

**THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD AS A PURE GIFT:
BIBLICAL, DOGMATIC AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

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Abstract

The priesthood is a cross-cultural reality. It is so common to nearly all humans that it could be used to buttress the fact that man is a religious being by nature. This is not different with the biblical conception of man. In the bible, the idea of priests and of relation with God occurs from the earliest chapters of the Old Testament. This idea is carried into the New Testament with a great diversity of language and modification. But the core of what the priesthood is remains. The problem is that modern and contemporary scholarship both in the scriptural and in the theological dimensions have seemed to take a direction that totally misrepresents the facts on the priesthood. It is boldly asserted that the priesthood of the Old Testament was homogeneously that of the whole nation or that of the family of Aaron alone. The various developments, nuances, distinctions, and specifications are hardly brought to bear on the reflections. The consequence is that when the idea of the New Testament priesthood is presented and examined, based on a few texts and a simplistic examination of terminologies, the full reality of a special ministerial priesthood willed by Christ and actually established by him is denied. But the reality on ground contradicts this theoretical explanatory scheme. The consequence is that the reality is reinterpreted in terms outside the New Testament itself and explained in terms of a heterogeneous development of a simplistic reality. This poses the risk of making the ministerial priesthood a totally human invention unconnected with the Founder of Christianity, Christ. This write up, seeks on the bases of a thorough analysis of Old Testament biblical texts, a theological interpretation of New Testament actions and gestures of Jesus, and a linguistic study of hieratic terminologies used in the Scriptures, to offer a reconciliation between the existent reality of an age old ministerial priesthood extant in Christianity and the more explicit use of the term for priests only for the common priesthood and the contemporary attitude of treating of the question with levity. The method

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is strictly biblical, dogmatic and theological. The difficulties include that the majority of the thinkers are not ready for a non-political theological correctness and that they would prefer a more democratic than theological attitude to the reality. The findings of the article is that a very dispassionate, logical and profoundly open attitude to the facts, will restore the dignified place and understanding of the ministerial priesthood to the image and consciousness of the average Christian and stop this current wild slipping of almost every one unto ministry in the understanding that it is a totally human subjective thing.

Keywords: Ministerial Priesthood, Pure Gift, Foundations, Biblical, Dogmatic, Theological

1. *Dispositio*

God has a way of constantly and permanently remaining above and beyond all man's anthropomorphic designations of him. No wonder, the religiously rooted Italian proverb, '*le vie del Signore sono infinite*' (the ways of the Lord are infinite – probably from the modification of Rm. 11: 32 -33) is very apt. This is important because, the title, *the priesthood – a gift from God and an offering to God for his people* really fascinates. One would have expected a title with a Prelude like, the Catholic Priesthood. Instead the broad designation, the priesthood, opens us all to the very marvelous immensity of the grandeur of God. This is interesting since the priesthood is neither restricted to the Catholic faith, nor to the Judaeo-Christian religion, nor even to revealed religions alone. Yet, it remains a gift of God in some real way. It certainly is an offering of God to his people. The caption clearly indicates the transcendental horizon of anthropology. It underlies the fact that man is essentially a relational being on the theological horizon. In some way, the transcendent is wired deeply into the DNA of man. This would be expressed by the saying that man is a creature of God and made in his image. He naturally seeks back his maker. The human means of doing this and mediating it will essentially capture the philosophical core of what priesthood stands for. That is why it becomes richly elucidating to ponder on this wonderful present from God and gift to Him.

But the most interesting part is the finding of the reflection. It has often been said that the (Catholic) ministerial priesthood is not reflected in the

New Testament and that the New Testament does not have anything in common with the priesthood of the Old Testament. This is such that when it is accepted that the letter to the Hebrews does express itself in calling Christ a priest and does identify Christian priesthood, it does not really seem to fit in with contemporary Catholic and Christian practice of the priesthood. What the occasion of this reflection has provided is a rich way and a deeper manner of examining the New Testament understanding of the Priesthood. It is a broader vision and a more spiritually open attitude to the revelation of Christ that goes way beyond just what has been echoed by scholars. Is life exhausted in writings? Is writing limited to what is either copied or printed? Does learning issue only from writing on ink and paper? Do lives and practices, traditions and custom not document event, truth and intention? Is it possible that such a sublime mystery as the Christian way was transmitted and pious believers had the audacity to invent what Christ did not intend or develop it along lines that are deviatory from the master's will?

The obvious point is that the Latin dictum, *ab actu ad possum illatio licit* (from the act to the possibility, the inference is valid) and its inverse, *a posse ad actum, illatio non licit* (from the possibility to the act, the inference is not valid) are still very viable principles today. They must be kept in mind when reflecting on the topic. That in reality there exist ministerial priests and a hierarchy in the Church (today) is a fact. Also, that they are called overseers (episcopi - i.e., bishops) and elders (presbyters) in the New Testament [without the word, priests (hierus)], as different from the generality of the faithful, to whom these minister or render their service is another fact. But these realities are stronger pointers to an understanding of Christ as willing and acting like a priest. They are pointers to his special priesthood in a more pre-eminent manner than the inverse argument that Christ and his disciples had nothing to do with such a special understanding of priesthood but that only historical situations and circumstances gave rise to their development. These issues will occupy us for a better appreciation of the gift itself and the Divine love that instituted it. Consequently, the title for the article reads: *The Ministerial Priesthood: A Pure Gift; Biblical, Dogmatic and Theological Foundations.*

