

The Priesthood

Italicized below are the **Authoritative statements of Roman Catholic Teaching** on the Priesthood

The Council of Trent

Session XXIII: On the Sacrament of Order

Canon I. If any one saith, that there is not in the New Testament a visible and external priesthood; or, that there is not any power of consecrating and offering the true body and blood of the Lord, and of forgiving and retaining sins, but only an office and bare ministry of preaching the Gospel; or, that those who do not preach are not priests at all: let him be anathema.

Session XXII: On the Sacrifice of the Mass

Canon II. If any one saith, that by those words, Do this for the commemoration of me (Luke xxii. 19), Christ did not institute the apostles priests; or, did not ordain that they and other priests should offer his own body and blood: let him be anathema.

Note of definition: *anathema*: a-nath-e-ma n

1) a curse from a religious authority that denounces something or excommunicates somebody; 2. any forceful curse or denunciation.
Encarta® World English Dictionary

The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism

1466. When did Christ institute the sacrament of orders?

Christ actually instituted the sacrament of orders at the Last Supper. After he had consecrated the bread and wine, and changed them into his own body and blood, he told the apostles to ‘do this as a memorial of me’ (Luke 22:19). By this he was conferring on the apostles and their successors the principal power of this sacrament, namely to consecrate and offer his body and blood in the Sacrifice of the Mass.

1488. What is the primary ministry of a priest?

The primary ministry of a priest is to consecrate and offer the Holy Eucharist, and to forgive sins. IN this, priests differ from deacons who do not receive the power to consecrate the Eucharist, offer Mass, or forgive sins by sacramental absolution.

SUMMARY OF ROMAN CATHOLIC TEACHING ON THE PRIESTHOOD

It is evident from these authoritative sources that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ personally instituted the office of priesthood for the exercise of two primary responsibilities: the first is to offer the sacrifice of the Mass and the second is to hear confession of sins and to make absolution. Thus in the exercise of his responsibilities, specifically in the sacrifice of the Mass and through confession and penance, the priest is a mediator.

The Greek word for mediator in the New Testament is the word *mesitēs*, that is, ‘one who intervenes between two, either in order to make or restore peace and friendship; a medium of communication, an

arbitrator' (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 1887). Thus a mediator is one who goes between two individuals or parties in order to reconcile the one with the other.

Does the Bible teach that the Lord Jesus Christ instituted a special class of men in the church known as priests who would be given the authority to reconcile men with God through the Mass and through confession and penance? The answer to that question, as we shall see, is quite simply 'no'.

First of all, as we noted in the previous chapter, the whole concept of continuing sacrifices is completely contradictory to the teaching of the Word of God. The Lord Jesus did not commission or institute a human priesthood, beginning with the apostles, who would continue the offering of sacrifices in a Mass. All sacrifices have now been abolished because the 'once of all' sacrifice of Jesus Christ is complete. Since the sacrifices have been abolished (Heb. 10) there is no longer any need for a priesthood. Whatever it was the Lord Jesus was commissioning for his apostles to do, it was not to authorize them to become priests who would continue his sacrifice in the offering of a Mass.

Some contemporary Roman Catholic writers emphasize that the priest does not actually re-present Christ's sacrifice as a literal sacrifice, but only re-presents his one-time historical sacrifice as a memorial. One such writer has written:

The Catholic Church has never taught that in the Mass Jesus is 're-sacrificed' or offered up to suffer again. The Catholic Mass is called a sacrifice because it 're-presents,' 're-enacts,' or presents once again before us, the one sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. Jesus Christ was sacrificed once, but God, in his mercy, makes present to us once again the one sacrifice of Christ through the Mass so that we human beings can enter more deeply into the reality and significance of that sacrifice. Catholics believe that this is possible because Jesus Christ is 'the same yesterday, today and forever' (Heb. 13.8). What Jesus did in the past—his death on the cross—is present to God. God can make this present to us when Christians gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper or Eucharist is his memory. Therefore, Catholic Christians believe that Jesus is not 're-sacrificed' in the Mass, but that his one sacrifice on Calvary is made real and present to us by God, so that we can enter into this central mystery of our faith in a new way. (Alan Schreck, *Catholic and Christian*, 1984, pp. 133-134).

