

THE TWO SACRAMENTS OF VOCATION

2: HOLY ORDERS - *Jesus Christ the High Priest among his Priest-like People*

(The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1536-1600)

A note at the start

This part of our course will deal for the most part with *priesthood*. I have done this for two reasons.

1. Priesthood is the Sacred Order all that Catholics have come into contact with - until recently there were few if any deacons, and bishops are seen rarely. Of the three Sacred Orders (bishop, priest and deacon) it is most important therefore that priesthood be understood.
2. The Sacred Order of Priesthood is directly related to (and was designed by Christ to promote) the secular priesthood of all the Baptised - we will understand better the vocation of the laity as a *Priestly or Priest-like People* if we understand what a priest is, does and why he does it.

Having said this, the other two Orders - the Diaconate and Episcopacy (deacons and bishops) - will be covered in this section of the course, only not in the same detail.

Introduction: what is priesthood?

The Sacred Scriptures are shot through with the concept of priesthood and consecrated service of God. The word 'priest' may not always be used, but it is clear from the stories and the language of the Old Testament that what we mean by *priest* was a highly familiar concept to them - to such a degree that they could not conceive of their relationship with God without the priestly ministry. Certainly it was exercised in a way very different from the priesthood of today in the Catholic Church, and no one would seriously expect Old Testament priests like Melchizedek or Aaron to wear dog-collars or cassocks as priests do today, BUT the work of the priest and the

thinking behind priesthood which we know today is clearly identifiable throughout the Old Testament.

This raises the question: *What is priestly work?* The Letter to the Hebrews gives us a beautiful and concise definition:

- *"For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honour on oneself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was." (Hebrews 5:1-4)*

This text picks out the 3 essential and necessary things that mark priestly service:

1. **SACRIFICE:** *"For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed ... to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins."* The priest is a human being whom God calls to offer sacrifice to God on behalf of all the people. The purpose of sacrifice is basically two-fold: through sacrifice, man offers adoration (worship) to God because of his glory, and also begs forgiveness and mercy from him instead of judgement and condemnation because of our sins.
2. **REPRESENTATION:** *"(He) is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God ...He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward"* The priest is called by God to be the representative of the people: he speaks to God on their behalf, and he represents God when he addresses the people, teaching them the commandments of the Lord so that they lead holy and blameless lives. SO, priests are father figures when speaking to Israel, and Israel-figures when speaking to God.
3. **RECONCILIATION/MEDIATION:** this flows from the last - because he represents the people when facing God, and God when facing the people, his office is one of mediation - he is to broker peace between the two. The priest's work is two-fold - to reconcile man with man (bind the family together in trust) and reconcile man with God (restore what was lost in the Fall of Adam).

These three works are the essence of priesthood: anyone who carries them out, in part or in full, is to some extent, according to the witness of Sacred Scripture, exercising priestly ministry. This is our yardstick - the priest offers sacrifice to God, is God's representative to his people and our representative before God, and he is called on to bind the people together in harmonious unity around him and to bind them to God.

Now we can ask the question - who is the priest? Who exercises priestly ministry, and to whom? There are more priests than you may imagine!

1. Priesthood in the Old Testament

Priesthood runs throughout the Old Testament: as the people of Israel grew in understanding of the God who created them, their understanding of the role of the

priest developed as well. Nevertheless, through it all, the three-fold office of the priest is visible - he offers sacrifice to God, mediates between the people and God, and where possible, attempts to effect greater unity within the people of Israel and unity between Israel and God. There are really two levels of priesthood within Israel - you could call it a more local priesthood and a more national priesthood. The key to Old Testament priesthood is the *family*.

A. Priesthood at a local level

Within the family, it was common practise for the father to appoint one of his sons to speak on his behalf to the rest of the children. Usually the eldest son, he would be the voice of the father, settling disputes between the other children, being a force for unity within the family. In addition, he would be the mouthpiece for the rest of the children: they would go through the eldest son when they needed to go before the father. If they had broken a law or disobeyed the father, the eldest son would be asked to speak for them - partly, I suspect, because the children might feel that the eldest son would be the father's favourite and so more likely to get a favourable response from him! In effect, the eldest son's job was to mediate between the father and the children of the family and to ensure that differences were made up.

This model seems to have taken effect in religious circles too. Before there was any institution of official priesthood, each family would offer their own sacrifice to God. But what is interesting is that it does not seem that just any member of the family would offer the sacrifice (and in effect be the 'eldest son' between the divine Father and his human children), but that all religious duties were carried out by a single delegated person within each family - surprise, surprise, by the eldest son! In effect each family had its own priest - the eldest son would mediate between the children and the human father, and in addition would offer sacrifice to God, and mediate between the human family (including his own parents) and the heavenly Father. *The eldest son is the family priest.*

B. Priesthood at a national level

On a national level, Israel saw itself as a single family - it is no wonder therefore that this family needs an eldest son who will speak for all the others to God, and who will represent God to them. The book of Genesis is in effect the history of these 'national priest figures' - we call them the Patriarchs: Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They offer sacrifice, stand between God and his people to represent both to the other, and they attempt to mediate between them - through them God makes covenants (family bonds) with his people (esp. Noah and Abraham), and they pass on, wherever possible, their knowledge about God. The family of Israel has an eldest son - the Patriarch - who acts as priest for the whole nation.

