



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 26 Commentary Hebrews 7-13

Lesson 27 Questions James and Jude

THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST Hebrews 7-13

INTRODUCTION

The theology of Christ the priest is developed only in the letter to the Hebrews. His priesthood came neither from Levi, son of Jacob, nor Aaron, appointed priests by God, for their ceremonies were only purification rites. But Jesus, who purifies consciences from dead works in order to serve the living God, sacrificed Himself, body and blood, and thus won an eternal redemption for all (Hebrews 7:26-28). The ritual and priesthood of the Old Testament was nullified forever.

To replace it, Jesus instituted a priesthood with His own powers. At the Last Supper, He took bread and wine, blessed them, and said,

“This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me,”

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you” (Luke 22:19-20).

We read of this in the New Testament Gospels, but also in Acts 6:7 and in 1 Corinthians 10:16. Hebrews takes this information and develops the great realities around it that come to us, realities

far more extensive than the Old Testament priesthood, which was bound up with the place of cult—the Temple. That is why it disappeared after the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

I. CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD: A NEW AND HIGHER ONE (Hebrews 7:1-28)

A. Melchizedek: A Different Model (Hebrews 7:1-28)

1. King and Priest. Scripture might have never emphasized this ruler of a small territory when Abraham had migrated to Canaan except for this inclusion in Hebrews. The writer saw a close connection with Christ, a model prefiguring the Son of God.

Melchizedek was the king of Salem, says Genesis 14:18-20; Salem at that time was a small city-state whose name meant peace. Today it is Jerusalem. His own name meant “saving justice,” so he was a king of peace and salvation. Since Genesis gave no mention of his parentage or his death, he became a symbol of a priest forever. The

writer of Hebrews sees him as representing a priesthood that is unique and eternal, and so a prefigure of Christ.

When Melchizedek came out to meet the victorious Abraham, he blessed him, thus giving him what a priest has from God. Then Abraham gave him a tenth of all his booty. We can see in this the origin of what is called a tithe—a tenth of an amount. It is interesting also to see the reason for the tithe Abraham gave Melchizedek: the priestly blessing, a service of a priest, was valuable and so deserved a gift back. When we think of our Catholic priests who give their whole lives vowing celibacy to be able to give all their time and energy to God's people, with no other income, we gratefully and considerately take care of their needs, as representatives of God. I'm not sure that Catholics have ever tithed in their church support, but I know of many fine non-Catholics who consider this an obligation before God to give to Him their first tenth before any other use of their money. What would a tenth of your weekly or monthly income be? Are you tithing that for God's work? Nothing can ever reward you as much as if you have a sense of gratitude to God for your own income. When you tithe, count in your other ways of giving to the Church, deducting it from the 1/10 of your income and let your Church support be the remainder.

A last teaching about Melchizedek is: "Like the Son of God, he remains a priest forever" (Hebrews 7:3). (The Catholic priesthood holds the same teaching for its priests.) As a priest forever, Jesus "is able to save those who approach God through him since he lives forever to make intercession for them." Do we understand the power of our prayer through Christ our Lord?

Psalm 110 speaks of Melchizedek when it says of the Messiah: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4). The priesthood of a new order was necessary, for the Old Law ended with the coming of Christ the Messiah.

B. The Christian Sacrifice. "Unlike the other high priests, Jesus has no need to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people" (Hebrews 7:27). How, then, explain the Catholic Sacrifice of the Mass day after day all over the world? Jesus Himself set this up at His Last Supper when He said after He had taken bread, given thanks, and broken it: "This is my body to be given for you. **DO THIS AS A COMMEMORATION OF ME.**" And of the cup of wine He said: "This is the new covenant in my blood which will be shed for you" (Luke 22:19-20).

St. Paul quoting this in his First Letter to the Corinthians writes:

"I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.' Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes! This means that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Paul and the Apostles established "The Lord's Supper" in the Church and it has continued throughout the Christian Church. Some Christians at the time of the Protestant Reformation (?) dropped the Eucharistic teaching of the Church with its fifteen centuries of belief. There are so many, many miracles in Christian history regarding the Eucharist, and so much testimony of its importance in their lives, that to deny these is a strange thing.

