

ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
“MODELS OF THE PRIESTHOOD FOR TODAY”
LOUISIANA PRIEST CONVOCATION
ROOSEVELT HOTEL
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
SEPTEMBER 19, 2022

My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am very happy to be with you today. I thank His Excellency Archbishop Gregory Aymond, Archbishop of New Orleans, as well as my brother bishops from this Ecclesiastical Province for their kind invitation. I am grateful to you – the priests of the Province – for your ministry. Today, the priesthood is viewed with skepticism. That has certainly been the case over the past twenty years, but you have shouldered on or responded to the Lord’s call to serve as a priest, even amid the shadows.

Thank you for your priestly service during the time of the pandemic. It certainly took a collective toll on our people and even on us, but still you labored for the salvation of souls. You are the heirs to the legacy of the aptly-named “Shreveport Martyrs.” Thank you for your heroic service. I express the gratitude and spiritual closeness of the Holy Father to all of you.

A year ago, I was supposed to address you on the subject of “The State of the Priesthood Today.” I think a *CARA Report* would offer you more in that regard than I. Later, the subject changed to “The Bishop and Priest as Co-Workers.” Certainly, I will touch upon that theme, but today, I would like to address the subject of the closeness of Christ in the priest by exploring two recent speeches of the Holy Father and then contemplating models of the priest to propose them anew as a way of living our priesthood in the contemporary period.

The first speech is the Pope’s homily at this year’s Chrism Mass, and the second is an address he delivered in February to an International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood, held in Rome. In 2016, on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, the World Day for the Sanctification of Priests, the Holy Father said:

He (the priest of Christ) is anointed for his people, not to choose his own projects but to be close to the real men and women whom God has entrusted to him. No one is excluded from his heart, his prayers or his smile. With a father’s loving gaze and heart, he welcomes and includes everyone, and if at times he has to correct, it is to draw people closer. He stands apart from no one, but is always ready to dirty his hands.” (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS, 3 JUNE 2016)

Part I: Threats to the Closeness of Christ in the Priest – Spiritual Worldliness, Numbers, and Functionalism

In his Chrism Mass homily this year, the Holy Father identified three threats to the closeness of the priest to his people: spiritual worldliness; numbers or statistics; and functionalism. After encouraging priests to fix their eyes on Jesus, the Pope suggested that the devil tempts us to turn our glance away from God and toward ourselves – to engage in very subtle forms of idolatry, which replace God.

Spiritual worldliness. We, as priests, stand *in persona Christi capitis*. Daily, through prayer, we must nourish our friendship with Jesus, but living in a society that places high value on material goods, human respect, status and influence, we can become distracted from our first love, namely Jesus Christ, and be drawn to the things of this world. The Holy Father writes:

“One space of hidden idolatry opens up wherever there is spiritual worldliness, which is “a proposal of life, a culture, a culture of the ephemeral, of appearances, of the cosmetic”. Its criterion is triumphalism, a triumphalism without the cross. Jesus prayed that the Father would defend us against this culture of worldliness. This temptation of glory without the cross runs contrary to the very person of the Lord, it runs contrary to Jesus, who humbled himself in the incarnation and, as a sign of contradiction, is our sole remedy against every idol.” (POPE FRANCIS, HOMILY FOR THE CHRISM MASS, 14 APRIL 2022)

Sometimes, the desire to want to be “in the know,” or to associate with people of influence and culture in order to ascend the ecclesiastical ladder can lead to self-absorption, seeking our glory rather than that of God. The Holy Father contends that this worldly attitude, which can manifest itself in the accumulation of worldly goods, robs us of the “presence of Jesus, humble and humiliated who draws near to everyone, the Christ who suffers with all who suffer...”

Pope Francis is particularly blunt when he says, “A worldly priest is nothing more than a clericalized pagan.” (IBID.)

Numbers. A second type of idolatry, which he suggests, replaces the Spirit of God is a type of pragmatism “*where numbers become the most important thing.*” It is not that numbers are not important. You only have to ask your parish business manager, your finance council, your vocation director or seminary rector about numbers, and they will tell you about the importance of numbers.

