

The Ordained Priesthood Establishes the Baptismal Priesthood: Vatican II and Hebrews 7*

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The documents of the Second Vatican Council offer a rich theology of priesthood. *Lumen Gentium*, for example, develops an understanding of the baptismal priesthood such that it becomes a primary lens for comprehending the Church as a whole; the Church is the *priestly* People of God.¹ In *Presbyterorum Ordinis* [PO], the Council devotes an entire document to thinking about the hierarchical priesthood, and seeks to develop a theology of the ordained priesthood adequate to the challenges of the modern world.

Despite the rich theology of priesthood contained in the Council documents, questions have arisen in recent times concerning the precise relationship between the hierarchical priesthood and the baptismal priesthood. How are they related? Are they of equal dignity? Does emphasis on one undervalue the other? Can there be a true hierarchy among the baptized? At bottom, these are questions about the place of Orders within the Church.

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¹ See Benoît-Dominique de La Soujeole, O.P., “The Church is the People of God,” in *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 247: “Rather than consider membership in the Church in an exclusively ‘essential’ way, at the level of the conditions for receiving the grace of Christ and of its effects in the believer, the Council Fathers opted for a dynamic presentation that was made possible by the historical aspect conveyed by the People of God theme: all human beings are situated positively in relation to the Church, although in various degrees.”

Presbyterorum Ordinis §4 offers what is perhaps the most important statement of Vatican II concerning the relation between the ordained and baptismal priesthoods. There, the Council states that hierarchical priests “establish and build up the People of God.” “To establish” expresses primacy, in terms of function or activity, such as priests confecting the Eucharist and hearing confessions unto the building up of the Church. This is the immediate sense in the context of *PO*. But primacy should also be understood in a stronger sense. It should be taken ontologically, so that, to borrow a phrase from Fr. Anthony Giambrone, O.P., the “radical baptismal equality [in virtue of the common priesthood] ultimately depends upon a hierarchical distinction.”²

Taken in this sense, the hierarchical priesthood establishes the baptismal priesthood such that, were the hierarchical priesthood not to exist, there would be no baptismal priesthood at all. That is, *PO* §4 should be read as asserting that the ordained priesthood is the very condition for the existence of the baptismal priesthood, in the way Christ himself establishes—that is, he is the very condition for—the new covenant.

The primacy of Christ with respect to the new covenant offers a good point of departure for grasping the theological reasoning that lies implicit in Vatican II texts such as *PO* §4 and *Lumen Gentium* §10, where the distinction in essence between the hierarchical priesthood and the baptismal priesthood is affirmed. Christ certainly establishes the new covenant by what he does—by the accomplishment of the paschal mystery. But also, his very person as the incarnate redeemer is itself a guarantee that the new covenant has been established. And his very identity as the eternal Son is revealed by his priesthood.

This is how chapter 7 of the Letter to the Hebrews takes things. While Hebrews frequently refers to Christ as “mediator,” since he cleanses us by his sacrificial death, chapter 7 names Jesus the “guarantee/surety [ἐγγυος; *enguos*] of an even better covenant” (7:22). This is the only instance of this term in the entire New Testament. It is applied to Christ in recognition of his priesthood: Christ, as the true priest, is the guarantee of the new covenant. Hebrews recognizes Christ as such, however, because he is the one “who remains forever.” That is, Christ is named the ἐγγυος *because he is* the eternal Son of God: “But he, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away” (7:24). In other words, because Christ is the eternal Son and holds within himself “the power of a life that cannot be

² Anthony Giambrone, O.P., “Priesthood and the Project of Catholic Exegesis,” in *The Bible and the Priesthood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2022), 20.

destroyed" (7:16), he lays true claim to the priesthood, and in this way also establishes the even better covenant.

The Christological and sacerdotal apprehension of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews as both "mediator" and "guarantee" has important implications for thinking about the ministerial priesthood as establishing the People of God, not only by the mediation of holy things in the reverent celebration of the sacraments, although that is of course essential. Ordained priests must also in some way function themselves as guarantees, that is, as signs, by virtue of the sacrament they share which identifies them with the person of Christ. And Christ is himself the sign *par excellence* that points to but also guarantees the reality of the new and better covenant. Attending closely to the strict exegetical argument of Heb 7 can provide a strong biblical rationale for the tacit theological reasoning undergirding the assertions found in the documents of Vatican II concerning the primacy of the hierarchical priesthood.

