

QUESTION 22

Christ's Priesthood

Next we have to consider Christ's priesthood (*sacerdotium Christi*). And on this topic there are six questions: (1) Is it fitting for Christ to be a priest? (2) What is this priest's victim (*hostia*)? (3) What is the effect of this priesthood? (4) Does the effect of this priesthood apply to Christ Himself or only to others? (5) Is Christ's priesthood eternal? (6) Should Christ be called a priest according to the order of Melchisedech?

Article 1

Is it fitting for Christ to be a priest?

It seems that it is not fitting for Christ to be a priest (*Christo non conveniat esse sacerdotem*):

Objection 1: A priest is less than angel; this is why Zachariah 3:1 says, "God showed me the high priest standing before an angel of the Lord." But Christ is greater than the angels—this according to Hebrews 1:4 ("Having become as much superior to angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs"). Therefore, it is not fitting for Christ to be a priest.

Objection 2: Things that existed in the Old Testament prefigured Christ—this according to Colossians 2:17 ("... which are shadows of things to come, but the body is Christ's"). But Christ did not take His origin of flesh from the priests of the Old Testament; for in Hebrews 7:14 the Apostle says, "It is clear that our Lord sprang from Judah, but in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests." Therefore, it is not fitting for Christ to be a priest.

Objection 3: In the Old Law, which is a figure of Christ, the lawgiver and priest are not the same; hence, in Exodus 28:1 the Lord said to Moses the lawgiver, "Take Aaron, your brother, that he might minister to me in the priesthood." But Christ delivers the New Law (*Christus est lator novae legis*)—this according to Jeremiah 31:33 ("I will give my laws in your hearts"). Therefore, it is not fitting for Christ to be a priest.

But contrary to this: Hebrews 4:14 says, "We have a high priest (*pontifex*) who has entered heaven, Jesus, the Son of God."

I respond: The proper duty of a priest is to be a mediator (*mediator*) between God and the people, viz., by (a) *handing on divine things to the people*, since 'priest' (*sacerdos*) means, as it were, giving sacred things (*dans sacra*)—this according to Malachi 2:7 ("They will ask for the Law from his mouth," i.e., from the mouth of the priest)—and, again, by (b) *presenting the prayers of the people to God and in some sense making satisfaction to God for their sins*; hence, in Hebrews 5:1 the Apostle says, "Every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in the things pertaining to God, that he might offer gifts and sacrifices for their sins."

All of this is especially fitting for Christ. For through Him gifts have been given to men—this according to 2 Peter 1:4 ("... through whom"—i.e., through Christ—"He gave us the greatest and most precious promises, so that through them you might be made sharers in the divine nature"). He also reconciled the human race with God—this according to Colossians 1:19-20 ("It was God's good pleasure for all fullness to dwell in Him"—i.e., in Christ—"and to reconcile all things through Him"). Hence, it is especially fitting for Christ to be a priest.

Reply to objection 1: As Dionysius explains in *Caelestia Hierarchia*, hierarchical power befits the angels insofar as they are likewise in the middle between God and man, with the result that the priest himself, insofar as he is in the middle between God and the people, is called an angel—this according to Malachi 2:7 ("He is an angel of the Lord of hosts").

Now Christ was greater than the angels, not only with respect to His divine nature, but also with respect to His human nature, insofar as He had the fullness of grace and glory. Hence, He also had the hierarchical or priestly power in a more excellent way than the angels, to such an extent that even the angels themselves were ministers of His priesthood—this according to Matthew 4:11 (“Angels came and ministered to Him”).

However, as regards His passibility, He “was made a little lower than the angels,” as the Apostle puts it in Hebrews 2:9. And on this score He was conformed to the human wayfarers who are appointed to the priesthood.

Reply to objection 2: As Damascene says in *De Fide Orthodoxa* 3, “What is similar in all respects will of course be the same, and not an exemplar.” Therefore, since the priesthood of the Old Law was a figure of Christ’s priesthood, Christ did not want to be born of the lineage of figurative priests, and this in order to highlight that His priesthood is not altogether the same, but instead differs in the way that what is genuine differs from what is figurative.

