

DIGNITY AND DUTIES OF THE PRIEST;

SELVA.

A COLLECTION OF MATERIALS FOR ECCLESIASTICAL RETREATS.
RULE OF LIFE AND SPIRITUAL RULES.

BY
ST. ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI,

Doctor of the Church.

EDITED BY

REV. EUGENE GRIMM,

Print of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer.



REDEMPTORIST FATHERS

BROOKLYN

ST. LOUIS

TORONTO

Nihil obstat.

Arthur J. Semlin, S.T.D.,
Censor Librorum.

Imprimatur.

† Patritius Cardinalis Hayes,
Archiepiscopus Neo-Eboracensis

Non-Solent

Die 14 Mar., 1907

APPROBATION.

By virtue of the authority granted me by the Most Rev. Patrick Murray, Superior General of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, I hereby sanction the publication of the work entitled "DIGNITY AND DUTIES OF THE PRIEST," which is Volume XII of the complete edition in English of the works of St. Alphonsus de Liguori.

JAMES HARRON, C.S.S.R.,

Provincial

New York, N. Y., March 4, 1907.

more perfect than the apostles," says Innocent III.: "It was, however, not to her, but only to the apostles, that the Lord intrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven." St. Bernardine of Sienna has written: "Holy Virgin, excuse me, for I speak not against thee: the Lord has raised the priesthood above thee." The saint assigns the reason of the superiority of the priesthood over Mary: she conceived Jesus Christ only once; but by consecrating the Eucharist, the priest, as it were, conceives him as often as he wishes, so that if the person of the Redeemer had not as yet been in the world, the priest, by pronouncing the words of consecration, would produce this great person of a Man-God. "O wonderful dignity of the priests," cries out St. Augustine: "in their hands, as in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, the Son of God becomes incarnate." Hence priests are called the parents of Jesus Christ: such is the title that St. Bernard gives them, for they are the active cause by which he is made to exist really in the consecrated Host.

Thus the priest may, in a certain manner, be called the creator of his Creator, since by saying the words of consecration, he creates, as it were, Jesus in the sacrament, by giving him a sacramental existence, and produces him as a victim to be offered to the eternal Father. As in creating the world it was sufficient for God to have said, Let it be made, and it was created—*He spoke,*

¹ "Lect Beatissima Virgo excellentior fuerit Apostolis, non tamen illi, sed ipse Dominus claves regni caelorum commisit."—*Cap. Nova quorundam De Penit.*

² "Vobis deditur."

³ "Ego te absolvo."

⁴ "Ego te absolvo."

⁵ "Ego te absolvo."

⁶ "Ego te absolvo."

⁷ "Ego te absolvo."

⁸ "Ego te absolvo."

priesthood is called, at the synod of Chartres, in 1550, the seat of the saints. Priests are called Vicars of Jesus Christ, because they hold his place on earth. "You hold the place of Christ," says St. Augustine to them: "you are therefore his lieutenants." In the Council of Milan, St. Charles Borromeo called priests the representatives of the person of God on earth. And before him, the Apostle said: *For Christ we are ambassadors, God, as it were, exhorting by us.*

When he ascended into heaven, Jesus Christ left his priests after him to hold on earth his place of mediator between God and men, particularly on the altar. "Let the priest," says St. Laurence Justinian, "approach the altar as another Christ." According to St. Cyprian, a priest at the altar performs the office of Christ. When, says St. Chrysostom, you have seen a priest offering sacrifice, consider that the hand of Christ is invisibly extended.

The priest holds the place of the Saviour himself, when, by saying "Ego te absolvo," he absolves from sin. This great power, which Jesus Christ has received from his eternal Father, he has communicated to his priests. "Jesus," says Tertullian, "invests the priests with his own powers." To pardon a single sin requires all the omnipotence of God. "O God, who chiefly manifestest Thy almighty power in pardoning and showing mercy," etc., says the holy Church in one of her

¹ "Vos estis Vicarii Christi, qui vicem ejus geritis."—*Ad Pr. in st. c. 36.*

² "Dei personam in terra gerentes."

³ "Pro Christo legatione fungimur, tanquam Deo exhortantes per nos."—*1 Cor. v. 30.*

⁴ "Accedat Sacerdos ad altaris tribunal in Christo."—*Sermo de Balthazar.*

⁵ "Sacerdos vice Christi vobis fungitur."—*Ep. ad Corin.*

⁶ "Cum videris Sacerdotem offerentem, considera Christi manum invisibiliter extendam."—*Ad pop. Ant. lxxx. 30.*

⁷ "De suo vestitus Sacerdotem."

