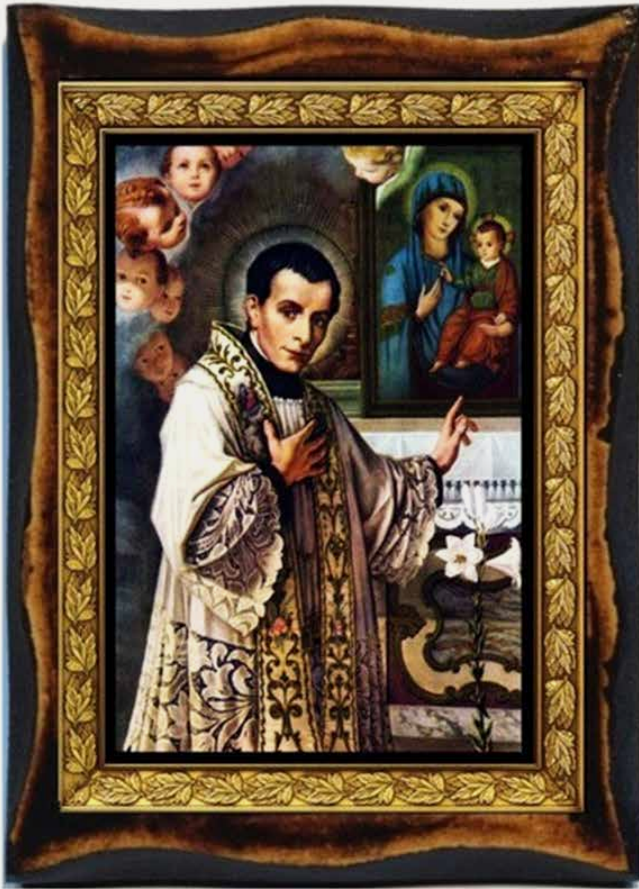




★ SALESIAN SPIRIT – ST. CAFASSO'S CONFRENCES – 7

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# ON PRIESTS SOCIALIZING

( Part-I)

Can the priest take part in some entertainment to lessen his fatigue, recharge himself, and start off refreshed? It is true that the priest is a special person, separated from the others, transformed into a new creature between God and man. Even then, he is always human, just like anyone else. Therefore, he needs rest. Why shouldn't he enjoy rest, relaxation and entertainment in some way? No canonist, no theologian, no ascetic prohibits it! Rest, relaxation and entertainment are more than lawful, useful and necessary.

The difficulty lies in fixing the 'what' and the 'how' of this relaxation! (1) For some, it was, and it has to do with God in prayer, to talk to and familiarize with God. This was the way that St. Francis Xavier, St. Francis de Sales, St. Francis Regis and many other holy priests thought about rest & relaxation. But more is needed. (2) For others, it would be to suspend serious engagements and do something light. For example, reading something, doing exercises, or learning some mechanical or liberal arts. But it may not be sufficient for us. (3) For others, it would be walking in the countryside, visiting the sick, and finishing some pending work. This is very common and does not call for much virtue, so anyone can adopt it easily. (4) But for some, I am afraid, it is still insufficient! Some people don't feel relaxed if they don't give vent to their tongue, if they don't find themselves in some company, in some group chatting, laughing and joking! Should a priest indulge in this sort of pleasure? I will neither permit it nor prohibit it at one go. There are many reasons and circumstances that can vary the morality of this action, and so it is necessary that we discuss them. We will see the nature, the defects, and the dangers of this type of relaxation in the world and, hence, how the priest must behave so as not to burden his conscience or lose his esteem and reputation.

By 'socializing', I do not mean a visit or an accidental trip to the home of a lay person or a visit made for necessity or even an insignificant

one; if there is harm in this, it will be called by another name and not in the way I mean by 'socializing' I mean a meeting, a gathering of several people, who more or less frequently gather at a place to spend time, to spend time with family members and have pleasant conversations. The priest goes there to spend some time and get some relaxation. What do you say about this? I distinguish three sorts of socializing: (1) Some are bad and dangerous. The priest should avoid them. (2) Some are lawful and honest. The priest can take part in them with due caution. (3) Some are useful and good. The priest can take part peacefully.

### DANGEROUS SOCIALIZING

Some socializing is bad and dangerous. They are bad either because of what is involved, because of their object, or the kind of people who frequent them. With this first principle, we begin to exclude a large number of places and gatherings which are not suited for priests. E.g. (a) Those gatherings in which it is normal to examine not one's own conscience but one's neighbourhood, class, town ... so that everyone has his say! This socializing is not for the priest; the priest, in conscience, cannot go there. (b) In other gatherings, there are often good times, and occasionally, if not always, the priest is also brought in on the pretext of being a relative, friend, or guest. Let us see how they talk and what they do! They laugh; they make fun of a devout man, then of a devout woman; they ridicule their attendance at the Church, at the sacraments, their modesty and concentration. And from people, they go to other things. I do not say that they deny dogmatic