This system is seen as God's way of re-uniting the family he created in Eden but which was fractured by sin. BUT, the system breaks down because the eldest son is not always reliable. Read Genesis to see a catalogue of failures in the eldest son:

1. Cain, who fails to unite the family around the father, Adam, so badly that he murders his brother Abel.
2. Abraham's first son is Ishmael, conceived through the slave-girl Hagar because Abraham lost confidence in the chance of having a son through Sarah:

Ishmael becomes the founder of the nation of Arabs (again, not a success if looked at from Jewish eyes).

3. Isaac, Abraham's other son, has two sons - the first-born is Esau who thinks so little of his role in the family of uniting it under Isaac that he sells his first-born sonship to his brother for a meal.
4. Jacob, Isaac's second-born, has 12 sons - but the first-born is not adequate for the office of eldest son: far from representing the father and settling quarrels among his brothers, Reuben takes an active part in the plot to enslave Joseph, the 11th son.

The priesthood of the eldest son fails because the first-born sons are not up to it. Every first-born son in Genesis (with a single exception) is found to be less than satisfactory. They have little understanding of their unique position in the family, often no great love for their younger brothers and sisters and often a hunger to topple their father and receive their inheritance as soon as possible.

C. Mad Cow Disease at Sinai - New Priests are ordained

The system finally collapses at Sinai, when the eldest sons show their collective failure to exercise the office of their birth. When Moses is on the mountain for forty days, receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the people of Israel lose faith and demand an idol to worship.

The eldest sons from the families of Israel were the ones charged with representing God before their own families and supervising the true worship of God - yet they do *nothing* to deflect the intentions of Israel, and in all probability even take an active part in demanding the worship of an idol. When Moses returns from the mountain, in horror at what they have done, Moses calls the priests to himself (Ex. 32:26, those who should be defending the honour of God) – but the only ones to step forward are *not* the first-born sons (who should have been first to defend the true worship of God) but *the tribe of Levi*: Moses orders them to cut down those who had instigated this sacrilege. Who are the 3000 men who are killed if not the responsible ones - the eldest sons? After the slaughter, Moses says to the men of the tribe of Levi

- *“Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, that he may bestow a blessing on you this day.” (Ex. 32:29).*

The first-born sons had failed in their office, and had been deposed. From now on until the coming of a first-born son who was righteous and worthy of the office, the work of the priest was to be performed by the tribe of Levi. Within the tribe of Levi, only the family clan of Aaron could be actual priests - the other Levites were assistants to the priests, helping them in the performance of their sacrificial duties. We can see all this in the Book of Numbers:

- *“The Lord spoke to Moses and said: ‘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 ... You*

are to enrol Aaron and his sons, and they are to carry out their priestly duty ... I myself have chosen the Levites from among the sons of Israel, in place of the first-born ... Take a census of all the first-born among the sons of Israel, all the males from the age of one month and over; take a census of them by name. Then you will present the Levites to me, the Lord, in place of the first-born of Israel'.” (Numbers 3:5-7, 10, 11-12, 40-41)

BUT we should remember, in the eyes of the Sacred Scriptures, this was an *adaptation of God's plan*, forced on him because of the failure of the true first-born to mediate between the Father and the other children. In time, the priesthood of the first-born would be returned – when a first-born son could be found who was capable of fulfilling the role of priest. The traces of this are maintained in the Law of Sinai that lays down that the first-born are consecrated to God in his service, and that parents were therefore obliged to bring their son to the Temple to redeem their son from God - almost to release him from service as priest within the family.

From the time of Moses until Christ, sacrifice was therefore carried out not at home by the eldest son (because they had lost this priestly right at Sinai) but by the new priests - the tribe of Levi: they were the new, if temporary, first-born sons (i.e., priests) so they exercised the three-fold office of priesthood:

- offering animal and cereal sacrifice,
- the double representation of people before God (pleading for God's mercy and forgiveness, especially on the annual Day of Atonement) and God before people (by teaching them the Law of the Covenant, administering justice etc., just as Moses had done in the desert),
- mediating between God and Israel, attempting to unite Israel in peace and seek her reconciliation with God.

D. Israel, first-born son among the Nations

While all this is going on, there is, in the Old Testament, a rather shadowy idea of the international level of priesthood, in other words of a priest (eldest son/sacrificer/mediator) who speaks on behalf of *the whole of mankind*. The book of Genesis presents the whole human race as being a single family, made up of a number of brothers (the different nations). Israel saw the peoples of the world as simply a group of children in a family: each nation descended from one of the three sons of Noah - Shem (Israel), Ham (Canaan, Egypt etc.) & Japheth (other Gentile peoples). Each nation they saw as a single individual, a child in God's family. The eldest son among the nations therefore has a priestly role in that family of representing the will of the Father to the other children, and of petitioning the Father on their behalf. The oldest nation is the only one to claim descent from the eldest son of Noah (Shem): the 'Shem-ites' or as we say today, the Semites - Israel. Israel is regarded by God as the first-born son in his family of nations. The nations are prodigals, runaways, and so he intends to preserve his priest-son, his first-born, the eldest son in the family of Nations so that Israel may lead the younger brothers back to their Father. This is why he intervenes in the slavery of Israel in Egypt – in effect a younger brother was holding the older brother in chains. This is exactly how God regards it – God instructs Moses:

- “And you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me”; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son’.” (Ex. 4:22-23)

For this reason, the Sacred Scriptures refer to Israel as a *priestly people* - it does not mean that all were priests who offered sacrifice in the Temple, as clearly they were not (only the Levites were permitted into the sanctuary, let alone offer sacrifice). It means the same as other references to Israel as the first-born of the nations, God's eldest son. In other words, the whole nation of Israel acted as one person in the role of an eldest son in a family. Each Jewish man, woman and child had the sacred obligation of presenting to the world the authority and teaching of the Father, so that the other ‘children’ (the pagan nations) might learn and follow his will. In addition, the entire Jewish nation spoke as one person to the Father, to beg him for the forgiveness of the other children and to beseech his mercy. This after all, is the work and privilege of the eldest son - sacrifice, representation and reconciliation/mediation

