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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love Thee, save souls
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

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The Duties of the Laity toward Priests

“Go, show yourselves to the priests.” St Luke 17:14

In almost every part of the Gospel in which we read of the miraculous cures of leprosy affected by Jesus Christ, we read also that he sent those whom he healed to the priests. Thus, in the 8th chapter of St. Matthew, when the leper said to him:

“Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean,” and Jesus answered: “I will; be thou made clean;” he told him to tell no one, but commanded him, at the same time, to go to the priest: “Go, show thyself to the priest” (St. Matthew 8:4). And why was that? To show that he wished to honor priests. It is of this that I will speak today, for it is a matter in which many Christians err grievously.

The priests of Jesus Christ, no matter what sort they are, must be held in the highest honor by all.

I. “Honor to whom honor is due” (Rom. 13:7), says St. Paul. But honor is due to a person for different reasons, either

1. On account of the high position and dignity that God has given him above others, and thus a king or prince is deserving of far greater honor than what is due to an ordinary citizen, although the latter may be a very rich man; or,

2. On account of the excellence of the office he fills, and thus the judge must be honored above a lawyer or clerk; or,

3. On account of the person whom he represents; thus the ambassadors and plenipotentiaries of a king have a right to the same honor that would be shown to their royal master.

1. Priests are entitled to honor for all three reasons. Let us hear what the Holy Scripture says of the dignity of priests: it calls them the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the trumpets of the Lord, the walls and pillars of the Church, the gate of heaven, the privy councilors and courtiers of God, kings, Angels of the Lord, gods on earth. The Prophet Joel says: “Between the porch and the altar, the priests, the Lord’s ministers, shall weep” (Joel 2:17). Therefore in processions they always walk next to the Blessed Sacrament, just as courtiers are accustomed to do with their sovereigns, while the people walk behind them, as lackeys do with their king. “But you are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9). The holy Fathers maintain that the priesthood far excels the dignity, of royalty. St. Ambrose says: “If you compare the priestly dignity with that of a king, you

will find that the former exceeds the latter more than gold does lead.” “For the lips of the priest shall keep knowledge, and they shall seek the law at his mouth, because he is the angel of the Lord of hosts” (Malach. 2:7). What more proof do we require? It should suffice for us to know that when the Eternal Father wished to make known the glory of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, he gave him this title and confirmed it with an oath: “The Lord hath sworn and he will not repent; thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Meichisedech” (Ps. 109:4). Such was the oath sworn by the great God. Could there be anything greater said or imagined of the dignity of the priesthood?

Do you think that I have said too much and made too much of the priesthood? If you do, then consider the other source of dignity: see what an office and duty the priest has to perform. You will then see clearly enough that what I have said up to this of the dignity of the priesthood is really true. In what does the priestly office consist? In teaching men and showing them the right way to heaven, in acting as mediators between God and man, and in something far more excellent still, which is the twofold power that is given to every priest in his ordination, and which imprints an indelible character on his soul, the power that he has over the Body and Blood of Christ.

2. Priests alone have power over the souls of Christians in the sacramental tribunal of Penance, in which they, as judges with full powers, pronounce judgments with regard to the souls even of emperors, kings, and rulers, and declare them to be either true children of God and in his grace and friendship, or slaves of the devil, groaning under the yoke of sin, and thus decide whether they belong to heaven, or to hell; for to priests alone do Christ and his representatives say: “Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained” (St. John 20:22, 23). Oh, the mighty princes of heaven, Angels and Archangels, here must yield to poor mortals. They cannot say to a sinner and enemy of God: “I absolve you from your sins; I forgive the evil you have done, I restore to you the sanctifying grace that you have lost, and make you again the friend of God; I free you from the flames of hell, and make you an heir to heaven; that is beyond their power. “Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” was the question that the Pharisees in astonishment asked our Lord when they heard him say to the man sick of the palsy: “Man, thy sins are forgiven thee.” How? They asked in surprise, “who can forgive sins, but God alone?” (St. Luke 5:20, 21.) Certainly I can do it, although I am only a sinful man, and so can every priest.

