

THE PRIESTHOOD

PRAYER TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit, we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

www.buriedtreasure.us

What is a priest?

A priest or priestess (feminine) (from Greek presbýteros through Latin presbyter, "elder", from Vulgar Latin "provost" "one put over others", from Latin praepositus "person placed in charge"), is a person authorized to perform the sacred rituals of a religion, especially as a **mediatory** agent between humans and one or more deities. They also have the authority or power to administer religious rites; in particular, rites of **sacrifice** that are meant to appease God or the gods.

Mediation and Sacrifice

The two fundamental principles that underlie the office of priesthood are mediation and sacrifice. As a mediator, the priest stands between the people whom he represents and the God whom he addresses. Yet as we know in the Old Testament there were two kinds of mediators between God and the people.

There were mediators from God to communicate His mind and His will to the people. These mediators were called prophets. They were from God to the people. We might call this downward mediation: from heaven to earth. There were also mediators from the people to God to offer Him the people's adoration, invoke His aid, and beg His mercy for the people's sins. These were in Old Testament parlance called priests. This was the upward mediation: from earth to heaven.

Moreover, the priests of the Old Testament were not only to mediate from the people to God, they were to do so in a distinctive, indeed, unique way. They were to offer sacrifices (the plural is of the essence of the Old Law) of goats and sheep, of oxen and cattle, of bread and wine, of wheat, barley, and oats, and fruits of trees.

The Old Testament provides us the historical narrative by which we come to understand the various types of Priesthood that God Revealed to His people and how this Revelation forms the basis by which we can understand the Priesthood of Jesus Christ and the New Testament Priesthood that He established.

Adam: High Priest of Humanity

The Israelite people understood through Revelation that all of God's creation represents a (macro) Temple, a place of worship. God created the cosmos in six days and then consecrated and blessed it on the seventh. So when Solomon (960-922 BC) built the temple in Jerusalem, he completed it in seven years and seven months and consecrated and blessed it during a seven day-liturgy, where he offered seven petitions (cf. 1 Kings 5-9). So the Israelites understood that their Temple was a microcosm (a miniature replica) of God's Temple – all of creation.

Every temple, however, needs a sanctuary, and every sanctuary needs a high priest to minister in it, and every high priest is "appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices." That sanctuary is none other than the Garden of Eden.

This brings us to Adam and his duty to till ('Abad) and keep (Shamar) the garden. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." (Genesis 2:15) These words are better translated, "to serve" and "to guard." These two Hebrew words are only used together elsewhere in Scripture to

describe the duties of the Levites who were the priestly tribe chosen by God in the Exodus story. Therefore the command spoken to Adam implies priestly service.

So, Adam is the first priest and the high priest of humanity and as a priest he was obliged to minister in the sanctuary (the Garden of Eden) and offer sacrifice. His ministry was to guard the Garden from intruders and if necessary he was to lay down (sacrifice) his life for his bride Eve.

God also revealed to Adam that “the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (Genesis 2:9) Adam was forbidden (punishable by death) to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but Adam could eat from the tree of life. So Adam could choose between the “tree of life” and the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”.

When the serpent (the intruder) enters the garden, he threatens Adam that if he does not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will surely die. Adam understands that both he and his bride Eve are facing a life threatening decision, which tree to eat from? Adam the High Priest of Humanity failed the test. Jesus, the New Adam, the New High Priest, the Tree of Life Himself, reverses the Original Sin of Adam by freely sacrificing His life for His Bride (the Church ... you and I).

The Priesthood from Adam to Aaron and the Levites (Patriarchal Age)

The sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel also exercised a priestly ministry and were called to offer sacrifice. As a tiller of the ground, Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruits of the ground, while Abel’s sacrificed firstlings from his flock. God accepted Abel’s gift and rejected Cain’s and we know the rest of the story, Cain became furious and killed his brother Abel.

