

Christ's Priesthood and Christian Priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews

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PRIOR TO Vatican Council II, there was little emphasis in Catholic theology on the common priesthood of all the faithful. Among the many aspects of the Council's return *ad fontes*, to the Church's sources in Scripture and Tradition, was a recovery of the biblical doctrine of the priestly identity of the whole people of God (cf. 1 Pt 2:5, 9; Rv 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).¹ *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes that, although the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood "differ from one another in essence and not only in degree," they "are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ." The decades since Vatican II have witnessed an attempt to gradually assimilate this new emphasis on the common priesthood in all its implications, while balancing it with the uniqueness of the ministerial priesthood—not always with complete success. One of the distortions that has attended this effort is what has been called the "clericalization of the laity and laicization of the clergy."² There is an evident lack of clarity concerning what exactly the priesthood is, in what sense it is uniquely exercised by those ordained to priestly ministry, and in what sense it is shared by all the faithful.

Among the factors that make this assimilation a challenging task, not least is the fact that the New Testament nowhere uses the term "priests" or "high priests" for those whom Christ appointed as ministers of the new

¹ This retrieval had, however, already begun in Pius XII's 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*, 83–104.

² Cf. Pope John Paul II, address to Antilles bishops, May 9, 2002; and *Christifideles Laici*, 23.

covenant. It is not difficult to see why this is the case. In the period prior to 70 A.D., when much or most of the New Testament was written, “priest” denoted something very specific in a Jewish context: it denoted a descendant of Aaron who offered animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple according to the prescriptions of the Mosaic law. Obviously Christ and his apostles fit none of these characteristics. “Priest” also denoted something very specific in a gentile context: idolatrous pagan priests, who were of course even further removed from the identity and role of Christ. Although there are significant indications in the Gospels that Christ intended the Twelve to serve as a new priestly leadership for a new Israel, these are allusive and indirect.³ Paul too uses priestly terminology in a way that suggests his awareness of his apostleship as a priestly ministry,⁴ but again this is indirect; Paul does not refer to himself as a priest.

Moreover, only one book of the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews, refers to Christ using the biblical term for a priest (Greek *hiereus*, which translates the Hebrew *kohen*). Yet for Hebrews, Christ’s priesthood is not a peripheral matter but is the heart of its christology as well as the interpretive key to its soteriology, that is, its explanation of how we are saved. With the hindsight of two thousand years of Christian history, it is difficult for us to appreciate the groundbreaking originality of the letter to the Hebrews. Perhaps Jesus might say to this author, as to Peter (Mt 16:17), “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Not surprisingly, this mysterious letter—or rather, homily within a letter, written by an anonymous author to unknown addressees in an unidentified setting—was one of the last books to be universally accepted among the early churches as part of the New Testament canon. Like the rest of the New Testament, Hebrews interprets the mystery of Christ against the background of the prophecies and figures of the Old Testament. But whereas for the rest of the New Testament the primary biblical prototype for our salvation is the Exodus event (the source of key soteriological notions like redemption,

³ For a brief analysis of these allusions and their significance, see Brant Pitre, “Jesus, the New Temple, and the New Priesthood,” *Letter & Spirit* 4 (2008): 47–83. See also Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah” (Parts 1 and 2), *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 4 (2006): 155–75 and 5 (2007): 57–79; André Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).

⁴ Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 4:1; 9:13–14; 2 Cor 5:20; 1 Tim 4:14. See Thomas Lane, “The Ministerial Priesthood in the New Testament,” *Incarnate Word* 2 (2009): 723–40; Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, trans. J. Bernard Orchard (Petersham, MA: St Bede’s, 1986), 267–69.

ransom, deliverance from slavery), Hebrews views salvation from the perspective of the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*—the day each year when the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies, making atonement by sprinkling the blood of a sacrificed bull and goat. Whereas other New Testament writings speak of Jesus as Messiah-King (like David and Solomon of old), a redeemer and lawgiver (like Moses), and the founder of a new humanity (like Adam), Hebrews speaks of Jesus as a *priest*, a new Aaron who offers sacrifice to God to expiate the sins of the people. The ideas of priesthood and sacrifice were germinating in the New Testament period as the early Christians reflected on the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. But it is the letter to the Hebrews that weaves these ideas into a coherent and powerful vision of Christ, the true high priest whose sacrifice fulfills and infinitely surpasses the old.

