

Ministerial Priesthood
in the Third Millennium

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Faithfulness of Christ,
Faithfulness of Priests



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Introduction

Monsignor Kevin W. Irwin

If you Google the word “symposium,” in .07 seconds you receive 56,700,000 possible hits, the first one being (of course!) a Wikipedia article. That article indicates that the word “symposium” means to come together for a discussion, or an academic conference. Later on the article indicates that another meaning of “symposium” is “to drink together”—meaning that the kind of conversation at a symposium is meant to be relaxed and convivial.

When we at The Catholic University of America first learned of Pope Benedict XVI’s intention to proclaim a “Year for Priests” we decided that we should do what a Catholic university does best—host a symposium to engage participants in discussion and dialogue with presenters and with each other. The aim is to offer an academic symposium that has pastoral implications for the ordained, for seminarians, and the baptized faithful with whom we work and minister in our various apostolates and parishes. In effect the symposium mirrors what we have always done at CUA in cooperation with Theological College and the eight other houses of formation with whom we collaborate in DC. We at the university provide the academic courses in theology, philosophy, and canon law for our students (including courses in supervising ministry, pastoral theology, preaching, presiding at sacraments, etc.) and cooperate with the formators at the formation houses where the students “unpack” what they have learned and apply their learning to pastoral placements and eventually to their (largely parish) assignments.

This book collects the backbone of the symposium—the academic papers presented. Unfortunately it does not (and cannot!) contain the discussions both at the symposium itself or the informal conversations had over coffee or lunch or at the events surrounding Theological College’s alumni days. But we judged early on that if we could publish these papers we would make a particular, university-based contribution to the Year for Priests. We cannot thank the staff of Liturgical Press enough for working with us so closely in such a short time to produce this volume.

The range of issues about the priesthood presented here reflect the range of issues faced by the (American) priest today. The presenters are all acknowledged scholars and professors. They are also ordained and ministering priests. They bring to their craft of doing academic theology the lens offered by pastoral ministry. Hence they are particularly qualified to speak to the topics at hand.

The Sulpician Superior General Rev. Ron Witherup, SS, sets the tone by reminding us all—lay and ordained—that Christ is our one high priest and that through baptism and ordination we all participate in that unique and eternal priesthood. Msgr. Paul McPartlan offers rich insight about the terminology we use to describe “the priest” and nuances our understandings of them and of the ministry of the priest through them. The former Sulpician Superior General Rev. Lawrence Terrien, SS, reflects briefly on the particular contribution of the French school of priestly spirituality as he proceeds to digest and comment on contemporary magisterial documents on the priesthood and their immediate implications for priests today. Rev. Michael Witczak follows in a long tradition of liturgical scholars at CUA by emphasizing the theological meaning of the liturgy we celebrate—*lex orandi, lex credendi*—with specific reference to the present rites of ordination. My own contribution follows something of a trajectory in my own research and writing in raising the perennial question about what are the spiritual and daily life implications of celebrating the liturgy for and with the people of Christ?

Allow me to conclude by inviting you, the reader of these papers, to engage afresh the ideas offered here and reflect on them for your own priesthood—baptized and ordained—for

your sake, for all our sakes, for the sake of the church, and in particular for those who are ordained priests and serve the church in this third millennium.

Chapter 1

The Biblical Foundations of the Priesthood: The Contribution of Hebrews¹

Very Rev. Ronald D. Witherup, SS

The word that one most often encounters when reading about the Letter to the Hebrews is “mysterious.”² It is an apt description for this neglected letter of the New Testament, which is at once both intriguing and difficult to understand. To read Hebrews is to enter into an astonishing world of divine beings and hyperbole.

1. The following abbreviations are used in this essay: AB (Anchor Bible); ABD [*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)]; *Bib* (*Biblica*); CCC (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997]); EDNT (*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991]); JSNTSS (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series); LG (*Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [1964]); NAB (New American Bible with Revised New Testament [1989]); NRSV (New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition [1991]); PDV (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation on Priestly Formation [1992]); PO (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Vatican Council II’s Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests [1965]); SBL (Studies in Biblical Literature); *ScriptBull* (*Scripture Bulletin*); SubBi (Subsidia Biblica); TDNT (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995]); TDOT (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991]).

2. I extend sincere gratitude to Very Rev. David M. O’Connell, CM, president of The Catholic University of America, and to Rev. Melvin C. Blanchette, SS, rector of Theological College, for their gracious invitation to participate in this symposium. I also thank Rev. Msgr. Paul J. Langsfeld for several helpful comments in the preparation of this paper.

One gets the sense of standing on the threshold of the cosmos. The very first words of the letter set this cosmic tone: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe" (Heb 1:1-2, NAB).³

Yet there can be no doubt that this letter, more than any other writing of the New Testament, has contributed to the Catholic Church's understanding of the priesthood. Its unique presentation of Jesus Christ as the great High Priest has inspired Christians through the ages to reflect upon what God has given the world in the gift of his own Son. In keeping with the theme of this symposium during this unprecedented year for priests proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI, I propose to explore the fundamental contribution of Hebrews and how it might apply pastorally to the priesthood in the third millennium.

