

The Priest According to Saint Vincent and Today

A Vincentian Message to Priests Today

by Alain Pérez, C.M.

“If one wishes to express in one sentence the idea of priesthood proffered by St Vincent de Paul, one might say that for him, the priest is a man called by God to participate in the priesthood of Jesus Christ to extend the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ, doing what Jesus did in the way he did it” (JACQUES DELARUE).

So, this is St. Vincent’s deep insight on priesthood. This idea did not well up spontaneously in him, however, nor did it emerge from received instruction or a deepening within him of doctrine. St. Vincent’s conception of priesthood was forged in the actual reality of his own life experience.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SAINT VINCENT

It seems that the perspective on priesthood had been propounded to him by the concerns of his father. He adopted his father’s views quickly, evidently, since he was ordained a priest on 23 September 1600 by the bishop of Périgueux who was blind and dying! Vincent was only nineteen years old. He will never forget this excessive eagerness; it will have such an effect on him that when it is suggested to him, from motives that were not entirely pure, to ordain one of his nephews he will oppose it saying, *‘For myself, if I had known what it was that I had the temerity to take on, as I have known since, I would have preferred to work on the land than to find myself in this dreadful position’* (Letter to the Canon St-Martin, 1658; SV V, 568; CCD, # 2927, 569-570). He wrote to Monsieur Dupont-Fournier, a lawyer in Laval, in the same way on 5 March 1659: *‘... so, one must be called by God to this holy profession... with my experience of the*

disorders produced by priests who have not made the effort to live according to the holiness of their specific character, causes me to advise those who ask my opinion about receiving it, not to do so unless they have a genuine call from God and a pure intention of honouring Our Lord by the practice of His virtues and the other sure signs that His Divine Goodness is calling them to it. I feel so strongly about this that, if I was not already a priest, I would never become one. I often say this to such applicants, and I have said it more than a hundred times when preaching to the country folk' (SV VII, 463; CCD VII, # 2792, 462-464).

This theme in St Vincent of 'the dignity of the priesthood' may seem excessive to us today and altogether anachronistic. But, as I said above, his conception of the priesthood was forged from the actual reality of his experience. However, St. Vincent's experience — in the early years of his priesthood and throughout his various ministries, as a parish priest or during his appointment as tutor with the de Gondi family — led him to see the deplorable state of the clergy in his time. The 'higher clergy' lived at court or under the influence of the nobility, and the 'lower clergy' lived in the country poverty stricken and ignorant. Both lost sight of their character as **men of God**. As for the 'lower clergy', they were so involved with the people in their charge that instead of helping them to live well, they more often shared their vices, their excess and their dirt to the extent that 'the name of the priest became synonymous with the ignorant and the debauched' (AMELOTTE, II, p. 96). In the same vein, a bishop confided sadly to St Vincent one day, 'I am horrified when I think that in my diocese, there are nearly seven thousand drunken or indecent priests who go to the altar every day without any calling' (ABELLY, *Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, L. I, C. XXIII). One could hold forth for a long time on the deplorable state of the clergy of France in the seventeenth century. Be that as it may, through his different ministries, St Vincent sees the very great spiritual distress of the poor people of the countryside and that the primary cause of this lamentable state was the lack of ability of the priests who were responsible for souls in these places.

From these experiences, therefore, two intimately related convictions are going to take root in his spirit: **the necessity to come to the help of the poor in the countryside who damn themselves in ignorance, and for that priests are necessary, good, zealous and educated priests**. In order to respond to this urgent double need St Vincent organises missions on the de Gondi estates; and thanks to the assistance of Monsieur and Madame de Gondi, he founds a society of missionaries in 1625, the Congregation of the Mission, a foundation which will make the occasional renewal of

the missions, which were high moments of evangelisation in the countryside, easier. In the same way, so as not to lose the benefit of the missions, he sees the necessity to leave behind a clergy capable of continuing the work, a well educated clergy who will help the poor remain in good standing. And so, at the invitation of the Bishop of Beauvais, who had already welcomed some missionaries into his diocese for a three week period, he undertook the preparation of the diocesan seminarians for their future priestly ministry. That was in September 1628. How long does it take to form a good priest, however, for him to be able to persevere? Recognizing this problem, and at the suggestion of one of the ordinands, in 1633 St Vincent organises the **weekly Tuesday meetings** in the house at St Lazare. The purpose of these meetings is to help the ecclesiastics persevere *'in the holiness of their vocation... in presenting together the virtues and the duties proper to their ministry'* (ABELLY, *Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, L. II, C. III, p. 446).