But the priest has a still greater power, not merely over the souls of men, but over the Almighty God himself, In the holy sacrifice of the Mass, for as often as he pleases he can offer the Son of God to his heavenly Father, and with a few words he can change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. Where is the angel in heaven, or the other man on earth to whom God has given such power? The world still wonders at the Prophet Elias, who could make fire come down from heaven in obedience to his command; at Josue, who commanded the sun to stand still, and was obeyed; at different Saints at whose command mountains changed their position. But what are all these miracles compared to what the priest does at the altar daily? He need say only the four little words:

“This is my body,” and behold! The great God of heaven and earth is obedient to his voice. Jesus Christ comes down upon earth with his divinity and humanity, body and soul, and is present wherever and whenever the priest wishes. St. Ambrose compares the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ to the creation of the world; for, just as before the creation there was neither heaven nor earth, nor any creature, and all things were called into existence by the word of the Almighty God: “let it be;” “he spoke and they were made” (Ps. 148:5), in the same way, before the consecration there is nothing in the Host but the substance of bread, and when the priest says the words, “This is my body,” the bread is annihilated and the Body of Christ takes its place. Yet there is this difference between the divine “let it be” and the words of the priest, that the former created all things, while the latter bring forth, so to speak, him of whom St. John says: “All things were made by him.”

3. Finally, who is the Person whom the priest represents? It is again the highest Person in heaven and on earth, Jesus Christ the Son of God. Hear what St. Paul says: “For Christ we are ambassadors; God, as it were, exhorting by us” (2 Cor. 5:20). Christ himself says to priests: “As the Father sent me, so I also send you” (St. John 20:21), in my stead: “he that heareth you heareth me; he that despiseth you despiseth me.” What the priest does outwardly, Christ does inwardly, and all is done in the Person of Christ. The priest says in the confessional: “I absolve thee from thy sins;” he says at the altar, during holy Mass: “This is my body, this is the chalice of my

blood;” nor can he say those words otherwise than as a plenipotentiary and ambassador of Jesus Christ, just as if Jesus Christ himself spoke them, for if he spoke them in his own person they would evidently be false and untrue, since it is quite clear that the body and blood of the priest are not hidden under the appearances of bread and wine. You may see from this that no dignity can exceed that of the priest, that no power can be more excellent, and that no person can be greater than he whom the priest represents.

II.1. By divine command priests were forbidden even to uncover their heads in the presence of the people. Priests were allowed to marry into the royal family. The highest court of justice, from which no appeal was allowed, was that of the priesthood alone, according to the divine command: “But he that will be proud and refuse to obey the commandment of the priest, who ministereth at the time to the Lord thy God that man shall die” (Deut. 17:12).

The very name and presence of the priest inspired all with reverence and respect. When Anna, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, was praying with bitter tears in the temple at Jerusalem, that God might take away her barrenness, the high-priest Heli came in, and, thinking she was intoxicated, he said to her the reproachful words: “How long wilt thou be drunk? Digest a little of the wine of which thou hast taken too much” (I Kings 1:14). Certainly, that was a great calumny; it was a shameful crime of which to accuse a good, innocent, and respectable woman, who had already sorrow enough to bear, and had sufficient reason therefore to be very angry. In our days we should not expect any woman to bear patiently such a grievous insult, without making any effort to defend her good name and to prove her innocence. She would soon find words enough to defend herself. But how did Anna act in those circumstances? She thought to herself: It is a priest who is speaking to me; and therefore she answered in a humble manner, with downcast eyes and the greatest reverence: “Not so, my lord, for I am an exceeding unhappy woman, and have drunk neither wine, nor any strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the Lord. Count not thy handmaid for one of the daughters of Belial” (I Kings 1:15, 16). Mark how she calls him her lord, and herself his handmaid: “Would to God thy handmaid may find grace in thy eyes” (Ibid. 18). So great was the respect she had for one who unjustly accused her, because he was a priest of God! St. Paul, although he knew that the Jewish priesthood had ceased, and had become a mere empty name, had still a great respect for it; for when he was beaten on the mouth by the order of Ananias the priest, he said, full of zeal for the glory of God: “God shall strike thee, thou whited wall. For sittest thou to judge me according to the law, and contrary to the law commandest me to be struck?” What? Asked the bystanders: “Dost thou revile the high-priest of God?” (Acts 23:3, 4.) Whereupon St. Paul was shocked, and excused himself humbly, saying: “I knew not, brethren, that he is the high-priest. For it is written: Thou shalt not speak evil of the prince of thy people” (Acts 23:5).

