

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 6:1-7
<i>Response</i>	Let thy steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in thee.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 2:4-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 14:1-12

The fifth Sunday of Easter for Year A continues our journey through the first letter of Peter. And in this case we're looking at a crucial passage from 1 Peter in chapter 2, verses 4-9. It's all about the priesthood of the people of God. So if you turn with me there to the reading for today, the second reading for this Sunday, we're going to start with verse 4 and just read through the entire thing. There's a lot going on in this verse and in this passage that we're going to need to unpack. So let's dive right in. In 1 Peter 2:4, it says:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner," and "A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall"; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.¹

Beautiful. Beautiful, poetic, extremely rich passage. There's no way to pack in everything I'd like to say about this text into this short video. But for our purposes here, I just want to highlight a few elements of 1 Peter 2. First, notice that the Christology of this passage—its theology of who Christ is—is using the imagery of the Jerusalem Temple. It's describing Christ as the cornerstone of a new temple. So if you go back to the Old Testament, you're going to see over and over again that the prophets, like Isaiah and Ezekiel, will talk about the age of salvation as a time when God will come and establish a new temple.

Well, in this case, Peter's taking that same prophecy—that same imagery from the Old Testament—and he's declaring that it has been fulfilled not in the stone and mortar of a particular building, but in the living person of Jesus Christ Himself. He is the living stone and the new temple.

Now, the second thing that he says here that's really fascinating is that this temple is described in verse 5 as a spiritual house or a spiritual household that's actually made up itself of other living stones—namely, the Christians to whom Peter is writing this letter. So in other words, it's not just Jesus who is the temple of God, but insofar as all who belong to His mystical Body, who belong to the Body of Christ — all those who are in Christ through Baptism — are members of His Body. They too are living members of the temple of God, of the new temple that is Christ.

And this leads to something that's extremely striking and extremely important. Peter says then that Christians are not just a temple, but they're a holy priesthood. The Greek word here is *hierateuma hagion*. *Hiereus* in Greek is the standard Greek word for a priest, somebody who is set apart to offer sacrifice—to offer sacrificial worship. Well, what's striking about Peter's use of the term priesthood—and this is

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

extremely important—is that he’s not using it in context to refer to Christian leaders or Christian ministers who have been ordained to lead, who have had hands laid on them to lead the people of God. He’s actually talking to what we would refer to as the laity. He is saying that the laity themselves—the entire people of God, all Christians—belong to a holy priesthood.

You might think, “Well, wait...how is that the case?” Well, he gives you the answer in the very next line, because he says that this holy priesthood has been set apart “to offer spiritual sacrifices”—*pneumatikas thysias*. So if you look, *thysias* is an animal sacrifice. You’ll see this in the Old Testament, whether it’s a bull or a goat or a lamb or a turtledove or even an unbloody sacrifice of bread or wine. That’s sacrifice in the Old Testament. Here Peter is talking about the people of God offering spiritual sacrifices insofar as they are a priesthood.

Now this is very, very important. I’m going to come back to it in just a minute, but I just want to stress this, because one thing that Catholics will sometimes be puzzled by is that when they read through the New Testament, it’s customary in contemporary Christianity—both Eastern and Western, both Catholicism and Orthodox, as well as in ancient Christianity since the time of 1 Clement in the first century — to refer to ordained Christian ministers as priests.

But if you look at the New Testament, people who are ordained are called bishops, (*episkopos*) or they’re called presbyters (elders, *presbuteros*) or they’re called servants (*diakonos*). What we don’t see is people being called priests, using the Greek word *hiereus*. That term tends to be utilized and reserved for Jesus, for example, like in the letter to the Hebrews. However, what’s striking is that when the word priesthood is used by the authors of the New Testament, they tend to use it with reference to the laity. They tend to use it with reference to the Church as a whole, to all of the baptized.

Now, whenever you see the New Testament doing something you wouldn’t do—if it zigs where you would zag, I like to tell my students—then that usually means you need to pause and ask yourself, “Why?” Why did the New Testament put it differently than I would put it? And in this case, I would suggest to you that 1 Peter is revealing that one of the profound mysteries of the New Covenant is that the

vocation of all of the people of God—of all of those that belong to the Body of Christ—is to be baptized priests. This is the priesthood of the baptized.