So - we have priesthood operating on a number of different levels:

1. **Priesthood in the family home:** the eldest son offers sacrifices to God on behalf of the whole nuclear family. They sacrificed animals to God and led their families in prayer and worship - this is priesthood in a ministerial and liturgical sense.
2. **Priesthood among the tribe:** the eldest son, or appointed leader of the tribe sacrificed on behalf of all the clans (the ‘younger children’) who made up the tribe. Each of the twelve tribes had a tribal leader who was in effect high priest for the entire tribe; he interceded with God on their behalf and taught the people the ways of God on his behalf. Again, this is liturgical and ministerial.
3. **Priesthood in the family of Israel:** the Patriarch (Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob etc.) would, as the leader of Israel, assume the office of sacrifice on behalf of the whole nation. Over all the tribes there was a single leader, an ‘eldest son’ who would speak on behalf of the whole nation and also teach the whole nation as God taught him. Again, ministerial and liturgical.
4. **Priesthood in the family of nations:** the ‘eldest son’ in the family of nations (i.e., Israel) would meet as a community to offer spiritual sacrifice on behalf of the other nations, acting as a single priest. Israel is called a “kingdom of priests” (or, a better translation, a “priest-kingdom” i.e., a kingdom whose character was *priestlike*). But note - this is neither ministerial nor liturgical priesthood. Each individual Jew did not offer sacrifices in the Temple as an ordained priest or lead the people in their worship of God. They never thought of themselves individually as priests but as holding a spiritual role to the pagan nations that was similar to the work of a priest within Israel or within the family. Together, as the eldest son of God they worked in a priestly way, interceding for the younger children (the pagan nations) *and* bringing the will of the Father to their attention.

BUT - there is a problem, pointed out by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. The purpose of sacrifice is to give due honour to God: this is simply not possible if the one

who offers the sacrifice is unworthy (through sin). In addition, the sacrifice is an offering to plead with God to forgive sin - again, this cannot be effective if the one offering the sacrifice is himself sinful. A sinful priest can not offer a spotless offering, which is the only sort which is acceptable to God - the offering can only be as acceptable as the one who offers it: a sinful priest is only capable of offering an imperfect offering.

So what? What does this mean? - that the sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament cannot take away sin, because they are not perfect offerings. They can be *signs* of a people asking for forgiveness, and *pledges* of the desire to do better next time, to try harder to follow the Law of God, but they cannot actually remove the guilt of sin. No matter how many goats, sheep or cattle they sacrificed in the Temple, *none* of them could wash away the guilt of even the smallest sin.

Equally, the priests who offered them could *never* be true mediators because the mediator must be an unaffected party - he cannot mediate on behalf of *himself*. SO – the priest would need to be untouched by the sin he is asking the Father to forgive. And where is there a priest in the Old Testament who was entirely without sin?

For these reasons, all the sacrifices of the Old Testament were never enough to bring about true reconciliation between God and man. The Old Testament priesthood is imperfect: it seeks a greater priesthood, which can actually accomplish all the three offices of the priest that are only symbolically acted out by human priests.

Recap so far

What we are looking for is a restoration of the original system before the disaster of Sinai - *the priesthood of the eldest son*. They were deposed because their sins made them unable to carry out their priestly office. Therefore, before that priesthood can be restored, we need:

1. **FIRST-BORN:** he will have to be of the eldest tribe of Israel, to be a true successor to the Patriarchs. The tribe ranking as first-born in Israel was Judah, because the three more senior tribes (Reuben, Simeon and Levi) were disqualified by the sinful lives of their founders (*see Genesis 49:1-10*).
2. **INNOCENCE:** a first-born son who is *qualified* to mediate - in other words who needs to make no confession of his own sin but can speak for the others. he will have to be without sin.
3. **PERFECT SACRIFICE:** he must be able to give to the Father a *perfect act of praise* - a perfect gift in sacrifice, on behalf of his own family, on behalf of the nation-family of Israel and on behalf of the family of nations which is the world. The sacrifice itself must be perfect and thus worthy of God.
4. **REPRESENT GOD:** he must speak truly on behalf of the Father – informing the younger children of the Father's will. He must know the Father's will fully and completely – they must be one with each other otherwise the plan and intentions of the Father could be misunderstood in the telling and the father be misrepresented.

5. **REPRESENT MAN:** He must be willing and able to speak to the Father on behalf of all the children, asking him to forgive their sins, to reverse the effect of the Fall and to give them the possibility of entering paradise. SO – he must be fully and completely human – immersed in human nature: one of us speaking on our behalf to the divine Father.

Being a ministerial priest to the Jews was of massive importance. They saw no conflict between being called a kingdom of priests and at the same time having a priestly tribe in their midst who performed the ministerial tasks of the priesthood (sacrifice, study of the Law of God, authoritative teaching etc.). The early history of the people of Israel showed where their power came from - their power lay in their priesthood. At the siege of Jericho, the city is taken by Israel not as the result of clever tactics, subtle military stratagems or brilliant generalship: the walls are brought crashing down by the ministry of the priests who carry the Ark around the walls, who lead the people in their common liturgical act of worship which concludes with the great roar of approval sent up by the people. Jericho is destroyed not by warfare but by prayer - led by the Levitical priests, without a single arrow being fired in anger. *Israel's power lies in her priesthood*, because after the catastrophe of the Golden Calf, God would permit only the priests to carry his Ark - they would mediate God's covenant love to his people, and by their participation, God would continue to defend his people.

