

Christian community sanctification and leadership

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: *In general, it is necessary for the priest to always carefully control his aspect and behavior in his relations with the believers, always maintaining an attitude of seriousness and dignity that calls for respect, because an act of the priest can not be without effect on the believers.*

Keywords: Priest, consecration, Holy Spirit, parish, Church, believer, spiritual relation.

Introduction:

As a representative and teacher of a religious doctrine affirming the value of the spirit in the human beings and in the universal culture, a priest should be remarkable among his believers not only by his spotless moral life, but also by an intense inner spiritual experience. It is about cultivating the spirit, that superior part of our being, which is the “image of God” in man and by which we are oriented towards Him and towards heaven. By mission and institution, priesthood forms “an aristocracy of the Spirit”. [1]

According to the teachings of the great theologians of the Christian Church, the spirit, that innermost, intimate and noblest essence of our being is the general or elementary divine headquarters or altar, given to every Christian by baptism and by virtue of which all Christians constitute, according to the word of the Apostle Peter, “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation...” (1 Peter 2:9) and the headquarters of the special grace given to the clergy by ordination. According to the word of our Saviour, “It is the Spirit Who gives life...” (John 6:63; compare to 2 Corinthians 3:6). He is the One Who enlivens all the work of God's servants in the world, Who supplies all the enthusiasm, dedication and zeal of the priest and Who maintains in him the sacred fire of love for God and for people.

This divine spark planted by God in the human being is the source radiating all the power of priesthood. The inner life of the spirit is absolutely indispensable for the priest, because it maintains the relation between his soul and God, from Whom he gets his authority and power and from Whom “every good and perfect gift is” (Jacob 1:17) and towards Whom the priest ought to turn not just his own eyes but also the eyes of the world. This inner life of the spirit is the “kingdom of God... within us” that our Saviour speaks about (Luke 17:21) and, in it, the priest finds the source and the support of his creative energy, because it helps him to see everything through the prism of eternity and of the high mission of priest. It is the sap of life flowing through all the being of the priest and yielding the flowers of virtues and the fruits of good works. The inner life is the secret chamber of the soul, from where the good man takes out his good things, as it is written in the Holy Scripture (Matthew 12:35 and Luke 6:45).

St. Paul the Apostle speaks frequently about the inner man (τονεσω ανθρωπον), to whom we must turn our attention, praying to God to “grant you to be strenghtened with power through His Spirit in your inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; ...rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:16-18).”The inner man” is, according to St. Paul, the ground and support of our being from eternity: “Therefore we do not lose courage; on the contrary, even if our outward man is wasting away, our inward man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). [2]

The quality of the priest’s external manifestations will be informed by the quality of the inner ground from which they arise, for “any action faithfully bears the stamp of the purity and intensity of the inner factor that produced it” [3]; or, as Mark the Ascetic says, visible actions are the offspring of the invisible actions. *An intense, rich and deep inner life naturally and necessarily flows out as the seep of the earth bursts into buds and flowers;* for, according to the word of our Saviour, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34 and Luke 6:45).

Balance and harmony between inner ground and outer manifestations make the man of substance and ensure the success of priesthood. Moreover, for every man, his inner life, his spiritual life, is the soundboard (resonance board) that brings together, sifts as through a sieve and selects all the impressions, knowledge and feelings coming from the outside, which are subsequently turned into reactions, attitudes and actions whose quality depends on the vibrating force of each heart, as the sweetness of a violin sound depends on the quality of the material and the sensitivity of its resonance box. In the spiritual laboratory of the priest come to life, bear fruit and then come out into the external life, like branches full of fruit, all his private and public manifestations; here is the spring of his conduct in the family, among friends and acquaintances, in society and so on.[4] Indeed, about the heart of a priest with an intense inner life one can say that “rivers of living water will flow out of it”, as our Saviour says (John 7:38).

