

Hierarchical priesthood and royal priesthood in the New Testament

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We must respect the silence of the New Testament, which never refers to a Christian as a priest. Only one person, Christ Jesus, is described as having this salvific function in the *Letter to the Hebrews*. For it is indeed a function that is being referred to here. Furthermore, the discretion of Scripture – apart from the *Letter to the Hebrews* – on the priesthood of Jesus himself is also significant. From the outset, faith does not focus on this aspect. It belongs to a larger whole." This is one of the conclusions drawn by Canadian Dominican Jean-Marie-R. Tillard in his article "Priesthood," published in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (1990). It reflects a widely held position in Catholic theological teaching. At present, it can even be considered a moderate voice among the various opinions within the Church. If it proves to be accurate, in the long term it could lead to major changes in the Church's doctrine and practice regarding the ministerial priesthood. The first signs of this are already visible on the horizon. We must therefore first examine this challenge to the priesthood.

1. The challenge to the priesthood

During my studies at the major seminary in Chur, a seminarian who had just spent a year studying in Lyon explained to me that the New Testament did not legitimise the ministerial priesthood. He quoted Hebrews 7:27, according to which Christ offered his sacrifice "once and for all". The ministerial priesthood of the Church would be a consequence of the inculturation of the Church in the Hellenistic world. This thesis was recently supported by Herbert Haag, priest of the Diocese of Basel and professor emeritus of the Old Testament at Tübingen. According to Haag, in the early days of the Church, the Eucharist was not celebrated by a priest but led by a presider. What strikingly resembles the neo-Marxist ecclesiology of a certain contemporary heterodoxy was, according to Haag, common practice in the early Church. In this case, it is difficult not to think of the German Romantic philosopher and poet Friedrich von Schlegel, who wrote **about** a certain kind of historiography: "One always detects in the ancients one's own desires and wishes and, above all, oneself."

Haag arrives at these conclusions by sidestepping the truths of faith, through the ideological use of so-called critical historiography. He uses his own reconstruction of the past to undermine the Church's faith in the present. The goal of this historical revisionism is a relativist interpretation of dogma. However, the attempt to understand the whole of the faith, possessed by the Church in the

¹ Lecture given at the 4th CIEL colloquium, Versailles, 1998.

present, through historical and partial hypotheses can only fail. Faith is not a historical hypothesis but a living reality in the Church. It cannot be grasped through the remains of the past. Outside the living body of the Church, there is no science of faith, at most an ideological critique determined by personal prejudices.

Life exists only in a living body. *Mutatis mutandis*, faith is revealed only in the believing body of the Church, which possesses faith in the *present moment* of the Holy Spirit. For believers, faith is only perceptible through the action of the head, heart and hands of the Church. The attempt to discover faith by returning to historical and theoretical sources is a misguided approach that is at the root of all heresies. Historiography sees the witnesses of the past only in the light of its own era. The light with which the historian illuminates the past is his own: it depends on his personal point of view. The historical study of faith is therefore only relevant if the faith, as witnessed in historical documents, is perceived in the light of the present Church. Neither the Church nor theology lives from historical regression, but from the faith contained in the liturgy, the Holy Scriptures, the Fathers and the doctrinal decisions of the Magisterium.

The intellectual archaeologism found in Haag and others therefore only appears to refer to the past. It has a profoundly dishonest trait. It feigns the existence of another world and another Church, of which the historian is the pastor and high priest. But of course there is **only one Church**, the one that exists in the present. We see the past, not in the past but in the present. It is in the present **that** it is reconstructed by the human mind. Yesterday no longer exists and will never be resurrected. The traces it may have left behind exist only in the present. We can therefore say that history deals with the present and that escaping into history often serves to camouflage an ideological agenda for the present.

In summary: the modern challenge to the ministerial priesthood is the result of a historical and ideological reading of the biblical texts concerning the priesthood. These writings should not be understood in a historical-ideological framework, but in the context and light of the faith of the living and present Church.

Having addressed this issue, we will now ask the question of the priesthood of Christ, which is at the root of the ministerial priesthood.

2. Was Christ a priest?

The ministerial priest is a priest insofar as Christ is a priest. The discourse on the ministerial priesthood must therefore be rooted in the priesthood of Christ.