Hebrews 7

Hebrews 7 constructs a profound exegetical argument built around Gen 14 and Ps 110 in order to show the surpassing excellence of the priesthood of Jesus, the one who has become "the guarantee of a better covenant" (7:22).

The chapter divides roughly into two halves, the first being an exegesis of Gen 14 and the second an exegesis of Ps 110. Taking these together, Heb 7 demonstrates that the priesthood of Jesus is far greater than the Levitical priesthood of the old law.

Beginning with the second half of the chapter first, the words of God in Ps 110 are quoted twice: "The Lord has sworn, and he will not repent: you are a priest forever." Whereas the Levitical priesthood was established by the law and sustained by physical descent, Scripture itself attests to another priesthood, one that lasts forever and is not dependent upon hereditary descent. Hebrews 7 applies the psalm to Jesus, recognizing him as the eternal priest addressed by the psalm "by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed" (7:16). Because Christ lives forever, the oath of Ps 110 is applied to him, and his priesthood cannot pass away.

The use of Ps 110 allows Hebrews to highlight one principle way in which the priesthood of Jesus far surpasses in dignity and power that of the Levitical priesthood. The old priesthood was circumscribed, as it were, by death. Hence its dependence upon hereditary succession. The priesthood of Jesus, by contrast, is subject in no way to death, and in this way is simply

of a different order of magnitude from the Levitical priesthood. Hebrews 7 frames the comparison in this way:

Those priests were many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, but he, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:23–25)

In this way, Christ brings a better hope, and is the guarantee of a better covenant, one that is not constrained by death, since it depends upon the one who lives forever. His priesthood is established by the power of his eternal life, and so the oath of Ps 110 is properly applied to him. There is no need for his priesthood to depend upon the law and its hereditary succession. The priesthood of Jesus can overcome death where the priesthood of the Levites could not.

Hebrews 7 uses Ps 110 as a kind of scriptural proof for the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the law, and therefore over the Mosaic covenant from which the Levitical priesthood is established. "On the one hand, a former commandment is annulled because of its weakness and uselessness, for the law brought nothing to perfection; on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God" (7:18–19). Christ is the guarantee of a better covenant, one that does not pass away, established by the unchangeable oath of God.

But Heb 7 makes a further claim about the priesthood of Christ. Not only is it superior to the Mosaic covenant; it is superior also to the Abrahamic covenant. This is the point of the citation of Gen 14 and the figure of Melchizedek, with which Heb 7 opens. Melchizedek is described as "without father, mother, or ancestry, without beginning of days or end of life, thus made to resemble the Son of God, he remains a priest forever" (7:3). Hebrews understands the figure of Melchizedek as resembling Christ himself, because, like Christ, Melchizedek lives forever, and his priesthood also does not pass away. He anticipates, in some sense the promise of Ps 110.

Melchizedek himself is a kind of guarantee of the continuity of the divine plan of redemption. He is greater than Abraham because he "received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises" (Heb 7:6). There is a twofold argument that is made: Melchizedek is recognized as a priest who remains forever, resembling in this way the Son of God. But also, whereas the hereditary priesthood of the old law

received tithes from the people, the old priesthood itself is tithed in the gift of Abraham to Melchizedek. And in this way, the Levitical priesthood itself is given over in service and anticipation to the priesthood of Christ:

One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, was tithed through Abraham, for he was still in his father's loins when Melchizedek met him. . . . When there is a change of priesthood, there is necessarily a change of law as well. (Heb 7:9–10, 12)

The priesthood of the old law points to Christ, and once he arises in the likeness of Melchizedek and is made eternal priest “not by a law expressed in a commandment concerning physical descent but by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed” (Heb 7:16), he is revealed to be the one to whom the old covenant desired and anticipated, and the one who in his person establishes and guarantees the better covenant. The upshot of Heb 7 and the tight exegetical argument there is that Christ is the guarantee of the new covenant, precisely because he is the eternal Son of God, which is to say that he is the eternal priest of Ps 110 and the priest prefigured by Melchizedek.

