The Twenty-Seventh Week in Ordinary Time
October 7, 2018

“‘Priests,’ says St. Jerome, ‘will save themselves, not by their dignity, but by the works that correspond to their dignity.’” (Alphonsus de Liguori p.48)

Last weekend in our study of the Sacrament of Holy Orders (the priesthood), we spoke of the dignity of the priesthood. Today, we will examine the duties associated with the priesthood and the consequences attributed with not fulfilling these duties.

What are the duties of a priest? The first duty of a priest, amongst many, is to be a mediator between God and man. To best perform this task, a priest is called to be a man of prayer. It is on this account, the Church obliges a priest to pray the Divine Office (Breviary) everyday. A priest is also expected to offer the Divine Liturgy (Mass) during the year. If a priest is unable to fulfill these obligations (illness, for example), his bishop can dispense him from doing so and oblige him to offer prayers for his people in another manner. “Speaking of the priest of God, St. Gregory Nazianzen writes: ‘The priest must first be cleansed before he can cleanse others; he must first approach God before he can lead others to him; he must first sanctify himself before he can sanctify others; he must first be himself a light before he can illumine others.’” (p. 63) Let us consider this point through the rule of a monarchy and ask ourselves a question: Can a court official fulfill his duty as mediator for the people if the sovereign does not know him or has been betrayed by the actions of that official? Can a priest, who has become like warm or cold in both his prayer and virtuous living, truly assist his people as a mediator? I am of the belief that this would be difficult because it can be difficult to rekindle the fire of love in the heart of a man when the coals have grown cold. “Philip the Abbot used to say that priests are chosen to defend the people, but for this their dignity is not sufficient; sanctity of life is also necessary.” (p. 64) A priest must become holy through prayer and good works for it is written: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19: 2)

Saint Alphonsus, along with other saints, has examined the consequences which resulted from priests failing to live up to this great dignity through a life steeped in sin. Saint Alphonsus would write that the sin of a priest should be considered a grievous offense for he should know better. “He cannot allege ignorance, for he knows the great evil of mortal sin: he cannot plead weakness, because he knows the means by which, if he wishes, he can acquire strength; if he is unwilling to adopt the means, the fault is entirely his own.” (p. 72) “Greater knowledge is followed by greater punishment,” says St. John Chrysostom. (p. 76)

Saint Alphonsus went on to write more concerning the punishments which await priests who choose a life contrary to the greater gift of priesthood which they have received. Sufficient to say, we very much need to pray for all priests. I know that it is hard to pray for priests who have abused both children and adults. However hard it may be, we must pray for them. God does not want any of His children to be lost from Him whomever they may be, priests or laity. This week, let us take time to offer an extra prayer to God consoling Him and His people who have been wounded by those who are His priests.