Now it's different from ordained priesthood—we can talk about that some other time—which is consecrated to offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist, which is actually the Body and Blood of Christ. In this case, the priesthood of the baptized is consecrated to offer spiritual sacrifices. And we'll see what that is as we work through the letter of 1 Peter, especially the offering of their own suffering and their prayers. Those are both two spiritual sacrifices of the holy priesthood of the new temple of the Church.

In any case, let's keep going. So if we keep going through this section, Peter goes on to describe...quote a few passages from the Old Testament, one from the book of Isaiah and then another from the book of Psalms, which use the imagery (in Isaiah 28 and Psalm 118) of a cornerstone or a messianic stone that's going to be the foundation stone of a new temple. Isaiah 28 describes this stone being the kind of cornerstone or foundation of a new temple, whereas Psalm 118 mysteriously says that:

“The very stone which the builders rejected
has become the head of the corner...”

So what Peter is doing here is he's taking these two prophecies of a stone in the temple from the Old Testament and applying them to Jesus Himself. He's revealing that Jesus is the true cornerstone. He's the living foundation stone of the new temple. And then the people who belong to Christ—through Baptism and faith—are the new Israel. And he's going to use the language that was used for Israel in the Old Testament to now speak about the Israel of God that is the Church. You can see this especially in verse 9 when Peter says:

...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own
people...

Those are all technical terms that were used to describe the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament. The most memorable example of this is from the book of

Exodus 19:4-6. Whenever God calls the people of Israel to gather around Mount Sinai during the time of the Exodus, He says that they are going to be to him:

...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

What does that mean? Well, holy—the word holy—I’ve probably said before, in Hebrew *kadosh*, means to be set apart...set apart from sin and set apart for God. And the same thing is true here. “A kingdom of priests” means that the twelve tribes of Israel, united as a kingdom, have as their fundamental vocation that of offering sacrifice to God. In other words, they are a kingdom that is ordered to worship. So both those things, being holy, set apart from sin and set apart for God and being called out of the nations in order to worship God—is the fundamental vocation of Israel...and not just of Israel’s priests, but of all people of all twelve tribes.

Now what happens here is Peter takes that vocation, and he says that is the vocation of those who are in Christ. They are the new priesthood, the new holy nation, God’s own people who have been called out of darkness. See the language of vocation there? The language, *kaleo* in Greek, means called and *vocātiō* in Latin—that’s where we get the word vocation. So you were called “out of darkness,” darkness of sin, and “into his marvelous light.”

So, real quick, I might note this, one of the most popular terms for describing the Church at the time of the Second Vatican Council and in the documents of Vatican II—especially *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the Church—is “people of God.” *Laos theou* is the Greek term.

Now I’ll never forget, one time I was talking with someone...I was talking with a Catholic who was somewhat critical of some of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. And one of the things he really had a problem with was this idea of the “people of God.” He said that’s a Protestant idea; that’s not a Catholic idea. And I remember chuckling when he said it, because I had to point out to him, “Well, actually, the expression “people of God” is a biblical idea, and it comes from the first letter of the first pope, namely 1 Peter. It’s in 1 Peter 2:10.” So it’s hardly a Protestant term. It’s a biblical term. It goes back to the book of Hosea. It’s

the way God describes the Chosen People, the people who belong to Him in a special way through the covenant. And now 1 Peter is using that same terminology, “people of God,” to describe the Church, the Body of Christ.

Alright, so those are just a few key points. But that last one—to use technical terminology or theological language—is really a key point about what we call “ecclesiology,” the theology of the Church. What is the Church? The Church isn’t just an institution. It’s the new temple. It’s the new Israel. It’s the living Body of Christ.