Hierarchical Priesthood as a Sign

When Heb 7 recognizes Christ as the “guarantee” of the new covenant, it recognizes him as the true sign of the covenant, a sign that makes present what is signified. And this sign is made visible to us in his humanity. St Thomas, commenting on Heb 7:24 (“but [Christ], because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away”), grounds the apprehension of Christ’s priesthood in the hypostatic union itself:

But the priest who is Christ is immortal, for he remains forever as the eternal Word of the Father, from whose eternity redounds an eternity to his body, because *Christ rising from the dead, dies now no more* (Rom 6:9). . . . Therefore, Christ alone is the true priest, but others are his ministers: *let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ* (1 Cor 4:1).³

Melchizedek himself functions for Hebrews as a kind of anticipatory sign

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Heb* 7, lec. 4, no. 368; all translations from St. Thomas come from the Aquinas Institute at aquinas.cc.

of the eternal priesthood of Christ. And the hierarchical priesthood, as with the other sacraments, is an efficacious sign, one that makes present what it signifies. The sacrament of Orders is a sign of Christ the priest, the one who is the guarantee of the new covenant. In this way, the ordained priesthood is also a sign that guarantees the new covenant and makes it present.

St. Thomas holds it as a fundamental principle of the sacramental economy that, in every sacrament, “spiritual grace is bestowed under the sacred sign of visible things.”⁴ The visible, material things are true signs, efficacious signs that confer grace, and the material element is essential to the sacraments. This is true also for the sacrament of Orders. When he discusses Orders in the *Summa contra gentiles*, St. Thomas notes that, because the nature of the sacraments is such that sacramental power is conveyed through sensible signs, the ministers of the sacraments must also be given a spiritual power by which they are competent to work the sacraments. Were this not the case, ministers would be punching above their weight in vain: “Hence these same sacraments should be dispensed by visible men having spiritual powers.”⁵

This statement functions as a definition of Orders, and contains two elements: an ordained priest is someone who must be a “visible man” and who also is given, via Orders, a “sacramental power” unto the ministering of the other sacraments. In light of Heb 7 and the identification of Christ as the “guarantee” of the new covenant, it is the first element that is of interest here. The ordained priest also is a sign, a sign of Christ; and in this way, an ordained priest is a visible sign of the already existent reality of the new covenant.

This can be traced out with help from Pope Benedict XVI. In a definition that parallels St. Thomas’s “visible man” with “spiritual power,” Benedict finds the essence of the priesthood to be expressed in the words of Eucharistic Prayer II: “To stand in your presence and minister to you.” Again, it is the first element of Benedict’s definition that is of interest here, since one who stands is, to that extent, visible. Three aspects of Benedict’s analysis are salient.

First, he notes that the words of Eucharistic Prayer II above are taken directly from Deut 10:8 and 18:5. These words of Scripture describe the role of the Levitical priests: they were set apart that they might stand before the Lord, and for this reason received no share of land, but rather

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] IV, ch. 74, no. 1.

⁵ SCG IV, ch. 74, no. 1.

tithes from the people, as noted in Heb 7. Now, writes Benedict, these words apply even more perfectly to the priesthood of the new covenant. Even more than the Levites, ordained priests are set apart that they might stand before the Lord. In this way, the words of Deuteronomy are transposed into a higher key, one that expresses more fully the inner truth of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And, crucially for Benedict, the transposition of these words to the Roman Missal illustrates the continuity of the testaments of Scripture.

This continuity is the second important aspect of Benedict's analysis. Heb 7:11 asks:

If, then, perfection came through the Levitical priesthood, on the basis of which the people received the law, what need would there still have been for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not reckoned according to the order of Aaron?

Christ, the true priest and the one who inaugurates the new covenant, brings what the old law could only hope for, and in this way far surpasses the old law (see 7:18). Benedict is careful to note, however, that the continuity between the Old and New Testaments is grounded, at least in part, by the words of Deuteronomy about priesthood. "It is precisely the step forward of the New Covenant, which takes up into itself and at the same time transforms the Old Covenant by elevating it to the height of Jesus Christ."⁶ It can be said, along the lines of Heb 7, that Christ, by the authority of his eternal life, lifts the priesthood from the law, "which appoints men subject to weakness," and takes it onto himself, so that, far from abolishing priesthood, he fulfills and elevates it in his own person as the eternal Son (see 7:28). Christ's priesthood, even as his very person, becomes then, a guarantee of the unity of the Old and New Testaments. By standing before the Lord, ordained priests are signs of this inner unity of the plan of salvation.