My lecture comprises four parts: the context of Hebrews and why it matters; the principal message of the letter regarding Jesus Christ, the High Priest; the influence of Hebrews on the church's theology of the priesthood; and proposed reflections on the pastoral application of this letter today.

The Context of Hebrews and Why It Matters

If Hebrews has generally been a neglected book of the New Testament, recent publications in English have begun to remedy this situation. There are now several outstanding English commentaries and monographs on the letter that provide a rich collection of resources from which to seek guidance as one enters the world of Hebrews.⁴ At the outset, I should state clearly some

3. Except where indicated otherwise, the biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

4. A superb guide to the contemporary scholarship on Hebrews is Daniel J. Harrington, *What Are They Saying about Hebrews?* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2005). See also Richard Ounsworth, "What are They Saying about the Letter to the Hebrews?" *ScriptBull* 39:2 (2009): 76–90. Important recent commentaries include: Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia Series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, AB 36 (New York:

essential presuppositions concerning this letter, many of which are shared by a majority of contemporary scholars.

Although the date, authorship, provenance, and destination of Hebrews are contested, many believe it was written sometime between AD 60–100 by an educated, anonymous, Jewish Christian author, who is addressing a community in danger of experiencing the defection of some of its members from the faith (apostasy). Written in elegant Greek (the best in the New Testament), Hebrews has only the loose form of a letter and is best described in its own terms as “a message of encouragement” (13:22, NAB; “word of exhortation,” NRSV). Many scholars consider it a sermon or a homily.

Regardless of whether this is the most accurate description of its genre, it is evident that Hebrews exhibits considerable rhetorical refinements that are equally at home in skilled oratory or sermons.⁵ It also provides an extraordinary example of the inventive interpretation and reapplication of the Old Testament, typical of highly trained rabbinical practice. While the novel interpretations at times can mystify the modern mind, there can be no doubt of the respect of the author for the Word of God, which indeed is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” and “able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). The argument of Hebrews is thoroughly rooted in the Old Testament traditions of Israel, even if occasionally, the author is unclear about the precise location of the source(s) he quotes or

Doubleday, 2001); Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007); Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, Interpretation Series (Louisville: John Knox, 1997); and James W. Thompson, *Hebrews*, Paideia Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). Two fine introductions to the theology of Hebrews are Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); and Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, New Testament Theology Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).

5. Some scholars rightly emphasize that Hebrews was intended to be *heard* rather than read. One could thus properly speak of “hearers” rather than “readers.” Centuries later, however, we read this document and call it a “letter.” I stick with convention and refer to the author (rather than the “preacher”) and designate it a letter.

mentions.⁶ He is thus conversant with the traditions of Israel but sees them in a new light, refracted as it were, through a trinitarian⁷ and christological prism that brings out new shades of understanding previously hidden.

Yet this highly doctrinal orientation masks a more subtle insight. The author's highly developed theological stance is not done for its own sake. Throughout the letter there are indications that the real reason for this perspective is, in fact, exhortative. As Frank Matera has noted in his excellent *New Testament Theology*, as important as Hebrews' christological perspective is, it is "ultimately at the service of exhortation."⁸ The author desires to exhort, to encourage, to strengthen, and to bolster a community being tested, most likely because of persecutions and the temptation to renege on the faith in the face of danger.

Thus in chapter 2 of the letter, when Christ's priestly identity is already stated, his suffering is acknowledged precisely because "he is able to help those who are being tested" (2:18). The letter reinforces this perspective at several points with such exhortations as "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering" (10:23). Moreover, the final chapter is also exhortative and is oriented eschatologically toward our heavenly future: "For

6. See, for example, the expression "someone has testified somewhere" (2:6; cf. 4:4).

7. Although the Christology of Hebrews overshadows the trinitarian underpinnings, they are nonetheless present. God as "Father" is mentioned only three times, yet the very concept of Jesus as God's Son, which is omnipresent in Hebrews, implies the fatherhood of God. The Holy Spirit is mentioned only seven times in the letter yet functions in accord with both Christian theology in the New Testament and its Old Testament antecedents. A key verse where all three persons of the Trinity are referenced is Hebrews 9:14. For a good exposition of the importance of trinitarian thought for ministry, see Peter Drilling, *Trinity and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

8. Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 336, 349. Similarly, another scholar calls the author of Hebrews "one of the great pastoral theologians of the apostolic period" and describes the letter as "a pastoral theologian's rhetorical effort to shore up the faith" of his community. See John C. Laansma, "Hebrews, Book of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 274, 276.

here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (13:14). In Hebrews eschatology and exhortation merge to keep the focus on hopeful anticipation as we make our way toward perfection, a prominent theme in Hebrews, following Jesus the High Priest himself.⁹ Hebrews can consequently be considered a document of hope, something that Pope Benedict calls attention to with great frequency in his encyclical, *Spe Salvi* (In Hope We Are Saved, 2007).¹⁰

Although we cannot be more precise about the historical context of the first recipients of this message, we can accept that a proper understanding of Hebrews comes from this context of encouragement.¹¹ Its doctrinal stance is intended to support those in times of trial. As we shall see, this impacts on our own contemporary understanding of the priesthood as well.