My experience of visiting parishes in this country is that immediately people tell you how many people attend Mass, how many children are in the school, how many baptisms there were, etc. These days, with declining numbers of clergy, demographic studies and pastoral planning strategies are becoming critical tools for understanding how best to evangelize. They can provide a “snapshot” of the reality of a diocese or a parish, but “numbers aren’t everything.”

I think that is why I wanted to avoid “The State of the Priesthood Today.” It could be depressing lead to despair. While the statistics are sobering, each of us can think of members of our presbyterates who live their priesthood joyfully. We could resign ourselves to the idea of managing a perpetual decline, or we can ask: What helps those priests to be so joyful? Why are some parishes so vibrant? Is it only a question of demographics or finances?

Sometimes in our obsession with numbers and statistics, we can depersonalize persons and parishes. The Holy Father admonishes:

“This cannot be the sole method or criterion for the Church of Christ. Persons cannot be “numbered”, and God does not “measure out” his gift of the Spirit (cf. *Jn 3:34*). In this fascination with and love of numbers, we are really seeking ourselves, pleased with the control offered us by this way of thinking, unconcerned with individual faces and far from love.” (IBID.)

The criterion for judgment risks becoming what the numbers say rather than the good of persons, the Church, or even God's will. Our desire to "push ahead" because of the numbers rather than to carefully discern the will of God can be disastrous, not only for the faith of our people, but even for our own faith, because we replace the promptings of the Spirit with a statistical analysis of the problem. Pope Francis points out that the saints knew how to take a step back "to leave room completely for God," which he says is "the mark of the Spirit," who loves to keep hidden.

Functionalism. The greatest threat to the closeness of Christ in and through the priest is functionalism, which aims at efficiency and which replaces the Eternal Father who is "creative" and who creates through tender love. The Holy Father describes this functionalism:

"'Functionaries' take no delight in the graces that the Spirit pours out on his people, from which they too can "be nourished" like the worker who earns his wage. The priest with a functionalist mindset has his own nourishment, which is his ego. In functionalism, we set aside the worship of the Father in the small and great matters of our life and take pleasure in the efficiency of our own programs. ... These are the lovers of the route plan and the itinerary, and not of the journey itself." (IBID.)

While we as priests must learn from the world of business how to do things efficiently and well, the Church is not principally a business; rather, it is the Mystical Body of Christ whose head was not merely efficient, but who cared for each person He met and who revealed His Merciful Father.

In his February discourse to those gathered for the International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood, Pope Francis gave examples of how this functionalism develops within the priesthood. First, it comes from forgetting that our first vocation is to holiness, which begins at baptism. He writes:

"It is always a great temptation to live a priesthood without baptism – and there are some priests "without baptism" – in other words, forgetting that our primary vocation is to holiness. To be holy means to conform ourselves to Jesus, letting our hearts thrill with his same sentiments (cf. Phil 2:15). Only when we strive to love others as Jesus does, do we make God visible and fulfil our vocation to holiness. Quite rightly, Saint John Paul II reminded us that, "the priest, like every other member of the Church, ought to grow in the awareness that he himself is continually in need of being evangelized" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, [25 March 1992], 26). (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM ON PRIESTHOOD, 17 FEBRUARY 2022)

Our response to the call to holiness must first and foremost be a response to the One who first loved us and called us to be His Son by adoption in baptism, and then, configured us, through our ordination, more deeply to His Beloved Son, so that we truly are sons in the Son.