1. Spiritual mission of the priest

We could say that the spiritual mission of the priest does not start in the Holy Altar and pulpit of the church, but even from the altar inside his soul. “On the stage of the inner life are waged the most serious wars between the efforts towards good and temptations towards sin; it is here that the most brilliant moral victories against the evil thoughts and inclinations, against the temptations to sin, against sin itself, are being won. On the altar of the inner life are brought the hardest, but also the most delightful offerings, snatched from pride, selfishness, greed, mean instinctive impulses, snatched from the natural man...”.[5]

Spiritual life is not the same thing as the priest’s culture. Spiritual life includes, of course, a great dose of culture, but culture is not all. Because there can be priests who are highly educated, with a spiritual life that is dull and cold, which does not radiate any warmth; and inversely, there can be priests with less culture, but with an intense inner experience, able to arouse also in others sparks of spirit and enthusiasm. [6] As an instrument of divine grace and as an organ of sanctification of the world, the priest is obliged to pray not only for himself but also for his believers, whose mediator he is. As a priest, his primary function and mission is to pray for the Church, to transmit to God the prayer and the homage of the Church, of his parish, by the divine services ordained by the

Church. The spiritual life of the priest is maintained primarily by these sacred meetings with the believers in the Lord's house, occasioned by religious services. [7]

In this capacity, he is the announcer, the spokesman, the voice of the praying community or of the community he is leading, expressed through sacred formulas of prayer consecrated by the tradition and sanctioned by the Church. This is his main daily duty and task: to pray for the people; it must remain at the heart of his daily activities and prevail over all the other aspects of his priestly mission (teaching and management activity, social activity, cultural activity, household activity etc.). "The priest has, among other tasks, also the task of maintaining and kindling the fire of prayer in the house of David, in his parish and in his church. Woe to the priest who does not pray, who has not fought to win the habit of prayer, who sees the divine service as nothing else but a burden, who has extinguished in himself the spirit of prayer." [8] As a servant of the holy altar, the priest must be an example and model for his believers in point of the zeal for prayer, piety and warmth of prayer, motives or object of prayer and so on. The prayer of the priest during the divine services officiated inside or outside the church is the essential function of priesthood.

But the priest should not lower this Holy and capital duty to the level of a mere professional obligation, completed mechanically, out of routine, or out of the desire for material gain. The priest must not pray "only with his lips". He ought to behave as someone who is always before God and ought to serve Him piously and from the bottom of his heart, with awe and faith, warmth and dignity. He must pray from the heart and selflessly. He must put soul and conviction in everything he says and does during the divine services in order to encourage others to prayer, by his example. "The duty of the priest is not only to pray, but also to teach others to pray, giving them the habit of prayer. The grace and religiousness of a parish is decided by the priest. He ought to be and look like a man of prayer by his excellence in the mediation of the transmission of the divine grace, and in order to infiltrate the taste, the need and the manner of praying in his parishioners." [9] Therefore, one of the goals a priest must follow in his sacramental activity is to attract the faithful to prayer, especially, associating them particularly to the prayer of the Church, to pray and sing along with the priest and with the singers.

It is self-evident that the parish priest cannot meet every day, strictly, the entire order of prayer and divine services imposed to the dwellers of the monasteries, whose chief purpose and duty is precisely to pray incessantly. However, he is obliged to more than the minimum of prayer required from any lay believer every evening and every morning. He should appeal more often to the Book of Hours (*Ceaslov*), this code of sacred prayer of the Church, which should not be left solely to the singers of the choir in the church, but ought to be an indispensable prayer guide, a *vademecum* of the priest, always present in his hand, in his house and in his religious life, where he finds the order of the Holy Communion, the daily Akathists and Canons of prayer, the Compline etc. The accomplishment in time, with love and awareness, of all the duties and rites that are to be accomplished by any servant of the holy altar characterizes a priest inspired by a high conscience for his mission and his responsibility. The priest should endeavor especially to respect the Rules ordained regarding his bodily and spiritual preparation for the Liturgy; he ought to make his whole being a worthy abode of the divine grace given to him through ordination, the grace that sanctifies and turns, through his lips and his hands, the honourable gifts into the Holy Body

and Blood of the Lord. [10] In fulfilling his duties called for by the divine service, the priest is officiating in the name and person of the Saviour, but also as a mediator of the community faithful to Him. The Holy Fathers and interpreters of the liturgy affirm that the celebrant represents, on the one hand, the person of Jesus Christ, but he is also the empowered representative, delegate or interpreter of the Church, namely of his community of believers, because he speaks and prays not for himself or on his behalf, but for the believers and on their behalf.