The Principal Message: Jesus Christ, the High Priest

Scholars are generally agreed that the main contribution of this fascinating New Testament book is its unique and highly developed notion of Jesus Christ as the great High Priest (Greek, *archiereus*).¹² This theme, however, is rooted in a more overarching

9. The Greek verb *teleioō* ("to complete, be perfect, reach a goal") features prominently in the theology of Hebrews, orienting the hearers/readers to the heavenly Jerusalem where God's salvation will be fully accomplished. The same verb is used of Jesus as "having been made perfect" through his obedience and suffering (Heb 5:9). See John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSNTSS 49 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 201–2.

10. The Holy Father uses Hebrews throughout the encyclical, but one of his most striking observations is the strong connection in Hebrews between faith and hope. See *Spe Salvi*, par. 2.

11. There may be a connection with Christians from or in Rome, but no certain judgment can be made (the greetings of "those from Italy," 13:24).

12. Important studies include three works by Albert Vanhoye, *Our Priest is Christ: The Doctrine of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1977); *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest, according to the New Testament* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1980); *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SubBi 12 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989); and John M. Scholer's *Proleptic Priests*, mentioned above in n. 9.

christological understanding. Hebrews begins with the announcement of Jesus as the Son of God, a high Christology that shows Jesus as higher than the angels, divine beings who surround God and act as his messengers.¹³ Jesus is now the messenger “far superior to the angels” (1:4, NAB). Although Hebrews acknowledges implicitly Jesus’ divine Sonship in terms of incarnation, it is the exaltation after the sacrifice of the cross that is most relevant. His Sonship is intimately connected with his priesthood.¹⁴ As a faithful Son whose identity comes from his Father, he is nonetheless made a priest, a man called, set apart, and imbued with holiness, to make intercession for humankind.¹⁵ Jesus suffered death, Son though he was, and in doing so was made perfect through suffering (2:8b-10). He offered himself as the sacrificial victim. He tasted death for all (2:9b) and was one like us in everything but sin (4:15). His experience, then, was intimately close to our own, which enabled him to both understand us and assist us in our struggles. The letter explicitly states:

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. (2:17-18)

13. Actually, Hebrews contains one of only three passages in the New Testament (Heb 1:8-9; John 1:1; 20:28) that explicitly acclaim Jesus as “God,” supporting the notion of the letter’s high Christology. See Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1967), 23–25.

14. On the nature of Jesus’ priesthood as royal, see Deborah W. Rooke, “Jesus as Royal Priest: Reflections on the Interpretation of the Melchizedek Tradition in Heb 7,” *Bib* 81 (2000): 81–94. Although I am largely persuaded by Rooke’s main thesis that there is a connection between the royal and cultic identity of Jesus the High Priest, whether it is wise to use the word “ontological” (p. 82) is less certain from a strictly biblical viewpoint. However, it would be fair to say that Jesus’ High Priesthood is not merely *functional* but is bound up with his identity as God’s Son.

15. For the Jewish antecedents of Hebrews’ understanding of priesthood, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 97–103.

This is the first comprehensive statement about Jesus the High Priest in Hebrews, and it both concludes a section devoted to exhortation and the example of Jesus' self-abasement and subsequent exaltation, and begins setting forth an extensive exploration of this High Priest who is in every way superior to what had come before (Heb 3–10).

Jesus the High Priest

Since the design of the letter is quite complex and our scope and time are limited, I will summarize as succinctly as possible the high priestly theology of Hebrews.¹⁶ Hebrews begins with the assertion that Jesus, as God's faithful and obedient Son, is superior to Moses, the faithful lawgiver and servant of God (3:1-6). When he describes Jesus' priesthood (4:14–5:10), it is in these terms.

- He exercises his ministry from heaven, where he has already passed to exaltation and sits at God's right hand (4:14; also 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).¹⁷
- He sympathizes with our weaknesses because he is exactly like us, having been taken from among human beings, but without sin (4:15; 5:1).
- He has not chosen his own identity but was called by God and sent on mission (5:4; 3:1).
- Just as the High Priest of old entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and offered sacrifices for the sins of the people (9:7), so Jesus Christ has entered a heavenly

16. For background on the biblical vocabulary of priesthood (Hebrew, *kōhēn*; Greek, *hiereus* and *archieus*) see TDOT VII.60–75; TDNT III.257–83; EDNT 2.174. A good overview of the Old Testament priesthood can be found in Merlin D. Rehm, "Levites and Priests," ABD 4.297–310.

17. Sitting at God's right hand (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2) is not meant to indicate a mode of rest but a position of power and authority; it constitutes a location whence Jesus still acts as High Priest. See David R. Anderson, *The King-Priest of Psalm 110 in Hebrews*, SBL 21 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 174.

sanctuary, having offered sacrifices for sin, offering himself as victim (5:1; 9:12, 14, 25; 10:10).

- He learned obedience through suffering (5:8).
- His sufferings made him “perfect” and the source of salvation, redemption, purification, forgiveness, sanctification, and perfection for all (5:9; 10:18, 22).
- As High Priest chosen and exalted by God his Father he is our forerunner (Greek, *prodomos*, 6:20).
- His royal priesthood has made him mediator of a new and better covenant (7:22; 8:6, 13; 12:24).¹⁸
- In essence, Jesus’ priesthood both fulfills and yet exceeds and abolishes the Old Testament cult in favor of a new cult (7:18; 8:13-14; 9:14; 10:9).

