

Shall I Be A Priest?

By Rev. William Doyle, S.J.

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[The author, Fr William Doyle, is regarded by many as a saint. From 1908 to 1915, he gave no less than 152 missions and retreats. His fame as preacher, confessor and spiritual director spread wide and far, and he had "a special gift to hunt out the most hardened and neglected sinners and to bring them back with him to the church for confession." He was appointed during World War I chaplain of the 16th Irish Division. Having fulfilled his priestly duties in an outstanding fashion for almost two years, he was killed in the Battle of Ypres on 16 August 1917, having run "all day hither and thither over the battlefield like an angel of mercy." This good shepherd truly gave his life for his sheep. This is a 1929 reproduction of a little pamphlet Fr Doyle had earlier produced to encourage young men to join the priesthood. Obviously, Fr Doyle is quoting, where appropriate, the ritual authorized by Pope Saint Pius V. Some wordings may have changed under the ritual of Pope Paul VI, but the underlying reality certainly has not.]

CHAPTER I.

"Out of the Mouth of Babes."

"BUT, mother, is Jesus really there behind that little golden door? Does He never go away? Does He ever get tired? Is He never hungry, or sleepy, and how did He get in there?"

Two big eyes, full of eager questioning, looked up into mother's face, as if fearful that the story of Jesus, dwelling in the Tabernacle, might not be really true.

"Mother, how did He get in there?"

The lady smiled with pleasure as she saw how deeply her words had sunk into the heart of her little son, five years of age; and lifting him up in her arms, as she sat before the altar in her castle chapel, she explained to him the mysteries of the Holy Sacrifice and the wonders Of the Real Presence.

The child listened eagerly while she told him of those whom God had chosen to be His priests, and of the power given to them alone of bringing the great God down from Heaven to live with us on earth. She told him what a priest could do; how he could wash away every sin and raise the dead soul to life; bring back peace and happiness to the broken-hearted; change the bread and wine at Mass into the living Body of Christ, and bear Him in his hands to be the food of others.

"The holy priest does all that, René, and it is he who puts dear Jesus in the Tabernacle, that you may go to Him and ask Him all you want. He is always glad to see you come to visit Him, He will never grow tired of your company, and, perhaps, if you asked Him, René, He might some day make you also one of His priests, and let you hold Him in your consecrated hands."

Passing the chapel late that night the mother noticed the door half open, and, looking in, saw her baby boy standing on the altar steps. The light of the lamp fell upon his curly head, while, with a

look of mingled awe and eager expectation on his face, he stretched out his chubby hands towards the Tabernacle, and whispered:

“Jesus, are You there? Mother says You are; but, Jesus, is it really true?”

With a throbbing heart the mother stood rooted to the spot, as she watched her little René bring a chair and climb upon the altar.

“He must be asleep,” he murmured, “I’ll wake Him up.”

Tap, tap, tap, upon the Tabernacle door. The child paused, bending forward to hear an answer.

Tap, tap — “O Jesus,” he cried, with a sob of disappointment in his voice, “I am so sorry You are asleep, for I wanted to ask You to make me a holy priest. I want so much to be a priest that I might hold You in my arms and kiss Your little face as often as I like. Good night, now, dear Jesus; but when You are awake tomorrow I’ll come back to you again, for I do want, Oh! so much, to be one day a holy priest.”

René was right in his eagerness, for the noblest ambition which can fill the heart of any boy is the desire to be one of God’s Holy Priests.

A sweet poet, Wordsworth, once wrote

“A mother is a mother still

The holiest thing on earth.”

Had he known the Catholic priesthood, the sublime dignity and lofty calling of Christ’s Anointed, he must have changed his words, since of all God’s creatures there can be none more sacred than the priest, whose body, hands and feet, whose lips, eyes, ears, and very soul are “holy to the Lord.”

A Priest’s Holy Body.

In the tabernacles of our churches are kept the Consecrated Vessels for the service of the altar. They are guarded with jealous care, because the anointing with Holy Oils has given them a sacred character; they may never again be put to profane use — their contact with the Precious Body and Blood of Jesus Christ has imparted to them something of His holiness.

A priest’s body also is a vessel of holiness, set apart for the service of the altar only, blessed by the imposition of the Bishop’s hands, consecrated by the chrism of Ordination, cut off from human love and earthly pleasures by a solemn vow of Chastity. Round that frail but sacred body the Almighty has thrown His protecting arms, and thunders His woes against its violators: “Touch not the Lord’s anointed, for I have separated you from other people, that you should be Mine.”

“You are,” says St. Paul, “a High Priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and made higher than the heavens.”

The Anointed Hands.

There is no moment more solemn in the ceremony of Ordination than when the young levite kneels on the altar steps and stretches forth his hands for their anointing. Across the up-turned palm the Bishop traces a cross with Chrism: “Vouchsafe, O Lord,” he prays, “to consecrate and sanctify these hands, that whatever they bless may be blessed, and whatsoever they consecrate may be consecrated and made holy, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

With hallowed hands still dripping from the Holy Oils, wrapped in a white linen cloth, symbolic of their purity and their power to bind and loose, the newly-ordained lies prostrate on the ground. The bleeding Stigmata of the saints did not pierce more deeply than the words which he feels are graven in his hands: "Holy and Sanctified and Consecrated to the Lord."