Regarding vocabulary: a priest is a minister of religion who offers sacrifices. There can be no priest without sacrifices, and no sacrifices without a priest. The priest may be responsible for many things, but it is only sacrifice that makes him a priest. Why does the priest offer sacrifices? For the expiation of sins. Three key concepts are therefore at stake: priest, sacrifice and expiation.

Where do we find Christ's priesthood in the Gospels? The answer may surprise us – we remember Fr. Tillard: it is true that Christ, in the Gospels, never presents himself as a priest. He links his mission to the Messiah King, the Son of Man, the Servant of Yahweh and the Prophet. The only priests recognised by Jesus are those of the Temple, even though he had a tense relationship with them. Even the early community seems to have developed a priestly consciousness. Its members offered their sacrifices in the Temple. This is evident in Acts 21:26: "The next day Paul took these men, purified himself with them, and entered the Temple, where he announced the end of their period of purification, when the offering required of each of them was to be made."

Jesus, belonging to the tribe of Judah, did not have the right to offer sacrifices personally. In an environment where only the Levitical priesthood was known, he could not present himself as a priest without being misunderstood. Moreover, it was only at the end of his earthly life that his priesthood became visible and understandable. In any case, Jesus never opposed the Levitical priesthood. Acts 6:14 – which recounts the trial of Saint Stephen – denies that Jesus was preparing to overturn the worship and order received by Moses.

The reason why the Gospels are not very explicit about Christ's priesthood is that Jesus, at the time he was preaching to the Jews, had not yet offered his sacrifice. However, the Gospel is full of allusions to what is to come. On the tree of the Gospels, the buds are already there, ready to open at the right moment. The fruits will be picked by the *Letter to the Hebrews*.

Let us examine some of these buds. The first is found in the Gospel of St John, at the end of the messianic week which marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It concerns the Temple, whose destruction and reconstruction Jesus mentions (John 2:19-21): "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said to him, 'This Temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will rebuild it in three days?' But he was speaking of the Temple of his body."

Christ unites the two: the Temple, the place of Levitical sacrifice, and the Temple of his body, the place of the new sacrifice. Some commentators understand this text only in relation to the Messiah King who will build a house and establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). This explanation avoids any priestly connotation. As King Messiah, Jesus would simply rebuild the Temple. But Jesus, in St John, does not speak of the King Messiah but of his body. It is his body that in the very near future will need "rebuilding", not the Temple, which at the time Jesus speaks is functioning perfectly. The body of Christ, called to become the new Temple, gives Christ an eminent priestly quality. It is not surprising that Jesus' death had repercussions on the Temple: "Suddenly the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mt 27:51).

The veil of the Temple hid the central part of the sanctuary, where the Tablets of the Covenant were kept. They had disappeared after the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar. When the Israelites returned from Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the Temple, the Holy of Holies

remained empty.² This emptiness in the old Temple is brought to light by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Christ's death shows that a new Temple and a new priesthood had become necessary.

Another Gospel passage related to the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ is John 1:29. Saint John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The lamb is the sacrificial animal for the Passover feast, and the Baptist, in naming Jesus thus, designates him as the new Paschal Lamb.

A theological elaboration of Jesus' sacrifice can also be found in *Romans* 3:21-26. This is a key passage in the entire letter. St Paul first presents the situation of the pagans and Jews before God. The conclusion is terrifying: pagans and Jews are guilty before God. The Mosaic Law was only a catalyst that contributed to multiplying sins. Is there a way out? Romans 3:22-25 gives the answer: "There is no distinction: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God predestined to be, through his own blood, a propitiatory sacrifice through faith, in order to demonstrate his righteousness."

Some exegetes have suggested that this means that God sacrificed Jesus as a victim. But let us look at the central statement in verse 25, which speaks of Christ as "propitiatory, through his own blood." The text does not say, "God sacrificed .him" Propitiatory is the translation of the Greek *hylasterion*. *Hylasterion* (in Hebrew: *capporet*) is the table that covered the ark of the covenant. According to Leviticus 16, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled the blood of a bull on the ark to atone for his own sins and those of the people. According to Romans 3:25, Jesus is the new propitiatory being in his own blood. What does this mean? First, that this blood is not that of the usual sacrificial animals. If Christ in blood is the propitiatory being, the table no longer needs blood from outside. Christ is simultaneously the priest who sprinkles the blood and the victim who gives the blood. This does not invalidate the Levitical sacrifice but completes it. Nevertheless, Christ's priesthood is very different from that practised in the Temple.