Hebrews is thus the primary biblical source for the Catholic doctrine of the priesthood. The continuing effort at the development of an authentically biblical theology of the new covenant priesthood must involve a careful study of this letter. Although the letter does not speak directly of Christ's apostles or Christians in general as priests, a deeper understanding of its teaching on Christ's priesthood will shed new light on both the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood as distinct ways in which Christ's priesthood is realized in his body the Church.

Hebrews opens its argument regarding Christ's priesthood with an elegantly succinct definition of the priesthood as understood in the Old Testament: "Every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5:1). In the central section of the letter (5:11–10:39), Hebrews shows how this definition applies preeminently to Christ. As with every aspect of the mystery of Christ, the relation between the old and the new involves both continuity and discontinuity. On the one hand, Christ is the perfect realization of all that the Old Testament priesthood stood for. On the other hand, he realizes it in an unexpected way, not fully conforming to the old pattern but transforming and elevating it to a whole new level.

In this article I propose to describe four essential aspects of priesthood expressed in Hebrews 5:1 and to show how, for each, Hebrews presents Christ as both fulfilling and radically transforming the Old Testament notion. At the end, I will offer some brief reflections on how the vision of Christ's priesthood found in Hebrews can deepen our understanding of the priesthood of the new covenant in both its forms.

Chosen from among Men

First, a priest is “chosen from among men” (*ex anthrōprōn*).⁵ In order to act on behalf of human beings, a priest must be one of them; he must be a genuine representative. An angel, for example, cannot serve as a priest for human beings. In the Old Testament this characteristic is evident in that the Israelites’ priests are chosen from among their brethren, the tribe of Levi. However, the accent in the Old Testament is not on the commonality between priest and people, but on how the priest has to be *separated* from the rest of the people.⁶ The root meaning of the word “holy” (Hebrew *qadosh*) is “separate” or “set apart.” Since a priest is one who draws near to God, the Holy One, he must be set apart from all that is profane. The elaborate description of the ordination of Aaron and his sons is all geared toward expressing the absolute necessity of separation. They are distinguished from others by their sacred vestments, by their ceremonial bath which washes away the residue of any contact with the profane, by their anointing with oil, and by their sprinkling with sacrificial blood (Ex 29; Lv 8–10). The Aaronic priests are also subject to strict regulations to maintain ritual purity. They must be free of all blemishes and physical defects (Lv 21:17–23). They must never approach a corpse or mourn for the dead except for their nearest kin (Lv 21:1–4). In the case of the high priest, the rules are stricter still: he can never leave the sanctuary, and he may not even mourn for his parents (Lv 21:11). Only the priests may enter the sanctuary, and only the high priest may enter the inmost chamber, the Holy of Holies—and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Lv 16). Outside, the sanctuary is surrounded by a sacred zone in which the Levites stand guard to ensure that no lay person even inadvertently stray too near the sanctuary and bring down the wrath of God (Nm 1:51–53). All this is to instill in the people an awareness of the infinite distance between the holy God and sinful, unholy humanity.

Once this emphasis is recognized, it is striking to compare the way Hebrews describes how Christ is chosen from among men. In order for Christ to become high priest, Hebrews does not say he had to be separated from others. Rather, “he had to be made *like* his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb 2:17)—that is, the Son of God had to become incarnate. The emphasis is not on separation but on solidarity. To become like us, he had to experience temptation (2:18; 4:15), suffering (5:8), insult (13:13), and

⁵ The Greek term used here (appearing twice in Heb 5:1) is *anthrōpos*, “human being,” rather than the gender-specific *anēr*, “male.”

