

“The Lord has sworn and will not relent, You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4)

✠ Lecture III: The Order of Melchizedek ✠

The first time the word “priest” was mentioned in Holy Scripture was when Melchizedek was mentioned, “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out **bread and wine**; he was the **priest** of God Most high” (**Gen 14:18**). He blessed our father Abraham (**Gen 14:19**) who gave him a tithe of all (**Gen 14:20**). A major theme of the Holy Book of Hebrews is the contrast between the Levitical Priesthood of the Old Testament and the Priesthood that our Lord Jesus Christ established, which is according to the order of Melchizedek, the following points are noteworthy:

1. Melchizedek is given no genealogy, and nothing is said of his death, he is “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.” (**Heb 7:3**)
2. His name is translated “King of Righteousness” meaning “King of Peace.” (**Heb 7:2**)
3. He receives tithes from our father Abraham, implying he is superior to Abraham in rank – and by extension, superior to Abraham’s descendants, the Levites. (**Heb 7:4,9**)
4. Note the link between the Priesthood of Melchizedek and the bread and wine (The Eucharist).
5. St. Paul explicitly declares that our Lord Jesus Christ is a Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (bread & wine) even though He was born from the tribe of Judah and not Levi (**Heb 7:14-17**). The Apostle explains saying, “If perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? **For the priesthood being changed**, of necessity there is also a change of the law” (**Heb 7:11-12**)→ This was fulfilled when the high priest tore his clothes (**Mk 14:63**) during the Lord’s trial and when the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom when the Lord breathed His last (**Mk 15:38**)

✠ The Priesthood of the New Testament:

Our Lord was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek when He took the bread and wine, blessed them, and gave them to His disciples saying, “This is My body and My blood.” Our Lord was called a **High Priest** according to the order of Melchizedek (**Heb 3:1; 5:10; 6:20; 4:15**); the word “High priest” implies that there are other priests also according to this order (bread & wine) among whom He is the Chief High Priest. This is obvious since our Lord said to His disciples, “do this [the Eucharist] in remembrance of Me” (**Lk 22:19**). This is the Priesthood of the Gentiles about which prophecies in the Old Testament exist:

- “For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place **incense shall be offered in My name.**” (**Mal 1:11**)
- “Then they shall bring all your brethren for an offering to the Lord **out of all nations ... And I will also take some of them for priests and Levites**, says the Lord.” (**Is 66:19,21**)
- “In that day there will be **an altar** to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt.” (**Is 19:19**)

→ This altar is obviously not a pagan altar since it is an altar “to the Lord”, and it cannot be a prophecy about a Jewish altar since it is unlawful to the Jews to have an altar outside Jerusalem; the Holy Book of Exodus is about the Jews trying to go out of Egypt because they cannot offer a sacrifice to the Lord in a foreign land. Even today Jews have synagogues all over the world but still no altar because where the Temple should be in Jerusalem is standing a Muslim Mosque (no wonder the Middle East conflict is complicated)! Moreover, St. Paul affirms, “We [Christians] have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle [the Jews] have no right to eat [the Eucharist]” (**Heb 13:10**) Our Lord also gave us instructions concerning this altar, “Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (**Mt 5:24**)

✠ The Universal Spiritual Priesthood of All Believers:

King David said, “Let my prayer be set before You as **incense**, the lifting up of my hands as the evening **sacrifice**” (Ps 141:2), “I will offer to You the **sacrifice** of thanksgiving” (Ps 116:17), “Offer the **sacrifices** of righteousness” (Ps 4:5). King David was not a priest like the sons of Aaron but his worship is considered as spiritual incense and sacrifice. This is what the spiritual priesthood of all believers means. St. Paul describes the Philippians’ gift as “**a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice**, well pleasing to God.” (Phil 4:18)

Therefore, St. Paul exhorts us saying:

- “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies **a living sacrifice**, holy, acceptable to God, **which is your reasonable service.**” (Rom 12:1)
- “Let us continually offer **the sacrifice of praise** to God, that is the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such **sacrifices** God is well pleased.” (Heb 13:15-16)