Upon them now will rest the Immaculate Body of the Saviour; they will hold the Consecrated Host and break the Bread of Life to thousands of hungering souls. These holy hands will be raised aloft to bless the innocent and absolve the sinner; they will pour the waters of Baptism on the new-born babe, join the sacred bonds of Matrimony and anoint the body of the dying Christian to prepare him for his journey to Eternity. Many a time will they be clasped in prayer and stretched out before the altar throne in mute supplication for the souls of men; their secret power will break the chains of sin, drive back to Hell the spirits of darkness, and ward off from a wicked world the anger of an offended God.

Sacred and holy are the hands of every priest, which can not only bless, absolve, and fortify, but hold and touch the living Body of the Lord.

The Feet of Mercy.

"How beautiful upon the mountains," says the Prophet, "are the feet of him who brings good tidings, and that preaches peace" Such are the feet of God's Messenger of Love, ever ready to hasten, to the bedside of the sick and dying, bringing hope and consolation, pardon and reconciliation to the sinful.

In the morning they "go unto (Psalm 42(43):4) God" to offer the daily Sacrifice; they turn from the Tabernacle to the Seat of Mercy, the Confessional; by day and night they hurry through the streets and lanes of our cities, across the valleys and up the mountain-side, in heat, and cold, and wet, for souls are ever crying out for the comfort they bear. They are often, like the Master's feet, weary in the pursuit of sinners, seeking the lost sheep of the House of Israel; but the sound of their coming means salvation and the snatching of God's loved children from the fires of Hell.

With these thoughts in her mind, St. Catherine of Siena used to throw herself on her knees and kiss the footprints of the holy feet of priests as they passed her on their mission of peace and mercy.

Lips Bringing Peace.

Holy, too, are the lips of the priest, formed to utter words no other man may speak. Seven times a day, with the Psalmist, in the Divine Office, they sing the praises of God; over the bowed head of the repentant sinner they bend to whisper the message of reconciliation: "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven you." The dying soul hears them as he sinks into the arms of his Creator, hears them assuring him that all his sins are cancelled, and that he may face his Maker with a brave and trustful hope: "Depart, Christian soul, and may the Lord Jesus meet you with a smiling and benign countenance," a prayer that God gladly listens to and obeys, for He loves the priest whom he has chosen.

With the morning light these holy, trembling lips, with love and awe, bring down the Lord of all creation upon our altars: "This is My Body — This is My Blood." No longer bread and wine, but the living Body of the great God; a moment more and they are purpled with that life-saving flood which streamed from the open Wounds on Calvary, the Precious Blood of the Saviour of mankind.

Holy lips, indeed, whose mission is to sanctify, to pardon, and to console; whose commands the Lord of Hosts obey, ever making earth brighter and Heaven nearer by the marvellous power given them from on high!

Holy Eyes and Ears.

Holy eyes which are closed to earthly things, since they must look so often on the ravishing beauty of the Consecrated Host; eyes which meet the pure gaze of the Hidden God morning after morning during Mass.

Holy ears, the trusted friend of countless souls, to whom are confided secrets none others may hear, into whom are poured the sins, the sorrows, the miseries of the human heart, and thus lighten a little the crushing burden of earth's weary pilgrimage.

The Graven Soul.

“You are a priest FOR EVER,” says the ordaining Bishop, set apart “to offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins. (Hebrews 5.) As he lays his hands on the bowed head before him, the Eternal Spirit stamps the soul of the priest with His mysterious “Mark” or “Character.”

The Jewish priests of the Old Law wore always on their foreheads a silver plate bearing the words: “Sanctum Domino — Holy to the Lord”.

The Ministers of God's Church carry graven on their souls the Sign of Ordination, which can never be effaced. In the eyes of God and His Heavenly Court he is no longer a man, a sinful child of Adam, but an “Alter Christus,” another Christ.

“Did I meet an angel and a priest,” said St. Francis of Assisi, “I would salute the priest before the angel.”

“You are a Priest For Ever,” is written on his soul. Forever a priest of the Most High with power over the Almighty.

For ever, whether a saint on earth or buried in sin, whether glorious in Heaven or burning in Hell, “marked and sealed and signed” as God's most precious treasure which no earthly hand may touch.

Yes, René was right: “Dear Jesus, I want to be a Holy Priest,” for there is no earthly career more glorious, none more honourable, than the life of those who are called apart to serve the Altar and save souls.

CHAPTER II.

DIGNITY OF THE PRIESTHOOD.

The Elect of God.

We turn our thoughts back to the days of Our Lord, to the time when the meek Saviour lived amongst men. Darkness has stretched her mantle over the land, bringing repose and sleep to every living thing, but out on the lonely mountain top a solitary figure kneels in prayer. With bowed head and uplifted hands the Divine Redeemer pours out the “Prayer of God” that His Heavenly Father's blessing may come down upon the work He is about to do.

“And when day was come, He called unto Him His disciples, and He chose twelve of them whom He also named Apostles.” (Luke 6.) Lovingly the Saviour must have looked upon the little band, for

they were to be His priests, the first ministers of the New Law He had come from Heaven to establish. They were only poor, rough fishermen, but strong with the Divine commission to “teach and baptise,” each of the twelve would carry their Master’s name to the ends of the earth. To them He would give the power not possessed by the mighty angels, the power “to bind and loose,” and change the bread and wine into His own Body and Blood.