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2. *Positio*

The idea of the priesthood is a cross-cultural one. In ancient times and in traditional societies, religion and culture were very much tied together. In that socio-cultural milieu, often most people were automatically priests for themselves as well as their households. They said their prayers, poured libations, made invocations and offered sacrifices directly to what they considered the deity. In a culture like that of the Igbos of Nigeria in Africa, this was obtainable.² But in addition to this, there were also people specifically dedicated to and assigned the role of mediation with the deity. In Igbo culture again, such figures, as *dibia afa*, *dibia aja*, *dibia ogwu*, *dibia mgborogwu*, *Ezemmuo* and the like readily come to mind. For that type of traditional religion, there was an athenatic, i.e. a non reflected, distinction of the priesthood that was general and particular. This is also valid for the Judaeo-Christian religion. In Israel, there existed a time when anybody could offer sacrifices and approach God. Sacrifices were not the exclusive prerogative of the priest in early times: Cain and Abel (cf. Gen. 4: 4), Noah (cf. Gen. 8: 20), Abraham (cf. Gen. 12: 7 – 8; 13: 4, 8; 15: 9), Isaac (cf. Gen. 26: 25) and Jacob (cf. Gen. 35: 3 – 7) offered their personal sacrifices. Priestly functions are also discharged by heads of households in the bible (cf. Jdg. 13: 19; cf. Job. 1: 5, the killing of the paschal lamb also), by a judge and even by a king. Priests were associated with particular shrines (cf. Jdg 20: 18 - 27; 1 Sam. 1: 3ff; 21: 1ff; 22: 9-11, 19).³ All offered sacrifices personally and directly without needing any intermediaries or special mediators. In that sense, if the priesthood, before we define it, is understood to be tied with approaching God and offering sacrifice, then the agents of these sacrifices and invocations of the deity exercised priestly roles and were priests. This is in a very wide and general sense. But in the history and development of Israel, the establishment of the priesthood is well known in the case of the Levites. But much before them, Moses also offered

² In Ngwa land of Abia State, Nigeria, for instance, *itu mai* – pouring libation – which is like an act of sacrifice in its original sense, could be done by almost any man traditionally.

³ Cf. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites” in Keith, Crim; Lloyd, Richard, Bailey; Victor, Paul, Furnish; Emory, Stevens, Bucke (eds.), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 881.

sacrifice, and even his father-in-law, Jethro, was known to be a priest of Midian.

In such cases as the one of the Ezemmuo among the Igbos, as an institution, it has been traditionally held that the lot falls on someone, a member of the family or community to become the chief priest or priest of the deity. Refusal to accept this has been historically associated with severe consequences. Arinze captures this in his *Sacrifice in Igbo land*.⁴ In that sense, the traditional religious priesthood becomes a gift of the deity for the community. This is because the lot that falls on someone is no mere chance event but an indication of the choice of the deity to be served about the specially chosen one to exercise that role. When this choice is generously accepted, the acceptance also becomes an offering by the community to the deity for its adherents and for their mutual relationship.

Biblically and analogously, the designation of a specific person by an oracle of God as a servant also constitutes one as priest and the person becomes a gift of God for his people. But the mere obedience of man to the divine and the free collaboration of the human with the transcendent are also acts of offering to God. But in the idea of the priesthood, the philosophical indubitable background idea behind its gratuity is the fact of the specificity of a class, a group, a unit as distinct from the general in the service and the inter-relationship between man and the divine.

3. *Compositio*:

3. 1. Priesthood in the Old Testament

In biblical thought, the priesthood represents Israel's union with God.⁵ As stated in the *positio*, the whole nation, under the Mosaic covenant is to be a kingdom of priests (cf. Ex. 19: 6; Lev. 11: 44 ff; Nm. 15: 40). According to Abba, it is this whole nation that becomes the mediator of

⁴ He mentions Agwu specifically as a deity which possesses people and assigns them a function. See F. A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970, 20.

⁵ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 876.

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the covenant.⁶ A particular way of life, a holy living is expected of the nation. The sanctity required of the people for the service of God is symbolized in the priesthood. The latter, therefore, becomes the mediator of the covenant. Things develop till when in the second temple, there is a threefold hierarchy of cultic officials: the high priest, the priests and the Levites. These constitute three distinct orders with distinct functions, characteristics and privileges.⁷

The word, priest, with either the prefix, high or chief or alone in itself without any prefix, is said to occur over seven hundred (700) times in the Old Testament and over eighty (80) times in the New Testament. The other word, Levite occurs about eighty (80) times in the Old Testament and about three (3) times in the New Testament. The usual Hebrew term for priest is *kohen*. Words from Aramaic and Phoenicia sounding like *Kohen* or even *Kamen*, *kahan* or *kahin* as loan words are used. From Arabic and other language groups with affinity, *kohen* or *kahin* also means seer or soothsayer. It is believed to be the origin of the Hebrew *kohen*, priest. But it is also associated with the word *kun* which means to stand. "The priest is therefore one who stands before God as his servant or minister."⁸

The words could sometimes designate idolatrous priests (cf. 2 Kgs 23: 5; Hos. 10: 5; Zeph. 1: 4; Hos. 4: 4). Only foreign priests are mentioned in the book of Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus for instance, Melchizedek (cf. Gen. 14: 18) and also Egyptian priests (cf. Gen. 41: 45, 50; 46: 20; 47: 26) and the Medianite priest, Jethro (cf. Ex. 2: 16; 3: 1; 18: 1).⁹ Other foreign priests mentioned include Philistine priests (cf. 1Sam 6: 2), Priests of Dagon (cf. 1Sam. 5: 5), priests of Baal (cf. 2Kgs. 10: 19), priests of Chemosh (cf. Jer. 48: 7) and priests of the Baalim and Asherim (cf. 2Chr. 34: 5).¹⁰ These are all professional priests strictly as distinct from every other person who can do some priestly functions.

⁶ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 876.

⁷ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 876.

⁸ R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 87.