No wonder we read in the Holy Book of Revelation that Lord Jesus Christ “has made us kings and priests” (Rev 1:6). Obviously we are not literally kings with crowns and thrones to sit on and likewise, we are not priests literally but in a spiritual sense as explained above. Notice that this spiritual priesthood is available to both genders and it does not cancel the New Testament Priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek. The same happened in the Old Testament for the spiritual priesthood of the congregation did not abolish the Levitical Priesthood. Therefore, St. Peter said, “You are a chosen generation, **a royal priesthood, a holy nation**, His own special people, that you may **proclaim the praises** of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9), the Lord said the same to the children of Israel, “You shall be to Me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation**” (Ex 19:6)

✠ The Rebellion:

St. Peter said, “There were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies... and bring on themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet 2:1). This applies to the issue of Priesthood for the Holy Book of Numbers tells us a story about Korah, Dathan and Abiram with 250 leaders of the congregation rising against Moses and Aaron and saying, “all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” (Num 16:3). They rebelled against the Levitical Priesthood and wanted to generalize this honor. As a result “the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods” (Num 16:32). In the New Testament, St. Jude describes the heretics and says that they “perished in the rebellion of Korah” (Jude 11). This applies to the Protestants who rejected the New Testament Priesthood and the Eucharist.

Q: Our Lord said, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven” (Mt 23:9). Why then do we call the priest ‘father’?

A: These words were spoken to the disciples only and not to the whole congregation. Our Lord spoke certain things just for the disciples therefore St. Peter once asked Him, “Lord, do You speak this parable **only to us, or to all people?**” (Lk 12:41) The spiritual fatherhood is supported by many biblical examples:

1. The Old Testament:

- Elisha the Prophet called Elijah, his teacher, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen.” (2 Kgs 2:12) and King Joash called Elisha the same (2 Kgs 13: 14)
- King David said to Saul, “my father” (1 Sam 24:11) out of respect to the age difference and because Saul was the Lord’s anointed.
- Job the righteous said, “I was a father to the poor.” (Job 29:16)

2. The New Testament:

- St. Paul said, “To Timothy, my true son in the faith” (1 Tim 1:2), “To Timothy, my beloved son” (2 Tim 1:2), “You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 2:1), “To Titus, my true son in our common faith” (Titus 1:4), “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains” (Phil 10). Now should Timothy, Titus, and Onesimus tell St. Paul, “you’re not our father since we do not call anyone on earth our father.”
- St. Paul also said that St. Timothy served the gospel with him “As a son with his father” (Phil 2:22)
- St. Paul also said to St. Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father” (1 Tim 5:1), here the Bishop respects the age difference and considers the older man as a father. St. Stephen actually addressed his accusers saying, “Men and brethren and fathers” (Acts 7:2)
- St. Paul said to the Galatians, “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you.” (Gal 4:19)
- To the Corinthians he said, “As my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel...For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord.” (1 Cor 4:14-15,17)
- St. John said, “My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin” (1 Jn 2:1)
- St. John said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 Jn 4)

Q: How come we take a blessing from a human being (the priest) isn’t God the source of blessing?

A: Absolutely, God is the source of all blessings as St. James said, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (Jam 1:17) but God used human beings as channels for His blessings, examples:

- Our father Noah blessed his sons (Gen 9:26-27)
- Our father Isaac blessed his sons (Gen 28:3), St. Paul said, “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.” (Heb 11:20)
- Likewise, Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons (Gen 48:20; Heb 11:21)
- God said to our father Abraham, “You shall be a blessing” (Gen 12:2), Elijah was a blessing in the house of the widow (1 Kings 17), Elisha blessed the house of the Shunammite (2 Kgs 4), it was written, “The Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake.” (Gen 39:5)
- St. Simeon the elder blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph (Lk 2:34)
- St. Paul said, “The cup of blessing **that we bless**, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16)

Actually, we, as Christians, are required to bless others:

- “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you” (Mt 5:44)
- “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Rom 12:14)
- “Not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing” (1 Pet 3:9)

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*The Priesthood*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.