SO - what is priesthood? From the Old Testament, we now know that priesthood is

- ***Sonship*** - the first-born who speaks on behalf of the family.
- ***Spiritual fatherhood*** - the one who becomes a father figure because he represents the father to the other members of the family.
- ***Ritual*** - it involves the leading of the people in acts of corporate worship, the family gathered together before the Father.
- ***Granted by God*** - it is gained not by the election of the people or by the desire of the man to undertake the office. It is not a right that any man can claim but the gift God offers to those he has chosen.
- ***Sacrificial*** - in that it requires the priest to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people.
- ***SELF-sacrificial*** - the priest represents the sinful people on whose behalf he sacrifices: he summarises them, *and so whatever they deserve for their sins, the priest must be prepared to accept on his own shoulders in order to save his people*. The High Priest, once a year, would enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the residence of God among his people, in fear and trembling because he was unworthy (through his own sins) to be standing before God, and he offered his life to God in substitute for the people – ‘take my life rather than theirs.’ This comes from the prayer of Moses on Mt. Sinai at the time of the great apostasy, when Israel worshipped the Golden Calf:

“ ‘I am grieved,’ he cried ‘this people has committed a grave sin, making themselves a god of gold. And yet, if it pleased you to forgive this sin of theirs...! But if not, **then blot me out from the Book you have written**’.” (Exodus 32:31-32)

One day, they believed, God would take the High Priest at his word when he prayed this and would take his life as a ransom for the sins of all the people. This would not happen until the time of Jesus Christ himself.

2. Jesus Christ: Our Great and Eternal High Priest

Jesus Christ restores what was thrown away at Sinai. The priesthood of the first-born son is restored. He is called a priest of the order of Melchizedek - i.e., from the time *before* the Golden Calf, in the time of Abraham. He is priest by virtue of the fact that he is first-born son of the Father (as Melchizedek was priest by virtue of *his* birth as 1st born son of his father, Noah) not by the temporary dispensation that God inaugurated because of the Golden Calf. Levitical priesthood would cease when a first-born son appeared who was worthy to intercede. Jesus is the priest *par excellence* because he fulfils the criteria for priesthood with infinite perfection. Using the five-fold description on the previous page, see how Christ fulfils the role of the expected priest:

1. **FIRST-BORN:** (he will have to be of the eldest tribe of Israel, to be a true successor to the Patriarchs). The son of Jacob who is given the role of the first-born is not Reuben, Simeon or Levi but *JUDAH*: Jacob disqualifies the older three in his favour because he is the upright son. He makes him head of the household, and his tribe are made the first-born in perpetuity "*The sceptre shall not depart from Judah ... until he comes to whom it belongs*" (Gen. 49:10). The First-Born who completes the priestly role of the eldest son - the final High Priest - will come from the tribe of Judah: as Christ does. NOTE: Christ is actually the First-Born Son by nature, not just through his human birth. If priesthood is first-born sonship, then Christ has a better claim to priesthood than any other human being because he is eternally the first-born of the Father. He has always been priest because he has always been the first-born Son of the eternal Father.
2. **INNOCENCE:** (free from sin so that he may intercede for his family) Christ the Priest is wholly free from sin - this must be true because he is God, and sin is the desire to be separated from God. God and sin are irreconcilable. Jesus Christ, the God/man, is entirely united to his Father. His holiness is entire and complete. Christ is the only man who can intercede without the need to seek forgiveness for his own sin. No other human being fits this essential qualification.
3. **PERFECT SACRIFICE:** (he must offer a perfect and acceptable sacrifice) This means he must be without sin himself, and give to the Father a gift without blemish, one which does not already belong to the Father by right of the fact that he made it. Only Christ fits this criterion: only he is without sin,

so eligible to offer the sacrifice. BUT also, the only gift that the Father could receive which is perfect (with no imperfection at all) but also which is not his already. We are the property of God because he made us – so we belong *absolutely* to him. But Christ is uncreated – he is God and so he is *not* the property of the Father but his equal, the uncreated God. SO – the only sacrifice in all creation that is worthy of God is Christ himself. Jesus is not just the giver: he is also the gift, the perfect sacrifice. Remember the self-sacrifice which is involved in the ministry of the priest: Calvary is the ultimate priestly act because only there do we have a perfect priest (Christ) offering a perfect gift, acceptable to the Father (Christ's life).

4. **REPRESENT GOD:** (fully - teach the will and wisdom of God without diluting it with his own worldly opinion or filtering out the less palatable parts). The long-awaited priest will have to be so close to God as to actually be God (because only God can fathom and understand the depths of God). Jesus Christ, the divine Son of the Father, is the only possible candidate. He doesn't just communicate the Father's will and teaching, as if relaying a message: he actually shows us the Father himself (Jn. 14:9). He taught “*all that I have heard from my Father*” (Jn. 15:15), the fullness of the Law, showing how it is to be kept (esp. in the Sermon on the Mount “*You have heard it said ‘You shall not kill’, but I say this to you...*” (Mt. 5). Christ is the only one who could reveal to us the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth – because he has been with the Father since before the beginning of time.