So clearly God Revealed that proper worship of Him requires sacrifice. A sacrifice is the offering of a victim by a priest to God alone, and the destruction of it in some way to acknowledge that He is the Creator of all things. The destruction of these offerings removed them from man's use and thereby signified that God is the Supreme Lord and Master of the entire created universe and that man is

wholly dependent upon Him for everything. Sacrifice, therefore, is the most perfect way for man to worship God.

We see in the Old Testament story how the Father of the family was in fact the Priest and therefore the person to offer sacrifice to God. Noah disembarked the ark following the great Flood, he offered sacrifices on behalf of his family (Gen. 8:20-21). Abram, after a long trek from Ur (stopping for a while at Haran), came into Canaan and built an altar at Shechem (Gen. 12:7; 22:13). Job, the patriarch of Uz, offered sacrifices as the head of his family (Job 1:5). When Moses fled from Pharaoh into the land of Midian, he met and married the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest (Ex. 2:15ff). This period from the time of Adam to the time of Moses is commonly called the Patriarchal Age, where the father of the family and the firstborn son were the Priests that offered sacrifice to God.

The Two Lines of Cain and Seth

After the death of Abel, Eve bore a son named Seth. God chose to continue His Revelation through the genealogical line of Seth and his descendants; Noah, Shem (where we get the word Semites), Eber (where we get the word Hebrews), Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Jesus. Through this line the true religion was made manifest to the whole world. Cain on the other hand was banished from the Lord's presence and took up residence in the land of Nod and his genealogical line excelled in sin and debauchery.

The True religion had one God and an exclusive male priesthood. The other religions flowing forth from the line of Cain were corrupted in various degrees. They include polytheism, pantheism, human sacrifice, female priests, etc.

Pagan Religion and Priestesses

In ancient Near Eastern religions the gods (and goddesses) themselves partook in grotesque sex acts. They engaged in incest (e.g., Baal with his sister Anat). They participated in bestiality (e.g., Baal having sex with a heifer, which give birth to a son). And they engaged in sexual orgies and seductions. These religions commonly included fertility cult rituals, goddess worship, and priestesses (who

served as the wife of the god. Temple prostitutes abounded, and sexual immorality was carried out in the name of religion. To have sex with priestesses meant union with the goddess you worshiped. In fact, sex with a temple prostitute would prompt Baal and his consort Asherah to have sex in heaven, which in turn would result in fertility all the way around --- more kids, more cattle, more crops etc.

The Priesthood of Melchizedek

Only 4 verses in the OT mention the royal priest Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20; Ps 110:4). Melchizedek is the first person in Scripture who is explicitly called a “priest”. Indeed, he is the only figure in Genesis who is identified as a priest of “God Most High”. Also Melchizedek is identified as the king of “Salem”. So he is a priest and a king.

Melchizedek ministers to Abraham as a priest not only by blessing him, but by also bringing forth “bread and wine” as a thank offering made to God Most High in gratitude for a successful mission. This thank offering would constitute a communion sacrifice to be consumed by the priest and participants alike.

In Psalm 110:4, the Lord swears an oath of ordination to the Davidic Messiah; "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

The Levitical Priesthood

Three months after Israel’s escape from Egypt, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and encamped before the holy mountain. Moses ascended the mountain and there God declared his intention to transform the Israelite nation into a kingdom of priests. “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5-6)

When Moses delivered God's message to the people they responded "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." (v.8) God's plan was to use the Israelite nation (His Firstborn Son) as a mediator to all the other nations. The people of Israel were to extend the Father's unifying and universal rule to the whole world.

To establish this intimate father-son relationship with Israel, God had to manifest himself to all the Israelite people – but only after appropriate preparations had been made for such a close encounter with the Creator of the universe. Before the consecration of the Nation as priests, the Lord commanded the entire Israelite nation to wash their clothes and to *abstain from sexual relations for three days*. (Note here the connection between priestly service and celibacy)

On the morning of the third day Moses brought the people to the foot of Mount Sinai to meet God. God entered into a solemn and sacred bond (covenant) with his people by having them sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. Moses took the blood from the sacrifices and sprinkled half of the blood on the altar (representing God) and threw the other half of the blood upon the people, thus establishing a blood covenant bond between God and His people, a nation of priests.

