thanksgiving after the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? Will he forget that while at the altar of earth he is also before the altar of the Most August Trinity? Will he forget that all his sacrificial actions depend on Him Who was both the Priest and the Victim in that first bloody sacrifice? Or will he rather be faithful in meditating on these sublime truths that he might ever more worthily and conscientiously act in the place of Jesus the Eternal High Priest! Will he not take great pains to see that he is always prepared spiritually and recollected mentally for the sacred function which he is about to undertake!

As man's mediator, the priest also offers to God the prayers of man and in man's behalf, that God might shower upon us the

² *Treatise on the Priesthood* by St. John Chrysostom. (The Newman Book Shop, Westminster, Md., 1943), p. 44.

graces which are necessary for our salvation. By prayer we acknowledge the power and goodness of God and also our own dependence on Him. By prayers we praise God and beg His graces without which we would be able to do nothing. God has decreed that certain things be given to man only on the condition that he pray for them. It is for all of these that the priest prays his Divine Office. He prays in his own name, yes, but primarily and principally he prays in the name of Holy Mother Church. His prayer is her prayer. The importance attached to the Divine Office and the faith which the Church places in it are not to be minimized. Would the Church impose the Divine Office on priests under penalty of mortal sin whose just retribution consists in eternal damnation in hell—would the Church whose sole concern in all things is the honor and glory of God and the salvation of souls threaten an immortal soul with such a punishment as this if the matter were of but little consequence? The mind of the Church is clear from her actions. The true mediator between man and God, then, is mindful of the importance of this obligation and of the great number of souls both within and outside of the Church who depend on his prayer and on his recitation of the Divine Office. He prays it “worthily, attentively and devoutly.” He considers it not a burden but rather a privilege. He does not seek to be excused from its recitation under various pretexts for no serious reason. He seeks rather to remain always as mediator between man and God.

THE DIGNITY OF THE MEDIATOR

As God’s mediator, the priest vested with the character of Jesus is also clothed with a dignity surpassing all other dignities of the world. As St. John Chrysostom explains: “If you desire to see how great is the difference between a king and a priest, consider the measure of the power which is granted to each and you will see the priest placed far above the king. Though the royal throne is an object of admiration on account of the gems which adorn it, and the gold with which it is encircled, yet to the king belongs only the administration of earthly things, nor beyond those has he any power. But the throne of priests is set in heaven, and they have power to determine heavenly things. Who has said this? The King of heaven Himself. . . . What honor can be compared to this?”³ What honor can be compared to the dig-

³ *Sermon 5 on Isai. 6, 1.*

nity of having imprinted indelibly on your soul the likeness of Christ? So great is that honor that St. Paul tells us that, "neither doth any man take the honor to himself, but he that is called by God, as Aaron was" (*Heb.* 5, 4). So great was the dignity attached to the priesthood of the Old Law that God commanded Moses to tell Aaron that he that "hath a blemish, he shall not offer bread to his God" (*Lev.* 21, 21). "Yet that ancient priesthood derived its greatest majesty and glory from being a fore-type of the Christian priesthood; the priesthood of the New and eternal Covenant sealed with the Blood of the Redeemer of the world, Jesus Christ, true God and true man."⁴

As God's mediator, the priest must always be mindful of the sublime dignity indelibly impressed on his soul and so keep himself separated from all persons, places and things which will in any way stain his soul, thereby rendering him liable to defile the sanctuary of God.

THE MEDIATOR MUST GIVE GOOD EXAMPLE

This great dignity of which we have spoken is known to all men and for this reason they look to the mediator for an example of all good things. "For all wish to judge of a priest, not as of a man clothed in the flesh and subject to human infirmity, but as of an angel exempt from every weakness."⁵

Example is one of the easiest and surest ways of teaching man what he must do. One of the reasons why Jesus took upon Himself our weak flesh and blood was to show us an example, that seeing it we might be encouraged and be led forward to the eternal and invisible reward which was promised to us. Many minds there are that will remain untouched by words, but there are few hearts that can resist the call of good example. Men must be led, not driven. By example, Jesus led men to a goal which transcended their understanding; a goal which was real, yet so far above the conceptual power of words, that many turned from Him saying, "this saying is hard; and who can hear it?" (*John* 6, 61). Yet those who waited were assured of the reality of the goal by the reality of the actions it prompted.