The result of our analysis is therefore twofold. It is true that in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, there are no explicit references to Christ's priesthood. However, Jesus' preaching prepares us to understand his death as a sacrificial act performed by the high priest Jesus Christ. Was Christ therefore a priest? We can only answer "yes". We must now clarify the nature of this priesthood.

3. What is the priesthood of Christ?

² Cf. Pompey (63 BC) in Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, I, 7: "Nothing moved the nation so much as the fact that the holy place, hitherto forbidden to view, was unveiled by strangers. Thus Pompey and his retinue, entering the Temple building, in the room where only the high priest was allowed to enter, saw with their own eyes the interior furnishings: the lampstand with its lamps, the table, the libation vessels, the censers, all objects made of solid gold, along with a large supply of perfumes and a treasure of sacred silver amounting to nearly two thousand talents (152)."

Christ's priesthood is not a purified and renewed Levitical priesthood. We must not forget that the Temple, especially during major festivals, resembled a slaughterhouse rather than a sanctuary. The first chapter of the Book of Leviticus gives an idea of how this sacrificial activity unfolded by presenting a burnt offering. First, a flawless ox was slaughtered. Then it was cut into pieces and Aaron's sons offered the blood by pouring it around the altar. Next, they lit a fire on the altar and placed the pieces of meat with the head and fat on it. The entrails and feet of the ox were washed and burned on the altar.

According to the *Letter to the Hebrews*, Jesus Christ is not a priest according to the order of Levi or Aaron, but a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Compared to the places mentioned above, this is an improvement. The outline is thus complete. The third chapter of the *Letter to the Romans* speaks of the new way in which Christ fulfilled the Law. The *Letter to the Hebrews* sheds light on this new way at the end of the sixth and in the seventh chapter. Before going into detail, let us first review the *Letter to the Hebrews*. The thirteen chapters can be grouped into three parts:

1-2 Jesus is greater than the angels

3-10 Jesus is the high priest

10-13 Exhortation

It suffices to know that the *Letter to the Hebrews* concerns above all the priesthood of Christ. The end of chapter six explains how the old priesthood is replaced by the new priesthood (Heb 6:19ff): "In hope we have an anchor for the soul, sure and steadfast, which enters the inner sanctuary behind the veil, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

God receives atonement for sins. The novelty lies in the fact that Jesus presents himself to God, not as a Levitical high priest, but as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 7 explains this change and shows that the priesthood of Melchizedek is more perfect than that of Aaron.

The letter addresses the question of the purification of sins, carried out by Christ. How does Jesus purify sins? By atoning for them. How is atonement made? Through sacrifice. Who offers the sacrifice? The priest. Therefore, Jesus, the expiator of sins, must be a priest. This reasoning, apart from the last point, is quite obvious to a believing Israelite. The difficulty lies in the fact that Jesus, not belonging to the tribe of Levi, cannot be a priest according to the law of Moses. For the *Letter to the Hebrews*, this is not a problem: Jesus Christ is not a Levitical priest, but a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Is this conclusion correct?

This question is easy to answer. In the Old Testament, there is a messianic text that establishes a connection between the Messiah and the Melchizedek priesthood, namely Psalm 110 (110):4: "Tu es sacerdos in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisedec" (You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek). The *Letter to the Hebrews* quotes it in chapter five (5:6).

Two ideas emerge from this: a) Jesus is a priest, and b) he is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. What is the difference between these two priestly orders? Hebrews 7 gives us the answer, which takes as its starting point the mysterious encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek. It is a brief account in Genesis 14:17-20, and the only time Melchizedek appears in person in the Bible. The encounter takes place after Lot's liberation. Let us read the text (18-20):

Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, "Blessed be you, Abraham, by God Most High, creator of heaven and earth. Blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave him a tenth of everything.