⁸ "Deus, qui omnipotentiam suam parcendo maxime et miserando

and they were made;—so it is sufficient for the priest to say, "Hoc est corpus meum," and behold the bread is no longer bread, but the body of Jesus Christ. "The power of the priest," says St. Bernardine of Sienna, "is the power of the divine person; for the transubstantiation of the bread requires as much power as the creation of the world." And St. Augustine has written, "O venerable sanctity of the hands! O happy function of the priest! He that created (if I may say so) gave me the power to create him; and he that created me without me is himself created by me!" As the Word of God created heaven and earth, so, says St. Jerome, the words of the priest create Jesus Christ. "At a sign from God there came forth from nothing both the sublime vault of the heavens and the vast extent of the earth; but not less great is the power that manifests itself in the mysterious words of the priest." The dignity of the priest is so great, that he even blesses Jesus Christ on the altar as a victim to be offered to the eternal Father. In the sacrifice of the Mass, writes Father Mansi, Jesus Christ is the principal offerer and victim; as minister, he blesses the priest, but as victim, the priest blesses him.

V.

Elevation of the Host Occupied by the Priest.

The greatness of the dignity of a priest is also estimated from the high place that he occupies. The

¹ "Ipse dixit, et facta sunt."—*Ps. xxxiii. 9.*

² "Potestas Sacerdotis est sicut potestas Personarum divinarum;

³ "in nomine transubstantiatione, tanta requiritur virtus, quanta in

prayer. Hence, when they heard that Jesus Christ pardoned the sins of the paralytic, the Jews justly said: *Who can forgive sins but God alone!* But what only God can do by his omnipotence, the priest can also do by saying "Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis;" for the forms of the sacraments, or the words of the forms, produce what they signify. How great should be our wonder if we saw a person invested with the power of changing a negro into a white man; but the priest does what is far more wonderful, for by saying "Ego te absolvo" he changes the sinner from an enemy into the friend of God, and from the slave of hell into an heir of paradise.

Cardinal Hugo represents the Lord addressing the following words to a priest who absolves a sinner: "I have created heaven and earth, but I leave to you a better and nobler creation; make out of this soul that is in sin a new soul, that is, make out of the slave of Satan, that the soul is a child of God. I have made the earth bring forth all kinds of fruits, but to thee I confide a more beautiful creation, namely, that the soul should bring forth fruits of salvation." The soul without grace is a withered tree that can no longer produce fruit; but receiving the divine grace, through the ministry of a priest, it brings forth fruits of eternal life. St. Augustine says, that to sanctify a sinner is a greater work than to create heaven and earth. *And hast thou, says Job, an arm like God, and canst thou thunder with a voice like Him!* Who is it that has an arm like the arm

¹ "Quis potest dimittere peccata, nisi solus Deus?"—*Mat. v. 23.*

² "Ego feci caelum et terram, transubstantiationem vero, et absolutionem creaturam de tibi: hoc novum creaturam quae est in peccato. Ego feci ut terra produceret fructus suos; de tibi melleam creaturam, ut aqua fructus suos produceret."

³ "Proveo majus hoc esse divinum, quam est caelum et terra, et quocumque occurrat in corde et in terra."—*In Jo. 6. 26.*

⁴ "Et si habes brachium sicut Deus, et si voce similes vocem Domini."

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priest is placed between God and man; inferior to God, but superior to man.

St. Denis calls the priest a divine man. Hence he has called the priesthood a divine dignity. In fine, St. Ephrem says that the gift of the sacerdotal dignity surpasses all understanding. For us it is enough to know, that Jesus Christ has said that we should treat his priests as we would his own person: *He that heareth you, heareth me; he that despiseth you, despiseth me.* Hence St. John Chrysostom says, that "he who honors a priest, honors Christ, and he who insults a priest, insults Christ." Through respect for the sacerdotal dignity, St. Mary of Oignies used to kiss the ground on which a priest had walked.

II.

Importance of the Priestly Office.

The dignity of the priest is estimated from the exalted nature of his offices. Priests are chosen by God to manage on earth all his concerns and interests. "Divine," says St. Cyril of Alexandria, "are the offices confided to priests." St. Ambrose has called the priestly office a divine profession. A priest is a minister destined by God to be a public ambassador of the whole Church, to honor him, and to obtain his graces for all

¹ "Inter Deum et hominem medius constitutus: minor Deo, sed major homine."—*In Genes. Post. c. 2.*

² "Qui Sacerdotem dixit, potius divinum imitatur vultum."—*De Eccl. Hier. c. 4.*

³ "Anglica. Ista divini est dignitas."—*Ibid.*

⁴ "Excedit omnem cogitationem doctrinam dignitatis sacerdotalis."—*De Sacra.*

⁵ "Qui vos audit, me audit; et qui vos spernit, me spernit."—*Luk. x. 16.*

⁶ "Qui hoc Sacerdotem C
⁷ "Genus
⁸ "Dei

Jesus has died to institute the priesthood. It was not necessary for the Redeemer to die in order to save the world; a drop of his blood, a single tear, or prayer, was sufficient to procure salvation for all; for such a prayer, being of infinite value, should be sufficient to save not one but a thousand worlds. But to institute the priesthood, the death of Jesus Christ has been necessary. Had he not died, where should we find the victim that the priests of the New Law now offer? a victim altogether holy and immaculate, capable of giving to God an honor worthy of God. As has been already said, all the lives of men and angels are not capable of giving to God an infinite honor like that which a priest offers to him by a single Mass.