5. **REPRESENT MAN:** (speaking as one of us, from within humanity) The candidate will need to be a human being. He will petition the Father from within humanity, appealing for mercy for his *brothers and sisters* - remember priesthood and salvation is a family matter. The priest is the eldest son of the family who addresses the father on behalf of his younger brothers and sisters. Christ's incarnation as man is critical for his priestly role. By taking human nature, he enters our history and our race - his prayer for mercy to the Father comes from among us, from within the human race – “*You wanted us to be saved by one like us. Man refused your friendship but man himself was to restore it through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” (Preface 3 of Sundays in Ordinary Time)

As we saw at the very beginning, the role of the priest is essentially threefold. He is called to offer sacrifice, to act as intermediary between God and man and to effect reconciliation and harmony not only between individuals and God but also among the ranks of humanity. We should now be seeing how Jesus Christ is the perfect and unending priest

1. **SACRIFICE:** Our Lord offered sacrifice once and for all on the cross. His was the perfect self-offering, the culmination of all the sacrifices offered in the Temple in Jerusalem since these were substitution offerings (the High Priest would offer his own life - and when this was not taken, he would offer the blood of a lamb and a goat in place of his own). In Christ, the life of the new High Priest was finally acceptable and offered willingly by Christ to the Father.

2. **REPRESENTATION:** this two-way representation is perfectly fulfilled by Christ. To humanity, Christ is the revealer of the Father, the Father figure *par excellence* who speaks in the Father's name with absolute authority. In addition, Christ is the representative of humanity who petitions the Father for mercy: he is the humanity-figure whose prayer is effective because his offering is perfect.

3. **RECONCILIATION/MEDIATION:** the eldest son role - to strengthen the bonds of unity in the family by making peace between the younger brothers and sisters and continually restoring their relationships with the father. Christ's reconciliation is so effective that it has not just restored that was lost in Adam and the Fall, but has enriched humanity beyond its greatest hopes by uniting it to the Godhead, filling humanity with the Holy Spirit and making human beings into adopted Sons of God.

3. Priesthood within the Church

Christ is High Priest *forever* because he is First-born Son forever. His priesthood does not end just because his bodily presence on earth is over. The Letter to the Hebrews makes this clear: the author says the “*we have a High Priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven*” (Hebr. 8:1). This is the true Temple, of which all other places of worship are poor copies. The language is peculiar: he says we “have” a priest (not “had”), who “is seated” (not who “was with us on earth”) - in other words, *Christ in heaven after the Ascension is still being priestly, fulfilling his priestly role*. This means the offering of sacrifice, a ministry of representation and of reconciliation. If Christ is present in heaven as PRIEST he must be doing all these things. Certainly in the Book of Revelation, Christ is presented as *very* priestly: he is a **Lamb** (sacrificial animal) on an **altar**. He is also **vested as the High Priest of Israel** (Rev. 1:12-14) **standing in the sanctuary of God** with the sacred lamp stands (where only the priests were allowed to go) and **presiding over the ritual actions of sacrifice** (solemn reading from the word of God, incense-burning, libation pouring etc.) to which **the assembled people respond with liturgical actions** (praying, prostrating etc.) and **liturgical words and chants** (hymns, chants, “alleluia’s”, “amen’s” etc.). There is no doubt about it – St. John tells us in Revelation that Christ is offering sacrifice in heaven, interceding for the younger brothers of the family of nations. The only sacrifice that we have is the sacrifice of Christ’s life on the cross – so Christ is forever presenting to his Father the saving death by which he pleads for the salvation of his younger brothers and sisters. He does this in heaven, outside the confines of time, so that his single sacrifice is no longer restricted by time - it is an eternal and timeless event, eternally present and never ending. Christ the High Priest is offering Calvary to the Father as you read this, in the eternal present-moment of heaven.

This is absolutely essential for us – and uniquely Catholic. Christ’s priesthood isn’t over just because the sacrifice of Calvary happened almost 2000 years ago. Christ is *eternally* priest. He is *still active as Priest, offering sacrifice to the Father, making representation to him on our behalf and to us for the Father, and finally bringing about true reconciliation*. If Christ is still fulfilling his priestly ministry today, then it is possible for you and I to take a part in the priestly work he is carrying out.

Protestant theology is repelled by this because they feel we are saying that Christ's work was unfinished or inadequate. WE ARE NOT SAYING THAT: Christ's work is sufficient to free us from our sins – but his work is not just in the past but also in the present, freeing you and me from sin today. This is priestly work – Christ the High Priest is offering himself to the Father as we speak and this is powerful in our lives. His priestly work is without conclusion because he is outside time and the concept of conclusion. SO – all generations of the Church can be entered into this self-offering of Jesus to the Father and in that way they *share in Christ's on-going priestly work*. We aren't filling in the blanks he didn't cover – instead we are being allowed by Christ to do some of his unending priestly work with him. This shouldn't come as a surprise since we are the Body of Christ, supernaturally joined to him in Baptism, associated with all his actions and works by the Spirit that binds us together and to him.