⁶ See Albert Vanhoye, *Our Priest Is Christ: The Doctrine of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. M. I. Richards (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1977), 28.

death (2:9). Not only are his physical wounds not an obstacle to his priesthood, as they would be in the old covenant, they are its very condition! Jesus is able to be a *com-passionate* high priest because he has literally *suffered-with* us. He comes to our side in times of trial as one who knows our human experience from within (cf. Jn 2:25). It is hard to imagine a more radical transformation of the concept of priesthood.

This transformation is even more evident if we consider the specific circumstances that led to God's choice of the Levites. After the disastrous golden calf idolatry in Exodus 32, Moses demands that the Levites who rallied to his side go through the camp "and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor" (Ex 32:27) in order to atone for the sin and turn away God's wrath. After they do so, Moses declares, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother" (Ex 32:29). It is precisely their willingness to ignore the bonds of human solidarity that qualifies the Levites to serve in the sanctuary.⁷ A similar incident occurs in Numbers 25:1–13, where Phinehas slays a fellow Israelite in the act of idolatrous intermarriage and thereby earns himself a perpetual priesthood. Thus if any quality typifies a priest of the Pentateuch, it is severity. A priest must have such zeal for the holiness of God that he is ready to kill without mercy, even his closest family members.

How does this compare to Christ's priesthood as portrayed in Hebrews? The primary attribute used to describe his priesthood is *mercy*. His priestly office, rather than distancing him from us, draws him into the most profound identification with us. "For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Heb 2:11). The Gospels depict this solidarity with sinners at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in his submission to John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4) and at the end of his ministry in his crucifixion as a common criminal, between two other criminals (Mk 15:27; cf. Is 53:9). Obviously Christ has no less zeal for the holiness of God than the ancient Levites (cf. Mk 11:15–17; Jn 2:17). Yet he exercises this zeal not by slaying his people in retribution for our sins, but by *submitting himself* to the death that we deserve. In Christ, faithfulness to God and solidarity with sinners are perfectly united, revealing the infinite mercy of the Father.⁸ He has effected his priestly consecration—his "setting apart"—not by separating himself by sinners, but by separating sinners from sin!

The irony of the Old Testament priesthood, as Hebrews points out, is that although priests are segregated from the people by so many rituals,

⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁸ Ibid., 30.

they cannot escape the fact that they themselves are sinners (5:3; 7:27)—witness the lead role played by Aaron in the golden calf debacle. Though they may not touch corpses, they themselves will eventually *become* corpses through physical death (7:23). Their fallen human condition is not fundamentally changed by their priestly consecration. Christ, on the other hand, is “holy, blameless, unstained” (7:26)—possessing the absolute holiness that belongs to God alone. Hebrews adds that Christ is “separated from sinners” (7:26), but this now has a different meaning: his humanity has been totally transformed by his resurrection and can no longer be affected by the realm of sin and death: “death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9).

Appointed by God

The second element highlighted by Hebrews 5:1 is that a priest is “appointed” by God. One does not simply choose to enter into priestly ministry as a career or even as a form of generous humanitarian service. Appointment to this office is entirely at God’s initiative. “One does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was” (Heb 5:4). In the Old Testament, this principle was expressed in God’s designation of the tribe of Levi to serve in the sanctuary, and of the family of Aaron to serve as priests within that tribe. No other priesthood was acknowledged or allowed to function on behalf of God’s people (Nm 18:1–7). Numbers depicts the impressive divine confirmation of this mandate in the story of the revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who accused Aaron of having exalted himself to the priesthood and who harbored ambitions of attaining it themselves (Nm 16:1–10). In punishment, God caused the ground to open up and swallow them alive along with their households (Nm 16:28–33). The budding of Aaron’s rod, alone of the rods of the Israelites leaders, was further miraculous proof that Aaron had not arrogated the priesthood to himself but was appointed by God (Nm 17:1–13).