“You have not chosen Me,” He said, as He saw the shrinking humility of His astonished followers, “You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you” for an honour and dignity unknown in the world before. “I will not now call you servants, but I have called you Friends, because all things whatsoever I have heard of My Father, I have made known to you.”

“You are the salt of the earth” to season men’s lives with the savour of holiness; “You are the light of the world” to lead every straying soul to Me.

Deeply conscious of his own great unworthiness, his faults and failings, many and great though they be, the priest can never forget the loftiness of his calling and that he is the elect of God.

“I — the Great God — have chosen you,” rings in his ears as the soldiers’ bayonets flash to the salute.

“I have chosen you” makes him the welcome guest in every house, gives him the place of honour wherever he goes, while, should he be unmindful of the favours he has received, the uncovered head and reverent bow of those he meets bring home to him that others see in the priest, not a sinful man, but Christ’s dear Friend, chosen for a holy work.

St. Martin of Tours was once dining at the table of the Emperor Maximus, in company with all the dignitaries of the court. Filling his goblet with wine, the Emperor presented it to the saint, asking him to bear it to the most distinguished guest in the banqueting-hall. St. Martin rose, and passing by the princes and nobles of the royal suite laid the goblet before his chaplain, exclaiming: “Who is more worthy of this honour than a priest of Jesus Christ?”

“Higher task than that of priesthood,” wrote Carlyle, “was allotted to no man! Is it not honour enough therein to spend and to be spent?”

A Priest to Offer Sacrifice.

God has ever wished to be worshipped by sacrifice. Cain and Abel offered Him the first-fruits of their flocks, burning the slain victim as a holocaust in His sight. Noah, in gratitude for his deliverance from the Flood, built an altar to the Lord, and thus from age to age the “sweet odour of sacrifice” ascended daily before the throne of God till, with the coming of Christ, was at length fulfilled the prophecy of Malachias (Malachi): “In every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered to My name a clean oblation” — the adorable Sacrifice of Calvary repeated in the Mass.

This is the great work of the priest: “For every high priest taken from men,” says the Apostle, “Is ordained that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins.” (Hebrews 5.)

Sacrifice, that is a solemn, public act of worship, offered in the name and for the welfare of the people is an act of religion which can only be performed by one who has been specially chosen, called and empowered to discharge the office of sacrificer; hence no sacrifice can exist without the priesthood.

“I will go unto the Altar of God,” (Psalm 42 (43):4) the priest says each morning as he begins his Mass, unto the Altar of Sacrifice, for the greatest and most awful of mysteries, to exercise the office of mediator between the Creator and His Creatures. The sins of the world are ever calling to Heaven for vengeance, but the Priest, the man whom God has chosen “to stand between Him and the wicked nation,” has the power to turn aside the angry arm of Divine Justice and win pardon and forgiveness for the sinner.

Once while the Israelites were wandering in the desert, a sedition arose against Moses and Aaron, who fled to the Tabernacle to save their lives. “And the Lord said to Moses: Get you out from the midst of this multitude this moment, for I will destroy them.” Moses loved his people, stiff-necked and rebellious though they were, and in his hour of need remembered the power of the High Priest, and the honour God ever showed His anointed.

“Take the censer,” he said to Aaron, “and put fire in it from the altar, and incense upon it, and go quickly to the people to pray for them: for already wrath is gone out from the Lord, and the plague rages.” (Fourteen thousand seven hundred men were lying dead). “And Aaron, running to the midst of the multitude, which the burning fire was now destroying, offered incense: and standing between the dead and the living, he prayed for the people, and the plague ceased.” (See Numbers 16 and 17)

Morning after morning, at thousands of altars, other Aarons stand praying with “holy and innocent hands,” offering the adorable Sacrifice of Atonement and Propitiation, and once again, as of old, just punishment is averted, and “God does not do the wicked things He said He would do,” through love of His priest.

The Ambassador of Christ.

An eminent Irish Judge, who hears Mass every day in his own oratory before leaving for the law courts, has been accustomed to show his chaplain every mark of respect and esteem. With his own hands he pours the water on the priest’s fingers, holding the towel while he wipes them; he helps him to put on the sacred vestments, serves the Mass himself, and in many other ways strives to impress upon those present the dignity of his guest.

“When I am on circuit,” he said once, “I always bear in mind that I am the, representative of his Majesty, the King, and I expect and demand that all should remember to show me the honour due to my rank; a priest is the ambassador of Christ, the King of kings, and therefore still more worthy of all the honour we can pay him.”

The Ambassador of Christ! A glorious title for anyone to claim!

As Ambassador, sent by the King of Heaven and Earth to bring His message of “peace and good will” to all men;

a Liberator, with power to break the chains of Hell and set free the souls held captive by the fetters of sin;

a Consoler, bearing the balm of consolation to bleeding hearts, bringing back lost happiness by the certainty of forgiveness;

the Representative of God Himself, raised up to continue His own work:

“All power is given to Me in heaven and on earth, go you all, therefore, and teach all nations; whosoever hears you hears Me;... behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world.”

Is it any wonder, then that a certain saint, to whom God had granted the favour of seeing his Angel Guardian in bodily form, noticed on the morning of his Ordination that the Angel, who had always gone before him, now walked behind. The Heavenly Court had seen the marvellous change wrought in the soul by the imposition of hands, though hidden from human eyes.