That is all. Based on this account and on Psalm 109:4, Hebrews 7 explains the priesthood of Christ. Five aspects are highlighted:

1. The Melchizedek priesthood is eternal. This follows from Psalm 109 and from the fact that Genesis 14 makes no mention of Melchizedek's family or ancestry. He has no father, no mother, and no family tree. His days have no beginning and no end. The same is true of Christ.
2. The Melchizedek priesthood is more perfect than that of Abraham, because Melchizedek blessed Abraham. The one who blesses is superior to the one who is blessed. Melchizedek is therefore greater than Abraham and his descendants, which include the Levitical priests.
3. The Melchizedek priesthood establishes a new law, because in replacing the Levitical priesthood that had failed, it was also necessary to replace the law that depended on it.
4. The priesthood of Melchizedek is strong because it is based on imperishable life, not on the fleshly law. This is shown by the resurrection of Christ.
5. The Melchizedek priesthood was established by an oath from God. That is why Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant.

To summarise: Christ, a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, differs from the Levitical high priest because 1) his priesthood is eternal and therefore he does not need to be 'fed' because the effect of his sacrifice could weaken; 2) he transcends the religion of the Temple; 3) he introduces a new Law; 4) he is powerful because of his resurrection, no longer having to fear death; 5) he is guaranteed by the irrevocable word of God. In a nutshell: the sacrifice is no longer offered by men but by God himself.

The old ritual was an effort to free oneself from sin. One gave God a sacrifice, and He gave reconciliation. This system could not last because God cannot be satisfied with goats and bulls. God is priceless. He does not need the blood of animals, for they already belong to him. These sacrifices add nothing to his honour. That is why God says in Psalm 50:

I do not take for myself the bull from your pastures, nor the goats from your pens. For every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the wild animals are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for

the earth is mine and everything in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God your sacrifice of thanksgiving... (Psalm 50:9-14).

God is not concerned with animal sacrifices. He wants man's heart and his consent. It is worship that God expects. Everything already belongs to God except the "yes" of man, to whom he has given freedom. He wants to draw him to Himself, not with his omnipotence but with his love. God had long awaited this "yes", which signifies the offering of oneself, a sacrifice He desired and which was offered by Jesus Christ. Sacrifice was therefore not abolished, but the sacrificial gift was replaced. Jesus, on the cross, offered God the "yes" that humanity could not give Him.

Of course, it was not a sumptuous liturgy with robes and chasubles, imposing fanfares, sublime choirs, prodigious songs and Handel's *Hallelujah*. It was an execution. And yet, Jesus' death on the cross is the only true liturgy in history, a cosmic liturgy taking place not in the confined space of the Temple, but before the eyes of the world. Jesus appears before the face of God. He enters the true Temple, not to offer the blood of animals, but to offer himself. Christ thus transcended the liturgical framework of the Temple and sacrificed himself on the altar. He gave his blood and accomplished what all humanity could not do.

But could the Levitical high priest not have preceded Christ by placing himself on the altar in order to die for humanity? Certainly not. Worship requires an immaculate offering. The sacrificial animal must be perfect. But among all men, there was no perfect and spotless lamb to be found. It was a repeat of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah: there was no righteous man to save the city. Time passed and no righteous man could be found. Centuries went by and no righteous man appeared. And finally, there was Bethlehem. It is hardly surprising that the vast empire of injustice that was in place sought to eliminate the child of Bethlehem. It ultimately succeeded. And this crime, the most abominable in human history, had a most happy outcome. For the first time, someone who did not deserve death for his own sins died. He gave a life that was truly his own. God accepted his life as atonement for all humanity.

4. From the priesthood of Christ to the ministerial priesthood of the Church

The death of Christ was the only act of worship that restored justice forever. Why, then, does the Church still need ministerial priests? Martin Luther answered this question by saying that the Gospel does not **need** a special ministry to be proclaimed. Did he therefore abolish the priesthood? Quite the contrary! According to Luther, anyone who is born through baptism can claim to be a priest, bishop, and pope (WA 6, 408). The Protestant ministry serves **only** for the orderly functioning and practical organisation of the Church. Priestly ordination coincides with baptism. This opinion is in complete rupture with Tradition. We will limit ourselves to showing **that** it is also at odds with the New Testament.