In his most recent letter on the liturgy, the Holy Father commented:

"Our first encounter with his paschal deed is the event that marks the life of all believers: our Baptism. This is not a mental adhesion to his thought or the agreeing to a code of conduct imposed by Him. Rather, it is a being plunged into his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, a being plunged into his paschal deed. It is not magic. Magic is the opposite of the logic of the sacraments because magic pretends to have a power over God, and for this reason it comes from the Tempter. In perfect continuity with the

Incarnation, there is given to us, in virtue of the presence and action of the Spirit, the possibility of dying and rising in Christ.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC LETTER *DESIDERIO DESIDERAVI*, 29 JUNE 2022, 12)

Another type of functionalism lamented by the Pope is the reduction of the spiritual life to mere religious practice – a priesthood lived without Divine Intimacy. The Holy Father writes:

“The intimacy born of prayer, the spiritual life, concrete closeness to God through listening to his word, the celebration of the Eucharist, the silence of adoration, entrustment to Mary, the wise accompaniment of a guide and the sacrament of Reconciliation... Without these concrete “forms of closeness”, a priest is merely a weary hireling who has none of the benefits of the Lord’s friends. ... All too often, for example, in the life of priests, prayer is practiced only as a duty; we forget that friendship and love do not come from following rules, but are a fundamental choice of the heart. ... A priest who prays is a son who constantly remembers that he is such, and that he has a Father who loves him deeply. A priest who prays is a son who keeps close to the Lord.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM ON PRIESTHOOD, 17 FEBRUARY 2022.)

Part II: The Priesthood: A Fourfold Closeness

While there are threats and risks to living our priestly ministry in a fulfilling way, we can rediscover our own priestly identity by meditating on a fourfold closeness that Pope Francis proposed to priests during his address this past February: a closeness to God, a closeness to the bishop, a closeness to other priests, and finally, a closeness to the people. Here we will briefly address the subject of the priest as a co-worker with the bishop.

All of us understand some of the challenges to our priestly ministry as we experience epochal change. The Holy Father has said, “We live not so much in an epoch of change, but in a change of epoch.” As we experience epochal change, we can live our priestly ministry in different ways, but the fundamental question is whether we live our priestly vocation in a way that has the flavor of the Gospel.

Some respond by trying to live their vocation in a “safe” way, protecting themselves from risks or sheltering themselves from the world, longing for a time in the past, when the Church was seemingly much more glorious, but which is a time that no longer exists. Others try to live their vocation with an exaggerated sense of optimism that everything will be alright, without any discernment and without having the courage or confidence to confront issues and make decisions. Both these responses seem to be inadequate to meet the challenges of our day.

It seems to me that what we need to do is be realistic. Rather than flee from reality, we need to embrace reality, to attempt to understand reality, and to engage it in light of the Gospel and the living Tradition of the Church. At the dawn of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II invited us to “*Put out into the deep.*” We need to do just that, but without fear. We do not need to be imprudent but discerning. We need to discern God’s will and to carry out our mission, but with apostolic boldness.

Closeness to God. The Apostles were able to be bold after the Pentecost event, because they were close to God – close to the Risen Lord. This closeness to God is at the heart of the priesthood. Divine intimacy, born of prayer, is demanded of each priest to grow in the priesthood, for the measure of our

success is conformity to the life of Christ and growing in holiness, that is, in communion and friendship with God. In his February address, Pope Francis described this closeness to God:

“A priest is called above all to cultivate this closeness, this intimacy with God, and from this relationship, he will be able to draw all the strength needed for his ministry. Our relationship with God is, so to speak, what “grafts” us to him and makes us fruitful. Without a meaningful relationship with the Lord, our ministry will prove fruitless. Closeness to Jesus and daily contact with his word, enables us to measure our life against his, learning not to be scandalized by whatever befalls us and protecting ourselves from “stumbling blocks”.” (IBID.)

The Holy Father is not naïve; this closeness is more necessary when we, like Jesus, are faced with ingratitude and constant attacks. It is that friendship that sustains us, even in moments of struggle. No one of us could say that Christ does not desire to be close to us; rather, we must make a fundamental choice of our heart. On what is my heart set?