⁹ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 881.

¹⁰ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 877.

Later on, for the professional ministry, the teaching function of the priesthood seems to have taken precedence over the sacrificial one. The priesthood was the custodian of past revelation and legal precedent. The priest was a teacher and an administrator of Justice. He was God's spokesman before the people and people's spokesman before God.¹¹ In the Septuagint and New Testament Greek, the Hebrew word, *kohen*, is translated by the Greek *hierus*, which is the word for priest. It is this Greek form that appears all through in the New Testament.¹²

In the Old Testament, one finds three orders of high priest, priest and Levites who had their distinctive roles in the post-exilic period. The restored community of Judah appeared to be more of a hierocracy than a monarchy. The high priest assumed more and more importance. This came to the extent that the high priest, Joshua and the Davidic governor Zerubbabel were placed side by side (cf. Hag 1: 1, 12, 14: 2: 2. 4). The high priest traced his descent from Eleazar, the Son of Aaron. The office was hereditary and was conferred for life (Nm. 3: 32; 25: 11ff; 35: 25, 28; Neh. 12: 10 -11). His clothings are special and with detailed specifications. So are his duties.¹³ But "the ceremonies of the Annual Day of Atonement are the most important of the High priest's duties."¹⁴

Like the high priest, the priests are cultic specialists associated with the high priest. They are restricted to the Levitical house of Aaron (cf. Ex. 28: 1, 41; 29: 9; Lev. 1: 5. 7 -8, 11; Num. 3: 10; 18, 7). They are to be free from physical defects (cf. Lev. 21: 16 -22). They were divided into twenty four groups that took turns per week to serve in the temple. Sixteen of these traced their origin through Zadok to Eleazar, son of Aaron while eight traced their origin through Ithamar to Eleazar (1Chr. 24: 1 - 19). Like the high priest, they were consecrated in elaborate ceremonies and wore specific clothings, but were not anointed like the high priest.¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 881

¹² Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 877 - 878

¹³ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 878.

¹⁴ R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 878.

¹⁵ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 878.

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The priests had specific functions which included the care of the vessel of the sanctuary and the sacrificial duties of the altar. For instance, that only the priests might sacrifice (cf. Num. 18: 5-7), the ancient prerogative of giving instructions in the way and requirements of God (cf. Mal. 2: 6- 7; Jer. 18: 18), custodians of sacred tradition, authorities par excellence in all matters of law, and like the prophet, mediums of revelation. As Israel developed and used written laws and became a people of the book, the instructions and teaching increasingly passed into the hands of the scribes.¹⁶

In addition, priests were the custodians of medical lore who played an important function in safeguarding the health of the community (cf. Lev. 13 – 14); they retained their traditional role of the administrators of justice (cf. Deut. 17: 8-9; 21: 5; 2 Chr. 19: 2- 11; Ez. 24: 44); they blew the trumpets which summoned people to war and to the beginning of a feast (cf. Num. 10: 1-10; 31: 6); and they were the only ones who could bless in the name of God (cf. Num. 6: 22 – 27). There is a symbolic sanctity of the priesthood that is expressed in different gestures: freedom from physical defects (cf. Lev. 24: 21), white linen robes (cf. Ex. 39: 27 – 29) and conformance to regulations for ceremonial purity (cf. Ex. 29: 1ff; 40: 31 etc).¹⁷ He gives instruction in ceremonial and moral matters (cf. Lev. 10: 10 – 11). Only the Aaronite priest may burn incense and not even the king may usurp priestly prerogatives (cf. 2 Chr. 26: 16-20; Ex. 30: 1 – 10; Nm. 16:40; 18:7).¹⁸

Priests did become so important in Davidic dynasty that they were almost like the real leaders (cf. 2Chr. 23-24). By the time of the Chronicler, the priesthood had almost reached its final form such that he is called head or chief priest (cf. 2 Chr. 19: 11), the great priest (2Chr. 34: 9), or the Prince of the house of God (1Chr. 9: 11). His spiritual and temporal authority was formally established.¹⁹

¹⁶ Cf. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” 879.

¹⁷ Cf. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” 879.

¹⁸ Cf. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” 886.

¹⁹ Cf. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” 886.

Any violation of priestly sanctity is to be expiated by the high priest and the whole priestly brotherhood together (cf. Num. 18: 1). The priesthood is invested in the house of Aaron and his descendants and all others are barred from it under pain of death (cf. Ex. 28:1, 43; Num. 3: 10; 16: 40; 18: 1-7). A priest is chief among his brethren (cf. Lev. 21: 10)²⁰ while his death marks the end of an epoch (Num. 35: 28). It was also possible to find some non Levites incorporated into the Levitical priestly ministry for instance, Samuel (cf. 1 Sam. 1: 1, 27 – 28). These are various developments that happened over several centuries in the understanding of priesthood in Israel.

These various developments in the course of history assume their importance in the context of this article as many have rigid ideas on the composition of the priesthood of Israel without making any rooms for exceptions, growth and development. They are fixated on the idea that all priests were of the house of Levi. That was the norm indeed. But there were also apart from the Levitical priests, Mosaic priests of the house of Dan, priests of the house of Eli and Zadokite priests. Jeroboam even consecrated some people priests in the Northern kingdom (cf. 1 Kgs. 12: 31, 13: 33).²¹

Finally, the Levites are the third order of the hierarchy. They come from one of the tribes of Israel, from Levi, the third Son of Jacob by Leah. But the word, Levite also means to be attached. So, they were attached to Aaron or could be foreigners attached to Israel and to cultic activities.²² They were a tribe that engaged in fights with Israel before they were separated for cultic functions (cf. Gen. 34: 25 – 30; 49: 5; Deut. 33: 8ff). The Levites became a representative group for the Hebrews. They constituted a special priesthood in the midst of a nation that was itself that of priests in general.²³ They are subordinate cultic officials. They have charge of the lower duties of the sanctuary (cf. Num. 1: 50; 3: 28, 32: 8; 15; 31: 30, 47; 1 Chr. 23: 28, 32). They are responsible for the care of the courts and sometimes function as interpreters of the Law (cf. Neh.