How does this second characteristic apply to Jesus? Throughout the New Testament a common theme is that Jesus assumed his messianic mission not on his own initiative but in obedience to the Father, knowing that it meant for him only suffering, humiliation, and rejection (Mt 26:39; Mk 10:45; Rom 15:3; Phil 2:8). Jesus’ sayings in the Gospel of John typify his disposition: “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me” (Jn 8:54; cf. 5:30; 6:38; 14:31). It is God who has appointed Jesus for his mission. But the author of Hebrews knows that for his Jewish Christian readers it is not at all obvious that Jesus was appointed a *priest*. He acknowledges the difficulty: “For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe

Moses said nothing about priests” (Heb 7:14). To make his case for Jesus’ priesthood the author of Hebrews turns to the psalms, quoting from Psalms 2 and 110 respectively: “So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, ‘You are my Son, this day I have begotten you,’ as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek’” (5:5–6). These two psalms are, in fact, the pillars on which the entire argument of Hebrews rests. Both are royal psalms clearly referring to the Davidic king, the anointed one who rules over God’s people. The early Christians easily recognized them as prefiguring Jesus, the promised Messiah and son of David.⁹ Psalm 2 designates the Davidic king as God’s son, a claim that applies in a transcendent way to Christ. And Psalm 110 makes the surprising claim—unique in the Old Testament—that the Davidic king is a *priest*.¹⁰ God even swears an oath of ordination: “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek’” (Ps 110:4). But how can the king, who belongs to the tribe of Judah, be a priest? The psalm implies that there is an authentic priesthood other than, and prior to, the Levitical priesthood established at Mount Sinai. The psalmist calls it the “order of Melchizedek” in allusion to the mysterious priest-king of Salem who blessed Abraham and offered bread and wine (Gn 14:18–20). The psalm suggests that such a priestly office belongs to the Davidic king simply by virtue of his being king—it is a royal priesthood. The fact that Melchizedek was a gentile also suggests a universal priesthood that was not limited to the Israelite people.

Psalm 110, as Hebrews interprets it, thus serves as a powerful argument that a pre-Levitical, royal, and universal priesthood has been reestablished in Christ. To confirm the point, Hebrews notes that the priesthood of Melchizedek in Psalm 110 is by divine oath (“The LORD has sworn”), whereas the Levitical priesthood in the Law of Moses was established without a divine oath, implying that the latter was a temporary and changeable arrangement (Heb 7:20–28).

How, then, was Christ appointed to this priestly office of Melchizedek? The psalm implies that it is by eternal divine decree, but Hebrews hints

⁹ Psalm 110 is one of the most frequently quoted biblical texts in the New Testament, applied to Jesus by citation in Mt 22:44; Mk 12:36; Lk 20:42; Acts 2:33–35; Heb 1:13; and by allusion in Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; 16:19; Lk 22:69; Acts 7:55–56; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20–22; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2; 1 Pt 3:22.

¹⁰ David (2 Sm 6:12–18; 24:25) and Solomon (1 Kg 3:15; 8:62–64) had, in fact, engaged in the priestly activity of offering sacrifice, but are nowhere else referred to as priests. Elsewhere kings are rebuked for presuming to carry out priestly activities (2 Chr 26:16–21 and possibly 1 Sm 13:8–14).

that it occurred at a specific moment in history: the event of Christ's passion and resurrection. The author suggests this by making one of the most daring theological claims in the New Testament: the Son of God had to be "made perfect" through suffering (2:10; cf. 5:9 and 7:28). This statement would have startled the early Christians as much as it does us. In what sense could God's Son need to be "made perfect"? And why did it have to be through suffering?

Hebrews seems to be using the verb "make perfect" (*teleioō*) in three senses.¹¹ First, it alludes to the Old Testament use of the adjective "perfect" (*teleios*) for animals that are whole and unblemished, worthy to be offered in sacrifice to God. Applied to human beings, *teleios* signifies total moral integrity and singleness of heart toward God (Gn 6:9; 1 Kg 11:4; Sir 44:17). That Jesus had to be "made perfect" in this sense does not mean that he was ever morally flawed. Rather, all the evil of human sin unleashed upon him brought forth the most intense act of love, trust, and obedience to God that could ever come from a human heart (cf. Heb 5:8). In the furnace of suffering Jesus' human nature was refined to limitless perfection. The more intensely he suffered, the more perfect was the obedience he offered, as man, to the Father.