Reply to objection 3: As was explained above (q. 7, aa. 7 and 10), other men had certain graces in a particular way, whereas Christ, as the head of everyone, had the perfection of all graces. And so, as regards the others, one is a lawgiver and another a priest and another a king, but all of these come together in Christ as in the font of all graces. Hence, Isaiah 33:22 says, “The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king: He will come and save us (*dominus iudex noster, dominus legifer noster, dominus rex noster, ipse veniet et salvabit nos*).”

Article 2

Was Christ Himself simultaneously priest and victim?

It seems that Christ Himself was not simultaneously priest and victim (*ipse Christus not fuit simul sacerdos et hostia*):

Objection 1: The priest’s role is to kill the victim. But Christ did not kill Himself. Therefore, He was not simultaneously priest and victim.

Objection 2: Christ’s priesthood is more similar to the priesthood of the Jews, which had been instituted by God, than to the priesthood of the gentiles, by which demons were worshiped. But in the Old Law it was never the case that a man was offered in sacrifice, something that was especially reprehended in the sacrifices of the gentiles—this according to Psalm 105:38 (“They shed the innocent blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan”). Therefore, in the case of Christ’s priesthood it was not fitting for the man Christ to be Himself the victim.

Objection 3: Every victim is such that it is sanctified by being offered to God. But Christ’s human nature was from its beginning sanctified and conjoined to God. Therefore, it cannot appropriately be claimed that Christ as a man was the victim.

But contrary to this: Ephesians 5:2 says, “Christ loved us and handed Himself over for us, an offering and victim to God to ascend with a fragrant odor.”

I respond: As Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 10, “Every visible sacrifice is a sacrament, i.e., a sacred sign, of an invisible sacrifice.” But an invisible sacrifice is one by which a man offers his own spirit to God—this according to Psalm 50:19 (“An afflicted spirit is a sacrifice to God”). And so everything that is offered to God in order that a man’s spirit might be borne toward God can be called a sacrifice.

Therefore, man needs sacrifice, and this for the sake of three [effects]:

First, *for the remission of the sins by which a man is turned away from God*. And this is why in Hebrews 5:1 the Apostle says that it pertains to priests “to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

Second, *in order for a man to be preserved in the state of grace, always adhering to God, in which his peace and salvation consist*. Hence, in the Old Law, as prescribed in Leviticus 3, the peace offering or peace-making victim (*hostia pacifica*) was immolated for the salvation of those making the offering.

Third, *in order for a man’s spirit to be perfectly united with God*—something that will occur especially in [the state of] glory. This is why, again, in the Old Law, as prescribed in Leviticus 1, what was offered was a holocaust, in the sense of a *total burning (totum incensum)*.

Now these effects have been conferred on us through Christ’s human nature. For, first of all, *our sins have been erased*—this according to Romans 4:25 (“He was handed over because of our sins”). Second, *through Him we have received saving grace (gratiam nos salvantem per ipsum accepimus)*—this according to Hebrews 5:9 (“He became to all who submit to Him the cause of eternal salvation”). Third, through Him we have attained the perfection of glory—this according to Hebrews 10:19 (“Through His blood we have the assurance of entering the Holies,” i.e., entering into heavenly glory).

And so Christ Himself as a man was not only the priest but also the perfect victim, being at once the victim for sin, the victim for the peacemakers, and the holocaust.

Reply to objection 1: Christ did not kill Himself, but instead willingly exposed Himself to death—this according to Isaiah 53:7 (“He was offered up because He willed to be”). And so He is said to have offered Himself.

Reply to objection 2: The killing of the man Christ can be connected to two acts of will:

First, *to the act of will of those who killed Him*. And on this score He does not have the character of a victim, since Christ’s killers are not said to have offered Him as a victim to God, but instead are said to have committed a grave sin (*graviter deliquisse*). And the wicked sacrifices of the gentiles, by which they offered up men to idols, bore a likeness to this sin.

