

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 study of the letter of 1 Peter. And the reading for this Sunday is from 1 Peter 2:4-9, a very crucial text for what theologians refer to as ecclesiology, that is the theology of the Church. And so let's take a look at this passage and see what it has to say about the mystery of the church. 1 Peter 2:4 says this:

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

This passage is so rich with so many things. I'll try to go through them in order. The first thing, before we get to ecclesiology, notice the christology of this passage. What is its picture of Christ. Christ is the living stone who is the beginning of a new temple. So elsewhere in 1st Peter we've seen the image of a new exodus, Christ is the new lamb. Now we're seeing the image of a new temple with Christ as the new cornerstone. And remember, the temple in Jewish practice and belief, in the Old Testament, is the dwelling place of God on earth. It's also the place of the priesthood and it's the soul place of sacrifice, of sacrificial worship. So the temple functions both as the dwelling place of God on earth, but also as the place where human beings come in order to commune with God, in order to worship God through sacrificial worship and through the priesthood in particular, okay? So that's the first point with regard to its christology.

Secondly, though, with regard to the church, the imagery of the church here is that the church is effectively a new temple that consists in the stones of the temple being built together to become this place of worship. So here, instead of earthly stones constructing an earthly temple, Peter describes the members of the church, the believers to whom he's writing, as living stones who are together built into a spiritual house so that they might be a holy priesthood and offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. So here, notice what Peter's doing. He's taking the language and imagery of Judaism, the stones of the temple, which to this day you can go and see the stones at least of the slab in the Wailing Wall, these massive stones with which the temple was built. The sacrifices that were offered to God in the household that was the temple, this massive earthly building, and Peter is now transferring this to the church. Not earthly stones, but human beings. Not a physical house, but a spiritual body offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ Jesus, through Jesus Christ. So the imagery here is of the church as the new temple of God and of the members of the church as living stones in this holy house. And Christ is both

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.

the temple in his own person, but there's a sense in which he's also the cornerstone. He's the first stone to be laid in the building of this new temple. So he says, here he quotes the Old Testament:

I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

So how do we become members of this house? Well, again, it's through faith. It's through belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Although not everyone's going to believe. Peter says the “stone which the builders rejected”, this is a quote from Psalm 1:18, “has become the head of the cornerstone” of the temple. And he's not just the stone that's the foundation cornerstone of the temple, he's also a stumbling block. So he's making a pun here. Jesus Christ is the rock for those who believe. He's a cornerstone of the new eschatological temple that's going to give praise and worship to God. But for those who don't believe, he's a *skandalon*, a stumbling block that they're going to trip over and fall because they can't see in him the Christ, the son of God, that he truly is. Very powerful and evocative use of these Old Testament images of the stones to reveal the mystery of who Christ is and then who we are in Christ.

And that last point is the key. If you look at verse nine, this is a fascinating list. Peter gives a litany here of different images to describe the believers to whom he is writing. And look at how he describes them. They are “a chosen race,” they are “a royal priesthood,” they are “a holy nation, God's own people.” Now, every one of those epithets would ordinarily, in a first century context, have been applied to the people of Israel. If you go back to the Book of Exodus, for example, chapter 19, when God brings the 12 tribes to Mount Sinai, he says to them:

you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The word holy in Hebrew, *kadosh*, literally means set apart. So the 12 tribes of Israel are set apart from all the nations of the world. They're a holy nation. Priests, they're a kingdom of priests because priests are someone who are chosen to offer worship, to offer sacrifice to God in the tabernacle in Exodus or in the temple at the time of David. So these images, even the image of God's own people, if you

go back, for example, to the Book of Hosea in the Old Testament, in chapter 2, verse 23, you'll see that this image of the people of God is a way of expressing the collective people of Israel who are in covenant with God. So for example, in Hosea 2:23, God says:

“And I will have pity on Not pitied,
and I will say to Not my people, ‘You are my people’;
and he shall say, ‘Thou art my God.’”

So to be the people of God means to be in covenant with God. To be not the people of God means to be out of covenant with God. So this litany of terms that Peter is using to describe the church are Jewish ways of referring to Israel. So effectively, what 1 Peter is doing here in chapter 2 is giving us a theology of the church in which Christ is the new cornerstone, the church is the new temple, and the church is also the new Israel, the new Israel of God, which as I've said in my other lectures on 1 Peter, is not unique to Peter. It's something you're going to see in the letters of Paul. So at the end of Galatians, Paul will famously end his letter to the Church of Galatia by saying, Galatians 6:16:

Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.

