

AN OVERVIEW OF PRIESTHOOD

Old Testament View:

The priesthood of the Israelites did not become a reality until the time of Moses. Prior to Moses, there were sacrifices offered by Noah, Abraham, and Jacob. The one exception is Melchizedek who was considered a priest/king of Salem. In Hebrews, we see that this is (or reflects) the Christ (of the line of Melchizedek).

The Mosaic Law gives three ranks of priests:

Levites: Males of the tribe of Levi who acted as ministers for the priests as musicians, porters, etc. They were allowed in the inner court of the temple only and did not perform a priestly offering.

Priests: Descendants of Aaron were arranged in groups of 24 to take turns at the religious duties and sacrifices, certify and cleans lepers, offer incense, etc.

High Priest: Aaron and the first-born of his line were the High Priests whose office was life-long. Only he could enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

New Testament View:

The Christian Scriptures refer to Christ as the High Priest. Hebrews 5:10 says, “[Christ was] declared by God high priest according to the line of Melchizedek.”

It is Christ who instituted the priesthood through his Apostles. Sharing in the fullness of priesthood, they appointed presbyters (priests) to serve the churches (Acts 14:23, for example). Finally, Christians (1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6) have a share in the kingdom of priests.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation ... in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king. Through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation the faithful are consecrated to be ... a holy priesthood.” (Catechism, 1546)

While being ordered one to another ... the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. (Catechism, 1547)

Through the ordained ministry, especially that of bishops and priests, the presence of Christ as head of the Church is made visible in the community of believers. (Catechism, 1549)

The Three Degrees of the Sacrament:

St. Ignatius of Antioch taught: Let everyone revere the deacons as Jesus Christ, the bishop as the image of the Father, and the presbyters as the senate of God and the assembly of the apostles. For without them, one cannot speak of the Church.

Bishops (Episcopacy) enjoy the fulness of the priesthood. They are successors of the apostles who are endowed by Christ with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit to teach, to sanctify, and to govern (or oversee).

Priests (Presbyters) are co-workers of the bishops. As members of the *presbyterate*, priests are also united to the bishop as a *presbyterium* and can only exercise their ministry in union with the bishop. As co-workers, priests are ordained to preside over and offer, above all, the Sacraments of Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and, in some cases, Confirmation. As part of the presbyterium, priests offer the laying on of hands at the ordination of presbyters.

Deacons (Diakonia) receive the imposition of hands ‘not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry.’ (Catechism, 1569). Ordained by God in order to serve, deacons are ordinary servants of what all lay faithful can do in an extraordinary way.

Religious Orders:

Men and women religious sisters, brothers, priests and deacons who consecrate their lives to God through Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. Religious orders include Dominicans, Benedictines, Franciscans, Jesuits, etc. According to their charisms (spiritual gifts) they work with and empower the faithful to live up to their share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission.

Third Order:

Groups of ordained or lay faithful who are associated with a religious order. St. Rose of Lima, for example, was a Third Order Dominican.

Titles:

Certain titles are given to consecrated religious and the ordained. Here are a few:

Reverend - (Priests)
Reverend, Mister (Transitional Deacons)
Very Reverend (Priests who are Deans or Vicars)
Most Reverend (Bishops)
Rev. Mother (of Women's Religious Community)
Rev. Monsignor (Chaplain to Pope or honorary)
Excellency (Bishop)
Grace (Archbishop)
Emminence (Cardinal)
Holiness (Pope)

Social Review

We have reviewed the first three books of the Bible - Genesis, Exodus, & Leviticus. While each book has its differences, the one common theme that runs throughout is God's covenant with his people. From the fall of Adam, God set in motion a plan of salvation which included, above all, an intimate communion with Him. Leviticus, with all of its priestly rules and rituals, promotes the way to remain in a covenantal relationship with God. Repeating over and over again, God says, "Be holy as I am holy." Later, in the New Testament, Jesus offers, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

If Aaron and the priests and the people remain "set apart", they will live up to God's call to "be holy." The priests become the mediators between God and Israel. In no way are they an upper class. They are simply "set apart" from within the people of God to do God's work for the people - and the work of God's people is to remain in covenantal union with God.

As we review Leviticus, we can certainly see that even a good and righteous person would find it difficult to live up to every prescribed law and then, when they sin, offer gifts to God to remain in union with God.

This is where Jesus comes in! Thanks be to God in Christ, we have a High Priest who offered himself up as a sacrificial offering. As priest and lamb of sacrifice, he enters the Holy of Holies and reveals to all the presence of God. The torn temple veil at Jesus crucifixion gives us the sign that he is the one who makes us Holy as God is Holy.

We are called to approach Christ as the Israelites approached Aaron. However, we do not bring goats or bulls. We simply bring ourselves and Christ does the rest. Christ the Head, brings to completion our own imperfection and lack of holiness. He makes us Holy as God is Holy. He makes us Perfect as God is Perfect.

As baptized people, we all have a share in the priesthood of Christ. We live out His priestly mission by offering ourselves (as members of His Body) to God. In union with Christ, we act as mediators between God and humanity. The Holy bread we eat and the cup we drink is the communion necessary to make God present to the world. Without shared communion with God, the sacrifice is incomplete.

As priestly people - ordained and lay faithful - we share this communion with God through Christ and with the Holy Spirit. This priestly action at Mass is the greatest gift we can offer the world around us. This does not mean we are better than the world. We are simply set apart, to do the public work (liturgy) on behalf of communion.



My Review

The next time you go to Mass, prepare to bring the prayer requests of your friends with you. How often do people ask you, "Say a prayer for me!"

In addition, listen carefully to the Prayers of the faithful and the Eucharistic prayer petitions. They are offered as a prayer for the whole world.

As you offer these prayers at Mass, keep in mind that you are responding to your priestly life in Christ.

When I attend Mass, am I prepared to participate in the priestly mission of Christ?

When I receive Communion, am I receiving it for me or for others?