Second, the killing of Christ can be thought of in relation to an act of will on the part of Him who is patient and who willingly offers Himself up to suffering. And on this score He has the character of a victim. And in this there is no likeness to the sacrifices of the gentiles.

Reply to objection 3: [No reply given.]

Article 3

Is the effect of Christ’s priesthood the expiation of sins?

It seems that the effect of Christ’s priesthood is not the expiation of sins (*effectus sacerdotii Christ non sit expiatio peccatorum*):

Objection 1: It belongs to God alone to erase sins—this according to Isaiah 43:25 (“I am He that blots out your iniquities for my own sake”). But it is as a man that Christ is a priest and not as God. Therefore, Christ’s priesthood does not expiate sins (*non est expiativum peccatorum*).

Objection 2: In Hebrews 10:1-3 the Apostle says that the victims of the Old Testament “cannot make [those who draw near] perfect; otherwise, the worshipers, once sufficiently cleansed, would have no sins on their conscience (*nullam haberet conscientiam peccati*); but among them a recounting of sins is made every year.” But, similarly, a recounting of sins is made under Christ’s priesthood when it is said, “Forgive us our trespasses” (Matthew 6:12). Likewise, sacrifice is being offered continually in the Church; hence, in the same place it is said, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Therefore, sins are not expiated through Christ’s priesthood.

Objection 3: As is clear from Leviticus 4, in the Old Law a he-goat was immolated especially for the sins of the ruler, or a she-goat for the sins of some of the people, or a calf for the sins of the priest. But Christ is compared not to any of these animals, but to a lamb—this according to Jeremiah 11:19 (“I am like a meek lamb being carried to the sacrifice”). Therefore, it seems that Christ’s priesthood does not expiate sins.

But contrary to this: In Hebrews 9:24 the Apostle says, “The blood of Christ, who through the Holy Spirit offered Himself unspotted to God, shall cleanse our consciences of dead works, to serve the living God.” Now it is sins that are being called dead works. Therefore, Christ’s priesthood has the power to wash away sins.

I respond: Two things are required for the complete cleansing of sins, and these correspond to two of the things that exist in a sin, viz., (a) *the stain of sin (macula culpae)* and (b) *the condition of deserving punishment (reatus poenae)*. The stain of sin is erased through grace, by which the sinner’s heart is turned toward God, whereas the condition of deserving punishment is totally removed through a man’s making satisfaction to God.

Now the priesthood of Christ effects both of these. For by His power the *grace* is given by which our hearts are turned toward God—this according to Romans 3:24-25 (“... having been justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God proposed as a propitiator through faith in His blood”). He has likewise made satisfaction in full for us, insofar as “He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4).

Hence, it is clear that Christ’s priesthood had the full power to expiate sins.

Reply to objection 1: Even though Christ was a priest as a man and not as God, still, one and the same [person] was a priest and God. Hence, in the Synod of Ephesus one reads, “If anyone claims that it was not the Word of God Himself who became our high priest and apostle, but some other man, i.e., one born of a woman, besides Him, let him be anathema.”

And so, insofar as His human nature acted in the power of the divine nature, the sacrifice in question was absolutely efficacious for wiping away sins. For this reason, in *De Trinitate* 4 Augustine says, “... so that, since four things are thought of in every sacrifice—(a) who it is offered to, (b) who it is offered by, (c) what is offered, and (d) who it is offered for—the same one and true mediator, reconciling us to God through His sacrifice of peace, remained one with Him to whom the sacrifice was offered; united within Himself those for whom He offered it; was Himself the one who offered it; and was Himself what He offered.”

Reply to objection 2: In the New Law sins are recounted not because of the inefficacy of Christ’s priesthood, as if the sins are not sufficiently expiated through Him; instead, they are recounted either (a) on the part of those who do not want to participate in Christ’s sacrifice and in light of whose sins we pray that they might be converted, or (b) on the part of those who, after having participated in this sacrifice, deviate from it in various ways by sinning.