So it is that the priest must offer good example to the people, since "the people are wont to look to the conduct of their superiors as a model and to form themselves on their example."⁶

⁴ Encyclical *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, p. 8. (References to Encyclicals will be to the N.C.W.C. translations.)

⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

St. John Chrysostom also warns us that "it is impossible to conceal the faults of priests. As their good deeds are profitable to many and excite them to emulation, so too their faults render others more lax and negligent in the practice of virtue, and more loathe to undergo the labor of doing good."⁷ What a tremendous responsibility! "For the sins of ordinary people, as though committed in secret, injure only those who commit them, but the sins of one who holds a position of eminence and is known to many are detrimental to all, for they render the fallen more remiss in striving to do good, and they excite the diligent to pride."⁸ Let the mediator be ever mindful of the warning of Christ; "but he that shall scandalize one of these little ones that believe in Me, it were better for him that a millstone should be hanged about his neck and that he should be drowned in the depth of the sea" (*Matt.* 18, 6). Let the mediator learn of his duty from Holy Mother Church. "Clerics must live both interiorly and exteriorly a holier life than lay people, and must excell them in giving an example of virtue and good deeds."⁹ Let him remember the words addressed to him by the Bishop on the day of his ordination: "Let the fragrance of your life be a delight to the Church of God, that both by preaching and by example you may build up the house, that is, the family of God." Let priests give this example, "otherwise their elevation will not be to their merit but to their damnation."¹⁰

The priest must shine by his example of not one or another virtue; but he must "be adorned with all virtues, and give an example to others of a righteous life."¹¹ He must possess not just the empty external manifestations of virtue which even the devil imitates, but rather the internal reality possessed in such intensity that it surges forth from the heart through all his members, giving to their life and action a new radiance which is perceived and recognized as true by those with whom he comes in contact. The Spirit of Truth and Holiness Who dwells in the hearts of the faithful quickly whispers a warning lest they be deceived. The priest must practice all virtues, but there are some he must give special attention to—those which deep down in his heart he knows he is most in need of.

⁷ *loc. cit.*

⁸ *loc. cit.*

⁹ *Codex Juris Canonici*, can. 124.

¹⁰ St. Laurence Justin., *De Instit.*, prael., c. 11.

¹¹ *Imitation of Christ*, IV, c. 5, v. 13.

As God's mediator, the priest must never forget the grave obligation he is under constantly, to strive for perfection sincerely and forcefully. He must use all the means at his disposal to attain this end. He must put his hand to the plow and not look back.

THE POWERS OF THE MEDIATOR

As God's mediator, the priest has been given powers which cause the very angels in heaven to marvel in contemplative silence at the incomprehensible love and mercy of the Infinite Omnipotence. "Wonderous things are these; so wonderful they surpass wonder."¹² To this man has been given power over God Himself. Could God have given Himself over to the power and decisions of man in a more complete way than He has in His Sacramental Presence? Let the priest ever be conscious of the tremendous mystery which he not only contemplates but also causes. Let him pray constantly for an increase of Faith that he might ever penetrate more deeply into the sacred reality involved.

Not only does the priest possess power over the Sacramental Body of Christ, but he also has power over the Mystical Body of Christ. Through him is this Body given life; through him is this Body sustained in life; through him is this Body transferred to the life of vision, the life of union, the life of beatitude. The priest assists the Christian, literally, from the cradle to the grave. "Scarcely is he born before the priest baptizing him, brings him a new birth, to a more noble and precious life, a supernatural life, and makes him a son of God and of the Church of Jesus Christ. To strengthen him to fight bravely in spiritual combats, a priest invested with a special dignity makes him a soldier of Christ by holy Chrism. Then, as soon as he is able to recognize and value the Bread of Angels, the priest gives It to him, the living and life-giving Food come down from heaven. If he falls, the priest raises him up again in the name of God, and reconciles him to God with the Sacrament of Penance. Again if he is called by God to found a family and to collaborate with Him in the transmission of human life throughout the world, thus increasing the number of the faithful on earth and thereafter the ranks of the elect in heaven, the priest is there to bless his espousals and unblemished love; and when, finally arrived at the portals of eternity, the Christian feels need of strength and

¹² St. John Chrysostom, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

courage before presenting himself at the tribunal of the Divine Judge, the priest with the holy Oils anoints the failing members of the sick or dying Christian, and reconsecrates and comforts him. Thus the priest accompanies the Christian throughout the pilgrimage of this life to the gates of heaven."¹³

The priest in this life, through the powers granted him on ordination day acts as the Head of the Mystical Body of Christ. Let him truly be the means of life for It.