Our starting point is John 20:19-21. It is the evening of Easter Sunday. The apostles are gathered behind closed doors. They are afraid of the Jews. Suddenly, Jesus appears and stands

among them, saying, "Peace be with you!" He shows them his hands and his side, and the disciples rejoice when they see the Lord. Jesus says again, "Peace be with you!" And he continues, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." There is therefore a deep connection between the mission of Christ and that of the apostles. That is why their mandate must be understood in accordance with the mission of Christ. Christ seals his words by breathing on the apostles and sending them the Holy Spirit (v. 22). Contrary to Luther, it must be said that this action means much more than the transfer of a function that is necessary for pragmatic reasons. The apostles truly participate – in the Spirit – in Christ's mission and therefore in his priesthood. The priest, holder of the ministerial priesthood, is therefore a priest to the extent that he participates in the priesthood of Christ. The sacrifice of the priest is that of Christ and consists in the offering of himself. This is also the reason for the celibacy of Jesus and the ministerial priest.

John 20:21 is the key passage; it is surrounded by many other passages that explain the priestly mission of the apostles and those who continue Christ's mission. Here are a few examples³ :

- Christ commands the apostles to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15). He grants them his authority (Lk 10:16; Mt 10:40). He gives them the power to bind and loose (Mt 18:18) as well as to baptise (Mt 28:19), celebrate Mass (Lk 22:19) and forgive sins (Jn 20:23). The mission of the apostles, linked to that of Christ, is also founded in the letters of St Paul. According to him, the apostles received from Christ "the grace and apostleship to bring all nations to the obedience of faith in his name" (Rom 1:5). They are "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1). They are ambassadors of Christ, through whom God exhorts (2 Cor 5:20), proclaimers "of the word of reconciliation" and bearers "of the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18f).
- The New Testament also bears witness to the use of the powers conferred upon them. They preach everywhere (Mark 16:20) and give laws and orders to the faithful (Acts 15:28ff; 1 Cor 11:34). They judge in court and pronounce punishments (1 Cor 5:3-5; 4:21). They baptised (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor 1:14), celebrated Mass (Acts 2:42-46; 20:7) and conferred ecclesiastical offices by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6; 14:22; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6; Tit 1:5). Alongside the apostles, the early Church had presbyters (Acts 20:17-28; 1 Pet 5:1-2; Tit 1:5-7) and deacons who performed functions in the Church. The deacon Philip preached and baptised (Acts 8:5-38). The elders of Jerusalem decided with the apostles on the role of the Old Law (Acts 15:22ff). The elders of the community administered extreme unction to the sick and forgave sins (James 5:14ff). The apostles' collaborators receive their ministry and authority not from the community but from the apostles (Acts 6:6; 14:22). Charismatics in apostolic times played an important role in building up the Church (1 Cor 12-14), but if they did not have an ecclesiastical ministry, they were not part of the hierarchy. St Paul asks that charisma be subordinate to the apostolic ministry (1 Cor 14:26ff).

³ For a complete list, see Ludwig Ott: Grundriß der katholischen Dogmatik 335f.

In summary: the ministerial priesthood of the Church is the priesthood of Christ, transmitted to the apostles by Our Lord on Easter evening. The consequences of this mandate are explained in the New Testament.

5. The royal priesthood of all believers

We still need to clarify the transition from the ministerial priesthood, entrusted to the apostles and transmitted by the laying on of hands, to the royal priesthood of all baptised believers. The *locus classicus* where this is discussed is the *First Letter of Saint Peter*. This short text is rather difficult to understand (2:4-6): "Come to him, a living stone, rejected by men but chosen and precious in God's sight. And like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Reading this text will help us understand the priesthood of all the baptised.

The text contains two directives: 1) Come to Christ, the living stone! and 2) Build yourselves up as living stones! Let us first examine the second: **what are** we building? The letter answers: a spiritual house for a holy priesthood. How do we build it? With "living stones". Why the image of stone? The letter uses it in the context of building a house, where each stone has its place and function. It is the whole set of stones that makes the individual stone part of a bridge, a dam, a monument or the layout of a road. On the other hand, there is no whole without the individual stones. We can therefore see an interaction: the whole made up of the individual stones and the character of the individual stones made up by the whole.

The same is true in the spiritual house that is the Church. Every Christian is part of its walls. The image of the stone helps us understand the ability of the baptised to take their place among and in relation to other baptised persons. It is true that today we often find a "Marxist" view of the Church. Life and death cannot be delegated to a community. Nevertheless, communion remains an important aspect of Christianity. The royal priesthood is the most complete expression of this. Indeed, unlike the ministerial priesthood, the royal priesthood is not exercised by a single individual, but by all the living stones, built into a spiritual house. It is precisely the image of the stone that expresses the communal nature of the royal priesthood.

