

Our Savior Jesus Christ, the Accomplished Model of Soul Shepherd

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ABSTRACT: Our Savior Jesus Christ is not just the model of our moral accomplishment, but the model of soul shepherds, meaning the priests who perform the holy services in the Church, in His name and through His sanctifying power. Just like the Saviors won the sinners' souls, He forgave them and attracted them to Him through His godly love, in the same way, the priest of our days has to behave towards his believers with undoubted love, kindness, patience and humbleness, in order to make them go back to the right way and get closer to God, with trust and open heart.

KEYWORDS: shepherd, model, holiness, sacrifice, love, redemption

Introduction

Our Lord Jesus Christ has established the Christian priesthood (John XX, 21-22; Matthew XXVIII, 19), in order to continue His redeeming work in this world. In the Holy Church, priests, sanctified through the Service of ordination, continuously fulfill this work of the Savior, sharing with the believers the fruit of objective redemption, achieved by Him through the embodiment, the sacrifice on the Cross, His resurrection and ascension to Heaven.

Content

To achieve the supreme goal of our mission and service as priests – the believers' redemption- we do not have to invent new means and methods of pastoral care, but we should appeal to the bimillennial experience and tradition of the Church, to learn from here how we should proceed in any circumstance, depending on the situation, with each category of believers, taking into consideration their psychological nature, their environment, the living conditions that they come from and their spiritual background.

For the moral-religious life and pastoral activity of the priest, the most eloquent example, more illustrative and more worthy of being followed is our Savior Jesus Christ "*The good Shepherd*" (John X, 11), Who defined His spiritual role thus: "*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve Himself and give His soul as a reward for many*" (Matthew XX, 28). He expressed this imperative through other words, also: "*I came so that My sheep have life and have it in abundance... I am the Good Shepherd and I know my sheep and they know Me. Like my Father knows Me I know my Father. And I pledge my soul for the sheep*" (John X, 10, 14-15). He Himself confesses that He came into the world to save the human kind from the slavery of the sin. "*Son of Man came to redeem the lost one*" (Matthew XVIII, 11), He said to His holy Apprentices and Apostles, because "there is no wish before Father, the One in the Heaven, so that some of the little ones would die" (Matei XVIII, 14). The Savior's life, as a Shepherd, was nothing more than a mere use of these words. While preaching His evangelical teaching, He would cure all the sickness and inability in the people (Matei X, 1) and fed the hungry crowds (Matthew XIV, 13-21), and, at the Last Supper He washed His Apprentices' feet, thus giving them a true lesson of service and humility and saying: "If I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too have the obligation of washing one another's feet. Because I taught you a lesson, so you do just like I did to you" (John XIII, 14-15). The holy Apostles followed the example too. Translating into acts the Savior's example, the Saint Apostle Paul writes in the following manner to the Corinthians: "*Although I am free in front of everyone, I have enslaved Myself to everyone, in order to earn the*

most of them. I was like a Jew with the Jews, to win the Jew; with those under the Law as one under the Law, even though I am not under the Law, so I can win those who do not have the Law. With the weak ones I made Myself weak, so I can win the weak ones; I made Myself all to everyone, so that I, through any way, redeem some of them” (Corinthians IX, 19-22).

The Savior’s attitude, like the Apostles’, as shepherds, was determined by the great value of the souls for which He embodied in order to save them. The unmeasurable value of the human soul was shown by the Savior when He cherished a single soul more than the entire material soul: *“What use is to the man, if he wins the entire world, and his soul is lost? Or, what will man give in exchange for his soul?”* (Matthew XVI, 21). As a shepherd of souls, one needs to have and cultivate, in in one’s life and pastoral-missionary life, the following qualities:

a) To have honest and uninterested love towards people, to be able to serve them with zeal. *“In vain we boast with fasting, with watching, with poverty and with reading the Scriptures, if we did not achieve the love for God and the love for one’s neighbor. For he who has achieved love has God in himself and his mind is always at God”* (Stăniloae 1947, vol. I 127).

b) To give yourself in the work of helping them with all the sacrifice and endeavor. *The fruits of love are: to do well by your neighbor from all your heart, to endure for a long time, to be indulgent and to use things wisely”* (Stăniloae 1947, vol. II 42).

c) To cherish the human soul more than all the material goods. Taking into consideration the value of the soul, we have to take care, constantly, of its redemption to inherit the eternal life. *“Let us fortify our mind, to strain our souls, to prepare our heart! For the soul we run; eternal things to hope for”* (Fecioru 2003, 17), says a holy father.