“I can rule the bodies of men,” exclaimed Napoleon, “but the kingship of a priest is over souls; what dignity can equal this!”

CHAPTER III.

POWER OF THE PRIESTHOOD.

Raised up and chosen by God to be His earthly representative, the guardian and protector of the Flock of Christ, a priest is fitted for his lofty calling by the plenitude of grace poured on him by the sacrament of Holy Orders, and given powers the magnitude of which he can scarcely realise.

The Miracle of the Mass.

“Now, there are made many priests,” says Thomas a Kempis, “and Christ is offered up in divers places.”

Custom has made the Holy Sacrifice no longer a wonder, but if Our Lord had not said it, who would have dared to “do this in commemoration of Me”?

To prepare for the first Mass ever offered to God, the Sacrifice of His own beloved Son, many things were needed. Thousands of years of prayer and longing for the promised Redeemer must pass away; the slaying of the Paschal Lamb, with its mysterious rites and ceremonies; the birth of the Virgin Mother, the beautifying of her soul with every virtue to fit her for her glorious mission. Then came the thirty years of hidden life, the betrayal, the mocking and the scourging, till the innocent, bleeding Victim stood ready for the altar of the Cross.

The bread and wine, the consecrated stone, [even this is no longer an absolute requirement,] a priest. is all that is needed now, for “at any moment it is in his power to call the Lord of Glory with holy words down upon the earth, to bless Him with his lips, to hold Him in his hands, to receive Him into his mouth, and to distribute Him to the faithful, whilst at the same time the Angels stand about him in reverent awe to honour Him who is sacrificed.”

“The power of the priest,” exclaims St. Bernardine of Sienna, “surpasses the power of the Blessed Virgin; Mary brought the Son of God only once into this world, the priest can do so daily.”

The moment of Consecration comes, the priest’s head is bowed as the awful words fall from his lips: “This is My Body.” With the swiftness of light, the Lord of Hosts has “leaped down from His throne on high,” the substance of the bread has gone, and in his hands, which he has striven to render “holy and undefiled,” the ‘Melchisedech’ of the New Law holds his Creator, Redeemer and Judge. A moment more and by the second words of consecration, “This is My Blood,” the Lamb of God lies “mystically slain,” for the sacrifice of Calvary and the Altar are the same.

“Whatsoever You Shall Loose upon Earth, Shall be Loosed also in Heaven.”

Not content with humbly submitting Himself to the will of the priest, God has given him the right to sit in judgment on the sins of men and release them from the debt they owe to His offended majesty.

“Go, show yourselves to the priest,” He said, “he is My representative on earth, holding in his hands the power of God. No matter what your sins may be, no matter how numerous or repeated times without number, if only he forgives you, so shall I. His authority, his right to forgive is absolute, for I have said to him:

‘Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven’; and ‘Whatsoever you shall loose on earth, shall be loosed also in heaven’.”

Confident in that promise for “God is faithful and cannot deceive,” the poor sinner kneels at his confessor’s feet. He knows he is not speaking to an ordinary man but to “another Christ,” and humbly but trustfully pours into his ear the secrets of his soul.

His life has been a sad record of sin and shame. God’s love has been scorned, His mercy abused; crime and iniquity heaped up till his sins were more numerous than the sands on the sea shore.

He has hurled the thunderbolt of destruction at himself; he is stripped of every particle of sanctifying grace and merit; the virtue of charity is gone, Faith and Hope are weakened; the Holy Spirit with His gifts has fled, while before his feet yawns the bottomless pit of hell, from which eternity will not release him. What he has said no one will ever know; sorrow fills his heart, he hears the words: “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” and the hideous load of sin drops from his soul for ever. Back hastens the Holy Spirit to His earthly temple, driving out the Powers of Darkness; grace and merit lost by sin are restored; the gates of Hell are closed; and the soul so lately the enemy of God, sealed with the sign of damnation, is once more His child, the heir to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The saints, from time to time, have made the dead body live again, knowing that it must one day crumble to dust, but the miracle of the priest is far greater, raising a dead soul and giving it an eternal life which can never end.

“Oh! Father,” exclaimed an officer as he finished his confession, “tell the world there is no happiness to be compared to that which I have found here at your feet. God has given me riches and glory. I have never refused myself any of the false pleasures and joys of passion, but all is nothing to the joy of this day, the happiness of forgiveness.”

The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Know you not,” said Pilate, “that I have power to condemn you, and I have power to release you?”

Jesus answered: “You should not have any power against Me, unless it were given you from above.”

Conscious of the great powers bestowed on him at Ordination, the minister of God knows well that they are “given him from above,” for the spiritual help of the flock entrusted to his care. To him they bring the little ones that the waters of baptism may make them God’s children; he alone can loosen the chains of sin and give back the Wedding Garment of grace. Were he taken from the world, the Mass must cease, Christ would no longer come down from His throne of glory, and the sepulchre of the Tabernacle, where His living Body had lain concealed for ages, would at last be empty.

To him is given the joyous task of preparing the Eucharistic Banquet, of breaking the Bread of Life and feeding with the Food of Angels the souls of those who hunger for love. His hand can bless the marriage bond, cure the sick body by the holy unction, and speed the departing soul, fortified, absolved, and comforted, on its way to Paradise. To him are given even the “Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven,” his power reaches out beyond the grave, for, the sentence of “binding or loosing,” which he passes in the tribunal of penance, is ratified at the bar of eternal justice above.