1. **OFFERING SACRIFICE:** priests offer sacrifice. For there to be priests, there must be a sacrifice for them to offer. From the very beginning of Christianity, we have believed that the *animal* sacrifices of the Old Testament have been rendered obsolete. Yet we do have a sacrifice which takes their place: instead of the countless, bloody, animal sacrifices offered in the Temple, we have a single, unbloody divine sacrifice to offer to the Father. This is no less than the sacrifice of Christ himself on the cross. Christ perpetually offers this sacrifice to the Father - so all we need is the means to share in this offering, even though we are still on earth. The means is the Mass: it is truly a sacrifice because it is Christ's sacrifice on Calvary presented in unbloody form. We DO have a sacrifice to offer to the Father - Christ's sacrifice, united with Christ who is offering it. For this reason, it is Christ, the sacrificial victim who is truly present in the form of bread and wine. Note, also, that when Christ established the Mass (at the Last Supper) he deliberately pointed out how it was the making-present of his sacrificial death - he spoke of what had been bread as “My Body *which will be given up for you*”, while the cup is transformed by Christ into the Blood he said *he was about to pour out*. So, as St. Paul wrote, whenever we eat this ‘Bread’ and drink this cup “*we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes*” (1 Cor. 11:26). The Last Supper/Mass is the liturgical way that we can take part in the eternal offering by Christ of his own death on the cross which he gives in love to the Father for all eternity in heaven. BUT - as a sacrifice, we need priests to offer it in the person of Christ: men he has chosen to be the physical means he uses to be visibly present among us as the eternal High Priest. These are, first of all, the apostles – he commanded them “*do this in memory of me*”. When they “do this” (i.e., at Mass), they are making present on the altars Christ's sacrificial offering (his Body and Blood), enabling those present to share in the offering of Christ's sacrifice to the Father. YET it is still Christ the High Priest who is making the offering, *through* the apostles he chose who act in his name and with his power. The apostles handed this authority to the men they trained and chose - we call them “bishops” whose ‘ordination’ goes back to the apostles and thus to Christ himself. In their turn, they chose men to share a part of the priesthood of Christ that they had received: we call these men ‘priests’. Since the reality of Christ's presence in the Mass is dependant on the valid ordination of the priest who offers the Mass, you can see how vital it is to be sure of the ordination of the priest: since the ordination of non-Catholic priests and bishops does NOT go back to the apostles and to Christ but only to the

sixteenth century at the earliest, we do not equate the Eucharist they offer with the Mass we celebrate. The power to consecrate at Mass, to transform bread and wine into Christ's own sacrificial Body and Blood, is beyond human power and so we need *divine authority*: that is given to human beings through the sacrament of ordination to the priesthood - from one who is already validly ordained. The only validity we can claim comes from Christ - so the only validly ordained priests are those whose ordination proceeds from Christ through the bishops. Only these men are capable of offering the sacrifice of the New Covenant because it is not they but Christ who consecrates and whose eternal priesthood is made visible in them.

NOTE: in the Old Testament, only the Levites could become priests in the Temple. *BUT, not all Levites were eligible* - only those men who descended from the clan of Aaron, within the tribe of Levi. The other Levites, descended from the other clans *could not become ministerial priests in the Temple* - but they were called to service in the rites of sacrifice and worship. They were of priestly caste and thus permitted by God to assist in the Temple, to handle the sacred objects of worship (the Ark of the Covenant, the seven-branched candlestick, the sacrificial animals etc.). In the New Dispensation, there is a place at the altar of sacrifice for the new Levites - we call them 'deacons'. They, too, are sharers in the divine gift of ordination, even if this does not entitle them to the offering of sacrifice. Like the Levites, they have the privilege of assisting in the rites of worship and sacrifice. Like the Levites, they vest and stand alongside the priests of the New Covenant to help them in the performance of their priestly duties, especially in sacrifice. A reading of the prayer of consecration for a deacon, by which he is ordained, will show how the Church sees the role of the deacon as corresponding to the role of the Levite in the Old Testament Temple.

2. **REPRESENTATION:** Christ continues his dual role of representation (to God the Father on behalf of humanity and to the Church on behalf of the Father) through the men he chose for this work. Again, we are speaking first of all of the Apostles. What he taught to them he also commanded them to preach to the whole world. They, above all, are the guardians of the teaching of Christ for they received Christ's own teaching and healing ministry. More than this, he told them "*Those who hear you hear me*" (Lk. 10:16) - when they teach it is *Christ the High Priest, the image of the Father, whose voice is being heard*. From the very beginning, the Church has held that in matters of faith, it is the teaching of the apostles which is primary and authoritative: and we come across that in the constant teaching of the bishops, the successors to whom the apostles entrusted their ministry. The bishops, like the apostles, are the Father-figures of the Church, because through them Jesus Christ, who made the Father visible to all and who taught "all" he had received from the Father, continues to teach the Church, to present the Father's will to the Church. For this reason, we call our priests "Father" - beyond and before anything else, they are true Father figures because they have received a share in Christ's priesthood, he who was truly and fully the image of the God the Father. In addition to representing the Father to us, as Christ did, the priest represents us to God the Father. He is a sharer in Christ's role as the human being who appealed to the Father for mercy and forgiveness. The priest is he

who, through Christ, goes before the Father and offers his own life in the place of his people. His life should be characterised by the willing offering of penance and self-sacrifice because he is, in this way, taking his part in Christ's work of representing the whole of humanity to the Father and asking for forgiveness.

3. **RECONCILIATION:** Christ continues to draw his people to deeper reconciliation with God the Father and with each other through the men he calls to share his priestly character and work. He gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins, something that only Christ could do on earth. *“Receive the Holy Spirit. Those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. Those whose sins you retain, they are retained.” (Jn. 20:23)*. The gift of the sacrament of Confession, in which Christ absolves our sins through the ministry of the priest, is a continuation by Christ of his own priestly work among us. In Confession, Christ the High Priest comes to us to reconcile us with the Father through the merits and victory he won on the cross. These he applies to the repentant sinner - completing the words he spoke over the cup at the Last Supper when he described the reason for his dying on the cross *“it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.”* It is only the priest who may forgive sins because, as with offering the Mass, this is an authority which is not natural to man - no priest absolves with his own authority but with the power he receives from the bishop who grants to him the power he has received from an unbroken line stretching back to Christ. It is Christ the High Priest who is absolving, through the ministry, presence and voice of the priest. NOTE that this reconciliation is continued in the Church through the sacrament of Anointing the Sick - this sacrament brings the healing of Christ's grace to the souls of the sick, restoring their unity with the Church which may have been damaged by their illness and re-uniting those who through their sickness are falling out of communion with the Church (because they may be unable to leave their home, or because their suffering may cause them to question, neglect or even reject their faith in God).