²⁰ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 880.

²¹ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 884.

²² Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 877.

²³ Cf. R. Abba, "Priests and Levites," 877 - 8.

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8: 7-9; 2Chr. 17: 7 – 9). Although listed separately from the singers sometimes, at other times, they functioned as singers, porters, gate keepers, choristers and musicians.²⁴ They often assisted the priests since they “were more upright in heart than the priests in sanctifying themselves” (2 Chr. 29: 34).²⁵

3.2. Priesthood in the New Testament

Many theologians and following them, scholars and ordinary Christians of today do not believe that there is any reference to the priesthood as it is today, especially to the ministerial priesthood in the New Testament. They do accept that the letter to the Hebrews mentions the priesthood. But they restrict it to only Jesus rightly but in such a way as if it is only a mere nomenclature without real content. The next thing is that they refer to only the common priesthood of the faithful. Following this line of thought, A. E Harvey states that “the story of the priesthood in the Christian religion is one that contains both a reassurance and disturbance.”²⁶ He considers the idea and the reality of the priesthood only as a metaphor. So, according to him this metaphor of the priesthood “supplies a rich source of imagery and spirituality and need create no conflict with the constantly non-sacerdotal teaching and style of Jesus.”²⁷ To say non-sacerdotal already implies non-priestly. Yet it was shown above that *kohen*, priest in Hebrew was translated with *hierus* priest in Greek. According to him, elaborate instances of the sacrificial imagery and the priestly metaphor occur in the letter to the Hebrews. Otherwise, one finds less elaborate instances in the rest of the New Testament (notably in Rm. 15: 16, Rm. 8: 3, 1 Pt. 2: 9; Ex. 19: 6). Since in the opinion of the writer, this is only a metaphor, therefore, this metaphorical use of the priestly imagery in the New Testament was enlisted both for the justification and for the repudiation of the priestly institutions.²⁸

²⁴ Cf. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” 879.

²⁵ Cf. R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” 886.

²⁶ A. E Harvey “Priesthood” in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pypier (eds.), *The oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000, 565.

²⁷ A. E Harvey “Priesthood,” 567.

²⁸ Cf. A. E Harvey “Priesthood,” 565.

Harvey holds that after biblical times, a potent use of the imagery emerged in the 2nd Century in Christianity. This was in connection with the Eucharist. In his opinion, interpreting the Eucharistic bread and wine in terms of sacrifice seemed to imply priestly function. Therefore, sacerdotal language began to be used of bishops. But he holds that it does not immediately enter into the priestly definition of the Christian mysteries. Nevertheless, he maintains that the sacrifice metaphor does transform the role of the presiding minister.²⁹ From a purely ecclesiological point of view, he states that in the 13th Century at the 4th Lateran Council, it was ordered that only an ordained priest had the power to effect the Eucharistic sacrifice. In this line, thinking of a revert, he states that at Vatican II, the Council replaced the word, sacerdos with the less priestly one, presbyter in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.³⁰ The implication of this analysis is that priestly only rightly refers to sacrificial and the sacrificial here only accurately again points to the bloody. He holds that there is a power and authority which members of the hierarchy want to wield and that this is what was challenged by the reformation. There was something of the power and limitation of the priestly metaphor when applied to Christian ministry. He avers that Christian priesthood was something different from its pagan and Jewish predecessors. This is in the fact that it embraced not only just the sacerdotal functions but also responsibilities for teaching and pastoral care and leadership. He insists that Catholic and protestant ministries while not being extremely polarized have been engaged in divisions. This he attributes to the power of priestly and sacrificial metaphors and the traditional instinct of maintaining priestly presence as opposed to faithfulness to the record of a founder and his followers who seem not to have envisaged any such development. But this appears to be a clearly superficial and biased reading of facts from the scriptures and a very shallow theological exposition. Continuing, Harvey believes that in the 20th Century, a number of factors put under strain the traditional forms of sacerdotal mystery. Among them, he identifies celibacy. According to him, this was first made compulsory in 1153 in Catholicism. In protestant Churches, the necessity of ordained ministers in a society tolerant of divorce, remarriage, sexual relationship out of heterosexual

²⁹ Cf. A. E Harvey "Priesthood," 565.

³⁰ Cf. A. E Harvey "Priesthood," 565.

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marriage, and this belonging to another age, with discrepancy between Church support for democracy and its challenge to the Church's hierarchical structure, the waning privilege of priests in education as it was previously and the rising theological competence of more lay people, the debate on the ordination of women, the inadequacy of the term priestess – indicative of the power and limitation of the priestly metaphor, liturgical reform, such as from backing the people to facing them, the direct access of the ministers to the people without an altar today but using only a table in between, all form part of what has really weakened the priesthood metaphor as it stands today.³¹ These are Harvey's submissions. But the list appears to us to be that of all the ways of politically being correct today, by being Christians without the saltiness of Christianity and therefore not being it too much at the same time.

About the idea of the priesthood, Harvey holds that when this is taken literally, and when it is given institutional form, "it sets up inevitable tensions within a religion that cherishes Jesus' promise of immediate personal access to a heavenly Father to be gained by every believer through repentance and faith."³² So spoken, this sounds delightful and beautiful. But is it all the reality about it? If the disciples of Jesus often laboured to understand Jesus when he spoke or acted and only later understood as he himself promised them, does it follow that one just reads their 'memoirs' and can already claim that he has so understood him as to make correct definitive statements as an individual as parallel to the Church? That is the worry with the sweet comments on New Testament events by nearly all overzealous exegetes and scholars.