How little the world thinks of the priest of God! How little it realises all it owes to him; the chastisement for sin he has warded off, the graces he has won for others, the help he has been to weary hearts, the souls he has saved from Hell. He goes on his way, at times despised and hated, his faults and failings magnified, as if he were not still a man, but the power of God goes with him, the grace of God surrounds him, while love, respect, and reverence follow his footsteps from those who know all they owe to the humble priest, the Ambassador of Christ on earth.

The Power of Priestly Holiness.

Armed with the weapons of his sacred calling, the priest is ever an instrument for good; but, strengthened by the power of great personal holiness, he becomes indeed a terror to Hell.

In the little village Ars, near Lyons, lived and died, some fifty years ago, a simple French Curé. He had none of the great gifts which the world looks for in her famous men; so deficient was he in learning, that his Bishop hesitated about ordaining him, and he could call neither talent nor eloquence to his aid. But the Blessed Curé d’Ars possessed a marvellous, secret power over men, the power of personal holiness. [John Vianney, 1786-1859, was canonized in 1925.]

For the last thirty years, his life never varied. At midnight, after a broken sleep of only three hours, he entered his confessional, where for eighteen hours he absolved and consoled the hundred thousand pilgrims who annually came to Ars. He revelled in austerities and humiliations, he hungered for prayer, winning souls to God and converting the most hardened sinners by the example of his heroic life as much as by the graces of his sanctity.

Francis Xavier was a saintly priest, too, and thus in ten short years was able to plant the standard of the Cross in fifty-two kingdoms and baptise, [so it is said,] with his own hand, over a million pagans.

The famous Cardinal Perronne used to say: “If learning only were needed to refute the Calvinists, I should hope to bring it about; but in order to convert them, one must send them the saintly Francis de Sales.”

Holiness in anyone is a mighty force for good, but priestly holiness has a power which charms all men, terrifies Hell, and wins the heart of God.

CHAPTER IV.

A PRIEST’S WORK.

Saving Souls.

“To save souls” is an expression often on the lips of many people, but how few give a thought to all that lies hidden in those words! To save a life is an act of heroism which wins the admiration of every man; to save an immortal soul and give it back to God, passes unnoticed in the world.

“Fire! Fire!”

Some years ago a fire broke out in a warehouse of an Irish city with such rapidity that, in a few moments, the whole building was a blazing furnace. The inmates had barely time to save their lives, and a sigh of relief went up when it became known that all had got out safely. But suddenly a cry of horror burst from the crowd and every eye was turned to the top window, where a little boy of ten, with pallid face and terror-stricken eyes, was seen vainly striving to tear down the iron bars of the window. Piteously he stretched forth his hands, screaming for help, while the red tongues of fire, which would soon wrap him round in their fiery embrace, crept higher and higher.

Brave men rushed forward in a mad effort to save the child, but were held back by men not less brave than they, who knew it was madness to enter the building now. "The stairs are burning," they cried, "at any moment the roof may fall in — God help the poor child, his sufferings will soon be over!"

A moment more and a fireman dashed into the burning house, right into the roaring flames. A death-like silence fell on the crowd; strong men's faces turned ghastly white, for none expected to see that hero again. Then, from a thousand throats a mighty cheer burst forth, for there at the window, the boy safely clasped in his arms, stood the gallant fireman. Quickly the escape ladder was run up, and in a few seconds rescued and rescuer stood safely on the ground, just as the blazing roof fell in with a crash.

It was a noble act, and all hearts go out in admiration to the nameless hero; yet, after all, what had he done? He had saved a boy's life, he had given the lad a few more short years to spend in this poor world, which, at its best, is but a Vale of Tears. But a soul? To save a soul? What does that mean? It means the rescuing of some poor creature from the never-ending, everlasting pains of Hell, from the flames of the bottomless Pit, and giving him in exchange the unspeakable bliss of Heaven for all eternity. What comparison can there be between the two? If it is a noble and blessed action to save a life, which can only last a few years, what must we think of snatching a soul from endless misery? How content we should feel, if, when we came to die, we could say, "There is one soul in Heaven now who would have been in Hell if it had not been for me." What comfort such a thought would be to a dying man, with what confidence would he go before the Judgment Seat if he could look back and say his life on earth had helped to save even one immortal soul.

Who can measure what a holy and zealous priest can do for the salvation of souls? "I think it is no exaggeration to say that every priest is the means of saving at least five thousand souls from being lost eternally in Hell" (Archbishop Lynch of Toronto).

Sometimes God gives him the happiness of absolving a dying sinner, literally snatching him at the last moment from the clutches of the demon, but most of the glorious work is hidden from his eyes. Still he goes bravely on, fighting the never-ending battle for the hundred and forty thousand persons who die daily (a million a week), knowing well the infinite value of his morning Mass, the all-saving power of the Precious Blood he offers for sinners, and how easy it is for a priest to win from the Sacred Heart of Christ mercy and forgiveness for the souls He died to save.

The Harvest is Great.

Readers of the Life of St. Francis Xavier will remember the agonising cry that broke from his lips as he gazed on the teeming population around him: "Souls, souls! O God, give me souls! The cry today is: "Priests, priests! send us priests!" for the harvest is waiting, but none to gather it "Send me half a million priests," writes a Jesuit missioner from India, "and I promise to find them abundant work at once."