II. THE HEAVENLY PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS (Hebrews 8:1 - 9:28)

A. A New Priesthood and Sanctuary (Hebrews 8:1-5). Our high priest has taken His seat at the right hand of God in heaven. When the Apostles saw Jesus taken up into heaven (Acts 1:2) they realized that He presides over the heavenly sanctuary. His priesthood is different from the levitical priesthood of the Old Testament, for His offering is Himself, His life and death. He is mediator of a new covenant with its infinite fruits. “Jesus has obtained a more excellent ministry now, just as he is mediator of a better covenant, founded on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6, 1 Timothy 2:5).

B. The New Covenant (Hebrews 8:8-12). “I will make a new covenant with Israel...; I will place my laws in their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts” (Hebrews 8:8, 10; Jeremiah 31:31-34). This is a promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (Covenant)... I will forgive their evildoing, and their sins I will remember no more” (Hebrews 8:11b-12). And so we have the sacrament of Baptism and the sacrament of Reconciliation (Penance). On the night of His resurrection, we find Jesus suddenly appearing to the Twelve through locked doors and saying, after a deliberate “breathing on them,” “Receive the Holy Spirit (the Sacrament of Confirmation). If you forgive men’s sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound” (John 20:22-23).

C. The Sacrificial Blood (Hebrews 9:1-14). This is the first time that the Hebrews’ writer speaks of blood of a sacrificial animal. Blood was a symbol of life itself and so must be offered in sacrifice to the author of life first, for blood was sacred to Him (Leviticus 17:1-16). It had a special significance as a means of atonement. The only time the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary in the temple, was entered, was on the feast of the Atonement, and the high Priest was the only one to enter it then, with the blood of a sacrificed clean animal, offered for himself and his people. These sins of the people were those of matters of food and drink, ritual washings, imposed until the

time of the “new order” (Hebrews 9:10). We see that the Old Testament covenant made use of blood to seal the pact, the covenant, of God and people.

Christ, the high priest of the new covenant, entered the sanctuary of a “tabernacle not made with hands,” offering His own blood and so achieved eternal redemption of all who will believe in it and live a new life. Christ fulfilled the Mosaic Covenant while establishing a New One—for “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22b). The tabernacle that Jesus entered after His death was the sanctuary of heaven, that He might appear before God forever on our behalf, having satisfied for the sins of many. The next time He appears it will be not “to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him” (Hebrews 9:28, Colossians 3:1-4, 2 Corinthians 5:16-23).

III. WORSHIP IN THE OLD AND NEW COVENANT (Hebrews 9:15-28; 10:1-18)

A. Old Covenant Worship (Hebrews 9:18-20, Exodus 24:6-8). In the desert, Moses received from God the plan of the tent for the worship and sacrifices of His Chosen People. The tent was divided in two sections, the Holy Place, in which were the lamp stand, the tables of the Law, and the loaves of permanent offering. The curtain in the middle divided this from the Holy of Holies, which only the High Priest entered once a year. There were the gold altar of incense, the Ark of the Covenant, plated with gold all over, and the gold jar containing some Manna, Aaron’s branch that grew buds, and the Tables of the Covenant. Above the Ark of the Covenant were two golden winged cherubim.

When the High Priest entered once a year, he took the blood of the sacrificed animal to make an offering for his own and the people’s faults of inadvertence (Hebrews 9:7).

B. New Testament Worship (Hebrews 10:1-10)

1. Scripture Accounts. Here the letter to the Hebrews declares: “Bulls’ blood and goats’ blood are incapable of taking away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). He follows with a quote from Psalm 40 applicable to Christ:

“You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but you gave me a body. You took no pleasure in burnt offering or sacrifice for sin; then I said, ‘Here I am, I am coming,’ in the scroll it is written of me, To do your will, O God is my delight” (Psalm 40:6-8).

Hebrews adds:

“This will was for us to be made holy by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ made once and for all” (Hebrews 10:10).

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “For the tradition I received from the Lord and handed on to you is that on the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and after he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me” (Hebrews 11:23-24). And to the Ephesians he wrote: ...Follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up for us as an offering and a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

It is clear from these Scriptures that Jesus offered Himself in sacrifice, body and blood, and gave instructions to His apostles to continue that through the bread and wine to be consecrated by His priests whom He asked to “Do this in memory of Me.” The whole Old Testament basic ideas of the worship of God and a fitting sacrifice offered to Him, Jesus drew into the New Testament that He established. Because of this, in the early centuries from St. Paul on, we find the liturgy which we call the Holy Eucharist, forming around the

scriptures, both Old and New, so that today after nearly two thousand years of worship, we have a developed and fulfilled, scripturally based worship, which we call the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

2. Our Sacrifice of Infinite Value, the Order of Mass. This is the worship service we call “The Mass” which somehow came into English from the word “Missa” used at the end of the Mass in Latin, “Ite, missa est.” “Go, it is ended.”