4. The Church as Priest for the Family of Nations

The Church has an essentially priestly nature. She is, after all, the Body of Christ - she is the human body of our Great High Priest. Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the people of the Covenant are referred to in the language of priesthood. The Old Israel is called a Kingdom of Priests while St. Peter refers to the New Israel, the Church in similar terms - he calls us *“a royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9)*. In some way, the entire Church has a priest-like ministry that has to be understood in terms of the priesthood we see in the Old Testament but specifically through the priesthood of Christ. Just as the Old Testament sees each nation as an individual person who, together with the other nation-individuals makes up a single family, so the Church regards the world as the family of God in which the first-born son is the Body of Christ, the Church. We are the priest whom God the Father has raised up to mediate between himself and the younger brothers and sisters in the family. The Church is the priest-nation in the family of God.

In effect, we are saying that what the priest is to the people of the Church, so the Church is to the people of the world.

- What is the priest to the people of the Church? The priest is to the Church what Christ is to the Church - Christ is the Head of the Church, he is the Bridegroom of the Church, he is the “oldest of many brothers”, he is both the one who brings us to the Father and the one who brings the very person, the will and the words of the Father to us, he is sacrificial Lamb and minister of the sacrifice. The human priest is to the Church all that Christ is - he is called by Christ to be the visible person through whom Christ continues to be Head, Bridegroom, oldest of the brothers, Father-figure and representative of the faithful, self-sacrificing minister. He becomes the visible presence of Christ the High Priest in the midst of the Church. *NOW - what the priest is to the people of the Church, so the people of the Church are to the people of the world.*
- **THUS** - the laity of the Church are priestly because they are called to be the ‘Head’ of the world - to lead and govern society in the path of the Gospel. They are to be the Bridegroom - wedded in absolutely faithful love to the people of the world so that our single desire is to bring them to the fulfilment of their faith and knowledge of God. They are to be “oldest of many brothers” - the ones who take responsibility for the errors of the younger and more ignorant nations. They are to be Father figures so that the world may look at the parish and understand what the Father is like (faithful, just, the giver of life, charity and mercy, filled with absolute holiness and sincerity). They are to be self-sacrificing ministers of communion with God - placing their own lives and comfort as secondary to the spiritual needs and maturity of the nations. **THAT** is what being a priestly nation means! It does not mean that we are all equally ministerial priests each one of whom could celebrate Mass if we wished (any more than the priestly-people of Israel thought that they could all offer sacrifice in the Temple - they couldn't, and nor can the priestly people of the New Israel): it means that no Christian is relieved from a share in Christ's priestly work - which is best exemplified on the cross. Welcome to the priestly people of Christ!

Christ's priestly people have a share in the three great actions of Christ the High Priest, as indeed do the ministerial priests he chooses:

1. **SACRIFICE:** *“Come to him (Christ) ... 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.” (1 Peter 2:4,5)* The priest-like people of Christ offer sacrifice as do all priests: their sacrifice is the gift of your secular lives - these are not simply secular pursuits but are now transformed into the outreach by which Christ has access to your family, to your workplace, to your circle of friends. Every act of suffering, injustice, patience becomes a priestly action that Christ unites to his death on the cross. Your sacrifices are helping to redeem the world.
2. **REPRESENTATION:** this two-way process is reflected in the lives of the priestly people of Christ. You represent the nations of the world before the Father (who is their Father as well as ours – it's just that they are not aware of

it) each time you come to Mass. Praying for the conversion of our country, for the conversion of sinners and the spread of the faith is a priestly action: we are imploring the Father to show himself to the nations, to reveal his Fatherly love for them and to spare his wrath. We pray for forgiveness for the world's sins, as your parish priest is there to pray for the forgiveness of the sins of the parish. We call on the Father to be merciful as Moses beseeched God to be forgiving to Israel over the Golden Calf. In the other direction, the Church is called to be a Father figure to the world as the priest is a Father to his parish. Thus, the Church is only being priestly when she authentically reveals the Father's nature to the world. When we stand up for the truth, defend the rights of the sick, the elderly, the unborn, the family through marriage; when we live in accordance with the teaching of the Gospel in the spirit of faith and forgiveness, then we will be displaying the Father to the world as Christ displayed the Father to us.

3. **RECONCILIATION/MEDIATION:** *“For in him (Christ) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20)* Christ the High Priest is the bringer of peace. This was bought at a high price - he paid with his blood on the cross. His priestly people are called to follow in his steps: peace and reconciliation are never achieved cheaply and as Christ's royal priest-nation, we are asked to be prepared to lay down our lives, to become targets if necessary (as Christ became a target) for the hatred of those who seek to increase harm and violence in any of its forms. Although the sacramental form of forgiveness (Confession) is only available from a priest, nevertheless, we all have a part to play in establishing peace between individuals and nations.