Schreck's statements are a complete denial of what the Roman Catholic Church authoritatively teaches with respect to the Mass and the Priesthood. He says that the Church has never taught that the Mass is the re-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But this is simply not true. The Council of Trent says that it is a true sacrifice, which is propitiatory for sin, and it calls down an anathema on anyone who denies this.¹ John Harden S.J. says,

The Sacrifice of the Cross is continued on earth through the Sacrifice of the Mass...It is the Sacrifice in which Christ is offered under the species of bread and wine in an unbloody manner. The Sacrifice of the altar, then, is no mere empty commemoration of the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ, but a true and proper act of sacrifice...The Mass re-presents Christ's sacrifice of himself to his heavenly Father. In the Mass, no less than on Calvary, Jesus really offers his life to his heavenly Father...The Mass in no way detracts from the one, unique Sacrifice of the Cross because the Mass is the same sacrifice as that of the Cross, to continue on earth until the end of time...The Mass, therefore, no less than the Cross, is expiatory for sins...' (The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism, 1264, 1265, 1269, 1277).

The official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are clear. The priest does not merely commemorate the death and sacrifice of Christ, but actually continues his sacrifice through the sacrifice of the Mass. But such teaching flatly contradicts the teaching we have seen in Hebrews chapters 7 and 10. Since the Bible is the Word of God and cannot contradict itself, the interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church must be incorrect.

It will be helpful here to look closely at what the Bible actually teaches about the priesthood.

In the Old Testament dispensation God appointed the tribe of Levi to the priesthood. They had the responsibility of representing the people before God and acting as mediators between God and the people. That

¹ See Canons at the beginning of this chapter

is the essential idea of a priest; he is one who mediates between God and man. God appointed these mediators because, in the sinful state, men could not come before him or have fellowship with him without their mediation in offering sacrifices. The central responsibility of the priest in the Old Testament dispensation was to minister in the sanctuary before God, offering sacrifices to him on behalf of the people and to teach them the law of God: 'For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins' (Heb. 5:1).

The entire sacrificial system in the Old Testament foreshadowed the one great sacrifice of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It has therefore been completely abolished. Similarly the priesthood which God established in the Old Testament was a foreshadowing of that which would one day be fulfilled in our Great High Priest the Lord Jesus Christ. 'With the coming of Christ...and with the accomplishment of His work of redemption, each of these offices, as it functioned on the human level, reached its fulfillment and was abolished' (Loraine Boettner, Roman Catholicism, p. 44).

Hebrews 7:11-24 makes very clear that the human priesthood of the Old Testament has been done away with. It has been replaced by the priesthood of Jesus Christ and he is now a priest for ever. The old covenant's priesthood and sacrifices have become obsolete (Heb. 8:13) and have been set aside.

The key biblical authority for this teaching is Hebrews 7:12, 7:18-19, and 7:24:

For when the *priesthood is changed*, of necessity there takes place a change of law also (Heb. 7:12)

For, on the one hand, there is a *setting aside* of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God (Heb. 7:18-19).

But He, on the other hand, because He *abides forever*, holds His priesthood *permanently* (Heb. 7:24).

These verses tell us that the Aaronic priesthood was changed with the coming of Christ. A new priesthood, one according to the order of Melchizedek, was inaugurated. There is a setting aside of a former commandment (the Old Testament dispensation of sacrifice and human priesthood which could not bring in perfection) and now, that which is perfect has come. What the Old Testament priesthood could not do, Jesus Christ has done. Consequently the old system is set aside. The Greek word translated 'setting aside' is *athetēsis*. It implies abolished. 'The declaration, "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek," thus announces the abrogation of the earlier law which instituted the Aaronic order' (F.F. Bruce, Hebrews, 1964, p. 148).