While some priests seek to fill the void in their heart with food or drink or other behaviors which can become addictive, none of these ever satisfy the heart’s deepest desires. Others make no attempt to satisfy the desire of the heart for divine intimacy, rather they replace it with activism, social activism, liturgical activism, excessive busyness, to avoid the silence necessary for prayer, self-reflection, and conversion. Yet, without this closeness to God, what do we have to offer our people that an efficient business man doesn’t offer? Pope Francis notes:

“Closeness with God enables the priest to touch the hurt in our hearts, which, if embraced, disarms us even to the point of making possible an encounter. ... A priest needs to have a heart sufficiently “enlarged” to expand and embrace the pain of the people entrusted to his care while, at the same time, like a sentinel, being able to proclaim the dawning of God’s grace revealed in that very pain. Embracing, accepting and showing his own impoverishment in closeness to the Lord is the best means to learn gradually how to embrace the neediness and pain that he encounters daily in his ministry, and thus to be conformed ever more closely to the heart of Christ.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM ON PRIESTHOOD, 17 FEBRUARY 2022)

Closeness to the Bishop. In addition to remaining close to God, the Holy Father invites priests to remain close to their Bishop. Pope Francis reminds us that “obedience is not a disciplinary attribute but the deepest sign of the bonds uniting us in communion.”

At the Last Supper, Jesus says, “You are my friends if you do what I command you: love one another.” The context of true obedience is love. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the older son does what his father asks of him, but he does it without love, and, in the end, he becomes bitter. The younger son, on the other hand, although his heart wanders, his heart also returns, and his genuine love for his father is revived through his experience of mercy.

Obedience involves attentive listening to God’s will, a will that is not discerned in isolation, but in a relationship - with the bishop and the community. The bishop, in discerning what is best for his priests, must also listen to God and discern with his collaborators, but he is discerning not as a school superintendent or a police chief, but as a loving father.

The Holy Father keeps telling us that he wants a synodal church – a Church that walks together, but a synodal church is also a Church that listens. The Holy Father writes:

“Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart that makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives.” (IBID.)

The Evil One wants to destroy the fruitfulness of our priestly ministry by sowing seeds of division, undermining the bonds that establish and preserve the Church in unity. In our speech and in our behavior, we must ask, not only whether we are obeying our bishop, but whether we are keeping our promise of *respect and obedience*. Are we deepening the bonds of communion with him, and through him, with our brother priests, or weakening them?

The Holy Father reminds: “Obedience is the fundamental decision to accept what is asked of us, and to do so as a concrete sign of that universal sacrament of salvation which is the Church. Obedience can also be discussion, attentive listening, and in some cases tension, but not a rupture.” (IBID.)

Closeness to other Priests. Through the bonds with our bishop, we also begin to understand that we are part of a larger family, with many brothers – our brother priests. Now more than ever priestly fraternity is necessary. Of course, there have always been priestly support groups, *Jesus Caritas* groups, and the like, but many priests live in isolation. Some choose to live in isolation – to be “lone rangers”. Occasionally, this is a function of having to manage multiple parishes, even in remote regions, but rather than withdraw, fraternity can help renew us for ministry.

Fraternity cannot be imposed. We all experienced this “forced fraternity” in the seminary. The Holy Father describes priestly fraternity as “choosing deliberately to pursue holiness together with others, and not by oneself.” What are the signs of this fraternity? The Holy Father uses the characteristics of love found in First Corinthians, Chapter 13, to describe fraternity.

He also speaks of the danger of *envy* in the priesthood and within presbyterates. It was the envy of Cain which the devil used to turn him against Abel. We are sometimes envious of others’ positions or parishes, envious of the relationships they have, and envious of their successes. As priests, we need to carefully examine our consciences and our attitudes toward our brothers. Can we rejoice in the successes of our brothers?

Similarly, we need to not be boastful or inflated. There is no need to talk about all the good things we are doing or to receive accolades from others, attempting to make ourselves more attractive. Rather, we should listen to the words of St. Francis de Sales, “Be who you are and be that well in honor of the Master Craftsman whose handiwork you are.”

A true brother accepts another as he is and calls him to greatness. As brothers, we strive to bring out the best in one another. Authentic compliments and words of encouragement are becoming of priests. In contrast, some priests harbor grudges and engage in gossip, ruining the reputations of their brothers. Here we must ask whether by our speech or even by our interior attitudes we are a bridge or barrier to deeper communion within our presbyterate.