As a general principle, priesthood was established first of all for the needs of worship, namely to mediate the relation between people and the divinity: on the one hand, to give God the honor and glory owed to Him by the creatures, and, on the other hand, to acquire from Him and transmit to the people His sanctifying grace and all that is necessary for our spiritual life. When he completes the sacred services, the Orthodox priest is exercising his primordial, principal and characteristic calling. The priest is, therefore, first of all, a sanctifier and only secondly a teacher and a leader of his flock.

It is well-known that our Saviour has founded the Christian priesthood primarily in view of its sacramental mission, at the Last Supper, when He leaves His apostles the duty and the power to celebrate the Holy Eucharist (“do this in remembrance of Me...” (Luke 22:19)) [11], supplementing it after that with the power to bind and loose [sins] and only later do the Apostles receive full authority by the words sending them to preach, i.e. to convert the whole world. Actually, even regarding the historical heathen priesthoods, the dominant conception has always been that their main task, the one characterizing their office, consisted precisely in bringing sacrifices of public worship, whereas in the Christian Church, the bearers of the priestly grace are “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Corinthians 4:1).

2. The relationship between priest and believers

The office of celebrant of the Orthodox Christian priest is, therefore, not only the most sublime point of priesthood, but also the most important aspect of his mission, namely that of being, finally, the sanctifying organ of his believers’ life. There is no need to remind that this priesthood, because of its sublimity, also constitutes a task meant for a person one can depend on, requiring from the priest a high degree of sanctity in his service. [12] This is, actually, one of the main differentiating points between us and the Protestants. It is known that in the Orthodox conception, as opposed to the Protestant one, the priest is an indispensable link connecting the ordinary or lay believers with God. In this capacity, he fulfills the double function we have talked about: on the one hand, he presents to God the believers’ offering - namely their gifts, worship and prayers or supplications – and, on the other hand, he transmits to people what comes from God, i.e. His grace. [13] This is why the Orthodox priest has always been an organ of sanctification of his flock, a trustee and holder of grace from above, which grace he puts within the believers’ reach, while the Protestant pastor and his modern version, the preacher of a sect, does not have either the preparation, or, by his calling or institution, the priestly powers vested into the legally established priesthood, which is the legitimate successor of the Apostles and of their successors, namely bishops and priests from everywhere.

Often overlooked is the great importance of the priest’s person in the achievement and maintaining of religious unity, in the accurate preservation of the doctrine itself, by

respecting the unity and uniformity of worship. On the priest, as celebrant in his double quality: as interpreter of Christ's priesthood and as representative or intercessor of the believers, depends the accurate or inaccurate rendering of the characteristic meaning of each mystery of the Church. The celebrant is thereby a faithful sentinel preserving intact and unaltered the being of religion itself, if he keeps the liturgical unity, but he can be just as well - by ignorance, recklessness or negligence - a mediator for the insinuation in the cult of beliefs foreign to a Christian person or under the moral level of a Christian person.

The relation between the priest and his believers is the moral fundament and at the same time an essential condition of the success of the priest's activity in the parish. It is known that in the Church, the priest has, in the middle of his believers, on a religious level, a special situation, a mission and a spiritual authority that are based on the special grace of priesthood received at ordination. The priest is, in his parish, a servant of God, a representative or delegate of our Redeemer, meant to continue His work of salvation of souls, an organ of the Holy Spirit, meant to sanctify and lead the faithful on the paths of salvation. Due to this mission of divine origin, received from the Church by the bishop and reinforced canonically by him, the parish priest is, in the parish he is leading, a *teacher* of his believers, a spiritual leader or adviser, and, at the same time, their *sanctifier*. He teaches them the word of the Gospel, particularly through sermon and catechesis, guides them on the paths of salvation, sharing to them the Christian teaching of faith, advising them, encouraging them on the path of moral virtues, rebuking them or scolding them if necessary, and, at the same time, sanctifying their life, putting God's grace, blessing and help within their reach, by the divine services performed by him.