What these suggest is that the practical reality where there are priests as a special class of people – ministerial priests – really is an anomaly when viewed in the light of the New Testament. But although many, as stated earlier, do feel this way, is that all there is to it? There is need to still investigate further into the New Testament itself and see the view of other if earlier experts to know whether everyone sails on the same frequency on this. M. H. Shepherd, in examining the theme of priests in

³¹ Cf. A. E Harvey "Priesthood," 566.

³² A. E Harvey "Priesthood," 567.

the New Testament, states that the Greek words for priest and its cognate, high priest (*hiereus* and *archhiereus*) are found in the gospels and Acts only with Jewish priests (and Levites) with only one exception (in Acts 14: 13). There it is used for the pagan functionary of the cult of Zeus at Lystra in Asia Minor.³³

In Judaism, priesthood was hereditary in the tribe of Levi. Among Ancient pagan cults of the Mediterranean world, some were hereditary, some voluntary while some were associated with civil magistracy. A persistent tradition invested kings and monarchs with priestly prerogatives. Their entitlements and advantages depended on many factors like whether the cult was official and state-sponsored, famous or insignificant, voluntary or forced.³⁴ “The essential concept underlying priesthood in the ancient world among Jews and gentiles was that of mediatorship between the divine and the human.”³⁵ Based on his superior knowledge of or the power of communication, the priest was the director of if not the actual performer of sacrifices offered to the deity. He was the dispenser and the interpreter of the message and the auguries from the divine realm. Therefore, he was the channel of weal or woe according to the divine pleasure. All these are very important as they will enable us to see the radical discontinuity and the continuity between the old covenant and the new and to intuit the reason behind this in understanding the Christian realities.³⁶

The antagonism of Christians to all pagan priesthood was a legacy from Jewish contempt for everything associated with idolatry. The same marked bitterness is found in the gospels and Acts between the early Christians and the Jewish priesthood. This attitude reflects the opposition and the persecution of Jesus and his followers by priests, high priests, and the priestly party of the Sadducees and their associates. The

³³ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament” in Keith, Crim; Lloyd, Richard, Bailey; Victor, Paul, Furnish; Emory, Stevens, Bucke (eds.), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 889.

³⁴ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 889.

³⁵ M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament” 889.

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rejection, by the Sadducean priesthood, of any doctrine of the resurrection exacerbated the antagonism to the preaching of the early apostles and evangelists. Yet it is testified (in Acts 6: 7) that a number of Jewish priests were converted to the faith.³⁷ But this hostility of attitude from a group could reasonably make the oppressed reject any terminological semblance to the oppressor.

It is believed that even among themselves, some priests were critical of the practices of some others. Among priests who could have detested the policies of the personages of the chief priests of the hierarchy or the Jewish priesthood was John the Baptist. This is evident in his brief recorded preaching ministry (cf. Mt. 3: 7).³⁸ Having mentioned John the Baptist, it is good to immediately keep in mind, that he was related to Jesus through his mother, Mary who was a close relation of Elizabeth such that the total exclusion of priestly relationships even in the life of Jesus may be out of place. The fact is that according to the Law (cf. Lk. 2: 22-24) the rite of purification should be accompanied by the rite of ransom with five shekels (cf. Ex. 13: 2, 12-15; 34: 20; Nm. 8: 16; 3: 47; 18: 26) for a first-born male. But this did not apply to the first-born sons of the Levitical families (cf. Nm. 3: 12, 46; 8:16). But Levites were presented to the Lord (cf. Nm. 8: 10). Jesus is presented but the ransom is not mentioned. In fact, Feuillet, holds that a certain interpretation of the presentation by some exegetes suggests that “Luke would be insinuating that Jesus was a Messiah both of Aaron and of Israel,…” but also it is possible that Luke thought that because of his transcendent sanctity, there was no need to ransom him.³⁹

In spite of the criticisms of today on the priests of those days, it remains valid that Jesus and his orthodox Jewish disciples accepted the priesthood and the sacrificial system of the temple. The Essenes of Qumran community repudiated any sacrifices in the temple but esteemed other priests. Jesus’ personal attitude to them is manifested in the episode

³⁷ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 889-890.

³⁸ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 890.

³⁹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 231.

of the healing of the lepers (cf. Mk. 1: 44; Lk. 17: 4) where he sends them to present themselves to the priests.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the process of separation between the Church, the priestly and the sacrificial institutions of Judaism began early. After the destruction of the temple, the Jewish characters developed sharp polemics against sacrifices and exalted the prophetic against the priestly traditions of the Old Testament. According to Shepherd, “Christianity made a positive and creative development of the concept of priesthood, however, in its transferal to Christ himself of the role of the perfect and great High Priest.”⁴¹ It is this type of observation and jump from the Old Testament to the Letter to the Hebrews which we consider very superficial. It is also the unobservant weakness of nearly all or majority of the scholars on the New Testament texts on the priesthood. They are not able to read beyond the letters of the New Testament, to the actions, the events, the spiritualizations, the transpositions, and the adaptations of the priestly reality in the life, activity and ministry of Jesus. They rather depend only on the terminological use of the term priest or its cognates.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ is exalted as unblemished, sacrificial victim, sinless High priest, the consummation of the Old Testament cultus, who brings it to a definitive end in history. He establishes a once and for all eternal mediatorship between God and man. The authority, honour and effect of Christ’s priesthood makes it “disarm and supplant forever, the Aaronite priesthood of the Old covenant and it finds its type and pattern in the legendary figure of Melchizedek (Gen. 15: 18; Ps. 110: 4) ...”⁴² It is interesting that Shepherd goes beyond other contemporary exegetes in noting that though the Letter to the Hebrews is the only New Testament book to apply the title to Christ, yet the idea and conception is not absolutely original to the writer. The conception, he rightly notes is rooted in Christ’s own interpretation of his atoning mission as a “ransom for many” (Mk. 10: 45). It is also more especially from his conception as found in his words of the new sacrifice associated with the bread and the cup of the last supper.⁴³ Unlike Harvey who states that the Church came

⁴⁰ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 890.