Moreover, the sacrifice that is offered daily in the Church is not different from the sacrifice that Christ Himself offered, but is instead its commemoration (*sed eius commemoratio*). Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 10 Augustine says, “Christ Himself is both the priest who offers it and the oblation, and He wanted the sacred sign of this reality (*cuius rei sacramentum*) to be the daily sacrifice of the Church.”

Reply to objection 3: As Origen explains in *Super Ioannem*, even though different animals were offered in the Law, nonetheless, the daily sacrifice, which was offered in the morning and in the evening, was a lamb, as was prescribed in Numbers 28:3-4. Hence, it was being signified that the offering of the lamb, i.e., of Christ, would be the culminating sacrifice of all the others. And this is why in John 1:29 it is said, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world.”

Article 4

Did the effect of Christ's priesthood pertain only to others or to Himself as well?

It seems that the effect of Christ's priesthood pertained not only to others but to Himself as well (*effectus sacerdotii Christi non solum pertinuerit ad alios sed etiam ad ipsum*):

Objection 1: Praying for the people belongs to the office of the priest—this according to 2 Maccabees 1:23 (“The priests made the prayer as the sacrifice was being consumed”). But Christ prayed not only for others but also for Himself—this according to what was said above (q. 21, a. 3) and according to what is said explicitly in Hebrews 5:7 (“In the days of His flesh, with loud cries and with tears, He offered up prayers and supplications to Him who was able to save Him from death”). Therefore, Christ's priesthood had an effect not only in others but in Himself as well.

Objection 2: Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice during His passion. But as was established above (q. 19, aa. 3-4), through His passion He merited not only for others, but also for Himself. Therefore, Christ's priesthood had an effect not only in others, but in Himself as well.

Objection 3: The priesthood of the Old Law was a figure of Christ's priesthood. But a priest of the Old Law offered sacrifice not only for others, but also for himself; for Leviticus 16:17 says, “The high priest enters the sanctuary in order to pray for himself, and for his household, and for the whole assembly of the children of Israel.” Therefore, it is likewise the case that Christ's priesthood had an effect not only in others, but in Himself as well.

But contrary to this: In the Synod of Ephesus we read, “If anyone claims that Christ offered the oblation for Himself instead of only for us (for He who did not know sin did not need a sacrifice), let him be anathema.” But the duty of the priest lies especially in the offering of sacrifice. Therefore, Christ's priesthood did not have an effect in Christ Himself.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), a priest is appointed as a mediator (*medius*) between God and the people. Now the one who needs a mediator is he who cannot approach God on his own, and such an individual is subject to the priesthood, participating in the effect of the priesthood. But this condition did not belong to Christ, since in Hebrews 7:25 the Apostle says, “... coming in His own right near to God, He is lives always to make intercession for us.”

And so it is not appropriate for Christ to receive the effect of His priesthood within Himself, but instead what is appropriate is for Him to communicate that effect to others. For the first agent in any genus has an influence that is not receptive within that genus; for instance, the sun illumines without being illuminated, and fire gives heat without being heated. But Christ is the source of the whole priesthood, since the priest under the [Old] Law (*sacerdos legalis*) was a figure of Him, whereas the priest of the New Law acts in His person—this according to 2 Corinthians 2:10 (“What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the person of Christ”).

And so it is not fitting for Christ to receive the effect of His priesthood.

Reply to objection 1: Even if prayer is fitting for priests, it is nonetheless not proper to their office [as priests], since it is fitting for everyone to pray both for himself and for others—this according to James 5:16 (“Pray for one another and you will be saved”). And so one could reply that the prayer by which Christ prayed for Himself was not an act of His priesthood.