So the imagery of the church as the new Israel is really crucial for understanding everything Peter is saying in the first letter because, as we've shown in other videos, the entire theology of 1 Peter is of a church in exile, of a church on a journey, of a church that is moving from this world to the world to come. And just like the Israel of Jewish scripture was taken out of Egypt and became pilgrims, sojourners moving through the desert on their way to the earthly promised land, so too the believers to whom Peter is writing now are also exiles. They are also members of a new covenant. But instead of moving from the earthly Sinai to the earthly Jerusalem, from Egypt to the earthly land of Canaan, they're on a journey. They are exiles who are wandering and on their way to the heavenly promised land of the heavenly kingdom of God, who have been called “out of darkness”, love this image, and “into his wonderful light.”

Now, there's so many things we could say about this passage. It's very foundational for a rich ecclesiology. I would like to highlight, though, two features of it that are important for understanding the theology of the church today, especially in the wake of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. So as you probably recall, in 1962-1965, the church had its 21st ecumenical council. And many of the documents are here in this collection, *Vatican Council II*, translation by Austin Flannery. It's an excellent translation that I highly recommend. But in that council, there was a lengthy document, one of the major constitutions was *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. And one of the themes that animates that dogmatic constitution is the description of the church as the people of God, the people of God.

Now, I have to confess being somewhat surprised when I remember one time I was in a class and a student raised a criticism of that because they had heard in certain Catholic circles that the idea of the church as the people of God was a Protestant idea. I said, "Well, that's an interesting point of view. But it might run into the problem that not only is the church as people of God taught in an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, it also appears in what might be the first papal encyclical, which is 1 Peter." So I would hesitate to charge the First Letter of St. Peter with being too Protestant in its ecclesiology. But that just goes to show you that 1 Peter has suffered the fate of many subsequent encyclicals, which is that no one reads it and pays close attention to it. So let's just first of all dispense with the idea that the epithet or the theology of the church as people of God is anything other than a deeply biblical and deeply apostolic way of reflecting the fact that the church is the covenant people chosen by God through election and then ratified through the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. I mean, that's what the people of God means.

However, there's a second image here which some Catholics might also think of as Protestant, but which is not Protestant. And that is the imagery of the priesthood of the baptized. Sometimes, for example, Catholics will hear about the priesthood of all believers, primarily through our Protestant brothers and sisters. This phrase was a very popular phrase at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was used by some Protestant reformers to attack the priesthood, the ministerial priesthood, the ordained priesthood, and say, "Well, all the people of God are priests. Therefore,

we don't need a ministerial priesthood.” And that, of course, is an erroneous understanding of priesthood, but it's absolutely crucial for us to recognize that the idea of the priesthood of all believers, properly understood, is neither Protestant nor erroneous. It's also biblical and dogmatic. So the same thing, *Lumen Gentium*, the document of Vatican II on the church, taught about the priesthood of the baptized and our participation in it. And of course, it gets it from, once again, 1 Peter. So if you go back and look at the reading for just a second, you'll notice something. Peter describes the believers that he is writing the letter to as a holy priesthood, who are called to offer spiritual sacrifices. And then again, he repeats it in verse nine: "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood" — *basileon hierateuma* is the Greek there. *Hierateuma*, priesthood, is from the root, *hiereus*, which is the ordinary common term for a priest. So if someone in the Old Testament is consecrated to offer sacrifice, they're called a *hiereus*. And *hierateuma* is a state of priesthood.

Now, why is that significant? Well, it's significant because, in the New Testament, the only time the word priesthood is ever used — I'll make this claim and I think I'm right about this — the only time it's ever used both here in 1 Peter and then again in the Book of Revelation is to refer to all of the baptized and not just to the ministerial priesthood. I know this because I remember when I was a young Catholic starting to study the Catholic faith and starting to try to answer questions and objections to the Catholic faith, I remember being very troubled by the fact that I couldn't find a passage in the New Testament which clearly described ordained ministers as priests. Rather, if you look for the word priest, it tends to get applied to the laity or to all of the baptized. And that's only a problem if you have a misunderstanding of baptism and priesthood. Absolutely, certain people are set apart for what we call the ministerial priesthood, but in the New Testament, the term that tends to get used for them is actually presbyters. They are elders. And even to this day, the ordained priesthood is called the presbyterate from that Greek term, *presbyteros*. But according to Peter himself, and according to the Book of Revelation, which we won't look at here, every person who is baptized is baptized into the priesthood of Jesus Christ and is able to exercise that baptismal priesthood precisely by offering sacrifices. Not the sacrifice of the Eucharist, that's what ordained priesthood is for, but by offering what Peter refers to here as spiritual sacrifices in this new priesthood. So the theology of 1 Peter is not just of a new

temple or of a new people of God, it's also of a new priesthood to which all of the baptized belong.