Priesthood is, first of all, a mission. It is the mission of serving God and serving people in order to bring them as close as possible to God. *“We owe it to Him, according to the Savior’s command, to show love to all the people and especially to true brothers who love us. Of course, the love in God is only one, undivided and unseparated and this is the one we have to spread for all alike”* (Teofil 1981, 697). The most practical and convincing example of this serving of one’s neighbor in the spirit of the Christian love was given by the Savior, Who said about Himself *“No one has greater love than this, for his soul to put it for his friends”* (John XV, 13). The Savior’s love is divine and all-encompassing. It surrounds us like the air, light and warmth because He loves everyone the same. *“He gives Himself entirely like the One that is love, he reveals, in the clearest possible way, His love to all those who love Him and want to get close to Him”* (Teofil 1981, 698). *In the command of love which the Savior left us as will, “natural love meets the divine one. Divine love comes to us in a divine manner, in the Person of God’s Son, whose name is love”* (I Ioan IV, 8-9) (Bria 1992, 59). As a great teacher of the Church says, *“Christ came, above everything, so that man knows how much God loves him, and knowing, to light his love for the One by Whom he was first loved and to love his neighbor, loving him not when he is close, but far away, wondering.”* (Mihăilescu 2016, 488). With the same warmth of love the priest must serve his king, given to him for guidance. Priesthood is a holy mission that can’t bring spiritual fruit unless served with sacrifice, in the spirit of evangelical love. *“You, make out from this love a sort of final goal, to which you connect everything you say, and express everything you have to say in such a manner that the one you are talking to, hearing, will believe, and believing to hope, hoping to love, says the same church priest”*.

The Savior was firm and consistent in word and deed. There was always a perfect concordance between His teaching and His life, one completely covering the other. *“His teaching was perfectly reflected in His deeds, and His life is unquestionably reflected in His teaching. The weld between them is so tight that they form an organic whole, undivided and inseparable. One perfectly interprets the deed* (Floca 1991, 55). The Savior identified with His divine teaching which He preached, lived, and fulfilled in an ideal way, showing all that the example of deeds has a much greater value than the word, as He Himself said: *“Not everyone that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in Heaven.”* (Matthew VII, 21). Addressing His disciples the urge: *“... learn from Me that I am meek*

and humbly in heart” (Matei XI, 29), He actually exemplified this divine commandment, having mercy on the poor, healing the diseases of the helpless, satiating the hungry crowds, humbly enduring the mockery, torment, and reproach received during His sufferings, and forgiving both the thief on the cross and those who had sentenced Him to death (Luca XXIII, 34, 43). Therefore, he asks His disciples to shine not only by word, but especially by deed.

Through the ministry of the priesthood, out of love for God and for people, the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ continues in the world in its threefold aspect: sacramental, teaching and pastoral. Priests who transmit the truths of faith from the pulpit and share divine grace with the faithful are sanctifying organs of the Holy Spirit and guiding beacons of the speaking flock. The diligent and devout fulfillment of the priestly mission demands from each priest very special qualities and virtues. Even in the Old Testament there was talk of certain moral qualities of priests. Their lives had to be pure and righteous, *“that they might be holy to their God, and not defile the name of their God, for they offered sacrifices to the Lord, and bread to their God, therefore they had to be holy”* (Leviticus XXI, 6). Both the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers, and the decisions of the synods, require the priest to be adorned with a special dignity and special moral qualities. The Holy Apostle Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy: *“Do not lay hands on anyone, neither do you share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.”* (I Timothy V, 22). Referring to the moral qualities of the clergy (no matter what priestly rank they are), the apostle of the Gentiles requires them *“to be blameless, a man of one woman, watchful, wise, proper, a lover of strangers, worthy to teach others, not drunken, unaccustomed to beating, not agonizing over ugly gain, but gentle, peaceful, unloving of silver, well governing his house, having obedient children with all due propriety”* (I Timothy III, 2-4).

Understanding how high and sublime the priestly mission is, the Holy Three Hierarchs shied and fled from it, and when they received it, although they had unsurpassed spiritual qualities to this day, they embraced it with much emotion, then they succeeded in making it the most fruitful pastoral work, remaining over the century’s incomparable examples of ministers, preachers and pastors of souls. The holy canons, the divine words and teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the works of the Holy Fathers ask the priest for righteous faith, unwavering hope, patience in troubles and temptations, and unconditional love for his pastors and for God, and these virtues must be proved by life, through his good deeds and purity of soul. For this reason, those recently baptized or baptized in cases of illness, immoral, undisciplined and aggressive, divorced or fallen from the right faith are not admitted to the priesthood. Also, the fornicators, drunkards, thieves and robbers, thugs, scandal-mongers and murderers are not admitted to the priesthood, according to the provisions of canons 9 and 10 of the First Ecumenical Council (Floca 1991, 55). Even if these candidates receive the priesthood, in the event of ignorance of their fallen moral condition, if they do not show signs of correction and persist in their deviations, they must be canonized according to the ordinance, if their guilt is proven.

