

# **The Catholic Priesthood**

## **(And the Priesthood of all Believers)**

By Greg Witherow

Catholics are sometimes asked, “Why do Catholics have priests? Priests are spoken of nowhere in the New Testament Church. Christ’s work on the Cross eliminated the need for priests and their sacrifices.” Additionally Catholics are told “the priesthood of all believers testifies against a separate priestly class. If Catholics read their Bibles they would know this.” At first blush these claims look problematic to the Catholic position. It is true, Saint Peter writes of the universal priesthood of all believers in his first epistle. And in the New Testament it is men called presbyters, not priests who shepherd the local parish. How can a Catholic respond? We will start by examining the universal priesthood as described in the Old Testament.

## **The Old Testament Priesthood**

After leaving Egypt God announced the Israelites would be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation<sup>1</sup>. The Protestant Reformation Study Bible comments on this as follows,

“Israel [was] to be a priestly royalty, a holy nation set apart from the world as a priest was set apart in ancient society.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet within this arrangement, there was still a priestly class. We see this when Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive the Law. Moses was told to not let the priests go with him. [Note: This is before the Levites became priests]. The same Study Bible comments as follows,

“This may refer to those who discharged the duties of priesthood prior to the establishment of the Levitical priesthood.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, under the umbrella of the universal priesthood of the Israelites there were two groups; a common priesthood of the people and a ministerial priesthood. This is vital to keep in mind when we see the universal priesthood transferred to the New Testament Church.

Israel’s universal priesthood was forfeited with the worship of the golden calf. Descending from Mount Sinai Moses cried out, “Who is on the Lord’s side?” The Levites rallied and at Moses command slayed 3,000 of the idolaters. As their reward the priesthood was transferred to the Levites. The Levitical priesthood continued to be divided into two groups. Only Aaron and his lineage were eligible to offer sacrifices. The other Levitical clans were responsible for the liturgical infrastructure including the music, singing, acting as doorkeepers and maintaining the apparatuses of worship and the tabernacle.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Outside the clan of Israel there was another type of priesthood. Melchizedek was a priest of God Most High who offered sacrifices of bread and wine. Additionally, Moses’s father-in-law Jethro was the priest of Midian as recorded in Exodus 2:16

<sup>2</sup> Reformation Study Bible comments on Exodus 19:6

<sup>3</sup> Reformation Study Bible comments on Exodus 19:24

<sup>4</sup> See Numbers chapter 4. The Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites clans of Levi were all given liturgical responsibilities.

## The Role of Priests in the Old Testament

There were three functions Aaron and his descendants performed that we will examine here<sup>5</sup>. First, they offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. Second, they heard confessions of sins from the people. Third, they served as spiritual fathers. These last two functions are less known to readers of scripture. We will therefore examine them here.

In the book of Leviticus the priests are instructed to atone for the sin of the people. In it we read,

“When a man is guilty in any of these, he shall confess the sin he has committed and he shall bring his guilt offering to the Lord for the sin which he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sins.”<sup>6</sup>

The Protestant Reformation Study Bible comments on this passage where it states,

“These sins require confession to God in the presence of a priest and a sin offering for the forgiveness of the sinner.”<sup>7</sup>

Additionally priests in the Old Testament were seen as spiritual fathers. In the book of Judges, Micah asks a Levite “to be a father and a priest to me”.<sup>8</sup> Later this Levite gets a better deal when a band of Danites ask him to leave Micah to serve their tribe to “be a father and a priest to us”.<sup>9</sup> This story illustrates how the Jewish people looked to their priests as spiritual fathers.

To conclude our look at the Old Testament, we see that God initially established a universal priesthood for the nation of Israel. This priesthood included common and ministerial roles. Upon transferring the priesthood to the tribe of Levi, these two roles remained intact. We now have a context for the priesthood’s New Testament application.

## The New Testament Priesthood

In the New Testament the universal priesthood is transferred to the new Israel, the Church. Saint Peter writes, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”. Again, Peter is quoting the passage in Exodus where Israel was granted the priesthood. The priesthood taken from Israel, given to the tribe of Levi is now awarded to New Testament believers.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms the priesthood of all believers.

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<sup>5</sup> The priests also were responsible for teaching the Law. But teaching was not restricted to the Levites. For example in the time of Christ the Pharisees were the primary teachers of the Law. A Pharisee could be from any tribe. Additionally the Scribes, Sadducees and presumably the Essenes played a teaching role.