This is an impressive and comprehensive view of Jesus’ priesthood.

The Figure of Melchizedek

Melchizedek’s role in this scenario is crucial. Jesus’ royal priestly identity is not bound to Israel’s historical priesthood, which was tied to the figure of Aaron and the tribe of Levi, which God set apart for priestly service. Unlike the Levitical priesthood, which was passed on through generations by family lines and tribal identity, Jesus’ priestly identity is traced to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek by way of Psalm 110:4, which features prominently in the author’s exposition: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17, 21).¹⁹

18. Covenant theology is prominent in Hebrews. At times, however, there is a play on the word covenant (Greek, *diathēkē*), which can also mean “last will and testament” (9:17; cf. 9:15).

19. In an extensive study of Psalm 110 in Hebrews, one scholar suggests that Hebrews 5:1-10, in particular, makes a unique contribution to the theology of the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ by explicitly connecting Ps 2:7

Melchizedek is an obscure and mysterious figure about whom little is known (Gen 14:22). He is said to be “King of Salem” (likely, Jerusalem) and “priest of God Most High” (Heb 7:1) who blessed Abraham (Abram) and brought out bread and wine for him after Abraham defeated certain kings and rescued his nephew Lot (Gen 14:17-20). Abraham, in turn, rewarded Melchizedek with a tenth of his goods. Melchizedek’s association with Abraham, the ancestor of Aaron and the Levi, the source of Israel’s inherited priesthood, gives him chronological and honorific precedence. As with so many characters in the Bible, Melchizedek suddenly appears on stage for his cameo performance and just as suddenly disappears offstage. The author of Hebrews, however, draws attention to this brief appearance and makes the most of it:

His name, in the first place, means “king of righteousness”; next he is also king of Salem, that is, “king of peace.” Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (Heb 7:2-3)

Melchizedek is consequently the perfect foreshadowing of Jesus’ unique identity. This elusive figure provides several essential elements to Hebrews’ Christology, in particular: divine rather than human origins, a royal and priestly identity not tied to human lineage yet fully human, and high priestly status that mediates cultically between God and humanity and provides blessing, hospitality (bread and wine), and peace (Hebrew, *shalom*). What is left unsaid but perhaps can be presupposed in the background is that the high priest in Israel, by virtue of his breastplate containing the names of the twelve tribes, was representative of the whole people. Hebrews clearly envisions Jesus as possessing a universal role for his people as High Priest. His once for all

and Ps 110:4. See Anderson, *The King-Priest*, 288. With many commentators, Anderson also points to the chiasmic parallel in 5:1-10 in which vv. 5-6, the Old Testament quotations, are central. See also Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 61, and Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 87.

sacrifice of his own body (7:27; 10:10) continues to intercede for his people from his heavenly throne (7:25).

In this theology of the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ, Hebrews holds together certain elements that should in normal parlance be seen in tension. Jesus is both priest and victim. He is both the one who offers the sacrifice and the sacrifice being offered. He is both fully human in his identity, especially in his ability to identify with our human state, and yet he is exalted above even the angels and is enthroned forever in a heavenly sanctuary. His sacrifice was made once for all, yet his intercession on behalf of his own people never ceases. We have already received the salvation and redemption achieved by this sacrifice, yet there is more to come in the eschatological age. He is made perfect, yet perfection for his people remains a future goal and an undimmed hope. Jesus' high priestly ministry both fulfills and annuls the old cult. In these tensions perhaps we could say that Hebrews is eminently a "catholic" writing in its ability to embrace the "both/and" dimensions of life.²⁰ They are not contradictory, but they remain in tension.

It is also interesting to see what is left out of this scenario. Curiously, Hebrews never picks up on the image of bread and wine associated with Melchizedek. The eucharistic overtones of this imagery are unmistakable. Many scholars conclude that Hebrews does not mention the eucharist at all, though some experts take the phrase "sacrifice of praise" (13:15) as an allusion to the sacra-

20. Hebrews is perhaps the most obvious New Testament document that could, if not carefully interpreted, lead to supersessionism (negating the value of the Old Testament and its religion in favor of the New). This is a danger to be avoided. Hebrews is not really supersessionist, in part because of this dual tendency to accept "both/and" tensions, and because the Old Testament foundations are critically necessary to understand the letter's unique theological perspective. All the major details associated with the High Priesthood of Jesus are from the Old Testament. The author is more in line with the Matthean Jesus, who speaks of fulfilling, not abolishing, the law (Matt 5:17). More cautiously, Andrew Lincoln warns against jettisoning the notion of supersessionism altogether, as both Judaism and Christianity have succumbed to it at one time or another (e.g., the sacrificial system of the temple). See his *Hebrews: A Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 118.

ment.²¹ Another notable lack is the use of shepherding imagery, which we have come to associate strongly with ordained ministry. Only near the end of the letter is Jesus called the “great shepherd of the sheep,” in the only passage that also mentions explicitly the resurrection (13:20). But unlike in John’s gospel, the image is not developed.