From the Islands comes a despairing appeal: “Bishop Harty [archbishop of Manila in the Philippines,] has nearly a hundred parishes without priests, Bishop Hendrick [Bishop of Cebu in Central Philippines] sixty more equally destitute. Thousands of pagans are asking for baptism, but there is no one to instruct them.”

“My parish in China,” writes Father Fraser, “is one hundred miles long by fifty wide. It contains seven hundred and fifty towns, with a population ranging from 500 souls to a quarter of a million each, and to cope with that huge work I have only two priests.” [Even the few priests were arrested or exiled in 1949 by the communist regime. What is the fate of these ‘parishioners’ today?]

Americans would naturally resent to be placed in the same category as the Heathen Chinese, but, says Archbishop Christie of Oregon, “There are between fifty and sixty million churchless persons in the United States who should be reached by the Catholic Church.”

“Most people in England,” the Protestant Bishop of Rochester stated recently in a public speech, “not only do not worship Almighty God, or believe in Jesus Christ, but they know absolutely nothing about Him, probably less than about Mahomet or Confucius... to hundreds of thousands He is practically unknown except as the substance of a hideous oath.”

The Bishop of London speaks of his “Pagan diocese, where not three per cent of the population ever enter a church. There are whole streets within easy walk of Charing Cross, and miles and miles in more obscure places, where the people literally live without God in the world.”

Not counting these so-called Christians, at the present moment the world contains nearly a thousand million pagans (1,000,000,000). Placed shoulder to shoulder, they would form a line four hundred thousand (400,000) miles long, or seventeen times round the earth. Passing a given point, in single file, one per second, day and night without ceasing, it would take thirty-one and a half years for the last person in that hideous procession to go by.

Four hundred thousand miles of pagans! Every one of them dear to God, and yet not even knowing His holy Name!

“What Christ did and suffered,” says Père Grou, S.J., “He would have endured for the salvation of even a single soul. The salvation of a soul is, then, the price of the Blood of God, the price of the death of God, the price of the greatest sacrifice which Christ could possibly make, which proves that the value of a soul is beyond understanding.”

“Could you but see the beauty of a soul, you would be so much enamoured of it that you would do nothing else but ask souls of God” (St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi).

“Behold, says the Lord, I will send many Fishers, and after this I will send many Hunters” (Jer. 16.). Dear reader, why should you not be one of the “Fishers and Hunters” of men’s souls?

CHAPTER V.

CAN I BE A PRIEST?

What Is Necessary?

One of the most momentous acts of the Pontificate of [Saint] Pius X. was the authoritative settling of the conditions requisite in candidates for Holy Orders.

Spiritual writers had been accustomed to insist on the necessity of a strong interior attraction for the priestly state as a certain sign of the Divine call, and maintained that if this sensible urging of the Holy Spirit, this desire and longing to be a priest of the Most High, were wanting, there could not be any real vocation, and delusion was to be feared.

Great stress was laid on the fact that since a vocation was a free gift of God, an act by which He selects some in preference to others, this choice must be made known interiorly to the soul so favoured; without this interior vocation it would be presumption and the height of folly to aspire to such a dignity, recalling the warning of St. Paul: "Neither does any man take the honour to himself, but he that is called by God, as Aaron was." (Hebrews 5.)

The result of this inaccurate teaching, now shown to be quite contrary to the mind of the Church, was that many a lad, possessing all the qualifications for the making of a splendid priest, was told he had no vocation, because he had no sensible attraction for the life, and even a fear and dread of its obligations.

In 1909 a French priest, Canon Joseph Lahitton, Professor of Dogmatic Theology in the Seminary of Poyanne, in the diocese of Aire and Dax, published his famous book, *La Vocation Sacerdotale*, in which he stated that the traditional view of the Church was that a vocation to the priesthood did not consist in any subjective feeling or inclination ("attrait") for that state, but was manifested by a certain fitness or idoneity in the candidate, and that it was the ministers of the Church who really gave the vocation in the calling to Orders. He argued that nothing further was required in the aspirant for a legitimate call from the Bishop than the three conditions laid down by St. Thomas and St. Alphonsus: "probitas vitae, scientia competens et recta intentio," [probity of life, competent for knowledge and right intention,] in other words, that there was no need to seek boys with vocations, but rather candidates for a vocation, those who by their piety and general fitness gave promise of being worthy of the great gift of vocation bestowed on them at ordination by the Bishop.

A special commission of Cardinals, appointed by Pope Pius X., having examined the question, approved fully of the teaching of Canon Lahitton on sacerdotal vocations, and their judgment was formally sanctioned by the decree of July 2, 1912.

From this decree of the Holy See it is now certain:

(a) That a vocation to the priesthood does not necessarily include any interior inclination of the person or prompting of the Holy Spirit. (b) That all that is required from aspirants to Ordination is "a right intention, and such fitness of nature and grace, as evidenced in integrity of life and sufficiency of learning, as will give a well-founded hope of his rightly discharging the obligations of the priesthood." (c) That, given these conditions, a true vocation is unquestionably conferred by the Bishop at the moment of Ordination.

Father A. Vermeersch, S.J., of Louvain, in his treatise, *De Religiosis Institutis et Personis*, lays down two signs of a vocation to the priesthood: "One negative, the absence of any impediment (physical deformity, insanity, etc.); the other positive, a firm resolution, with the help of God, to serve Him in the ecclesiastical state."