This quality of the priest is the first source of the connections created between him and his believers. The natural relationship between shepherd and his flock is the foundation on which, gradually, the religious relations between the priest and his believers grow, relations that are the most important and the most lasting and derive from the very mission of the priest, which is to mediate the connection between the believers and God and work for the salvation of their souls. This mission situates the priest in a position superior to that of his believers; in his quality of "man of God" - as St. Paul the Apostle called Timothy (1 Tim. 6:11), he becomes the spiritual father of his parish, and the believers are his sons. Due to the special grace of priesthood, acquired by cheirotonia, the priest is one who gives birth or rebirth to his believers for the spiritual, supernatural life, *the life in Christ*, as the great Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas called it (in the 14th century) in a famous book of his, bearing this title, translated into Romanian (by Fr. T. Bodogae, Sibiu, 1946). He can say, like St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians: "I have become your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15).

The priest baptizes his believers, thus introducing them, by baptism and chrismation, in the Church; through him, they become part of the Church, of this great spiritual family, joined together by their unity of faith, worship and organization. He blesses not only the cradle but also the home of family life by the Sacrament of Matrimony, which sanctifies, with God's blessing and the blessing of the Church, the relation between man and woman for bearing children and educating them as useful future members of the social organism. Also through the priest, the believers are reconnected with the Church, when their connection with it has been weakened or interrupted by sin.

And it is also the priest who blesses his believers on their last journey, the one to the grave, and maintains the memory of the deceased among the living, by divine services for their forgiveness, remembrance and eternal rest.

We see so many opportunities, situations, moments and circumstances in the believers' religious life that bring the priest into contact with his flock and in which he exerts his mission of spiritual "father" of his parish, maintaining their connection with heaven. The believers themselves recognize and honor, in their priest, this quality when they address him using the honouring appellation of "father". He has, towards his spiritual children, just as many rights, duties and responsibilities in the religious order as their bodily parents, in the material and social domain. He has the right to teach, bless and sanctify, guide, scold and reprove, and even punish them, if necessary, with the means available and for their own spiritual good. All, together, with no discrimination, make up the great spiritual family of the priest; they all owe him obedience, to the priest not as a man but as a representative of God, and, for all, he is indebted with the same care and the same responsibility to God.

We see a first category of relations that blossoms between the priest and his believers and which results from the very function or religious mission of the priest: namely to meet the spiritual and moral needs of his believers. The number, variety, frequency and durability of these connections depend, undoubtedly, on the richness and the religious life of the priest and of his parish. The richer the religious life of a pastor and of the believers of a parish is, the more numerous, the denser and the more durable the spiritual connections between these believers and their pastor will be. The divine services that the priest is officiating in the church and that the faithful are attending (Holy Liturgy, Church praise and Holy Mysteries), or those completed outside the church, at the request of the believers (religious services, such as consecrations of the water or of the home, Memorial Services and other services for the dead, "baptism" of the houses on certain dates of the year, Mystery of the Holy Unction) are just as many opportunities bringing the priest in relation with his faithful and helping him know each believer and thus know the parish, in general, especially at the beginning of his activity.

On all these occasions, the relationships between pastors and believers relies on the sacramental character of priesthood, on the priest's mission of holder and dispenser of divine grace, of sanctifier of the most important moments and circumstances of everyone's life and of the things that he needs for his religious life. In this capacity, the priest is at the heart of his mission, he exerts the holiest side of the sacerdoce that God and the Church invested in him. It is mostly from here that follows the halo of sanctity, prestige and authority that has always been given to priesthood, in which the believers themselves situate the priest and which in the old Church sometimes went up to worship, especially when the grace of ordination sealed distinguished personalities, being added to the worthiness of the man as it happened in the case of Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Basil etc.

Thus, it is up to the priest to maintain unbroken - in his relations of this nature with his flock - his prestige, authority and esteem that the believers are naturally willing to grant him. The more the priest knows and strives to fulfill better, in a more aware and selfless manner, the sacramental side of his mission and meet the religious needs of his believers, the more he will multiply the number of his contacts with the believers and their respect,

their confidence and their love towards him. Fulfilling competently, with kindness and diligence, his duty of celebrant, serving with faith, with due respect for the traditional worship orders, from the bottom of his heart and with sincerity, being relentlessly and graciously available to all his believers to meet their religious needs, the priest will be sure to enjoy not just the respect and love of his parishioners, but also the most sustainable foundation of his authority and success in his pastoral activity.