One also notes that two of the three traditional “powers” of the priesthood (Latin, *munera*)—teaching (*munus docendi*), divine worship (*munus liturgicum*), governing (*munus regendi*)—are not developed to any great degree.²² The prominence of the high priesthood imagery overshadows the royal and teaching (prophetic) dimensions of the priesthood of Jesus Christ in favor of the cultic, sacrificial office. The seeds of these latter two offices of the priesthood are present, but they remain in the background.

Since an argument from silence is always tenuous, we should not draw too many conclusions from these anomalies, other than to say that they do not feature prominently in the Christology of Hebrews. The focus remains nonetheless on the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ, the exalted Lord, the Son of God.

This unique New Testament teaching is as broad as it is deep. While maintaining continuity with the Old Testament traditions of the priesthood, Hebrews embarks on its own novel path to breathtaking christological innovation.

The Influence of Hebrews in the Church’s Theology of Priesthood

One cannot exaggerate the influence of the Letter to the Hebrews on the Catholic Church’s theology of the priesthood. From its liturgical rites of ordination to its catechism and to official documents on the priesthood, the church has utilized the

21. Lindars, *Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, 139. He adds, however, that the understanding of the Eucharist as sacrifice did not arise until after the New Testament period, beginning with the *Didache*.

22. CCC par. 1592; *PDV* par. 26. The royal dimension can be seen in the figure of Melchizedek himself, a king, and the prophetic or teaching dimension is seen both in Jesus’ connection to the Word of God (Heb 1:2-3; 6:5) and the mention of the leaders’ faithful rendering of it (Heb 13:7).

theology of Hebrews to great effect, explicitly and implicitly.²³ We should note, however, a striking truth. In the development of its theology of the priesthood, the church has gone where Hebrews itself never went. Nowhere in Hebrews (or in the New Testament) is there an application of the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ to the ministerial priesthood! Indeed, when leaders in the community are mentioned in Hebrews, the terminology used is much vaguer. They are called leaders (Greek, *hēgoumenoi* [13:7, 17, 24]) and no description of their duties is given. They are not called priests, a term that in the New Testament is never applied to Christian leaders but only to Old Testament figures, Jesus being the sole exception.²⁴ As Albert Vanhoye summarizes:

By its imposing volume, the priestly christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews brings out very clearly the most important point of the Christian position in regard to the priesthood: there is only one priest in the full sense of the term and this priest is Christ. Christ alone has been able [to] fulfill effectively the essential function of the priesthood, which is to establish a mediation between God and mankind [*sic*]. He is the sole mediator. . . . A single new priest therefore succeeds to the multitude of Old Testament priests.²⁵

This is the most profound teaching of Hebrews. Priests are by definition intermediaries between God and humanity, the spiritual and the secular. They are by nature called to a special holiness, set apart for service, which allows them to perform their

23. In my own Sulpician spiritual tradition, which is rooted in the seventeenth-century French school of spirituality, Hebrews was the main source for a high theology of the priesthood. One author goes so far as to say that Hebrews contains the entire doctrinal content of the French school's teaching. So, Eugene A. Walsh, *The Priesthood in the Writings of the French School: Bérulle, De Condren, Olier*, STD thesis (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1949), 24.

24. Hebrews also twice labels Jesus a "leader" (NAB) but with a different word (Greek, *archēgos* [2:10; 12:2]), which has the nuance of an innovative leader or "pioneer," the translation used in the NRSV.

25. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 312–13. Note how the very title of his book makes his point clear.

cultic rites, their sacral duties, as intermediaries. They are supposed to be avenues to the divine. Whereas in the past there were priests (plural) to take on this role, now in Jesus Christ there is but one priest, the great High Priest who as God's Son fulfills this role perfectly. He established free access to God for all in a way only a faithful Son could do by self-sacrifice to his Father's will. Albert Vanhoye's words again hit the mark:

Christ is not a member of a priestly family and on his cross he is far from fulfilling the requirements of ritual purity! If access to the sanctuary was formerly reserved to the high priest alone, now, on the contrary, all are invited to go forward with assurance by the way Christ opened up with his own blood (10:19-20).²⁶

This special priesthood cannot be copied. It is permanent and it is uniquely tied to the person of Christ, the only New Testament priest.

Yet, for valid reasons and—from a faith perspective—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing development of theology, the church came to apply much of the terminology in Hebrews tied to Christ's identity as High Priest to the ministerial priesthood by way of *analogy*. The priesthood today, or originally the "presbyterate" (from Greek *presbyteros*, "elder"), is but an analogous participation in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ.²⁷ We will now briefly examine some of the church's teaching in two of its most important documents on the priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis (PO)*, Vatican Council II's "Decree on Priestly Ministry and Life" (1965), and *Pastores Dabo Vobis (PDV)*, Pope

26. Vanhoye, *Our Priest is Christ*, 42.

27. It is also worth noting that Hebrews does not apply priestly terminology to the people of God. We must look elsewhere in the New Testament for an understanding of "the priesthood of the faithful" (1 Pet 2:5; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). This concept, though, is also properly rooted in an Old Testament tradition of a priestly people, the holy nation of Israel (Exod 19:6). See *LG* par. 10.