Then, as events would have it, around 1636, came the first attempt at a seminary for the students at the Collège des Bons Enfants. The unsuccessful attempt will drive Saint Vincent to set up the *grands séminaires* which will receive young people of twenty to thirty years of age. Thus, the seminaries will become the principal work of the Congregation after the missions. Here then, drawn quickly and in broad brush strokes, are the context and the events that led Saint Vincent to work with others for the *renaissance* that renewed the French Church in the seventeenth century. It is interesting to note that this renaissance was primarily a priestly work. It is priests who were the instruments, and they agreed to educate themselves and change in depth. Today, as the Church goes through a good deal of turbulence, should we not consider, in the same way, that the 'renaissance' can only work by a thorough formation and reform of the clergy? In any case, it seemed important to me to recall this context and these events, at least in part, before sharing some Vincentian convictions with today's priests, because it seems to me, taking into account the necessary transpositions of course, that the experience of St Vincent, his journey, can be a source of inspiration for us when we try to draw the profile of the priest today. Indeed, one can see every day: France has become a mission country as in Saint Vincent's time, and has been for some decades already. Consequently, **it seems necessary, just as in Saint Vincent's time, to give a real missionary formation to all of those who aspire to work for the building up of the kingdom of God, and especially to priests.**

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Correctly, the document 'Starting afresh from Christ', published in 2002 by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, proposes in paragraph 20, an element that seems to me essential for formation. **"The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the program of Families of consecrated life,** in such a way that every Institute and community will be a school of true evangelical spirituality."

The document continues: *"Starting afresh from Christ* means proclaiming that consecrated life is a special following of Christ, *a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting* as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren." This implies a particular communion of love for Christ who has become the centre of their life and the continual source of every initiative. It is... an experience of sharing, "a special grace of intimacy." It is "becoming one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life," and it is a life "taken up by Christ."

When we read these lines, how can we not recall the letter that Saint Vincent wrote to Antoine Durand (SV XI, 343-344; CCD X, # 153, 311) and the famous sentence: "Monsieur, you must empty yourself of self to put on Christ." Is this not the first requirement of a missionary? We know well from experience, the ever present temptation to turn our pastoral work into our own work, to use our ministry to draw attention to ourselves and make an impression! Hence Saint Vincent's insistence on purity of intention which makes us renounce worldly views in order to really try to do God's work. Hence his insistence equally on **humility**, for without humility there can be no question of a missionary doing God's work. On the other hand, **"if you act plainly and simply, do you see,"** said Saint Vincent, **"God must in some way bless what you will say, bless your words: God will be with you"** (Conference, 8 June 1658; COSTE XII, no. 182, p. 23). In the same way, he again said: "... *take my word for it, my dear confreres, take my word for it, it is an infallible maxim of Jesus Christ, which I have often proclaimed to you on his behalf, that, as soon as a heart is empty of self, God fills it. God remains and acts in it; and it is the desire for shame that empties us of ourselves; that's humility, holy humility. Then it will not be ourselves acting but God acting in us, and all will go well*" (Conference, September 1655; SV XI, 312; CCD XI, # 141, 278-282).

The spiritual life is the basis, the solid foundation, on which the life of the missionary is based. It is thanks to that that the missionary lives, "... [in] **complete docility to the Spirit**. It commits us to being moulded from within by the Spirit, so that we may become ever more