⁴¹ M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 890.

⁴² M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 890.

⁴³ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 890.

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to interpret the Eucharist in these terms, Shepherd understands that the words of institution have the sacrificial conception inherent in them. This issue of the conception of the sacrificial nature of the life and ministry of Christ, of the victim nature and the sacerdotal character is at the core of understanding how Christ understood his mission personally. Everything goes back there – the self-consciousness of Christ.⁴⁴ It is what has already been denied by Harvey as we saw a few pages above. Now, it is clear that Shepherd gives it some credence to the measure it serves him. This is where the whole work will be focusing to discover what progress has been made in the intellectual articulation of this point in the two thousand years of Christian history. It is precisely here that the action of the Church – its lived life, its liturgy, through the *sensus fidei* – the general believers’ sense of the faith – and the guidance of the Holy Spirit have manifested themselves as more secure, more solid, better rooted and more advanced than all the intellectual articulations of these years.

In Paul the apostle, according to Shepherd, the sacrificial character of Christ’s death is well marked out (cf. 1Cor. 5: 8; Rm. 8: 3; 3: 25). The doctrine of Christ’s mediatorship (cf. Gal. 3: 20) as well and his reconciliation of God and man (cf. 2Cor. 5: 19; Col. 1: 20-21; Eph. 2: 16) are all very clear. Such ideas are also found in the letter of St. Peter (cf. 1: 2; 18:19; 2: 24; 3:18). The theme of expiation for sin and ransom links all Johannine writings (cf. Jn. 1 29; 1Jn. 1: 7: 2: 2; 4: 10; Rev. 1: 5; 5: 9; 7: 14; 12: 11). These are very important since without saying priest, they apply all the actions and practices that constitute the content of what is understood as priesthood to Christ. They also transpose the priestly material actuations in a spiritualized and elevated form and present it of him. Thus, the discontinuation with the past and the continuation in a radically new manner are already present, sowing the seed for the future adoption of the vocabulary that will capture these without the contemporary dangers that were being avoided. The New Testament application of “the priesthood” to all the faithful of the Church is, therefore, a corollary of the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ.⁴⁵ The Church is made one with Christ through the indwelling of the Holy

⁴⁴ Cf. Anthony C. Dimkpa, *The Self-consciousness of Jesus Christ*, Enumclaw: Winepress Publishers, 2010.

⁴⁵ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 890.

Spirit. By sacramental union and communion with him in Baptism and the Eucharist, the Church shares in the prerogative of its master (see 1 Pet. 2: 5, 9; Rev. 1: 6; 5: 10; 20: 6). The contents of the cited passages are typological applications of the Old Testament promises to the Church (cf. Ex. 19: 6).

Shepherd maintains that no New Testament writer ever applies the title of priest to any particular individual member or order of ministry in the Church. However, he notes that the development of the usage has been considered inevitable. Early Church patristic writings like *1 Clement* 40 – 44, employ an analogy of the threefold hierarchy of high priest, priest and Levite to describe in analogous manner, the Christian ministry. It applies sacrificial language to describe the liturgy of bishops and elders. The *Didache* (13: 13) also calls the elders, “your high priests.” It calls the Eucharist a sacrifice and sees it in terms of the prophecy of Malachy 1: 11.⁴⁶ Does this mean that like Harvey holds, this is the point of human imposition on the master? To give a name to a reality surely does not change the reality in itself but only reveals it if the name is expository. Shifting his attention to the pastoral letters, Shepherd also holds that if they could be dated with greater accuracy and security, they would have been of immense help. They provide the clearest testimony in the New Testament to the developed norm of a threefold hierarchy. According to him, James 5: 14 and first and second John do not establish much⁴⁷ as regards the priesthood. One finds the qualifications for ministers (listed in Titus 1: 5-9; 1Tim. 3: 1-13). 1 Tim. 4: 14 contains a reference to ordination by the laying on of hands. Ignatius of Antioch is the first clear witness to monarchical episcopacy and the threefold offices of bishops, priests and deacons as these emerge clearly from his writings.⁴⁸ These are different biblical and post-apostolic times testimonies to the reality of an understanding of Christian ministry in terms that are priestly.

⁴⁶ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Priests in the New Testament,” 890.

⁴⁷ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Ministry, Christian,” Keith, Crim, Lloyd, Richard, Bailey; Victor, Paul, Furnish; Emory, Stevens, Bucke (eds.), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 390.

⁴⁸ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Ministry, Christian,” 391.

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It is in the history of the development of the offices of bishop and priest – elders that an obscure problem is noticed as regards ordination and succession. This could have developed in very many different ways. But clear information of apostolic tradition happens at the turn of the third Century with the work of Hypolitus about ordinations. He writes that Bishops were ordained by other bishops, elders by a bishop with the aid of other elders, while deacons were ordained by a bishop alone.⁴⁹ The point is that it would have been too strange to adopt this mentality at this early stage if there was no connection with the apostles and with the transcendent master who chose them.

