

## *The Twenty-Sixth Week in Ordinary Time* *September 30, 2018*

*“For it is testified: ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.’” (Hebrews 7:17)*

In our continuing study of the Sacraments, we have arrived at the **Sacrament of Holy Orders** (the priesthood). Due to the scandals involving the priesthood dating back to the revelations of Boston in 2001, I am of the firm belief that we (priests and laity) no longer understand or appreciate the dignity of this great sacrament, and the dread that falls upon those who fail to live a life worthy of this honor. I will endeavor, over the next two weeks, to briefly highlight both the dignity of the priesthood and the grave importance of having holy priests. My thoughts will be taken from the book by Saint Alphonsus de Liguori: *“Dignity and Duties of the Priest”*.

What is a priest? A priest is a man chosen by God to be His minister to His people. A simple question with a simple answer. But, does this answer really convey to us who a priest is and to what holiness of life he has been called to live? Allow me to offer, as Saint Alphonsus did so many years ago, another answer to this question which may provide us with a different view. I will offer the exact quotes compiled by Saint Alphonsus only citing the page numbers of his book. I am fully aware that you will be tempted to compare the priesthood which Saint Alphonsus cites to myself. Please also understand that I will disappoint in this comparison. Therefore, I only ask that you pray that I and other priests will eventually have the holiness of life to which this great honor requires.

*“In his epistle to the Christians of Smyrna, St. Ignatius Martyr, says that the priesthood is the most sublime of all created dignities: ‘The apex of dignities is the priesthood.’” (p. 23)* Priests are chosen by God to be His co-workers on earth offering His sacraments to His people. As he examined this priestly dignity, Saint Alphonsus would write these words: *“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?”* (p. 25) Saint Alphonsus would further emphasize this point by stating the dignity of the priesthood is greater than the dignity of the angels, the saints in heaven, and even the Blessed Virgin Mary. This may seem impossible at first, but it makes complete sense when we consider two points: Reconciliation and Eucharist.

As much as the angels, saints, and Mother Mary can guide and intercede for us through their prayers, not one can offer us the forgiveness of our sins. *“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.”* (p. 27) Saint Alphonsus would further emphasize this point with these words: *“Were the Redeemer to descend into a church, and sit in a confessional to administer the sacrament of penance, and a priest to sit in another confessional, Jesus would say over each penitent, ‘Ego te absolvo (I absolve you),’ the priest would likewise say over each of his penitents, ‘Ego te absolvo,’ and the penitents of each would be equally absolved.”* (p. 28) To pardon one single sin, a priest must be given, by his ordination, the same power as God.

Concerning the Eucharist, let us ponder the words of two saints (St. Bernardine of Sienna and St. Augustine of Hippo) compiled by Saint Alphonsus. *“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!” (p. 33) “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.” (p. 32)*

Saint Alphonsus would further strengthen the importance of the dignity of the priests, but he was also quick to stress the holiness of life required of the priest who has been such a great dignity. Next weekend, we shall examine the holiness of life needed by those who are priests and the tremendous desire each of us should have to pray for these servants of God. Allow me to finish with one line as a preparation for our continued reflection: *“Great is the dignity of the priesthood, but great also are its obligations. Priests ascend to a great height, but in their ascent they must be assisted by great virtue; otherwise, instead of meriting a reward, they shall be reserved for severe chastisement.” (p. 48)*