The old system, the old human priesthood, has been set aside and replaced by the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ. Because he abides forever, he holds his priesthood permanently (Heb. 7:24). The word 'permanently' is the Greek word *aparabatos* which means 'unchangeable, not liable to pass to a successor' (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon).

Jesus Christ could not have instituted a human priesthood through the disciples, for the Bible teaches that he exercises an exclusive priesthood for ever. It cannot be shared by or transferred to anyone else. The Mosaic system in the Old Testament foreshadowed the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now that he has come, the old system has been completely abolished.

In accordance with this New Testament change in the priesthood, through which the old order of ritual and sacrifice which prefigured the atoning work of Christ has been fulfilled and Christ alone has become our true High Priest, the human priesthood as a distinct and separate order of men has fulfilled its function and has been abolished (Loraine Boettner, Roman Catholicism, p. 44).

The entire Letter to the Hebrews was written to instruct and warn Jewish Christians who had come out of Judaism, but who, because of persecution, were being tempted to renounce Christianity and to return to the old Mosaic system. The Letter shows that the entire Mosaic system has now been set aside by God because Jesus Christ is the perfect fulfillment of all that the old system signified. Now men have direct access to God through Jesus Christ and they no longer need a human system of sacrifices and priests. Man can now come directly to

God through Jesus Christ. He has become our sacrifice. He has become our priest, and he is the only mediator between ourselves and God.

God did not intend the Mosaic system to be permanent. It was merely a temporary arrangement to teach men that they must come to him through a priest, and by means of a sacrificial death. But when the Son of God came, as the perfect fulfillment of all that the old system signified, the old covenant and its sacrificial system were set aside and a new covenant and a perfect means of coming to God took its place. Thus 'there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Jesus Christ' (1 Tim. 2:5). Christ himself said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me' (Jn. 14:6).

Jesus Christ is now the only priest God recognizes; he is the only priest men need because his work of sacrifice for sin is perfect. He now stands continually before God for his people. He alone can reconcile man with God, and we have now been given the right of access to God directly through him: 'For through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father' (Eph. 2:18).

In fact, in the entire New Testament, no mention is made of a new order of priests with the authority to continue sacrifices and forgive sins and thereby act as mediators between God and man.

The writers of the New Testament had two separate words for elder and priest. They do not mean the same thing at all, and the New Testament never confuses them. It never says *presbuteros*, elder, when it means priest. The New Testament word for priest is *hiereus*. In Greek, from Homer down, this word has a singular meaning. It meant a man appointed, or consecrated, or otherwise endowed with power to perform certain technical functions of ritual worship, especially to offer acceptable sacrifices, and to make effectual prayers. Likewise in the Septuagint, *hiereus* is the regular if not invariable translation of the Old Testament *kohen* and *kahen*, the only Hebrew word for priest. It occurs more than 400 times in the Old Testament in this sense. In the New Testament *hiereus* always means priest, never means elder. There is not anywhere in the New Testament the shadow of an allusion to a Christian priest in the ordinary sense of the word, that is a man qualified as over against others not qualified for the special function of offering sacrifices, making priestly intercessions, or performing any other act which only a priest can perform. The Epistle to the Hebrews attributed both priesthood and high-priesthood to Christ and to Him alone. The argument of the Epistle not only indicates that a Christian priesthood was unknown to the writer, but that such a priesthood is unallowable. It is to Jesus only that Christians look as to a priest. He has performed perfectly and permanently the function of a priest for all believers. His priesthood, being perfect and eternal, renders a continuous human priesthood both needless and anachronistic (Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary Record, July 1952, cited Boettner, p. 47).

In several places Paul lists the different kinds of ministries and men who are specifically set apart and gifted to God to do a work with the church, such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11, I Cor. 12:28). Nowhere does Paul mention priests. Paul did appoint elders in the churches, but, as we have seen, 'priest' is a different word altogether.

In contradistinction to a select class of men set apart for the special ministry of priesthood, the New Testament teaches that all Christians are priests. But the only sacrifices they offer are spiritual in that they have access to the throne of God in prayer and can plead before him on behalf of men:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (I Pet. 2:9).