THE DANGERS FACING THE MEDIATOR

"The billows which assail the soul of a priest are greater than those which the tempests raise upon the ocean."¹⁴ Thus are the eyes of babes opened. Had there been any false hopes of a life of hard physical and intellectual labor but eased of the spiritual combat, had there been any naive doubts concerning the dangers which lurked everywhere for the fragile vessel raised to such a dignity—had there been any of these hopes and doubts, St. John Chrysostom now removes them in terms which are unmistakable. Human nature has not changed since the time of Adam; quite obviously then, it has not changed since the time of St. John. The priest must exercise "constant care and unceasing vigilance over himself, watching on every side that no one may be able to discover an unprotected or neglected part, and inflict upon him a deadly wound. For all surround him ready to strike and cast him down. And this is true, not only of his private and public enemies, but even of those who pretend to be his friends."¹⁴ Priests must be ever watchful lest they be infected with the contagion of our times, lest they "imbibe opinions and follow a mode of life . . . alien to both their dignity and their mission."¹⁵ Briefly in the words of our Holy Father: "They should be constantly alert lest they compromise not only their consciences but also their good name and the efficacy of their ministry."¹⁶

Yet the dangers come not only from without, but from within the priest himself also. Vainglory, the dangerous rock described by St. John Chrysostom; satisfaction at the disgrace of fellow laborers in the ministry, grief at their success, love of praise, seeking of honors, preaching to please, the appearance of humility without the reality—on and on he goes telling of the many dangers which lie in wait for the unguarded man of

¹³ Encyclical *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, pp. 12, 13.

¹⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁵ Encyclical *Menti Nostrae*, p. 40.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

God who relaxes his vigilance. Dangers which time has long since proved to be realities and not merely fictions of an over-sensitive mind.

CONCLUSION

Such then is the priest, God's mediator and man's mediator. Through him come the blessings from God; through him go the sacrifices and prayers of repentent man. He is vested with a dignity surpassing all other dignities. He is called on to give an example worthy to be followed by all men. He has been granted powers not only over the Mystical Body of Christ, but also over the Sacramental Christ Himself. He is assailed by dangers which make his heart grow faint at the very thought of them. Well might this mediator, a frail mortal man, fear for the outcome of it all, were it to depend on himself alone. However, God has called him to this dangerous yet sublime dignity. Will God Who has been his sole source of strength and success during all the many years of preparation now abandon this noble work of His hands to a task completely surpassing his powers? Hardly; such is not the way even of man; how much less would it be the way of God! The number and magnitude of graces needed by the priest is truly great, yet "your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things" (*Matt.* 6, 32). From your youth "the Lord thy God hath trained thee up" (*Deut.* 8, 5). "He hath given His angels charge over thee; to keep thee in all thy ways. In their hands they shall bear thee up, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone" (*Ps.* 90, 11-12). "He is the protector to all that seek Him in truth" (*Ecclus.* 2, 13). Hear God's own words: "And I will be thy keeper whithersoever thou goest" (*Gen.* 28, 15). Confidently pray to Him with the Psalmist: "In Thy tabernacle I shall dwell for ever; I shall be protected under the covert of Thy wings" (*Ps.* 60, 5). "I am a beggar and poor; The Lord is careful for me" (*Ps.* 39, 18).

Let the priest place all his hope and confidence in Jesus the Eternal High Priest, Whose image and Likeness he carries in a very special manner in his soul. Let him fly in complete confidence to Mary, who bore Him since "Our Lady loves everyone with a most tender love, but She has a particular predilection for priests who are the living image of Jesus Christ. Take comfort in the thought of the love of the Divine Mother for each of you and you will find the labors of your sanctification and priestly ministry much easier."¹⁷

¹⁷ Encyclical *Menti Nostrae*, p. 46.