III.

Grandeur of the Priestly Power.

The dignity of the priest is also estimated from the power that he has over the real and the mystic body of Jesus Christ.

With regard to the power of priests over the real body of Jesus Christ, it is of faith that when they pronounce the words of consecration the Incarnate Word has obliged himself to obey and to come into their hands under the sacramental species. We are struck with wonder when we hear that God obeyed the voice of Jesus—*The Lord obeying the voice of man*—and made the sun stand when he said *move not, O sun, towards Gabaon, . . . and the sun stood still.* But our wonder should be far greater when we find that in obedience to the words of his priests—*Hoc est Corpus Meum*—God himself descends on the altar, that he comes wherever they call him, and as often as they call him, and places

¹ "Obediens Domus voci hominis."—*Jer. x. 16.*

² "Sol, contra Gabaon se movens. . . . Stetit itaque sol in medio caeli."—*Ibid. x. 12.*

the faithful. The entire Church cannot give to God as much honor, nor obtain so many graces, as a single priest by celebrating a single Mass; for the greatest honor that the whole Church without priests could give to God would consist in offering to him in sacrifice the lives of all men. But of what value are the lives of all men compared with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which is a sacrifice of infinite value? What are all men before God but a little dust? *As a drop of a bucket, . . . as a little dust!* They are but a mere nothing in his sight: *All nations are before him as if they had no being at all.* Thus, by the celebration of a single Mass, in which he offers Jesus Christ in sacrifice, a priest gives greater honor to the Lord, than if all men by dying for God offered to him the sacrifice of their lives. By a single Mass, he gives greater honor to God than all the angels and saints, along with the Blessed Virgin Mary, have given or shall give to him; for their worship cannot be of infinite value, like that which the priest celebrating on the altar offers to God.

Moreover, in the holy Mass, the priest offers to God an adequate thanksgiving for all the graces bestowed even on the Blessed in Paradise; but such a thanksgiving all the saints together are incapable of offering to him. Hence it is, that on this account also the priestly dignity is superior even to all celestial dignities. Besides, the priest, says St. John Chrysostom, is an ambassador of the whole world, to intercede with God and to obtain graces for all creatures. The priest, according to St. Ephrem, "treats familiarly with God." To priests every door is open.

¹ "Quasi stilla stilula. . . . pulvis exigua. . . . Omnes gentes.

himself in their hands, even though they should be his enemies. And after having come, he remains, entirely at their disposal; they move him as they please, from one place to another; they may, if they wish, shut him up in the tabernacle, or expose him on the altar, or carry him outside the church; they may, if they choose, eat his flesh, and give him for the food of others. "Oh, how very great is their power," says St. Laurence Justinian, speaking of priests. "A word falls from their lips and the body of Christ is there substantially formed from the matter of bread, and the Incarnate Word descended from heaven, is found really present on the table of the altar! Never did divine goodness give such power to the angels. The angels abide by the order of God, but the priests take him in their hands, distribute him to the faithful, and partake of him as food for themselves."

With regard to the *mystic* body of Christ, that is, all the faithful, the priest has the power of the keys, or the power of delivering sinners from hell, of making them worthy of paradise, and of changing them from the slaves of Satan into the children of God. And God himself is obliged to abide by the judgment of his priests, and either not to pardon or to pardon, according as they refuse or give absolution, provided the penitent is capable of it. "Such is," says St. Maximus of Turin, "this judiciary power ascribed to Peter that its decision carries with it the decision of God." The sentence of the priest precedes, and God subscribes to it.

¹ "Maximus ille est collis potestas: Ad eorum potestatem, corpus Christi de panis transubstantiatur materia; descendit de caelo in cornu Verbum, et altaris verissime reperitur in mensa. Hoc ille pronuntiat et gratia, quod nunquam datum est Angelis. Hi autem dicit Deus illi contentum mandata, tollunt peccata, et sic se vincunt."—*Serm. de Pascha.*

² "Tunc et (Peter) potestatem attribuit ut iudicet, ut in arbitrio ejus possint esse salutem."—*In Mat. II. Post. loc. 2.*