Second, Christ was "made perfect" in that his human nature was rendered capable of divine life. By becoming man he had assumed our fallen nature, which is in radical need of perfection, having fallen short of the heavenly glory for which it was made. He was "beset with weakness" (Heb 5:2); he was "in every respect tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). As man, Jesus experienced weakness, weariness, hunger, and thirst; he had to pay his taxes; he knew loneliness and misunderstanding; and finally he was killed. Although he never sinned, he died to the whole regime of sin that holds human beings in bondage (cf. Rom 6:10). Having assumed human nature in its fallen state, he transformed it through the act of love in which he died. As the Gospels repeatedly affirm, Jesus' suffering was therefore necessary as the God-appointed means for his human nature to enter divine glory (Mk 8:31; Lk 24:26).

Finally, "make perfect" (*teleioō*) in Hebrews alludes to this term as used in the Septuagint to render a Hebrew idiom, to "fill the hand" of a priest—that is, to *ordain* him (Ex 29:9; Lv 8:33; Nm 3:3). That Jesus was "made perfect" by his suffering means that has been ordained the great high priest (Heb 4:14), and his rite of ordination was the cross! Once again there is continuity but also a radical transformation of the Old Testament notion. Christ's priestly consecration is not through an external

¹¹ I owe this insight to a mini-course on Hebrews taught by Fr. Francis Martin.

ritual but through the divinization of his humanity. He “has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life” (Heb 7:16). Through his passion and resurrection, his human nature was perfected and made infinitely worthy to be offered in sacrifice to God. Simultaneously he was ordained as the high priest who is able to “bring many sons to glory” (2:10).

Mediation between God and the People

The third element of the definition in Hebrews 5:1 is that a priest “acts on behalf of men in relation to God”; he serves as a mediator. This mediatory function presupposes that human beings are unable to enter into communion with God on their own. There is a gulf between God and man that must be crossed, a divide that must be overcome (see Is 59:2), and God himself provides the way by setting up priestly mediators. The heart of a priest’s role is to overcome the divide by atoning for sin and then to maintain the divine-human communion once it has been established. This role is graphically portrayed in the covenant ritual at Mount Sinai (Ex 24), where Moses sprinkles the blood of sacrificed bulls on the altar (representing God) and on the people, symbolically forming a blood-kinship bond. The same function is depicted in negative form in Numbers, where as a result of the rebellion of Korah a plague breaks out and begins to decimate the people. When Aaron quickly carries burning incense into the midst of the people, the plague is stopped (Nm 16:46–50).¹² In the old covenant the priests’ mediatory duties were carried out daily in the prescribed temple sacrifices for sin, and annually in the rituals of the Day of Atonement.

But already in the Old Testament there was a recognition that the covenant mediation provided by the Aaronic priesthood was deficient. How could the blood of irrational animals forge a genuine communion between God and man? How could it cleanse the pollution in the human conscience? In fact, the covenant had hardly been ratified when Aaron himself led the people into the golden calf apostasy. Priests are again the instigators of mischief in Leviticus 10:1–2 and often throughout the Old Testament, in the violent intrigues of the Hasmonean period, and right up to the machinations of the Sanhedrin in the passion of Christ. Throughout the history of Israel it becomes increasingly apparent that the sacrificial rituals are powerless to change the human heart and to overcome the

¹² The priest’s mediatory role also includes intercession, although, strikingly, the Pentateuch portrays only Moses and never Aaron as interceding for the people. Later in the biblical tradition, however, intercessory prayer is attributed to Aaron (Ps 99:6; Wis 18:21).

evil that perpetually rises up from within. This recognition culminates in the insight of Jeremiah that God would have to provide a new covenant, a covenant in which his law is written on the human heart (Jer 31:31–34).

When Hebrews compares Christ's mediation with that of the Aaronic priests, the accent on discontinuity and contrast becomes even more marked. Note that Hebrews says the Old Testament priest "acts on behalf of men in relation to God" (5:1), not that he acts on behalf of God in relation to men. Old Testament priests do act on God's behalf in that they are charged with teaching the people God's law (Lv 10:11; Dt 33:10). But only Christ, the firstborn Son whom God sent into the world (Heb 1:6), is fully able to represent God to man as well as man to God; he perfectly fulfills the role of mediator on both sides. His total identification with sinners does not compromise his union with God but instead becomes the means of his perfectly accomplishing the Father's will.