2. Even Christ himself was always very respectful to the Jewish priests, although he knew their hypocrisy and impiety. We read that he made a scourge and with it drove out of the temple those who were profaning it. And who were they? “Buyers and sellers.” Why not rather the priests, who were really to blame for the desecration of the temple, and who tried to make profit for themselves out of it? No; he left them alone because they were priests, so as to show the people the respect he had for the bare name of priest. Once only did the meek Saviour complain as he stood before his judge, and that was when he received a blow on the cheek. He asked the servant of the high-priest: If I have spoken well, “why dost thou strike me?” (St. John 18:23.) Strange, indeed, that Jesus, who bore so many injuries and insults, and even the terrible scourging, the crown of thorns, and the nails, without opening his mouth, should complain of being unjustly struck on the cheek! Why was that? Not merely because that blow was struck unjustly, for his scourging, crowning with thorns, and crucifixion were still more unjust; but because he was struck on the pretext of his having been disrespectful to the high-priest, for the servant who gave him the blow said: “Answerest thou the high priest so?” That deserves a blow! Jesus could not bear to be accused of irreverence toward the priest, and therefore, lest any one should be scandalized in that respect, or take occasion from that false accusation of being irreverent toward priests, he said: “If I have spoken evil, give testimony of the evil; but if well, why striketh thou me?” As if I had been guilty of saying anything disrespectful?

From that you must again conclude that if the priests of the Old Law were by divine command held in the highest esteem by all the people, if the Apostles and Jesus Christ himself showed such respect toward them, although they only foreshadowed the priesthood of the New Law, and even when their priesthood had altogether

ceased, what honor, then, must we not show to the true and holy priesthood of Jesus Christ, and to his priests in the New Law, who are invested with such a great dignity, and who represent the Person of Jesus Christ.

3. It is that thought that makes good and pious Christians humble themselves in the presence even of poor and lowly priests. St. Anthony the Great, whenever he met a priest, used to throw himself down on his knees, kiss the priest's hand respectfully and remain there until he got his blessing. St. Catherine of Siena thought herself unworthy of kissing the priest's hand, but she used to kiss the ground on which he walked.

Why wonder any longer that even crowned heads bowed down humbly before priests. The Emperor Constantine took the lowest place at the Council of Nice, below all priests and on a low stool; he also decreed that priests should be honored above all lay people, no matter what the rank, dignity, or position of the latter might be. Boleslaus, King of Poland, never sat down in presence of a priest. In the same way the Emperor Theodosius refused to sit down when in the choir with the priests, although the patriarch tried to compel him to do so, because he thought that by so doing he would be wanting in respect to the priesthood of Christ. The Emperor Basil spoke publicly to the people on the dignity of the priesthood, saying: An earthly lord, no matter how clever, learned, rich, or noble he is, is still only a sheep of the fold of Christ; on the other hand, a priest, no matter how poor, lowly, and simple he is, is a shepherd of the fold of Christ, and therefore must be honored above all those who are not priests.

4. You will think that I say all this because I, as a priest, would willingly be held in great honor. And you are quite right; it is true that I desire the honor that belongs to the priesthood; but not for the person of the priest so much as for the Person of Jesus Christ, whom he represents, and who wishes his ministers and ambassadors to be honored; just as the honor we show the crucifix is not given to the wood or stone of which it is made, but to him whom it represents. For I readily acknowledge that the priest is only a weak, miserable, and unworthy mortal like all others, and although he represents the Person of Christ, although he is invested with great power and dignity, such as are not given to the Angels, yet he has not laid aside his human nature, which is inclined to evil. I know that priests are often very sinful men and full of faults, and I must say with St. Paul, I am the chief of them (I Tim. 1:15). I must acknowledge, with heartfelt regret, that now and then there are priests in the world who far surpass all others in wickedness; for they lead bad, immoral, and scandalous lives, unworthy of their dignity, and if such do not repent betimes, they will be amongst those of whom one of the holy Fathers says: "The crowns of priests will be the pavement of hell;" for since they are during their lives raised to the highest dignity on earth, but disgrace it by their sinful ways, they will be sent after death to the deepest pit of hell, in punishment of their crimes.