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 5:5,6

<sup>7</sup> Reformation Study Bible notes on Leviticus 5:5

<sup>8</sup> Judges 17:10

<sup>9</sup> Judges 18:19

“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, the Father. The baptized by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit are consecrated to be a spiritual house and **a holy priesthood**.”<sup>10</sup>

As in the Old Testament, the priestly duty is delegated into two roles. Through baptism the laity is a priestly people. Through Holy Orders men are appointed to a ministerial priesthood.

“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. In what sense? 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**.”<sup>11</sup>

In this way the Catholic teaching of the universal priesthood mirrors what God established in the Old Testament. Christ perfects and transforms the Old Covenant rather than disposing of it.<sup>12</sup> This is what Christ meant when he said, “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them”.<sup>13</sup>

## The Role of Priests in the New Testament

The ministerial priesthood provides spiritual fatherhood, hears confession of sin and offers Eucharistic sacrifice in the Mass. We will examine them here. To begin with, Saint Paul testifies of his spiritual fatherhood at Corinth.

“For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I **became your father in Christ Jesus** through the gospel.”<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere Paul addresses Titus and Timothy as his sons in the faith. It should not shock or offend us when the New Testament uses the language of family. For the record, Titus, Timothy and the church of Corinth looked to Paul as their spiritual father.

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<sup>10</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), paragraph 784

<sup>11</sup> CCC 1547

<sup>12</sup> There are many examples that illustrate this point. The Passover is transformed into the Eucharist and the transformation of circumcision into baptism are two examples of this point.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:17 Revised Standard Version

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:15 – Revised Standard Version. Paul is not contradicting Christ’s teaching of “call no man father (Matthew 23:9). Christ’s point was that God was the ultimate father. Therefore Christians can celebrate Father’s Day and call their biological dads “father”. Likewise, Saint Paul can call himself father in a spiritual sense.

Christ gave the apostles (and thus New Testament priests) the duty to hear confessions and to either forgive or retain sin.

“And when he had said this he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins on any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Saint Paul underscores the link between the Passover Sacrifice and the Eucharist<sup>16</sup> in his letter to the Corinthians where he states, “For Christ our Paschal Lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival”<sup>17</sup>. The Catechism states the following:

“The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its *memorial* and because it applies its fruit.”<sup>18</sup>

It is the role of the New Testament priest to offer up the un-bloody sacrifice of Christ. Thus we see the priestly service of fatherhood, hearing confession and offering sacrifice in the Church.

## Conclusion

The title of priest is used nowhere in the New Testament. But neither is the title Pastor or Reverend; titles Protestants use. Yet all these titles are appropriate. What is important is that the priestly functions of spiritual fatherhood, hearing confession and the Eucharistic sacrifice are responsibilities of the presbyter<sup>19</sup> in a parish. For the record, a Catholic priest (also titled Reverend, Pastor or Parochial Vicar) is a presbyter.

“The priests, prudent cooperators of the episcopal college and its support and instrument, called to the service of the People of God, constitute together with their bishop, a unique sacerdotal college (**Presbyterium**) dedicated, it is true, to a variety of distinct duties...The unity of the **Presbyterium** finds the liturgical expression in the custom of the **Presbyters** imposing hands, after the bishop, during the rite of ordination.”<sup>20</sup>

Saint Paul was called “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the **priestly service** of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Paul understood his ministry within a priestly context. So too do Catholic priests, who are called to a ministerial priesthood within the universal priesthood. In this way the Old Testament priesthood of Israel is fulfilled in the New Testament Church, the New Israel.

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<sup>15</sup> John 20:22, 23 – Revised Standard Version

<sup>16</sup> I wrote a paper called The Sacrifice of the Mass. It can be found on the Holy Trinity web site here: <http://www.holytrinityparish.net/faith.html>

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:7, 8

<sup>18</sup> CCC 1366

<sup>19</sup> As an Etymology word study, the word “priest” is ultimately derived from the Greek via Latin “presbyter”, the term usually translated as “elder”. (So says *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition, The World Publishing Company, Cleveland OH, s.v. “priest”). Presbyter can also be translated as “old man”, giving a sense of fatherhood.

<sup>20</sup> CCC 1567, 1568

<sup>21</sup> Romans 15:16