Summary

- Bishops: these are the apostles of our day (*C.C.C. 881*). They are entrusted with the Gospel and commissioned by Christ himself to ensure its faithful transmission to the ends of the earth. They are the arbiters of its interpretation for as long as they are united to their head, the Holy Father. In opposing our bishops on matters of faith and morals concerning the whole Church (for instance the teaching that abortion is contrary to the law of God, that contraception shatters the meaning of the covenant of marriage, that Mary was conceived free from original sin by the grace of God etc.) we can be certain we are not holding to the complete deposit of faith and are not true to the teaching of Christ. In the name of Christ & with his authority, they govern the Universal Church as a college of bishops subject to the agreement of the Holy Father, exercising pastoral oversight as well as doctrinal authority. (*C.C.C. 883-6*). *See also (C.C.C. 1555-1561)*
- Priests: these are co-workers of the bishop. They exercise a part of the bishop's priestly ministry of teaching the faith, governing the People of God and sanctifying them through the sacraments and prayer. Through them, Christ the High Priest carries on his work of raising up a people united to him, growing

in holiness, bound together in mutual love and looking forward to the final fulfilment of the promise of the Covenant - paradise. (C.C.C 1562-8).

- Deacons: these are literally ‘servants’. They are ordained to make present to the People of God the specific work of Christ who came to serve, not to be served. They offer their lives to the Church as a living image of the servant God, who offered his life on the cross for the salvation of all peoples. They assist the bishop and his priests in preaching the Gospel with the authority of Christ, they give their lives to works of charity (such as Hospital and Prison Chaplaincy) and they assist in the liturgy. Through their work, Christ the suffering servant continues to serve and strengthen his people. (C.C.C 1569-71, 1588)

Appendix

The Catholic Church, Priesthood and Men

The Catholic Church teaches that the ministerial priesthood may only be conferred on men. This is one of the most visible differences between the Catholic Church and practically every other Christian denomination today, with the exception of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Until 1994, this position was shared with the Anglican Communion: only men could be ordained priests. The change in practice and doctrine of the Anglican Communion since that date has caused a very serious rift with the Catholic Church and has damaged the ongoing ecumenical dialogue between us.

It remains the teaching of the Catholic Church that only men can be ordained. Since 1994, there have been some within the Catholic Church who have expected, or even promoted the belief that at some point in the future the Catholic Church will adopt the thinking of the Anglican Communion, and accept the ordination of women. In response to this development, Pope John Paul II acted swiftly to clarify, once and for all, the unchanging and unchangeable teaching of the Catholic Church. On 22nd May 1994 he issued the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in which he laid out the Church’s teaching unequivocally. Ordination is reserved to men alone for various reasons including:

1. the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his apostles only from among men;
2. the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men;
3. and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church.

The Pope teaches, in this letter:

“In calling only men as his apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner. In doing so, he exercised the same freedom with which, in all his behaviour, he emphasized the dignity and the vocation of women, without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time.”

He continues:

“Furthermore, the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. Rather, it is to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.

The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable. As the Declaration Inter Insigniores points out, “the Church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: today their role is of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church.”

After all this, the Pope reaches the conclusion of the Church’s thinking:

“Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force.

“Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.”

Not everyone finds the Pope’s arguments convincing. This means that it is for the theologians of the Church to develop his words and to reach out for fuller explanations of the Church’s teaching. HOWEVER, we must be under no illusions as to the Church’s teaching:

- The Church does not have the authority to ordain women.
- This means that the Church does not do it now because she is not able to. NOTE – the Pope is saying that the Church *can't*, not that the Church chooses not to. In other words, this is not a condition that will change – it is of the nature of the Church, not just a self-imposed restriction of practice.
- THEREFORE the teaching is definitive – it cannot be changed. When the letter was released, some theologians argued that the letter only reflected the current Pope’s opinion and so could be reversed. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarified this area of confusion by declaring, on 28th October 1995 that the doctrine contained in the letter, since it was based on a long-standing consensus of the Church’s Magisterium (the Bishops teaching the faith in union with the Pope), was infallibly taught and pertained to the deposit of faith – in other words had been revealed by God.

It is not for a future Pope to reverse this teaching – it is for future Popes and theologians to develop the thinking and theology behind this teaching. Further discussion within the Church as to *what* the Church's teaching should be in the future, as if it were not already laid out today, is therefore fruitless. However, further discussion on this issue so as to clarify the theological underpinnings of this position – this is essential.

Above all, we must remember that ordination to Holy Orders is not something to which any of us, man or woman, can claim by right. No one can demand to be ordained – God calls those whom he chooses by his own sovereign freedom. Nor can anyone claim to have been unfairly discriminated against – because the election to Holy Orders is by grace and not by merit. If one is chosen and the other is not, this is the prerogative of the Lord God – and he is not answerable to our concept of justice or equal opportunities. God rarely chooses those whom, in the eyes of the world, would make suitable candidates. The apostles are a case in point – one was a notorious sinner (St. Matthew), another was impetuous to the point of bluster (St. Peter), two more were so zealous as to want to destroy those who would not accept Jesus (St. James & St. John), a fifth has become known the world over for his doubting (St. Thomas) – and we haven't mentioned Judas yet. All twelve abandoned Christ in Gethsemane when he was arrested. Who would have chosen these men to become the foundation stones of the Church, other than God? God calls the least likely and the most surprising: he is not constrained by our concept of who would be capable or qualified. In other words, the reservation of ordination to men alone (and a tiny minority of men, at that) is not about who is up to the task – or about excluding women on the basis that they are not qualified or capable: it is about the free choice God exercises in calling those whom he wants. This notion of vocation – initiated by God regardless of the question of personal worthiness – is too often left out of the discussion when the ordination of women is raised. No one is worthy, and no one can claim a right to be a priest.