John Paul II's postsynodal "Apostolic Exhortation on Priestly Formation" (1992).²⁸

Vatican II's Decree on Priestly Ministry and Life

The most obvious message of the application of Hebrews in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* is that the ministerial priesthood is modeled entirely after the priesthood of Jesus Christ. The document cites or quotes Hebrews explicitly some eleven times. Using the letter as its inspiration, what is striking is the direct and immediate application that is made to the ministerial priesthood. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* makes the following main points:

- Priests live on earth but mediate heavenly matters, by offering gifts and sacrifices for sins; they are chosen from among human beings yet remain their brothers (*PO* par. 3; Heb 5:1).
- Our priesthood is an imitation of Christ's (*PO* par. 3; Heb 2:17; 4:15).
- Like Christ, priests should exercise hospitality, kindness, and sharing of possessions (*PO* par. 8; Heb 13:1-2, 16).
- The priesthood is a universal service, valid for all peoples at all times (*PO* par. 10; Heb 7:3).
- Christ's own holiness as the great High Priest makes up for the lack of holiness on the part of priests (*PO* par. 12; Heb 7:26).

28. Both documents are available in English in various editions. I have used an electronic version on CD titled *Church Documents*, 8th ed. (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2002). Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) also contains a section on the priesthood (par. 28) that dovetails with *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. Another official document that incorporates some insights from these works was issued by the Congregation for Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994). Interestingly, Vatican II's Decree on the Training of Priests (*Optatam Totius*, 1965) does not mention Hebrews at all. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* makes up for this lacuna.

- Priests are called to enter God's sanctuary with sincere hearts, put the Word of God in practice, and share the wisdom of God (*PO* par. 13; Heb 10:19, 22; 13:9-10).
- Priests should be men of faith, just as Abraham was a model of faith (*PO* par. 22; Heb 11:8).

This use of Hebrews obviously does not provide a total theology of the priesthood, but we should note its fidelity to the spirit of Hebrews, especially in the balance between the humanity of the priests and their sacral duties. Jesus Christ is the model; he is the one who provides the sanctity we ourselves can never provide.

John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation on Priestly Formation

Pastores Dabo Vobis quotes or alludes to Hebrews more than a dozen times. Its pastoral orientation, however, comes across even more quickly than in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. In the opening paragraphs, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* immediately connects the title in Hebrews of Christ, "the great shepherd of the sheep" (13:20), to God's promise recorded in Jeremiah to give shepherds for the flock (Jer 3:15; 23:4) and to the image of the "Good Shepherd" from John's gospel (John 10:11; cf. 21:15-19).²⁹ Like *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, this document also emphasizes the human dimension of the ministerial priesthood, and it does so utilizing two quotations from Hebrews (5:1; 4:15), stating explicitly at the beginning of chapter one: "The Letter to the Hebrews clearly affirms the 'human character' of God's minister."³⁰

This is a significant indicator of the document's pastoral character, I believe, because *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is the first official

29. *PDV* par. 1. The opening quotation from Jeremiah (in the Latin Vulgate) provides the document's title, "I will give you shepherds." Most theologians consider *Pastores Dabo Vobis* to be the most important official teaching on the priesthood since Vatican II. It was the result of the 1990 synod of bishops on priestly formation, and its teaching has directed the model of priestly formation adopted in many countries, especially in the United States. See the U.S. bishops' *Program of Priestly Formation*, 5th ed. (Washington: USCCB, 2006).

30. *PDV* par. 5.

teaching of the church to emphasize human formation as one of the four main pillars of priestly formation and, in fact, as foundational to forming good priests.³¹ There is no question that Jesus is the model, for the text of the apostolic exhortation says: "The priest, who is called to be a 'living image' of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the church, should seek to reflect in himself, as far as possible, the human perfection which shines forth in the incarnate Son of God."³² This orientation in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is quite remarkable, not only for its emphasis on the human qualities needed for priestly ministry,³³ but also for its fidelity to Hebrews, which in fact blends well the human and divine aspects of the ministry of Jesus the High Priest.

In addition to this basic stance, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* also applies Hebrews quite directly to the ministerial priesthood in three other important ways:

- Ministerial priests are configured to Christ, shepherd and head of the church, and participate in mediating the direct access to God Christ has achieved as High Priest; Christ fulfilled the Old Testament roles of mediation previously performed by kings, priests and prophets; ministerial priests now share this threefold ministry (*PDV* par. 13; Heb 8–9; esp. 9:24-28).
- Priestly vocation is a mysterious call by God's grace; it must be answered with full freedom; Christ makes up for our weaknesses even as we are called to perfection (*PDV* par. 20; Heb 7:26).
- Christ is the definitive Word of God; priests should be formed well to communicate faithfully the true wisdom of God (*PDV* par. 53; Heb 1:1-4).

31. *PDV* par. 43, which cites Heb 5:1 a second time. The other three pillars are spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation.

32. *PDV* par. 43.

33. See also *PDV* par. 47 and 72 where Hebrews (2:17; 4:15) is referred to twice more in the context of the human qualities necessary for priests.