Okay, now with that said, I’d just like to round out our discussion with two key quotes from the *Catechism*, because I think that this text from 1 Peter is one of the most important passages in the entire New Testament with regard to both ecclesiology (the theology of Church) but also to the theology of the laity, the theology of the baptized—those baptized men, women, and children—who don’t belong to Holy Orders, who haven’t been ordained to the ministerial priesthood. What exactly is the nature of the priesthood of the laity? This is another one of those things that were accentuated by the Second Vatican Council and which sometimes makes some Catholics a little nervous...that when we start talking about the priesthood of all believers, that we’re talking about again perhaps a Protestant idea, because that idea was very popular at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

Well, nothing could be further from the truth. The idea of the priesthood of the baptized or the priesthood of all believers is not just a biblical idea (as we see it already from 1 Peter) but a teaching of the Catholic Church. So let me just give you, in closing, two quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that exemplify this, which I think are really important for understanding the lay vocation. What is the vocation of lay people who are members of the Church? Listen to these words. This is from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 785:

On entering the People of God through faith and Baptism, one receives a share in this people’s unique, *priestly vocation*: “Christ the Lord, high priest taken from among men, has made this new people ‘*a kingdom of priests* to

God, his Father.’ *The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood.*”²

That’s *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 785, citing Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 10. Now for our purposes here, the thing I want to note most about that is that the *Catechism* uses the language of a “priestly vocation” to describe the mission and the call of the baptized to be “a kingdom of priests” and “a holy priesthood.” Now where is it getting this language from? Well, if you look at the footnotes, it’s getting it from the New Testament. This is how Peter himself—to say nothing of the book of Revelation—describes the priesthood and the call of the lay faithful.

So the first thing I want to say here is we want to make sure, when we talk about vocation, that we’re clear what we mean by that. Sometimes, especially in our own day, it’s become customary in contemporary Catholicism to talk about praying for vocations. And what we mean by that is we want to pray for people to be called by God to the priesthood or religious life. And that is a beautiful, wonderful and amazing thing, and we need to continue to do it every single day, to pray for vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life.

However, that custom can be misunderstood to mean that the only people who have a vocation are people who are called to priesthood or religious life. And that’s just not true. That’s not what the New Testament says, and it’s not what the teaching of the Church says. The teaching of the Church makes very clear that all of the baptized have a vocation and that vocation is in fact a priestly vocation. It’s the call to be a holy priesthood, a royal nation, a spiritual house, a new temple.

So if anyone ever says, “Well, I just don’t know if I have a vocation,” and they have been baptized, you need to correct them. Because they are fundamentally mistaken about who they are in Christ. In the New Testament, every single baptized person has a vocation. It’s the vocation to holiness. Now what does that look like though? One last quote from the *Catechism* to flesh it out. In paragraph 901, we read these words about the priesthood and the vocation of the laity:

² CCC 785, citing *Lumen Gentium* 10; cf. Heb 5:1-5; Rev 1:6

“Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and prepared so that even richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. *For all their works, prayers, and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body*, if they are accomplished in the Spirit—indeed even the hardships of life if patiently born—all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives.”³

That’s *Catechism* 901. Okay, so notice here...if the laity are really a priesthood of sorts, then that means by definition, they must have something to sacrifice. That’s what priests do—that’s what they’re set apart to do. So what is the sacrifice offered by the lay priesthood? Well, the *Catechism* tells you. It’s their work, their prayer, their apostolic undertaking (that means evangelization, which...that’s what we’re supposed to be doing, evangelizing), family life, married life, daily work, even relaxation of mind and body, as well as the hardships and sufferings of life—all of these things, if they’re done in the Spirit...

become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Now where did the *Catechism* get that language of spiritual sacrifices from? It’s from 1 Peter, right here in the New Testament. So when do the lay people offer that sacrifice is the final question. Well, we do it at the Eucharist, as the *Catechism* says:

these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord.

So the fundamental difference between the lay priesthood and the ministerial priesthood is that the lay priesthood offers the spiritual sacrifices of their hardships,

³ CCC 901, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 34, 10, and 1 Pet 2:5

their work, their life, their sufferings, their joys, their sorrows, their prayers, their evangelization—everything that they do in the world. The lay faithful offers that spiritual sacrifice to God along with (the *Catechism* says) the ministerial priest who offers the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. So there's a synergy there of the two priesthoods, baptized and ministerial, which is of course, exactly what we say in the Mass. You don't need me to tell you this. All you need to do is listen to the words of the Mass in which the priest says, "Pray brethren, that my sacrifice and yours, be acceptable to God the almighty Father."

So in closing then, at every single Mass, at every single liturgy, the laity can—not only can, but should—not just go to Mass to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, but should go to Mass to offer sacrifice in union with the Body and Blood of the Lord...the sacrifice of all their works, joys, prayers, and sufferings, and indeed all of their life, as they consecrate the world to God.