Two greater dangers lurk the priest and can lead him astray from the ideal accomplishment of this aspect of his mission: routine or a mechanical and unconvincing performance of his duty of celebrant and money-mindedness. These two great sins, of which some priests have made themselves guilty, not only put a stain on the halo of priesthood in general, but also endanger the spiritual connections between the priest and his flock. The believers do not joyfully run to priests who do their job “to get rid of this chore”, who serve without conviction and not from the bottom of their hearts, who are in a hurry to finish the job faster. Moreover, the relations between the priest and his believers will get cooler if the priest demonstrates the sin of money-mindedness, when he lets the believers see that he serves for money or when he claims from his believers more than they are used to or can offer him as a reward for his work. It is self-evident how serious and how harmful this sin is both for the priests in question and their flock and for the prestige and the reputation of the clergy in general. This is one of the leading causes undermining the relations between shepherd and flock, gradually weakening these relations and even triggering conflicts between the Church servants and the lay believers, unfortunately sometimes resulting even in their leaving the Church.

The priest is connected to his parish especially by his house and his family. Unlike other confessions, where the priest is not married, the Orthodox priest is - as he was everywhere in the old Church - a married man, a family father. Through his family, he is integrated into the social life of the parish. Actually, the very ecclesiological conception of the Orthodoxy places the priest not over the Church or over the believers, but in the Church, together with the faithful. Priests and Christians make up a spiritual family where the distinction is made not as between rulers and ruled, but as between parents and children, who are all together “brothers”, as sons of the same God. This is why Saint Paul the Apostle, like all the Holy Fathers, addresses not only the clergy but also the faithful by the appellative “(dearly) beloved brothers”, which has been preserved to this day as a traditional way of address at the beginning of the pericopes of the Apostle, read at the divine services, and in the sermons or advice and exhortations addressed by the priest to the believers in churches. The connection between the believer and the priest is, in fact, the expression and mark of his connection with the Church, of his belonging to a parish. And, on the contrary, the interruption of the connection with the priest actually means breaking the ties with the Church, getting out of the Church community and becoming situated outside the parish, namely at the periphery of the Church or outside it. This is why it is so important for the destiny of the Church herself that the priest should strive, on the one hand, to create, maintain and strengthen as much as possible his spiritual relations with the believers, and keep them closely united around him, and, on the other hand, to beware of everything that could contribute to weakening, interrupting and compromising these relations, which represent the foundation and the key condition of success for his pastoral

activity. Undoubtedly, today's situations are much different from those of the past, without fully justifying, however, the continual transfer of priests from one parish to another, as the instability of the shepherd is detrimental to the Church. The close relationship of the priest with his flock and his permanence in the parish is also a means of strengthening the idea of parish and the conscience of parish in the believers's souls, a means of defending the unity of faith, a barrier against sectarian propaganda and a practical method of preventing the breaking up of the parishioners from the priest and from the parish, equivalent - as we have seen - to coming out of the Church, outside of which there is no salvation, as St. Cyprian says ("Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus"). To the priest's love for his flock, they respond with love and come all around their shepherd at his call. St. John Chrysostom is so loved by the people in Antioch that when he is to be promoted to the patriarchal throne in Constantinople he has to be simply kidnapped from among them, by a ruse of the Governor Asterius of Antioch, on the order of Emperor Arcadius and of Eutropius. And it is still he who expressed, magistrally, in his speech to his believers of Constantinople, before going into exile, the strong spiritual connection that is created between the good shepherd and the believers: "I encourage you today to take comfort, because no one can separate me from you: What God has joined together, no man can separate (Matthew 19:6)... Tomorrow I will be with you at the hour of prayer, because where I am, you are and where you are, I am, too. We are one body and the head will not let itself separated from the body, nor the body from the head. Even though we are separated by space, we are united by love. No death can separate us. If my body dies, the soul will live on and will always keep the memory of his faithful. I am ready to give my life a thousand times for you and you do not need to thank me for it. I am only doing my duty, because a good shepherd gives his life for his sheep." [14].