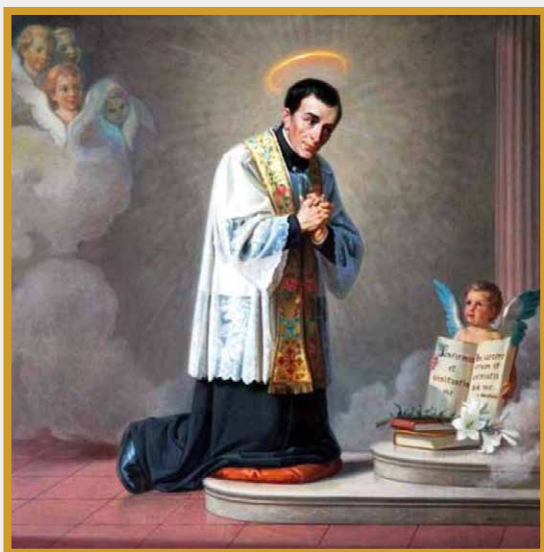
truths but certain practices and devotions they term 'superstitions'; they make fun of lovers, of relationships, now a funny saying, then a curious anecdote ... Listen to what St. Bernard says, "The tongue that you have consecrated to the Lord, to proclaim His Word, to announce His plans, and you use it, profane it, vilify it in this way. Don't you know that it is the most detestable sacrilege!" By our character, we are related to God, like the guard of honour that stands in readiness around its King. What would you say of this guard who, on seeing the King insulted, vilified and beaten, remained silent or, even worse, positioned himself better to see, hear and take pleasure in it? When David was insulted by Shimei, those who guarded him wanted to go and cut off his head! (2 Sam 16:9) That is the priest's loyalty when he sees the insults to the Lord, blasphemies, and obscene religious speeches. Of course, we are not to take off their head, but as St. Paul tells Timothy (2 Tim 4:2): argue, beg, rebuke in all patience. This is far from being a relaxation or a pastime. It would turn out to be torture or agony, as it would be for any son who saw his father torn to pieces but could do nothing to prevent it. Such should be the internal torture of a priest who sees evils and is unable to put an end to them.

### INAPPROPRIATE SOCIALIZING

The other reason socializing is inappropriate for a priest is the nature and quality of the people who participate in it. I place them into two categories: (a) Bad men and (b) Women. (a) Socializing with bad men: How will the people feel when the priest is found in their company and if the priest is enjoying it? Well, the relationship, familiarity, and conversation with these people are not for a priest! If you do not have anyone else to spend time with, be mortified and look for some other means of relaxation. What get-together and socializing did Jesus, the model of all priests, participate in? He was wisdom itself, yet he had no one else to talk to besides a few ignorant and crude fishermen! How pleasurable must he have been to speak and converse with them? And we do not read that he went to look for others! But oh yes! He went to look for declared sinners! So, we, too, can do that! Why did he go to them? To convert them. And he did



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convert them! When it is for such an end and when there is some hope, let us go! (b) Socializing with women: Fathers and doctors of the Church say that priests should be careful not to get close or stay with women. One may give umpteen number of pretexts, excuses, the appearance of kinship, convenience, courtesy, good purpose, and holy intentions ... woe to the priest who does not run away; he will certainly be lost! The devil always has a hook attached, a pretext to entangle a poor priest in this matter, and he knows how to wrap it up with such flashy colours that it makes the priest believe that his case is not the one condemned by so many saints and by such a long experience. Women and priests should be like two poles distant from each other. In the Church, in the confessional, ... where they need a priest to attend to them, attend with due

caution, dignity and reserve (St. Bonaventure). The Lord said, "What is that to me and to you, O woman?" I would recommend such a feeling to every priest who has to deal with women. It is not that you tell them that, but that you believe so!

A woman went to the house of a priest now and then. It was not bad, but it was not necessary either. The priest tried to tell her indirectly. But she did not understand. So, he sent word to tell her to remain at her home! She was offended. She met him and asked him in public if he had ordered her not to come to his house, and she wanted to know why. The priest replied, "The house of a priest is not for women!" Likewise, it should also be said that the house of the women is not for priests! A lady told the priest who seemed to court her: "Go and say your breviary, this is not your place!" A priest brought up in the school of the Master, formed according to His model, consecrated and set apart, who does not have anything to do with this world, who is destined to represent God on earth ... degrades himself to stare at a woman, to desire a woman! It is a disgrace. So, away from women!

We read in ancient pagan history that a slave girl was sold. The buyer put her to a virginity test! The girl was firm and strong as to kill the one who came to test her virginity. She was accused of murder and brought to trial, and she defended herself so well that she was not only acquitted but was also highly complimented. Thrilled at this, she demanded that she be made a priestess. To this, they said no! And why? Because, 'although your virtue is good, the fact that you were found in the company of such persons ... this alone suffices, in the eyes of the people, to give such a blemish on your character so as to exclude you and make you unworthy of that office!' My dear priests, let us get this into our heads once again: it is not sufficient that we are innocent in this field; it is necessary not to arouse the slightest suspicion. People confuse the 'possible' with the 'fact!' They do not look at 'what is done' and 'what was done' but rather 'what could be done' and 'what could have been done'!

In order to safeguard such a virtue and the good name of the priest, no sacrifice will be too much! St. Jerome thought it necessary to retreat into a forest to guard himself! St. Benedict turned to thorns, St. Thomas Aquinas took the burning coal in his hand, St. Philip rushed headlong downstairs, others cut their tongue with their teeth and threw it indignantly on the assailants, others disfigured their face and lacerated their flesh!

**(To be continued)**