The word "stone" recalls the ability of Christians to enter into communion with one another. This ability is essential for the exercise of the royal priesthood. However, Saint Peter does not write "come as stones", but "come as living stones". "Living" and "stone" are opposite terms. Nothing is more dead than a stone, the quintessential inanimate matter. One could say many fine things about the capacity of stones for communion. But ultimately, **no one** would want to spend a lifetime as a stone, even as a stone in the enchanting flank of a pyramid.

The term "living" therefore adds a meaning to the word "stone" that radically challenges the image of stone and eliminates any illusion that the royal priesthood is a kind of "workers' paradise"

built on the corpses of previous generations. The Christian is not, in fact, a stone in one of the walls of an earthly citadel, but a living stone in a spiritual house that unites within itself death as the essence of all that has been created and life that is stronger than death. It is the image of the resurrection that St Paul associates with the sinner redeemed by grace, who was dead and now lives in Christ. As sinners, we are lifeless stones. Through Christ's atonement, we become living stones. But beware! The life we receive is not our own, but that of Christ. In the words of Saint Paul: "I live, but it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20)". This is possible because, through baptism, we are now part of the body of Christ, living stones in the spiritual house.

Thus, "stone" means the dead sinner; "living" means the life redeemed for him; "living stone" describes the Christian as incorporated into the new Temple that is Christ.

Living stones are the foundation of the spiritual house for the formation of a holy priesthood. But how is this house built? St Peter's letter answers: by gathering the living stones around the cornerstone. Here is the process described in the letter:

- 1) The faithful are living stones.
- 2) The living stones are arranged in relation to the cornerstone.
- 3) A spiritual house for a holy priesthood is formed.
- 4) This priesthood offers spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God.

The royal priesthood is realised according to this order. The first two points are linked. Everything begins with the transformation of the faithful into living stones through baptism and confirmation. These sacraments are not a kind of vaccination administered orally, but an incorporation into the body of Christ.

The second point explains the correlation between living stones and Christ. The image of the stone is maintained. For the faithful, Jesus is the cornerstone, for the unfaithful a stumbling block, an obstacle that must be removed... which explains the death of Christ.

Let us examine again the arrangement of the living stones in relation to the cornerstone. There is no house without a proper arrangement of stones. Two things result from this for the Christian who is part of the spiritual house mentioned in the *First Letter of Saint Peter*. The Christian as a living stone is 1) aligned with Christ and 2) supported by Christ himself. The cornerstone provides direction and support. The living stones form a building that stands thanks to Christ. To the extent that they are ordered in relation to him, the living stones are part of the spiritual house.

We have now come to the third point. Those who are connected to Christ become a spiritual house for a holy priesthood. What does this mean? "House" refers to dwelling and therefore to being, while "priesthood" refers to action. "For a holy priesthood" means that the genesis of a new being in Christ serves to develop a new activity. At the origin is the spiritual home, the body of Christ. The resurrected sinner has been incorporated into Christ, who becomes his new dwelling place, which is not like an apartment: the inhabitant and his apartment are quite distinct, whereas

the one who dwells in Christ participates in him. The life of Christ becomes his life. This unity of life implies unity of action.

The actions of Christ become the actions of Christians, and the actions of Christians become the actions of Christ. Or more precisely: the body of Christians becomes the body of Christ, the Temple from which, according to Saint John, the Spirit proceeds. As we participate in this Temple, our actions are transformed by it. The actions of Christians become part of the activity of the body of Christ. If, therefore, Christ, according to the *Letter to the Hebrews*, is a priest forever, then Christians, as part of the body of Christ, participate in the actions and priestly being of Christ. This is the royal priesthood of all believers, a common priesthood, linked to the body of Christ in which every Christian participates. This is why the *First Letter of Saint Peter* does not say that we are royal priests, but that we form a royal priesthood.

The fourth point explains the effectiveness of this priesthood through the offering of spiritual sacrifices that are presented "through Jesus Christ". It is he who offers the sacrifice of my life. No one would say that it is not Christ, but only his hands that offer the sacrifice. His wounds bled, but it was Christ who suffered. We cannot say that during the Passion, first the back suffered, then the head crowned with thorns... The pain of the part is the sacrifice of the whole. This also applies to the royal sacrifice of all the faithful. It is not accomplished by this or that person, but by him, Jesus Christ. In this way, the personal suffering of the Christian becomes a powerful source of salvation.