While these statements are consistent with the teaching of Vatican II, much of which is quoted or referenced in the apostolic exhortation, it is noteworthy that *Pastores Dabo Vobis* develops much more thoroughly a theology of the priesthood that puts flesh on the bones of the council's teaching. It provides a far more extensive understanding. While it is replete with doctrinal insight, its pastoral sensitivity is equally apparent, a style that blends well with the character of Hebrews.³⁴

Pastoral Applications

Having looked at Hebrews itself and the two principal church documents on the priesthood, we now turn to our own pressing pastoral question. What lessons can be learned from the Letter to the Hebrews that can be applied to Catholic priests today? I point to six principal teachings that I think are particularly pertinent to our contemporary situation.

The Unwavering Focus on Jesus Christ

First and foremost, the unmistakable focus on Jesus is preeminent in Hebrews. The call to perseverance in the faith is accompanied by the invitation to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2). Nothing could be more important today in the life of priests. Not only is Jesus our model for the priesthood and its perfect embodiment, but in a contemporary yet traditional theology of the priest as "another Christ" (Latin, *alter Christus*), Hebrews is all the more important.

Priesthood is all about Christ. He is the only real priest. We priests act *in persona Christi Capitis* (in the person of Christ the head [of the church]) but really it is Christ who acts in us (Gal 2:20).³⁵ We are not literally but sacramentally other Christs. Thomas Aquinas said it best: "Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law was a figure of Christ, and the

34. A succinct summation of these teachings, as well as many others from church history, can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC par. 1539–53).

35. CCC par. 1548.

priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ.”³⁶ The expectation that priests should represent Christ concretely in people’s lives is not merely pious theology. It is rightly intended to be a way of *being* and not merely a way of *doing*. We are given a share in the sacred power (*sacra potestas*) of Christ the High Priest.³⁷ It is ultimately a call to integrity and authenticity to the mysterious call of our priestly vocation, to be conformed perfectly to Christ who molds us, shapes us, and gives us our very being. But we must also remember, although it is not Hebrews that speaks to the issue, that our priesthood is not the only type given to the church. Vatican II strongly reminds us of the priesthood of the faithful, rooted in other New Testament documents, which also should profoundly shape our own living out of the ministerial priesthood we have received.³⁸

Given the high Christology and theology of Hebrews, we priests especially could well reflect upon how we can better incarnate this modeling of Christ as we go about our ministries.

A Unique Priesthood, Source of a Vocation

A second application stems from the unique emphasis on the kind of priesthood Jesus had. Unlike the priests of the Old Testament, it was not hereditary. It was not automatic because one was born to it. It was rooted in the mysterious call of his Father, in the mold of Melchizedek who had no lineage but was a chosen king and priest. Our theology of priesthood rightfully emphasizes the mystery of a vocation.³⁹ It is a call, not self-chosen but a call to which we respond.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the only place Jesus is called an “apostle” is in Hebrews (3:1). He shares with us a divine call that he received from his Father and a divine mission that he accepted. Jesus was sent on mission from his Father. Priests, in turn, are called and sent by him on mission. Our identity and our ministry are bound up with the mystery of God at

36. *Summa Theologiae* III, 22, 4c, quoted in CCC par. 1548.

37. CCC par. 1538.

38. LG par. 10; CCC par. 1539.

39. PDV par. 34, 36.

40. PDV par. 36, which draws attention to Jesus’ words in John 15:16.

work through human resources, calling ministerial priests into being. This mystery of the vocation is not entirely in our control, but it gets tested and requires discipline, both of which Jesus experienced.

The Balance between Human and Divine

A third lesson concerns the balance between the human and divine, the sacred and profane, that one finds in Hebrews. On the one hand, as we have noted, it has one of the highest Christologies of the New Testament. In its understanding of Christ the High Priest, it exalts him in a way far above any human aspirations. On the other hand, the letter insists that even Christ was like us in all things but sin. Even this High Priest, unique Son of God that he is, is chosen from among men and can identify with our frailties, our sufferings, our limitations. Priests are at one and the same time called to a particular holiness (not higher!),⁴¹ while acknowledging our human limitations. While we can never perfectly imitate Jesus as High Priest, we can try to integrate better the human and divine aspects of our ministry. Even while we proclaim the Gospel message to others, we remain conscious that we ourselves are not the “masters” of the Word, but its servants.⁴² Even while we dispense the sacraments and mediate God’s grace to others, we are mindful that we ourselves need to receive the same divine aid and be touched by the same healing power of God.⁴³ This dynamic tension between the human and divine in the ministerial priesthood is ever-present.

Priests as Pastoral Theologians

Fourth, Hebrews can teach us about the wisdom of being “pastoral theologians,” for that is what I think the author was, and that is what we are called to be. The subtle blending in Hebrews of profound doctrinal depth, and sublime theological understanding about Jesus Christ himself, served to inspire, encourage, strengthen, and challenge the people for whom the message was

41. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (par. 17) is quite explicit about this point.

42. *PDV* par. 26.

43. *PDV* par. 26.

first written. It does the same for us. Hebrews reminds us of a truth about the priesthood emphasized in Vatican II and reinforced in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, namely, the intimate connection between our own priestly identity and spirituality and the people we serve. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* calls it “an intimate bond that exists between the priest’s spiritual life and the exercise of his ministry.”⁴⁴ As I read Hebrews, I believe one sees evidence of this bond. The deep and wise reflection on the ministry of Jesus the High Priest helped the author to reinterpret the Old Testament traditions in a way that also nourished his threatened community. We should not be reticent to put our theological insights to work as we seek to become more effective pastoral theologians.