"Is your intention honest and your strength and ability sufficient?" he asks; do you wish to be a priest, not to have an easy, comfortable life, or for the honour and esteem it will bring you, but to do your part in the building up of Christ's Kingdom on earth, convinced that a priest can do far more for God's dishonoured glory, the saving of perishing souls, and the sanctification of his own? If so,

a boy may go on to the Altar of God without any doubt whether “he has been chosen to the sacred ministry and apostolate” (Acts 1.), happy and secure in the thought that the Lord has turned His eyes of love upon him and marked him as His own.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEVIL’S TRAPS.

Knowing well the power of a priest, and how he can spoil the work of Hell for the destruction of souls, the devil, “the enemy of the human race,” strives might and main to choke the seeds of a vocation, and stifle the holy aspiration in the hearts of those who hope to stand, one day, at the Altar.

A. — Responsibilities of the Priesthood.

Many a generous soul has felt his courage sink and his resolution waver as he thought of the immense responsibilities the priest bears on his shoulders. He knows the tremendous dignity and power conferred on a man by Ordination, and that “Unto whomsoever much is given, of him much shall be required.” He pictures to himself the purity of heart and hand, the holiness of life, the bright example of every virtue expected from the guardians of the Holy of Holies; he realises that the care of souls is a heavy burden and a charge not to be rashly undertaken, and that though sacerdotal ordination bestows a vocation on a man, it does not follow that all do well in offering themselves for ordination. “It were better for Judas,” said the Lord, “if he had never been born.”

It is a clever snare of the evil spirit, which must be met by great trust and confidence in the goodness of Him Who will never refuse His help to those whom He has selected to do His work. “God never calls,” says St. Bernardine, “without giving, at the same time, to those whom He calls, sufficient grace for the attainment of the end to which they are called.”

B. — Its Dangers.

Though the dangers of the priestly calling are not a few, its helps and safeguards are many. Temptations, known only to the levite himself, spring up in most unexpected quarters. He must walk warily to avoid the pit-falls set for his feet; he must be ready for dangers to soul and body, for “perils in the city, for perils in the wilderness, for perils from false brethren,” and, above all, prepared for the envy and hatred of Satan, who “would have him that he might sift him as wheat.” But through it all the priest remembers that Christ “has prayed for him that his faith fail not,” which braces his courage for the fight, and strong with the grace which comes from the daily Sacrifice, the sevenfold prayer of the Breviary, and his sacred duties, he rests secure, trusting in his Master’s promise.

C. — Want of Ability.

Not a few are turned away from the service of God by a distrust of their own ability, or the fear of never being able to acquire the learning looked for in a priest. In the acquisition of knowledge the race is not always to the swift; patient, plodding perseverance will do the same work more effectually than the erratic flights of genius. “Experience shows,” writes Cardinal Gibbons, “that solid judgment with moderate attainments is far more serviceable to religion than brilliant talents combined with deficiency in practical taste. The occasions for the display of genius are rare; the opportunities for the exercise of mother-wit and discretion occur every hour.”

The Church has recently raised to her Altars one who was so wanting in talent and ability for study, that his superiors advised him, several times, to leave the seminary. Even as a priest the Blessed Curé d'Ars [Saint John Vianney] often spoke of the labour and pain the preparation of his sermons cost him, calling it the greatest trial of his life; yet no one was more frequently consulted in difficult cases, his answers being full of sound common sense and heavenly wisdom which he found in prayer.

D. — Not Holy Enough.

When all else fails, the devil transforms himself into an angel of light, and plays the part of the devotee. He fills the soul of the young aspirant with a sense of his own sinfulness and unworthiness of such an exalted calling, bringing back to his mind the failings of his early days, the times he has yielded to temptation, and how utterly wanting he is, even now, in solid virtue and holiness.

To those who have contracted a habit of sin from which they have not freed themselves, the warning of Almighty God to Moses may be aptly applied: "Come not nigh hither, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground." The handling of the God of Purity is not for them, until such time, at least, as they have given abundant proof of being "innocent in hands and clean of heart."

But this does not mean that a sinful life in the past need bar a man from Ordination; St. Peter, St. Augustine, and many other holy penitents offended God deeply, yet He did not refuse to number them among His chosen ones. As Cardinal Manning says very truly: "There are two kinds of men who are called by our Lord to be His priests. The first are the innocent. The second are the penitents. The antecedents of these two kinds are widely unlike, but their end is one and the same. They come up to the Altar by paths far apart; but they meet before it in one heart and mind, conformed to the perfection of the great High Priest."

Years of careful training in a seminary, habits of prayer and self-restraint, have crushed down the fierceness of early passion, purifying the soul more and more from the effects of sin, leaving to the graces of Ordination to perfect the work begun by God and fit the weak, unworthy creature for the sublime task of the ministry.

"No one wants you to become a priest if it be not your vocation; but if the priesthood is the crown God has prepared for you, what a loss, and one day what remorse, if you refuse it!" (Rev. J. M. Lelen).

CHAPTER VII.

A WORD TO PARENTS.

How few parents realise the immense power they possess for moulding the character and shaping the future career of their children. The tiny babe just born to them comes from God's hand with vast possibilities for good and evil; like the young forest tree, its soul may be trained to grow straight and beautiful, or bent and twisted, made horrible and deformed.