Ultimately, we are all brothers and the need for priestly fraternity and friendship could not be greater. Friendship is important for every human being but especially for celibate priests. There is little more precious than a faithful friend. Sirach says: *A faithful friend is an elixir of life; and those who fear the Lord will find him.*

Every friendship is an echo of the Incarnation, which is proof of God's love for us. Jesus' own life and ministry was directed toward cultivating friendship with His Apostles: *No longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends because I have shared with you everything that I have from my Father.* The first reason for friendship is to foster charity.

Priestly friendship also provides mutual support. This will be extremely important for us, as priests will be asked to pastor more parishes or serve wider territories, or undergo the stress of having to make difficult or unpopular decisions. Sometimes, it seems that we are listening to words of Henry V in Shakespeare's play, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers ..."

Of course, Henry V and his little band won the battle of Agincourt (though as a Frenchman I hate to admit it) despite being outmanned and outmatched in force and weaponry. What the play teaches us is that sometimes a smaller group, united in friendship and in a common cause, can overcome insurmountable odds. Friends support each other in the struggle, offering words of encouragement rather than negativity. They inspire us to be strong rather than to retreat. Everyone needs such friends, especially priests.

Friendship among priests offers a witness to the wider culture that deep friendships and chaste friendships are possible. Men are starving for brotherly affection, and forming strong bonds with other men can strengthen us in our resolve to live our vocation joyfully rather than succumbing to those negative behaviors which often result from loneliness or misplaced attempts to find affection or intimacy. Our fraternity can serve as an inspiration to those whom we serve.

When I think of close friendships, I think especially of "apostolic" friendships – friendships I made when I was a seminarian or doing graduate studies as a priest. I think about friendships I made through lay ecclesial movements. God places people in our lives and along our journey who draw us closer to Him.

But among our friendships, we must consider our friendships with our brother priests. The Second Vatican Council taught:

Priests by virtue of their ordination to the priesthood are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood. In individual dioceses, priests form one priesthood under their own bishop. Even though priests are assigned to different duties, nevertheless they carry on one priestly ministry for men. All priests are sent as co-workers in the same apostolate, whether they engage in parochial or extra-parochial ministry. ... This has been manifested from ancient times in the liturgy when the priests present at an ordination are invited to impose hands together with the ordaining bishop on the new candidate, and with united hearts concelebrate the Sacred Eucharist. Each and every priest, therefore, is united with his fellow priests in a bond of charity, prayer and total cooperation. In this manner, they manifest that unity which Christ willed, namely, that his own be perfected in one so that the world might know that the Son was sent by the Father. (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, 7 DECEMBER 1965, *PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS*, 8)

Although we are “men for others” and try to give ourselves without reserve, we too need affection and support, a support that very often can only be found among brother priests who understand our way of life, our struggles and joys, our pastoral concerns, and our very human needs.

I think as men, sometimes it is difficult for us to admit we need help and support. I think also that we try to go it alone, whether with the “Lone Ranger” mentality, or simply try by the sheer force of our will and our natural talents to press on ahead. To use an analogy from the military or even from sports, to be successful we need teamwork. Our teammates and our co-workers in the vineyard fortify us for our mission. Again, with increasing demands and decreasing number of priests supporting one another is more crucial than ever.

Closeness to the People. The fourth type of closeness identified by the Holy Father is closeness to the People of God, which is a “not a duty but a grace.” In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis stated:

“To be evangelizers of souls, we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people’s lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy. Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. ... Jesus wants to make use of priests to draw closer to the holy faithful People of God. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; without the sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 268).

Priestly identity cannot be understood without this belonging to the holy, faithful People of God. This closeness to the people cannot be interpreted to mean that a cleric lives like a layman or that the laity should be clericalized. By being close to his people, a priest can understand the joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams of his people, and present these to the Lord. This is where closeness to the people cannot be disconnected from closeness to the Lord.