It is remarkable to see Old Testament worship carried over into the Eucharistic Sacrifice. It is enriching to notice in the missalettes how much is from Scriptures.

a. The Church Building. We have two sections, as the dwelling Tent of Israel’s worship had: a section for the people, for baptisms, special candles, incensing, etc.; the second section for the priest and the service at the altar. The “manna,” the sacred Bread is also contained in “an ark of the covenant”—the tabernacle in which is reserved the Bread of the Eucharist—the Body and Blood of the Sacrifice. However, the consecrated wine is not reserved. We have incense, gold vessels and candle holders, reminders of angels such as the Cherubim, and a stand for the Word of God given from Moses on, and even before him. In the days of the Apostles and for the centuries of persecution, these rites were, as of the Last Supper, in private homes. In freedom, churches developed what we now have.

b. Differences in Christian Worship. Many Christian worship centers and churches have no need for an altar (used for a priest to offer the Sacrifice that Jesus told the Apostles to continue, and used for so much that came into early Christian worship from the Old Testament, even by Christ Himself). Perhaps in the reunion of Christians, unity of worship will be restored.

IV. PRESERVING FAITH (Hebrews 10:19-39, 11:1-39)

A. A New Opportunity (Hebrews 10:19-39)

1. Entering our Sanctuary (Hebrews 10:22-25). Jesus is the living curtain through which we enter—His flesh, says Hebrews 10:19-20. We read of how we should be equipped for such a worship: with faith, of clear and pure consciences “washed with pure water” (1 Peter 3:21); firm in our hope in the promises of Jesus, who “is trustworthy,” in love for each other and good works (Hebrews 10:23-24). And an important clue to their worship, which our own needs too: “Do not absent yourself from your own assemblies, as some do, but encourage each other; the more so as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25). Perhaps we are faithful Catholics who come to our “assembly”—the Sacrifice of Jesus in the Mass, but do we invite lapsed ones to come with us, to “pick them up,” telling them of “the way it is today,” of the values in it for you? A wonderful mother told me of her faithfully inviting her daughter to go to the church near to her new home, and one time it happened. At that Mass the daughter was completely changed in one amazing, overwhelming moment, flooding her with light and love. She has grown and grown in her faith and love and practice. She is my niece, for whom I had prayed for nearly eight years. It may not even be you whose invitation and prayer “worked,” but it is surely much of the resulting answer.

2. Losing the Faith in Apostasy (Hebrews 10:26-31). “Anyone who disregarded the Law of Moses was put to death on the word of two or three witnesses... anyone who tramples on the Son of God, and who treats the blood of the covenant which sanctified Him as it were not holy, and who insults the spirit of grace...”—all evidence of apostasy, renouncing the faith, abandoning previous loyalty—will be condemned to a far severer punishment. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:29-31). Yet, even such can be rescued by prayer from God’s faithful ones. There are cloistered nuns and

monks who spend much of their lives in prayer and sacrifice for those headed for eternal punishment; this call is from a merciful God who above all wants to save those Jesus died for. All Christians are also called to do some of this saving through prayer.

3. Persevering in Christian Life (Hebrews 10:32-39). In three verses, Hebrews 10:32-35, we hear of what these early Christians suffered for just being a Christian; we read in amazement of severe persecution and losses, never having suffered any of that for our faith: “Publicly exposed to humiliations and violence, sometimes as part of a group; sharing in the sufferings of those in prison, accepting with joy being stripped of your belongings...” (Hebrews 10:33-34) “because you knew that you owned something that was better and lasting.”

We in the free world, as we call it, though it is terribly bound in public and acceptable sins, are not subject to this kind of suffering for the faith, but we do have women and men in prisons and jails for opposing strongly the killing of unborn babies. “Do not lose your fearlessness now, since the reward is so great.” We are given in verses 37-38, a quotation from the short book of Habakkuk: “Only a little while now... he certainly will come before too long. My upright person will live through faith.” Are we “the sort who keep faith until our souls are saved” (Hebrews 10:39)?