Eschatological Perspective

A fifth teaching in Hebrews stems from its eschatological orientation and the context of trial and tribulation that is an undercurrent in the letter. The theology of Hebrews, profound as it is, was not developed for its own sake by a systematic theologian. It was pronounced as a message of encouragement to a community under stress, fraught with the danger of apostasy in light of impending persecution or severe trials. It also strives to exhort the faithful to remain steady in their stance of faith as they journey toward perfection. The goal is the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22). As with all eschatologically oriented documents, Hebrews is intended to impart hope to its hearers/readers. The message obviously is phrased in various ways but always with a combination of challenge and encouragement:

- Just as Jesus was tested in suffering, so he can identify with us when we undergo the same (2:18).
- Because we have this secure High Priest who has already accomplished our salvation, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful” (10:23).

44. *PDV* par. 24, cf. also *PO* par. 12.

- “Endure trials for the sake of discipline” (12:7).
- “Strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees” (12:12, NAB).

Given what the priesthood and the church has endured in recent years, we can properly see ourselves as a people in need of such advice, as we, too, journey toward perfection. As Pope Benedict XVI has reminded us in his encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, hope and faith go together intimately and, along with the virtue of love, sustain the life of the church on our pilgrim journey.

Priest as “Victim”

Sixth and finally, just as Jesus was both priest and victim, priests today should reflect on the radical nature of our call to serve others. This message, of course, is rooted in Jesus of Nazareth’s own teaching that he came to serve and not to be served (Matt 20:26-28; Mark 10:43-45). But for Hebrews, Jesus as victim is tied to his offering of his blood and his flesh, his sacrifice on the cross, and his subsequent vindication in the resurrection and exaltation at God’s right hand.

We priests today, naturally, do not make the same sacrifice, even though we make it present through the power of the Holy Spirit in the celebration of the Eucharist daily.⁴⁵ But analogously, we are called to self-abnegation, surrender to the will of the Father, and to follow the call of discipleship even though it may lead to suffering. We need to become, metaphorically speaking, “victims” in the sense of surrender to the Father’s will. I see two equally important sides to this expectation, outward and inward. Outwardly, a priest’s participation in the suffering of Jesus the High Priest should help us identify and empathize with those who suffer, just as his experience enabled him to be one with humanity in our trials and tribulations. Inwardly, priests are called to enter into the passion of Christ the High Priest by our acceptance and endurance of the difficulties and the suffering

45. CCC par. 1545.

that comes our way. Both means incarnate the practice of Christ the High Priest.

Sadly, the language of high priesthood (*alter Christus*, etc.) and the exalted nature of priesthood sometimes lead to entitlement rather than selfless service. Some priests seemingly lack the capacity for true empathy with those who suffer. Others, when things are simply not going their way or they meet great challenges in pastoral ministry, give up, lose hope, or walk away. Even worse, perhaps, is falling into the trap of clericalism, which is a distortion of the true priesthood. Priests sometimes begin to see themselves as the privileged class, and there are always people willing to put us on a pedestal. This is a corruption of the call to priesthood in the mold of the High Priest, Jesus Christ. It is an inherent danger in a high theology of priesthood. But, in my judgment, Hebrews maintains the balance. Priesthood is about ministry, serving others in the person of Christ. It is simultaneously a humbling and an exhilarating experience.

Conclusion

This “fascinating and unsettling” book beckons us in the third Christian millennium to examine carefully where we have come from and where we need to go as church and as priests of God.⁴⁶ This New Testament letter, the only document from its unknown author and the only source of our theology of Christ the High Priest, does not give us every aspect of priesthood or ministry as our understanding has developed through the ages. There are other dimensions covered by different New Testament perspectives, such as the shepherding imagery from the Johannine literature, the threefold hierarchical ministries (bishop, priest, deacon) that evolved from the Pastoral Epistles, the spousal imagery that comes from the Pauline tradition, the practice of celibacy or the call to simplicity of life that come from the teaching and example of Jesus, more developed thought on Jesus as Prophet and King, and so on.

46. This apt description comes from Laansma, “Hebrews,” 280.

Yet one can scarcely imagine understanding the priesthood without Hebrews. As Albert Vahoye says, "The more we meditate on the Epistle to the Hebrews the more we are awestruck by the riches which it offers us."⁴⁷ It places our whole understanding on a firm foundation, the person of Jesus Christ himself. We should glory in this fact. And it is entirely appropriate that we reflect in awe, during this year for priests, on the great gift that the priesthood is for the church and for the world.

While it is a time to support the priesthood and priests and to give thanks to God for priestly service, it is not a time to make of priests something we are not. If we are "other Christs," it is only as pale reflections of the real Priest. As members of the same pilgrim church, we journey with all the faithful, who share in the same priesthood of Jesus Christ albeit in a different way,⁴⁸ toward that heavenly Jerusalem to which Jesus beckons us. This is, however, a time to renew ourselves in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ. Let us heed the words of Hebrews itself:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.
(Heb 13:7-8)

47. Vahoye, *Structure and Message*, 73.

48. CCC par. 1539.