



★ SALESIAN SPIRIT: ST. CAFASSO'S CONFERENCES - I
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ON THE PRIEST

People heard about the wonderful things that John the Baptist was doing and asked him, "Who are you?" In the same way, we need to enquire of the priest, "Who are you?" because some venerate him while others curse him; some praise him to the skies while others condemn him to hell; some regard him as fortunate while others view him as useless, lazy, hard-headed, insensible to suffering & needs of others; some regard him as sacrificing himself for the public good while others consider him as a blood-sucking leech! So, who is a priest?

The priest should know 'who he is' as a priest. Because he will fall if he does not know who he is as a priest! And if he does not know it, he will not endeavour to arrive at it.

We can only pity the priest who does not know who he is! But the priest who begins to question his worthiness and considers the real dignity of his priestly state (grace of God) will consider his own miseries & problems of the world as nothing, will be attentive to his duties, learn of the demands of his priestly life, and continually grow, never stopping along the way.

Who is a priest? St. Bernard says that (1) In his nature, he is just like any other human person. (2) In his dignity, he is greater than everyone else in the world. (3) In his attire & conduct, he should be totally different from others as his character & state demand.

IN NATURE, LIKE OTHERS

The priest is born, lives, and dies just like others. He needs rest, food, and help, just like others. He has health problems and spiritual problems, just like others. Like others, he is happy, sad, crying, laughing, and fearful.

Some people hold that priests are just like others and nothing more! "He is just like me but pretends to be more than me only because he wears the cassock and has that name (Father) and that post (priest)." "He is just like me, nothing more, nothing less, so how can it be demanded that I open the secrets of my heart to him? (In the Confessional)" "He is just like me: He does his work, and I do mine! Gone are the days when 'priest' was special."

What if the priest is convinced that he is just like others and nothing more?! "If I am just like others, I can also fall into certain behaviours like others."

"By being a priest, I have not stopped being like others, so why can't I have a nice time, go for certain entertainments?" "Why are they making so much fuss about me drinking, smoking, going to play cards or other games, visiting that house, going to that place, dressing like



[These are St. Joseph Cafasso's conferences to the priests, which Don Bosco attended as a student at Convitto Ecclesiastico, and during the retreats at St. Ignatius, Lanzo. These conferences touched and moulded Don Bosco to be a holy priest and involved in the lives of the youngsters and attract them to a life with God in a very inexplicable way. These conferences are presented here because they are still very much relevant and point to the concrete way priesthood and religious life must be lived. Don Cafasso was Don Bosco's benefactor, confessor and spiritual director. He was Don Bosco's model. Don Bosco imitated him.]

that, speaking like this, joking like this..." With such theorizing, the priest will be deformed so that none will recognize the 'priest' in him!

The priest is not a man like others, but different. How is he different? He has to be different in his conduct! So, what does it mean to say, 'In nature, the priest is like others'? It means that the priests are subject to making mistakes and failures; they are human in speaking, conversing, and seeing; they are men in their ministry at the Altar, in the Confessional, in the most holy of acts. Therefore, the priest has to be careful, reserved and modest. Even if they are 'anointed' and vested in priestly robes, let them be conscious that they are made up of flesh & blood like the rest of humanity. The priest has to work on himself, carefully scrutinizing himself. Even if one is considered a saint, let him always remember that he is a man like others. If a priest forgets this, he will ruin himself.

IN HIS DIGNITY, THE HIGHEST

St. Dionysius: "Priest is the most august personage who lives on earth; in fact, he is a divine person." Pope Innocent III: "Priest is between God and man, lower than God but higher than man." St. Paul: "Priest is a man of God" (1 Tim 6:11). He is sent by God to men (related to the one who sends). St. Ephraem: "Priesthood is the highest of all dignities, honours, titles, positions." St. John Chrysostom: "Dignity of the priest is that it reaches the heavens." St. Ambrose says that the priest should first know his priestly dignity well so that he may endeavour to preserve it. If the priest does so, he will not do worldly things, activities, buffoonery, jokes, etc.

IN HIS ATTIRE & CONDUCT, DIFFERENT

The priest is entirely different from others. By his calling, he is separated from others, elevated and transformed into a different person. Therefore, his attire should be different, and he has to live differently, i.e., he has to live a virtuous and edifying life. The priest has to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth and the teacher of the people. It is a personal responsibility as well as a duty of his office. Where is the light if he is just like others in his attire, conduct & life? Where is the salt? Where is his teaching? His light does not shine; salt has lost its saltiness, and his teaching is not heard! What is the use of his homilies, exhortations & counsels that are not sustained by his personal life example (if he is just

like others)?

What is the diversity of life expected of priests? Secular life is not bad, but it does not do any good either: sleeping away, laziness, passing days and life itself doing nothing. This does not go well with the priest's life. Frequenting that house, that person, that pub, at suspicious times ... this is scandalous life; this does not edify people!

St. Gregory the Great says that the priest has to be different from others in that he should be more virtuous than the laity! He should be willing to pray more than that when he finds people who pray and pray a lot, too! When he sees people who frequent the sacraments, he should be moved to frequent the sacraments himself! When he comes across people who suffer without making a fuss, keep quiet and forgive; he, too, should do more! When he discovers people who have a delicate conscience, not only avoiding mortal sins but even venial sins, he cannot be left behind in this! If he sees in others a virtue, he should will to possess it & progress in it! If others have numerous & notable faults, he should have less. If others knowingly commit a fault, he cannot do that. If he happens to sin, he should rise immediately & with profound contrition.

How unfortunate it would be if a layperson were to tell the priest: "You are a priest, and I am a layperson. I do as much as you, even more than you! My life is like yours; no, it is better than yours! I don't go for certain entertainments, games, time passes, but you don't abstain from these! In an argument, I let go, keep quiet & suffer, but you don't stop at all! I control my eyes, tongue, my senses better than you! I think I am modest, more reserved than you are in the church (at the sacred functions)! Though I am a disciple and you are the Master, I think I am progressing better in virtue in humility, patience, kindness, charity, purity..." Indeed, it would be very shameful for the priest.

The priest, who is not different from others in attire and conduct, will be a scandal and confuse the people. What will be the confusion? The priest is the light in the moral world, and he will lose that light! How will the people go to him for confession, hear his homilies, or be corrected by him (when he is just like others)? Let us remember that when one priest misbehaves in the eyes of the people, the people think badly of all priests!