If the priests of the old law were to stand before the Lord according to the words of Deuteronomy, these words apply much more forcefully to priests of the new covenant. This is the third aspect of Benedict's exposition of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. There are two senses in which priests of the new covenant stand before the Lord. Benedict writes:

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, "The Catholic Priesthood," in Benedict XVI and Robert Cardinal Sarah, *From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy, and the Crisis of the Catholic Church*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), 50.

Now if this word is found in the Canon of the Mass immediately after the consecration of the gifts, after the entrance of the Lord in the assembly of prayer, then for us this points to being before the Lord present, that is, it indicates the Eucharist as the center of priestly life.⁷

This is the first sense in which priests of the new covenant may be said to stand before the Lord.

Benedict notes, however, a second in which the new covenant demands that its priests stand before the Lord and so fulfill the command of Deuteronomy. Turning to the monastic tradition, Benedict notes that standing can also be taken as an act of vigilance, and that this reveals a deeper meaning to the words found in the Eucharist Prayer II. It is a meaning that, among other things, reveals an ontological rationale for the discipline of celibacy as a sign of vigilance, of standing before the Lord. Although he does not use the word “sign,” Benedict’s description of the vigilance of the priests of Jesus Christ perfectly captures the sign value of the ordained priesthood:

What was considered here as a duty of the monks, we can rightly see also as an expression of the priestly mission and as a correct interpretation of the word of Deuteronomy: the priest must be on the watch. He must be on his guard in the face of the menacing powers of evil. He must keep the world awake for God. He must be the one who remains standing: upright before the trends of time. Upright in truth. Upright in the commitment for good. Standing before the Lord must always also include, at its depths, responsibility for humanity to the Lord, who in his turn takes on the burden of all of us to the Father. And it must be a taking on of him, of Christ, of his word, his truth, his love. The priest must be upright, fearless and prepared to sustain even insults for the Lord, as referred to in the *Acts of the Apostles*: they were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” of Jesus (5:41).⁸

⁷ Benedict XVI, “Catholic Priesthood,” 52.

⁸ Benedict XVI, “Catholic Priesthood,” 52–53.

Conclusion

Benedict writes that the ordained priest, simply by virtue of his priesthood, must take on Christ, his word, his truth, and his love, and that to do so is part of the requirement of vigilance, of standing before the Lord. By so taking on Christ, the priest becomes a sign, a “visible man” who, in the words of St. Thomas, has been given a spiritual power. So, the priest is a visible sign of Christ. With the precision of Scholastic thought, St. Thomas explains:

Now the minister is compared to his master as an instrument to the principal agent, for just as the instrument is moved by the agent in order to produce an effect, so a minister is moved by his master to execute his will. Again, the instrument should be proportionate to the agent. Therefore, Christ’s ministers should be conformed to him. Now Christ wrought our salvation as master by his own authority and power, inasmuch as he is God and man: as man, he suffered for our redemption, and as God, his sufferings were made efficacious for our salvation. Consequently, Christ’s ministers needed to be men, and to share in his divinity by a kind of spiritual power, since the instrument shares in the power of the principal agent.⁹

Our salvation is wrought, and the new covenant inaugurated, by Christ, who as God, and by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed (Heb 7:16), accomplishes an eternal and, therefore, filial, possession of the priesthood.¹⁰ The ordained priests are “proportioned” to him by ordination, and in this way become visible signs that reveal the presence and the reality of the new covenant, because they reveal the presence of him named by Hebrews as the guarantee of that covenant. St. Thomas notes that it is the priesthood of Christ which, as it were, guarantees the continuity of the old and new covenants, since Christ is,

The fountain-head of the entire priesthood: for the priest of the Old Law was a figure of Him; while the priest of the New Law works in His person, according to 2 Cor. 2:10: *For what I have pardoned, if I have pardoned anything, for your sakes I have done it in the person of Christ.*¹¹

⁹ SCG IV, ch. 74, no. 2.

¹⁰ See Giambrone, “Priesthood and the Project of Catholic Exegesis,” 19.

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 22, a. 4.

It is the person of Christ who establishes the new covenant by which the baptized are given to share in his priesthood. Just so, the hierarchical priesthood is prior to and establishes the common priesthood. N.V