However, this reply seems to be excluded by the fact that in Hebrews 5:9, after the Apostle had said, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech,” he added, “In the days of His flesh, He offered up prayers, etc.,” as quoted above; and so it seems that the prayer by which Christ prayed pertained to His priesthood.

And so we have to reply that other priests participate in the effect of their priesthood not as priests

but as sinners, as will be explained below (see ad 3). By contrast, Christ did not have sin absolutely speaking, though He did have “a likeness of sin in the flesh,” as Romans 8:3 puts it. And so it should not be said without qualification (*simpliciter*) that He participated in the effect of His priesthood; instead, He participated in it in a certain sense (*secundum quid*), viz., because of the passibility of His flesh. This is why [the Apostle] says explicitly, “... to Him who was able to save Him from death.”

Reply to objection 2: Two things can be thought of in the offering of a sacrifice by any priest, viz., (a) the sacrifice itself that is offered and (b) the devotion of the one offering the sacrifice:

Now the proper effect of a priest is what follows from the sacrifice itself. However, through His passion Christ brought about something not by way of the sacrifice, which is offered in the manner of an act of satisfaction, but by the very devotion with which, through charity, He underwent the passion with humility.

Reply to objection 3: The figure cannot be equal to the reality. Hence, the figural priest of the Old Law was unable to attain to such perfection that he would not need a sacrifice of satisfaction. By contrast, Christ did not need a sacrifice of satisfaction. Hence, the two lines of reasoning are not similar. And this is the point that the Apostle is making: “The Law appointed as priests men who had infirmity, but the word of the oath, which exists now after the Law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever” (Hebrews 7:28).

Article 5

Does Christ’s priesthood last forever?

It seems that the priesthood of Christ does not last forever (*sacerdotium Christi non permaneat in aeternum*):

Objection 1: Those who have an infirmity of sin that can be expiated by sacrifice need only that particular effect. But this condition will not last forever, since there will be no infirmity in the saints—this according to Isaiah 60:21 (“Your people will all be just”), whereas the infirmity of the sinners will not be able to be expiated, since there is no redemption in hell. Therefore, Christ’s priesthood does not last forever (*non est in aeternum*).

Objection 2: Christ’s priesthood is made manifest most of all in His passion and death, when “by His own blood He entered into the Holies” (Hebrews 9:12). But as is explained in Romans 6:9 (“Christ rising from the dead will die no more”), Christ’s passion and death will not last forever. Therefore, Christ’s priesthood will not last forever.

Objection 3: Christ is a priest as a man and not as God. But at one time Christ was not a man, viz., during His three days of death (*in triduo mortis*). Therefore, Christ’s priesthood does not last forever (*non est in aeternum*).

But contrary to this: Psalm 109:4 says, “You are a priest forever.”

I respond: In the office of the priest there are two things that can be considered: (a) the very offering of the sacrifice, and (b) the consummation itself of the sacrifice, which consists in the attainment of the end of the sacrifice by those for whom the sacrifice is offered.

Now the end of the sacrifice that Christ offered consisted not in temporal goods, but in eternal goods that we acquire through His death. Hence, Hebrews 9:11 says, “Christ is the high priest of the good things to come,” by reason of which Christ’s priesthood is said to last forever (*esse aeternum*). And this consummation of Christ’s sacrifice was prefigured in the fact that, as prescribed in Leviticus 16, the high priest under the Law (*pontifex legalis*) entered the Holy of Holies once a year with the blood of a

he-goat and of a calf, and yet he had immolated the he-goat and the calf outside of the Holy of Holies and not in it. Similarly, Christ entered the Holy of Holies, i.e., heaven itself, and prepared the way for us to enter by the power of His blood, which He had poured out for us on earth.

Reply to objection 1: The saints who will be in heaven will not need to be further expiated by the Christ's priesthood but, having already been expiated, they will need to be consummated through Christ Himself, on whom their glory depends. As Apocalypse 21:23 says, "The glory (*claritas*) illuminates it"—i.e., illuminates the city of the saints—"and its lamp is the Lamb."