like Christ" (*Redemptoris missio*, 87). Time devoted to the spiritual life is certainly not wasted for the mission because "... *the more consecrated persons **allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in history for the salvation of all***" (Starting Afresh from Christ, 9). Moreover, a privileged way of putting on Christ' is "... *to dedicate regularly, every day, appropriate times to enter deeply into silent conversation with him by whom they know they are loved, to share their very lives with him and to receive enlightenment to continue on the daily journey*" (Starting Afresh from Christ, 25). Thanks to this high point, the missionary will avoid mediocrity in his life and spirituality, gradual gentrification, a consumer mentality and thereby the temptation to efficiency and activism. Yes, a true missionary is someone who adopts the ways of an authentic spiritual life: his life is the proclamation of the primacy of grace; without Christ he knows he can do nothing; on the other hand, he does everything in him who gives him strength. "Give me a man of prayer, and he will be able to do anything" (Undated Conference; SV XI, 83; CCD X, # 67, 76). St Vincent said, "The interior life is necessary, one must reach for it; if one is lacking in it, one fails in everything. Let us seek, Messieurs, to make something of our inner lives, to make Christ reign in us..." (Conference, 21 February 1659; SV XII, 131; CCD XII, # 131).

Pope John Paul II urged missionaries in his encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio*, "For their part, missionaries should reflect on the duty of holiness required of them by the gift of their vocation, **renew themselves in spirit** day by day, and strive to update their doctrinal and pastoral formation." The missionary must be a 'contemplative in action.' **He finds answers to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer.** My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on **contemplation**. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God, and must be able to say with the apostles: "That which we have looked upon... concerning the word of life..., we proclaim also to you" (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Re-reading this last text of John Paul II reminds me of this anecdote that I experienced when I was a missionary in the Dominican Republic. From time to time my work brought me to participate in retreats or days of recollection with young people. During one day of recollection a young man in the group spoke about a priest who came to organize missions in his village. The priest in question was a young priest, recently ordained, full of hope,

dynamism and plans! Speaking about the priest, the young man said, “Yes... *Fr X is very generous, very nice... but you get the impression he is empty!*” I admit that the remark of that young man challenged me very strongly and made me reflect very much, and then I understood the words of St Augustine who said one day, “***He preaches the word of God externally in vain, who does not listen interiorly.***” From this reflection I meditated for a long time also on the text of Meister Eckhart, the Rhineland mystic of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, who said, “People should not worry so much about what they should do, they would do better to concern themselves with what they should be. If we are good and our way of being is good, we will shine.” One can ask: how to be and be good without a real and deep interior life? Actually, **is it not thanks to prayer that we become accustomed to see the world and others with the eyes of God? Is it not thanks to prayer that we learn to act in and to love this world as God does? Yes, really, it is prayer that helps us rediscover a sense of God that helps us return to our centre, that is to say, to the centre of our being.**

Today, more than ever, we need to return to our centre. Actually, today we are experiencing a crisis of interiority, which is generally poor and superficial and which shows itself in a certain difficulty in ceasing to be active in order to concentrate in silence. This deficit often leads to behaviour that is activist, impulsive or aggressive, and this behaviour is sometimes expressed in an atmosphere of constant noise or music that fragments rather than helps us to occupy and enrich our inner life. Now, Pope Paul VI said: “... *our evangelizing zeal must spring from true holiness of life, and, as the Second Vatican Council suggests, preaching must in its turn make the preacher grow in holiness, which is nourished by prayer and above all by love for the Eucharist... the world is calling for evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could see the invisible*” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 76). This is a very important missionary text. It makes us understand that “**we are missionaries above all because of what we are... even before we become missionaries in word or deed**” (*Redemptoris missio*, 23).

In fact, St Vincent wished that the priest “***live in a state of prayer,***” that prayer permeate all his life especially his pastoral activity. In effect, it is in this way that a missionary will not become a divided man, who pursues in action and contemplation two incompatible ends: his pastoral work, instead of lessening his being united to God, will, on the contrary, increase it and his prayer life will be extremely powerful in the service and evangelization of his brothers and sisters. This has direct consequences for the mission, if one still believes St Vincent: he said to Antoine Durand, “... *if the man*

who forms and directs others and speaks to them is animated with only a human spirit, those who see him, listen to him, and strive to imitate him will become totally human: no matter what he says and does, he will inspire them with only the appearance of virtue, and not the substance; he will communicate to them the spirit with which he himself is animated.... On the contrary, if [he] is filled with God... all his words will be efficacious; virtue will go out of him that will edify others” (SV XI, 344; CCD XI, # 153, 311).

