



The Holy See

HOLY MASS AND EUCHARISTIC PROCESSION
TO THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY MAJOR
ON THE SOLEMNITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Square outside the Basilica of Saint John Lateran
Thursday, 3 June 2010*

(Video)

[Images of the Celebration](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The priesthood of the New Testament is closely linked to the Eucharist. For this reason today, on the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* and almost at the end of the [Year for Priests](#), we are invited to meditate on the relationship between the Eucharist and the priesthood of Christ. We are also oriented to this direction by the First Reading and the Responsorial Psalm that present Melchizedek. The brief passage from the Book of Genesis (cf. 14: 18-20) says that Melchizedek, King of Salem, was "priest of God Most High" and therefore "brought out bread and wine" and "blessed him [Abram]", who had just returned after winning a battle. Abram himself gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything. In the last verse, the Psalm in turn contains solemn words, sworn by God himself who declares to the Messiah-King: "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110[109]: 4); thus the Messiah is not only proclaimed King but also Priest. It is from this passage that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews drew for his broad and articulate explanation. And we have re-echoed it in the refrain: "You are a priest for ever" Christ the Lord: almost a profession of faith that acquires special significance on today's Feast. It is the joy of the community, the joy of the whole Church which, in contemplating and adoring the Most Holy Sacrament, recognizes in it the real and permanent presence of Jesus, the Eternal High Priest.

The Second Reading and the Gospel focus attention on the Eucharistic mystery instead. From the

First Reading of the Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 11: 23-26) is taken the fundamental passage in which St Paul reminds this community of the meaning and value of the "Lord's Supper", which the Apostle had transmitted and taught and which risked being lost. Whereas the Gospel is St Luke's version of the account of the miracle of the loaves and fishes: a sign attested to by all the Evangelists and that foretells the gift that Christ was to make of himself in order to give to all humanity eternal life. Both these texts highlight the prayer of Christ, in the act of breaking bread. There is of course a clear difference between the two moments: when he breaks the loaves and fishes for the crowds, Jesus thanks the heavenly Father for his providence, trusting that he will not let the people go hungry. In the Last Supper, instead, Jesus transforms the bread and wine into his own Body and Blood so that the disciples may be nourished by him and live in close and real communion with him.

The first thing always to remember is that Jesus was not a priest in accordance with the Jewish tradition. He did not come from a family of priests. He did not belong to the lineage of Aaron but rather that of Judah and was therefore legally barred from taking the path of the priesthood. Jesus of Nazareth himself and his activities do not follow in the wake of the ancient priests but rather in that of the prophets. And in this line Jesus took his distance from the ritual conception of religion, criticizing the structure that gave value to human precepts linked to ritual purity rather than to the observance of God's commandments: namely, love of God and of one's neighbour *which, as the Lord says*, "is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk 12: 33). Even in the Temple of Jerusalem, a sacred place par excellence, Jesus makes an exquisitely prophetic gesture when he drives out the money changers and livestock vendors, all things that served for offering the traditional sacrifices. Thus Jesus was not recognized as a priestly but rather as a prophetic and royal Messiah. Even his death, which we Christians rightly call a "sacrifice", had nothing to do with the ancient sacrifices; indeed, it was quite the opposite; it was the execution of a death sentence by crucifixion, the most ignominious punishment, which took place outside the walls of Jerusalem.

In what sense, therefore, was Jesus a priest? The Eucharist itself tells us. We can start with the simple words that describe Melchizedek: He "brought out bread and wine" (Gen 14: 18). This is what Jesus did at the Last Supper: he offered bread and wine and in that action recapitulated the whole of himself and his whole mission. That gesture, the prayer that preceded it and the words with which he accompanied it contain the full meaning of the mystery of Christ, as the Letter to the Hebrews expresses it in a crucial passage that we should quote: "In the days of his flesh", the author writes of Our Lord, "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek" (5: 8-10). In this text, which clearly alludes to the spiritual agony of Gethsemane, Christ's Passion is presented as a prayer and an offering. Jesus faces his "hour" which leads him to death on the Cross, immersed in a profound prayer that consists of the union of

his own will with that of the Father. This dual yet single will is a will of love. Lived in this prayer, the tragic trial that Jesus faces is transformed into an offering, into a living sacrifice.

The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus "was heard". In what sense? In the sense that God the Father liberated him from death and restored him to life. He was heard precisely because of his total abandonment of himself to the Father's will: God's plan of love could be perfectly fulfilled in Jesus who, having obeyed to the end, to his death on the Cross, became a "cause of salvation" for all who obey him. In other words, he became the High Priest for having taken upon himself all the sin of the world, as the "Lamb of God". It is the Father who confers this priesthood upon him at the very moment in which Jesus passes over from his death to his Resurrection. He is not a priest according to the Mosaic law (cf. Lev 8-9), but "after the order of Melchizedek", according to a prophetic order, dependent only on his special relationship with God.

Let us return to the words of the Letter to the Hebrews which say: "Although he was a Son he learned obedience through what he suffered". Christ's priesthood entailed suffering. Jesus truly suffered and did so for our sake. He was the Son and did not need to learn obedience but we do, we did need to and we always will. Therefore the Son took upon himself our humanity and for our sake he let himself be "taught" obedience in the crucible of suffering, he let himself be transformed by it like the grain of wheat that has to die in the earth in order to bear fruit. By means of this process Jesus was "made perfect" in Greek, *teleiotheis*. We must pause to reflect on this term because it is very important. It indicates the fulfilment of a journey, that is, the very journey and transformation of the Son of God through suffering, through his painful Passion. It is through this transformation that Jesus Christ became the "high priest" and can save all who entrust themselves to him. The term *teleiotheis*, correctly translated by the words "made perfect", belongs to a verbal root which, in the Greek version of the Pentateuch, that is, the first five Books of the Bible, is always used to mean the consecration of the ancient priests. This discovery is very valuable because it tells us that for Jesus the Passion was like a priestly consecration. He was not a priest according to the Law but became one existentially in his Pasch of Passion, death and Resurrection: he gave himself in expiation and the Father, exalting him above every creature, made him the universal Mediator of salvation.

Let us return in our meditation, to the Eucharist that will shortly be the focus of our liturgical assembly. In it, Jesus anticipated his Sacrifice, a non-ritual but a personal sacrifice. At the Last Supper his actions were prompted by that "eternal spirit" with which he was later to offer himself on the Cross (cf. Heb 9: 14). Giving thanks and blessing, Jesus transforms the bread and the wine. It is divine love that transforms them: the love with which Jesus accepts, in anticipation, to give the whole of himself for us. This love is nothing other than the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, who consecrates the bread and the wine and changes their substance into the Body and Blood of the Lord, making present in the Sacrament the same sacrifice that is fulfilled in a bloody way on the Cross. We may therefore conclude that Christ is a true and effective priest because he was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, he was filled with the whole

fullness of God's love and precisely "in the night on which he was betrayed", precisely, "in the hour... of darkness" (cf. Lk 22: 53). It is this divine power, the same power that brought about the Incarnation of the Word, that transformed the extreme violence and extreme injustice into a supreme act of love and justice. This is the work of the priesthood of Christ which the Church inherited and extended in history, in the dual form of the common priesthood of the baptized and the ordained priesthood of ministers, in order to transform the world with God's love. Let us all, priests and faithful, nourish ourselves with the same Eucharist, let us all prostrate ourselves to adore it, because in it our Master and Lord is present, the true Body of the Jesus is present in it, the Victim and the Priest, the salvation of the world. Come let us exult with joyful songs! Come, let us adore him! Amen.

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