

# FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

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One of the obstacles that stand in the way of the Mission of Jesus Christ, and thus the Mission of the Church is in fact the priesthood in reference to the Holy Sacrifice. The manner in which each of us handles the body and the blood of Jesus can mean life to the World, indifference, or even whether we live or die.

O Lord our Father, may your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

With the language and theology presented in the epistle today, from Hebrews chapter 5, I would like to present to you one more obstacle that keeps us from the Mission of Christ. To do this I'm going to talk about the fact that there are three aspects of the priesthood (if just one wasn't confusing enough)! I'm also going to make use of what's known from the Latin mass as the Orationes Fratres, to see these three more specifically. That is the request for prayer and the giving of it when the celebrant says, Pray brethren, and your response, as in the bulletin, May the Lord.

First, and foremost there is the priesthood of Jesus Christ. It is from this priesthood, and the sacrifice made by Christ that we have any sense of the Holy Eucharist at all, of course. The author of the letter to the Hebrews interweaves this priesthood throughout his entire letter, seeing most likely that his audience is lacking in this understanding. And as they are lacking in this understanding, so is their Mission to the World. It is incredible, Holy Spirit inspired thinking and writing, and the entire letter is due your attention in reading and reflection.

We are told in Hebrews that Jesus was appointed to be a high priest once and for all, appointed by God the Father; but one who did not enter into the holy of holies in the OLD covenant manner. As the author of Hebrews would say in a later chapter, <sup>12</sup> He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption [for us]."

And it is this eternal redemption for us by the blood of Jesus of which we must truly be good stewards. So there is the offering made by the holy priesthood created by baptism as we come to the moment of receiving the Real Presence of Christ in his body and blood.

And this brings the matter of obstacle to hand. I turn to that famous section in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, as he wrote, probably with the same issues as of the letter to the Hebrews:

**11:23** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."**25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Paul went on to say, **26** For

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as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

**27** Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. **28** Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. **29** For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. **30** That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.<sup>h</sup>

Likewise, Peter would say,(1 Pet 2:5f) , “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. Who is, as he quoted from the bible,

“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.

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,<sup>[a]</sup> that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

The apostles agree. If therefore you are eating the body and blood of Jesus unexamined and in an unworthy manner, or as Peter says, as a holy priesthood you are not offering an acceptable sacrifice through Jesus Christ, then you will be sick, you might die, you will be crushed. And with your crushing goes the Mission of Jesus Christ to the World failed. A heavy, imposing obstacle.

It is not only the holy priesthood of all believers. Then there is the offering made by the ordained priest at the altar. This ministry must never ever be taken for granted by the priest, nor by those around. It is true that an early heresy of requiring proof of perfection or personal holiness to make a valid Mass was rejected, which allows then any priest to say the Mass without needing to qualify it. But this by no means excuses the priest from their devotion to Christ, their discipline of prayer and study, their preparation for saying the Mass. And most of us are well aware of what happens to the Body of Christ when a priest completely fails. Your prayers for this priesthood then are essential.

So we need some very good priesthood news. Something that we can count on in our sometimes overwhelming consideration of receiving Communion. And that good news is that, as scripture explains, [Heb 9:25f] This eternal high priest Jesus did not enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own.<sup>26</sup> Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself..

As we then consider the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, I want to refer specifically to two things that might assist our thinking in regards to the obstacle of not being prepared or ignorant in our faith and mission of the sacrifice of Christ in his body and blood.

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First, the inherent power and second, our responsibilities in Christ as a holy priesthood.

Regarding inherent power, the phenomenon of electricity can be an analogy. We can imperfectly liken the receiving of the Divine Power of the blood of Jesus Christ to the handling of electricity. Anybody who's ever been shocked by electricity or seen the results in another who has, knows that there is a way to handle electricity properly and safely, and there are ways not to. It is power all by itself. There is no doubt that it is beneficial and necessary to our modern world. But it can also destroy anything in its wild path because it is in fact so powerful. Good electricians and any construction worker know you must approach working with it with open eyes, a focused mind, and the removal of distraction.

As the apostles talk about it, It is the same way with the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is PERFECT power, and it is supremely beneficial, as the catechism says, and we add into our prayers at each mass, because -- we receive the forgiveness of our sins, we are strengthened in our union with Christ and one another, and it is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life.

So Paul said this divine power, like electricity, handled improperly can do even the same : physical life-threatening damage, not to mention spiritual and soulful. The catechism answers the question of how we might be prepared to avoid such damage. It says we are to be prepared by examining our lives, repenting of our sins, be in love and charity with all people. And to sum it I would add, and walk humbly with our God.

The other item is that prayer, the "Pray, Bretheren", that most likely began 1500 years ago as a bishop would ask for the prayers of his clergy standing at the Lord's table. As he would prepare to pray over the bread and the wine by saying the Sanctus, he would simply ask them quietly to pray for him, perhaps even with the laying on of hands. Something like the deacon who is just about to read the gospel to receive a blessing from the bishop or celebrant for its efficacy through that gospellor. This was a simple, humble action recognizing the ministry of the consecration of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and the honor of doing so.

As this went on over centuries, a developing awareness came into this moment, that it was not only the Bishop as priest standing at the altar, but it was also the holy priesthood, the royal priesthood, , as St Peter would say, the entire body of Christ gathered.

It was the awareness that a complimentary reality stood together: the ordained priest, and the holy priesthood by baptism. That is, again, they are similar priesthoods, and yet different in their functions. So as not all stand at the altar, so the priest cannot presume to contain all or be the be all for the people of God gathered. in that sense (understood correctly) the sacrifice being offered is not the priest's alone, but also the people's. Both part of the Mystical Body of Christ, each in their own way participates in the one sacrifice,

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the priest by the power he received in the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the people by the power they received at Baptism.

Thus it is not correct in the Orate, fratres, to say anything less than my sacrifice and yours. To say “our” means only that the Latin words for each had collapsed into a wrongly translated collective.

Like the early bishop, the priest is asking the people for their prayers, that the sacrifice about to be offered be found pleasing to God the Father. This is a profound moment of humility on the part of both priest and people. In pleading that the eucharistic action be found acceptable to the Father, we recognize that it is only by an act of sheer grace that He both permits and receives it. However, this in no way diminishes our confidence that the sacrifice is found acceptable by the Father. There is this dance between our confidence and the humility with which we plead to the Father to accept the action. In Christian hope we find a perfect synthesis of confidence and humility.

This explication of theology is important to share with you because as here we see both awe and beauty, humble access and sacramental benefit, a full theology as well of the Body of Christ, and given our Christian hope, our humility would not be necessary if there were not also **grave danger** in not being prepared, as Paul said, or allowing the words you say in response to the celebrant to be rote, or unthinking. It is the danger of not being prepared to have come prepared to make your own sacrifice **as the Church**.

And if this is not prepared, then **the Church** goes no further forward in serving Christ and his mission due to ignorance and selfishness. This is about as intentional as it gets.

You will see this represented in two small parts in the Orate Fratres in our Mass. One is about yours and our sacrifice being presented. The other is the word “May.” This is simply the awareness that all of us, priest and people in Christ, speak and act in the name of Jesus Christ to the Father. And we speak without presumption of perfection. There are command forms, but this is not one of them. It is the simple request for prayer and the giving of it. ““May the Lord accept”.

It is good, is it not, that we have a high priest “who is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself in his own incarnation was subject to weakness.” And yet did not sin. And so Jesus gave his body and his blood as only he could, so we also might be raised to glory, and his light and love shine through us. Let us be prepared to receive properly, and not inhibit the Mission. That Jesus calls us his friends is such amazing grace.

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