

Albert Vanhoye S.J. Let Us Confidently Welcome Christ Our High Priest

Chapter 7 'The Priestly Solidarity of Christ'. (Heb.5:1-10)

In this chapter Vanhoye deals with the nature of priesthood and its fulfilment in Christ. He begins by quoting from Hebrews chapter 5: *'Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness. and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. No one takes this honour upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was'.* (Heb.5:1-4)

These four verses are a general description of priesthood, emphasising being in solidarity with sinners as important in priesthood. The priest has two important relationships one with God and with the people. His relationship with God is initiated and established by God through a call; it is not a relationship the priest initiates or a role he selects for himself .

The priest of the N.T. is a mediator between God and people with whom he is in solidarity with the people while the priest of the O.T. sole concern was his relationship with God; he was a man of worship who at God's service.

The solidarity of the priest of the N.T. with the people stems from the fact that he is human and is chosen to act on behalf of people in relation to God. His relationship with God comes from his appointment by God as mediator in dealings between God and the people. Appointed by God the priest is acceptable to the people because he is capable of dealing gently with the ignorant and wayward, being aware of his own human frailty.

Sin is the big obstacle to a genuine relationship of humans with God. The priest mediates for sinners, including himself, through prayer, and the rituals of reconciliation, his offering of gifts and sacrifice.

We read in Heb. 5:4 *'And one does not take the honour (of priesthood) upon himself, but is called by God, just as Aaron was'.*

Priesthood is not a human achievement but a gift given totally at God's initiative. And when God gives the gift of priesthood to people they receive it humbly and place it at the service of others in their dealings with God. The letter emphasises that Jesus of Nazareth was destined for priesthood from the first moment of his life; but he did not promote or exalt himself to the office of high priest. He became high priest through his passion and was proclaimed as such by God as was foretold in Psalm 109/110: *'Yahweh has sworn an oath he will never retract, you are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek'* (Psalm 109/110:4)

'In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he

was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek'. (Heb.5:7-10)

This is a passage full of doctrine. *'In the days when he was in the flesh'* points to the weakness of this Jesus who was exposed to suffering and death which are presented to us both as an oblation and a plea. In authentic prayer, both attitudes of pleading and of making an offering must always be there. So when we ask for a favour we must also offer our availability to God. We cannot impose our way of seeing things on God; to require God to intervene in some situation, according to our directions, is to impose on God. We allow God the freedom to choose the solution as Jesus did. And when we offer something to God we also ask God to sanctify our offering, and adapt/transform it according to his plan.

In his agony in the garden, Jesus pleaded with his Father; *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me"*. But, on second thoughts, he changed his attitude to one of docility; *"Nevertheless, not as I will but as you will"*. (Mt. 26:29). And in doing so his plea became a self-oblation.

The letter continues saying that Jesus has been heard and been saved from death in a unique way by the Father. Because he offered his life as an unselfish gift for the love of the Father and for the benefit of people he conquered death.

The letter goes on to say: *'Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered'*. (Heb.5:8) Hearing that Jesus learned obedience in his passion is surprising but it does not imply that Jesus had been disobedient before his Passion. Indeed Hebrews chapter 10 emphasises that from the start he came to obey the Father's will: *"Lo, I have come to do your will O, God"*. (Heb. 10:1). This was an attitude of perfect obedience but that attitude was untested. It was thoroughly tested in his passion and Jesus maintained his attitude of perfect obedience and acquired the virtue of obedience. Only one who faces and overcomes the hardest temptations acquires the virtue of obedience in every fibre of his being. In the beginning that person may have been disposed to obedience but his obedience was not yet an acquired virtue. That is the law of our human nature and Jesus had taken on our human nature in its fallen state. As he was human needed to learn in the way we all do. His obedience was all the more acceptable to God because of his solidarity with us. He was subjected to cruel suffering in his passion; in no way did deserve this treatment. So he is our model and he is able to communicate his profound obedience to us; and give us an education that is indispensable for us to grow in virtue.

St Paul says in his letter to the Philippians that *'Jesus has assumed the form of a slave /servant'* (Phil.2:7), not the condition of a son. Also the letter to the Romans says he was sent; *'In the likeness of sinful flesh'*. (Rom.8:3)

Jesus took on our human nature in order to transform it and conform it more perfectly to God's plan. This is the true meaning of redemption. With amazing generosity Christ has accepted to be subjected to the education in suffering that is indispensable for us, to learn. Therefore *when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb.5:9-10).*

'And when he was made perfect' as a statement about Jesus seems surprising because we think of Christ as being perfect from the beginning and not needing to be made perfect.

“Becoming man” is a process of growing towards perfection. As a child, Jesus did not have the perfection of an adult; he had to acquire it through life experiences including various hardships. Saint Luke tells us quite explicitly that he grew not just *“in age”* but also *“in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and man”* (Luke 2:52). As an adult he did not yet have the perfection of priesthood; he had to acquire it through his passion. His relationships, with God and people, were severely tested when Jesus experienced that he was abandoned by God and thrown as prey to experience the wickedness of men. But his relationships resisted and conquered these experiences and were strengthened and reinforced through them because he accepted them in the loving obedience of a son and in solidarity with us his brothers and sisters. This was how his relationship to the Father acquired the highest degree of perfection and his relationship with us also came to be of a very high degree of perfection.