When answering the call of Christ, we give him our life in the priesthood or the consecrated life; we do so with the fundamental intention of making God the pole star which directs all the plans and aspects of our life. Because of this, **the best service we can render to people today is to be radically that which we must be and which is expected of us: men of God, with God, for God, and men who see in all things the presence of God.** Besides, if it is clear that people are waiting for material bread, it is also clear that they are waiting for a bread that is essential, that satisfies hunger and that saves: the bread of God! Our vocation as priests, as missionaries, therefore, is to be **“specialists in God”** according to the felicitous expression of Paul VI. Not specialists who know a lot about God or who can speak about him in a learned way, but specialists in the way of making the experience of God more alive, and in making that experience the fundamental project in life. This is how our life will be evangelistic, precisely by its special way of placing God at the centre of our existence. Because the current environment is not Christian, Karl Rahner said, *“Tomorrow’s believer will be a ‘mystic,’ that is to say, someone who has experienced something, or he will have ceased to be a believer.”* Does this not apply just as much to the “believer priest” or the “believer missionary?”

That said, the priest may be called, in certain cases, to live out his mission in the exercise of a profession or in voluntary work. For example, he will be a teacher, youth worker, nurse, social worker, permanent or voluntary in an association etc. What is important and decisive for the missionary is the spirit and the motivation with which he has taken up such a profession or activity. In themselves, the profession, the activity is immaterial; sometimes they should be the manner in which we involve ourselves in the world, how we live the mission. However, they can never be, in any sense, a way for us to escape our true identity as priests, as missionaries. That is why it is important and essential for the missionary to wonder always how to carry out this service. In other words, it is essential to know if he is helping others in being a youth worker, a nurse, a factory worker etc., as any other permanent youth worker, nurse or social worker can. It is essential to know if he is doing

it in order **to depart from his position as a priest or missionary**. Neither situation should occur. In such a case, why is he a priest? Is it necessary to be a priest in order to help others? Anyway, one is either engaged in usual pastoral work or in a salaried profession or voluntary work. *“Without an interior life of love which draws the Word, the Father and the Spirit to itself, an outlook of faith is impossible. As a consequence life itself loses meaning, the faces of brothers and sisters are obscured and it becomes impossible to recognize the face of God in them, historical events remain ambiguous and deprived of hope and apostolic and charitable missions become nothing more than widespread activity”* (Starting Afresh from Christ, no. 25).

Fr Arrupe, the former General of the Jesuits, said, *“Every application of the charism and every reform should be carried out by men of great spiritual stature, of unfailing supernatural spirit. This sort has an ardent zeal for the glory of God and the service of the Church, a sincere humility, complete obedience and a deep understanding of the Gospel”* (L’espérance ne trompe pas, p. 70). Saint Vincent was precisely one of those men of great stature: he loved people because he knew and loved God and wanted to serve only him. This God, known and met frequently in prayer, moulded him to make him a giant of charity, whose bold achievements in the service of the poor have not finished astonishing us.

After a century where verbal spiritualism has too often served as an alibi for refusing to see and fight injustice, there is a great temptation today of going to the opposite extreme and, under the pretext of effective action, of neglecting, relativising or minimising the importance of prayer in our missionary life. The mistake would be all the more serious in that prayer is ultimately the source of action. The example of the great mystics is there to prove it: whether it be St Bernard of Clairvaux, Therese of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, to name but a few. They remind our changing world that **all reform essentially comes down to digging deeper into the inexhaustible resources of the inner life**. For these are not people who are ‘out there’, permanently extrovert, affected by the ‘itch’ of reforming activism; they are people of interiority, that is to say they are so present to themselves and to God, that it is this presence that ultimately enabled them to reform in depth.

Saying this is, of course, not to relativise or even deny the importance of engagement in missionary activity. Besides, St Vincent teaches us not to trust every alleged love of God which remain pious sentiments. Like St John, he knows that **the love of God is not hot air** and risks being no more than pure deception if it does not lead to

effective love, always ready to pay in person the price of the love of God and neighbour. Edifying and lofty thoughts will not match the truth of love. He said (therefore) to his missionaries: "Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; for very often many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable are, nevertheless, very suspect if they do not translate into the practice of effective love" (SV XI, 40; CCD XI, # 25, 32).