To strengthen the Hebrews who were in danger of leaving the faith to return to Judaism, the writer of Hebrews cites the faith of their (and our) ancestors, from Abel who suffered death for his worship of God, to David and the prophets, adding lists of what they suffered for their faith, and in one case, an unusual reward: “Some returned to their wives from the dead by resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35). “But God has made provision for us to have something better, and they were not to reach perfection except with us.” None of the pre-Christian saints could enter heaven until Christ came to us, suffered for us, died, and “descended

into Limbo” says the Creed, until Jesus took them with Him to their reward, where He took His seat at the right of God’s throne. “Think of the way Jesus persevered and then you will not lose heart and come to grief” (Hebrews 12:1-4). It is a thrilling thing to read: “With so many witnesses in a great cloud all around us” (Hebrews 12:1) “can we cling to sin?”

“Perseverance,” we read, “is part of your training; for God is treating you as his sons (and daughters... though unsaid, it is wonderfully true, as St. Teresa told God).

Turning to good advice, we read of Christian wisdom, so often forgotten in our world of wars and rebellions, of cruel governments over their citizens: “Seek peace with all people.” Also, seek “holiness without which no one can ever see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14ff). The scene on Mt. Sinai that so frightened the Israelites below is contrasted with what is the Christian experience of God in our future: “You have come to Mt. Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jeru-

salem where the millions of angels have gathered for the festival, with the whole Church of first-born sons and all citizens of heaven” (Hebrews 12:22-23, Revelations 14:1, 21:10).

As if reluctant to close this long effort to save Christian Hebrews, the writer adds more (Hebrews 13:1): advice on marriage, on welcoming strangers (today? Many still do!). He reminds us of our leaders who teach or taught us; to “rely on grace for inner strength than on food” (Hebrews 13:9) “obey your leaders... they watch over your souls (Hebrews 13:17)! And we see something very Pauline: “I ask you very particularly to pray that I may come back to you all the sooner” (Hebrews 13:19).

One more ending reveals the writer’s faith and love: “I pray that the God of peace, who brought back from the dead, our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood that sealed an eternal covenant, will prepare you to do his will...” (Hebrews 13:20-21).

* * * * *

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 27
James and Jude

Day 1 Read the Notes.

- a. As you read, mark any passage or sentence that helped you or was enlightening. Share this.

- b. Was there anything that can help you in your spiritual life?

Day 2 Read James 1:2-4, Romans 5:3ff, 1 Peter 1:6, 4:13.

- a. What is the value of “every sort of trial”? Give an example.

- b. Read James 1:5-15. Quote a sentence that teaches us a valuable lesson as Christians.

- c. Read James 1:16-27 and the footnote to 1:18 (NAB). Share a point or two that is wisdom for all of us.

Day 3 Read James 2:1-13, 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Leviticus 19:18.

- a. Think of a time when you acted as in verses 2 and 3. Plan on a way to make up for such an act. What words of James show what God’s reaction will be?

- b. Read James 2:14-17, Galatians 5:6, Matthew 25:41-44. Explain the lesson that James is teaching here.

- c. Explain James’ teaching on faith and works.

Day 4 Read James 3:1-12, Proverbs 10:19, Sirach 14:1.

- a. What do these words teach you?

- b. Read James 3:13-18, Matthew 5:9, Ephesians 4:1-2. What is the important word in James 3:14, the one of which we become guilty? Quote another verse in this section which will help us over this.

Day 5 Read James 4:1-4.

- a. Do you agree with what James gives as the cause of many sins?

- b. How can parents help teenagers to avoid this influence?

- c. Read James 4:5-10. What season of the Church is planned to unite all Catholics in this positive advice from James?

- d. Read James 4:11-17. What helps you in this teaching of James?

Day 6 Read James 5.

- a. How can a “rich” person be affected by James’ words in 5:1-6?

- b. What is a lesson you want to learn from James 5:7-12?

- c. In verses 13-18, in what sacrament does the Church carry out these words? In the event that God does not wish 14a, what other effect will this sacrament have?

- d. In verse 16, how does the Church help us carry this out? Have you experienced or seen such answers to prayer? Briefly relate it?

- e. List the ways James teaches us to live our lives in faith?