

Lesson 2 Hebrews 4-5-6 Handout – Two Types of Priesthood

The Ministerial Priesthood and the Priesthood of the Faithful

Hebrews speaks of Christ as the one priest of the new covenant, who offers the one perfect sacrifice for sin in fulfillment of the former priesthood. Elsewhere the New Testament emphasizes the priestly identity of all Christians: “you are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ ” (1 Pet 2:9; see Exodus 19:6). By his passion Christ “has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father” (Rev 1:6; see Rev 5:10; 20:6). All Christians are now empowered to offer our prayers, labors, and every small deed of love and service as a pleasing sacrifice to God (Heb 13:16). Thus Paul exhorts, “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).

Although the New Testament does not use the term “priests” for the apostles whom Christ appointed, the Gospels contain subtle hints that Christ intended the Twelve to serve as a new priestly leadership for a renewed Israel. The letters of Paul likewise display Paul’s awareness of his apostolic ministry as priestly (see Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 9:13–14; Phil 2:17). From early on the Church’s tradition, reflecting on Scripture, maintained that the apostles and their successors are priests in a special sense by participation in Christ’s priesthood. Around the end of the first century, for instance, Clement of Rome uses priestly terminology to describe bishops: they are those who have “offered the gifts.” Ignatius of Antioch likewise speaks of “one altar, one bishop” in reference to the Eucharist. In the early third century Cyprian calls the bishop a “priest” (*sacerdos*) because in offering the Eucharist for the people he represents Christ. Hebrews hints at this ordained priesthood by asserting that “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat” (Heb 13:10), likewise alluding to the Eucharist.

The Catechism (1546–47) explains the two distinct ways of participating in Christ’s priesthood, that of the whole people of God (the common priesthood of the faithful) and that of the clergy (the ministerial priesthood):

Christ, high priest and unique mediator, has made of the Church “a kingdom, priests for his God and Father” (Rev 1:6; cf. Rev 5:9–10; 1 Pet 2:5, 9). The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own vocation, in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet, and king.

The ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests, and the common priesthood of all the faithful participate, “each in its own proper way, in the one priesthood of Christ.” While being “ordered one to another,” they differ essentially (Lumen Gentium 10.2). In what sense you might ask?

While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace—a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders. (**Ibid.** Healy pp. 108-109)