

The Eternal High Priest

I'm sure you've seen someone expertly shuffling playing cards and they "riffle" two stacks of cards so they intermingle and can then be slid together again to form a single pack. As I begin this reflection I feel as if I am trying to "riffle" several trains of thought, some of which are still in my head but most of which are notes on five sheets of paper in front of me – quotes from the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, the letter to the Hebrews, and the Catechism. Hopefully they'll all come together nicely into one pack.

My starting point is the last part of this quote from Hebrews¹:

To suit us, the ideal high priest would have to be holy, innocent and uncontaminated, beyond the influence of sinners, and raised up above the heavens; one who would not need to offer sacrifices every day, as the other high priests do for their own sins and then for those of the people, because he has done this once and for all by offering himself. (7 v 26-27)

We priests might wonder where we fit into what the author of Hebrews is saying, and the point is that we don't because the quote is comparing the priesthood of the Old Testament with that of Our Lord. Written in around AD67, it obviously isn't referring to our priestly ministry nineteen-and-a-half centuries later. What we need to recognize is that our daily sacrifice of the Mass is entirely different – different in purpose and different in effect - to the daily sacrifices offered by the priests of the Old Testament.

In the early books of the bible (and sometimes repeated almost word for word) we have a record of the establishment of the Old Testament priesthood. God had given Moses the two tablets of the ten commandments of the covenant he established with his chosen people. To emphasize the sacredness of those tablets Moses constructed the Tent of Meeting to house them – a structure that could be easily erected and dismantled again as the people stopped and started on their journey through the wilderness on their way to the promised land of Canaan. It consisted of an enclosed rectangular courtyard containing the Tent of Meeting. In front of the Tent was the Altar for burnt offerings and the Laver for ritual washing before entering the Tent which contained the Menorah (candle stand) and the Altar of Incense. There was then a veil (a screen) giving access to the Holy of Holies with the Table for loaves and, on the Mercy Seat, the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets of the covenant.

The establishment of the Tent and the sanctifying of the Holy of Holies also made necessary the establishment of the order of priests to carry out all the

¹ We don't know who the author of the letter to the Hebrews was, but in encouraging those new converts to Christianity in the practice of their faith by referring back to Jewish practices and beliefs they would have been familiar with, they have provided us with a rich source of information concerning the Old Testament priesthood.

rituals associated with the Ark, but which also acknowledged God's presence with his people in the form of the Covenant reserved in the Ark, and for that God chose the tribe of Levi – Moses' brother Aaron being appointed High Priest and his sons as priests to minister with him.

*Muster the tribe of Levi and put it at the disposal of Aaron the priest: they are to be at his service. They are to undertake the duties that are laid on him and on the entire community before the Tent of Meeting, in their service of the tabernacle. You are to give the Levites to Aaron and his sons as 'oblates'.*² (Numbers 3 v 6-7 & 9)

Only priests had access to the Tent of Meeting and it was the High Priest alone who performed the sacrifices that were central to the rites established by God and which seem to involve a lot of spilling of blood.

Blood represented life therefore God chose to use a blood sacrifice as part of the sacrificial system of the Jewish people. Each time blood was shed it reminded people of life and death. A blood sacrifice also involved a cost to the one giving the sacrifice (and) reminded them of the cost of sin.³

This blood I myself have given you to perform the rite of atonement for your lives at the altar; for it is blood that atones for life. (Leviticus 17 v 11)

The shedding of blood was the central action in making atonement for sin.⁴

But, as the Catechism says:

Instituted to proclaim the Word and to restore communion with God by sacrifices and prayer, (the Levitical priesthood) nevertheless remains powerless to bring about salvation, needing to repeat its sacrifices ceaselessly and being unable to achieve a definitive sanctification, which only the sacrifice of Christ would accomplish.⁵

In the book of Genesis (15 v 17-20), long before anything we have been talking about so far, we are introduced to the figure of Melchizedek - "a priest of God Most High" even before the Levitical priesthood was established. He met Abraham who was returning from battle and who honoured Melchizedek by giving him a tenth of all he had captured. Melchizedek was also a very mysterious figure, having no known parents or ancestry and "his life had no beginning or ending" therefore "he remains a priest for ever." (Hebrews 7 v 1-3) This is what is referred to in Psalm 110 when it says, prophesying about Our Lord: "You are a priest of the order of Melchizedek, and for ever". In Hebrews (7 v 15-19) it says: "There appears a second Melchizedek, who is a priest not by virtue of a law about physical descent [that he wasn't of the tribe of Levi] but by the

² ("lesser ministers" according to the footnote in the *Jerusalem Bible*)

³ (compellingtruth.org)

⁴ (Abide in Christ website)

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para's 1539 & 1540.

power of an indestructible life”, meaning that Jesus would be a priest for ever like Melchizedek.