Moses ascended the mountain to fast for forty days and to receive further instruction from God. Coming down from the mountain Moses saw the people worshipping the golden calf, thereby breaking the newly established Covenant they just had sworn to. Moses stood in the gate of the camp and exclaimed "whoever is for the Lord, let him come to me." (Ex. 32:26). The Levites said to Moses "we are on the Lord's side". (Moses and his brother Aaron were also Levites)

Moses commanded every man from the tribe of Levi to slay the golden calf idolaters and 3,000 Israelite kinsmen were slain. Then Moses said to the tribe of Levi, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord," (v.29). The men from the tribe of Levi became the sole priests in Israel.

The New Testament Priesthood

The Old Testament narrative concerning the Priesthood holds the interpretive key to understanding the New Testament priesthood. Jesus is the one and only High

Priest who is both victim and priest, who offers himself up to the Father. Jesus also is the one mediator between God and man. However, Jesus as a Divine person allows us to participate in the economy of salvation by sharing in His priestly office.

Remember when all 12 tribes of Israel made a blood covenant with God to be priests? The entire nation was consecrated as priests. This universal priesthood of the Old Testament is fulfilled by the “priesthood of the faithful” in the New Testament. All baptized Catholics share in the high priesthood of Christ received at baptism and strengthened by confirmation and the Eucharist. Essential to this priesthood is the right to receive the other sacraments, of participating in the Church's liturgy, and of being united with Christ the eternal priest as he offers himself, with the members of his Mystical Body, to the heavenly Father in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

The Ministerial Priesthood

The Levitical Priesthood was a ministerial priesthood, its primary focus was to minister to the other 11 tribes. Within the Levite tribe, the priestly duties were divided into three different divisions. Aaron, the brother of Moses was consecrated as the High Priest and only his direct descendants were eligible to become priests and from this genealogical line a High Priest was chosen. The remaining Levitical families were commissioned to assist the priests in the worship service.

This threefold division is seen in the New Testament Priesthood of the Catholic Church with the Bishops as the High Priests, the priests as the ministerial priests and the deacons as the Levites.

Jesus, the Priesthood and the Church

Since Jesus was always conscious that his earthly life would end on the Cross, it was imperative that he provide for the continuation of this leadership after He had departed. Although he would always be invisibly present to his Church in faith (“I am with you always, until the end of the age” Mt 28:20), nevertheless, this

headship of the Church must somehow continue visibly. This is why Jesus so carefully chose and prepared the Twelve to whom he explained the full meaning of his teaching. “The knowledge of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but to them [the crowds] it has not been granted” (Mt 13:10-11). He gave to the Twelve his own titles of “shepherd” (pastor) as when he said to Peter, “Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:17); “judge” (“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” Mt 16:19; cf. Mt 19:28), and “teacher” (“He who hears you, hears me,” Lk 10:16). All power in heaven and on earth has been given me, go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Mt 28:18-19)

Thus it is clear that in preparing and leaving leaders in his Church, Jesus intended that they should share in his headship of the Church not only as shepherds and teachers but also as ministers of his sacraments, that is, as ministerial priests. Those who are authorized by Christ to teach and govern are also authorized to lead the community in worship, especially by presiding at the Eucharist, the Church’s supreme act of worship.

Questions

- Why is a Priest different than a Protestant minister?
- What were the three different priesthoods established/revealed by God in the Old Covenant and how are they brought to fulfillment by Jesus in the New Covenant?
- Why can't women become priests?
- What is the difference between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the lay faithful?
- Why does the Church require a celibate priesthood?

Matthew 19:12 “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”