Hebrews notes that the rites of the old covenant are irremediably external. They "cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation" (Heb 9:9–10). The assertion that the law "made nothing perfect" runs like a refrain through the central section of Hebrews (7:11, 19; 9:9; 10:2; cf. 11:40) and is finally stated in its starkest form at 10:4: "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." The very fact that "the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties" (Heb 9:6) year after year, demonstrates that their ceremonies have no lasting effect. The Old Testament itself bears witness to this futility, as Hebrews shows by quoting the new covenant passage of Jeremiah 31:31–34 in full (the longest biblical quotation in the New Testament):

The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I paid no heed to them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . (Heb 8:8–12)

This promise highlights the essential difference between the Aaronic priests' mediation and that of Christ: the latter brings about not external, ceremonial purity but purity of heart, the transformation of the human heart prophesied by Jeremiah. Christ has finally and permanently overcome the divide between God and man.

Hebrews indicates that there is a twofold aspect to Christ's atonement for sin. First, he has made expiation for *past* sins (cf. Rom 3:25; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10). By his death, he took upon himself the penalty for the broken covenant of Mount Sinai, thereby bringing forgiveness for all the transgressions of Israel—and of all God's people for all time (Heb 10:12). "He is the mediator of a new covenant . . . since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant" (Heb 9:15). The covenant curse has been borne in his own body, and thereby neutralized (cf. Gal 3:13).¹³ But it is not enough to provide forgiveness for sins already committed. Christ also had to deal with sin itself—the root of evil in the human heart. To explain how Hebrews shows this, we will need to consider the fourth and final element in the definition of priesthood.

Offering of Sacrifice

Finally, the way that a priest carries out his mediation is by "offering gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5:1; cf. 8:3). In particular, as Hebrews later notes, he offers blood sacrifices, since "under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb 9:22). This principle, common to many ancient religions, rests on the intuition that blood, as the seat of life, is supremely valuable. Nothing more precious could be offered to God, and nothing else could make up for the disastrous rupture of communion that is sin. "It is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life" (Lv 17:11). From the beginning of the Aaronic priesthood, the priests' central function was to offer blood sacrifices to atone for sin and to renew communion between God and man.

Yet throughout the Old Testament there is a certain tension. God requires of his people sacrifices of bulls, rams, goats, and doves, as well as libations of wine, offerings of grain and oil and incense (Lv 1–7; Nm 15; Mal 1:13–14). Yet God also affirms the supreme importance of obedience over these ritual offerings. In fact, the latter are worthless if they are not accompanied by the very covenant righteousness that they are meant to establish. Samuel admonishes King Saul, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sm 15:22; cf. Pr 21:3). This theme becomes even more pronounced in the prophets, who rail against the perfunctory temple offerings not marked by true fidelity to God. "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings" (Hos 6:6). "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn

¹³ See Scott Hahn, "A Broken Covenant and the Curse of Death: A Study of Hebrews 9:15–22," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004): 416–36.

assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon" (Am 5:21–22; cf. Mi 6:6–8). Even within the Old Testament, it becomes evident that the priestly sacrifices are incapable of fully achieving their very purpose.

The explanation of how Jesus fulfills this aspect of the Old Testament priesthood is the high point of the letter to the Hebrews. As high priest, Jesus too had to offer sacrifice. But in his case there is no distinction between priest and victim. He offered not a helpless animal but *himself* (Heb 7:27; 9:14). He "entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood" (Heb 9:12). Hebrews notes that he did so through the "eternal Spirit" (Heb 9:14), a phrase not used anywhere else in the Bible. As A. Vanhoye points out, this phrase alludes to the perpetual fire on the altar of sacrifice in the temple, which had to be kept burning before God night and day (Lv 6:12–13); in rabbinic terminology it was called the "eternal fire."¹⁴ Hebrews hints that the fire that engulfs Jesus' priestly sacrifice is nothing other than the Holy Spirit. Through his life, public ministry, agonizing passion and death, Jesus' human heart was set ablaze to an infinite degree by the Spirit, so that he could return to the Father the limitless love that He had deserved but never received from humanity.¹⁵ Like a holocaust—the kind of sacrifice in which the victim is completely burnt on the altar—Jesus was entirely consumed in his self-offering. His suffering was the kindling that perfected his obedient love for the Father, and so made his humanity—and thus the humanity of "all who obey him" (5:9)—capable of divine life. Thus the value of Jesus' sacrifice is infinitely greater than the temple holocausts. His all-sufficient offering perfectly unites the requirement of blood sacrifice and the commandment of love.