To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father (Rev. 1:5-6).

Under the New Testament economy, there is but one priest, in the strict meaning of that word as defined by the Apostle Paul: 'One taken from among men, ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he

may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins' (Heb. 5:1). Our great High Priest, of whom all the priests under the Mosaic dispensation were but figures, is 'the one Mediator between God and man' (I Tim. 2:5). He presents the only effectual atoning sacrifice. He, on the ground of that sacrifice, makes intercession for those who come to God through him, and obtains acceptance both for them and their services, and authoritatively blesses his people...

It is common enough, however, in the New Testament, to represent all Christians as figurative priests, in the sense of persons solemnly consecrated to and habitually engaged to the divine service. These two views are given us in the passage before us. Ye are 'a holy priesthood,' and ye are a priesthood engaged in presenting to God 'spiritual sacrifices, which are acceptable to God by Christ Jesus...'

Christians are a 'holy,' a consecrated priesthood. You are aware that the priests under the Old Testament were separated from among their brethren. They were so by their birth, and by their consecration. As sons of Aaron, they belonged to the priestly order. In like manner, all Christians, by their being born again, are set apart to the service of God. And as Aaron's sons were consecrated by the sprinkling of blood and the washing of water; so Christians have their sprinkled by the blood of Him, 'who, by the eternal Spirit, offered himself a sacrifice to God without spot,' and are purified 'by the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Ghost' (Heb. 9:14; Tit. 3:5).

As they resemble the priests in their consecration, so they resemble them also in their work. They 'offer up spiritual sacrifices.'...The leading idea is, that Christians are brought into a very near relation to God; and that the whole of the lives should be devoted to his spiritual service. The are to 'offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of the lips,'... 'giving thanks to his name.' 'To do good and communicate they are not to forget, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.' They are to 'present their bodies' – themselves, embodied living beings, not the dead bodies of slain beasts – 'a living sacrifice.' 'Whether they eat, or drink, or whatsoever they do, they are to do all to the glory of God;' and 'whatsoever they do in word or in deed, they are to do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father, by him' (John Brown, Expository Discourses on I Peter, Volume I, 1975 reprint, pp. 249-52).

I Peter 2:5, 9 refers to a priesthood that all believers in Jesus share. We are a kingdom of priests. But this priesthood has nothing to do with sacrifices for sin, nor with men coming to God through our mediation. Men are to go directly to God through Jesus Christ, completely bypassing any human agency. We have no need of a human priesthood when we have the divine priest, Jesus Christ, to whom we can go at any time because he has made the perfect sacrifice. He alone is the mediator between ourselves and God. There is, and can be, no other (I Tim. 2:5).

Roman Catholic teaching on the priesthood is therefore in direct contradiction to the teaching of the Word of God. God no longer authorizes a human priesthood with its sacrifices to mediate between himself and man.

But what about the Roman Catholic teaching that men need a human priest to absolve them from sin by means of confession and penance? We will look at that question in detail in our next chapter.

This chapter gratefully presented here by Think Inc. with permission from the author and publisher. We highly recommend you obtain a copy of the book in order to grow in your understanding and practice of Biblical Truth.

Webster, William. Salvation, The Bible, And Roman Catholicism, The Banner of Truth Trust: Pennsylvania, 1990.

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I. The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, in Philip Shaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Baker Book House (1919 ed.).

II. The Documents of Vatican II, Walter M. Abbott S.J., General Editor, Association Press, Follett Publishing Company, 1966.

III. The Code of the Canon Law, Prepared by the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland in Association with The Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand and the Canadian Canon Law Society, William Collins and William B. Eedmans Publishing Company, 1983. John Paul II makes the following comments concerning The Code of The Canon Law: "It is hoped that this English Version of the Code will be a fitting resource for an attentive and fruitful study for the law of the Church..." "We order that henceforth it is to have the force of law for the whole latin Church, and we commit its observance to the care and vigilance of all who are responsible."

IV. The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism, John A. Hardon S.J., Image Books, Doubleday and Company, 1981