The letter to the Hebrews draws the following parallels between Our Lord’s priesthood and that of the Old Testament, and how infinitely greater was the sacrifice of his life in terms of what it achieved:

He is minister of the sanctuary and of the true Tent of Meeting which the Lord, not any man, set up. (8 v 1-3)

Under (the old) provisions, priests are constantly going into the outer tent to carry out their acts of worship, but the second tent is entered only once a year and then only by the high priest who must go in by himself and take the blood of offering for his own faults and the people’s. Christ has passed through the greater, the more perfect tent...and has entered the sanctuary once and for all, taking with him not the blood of goats and bull calves, but his own blood, having won an eternal redemption for us. (9 v 6- 7 & 11-12)

He does not have to offer himself again and again, like the high priest going into the sanctuary year after year with the blood that is not his own, or else he would have had to suffer over and over again. Instead he has made his appearance once and for all, now at the end of the last age, to do away with sin by sacrificing himself... Christ offers himself only once to take the faults of many on himself. (from 9 v 25-28)

The footnote in the *Jerusalem Bible* adds: the sacrifice of Christ is unique. There is no need for it to be repeated, since it wipes out sin, not with non-human blood, but with Christ’s own blood.

And so we return to the question that we started with and the answer is provided in this final quote from Hebrews:

All [Old Testament] priests stand at their duties every day, offering over and over again the same sacrifices which are quite incapable of taking sins away. He [Jesus] on the other hand, has offered one single sacrifice for sins (and) has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying. (10 v 11-15)

Unlike the priests of the Old Testament, we New Testament priests don’t stand at the altar offering the sacrifice of the Mass day after day because it doesn’t take sins away. What we are doing is celebrating the fact that they have already been taken away, that we are already redeemed, by the one single sacrifice that Our Lord offered on the cross on our behalf. What we celebrate in the Mass is, therefore, a commemoration, not a repetition. As the Catechism says:

The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice. The Eucharist *re-*presents (makes present again) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its memorial. (para’s 1362 & 1366)

The redemptive sacrifice of Christ is unique, accomplished once for all; yet it is made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Church. The same is true of the one priesthood of Christ; it is made present through the ministerial priesthood without diminishing the uniqueness of Christ's priesthood. Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers. (para 1545)

We are reminded of this and what we are doing when, at the Consecration of the Mass, the priest repeats the words of Our Lord at the Last Supper: "Do this in memory of me" – in memory of what he did and accomplished. At the same time there is the opportunity at the beginning of Mass to acknowledge our sins and ask God's forgiveness in order to prepare ourselves for what it is we are about to do. The Mass itself is a *re*-presentation, an act of remembrance, of what Our Lord has already achieved for us through his sacrifice. Every time we celebrate Mass Our Lord's sacrifice is renewed – not repeated, but renewed – and through our participation we reaffirm our belief in what he has achieved for us.

Christ our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer himself to God the Father by his death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish there an everlasting redemption. But because his priesthood was not to end with his death, at the Last Supper he wanted to leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice by which the sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit. (Council of Trent, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1366)

As a final thought: we priests don't celebrate Mass every day because we need to but because we want to – it's what we do – it's why we were ordained.

Canon Law reminds us:

Clergy have a special obligation to seek holiness in their lives, because they are consecrated to God by a new title through the reception of Orders, and are stewards of the mysteries of God in the service of His people. (Can.276)

One of the five things it goes on to list "in order that they can pursue this perfection" is:

They are to nourish their spiritual life at the twofold table of sacred Scripture and the Eucharist; priests are therefore earnestly invited to offer the eucharistic Sacrifice daily.

That invitation is surely extended also to the people of God to the same end.

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