Hebrews expresses this synthesis by placing the words of Psalm 40:6–8 on the lips of Christ:

When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do your will, O God,' as it is written of me in the roll of the book." (Heb 10:5–7)

¹⁴ A. Vanhoye, "L'Esprit éternel et le feu du sacrifice en He 9, 14," *Biblica* 64 (1983): 263–74.

¹⁵ "According to the Letter to the Hebrews, on the way to his 'departure' through Gethsemane and Golgotha, the same 'Jesus Christ' in his own humanity 'opened himself totally' to this 'action of the Spirit-Paraclete', who from suffering enables eternal salvific love to spring forth" (John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 40).

The body prepared for the Son was the body he assumed in his incarnation, precisely so that he would have something of infinite value to offer the Father. Jesus, like us, was tempted to give in to the self-centered and self-preserving demands of the flesh—its natural recoilment in the face of inconceivable pain. But he did the very opposite; he turned his back on himself out of love for the Father and for us. In the words of St. Athanasius: “This is the reason why he assumed a body capable of dying, so that, belonging to the Word who is above all, in dying it might become a sufficient exchange for all. . . . He put on a body so that in the body he might find death and blot it out.”¹⁶

Hebrews draws the conclusion that, whereas the Old Testament sacrifices had limited and temporary efficacy, Christ's sacrifice has total and eternal efficacy: “For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:13–14). The once-for-all sufficiency of Christ's work of redemption is nowhere stated more definitively than in Hebrews. Unlike the Aaronic priests, Jesus has no need to “offer himself repeatedly. . . for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world.” Rather, “he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:25–26). Whereas the Old Testament priest “stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices,” Christ “offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins” and then “sat down at the right hand of God” (10:11–12). What does this mean for the worshipers? Hebrews draws a radical contrast: “If the [Old Testament] worshipers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any conscience (*syneidesis*) of sin” (10:2). This implies that the new covenant worshipers *have* once been cleansed, and have no more conscience of sin! The conclusion is restated in a different way in Heb 10:10: “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*.”

For readers of Hebrews then and now, however, this affirmation may seem to fly in the face of reality. Most of us are conscious of plenty of sin (or if not, we have a dull conscience). Moreover, the Church provides the sacrament of reconciliation and other means to cleanse us of the sins we continue to commit. But a full consideration of the teaching of Hebrews challenges us not to allow this subjective reality to obscure the objective truth. Our sanctification is complete in a way that was not true of the

¹⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 9.44.

Old Testament worshipers. From now on, our Christian life consists in appropriating and more deeply living the holiness we have already been given, not in acquiring a holiness we do not have (cf. 1 Cor 1:2; 6:11).¹⁷

Implications for the Common Priesthood of the Faithful

What implications does the doctrine of the priesthood found in Hebrews have for the common priesthood of the faithful? One line of reflection is suggested by the use of the key term “make perfect” (*teleioō*). Hebrews expresses the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, strikingly, by using this term in a new way—now applied to his people! “For by a single offering he *has perfected* for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14; cf. 12:23). This suggests that the same three senses of *teleioō* applied to Christ also apply to those “many sons” whom Christ brings to glory: they are interiorly renewed and made totally blameless and upright, worthy to be offered in sacrifice to God; they are made capable of divine life; and they are ordained priests of the new covenant. Christ has changed his disciples from within, radically and permanently. The whole life of those who follow Christ is now qualified to be a priestly life, in which all our actions and sufferings can be offered as “a sacrifice of praise . . . pleasing to God” (Heb 13:15–16), or as Paul exhorts us, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). Thus we are invited to “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28–29).