5. Not without cause did Christ say to all: "According to their works do ye not" (St. Matthew 23:3). For it is a grievous error of some to imagine that they can do everything that a priest does or approves of. No; not everything that good and seemingly pious, religious and secular priests approve of is to be taken as an infallible rule of conduct; because even holy people have their faults and failings. Hence St. Paul says these remarkable words: "Be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1); by which he meant, if you see that I imitate Christ, then you can and you must do as I do. But no matter how wicked, faulty, or despicable a priest may be, he is still a priest of Jesus Christ; the Holiest of the holy, whom he represents, is still worthy of honor, so that he is to be 'honored just as if he were good and pious. I cannot show less respect to the ambassador of a king because he is not very clever or skilful, than if he were a miracle of knowledge, since I must honor the person of his master in him; nor must I hold a crucifix of wood in less esteem than a gold or silver one, for it represents Jesus Christ, whom I am always bound to honor.

St. Francis of Assisi understood that very well; he once entered a church the priest of which was leading a very bad life; a heretic came to him and said: What shameless priests you have in your religion; how could any one believe what is said by a man who leads such a bad life? St. Francis, in order to confound the heretic, and to show the people that they must honor even wicked priests, went up to the priest of the church, knelt before him and said: That this hand is soiled with many crimes, as that man says, I know not; but I do know that, in any case, it can dispense the Sacraments and many benefits of God to the people; therefore I kiss it with the respect and reverence that I owe to him in whose Name and by whose authority it dispenses the Sacraments. Thus speaking, he respectfully kissed the priest's hand, and by his humility induced him to amend his life.

Oh, how the example of this holy man puts to shame, not merely heretics, but many Catholics of our days! For how many there are who are grievously neglectful of their duty in this respect! Where is the honor due to

Jesus Christ that you should pay to his representatives? I speak to you who do not hesitate to call priests by opprobrious names, and to ridicule everything they say; is that the way to honor Jesus Christ in his priests? I speak to you who have the habit of looking down on priests, who are ashamed to be seen with them because the most of them are of lowly birth; you have just as much reason to be ashamed of crucifixes because they are mostly made of paper or wood! Is that the way to honor Jesus Christ in his ambassadors? I speak to you who often expect priests to perform services for you that are only fit for menials to render; is that the way to honor Jesus Christ in his representatives? I speak to you who publicly laugh at and ridicule priests; and to you, especially, who take a delight in speaking ill of them and in making known their faults. What a terrible crime it is to take away a priest's character, and thus to injure the reputation of a whole parish and give the people the greatest scandal; if we are ever bound to conceal our neighbor's faults, we must certainly cover those of a priest as well as we can. The great Emperor Constantine received letters in the Council of Nice complaining of some priests, but he threw them unopened into the fire, saying: It is not right to make known the faults of priests. A favorite saying of his, too, was: If I saw a priest doing wrong, I would cover him with my imperial mantle, so as to hide his sin as far as possible. Jesus Christ himself, when the adulteress was accused before him by the priests in the temple, wrote their sins on the ground that they might be ashamed to stone the woman to death; and why, we might ask, did he write them on the ground? He did so because they were the sins of priests, and our Lord wished to conceal them on that account, and therefore he wrote them so that the words would be at once rubbed out.

I conclude with the words of the Sacred Scripture: "With all thy soul fear the Lord, and reverence his priests" (Eccles.7:31). Whenever you meet a priest, or speak of one, or hear one speak, think of Jesus Christ, whose ambassador he is. Think, also, of him whom you dishonor if you are in any way disrespectful to a priest. A king takes to himself the insult offered to his ambassador, and will not allow it to go unpunished; and Jesus Christ also will punish all who offer insults to his priests, for he says: "He that despiseth you, despiseth me." "I will be the revenger" (Deut. 18:19). I repeat: "With all thy soul fear the Lord, and reverence his priests." Remember what our Lord has promised to those who honor his ambassadors and representatives: he who honors me, I will glorify him (I Kings 2:30) in eternity. Amen.

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