The People of God wants priests who are close to them, who are willing to leave their offices to be near to them, who comfort them in times of illness or loss, and who model the “style of Jesus,” which is one of “compassion and tenderness”.

Part III: Models of the Priesthood for Today

As I said at the beginning of this talk, I would also like to propose models of the priesthood from the past to see what relevance they may have for living our priesthood today, particularly with respect to the closeness suggested by the Pope. When I think of this Pontificate, the word that comes to my mind is “Mercy.” Mercy cannot be a parenthesis in the life of the Church; it imbues everything we do. We see this in many of the Holy Father’s gestures: from visiting far off, poor countries to washing the feet of prisoners. The Church shows forth the merciful face of God.

As priests, when we hear mercy, immediately our minds turn to the confessional, though we should not restrict mercy to the confessional. When reflecting on spiritual classics on the priesthood, I think of *The Dignity and Duties of the Priest* by Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori (1696-1787), patron of confessors and moralists. It was Alphonsus who influenced another great confessor – Saint John Vianney, patron of the parish priest.

The manuals remained the main way of teaching moral theology in the 18th century when Alphonsus exercised his pastoral ministry. In the changing world of his day, he invested a lot of intellectual energy into the preparation of instruments to help the confessor in the ministry of reconciliation. Alphonsus was well aware that the manuals of the previous eras were insufficient for priests as spiritual guides for their people. The world was changing, and priests needed to adapt to these changes.

His moral theology was the fruit of his mature thought. When he wrote his *Theologia Moralis* in 1748, he was more than fifty years old and had been ordained for twenty years, having previously worked in the “world”, hearing legal cases of people from all walks of life. He viewed his intellectual activity as an extension of his pastoral activity. He always makes reference to experience and to concrete situations and conditions, weaving together pastoral and theological concerns.

In 1755, he published a second edition of his *Theologia Moralis*, which contained his *Praxis Confessarii*. In this work, he describes the priest-confessor as having four offices: father, physician, teacher, and judge. Each office shows the need for ongoing formation. It is these models which I propose for your consideration.

The Priest as Father

Alphonsus presents the priest as *father*. Alphonsus’ experience hearing confessions as a young priest led him to move away from rigorism to a more moderate and compassionate stance. In this sense, his ongoing formation occurred through his pastoral ministry. He writes that to be a credible father, the priest must strive to show charity, must be a person of prayer and virtue, and must be patient. These are the characteristics of a good father.

The priest is a father who welcomes the repentant son in Luke 15. Each of us should regularly meditate on the parable of the Prodigal Son and ask whether our priesthood concretely matches that of the Father. Do I look every day for my lost children or just sit back and wait for them to return? Do I embrace them with mercy and compassion or do I judge them with severity? Do I assure them or reassure them of their dignity, symbolized by the robe and the ring? After an encounter with me, or really with Christ through me, do they feel free or oppressed?

To be a loving father requires patience and listening. Pope Francis is calling us to be a synodal Church, a Church that walks together. Parents accompany their children to adulthood and even into adulthood. They do so, sometimes by disciplining, but they do so effectively by listening. A synodal Church is a Church that listens. Just as parents must listen to their children, so also the priest-father should listen to his parishioners. Too often we want to talk but do not listen. Listening helps to discern the work of the Spirit and helps the parishioner to discern it too. To listen is a gesture of poverty; it is to look at the issue from the point of view of the “other”.

The Priest as Physician

The priest is a *physician*. When a physician conducts an examination, the patient’s medical history is critical. Attentive listening and dialogue are essential to discovering the root of the illness, whether physical or spiritual. The physician or priest acknowledges that there is a sick person in need of medical or spiritual attention. Sin is an illness which needs a cure - the *saving truth*. It is not enough to say the truth; one must articulate this *saving* truth in a way that pierces to the heart and is clear to the person, so that he or she may take the spiritual medicine.

Medical students are often taught an acronym which could be useful to us as priests as we discern how best to accompany those who present themselves to us: C-O-L-D-E-R. COLDER: Context, Onset, Location, Duration, Exacerbation, Relaxation.