You don't have to take my word for it, you can take the word of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. So if this language of baptism or priesthood, if it's new to you or if it's just something you've always wondered about, let me call your attention to the teaching of the Church on this matter. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 786, it actually quotes *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II on two things. First, on the priesthood of all believers and the priesthood of the baptized, and then second, on how that priesthood is exercised, because this is really the key point. If all of the baptized are priests in the New Covenant, in what sense are they priests and how do they offer sacrifice? Because that's what priests are always consecrated to do. And so this is what it says:

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."

So the Catechism there is citing *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II, paragraph 10, which is itself citing 1 Peter, okay? So the idea of the priesthood of all the baptized is something that Vatican II is retrieving and accenting so that we can understand that, if you are in Christ as a baptized person, you have been baptized into a royal priesthood. You are participating in your own way in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Now, that's not in the same way as the ministerial priesthood, that's for another talk for another time, but it is in a real way. So the question is, in what way? How am I a priest in the body of Christ? Catechism 901 answers that question again by quoting *Lumen Gentium*, this time paragraph 34, and 1 Peter, okay? So these are crucial texts for understanding who we are as baptized members of Christ. And this is what the Catechism says about the priesthood of the laity. Listen up, this is important:

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.”

Catechism 901, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 34, 10 and 1 Peter 2:5. Okay, this is so crucial. If you want to understand what it means to be a member of the priesthood of all believers, you need to realize that it has nothing whatsoever with doing away with the ministerial priesthood, men who are ordained to offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist. It has everything to do with you being consecrated through baptism to be a member of the royal priesthood so that in the Eucharist you bring your trials, your works, your prayers, your suffering, your daily life, any apostolic endeavors you might engage in as laypeople, you bring those to the Mass, and then you offer them as spiritual sacrifices, like St. Peter says, in union with the ministerial priest and in union with the offering of the body and the Lord in the mass. This is what you're supposed to be doing at Mass if you're a layperson. You're supposed to be exercising your baptismal priesthood, your royal priesthood, which equips you and enables you to offer spiritual sacrifices to God that are worthy of him and give praise to him through Jesus Christ.

And so often, unfortunately, it's the case that Catholics have fallen into thinking that priests are priests, and I'm just the laity, therefore I go to Mass to get something and not to offer anything. And it is true, you go to Mass to receive Holy Communion. That's the highest dignity and highest point of Mass. But that reception is actually predicated on you also offering. In fact, you offer before. And the key moment of this is the offertory. So in the offertory, the priest says to the people, "Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Father Almighty." What are you doing at that moment? At that moment, the priest's sacrifice, my sacrifice, is him offering the Eucharist. Your sacrifice is you offering your works, prayers, apostolic undertaking, family life, married life, daily work,

even your relaxation of mind and body in the spirit, and any hardships you're facing in life patiently born, you're uniting all that with the offering of the Eucharist to God, the Father through the Son and the Holy Spirit. That's your priestly moment. That's your baptism moment. The offertory should be a key moment in the liturgy where you are actively participating through the offering of yourself and your sufferings and your life in union with the Eucharist.

And that's what St. Peter's talking about here. The reason he even says this is because he's writing to Christians who are suffering. He's writing to Christians who are in exile. He's writing to Christians who are suffering like Christ suffered, and in doing that, they are actually manifesting and realizing the very priesthood that they were baptized into as laity. And so I would challenge you, I think it is not a coincidence, it's not inconsequential, that whenever the New Testament uses the word priesthood, it uses it not for the presbyters, but for the laity, because God is revealing to us that it's not only the presbyters who are going to lead the people of God in worship, but it's also the laity who will offer themselves and offer their spiritual sacrifices in union with the presbyters and in union with the Eucharist every time they go to Holy Mass.