Undoubtedly we also remember how Paul VI made a connection between evangelization and human advancement, development and liberation in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*. For him it is not possible to proclaim the new commandment without promoting, in justice and peace, genuine, authentic human growth. He said in his opening address to the third General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (27 September 1974) "*It is impossible to accept that the work of evangelization can or should neglect the extremely grave questions, so disturbing today, justice, liberation, the building of peace in the world. If this happened, it would be to ignore the teaching of the Gospel on love toward the neighbour who suffers or is in need.*"

So, in our missionary life, does this mean choosing between affective and effective love? This is a false debate, to which St Vincent would undoubtedly reply by saying: "*Oh, that priests would give themselves to the care of the poor; was that not the work of Our Lord and the great saints who not only commended the poor, but who consoled them themselves, brought relief and healing? Are not the poor the afflicted part of Our Lord? Are they not our brothers? And if priests abandon them, who do you want to help them? So, if there are any among us who are on mission to evangelize the poor and not to bring relief to them, to meet their temporal needs, I reply that we must help them and help in every way, ourselves and others.... To do this is to evangelize by word and deed, and it is the more perfect, and it is also what Our Lord practised and what those who serve in his name and character must do, as priests*" (SV XII, 87-88; CCD XII, # 1951).

CREATING THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

That said, the most important thing for a priest, a missionary, is not so much to 'do things' and 'do a lot,' but to pay even more attention to the evangelistic quality of what we do; so that what we do might be read by men and women today as the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ.

In the Church, in our missionary communities, people do a lot of work, with great generosity and great good will, but it seems sometimes that what counts most is such and such a work or such and such a pastoral involvement. As a consequence, we begin to develop what could be called a faith that is only 'skin-deep', that is to say a Christianity without interiority. **It is certain, however, that even if we restructure, modernise, plan our different commitments, our communities will not have as much evangelising strength if they do not create this fundamental experience: the experience of God.**

It is in looking to Christ, in listening to him that we will be able to know the invisible God. The God of Jesus Christ reveals himself to us in the Gospel of St Luke and especially in the parables. In these parables, Jesus expresses the unfathomable love that God has for us. He describes it with profoundly human characteristics which speak of the heart of the Father, the heart of God. Throughout his life and in his teaching, Christ wanted to show us the love of God for us. And this is the most important experience that we might create in our life. It is from this experience that we will be able to understand the love that God has for us and communicate it to others. This experience is fundamental for a baptized person, a priest, a missionary, and it completely changes his heart and his life.

A little parable to understand the importance of this experience! After dinner in an English castle, a famous stage actor was entertaining the guests by reciting texts from Shakespeare. During the evening, he proposed that someone suggest other texts. A rather timid priest asked the actor if he knew Psalm 22. The actor replied, "Yes, I know it, but I am prepared to recite it on one condition: that you recite it yourself afterwards." The priest was a little embarrassed but he agreed. The actor gave a remarkable interpretation, with perfect diction: "*The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want....*" Then came the priest's turn, and he stood up and recited the same words of the psalm. When he finished, there was no applause this time only a deep silence and tears which appeared on some faces. The actor remained silent for a moment and then stood up and said: "*Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope you realize what happened tonight: I know the psalm but this man knows the shepherd!*"

The current crisis of certain images of God does not mean that the Christian faith is becoming impossible! No, it is up to us priests, missionaries, to communicate to our contemporaries the experience of a God who is Love. The new culture which prevails today is indifferent to an 'almighty' God. It is capable of looking at and listening to witnesses and seekers of a God with a new face. That is to say, of witnesses:

- to a God who loves — a friend to humanity
- to a humble servant of his creatures, those who come to us who are not to be served but to serve
- to a God who is able to sympathise, to understand and who welcomes everyone and accompanies each person in their unhappiness
- to a God who suffers in the bodies of those who are hungry and who are destitute in the world.

Today the world needs mystics, spiritual masters who, through their experience, call to and enlighten those who are searching. Pope Paul VI said, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 41). And he added, “It is often said nowadays that the present century thirsts for authenticity. Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty. These ‘signs of the times’ should find us vigilant. Either tacitly or aloud — but always forcefully — we are being asked:

- Do you really believe what you are proclaiming?
- Do you live what you believe?
- Do you really preach what you live?