What is the context for the present pastoral problem or situation? Onset: When did it begin? Was it gradual or a particular event? Location: Where does it hurt? People today are hurting. Sometimes it is their heart that hurts the most due to family situations, broken relationships or divorce, wayward children. Duration: How long does the pain or sorrow last? Exacerbation: What makes it worse? Relaxation: What makes it better?

This acronym is often taught to medical students when they are learning how to do a patient exam. It again requires listening before diagnosing and offering some therapy or medicine. It also involves understanding this particular person in these particular circumstances. Each “medicine” has positive effects and “side effects” on each patient, and the priest-physician needs to understand his people. To acquire this understanding requires closeness to the people as the Holy Father recommends.

It is also useful to think of the standards set for physicians today. Keeping current with the latest medical literature and techniques is required of the doctor and expected by the patient. Which of us would make an appointment to see a physician who had done no further study since medical school? The priest-physician must have a regular *aggiornamento* or he might be guilty of spiritual malpractice. We as priests must be committed to ongoing formation if we are truly to accompany our people in a professional and pastoral way.

The Priest as Teacher

The priest is a *teacher*. He must be learned, not only in theology, but in other disciplines. If the priest is ignorant, he cannot teach a saving truth. He needs more than knowledge of principles; he must address the concrete situations of daily life.

While the priest of today has many pastoral duties, he must continue to learn, not just about theology but many other subjects. In the realm of theology, there was a time when seminarians read only Saint Thomas. At the time of the Council, things were changing, and there was great diversity, but priests jumped from one dubious theologian to another. Occasionally, there were true scholars, but should we have stopped there? People characterize the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI as periods of theological stability and clarity; that is fair enough, but how many of those individuals have done the hard work necessary to appropriate the teaching of Pope Francis?

Here, I have only been speaking about theology, but it is becoming more necessary than ever, if we are to be truly effective teachers, to engage the world of science and technology. Continual study also helps the priest to avoid errors in practical living, but also helps him to accompany his parishioners through the complexities of life in an ever-more technologically-driven and scientific world.

The Priest as Judge

Finally, the priest is *judge*. Interestingly, Alphonsus lists this last, though as a former lawyer, he would have been well-suited to emphasize the judicial office. The Council of Trent refers to the priest as judge and speaks of absolution as a judicial act. Alphonsus acknowledges the confessor as judge but cautions that “just as the judge is bound to hear the reasons of the parties and to examine the merits of

the case and finally to give sentence, so the confessor must first inform himself of the conscience of the penitent; he must examine his dispositions, and finally give or deny absolution.”

Here we are speaking about making a judgment, not about people but about acts. Nevertheless, what we are really talking about is the process of discernment: of recognizing the reality of concrete situations and persons in those situations; interpreting this reality through the lens of faith; deliberating through the use of reason and then choosing.

In a recent audience, the Holy Father said that discernment involves knowledge, skill, which also demands experience, and the will to make a choice, even a difficult one. Discernment involves emotions and making a decision, which often comes at a price and, when correct, brings lasting joy; and, finally, it demands hard work in the exercise of freedom.

A synodal Church must be a discerning Church. The Holy Father concluded that audience by saying:

“Discernment is demanding but indispensable for living. It requires that I know myself, that I know what is good for me here and now. Above all, it requires a filial relationship with God. God is Father and He does not leave us alone, He is always willing to advise us, to encourage us, to welcome us. But He never imposes His will. Why? Because He wants to be loved and not feared. And also, God wants children, not slaves: free children. And love can only be lived in freedom. To learn to live one must learn to love, and for this it is necessary to discern” (POPE FRANCIS, AUDIENCE, 31 AUGUST 2022)

My Brothers, once more I thank you for your vocations. Preserve them from spiritual worldliness and from the sterility of numbers and functionalism by remaining close to your Bishop, to one another, to your people, and, above all, to God as you exercise your role as father, physician, teacher, and judge. Thank you.