Reply to objection 2 and objection 3: Even though Christ's passion and death are not to be repeated in the future, nonetheless, the power of the victim remains forever, since, as Hebrews 10:14 says, "By a single oblation He has brought to perfection forever those who are sanctified." From this the reply to the third objection is likewise clear.

Now the oneness of this sacrifice was prefigured in the Law by the fact that, as prescribed in Leviticus 16, it was once a year that the high priest under the Law entered the Holy [of Holies] with the solemn offering of blood. But this figure fell short of the reality in that the particular victim (*hostia*) did not have everlasting power, and so the sacrifices (*illae hostiae*) were repeated annually.

Article 6

Was Christ's priesthood according to the order of Melchisedech?

It seems that Christ's priesthood was not according to the order of Melchisedech (*sacerdotium Christi non fuerit secundum ordinem Melchisedech*):

Objection 1: Christ is the source of the whole priesthood as the principal priest. But what is principal is such that it does not follow the order of others, but instead the others follow its order. Therefore, Christ should not be called a priest according to the order of Melchisedech.

Objection 2: The priesthood of the Old Law was closer to the Christ's priesthood than any priesthood that existed before the Law. But as is clear from what was said in the Second Part (*ST* 2-2, q. 1, a. 7), sacred signs (*sacramenta*) signified Christ more explicitly to the extent that they were closer to Christ. Therefore, Christ's priesthood should be designated as being in accord with the priesthood of the Law rather than in accord with the priesthood of Melchisedech, which existed before the Law.

Objection 3: Hebrews 7:2-3 says, "He is King of Peace. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life." But all of this belongs only to the Son of God. Therefore, Christ should not be called a priest according to the order of Melchisedech as if He were a priest of someone else's order. Instead, He should be called a priest according to His own order.

But contrary to this: Psalm 109:4 says, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech."

I respond: As was explained above (a. 4, ad 3), the priesthood under the Law was a figure of Christ's priesthood—not, to be sure, in the sense that it measured up to the reality, but instead in the sense that it fell far short of the reality, both because (a) the priesthood under the Law did not wash away sins, and also because (b) it was not eternal in the way that Christ's priesthood is. Now the very superiority (*excellencia*) of Christ's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood was prefigured in the priesthood of Melchisedech, since Melchisedech took tithes from Abraham, within whose loins the priesthood of the Law was itself tithed in a certain sense. And so Christ's priesthood is said to be in the order of Melchisedech because of the superiority of a genuine priesthood over the figurative priesthood under the Law.

Reply to objection 1: Christ is said to be [a priest] according to the order of Melchisedech not in the sense that He is a priest according to the order of a more principal priest, but in the sense that He is a priest according to the order of a priest who prefigured the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood.

Reply to objection 2: Christ's priesthood can be thought of in two ways: (a) Christ's offering itself and (b) participation in it:

As regards *the offering itself*, by its shedding of blood, the priesthood under the Law prefigured Christ's priesthood more explicitly than did the priesthood of Melchisedech, in which blood was not shed.

But as regards *the participation in this offering and in its effect*, which the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the priesthood under the Law mainly has to do with, this participation is more explicitly prefigured by the priesthood of Melchisedech, which offered bread and wine, signifying, as Augustine explains, the unity of the Church that is constituted by participation in the sacrifice of Christ. Hence, under the New Law Christ's genuine sacrifice is communicated to the faithful under the appearances of bread and wine.

Reply to objection 3: Melchisedech is said to be "without father and without mother and without genealogy, and not to have a beginning of or an end [of life]," not because Melchisedech did not have these things, but because we do not read about them in Sacred Scripture. And by this very fact, as the Apostle explains in the same passage (Hebrews 7:2-3), Melchisedech "is likened to the Son of God," who on the earth is without father and who in heaven is without mother and genealogy—this according to Isaiah 53:8 ("Who will tell of his generation?"). And with respect to His divine nature He has neither beginning nor end of days.