4. *Transpositio*: A Synthetic View of the New Testament Priesthood from Christ

One could decide to take a totally different view from how the priesthood has been hitherto presented and seen. But that there is evident development from a radical dissociation of the Old Testament terminology and its referent in the New, to a weak-willed acknowledgement; that there are elements of priestly and sacrificial actions if not language in the New Testament, is what the write up has done so far. André Feuillet,⁵⁰ has adopted a radically different approach that synthesizes and surpasses the approaches examined so far. This section is going to follow his line of analysis in offering up reflection on the wonderful gift of the priesthood as willed by Christ himself. He sets out from the texts of John where Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that true worshippers as the Father wants must worship God in Spirit and in truth (cf. Jn. 4: 21 – 22). He interprets this as amounting to the fact that Christ has provided mankind with a new worship, related to the Old Testament but immensely superior to it. The new worship demands a new priesthood. So, Christ brings a new worship and a new priesthood that is continuous and discontinuous with the Old.⁵¹

Feuillet raises the problem that there appears to be a complete break between the Old and the New Testaments given that while at least, the

⁴⁹ Cf. M. H. Shepherd Jr., “Ministry, Christian,” 391.

⁵⁰ Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, Matthew J. O’Connor (transl.), New York: Double Day and Co., Inc. 1995.

⁵¹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 11.

Letter to the Hebrews acknowledges Christ as priest (*hiereus*, six times; *archieus*: ten times),⁵² it does not indicate any way in which any other person can be a priest invested with special powers to continue Christ's work. So, what are the facts of the case? He decides to engage the texts of the Servant songs of Isaiah especially chapter 53 and the text of the priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 for the purpose of investigating into strict priestly characteristics. He does this through an exegetico-theological study to present a better understanding of two inseparable realities, the sacrifice and the priesthood of Christ which he says are at the heart of the Christian religion.⁵³ Feuillet notes that a number of issues were raised to him as a member of the International Theological Commission which had studied the priesthood. Most studies, on the priesthood, in his opinion, seem to amount to a challenge to the conception of the priesthood as held in the Catholic Church. The position is that the ministerial priesthood "differs ... in essence and not only in degree"⁵⁴ from the priesthood shared by all the baptized. The resulting denial of this affirmation and the confusion to which many are thrown because of it is the crux of the matter. The causes of the problem are complex. But the fact is that the Council did not expressly address the problem of the ministerial priesthood, focused as it was, on the role of the college of bishops as successors of the apostles and underlining the sharing of the baptized in the priesthood of Christ. By this, it inadvertently appeared to suggest that the bishops and the people of God were the only two necessary elements of the priesthood of Christ in a priestly Church, thereby forgetting the simple priest.⁵⁵ The problem is captured in a more poignant manner when Feuillet states: "The problem is this: Were the Apostles who are clearly the source and starting point of all the ministries now exercised in the Church, really constituted priests by Christ and is their priesthood distinct from that of God's people as a whole?"⁵⁶

⁵² Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 29, 106.

⁵³ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 12.

⁵⁴ Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*,

⁵⁵ Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 13.

⁵⁶ Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 14.

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The issue of the radical discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New is noted by Feuillet who insists that even the Letter to the Hebrews highlights it in underlining the deep gulf between the Old Testament priesthood and worship and the New. But given that the New Testament does see itself as a fulfillment of the Old, the correct way to see things is as simultaneously being a continuity and a discontinuity.⁵⁷

Though several non-Catholic scholars seem to relativise the content of the priestly references in Hebrews as being only in expression but not in content, Feuillet makes an extended excursus. Starting from the synoptic gospels, he states that Jesus really applied to himself at least the concept of a new high priest if not the name. Why the New Testament is reluctant about the application of the term high priest is explained by the Jewish prescription that: every high priest must come from the house of Levi, specifically from the family of Aaron and must be descended from Zadok; any non Aaronite claiming the priestly dignity was to be put to death (Nm. 2: 10; 2 Chr. 26: 16 – 21).⁵⁸

Having noted the above, the first place to examine the reality or priesthood or priestness or sacerdotality, if that could be said, is the synoptic gospels. There are several actions of Jesus that have been interpreted as priestly. They include the blessing of little children, the exorcism and expulsion of demons, the forgiveness of sins whereby Christ reconciled men to God among others. These are held by contemporary standards of the time to be more priestly actions than Messianic. Also the name, “the holy one of God” (cf. Mk. 1: 24; Lk. 6: 69) is held to be the equivalent of the priestly title “consecrated to God” (cf. Lev. 21: 6; 2 Chr 23: 6; 35: 3) or “consecrated to Yahweh” (cf. Ex. 28: 36). Again, Jesus liked to apply Ps. 110 to himself, which reads: you are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek (cf. Mk. 12: 35 - 36). The white colour of his garments at the transfiguration is also compared with what is said of the vestings of the high priest in the Old Testament.⁵⁹ This is akin to the white garment he is described to put on in the Apocalypse. The point of all these sacrificial and priestly

⁵⁷ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 29.

⁵⁸ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 30.

⁵⁹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 30.

indications is that “once the sacrificial character of the rite performed at the Last Supper is assured, Jesus’ priestly attitude on this occasion is automatically demonstrated.”⁶⁰

Furthermore, Shepherd claims that there are too many reminiscences of the last servant song (cf. Is. 52: 13 – 53: 12) in the synoptics. This last servant song suggests seriously that the servant is a priest. The others allude to his being a prophet, a master of wisdom and a mediator like Moses. He offers his life as an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of his brethren (cf. Is. 52: 13 – 53: 12). There are so many connections between the actions of Jesus and this last servant.⁶¹ His character is so similar to that of Jesus that Feuillet in studying the texts states that “every time the New Testament speaks of Christ’s role by alluding to the self-offering of the servant of Yahweh, it is implicitly presenting Jesus as the priest of the new covenant.”⁶² Paul and John have been noted to make a very repeated use of the motive and theme of the servant of Yahweh in depicting Jesus Christ. The Johannine formula “lay down one’s life” and that of the synoptics “the son of man did not come to be served... as a ransom for many” and the one “for their sake I consecrate myself” are all held to have some direct dependence on Is. 53: 10 and from their semitic flavor, exegetes believe that they originate in Jesus himself.

