

The Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 6:2-6
<i>Response</i>	I love thee, O Lord, my strength.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 7:23-28
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus answered him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 12:28b-34

The thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues our journey through the theology of the epistle to the Hebrews. And here we're looking at another famous passage, this time from Hebrews 7:23-28. And this is where Hebrews describes Jesus as a priest, a high priest forever, but also draws a contrast between the two priesthods — the Levitical priesthood of the old covenant and then the priesthood of Christ. So let's see what the letter to the Hebrews has to say in this passage about this contrast and the differences between the two priesthods. Hebrews 7:23 says this:

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself. Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but

the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever.¹

A lot going on here. So let's see if we can unpack this rich text. Let's begin with the first point. The first point that Hebrews is making here is to draw a contrast between the former priesthood (that would be the Levitical or Aaronic priesthood of the Mosaic law) and the priesthood of Jesus Christ. So we've seen a large part of the burden of this letter is to both defend and explain how it is that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the true high priest of the new and everlasting covenant... even though He wasn't descended from Levi and He never entered into the earthly temple in Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice to atone for sin.

And so the first thing that he begins to do here is to draw this contrast between the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Christ, and the first contrast he draws is that the previous priesthood consisted of many priests. Why? Well, because they die. Death would prevent them from carrying on an office or continuing in their office. But Christ, by contrast, is one priest who holds His office permanently.

So there's this series of contrasts being levied here. On the one hand, the Levitical priesthood consists of many priests who are functioning only temporarily because they are prevented by death, and they are sinners, and they're offering earthly sacrifices day after day after day in the temple.

Christ, by contrast, is one high priest who isn't prevented from continuing to exercise His office by death, because He died and has risen again. He lives forever — this is very important. The resurrection doesn't stop on Easter Sunday or 40 days later when He ascends. It continues. He continues to live in His resurrected body.

So His priesthood is permanent, He's without sin, and — this is extremely important — He continues forever... why? Because His priesthood is heavenly. He's not ministering in the earthly sanctuary in Jerusalem. That's not where Jesus

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.

was a minister. He's ministering in the heavenly temple of the heavenly Jerusalem, in contrast to the earthly one.

So this is going to be something that's going to be developed over the course of Hebrews. It's not fully developed in the passage for today, but it's going to become very central — the distinction between the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem, the distinction between the earthly priesthood of Levi and the heavenly priesthood of Jesus Christ, who's a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. We've seen this earlier in the book of Hebrews, when it talks about the fact that we have a high priest (this is Hebrews 4:14) who has passed through the heavens. But Hebrews is going to come back to this later and develop it after chapter 7. So He continues forever.

Now, that's the first point — this contrast between these two priesthoods, a temporary, earthly priesthood of many different priests, and the unified, the one priesthood of Jesus Christ that is eternal... not temporary. That's the first point.

The second point — and this is so crucial — in verse 25, it's because He has this everlasting priesthood that doesn't stop... He doesn't stop being a priest after He's raised from the dead. He doesn't stop being a priest after He ascends into the heavenly sanctuary, after He ascends into the heavenly temple. Because of this (this verse is so crucial), "consequently" — whenever you see that in Scripture, pay attention, because it means as a result of everything I've said before, it follows that:

Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

What does that mean? This is so crucial. It means that the priesthood of Jesus Christ and the sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ does not cease on Good Friday. It doesn't cease with His death on Calvary. He continues to exercise His high priestly sacrifices, His offering of Himself for all time as the heavenly high priest and the minister of a sanctuary that is not of this world. That's why people can continue to draw near to God through Him, because He's still acting as a mediator. He didn't

just say “the people who happen to be alive” when He was crucified and raised from the dead in the first century. He continues to act as high priest on behalf of humanity for all eternity. He has an eternal priesthood. It’s not like the men of the Aaronic priesthood who, when they die, would cease to function as priests. His is everlasting because of the mystery of His passion, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension. He lives forever. So crucial.

Now, one reason that is important, that He’s able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him (to act as a mediator) is because in these next verses, we’re going to have one of the texts that is frequently used against the Catholic theology of the Mass as a sacrifice — which we’re not going to go into depth in this particular video. We’re going to come back to that later in Hebrews, we’ll return to it. But one of the passages that will frequently be used against that doctrine is verse 27. So if you keep going, listen to what it says:

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Exalted where? Not into the Holy of Holies, not into an earthly throne of David in Jerusalem, but exalted *above* the heavens. That means He enters into eternity. He enters into the supernatural realm, not of the heavens (like the skies) but above the heavens where God dwells. Therefore:

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Okay, pause there. When Hebrews says that Jesus was offered once for all, the Greek word there is *ephapax*. Now this term... it can be translated in different ways. It has different connotations. It *can* mean “once and never again” — once and for all. If you say... I can’t think of an English way to say this, but if we say “once and for all”, we can mean “I’ve done this and I’m never going to do it again... once and never again.” But it can also mean — *ephapax* in Greek — once and for all time. In other words, I’ve done this once and its effects (or this event) continues; it endures.

So, as we're going to see a little later on in Hebrews, this verse will be used by some of the Protestant reformers — like Martin Luther, for example — to argue that the Mass (the Eucharist) cannot be a sacrifice, because Jesus died once and for all. In other words, there was one sacrifice. It happened on Calvary, and there can be no more sacrifice after that one time event.