Christ’s sanctification of his brothers and sisters brings about a change in one other aspect of the Old Testament priesthood. Whereas part of the Aaronic priest’s function was to tightly control access to God so that the people would not be consumed by God’s wrath, Christ’s priestly function is precisely the opposite: he opens access to the Father. Formerly only the high priest would dare to enter the Holy of Holies, and only once a year; now all are invited in. Now that the worshipers have been made holy—assuming they are faithful to their baptismal consecration—there is no danger in drawing near to the All-Holy. Rather, the constantly repeated exhortation in Hebrews is to approach God with confidence. “Let us then with confidence *draw near* to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). “A better hope is introduced, through which we *draw near* to God” (7:19); we have “a hope that *enters* into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf” (6:19–20).

¹⁷ See Benedict XVI’s comments on baptism and confession in relation to the “bathing” and foot washing of John 13:10 in *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part II (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 73.

"He is able for all time to save those who *draw near* to God through him" (7:25). "Since we have confidence to *enter* the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh . . . let us *draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (10:19–22).

It is, of course, not the same Holy of Holies as in the old covenant. Hebrews argues that the limited, temporal nature of the old covenant priesthood means that its sanctuary was also imperfect and provisional: the Aaronic priests "serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary." Hebrews demonstrates this point by noting that "when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern (*typon*) which was shown you on the mountain'" (Heb 8:5). This implies that there is a greater, heavenly sanctuary of which the earthly one was only a rough copy. That "greater and more perfect tent" (Heb 9:11) is Christ's own risen body (cf. Mk 14:58; Jn 2:21; 2 Cor 5:1). "For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb 9:24).

Implications for the Ministerial Priesthood

From the earliest days, the Church's tradition, reflecting on the witness of the New Testament, maintained that not only is Christ the great high priest in fulfillment of the former priesthood, but that those whom he calls to serve as shepherds of the new community, the Church, are also priests in a real sense by participation in his own priesthood. Hebrews alludes to this new priesthood by asserting that "We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat" (Heb 13:10)—clearly pointing to the Eucharistic liturgy at which Christ's appointed ministers of the new covenant preside. Like his priesthood, theirs has elements of both continuity and discontinuity with the old. I will conclude by offering a few thoughts on how Hebrews' vision of the eternal priesthood of Christ can illuminate our understanding of the ministerial priesthood.

Like Christ, priests are chosen from among men for a special calling. But they are chosen for solidarity, not for separation. Their essential priestly quality is not severity but *mercy* (2:17). Aware that they too are "beset with weakness" (5:2), they are willing to draw near to sinners and bear their burdens even at high cost to themselves (cf. Gal 6:2–3).

Like Christ, priests are appointed by God. They are appointed not in their own right as independent functionaries, but by participation in the

one priesthood of Christ. In ministering to God's people, they remain entirely dependent on him. As his ordination took place in the transforming fire of his passion (2:10), so priests are called to let the sacramental grace of their ordination transform (or "perfect") their whole life, bringing about a progressively deeper conformity to him.

Like Christ, priests are mediators between God and human beings. But their mediation cannot be merely by the outward form of the sacraments, rites, and laws of the Church. This would be an inappropriate re-establishment of the former kind of priesthood (9:9–10)—a return to externality. Rather, these sacraments have to be taught, celebrated, and lived in their full interiority, in a profound communion of heart and life with Christ. God's people have to be constantly directed toward the interior renewal and sanctification that is the purpose of these rites.

Finally, like Christ, priests offer a sacrifice for sins—but in this case, they make present anew his own once-for-all sacrifice of himself (10:14). Hebrews suggests this, as noted above, by its allusion to the Eucharistic sacrifice (13:10) in which the Church continually shares in Christ's self-offering to the Father. Priests must help the people of God realize the unlimited power of this sacrifice and appropriate it fully into their lives. They do not restrict access to God but help people draw near to the throne of grace with the confidence of children approaching their heavenly Father. **N-V**