Many a priest can look back to his early years and say with gratitude that it was to the watchful care of his parents, to their prayers, their example and holy lives, he owed the happiness of his sacred calling. God held the place of honour in his home; the image of His priestly Heart was ever before his childish eyes, the names of Jesus and Mary were the first he learned to lisp. The stories of God's friends, the Saints, were told him as he lay in his little cot, and mother's hand held his while he said his baby prayers. A few years later, in all the glory of a spotless surplice and soutane, he knelt at the

altar to serve his first Mass; was it while he moved among the unseen angels that the great God chose him as His priest?

Thus, step, by step, was he guided by counsel and advice through the perils of youth, till at last his consecrated hands rested on the bowed heads of those who had led him to the Altar of God, giving back to the Creator the child they had received from Him.

Unfortunately, some parents look upon a vocation in the family as a sort of social catastrophe. They may not, perhaps, go so far as directly to crush out the desire for a higher life, which God has planted in their child's heart, but they give it no encouragement. They speak of the advantages of the various professions, the fame to be won as a lawyer or doctor, the glory of a military career, the triumphs of the Diplomatic Service, forgetting the saying of St. Vincent de Paul, "There is no grander work on earth than to form a priest," no calling nobler or more honourable than to labour for the salvation of souls as the Ambassador of Christ.

No wonder the hearts of so few young men are fired by this noblest form of ambition, the longing to serve the King of kings, or aspire to the unspeakable dignity of the priesthood.

The great French Cardinal Mermillod, once wrote: "Christian women! your mother hearts do not burn enough with Divine love that their exhalations should bring forth the heart of a priest. Oh! ask of God that your families may give sons to the Church, ask Him that you, in your turn, may have the courage of sacrifice, and that from you may be born an apostle: to speak to men about God, to enlighten the world, to serve Him at the altar, is not this, after all, a grand and magnificent destiny?"

Even those parents who have not been blessed with a son, can do much towards helping to find recruits for God's grand army. It is an admitted fact that the multitude of vocations in France in recent years has been largely due to the wide diffusion of books treating of vocations, and such papers as The Annals of the Faith, and Catholic Missions. A simple pamphlet put in the hands of a boy may be the means of planting the seed of a vocation in his heart, by making him think what he might one day become.

A wealthy Catholic lady has devoted her life to the noble work of educating poor lads for the priesthood.

In a single year she has assisted three hundred and five ecclesiastical students, and in thirty years spent her large fortune in the training of hundreds of priests, many of whom would never have celebrated the Sacred Mysteries but for her generosity and self-sacrifice. In this world, even, she has reaped her reward: "My young Chinese priest, in the first year of his ministry, baptised 1,500 pagan children. Most of them, on account of the previous neglect of their parents, died soon after baptism, and went to Heaven. Yet these 1,500 children, snatched from Satan, are only a part of the fruits of his year's labour as a priest."

To give one's child to God and His work may be a sacrifice for a father or mother, but no joy on earth can equal that of parents as they see standing at the altar, the God of Holiness in his hands, the boy who owes his life, his all, to them.

Only a parent can understand the depth of feeling in the following letter, written by a mother on the morning of her son's first Mass.

"Bless God with me, I am now the mother of a priest. When, twenty-four years ago, a son was given me, you remember how I was almost overcome with the intensity of my joy. I beheld him

living beside me, stretching forth my hand to the cradle to assure myself that my dream, realised in the flesh, indeed nestled there. How different, how much higher the joy that today fills my soul with emotions never before experienced!

“I am now the Mother of a Priest!”

“The hands, so tiny twenty-four years ago when I kissed them so fondly, are now consecrated hands, destined to hold the Bread of Life.

“That intellect, which through my instrumentality received its light, is now set apart for the service of God.

“That body, which I have nursed and cared for, passing many sleepless nights when disease strove to carry it away, that body is now consecrated. The servant of a priest’s soul, it will wear itself out in restoring sinners, teaching the ignorant, dispensing the Lord Himself to all who seek Him.

“That heart, that virgin heart, that touched no other heart save mine, is now sacred.

“When God leads across his path a wandering sinner, how well he will know what words are best to strengthen such a one and bring him back to the truth. Yes, he will go about doing good; he will be a priest after the Heart of Jesus.

“There he stood, tall and serious. There was something glorious in his aspect. I was not far from the sanctuary. Enraptured at what I saw, I dared not move. Presently I saw him kneel before the Sacred Host, and I seemed to hear his thoughts. I could not pray. I could only stammer forth, ‘Almighty God, I thank You, I thank You. This priest was mine. I formed him. His soul was kindled from my soul. He is mine no more. He is Yours. Keep him from the shadow of evil. He is of the earth, earthly; save him from ever offending You. Almighty God, I love You, I love him, I reverence him; he is Your priest.’

“At Holy Communion, the altar boy saw me coming and said the Confiteor; the celebrant turned to me and raised his hand; it was the absolution for his mother.

My son! He sobbed, I think; then he took the ciborium and came towards me. What a union! God, His priest, and I.

“Did I pray? I do not know. A strange peace took possession of my soul, which was overflowing with love and thanksgiving. My God and my son! I am almost too happy. There have been sweet days in my life, but this is the happiest of all. For the first time I have a conception of how the endless instant of eternity with God is to be spent. Farewell, I can write no more.”

(From Towards the Altar.)