Tact, namely the ability to behave wisely with people, is usually the fruit of a maturity in thinking or even of a long experience that comes with age; this quality is, however, necessary even since the very beginning of our activity and we can acquire it as a lesson from the experience of our ancestors or those older than us, or from the sense of foresight and correct weighing of the realities, a sense that must never leave us. Tact is a quality - a virtue we could call it -, one of the most necessary for the priest, who in his activity is dealing with people of the most diverse characters and temperaments or natures. The Saviour Himself teaches His Holy Apostles: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves..." (Matthew 10:16). He always knows how to keep the right balance between what is required of him as a priest, on the one hand, and the actual realities in which he is given to work, on the other hand. Without sacrificing the evangelical ideal or giving it up, he pursues it patiently, without neglecting or defying realities. Because, if lack of zeal and idealism makes priesthood fruitless, too much zeal can often be just as detrimental, when it compromises success by using inappropriate means. The Saviour condemns, for example, the overzealous Apostle Peter when he draws the sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, to defend his beloved teacher; the gesture, however spectacular and heroic apparently, was, in essence, useless.

Wisdom, tact and prudence are necessary to the priest in his daily relations with people. He comes in touch with all sorts of people, temperaments, natures and characters, of the most diverse types. The soul of each man in turn represents a world of his own,

distinct from the worlds of the others. A priest must therefore be a good psychologist, a knower of souls; he has the duty to know people in all their spiritual external manifestations and inner folds, he needs to foresee, avoid and correct the evil inclinations of his believers or their attitudes determined by ignorance, sinful passions or mean interests. A priest endowed with tact, wisdom and psychological sense does not treat all the faithful in the same way; he does as a gardener who knows that a plant needs more sun, another needs shade, another one grows in damp soil, and another one thrives on dry ground etc. According to the word of the Apostle Paul, a diligent priest, with zeal for the salvation of his believers, makes himself everything for everyone, to save at least some of them (1 Corinthians 9:19-20).

Priestly tact, in the good sense of the word, does not mean, however, slyness, guile or cunning, flirting with immorality and aiming to save or meet personal or earthly interests saving or earthly satisfaction; the tact and wisdom we are talking about here is the Christian goodness, which takes into account the supreme interests of the Church and of the Country that we are serving. Tact, wisdom, prudence, patience and steadfastness give the priest that complex quality or combination of virtues that is usually called equanimity (spiritual balance), which generally characterizes people of good sense and character. "Spiritual balance helps the priest to be equal to himself in all the circumstances, be consistent in his actions and worthy of his holy mission. Such a priest is not once full of zeal, and at a different moment discouraged and apathetic. He is not sometimes too severe with the believers, and at other times too lenient with their mistakes. The line of his activity does not consist of fragments, but pursues a high aim and diligently works to achieve it. He does nothing superficially, or out of vain ambitions. He does not preach himself; he preaches Christ. He does not talk about his alleged "thaumaturgies"; he talks about the Saviour's wonders. He does not do theater while carrying out the religious service and does not do it hastily or superficially." [15]. When, however, this balance is missing, good and zealous servants lose their compass, they think they are more than they actually are, become full of themselves and of an un priestly pride, start preaching personal teachings, start using exceptional, curious and strange pastoral methods, with pretensions of replacing the twice millenary Church practice and method.

Conclusions

The priest's seriousness and dignity in dress, attitude and speech do not exclude simplicity and naturalness, good humor, friendliness, kindness and gentleness of manners, or familiarity. To his parishioners, the priest must never be distant and cold, indifferent or foreign, but close and familiar, like a true father to his children. Of course, familiarity does not mean sacrificing the priestly dignity or falling into vulgarity. The priest need not look by all means for popularity, familiarity or intimacy - exaggerated or misunderstood - with anyone, only to please everyone. The sanctified servants need some discretion and reserve to everything that could diminish or compromise their prestige in the eyes of the world; less familiarity and intimacy is recommended especially with those who do not know to respect priesthood, and the priest ought to avoid places or situations that could compromise his authority and prestige.

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