Now in a certain sense, that's true. Jesus is going to die in His human nature. He's going to pour out His blood on Calvary once and never again — *ephapax*. From an earthly perspective, that's true. However, Hebrews isn't just talking here about what happened on Earth. In context, what meaning has the author of Hebrews suggested to us? Well, if you want to understand what he means by *ephapax* in 7:27, you might want to read it in light of 7:25, because he has also just said:

Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

So in His priestly role as mediator and intercessor, He is continuing that process not once and never again, but once and for eternity, because He's a heavenly high priest. He is a heavenly mediator.

So this is a classic example of a good old-fashioned Catholic both/and. So they're both true. On the one hand, from an earthly perspective, Jesus offers Himself on Calvary once and never again. He's not going to die a bloody death ever again — He does that once and for all time, never again. However, as a high priest who takes the sacrificial offering of Himself on Calvary, lifts up His human nature in the resurrection, and then brings it into the eternal heavenly sanctuary, Christ is also going to offer Himself once and for all time as a high priest who has been:

... exalted above the heavens.

Who has entered into eternity to act as a mediator, not just for those who wanted to draw near to God through Him in the first century, but until the end of time. And you can see this (if you keep going) in verse 28:

Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever.

The Greek word there, *eis ton aiōna* — think here if you know Latin, like in the Glory Be to God... Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and the Holy Spirit. At the end of the prayer in Latin, we'll say *in saecula saeculorum* — a world without end or unto the ages or forever. That's the Greek expression here. Now what does that mean, He's been made perfect forever? Well, the Greek word here "made perfect" — *teleioo* — as I mentioned elsewhere, isn't just a word that's used to describe something being made flawless. It's also the ancient Greek term for ordaining a priest.

So for example, in the book of Exodus 29, when Aaron and his sons are ordained, they are *teleioo*-ed. They are made perfect. They're completed; they're made complete through the act of being consecrated as priests. So the very fact that Hebrews is saying in 7:28 that Jesus is ordained forever or made perfect forever or made a priest forever implies that He's going to offer sacrifice not just on Calvary but in Heaven. He is offering Himself to God the Father not just once and for all, in a sense of once and never again, but once and for all eternity. This is a totally new kind of priesthood, in other words. What Hebrews is revealing here is that the priesthood of Jesus Christ and the sacrificial offering of Christ ... although it takes place in time and in history, isn't bound by time and history because He takes that offering up into eternity as the high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

And this is why — I'll have more to say about this as we journey through Hebrews. This is why, in Catholic theology, although there's only one high priest, there's only one priest of the new covenant — and that's Jesus Christ — men who have received ordination into Holy Orders can act in the person of Christ because they participate in that heavenly, eternal high priesthood of Jesus by virtue of their ordination.

What do I mean? Well, listen to the words of the *Catechism* — we could do a whole show just on this point, but I just want to link the doctrine (the Catholic

doctrine) of a priest acting *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ) with the letter to the Hebrews. Watch how this works. So in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1548, the *Catechism* addresses a question people might have. Well, in light of Hebrews 7, which says that there's just one high priest, one priest Jesus Christ ... why do we have so many Catholic priests and so many bishops? How can we have so many? Well, it's because they participate in the one priesthood of Christ in this way. The *Catechism* teaches:

In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth.

So notice there ... the *Catechism* is using the language from Hebrews, which is the only book of the New Testament to call Jesus the high priest in this way.

This is what the Church means by saying that the priest...

Here meaning the ordained priest.

... by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi Capitis*: "It is the same priest, Christ Jesus, whose sacred person his minister truly represents. Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration...

... that means his priestly ordination.

... which he has received, *is truly made like to the high priest and possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself (virtute ac persona ipsius Christi).*" [Pius XII]

That's a quote from Pope Pius XII. This is the key line:

Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law was a figure of Christ, and *the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ*. [Thomas Aquinas]²

And there the *Catechism* is actually quoting Thomas Aquinas — *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1548. Now obviously there was a lot said just now in that passage. But for me, what I wanted to highlight is this. In a sense what the *Catechism* is revealing here by quoting St. Thomas Aquinas and quoting Pope Pius XII is that there really ever only was one priest. The only priest there ever really was is Jesus Christ.

And we'll see Hebrews is going to show this in subsequent chapters. It's just that the Old Testament priests pointed to Him by being types. They were prefigurations of the one priesthood in Christ. And now new covenant priests — priests in Holy Orders — what they do is participate in His one priesthood. So the Old Testament priests prefigure the high priesthood of Christ, and New Testament priests (or priests of the new law as Thomas calls them) they act in the person of Christ, because they're members of His Mystical Body. He is the head, and they are members who act with His authority and in His person.

And the reason they can do that is because the priesthood of Jesus Christ is not confined to space and time and earthly existence like the Old Testament priests were. He has taken His priesthood into eternity, into the heavenly realm. And so as He in Heaven is offering Himself eternally to the Father, those who have received Holy Orders on Earth are participating in that heavenly sacrifice, that heavenly offering of Himself, where He gives Himself once and for all time, for all eternity, as a priest forever to God. They are participating in that priesthood in a sacramental and invisible way on Earth now until the earthly Body of Christ is united with the heavenly Church, the Church Triumphant on the last day.

So this is a powerful, powerful mystery. It's the mystery of the priesthood that Hebrews is revealing to us in chapter 7 — the mystery of Christ's high priesthood and then the Church, the *Catechism*, is revealing to us the mystery of the

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1548

ministerial priesthood and of each man's sacred, sacramental, and invisible participation in that one priesthood of Jesus Christ who remains a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.