The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching. Precisely because of this we are, to a certain extent, responsible for the progress of the Gospel that we proclaim” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 76). We, therefore, face a challenge! This is because, unfortunately, in the Church and in our communities, there are people who do many things for which we respect and admire them. But few appreciate their way of life. The Church is not an NGO, even if commitment to the poor is a necessary condition for giving witness to the Gospel! What was new about Christ was that he preached God himself, he looked for him, he experienced him, he lived him. That is why he fascinated and spoke to those who saw him alive. He was admired not only for what he did, but because people felt in harmony with what he was and what he lived. And that is what is most lacking perhaps in our Church and in our communities. **We lack people who are more than what they do and who inspire admiration in those around them and the desire to live like them. We lack mystics, prophets, witnesses!** In the Church today there are priests, administrators, lawyers, canonists, theologians, sociologists, specialists in this and that, and that’s great! There have to be! They may be an interesting

asset to the mission. One can also say, however, there are not only those who know and do but also people who radiate something, who communicate something, which gives hope and a desire to live. I believe our biggest mistake today is to want to replace what is inspired by the power of the Spirit with organization, work and activity. The Spirit that is asked for, welcomed, contemplated and prayed to in an authentic spiritual life. “The future of the mission — in Europe as well — depends largely on contemplation.” That is why it is so important today not to be naïve and to have discernment! Indeed, we can be justifiably ecstatic about the achievements of the modern world! But we must be aware that if our societies are creative and efficient, it is because, much of the time, they dispossess people. They take their souls emptying them of their interiority and their spirituality. And the trouble is we find lots of very busy and efficient people who have lost their individuality and their interior voice! **Now, a man who is not at home in himself becomes an outsider, a lost person, absent to the people around him, an unhappy man who makes others unhappy and who does not know how to communicate with others.**

These are some of the convictions that preoccupy me on the priests and missionaries that we should be today. These convictions have grown in me from my personal and community experience in different ministries in France and abroad. Now, to conclude, I would like to share with you again a text by Madeleine Delbrel on which I meditate often and which will help you as well, perhaps, to live your vocation as priests and missionaries better! This is my dearest wish! Madeleine Delbrel expects this from priests: the absence of a real priest is an indescribable distress in life. The greatest gift one can give, the greatest charity that one can offer is for a priest to be a good priest. It is the closest that we can come to realising the presence of Christ on earth. In Christ there is a human life and a divine life. In the priest, one also wants to find a truly human life and a truly divine life. The trouble is that many look like amputees, either one or the other. There are priests who seem never to have had a human life. They do not know how to weigh truly the difficulties of a lay person, of a father or a mother of a family. They do not realize that a man or woman’s life is really very hard. When lay Christians have just once met a priest who has understood them, who has entered their lives and their difficulties with a human heart, they never lose that memory. A condition of his blending his life with ours, is that he does not live just like us. For a long time priests treated lay people like children; today some go to the other extreme and become friends. One wishes they would remain Fathers. When a

father has seen his son grow, he still considers him his son, an adult son. We also need the priest to live a holy life. The priest, while living among us, must remain apart.

The signs that we expect of this divine presence:

- **Prayer:** there are priests whom one never sees praying (what is called prayer).
- **Joy:** rather than busy, anxious priests.
- **Strength:** the priest must be the one in control. He must be aware, vibrant, never in a state of collapse.
- **Liberty:** one would wish him free of all formulae, liberated from every prejudice.
- **Detachment:** one feels sometimes used by him, instead of him helping us fulfill our mission!
- **Discretion:** he must be the one who remains silent (one loses hope in the one in whom we place too much confidence)!
- **Truth:** that he would be the one who always tells the truth!
- **Poverty:** this is essential. Someone who is free with regard to money; who has felt the 'law of gravity' which leads him to the least, to the poor!
- **A Sense of the Church:** that he never speak thoughtlessly about the Church, and like an outsider. A son who allows himself to judge his mother is immediately judged himself.

Bur often a third life overcomes the first two and submerges them; the priest becomes the man of the ecclesiastical life, of the clerical milieu: his vocabulary, his lifestyle, his way of calling things, his taste for petty interests and for petty squabbles for influence. All of this makes a mask for him which sadly hides the priest from us, and which he has undoubtedly left behind.

**The absence of a true priest in a life
is an indescribable poverty;
it is the only poverty!**

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