He who prepares for the priesthood is obliged to think seriously of the high priestly calling, to examine himself at all times, and, seeing his shortcomings and weaknesses, to force himself to remove them and to adorn himself with Christian virtues, according to the exhortation of the Holy Apostle Paul, who says: *“Brethren, how much they are true, how much they are honorable, how much they are righteous, how much they are pure, how much they are worthy of love, how much they are of good name, whatever virtue and any praise, let them be your thought”* (Philippians IV, 8), and *“what you have learned and heard and seen in Me, do, and the God of peace will be with you”* (verse 9). From these words it is clear that the apostle faithfully followed the example of the Savior, and this fact He also demands from His disciples, saying to them: *“So, please, follow me as I follow Christ”* (I Corinthians IV, 16). He who does not strive to put this example into practice will never succeed in carrying out an evangelical apostolate at the level to which the Church calls us today. *“Following Christ therefore requires a firm commitment to communion with God and neighbor, and therefore involves free choice and radical decision-making.”* (Bria 1992, 69), fact emphasized by the Savior in His Sermon on the mountain (Matthew VI, 24).

If someone finds that he lacks the qualities and does not have any means of correction, it is more dignified and more honest to look for another profession and occupation, so as not to produce folly in the Church. For the New Testament priesthood, in addition to the moral precepts, of which we have recorded only a few, we have a supreme model and a sublime ideal to follow: the life of the Savior, Who could always say of Himself: *“Who among you commits me to sin?”* (John VIII, 46). *“Jesus Christ does not bring into the world a philosophy, but a divine revelation. He himself, being life, brings a new and rich life, a life that had to be filled with edifying deeds.”* (Călugăr 1955, 19). The mystery of the victory of our Savior Jesus Christ and the extraordinary power of the Gospel consisted in His blameless life and in His perfect example of virtue which He showed everywhere. *“Jesus’s holiness is the divine holiness itself, the original holiness.”* (Mladin 1953, 508). The example of the deed is essential in the priesthood, because this example builds, overcomes any obstacle and conquers the soul: *“Verba volant, exemplatrahunt”* said the old Latins. Therefore, our Savior Jesus Christ also urges this to the apostles, when He tells them that it must be *“the salt of the earth”* and *“the light of the world”* (Matthew V 13-14), drawing their attention to the fact that *“great will be called in the kingdom of heaven, he who will do and teach men thus”* (Matthew V, 19). The Savior showed people not only how to behave in order to become true sons of God, but also how to live in order to be worthy to become inhabitants of heaven. *“Thinking, right from here on earth, of the heavenly life, according to which, we deify ourselves ..., to have a living example of incorruption, the life of the Lord and to follow in the footsteps of God, the only One to look at, Who cares how and in what way it is possible for people’s lives to become healthier”* (Fecioru 1982, 223), says a father of the Church.

Our Savior Jesus Christ said about Himself that He is the “Light of the world” (Matthew VIII, 12), and our Christian Church calls Him in its liturgical hymns *“The Sun of Righteousness”* and *“The High East”*, which has spread the light of knowledge in the world by God. He is light not only as a teacher, but also as a model of moral perfection for believers. As the *“Sun of righteousness”*, He represents Holiness itself, the absolute Goodness, and the divine Wisdom from which springs the riches of all Christian virtues, because in Him are all the virtues embodied. How much light, and how much warmth and comfort pours out the gaze, the word and the attitude of Jesus, Who embraces us and embraces us all with His eternal and boundless love. He made His will out of the commandment of love, when He said to His disciples, *“A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another, as I have loved you”* (John XIII, 34), leaving us, along the centuries the true model of serving people, in the spirit of love. He *“penetrates us with His divine energies, with His grace, with His holiness, unites us with Him and creates us again in His image. Through this relationship Christ dwells in us and we wear Him, we receive the form of Christ, that is, being Christopher’s (bearers of Christ) we also become Christopher’s (after the form of Christ)”* (Fecioru 1982, 610).

The culmination of His divine love was His Sacrifice on Golgotha, in which He shed His blood for the life and salvation of the world, attesting this by His own words, when He said to the disciples: *“No one has greater love than this, that he may put his soul into it for his friends”* (John XV, 13). For today's priest, who serves the holy in the name and with the power of Christ, these words are a reminder, a guide, and a guide to His whole pastoral activity, which He must constantly reflect upon, to put into practice, and to share with the people the light of Christ. The spiritual beauty of the divine image of Christ must shine in every believer *“Which man has ever shone brighter than Christ ...? And yet, what man has ever enjoyed this radiance less, like Him? To what extent did Christ enjoy this radiance? His light has served us only; He did not enjoy it”* (Blaise 2013, 43) said the philosopher Blaise Pascal.

We experience the presence and work of Christ in our Christian life only if we live in the light of His commandments, fulfilling His holy will. *“Through Christian deeds, the fruit of the collaboration of all the functions of the soul reactivated by grace in faith, Jesus Christ manifests Himself, for through them is manifested His working personality in us, His Self, which has become our self”* (Chițescu 2005, 86).

Conclusions

Our mission, of the holy ministers of the Church, is to behave in the midst of the world as “sons of light” (John XII, 36), spreading around us the light of love, peace, justice and goodness, for that our lives may be more and more beautiful and bright, that in this way our Lord Jesus Christ may make us worthy of the light of eternal life, which the saints enjoy in the heavenly kingdom, in the city of the New Jerusalem (Revelation XXI, 2), enlightened by the adoration of God, by Jesus Christ - the unseen and eternal light. (Revelation XXI, 23).

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