Why are the sacrifices offered by Christ pleasing to God? **Because** they are spiritual in nature. "Spiritual" is the antonym of "carnal" and means that this is not a "championship of suffering" or a "tournament of good works". The sacrifice is pleasing to God because of the spirit in which it is offered. We can understand 'spiritual' in a weak sense, as something that exists more in abstract theory than in reality. Obviously, this is not correct. The Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son. Sacrifices are spiritual when they are offered in love. Jesus gave his life out of love (Eph 5:2). Love is more valuable than suffering. A little suffering with a lot of love is better than a lot of suffering with a little love.

In summary, the baptised are integrated as living stones into a holy house to offer spiritual sacrifices. A house where sacrifices are offered is a temple. Christ is that house, the new Temple of the new covenant. By participating in the Temple as a living stone, Christians participate in the sacrifice of Christ: *Agere sequitur esse*. The sacrifice of the royal priesthood consists in all the individual activities of Christians insofar as they conform to Christ.

Finally, let us consider the royal priesthood as a communal action, and especially the epithet "royal".

It can be said that Christians form a royal priesthood, but not that every Christian is a royal priest. When touching a house with your hand, you **only** come into contact with a small part of it,

with a single stone, which is the house insofar **as** it is part of it. We are a spiritual house for the holy priesthood in the sense that we participate in a larger whole that does not belong to us and is not even visible to our eyes. The living stone, not seeing the whole, must believe in the existence of an imperceptible entity. That is why St Peter speaks of trust in verse 6. We will not be confused if we trust in the cornerstone. The royal priesthood is exercised in the trust of faith. The house in which we participate is spiritual, that is, invisible. Living stones do not perceive the whole. They live by believing, not by seeing. They are like the stones of a building, united by a cornerstone **that** they cannot discern. Only the fact that the house remains standing allows them to deduce its existence. In the same way, the organs of the body depend on the heart, enclosed in the chest, invisible, in total darkness. Here too, it is only the living body that allows us to deduce its existence. The organs of the body "trust" the heart, invisible to them, just as the stones of a house depend on the cornerstone, which is also invisible to them. This is the night of faith. To an unbeliever, sacrifice and love seem to be scattered in the wind. Why? Because, not being aligned with the cornerstone, he is unaware of it. Living stones are similarly blind. But they know that without the cornerstone, they would not be where they are.

Let us conclude by asking ourselves why the priesthood of the baptised is called a "royal priesthood". Obviously, because Christ's priesthood is that of a king. This kingship is revealed during the Passion, especially in the Gospel of St Matthew, when the cornerstone is rejected by the builders and sacrificed for our sins. In Matthew, Jesus presents himself before Pilate as king of the Jews. Then he receives the crown of thorns, a royal insignia. In the same vein, he is enthroned on the cross. Even the mockers who pass by confirm Christ's kingship: he is the king who reigns by suffering himself, not by making others suffer. Similarly, the royal priesthood is a priesthood that suffers and does not cause suffering. It is only in the eyes of the world that it represents a career in reverse. From God's point of view, suffering accepted with supernatural love transforms the one who suffers: he becomes a king. This suffering is stronger than the powerful of this world **because** it does not need them.

Let us conclude our presentation. *First*, we examined the challenge to the priesthood. Is there a priesthood in the New Covenant? The answer is yes, if we read the texts in their ecclesial context and not in a historical-ideological context. *Secondly*, we asked whether Christ was a priest, and in answering in the affirmative, we saw how Christ in his preaching prepared the understanding of his priesthood. *Thirdly*, we explained Christ's priesthood as a priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek: an eternal priesthood, superior to the Levitical priesthood, linked to a new law, stronger than death and guaranteed by an oath from God. *Fourthly*, we have shown, with the help of John 20 and other passages from the New Testament, that the ministerial priesthood of the priest comes from that of Christ. *Fifthly*, the royal priesthood has been presented as the incorporation of

the being and action of the baptised, living stones, into the holy house that unites all sufferings in sacrifice and the new Temple of Christ.