Another major text of study by Feuillet is John 17. The passage is called the priestly prayer of Jesus because of the two essential aspects of a priest’s role that it portrays namely, sacrificial offering and intercession. In the prayer, Jesus requests God to consecrate, *hagiazain*, him. The other meanings of this word include, to sanctify, to set aside, to sacrifice (cf. Deut. 15: 19, 21). The scriptures use this term when Yahweh is to set someone aside for a mission. In this sense, the discourse in chapter 10 of John where Jesus speaks of being consecrated and sent into the world (cf. Jn. 10: 36), can only refer to his being set apart for a mission. It means he is ordained and sent.

⁶⁰ Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 30.

⁶¹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 30 - 32.

⁶² Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 33.

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Exegetical studies of the use of the word, consecrate, show that what Jesus refers to here is much deeper than just what appears on the surface. In this sense, it has been said that ‘consecrate’ also means ordain (like in Ex. 28: 35, 41) or is a short form for the expression ‘consecrate as priest.’⁶³ Jesus does refer to two consecrations. One is done by the Father (cf. Jn. 10: 36) and one he, Jesus, does (cf. Jn. 17: 19). These are connected with Jn. 3: 16 where God has made an ultimate gift of his Son. ‘I consecrate myself’ has been interpreted to mean ‘I offer sacrifice’⁶⁴ (of myself). As in Is. 53: 12, a prayer of intercession is connected with the immolation of the servant, so sacrificial offering and intercession are both co-extensive and unitary though logically separable. Similarly, in John 17, there is sacrificial offering and intercession (cf. Jn. 17: 9, 15, 20) in a single comprehensive act of his as priest. Feuillet concludes that “the conception of the Christian priesthood that emerges from the New Testament as a whole... is a rich and complex one. It includes the preaching of the word of God, to which so much importance is being attributed today. It also includes the reconciliation of men to God through the forgiveness of sins....” But fundamental to this idea of the priesthood as obtainable from Is. 53 and John 17 is the idea of sacrificial offering and intercession.

5. *Propositio*: Conclusive Remarks

Balanced and profound literature that is worth consulting on the priesthood of the New Testament is vast. But good synthetic presentations of the thorny questions are not. What this study has done is to establish that Christ’s actions and speeches even as they are presented in scripture do capture and express the essentials of what priesthood radically redefined from what it was in the Old Testament, means and implies. What has not been sufficiently shown is that the ministerial priesthood was intended by him and instituted accordingly. That is the gift that this last section would try to make. But succinctly, it has to be noted that most of the study will involve indications of prototypes, prefigurations, parallelisms and models and their transpositions, fulfillments and surpassings as new accomplishment.

⁶³ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 38-42.

⁶⁴ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 44.

It was noted above that the most important function of the high priest was his service on the Day of Atonement. A good study of the fourth gospel reveals that the Jesus' reference to his return to the Father corresponds to the entry of the high priest into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. It is what makes possible the perfect glorification of God the Father.⁶⁵ There is a good and elaborate study of these parallelisms that one can only refer the reader to read up. But the closeness between the prayer of John 17 and the liturgy of atonement are unmistakable.⁶⁶ The letter of John and the letter to the Hebrews are very closely related. In both, Christ is seen as a priest who is also a sacrificial victim. He is the sanctifier, and others are sanctified by him. Numerous identified parallels abound and all show that the two functions of sacrificial offering and intercession which are specific to the priest and show that the prayer of Jesus in John 17 has an authentic priestly character are attributed to Christ by the author of the letter to the Hebrews.⁶⁷

The great connection between priesthood and sacrifice has been greatly emphasized. They are said to be so "closely linked that it is impossible to speak of the one without reference to the other."⁶⁸ This is important as the context of the prayer of Jesus is connected with the liturgical and priestly texts of the Old Testament. Moreover non professional priests in the classical sense are seen to have offered sacrifice. Also it is noted that in the history of mankind, priestly functions have not always been handed over to specialists. The soft argument that many use to discredit Christ as priest is that he was not from the tribe of Levi. But even in Israel as already noted, offering sacrifice was exercised by heads of families (cf. Jdg. 17: 10; 18: 19) and Kings (e.g., David and Solomon), though the history of Israel shows that the practice disappeared before the functional priesthood of Israel. Nevertheless, as one can imagine from these lines, the history of Old Testament priesthood is complicated.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 72.

⁶⁶ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 76-77.

⁶⁷ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 78.

⁶⁸ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 81.

⁶⁹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 81 -82.

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Although the functions of priests have earlier been hinted at, they could be said once more to include giving oracles and to teach and carry out liturgical exercises. They were modified with time when prophets began taking up the oracular function and scribes began taking up the teaching. But all priestly functions were summed up in that of mediation.⁷⁰ However, with time, prophets became themselves mediators of revelation and instruments of God. They became intercessors. So, the abysmal difference between the sacrifice of the Old Testament and that of Christ does not so much lay in the fact that the former was a preparation and a prefiguration. The key to understanding this would lay rather in the ministry of prophets whose sanctity and commitment to the service of God provided for most elements of what was required in the priest. It is in this line that one finds Moses as a mediator par excellence – a mediator of revelation and intercession.⁷¹ This is important because, even if in the scriptures, Christ does not have the name, yet he does have the function of a priest – a servant. One notices that the servant of Isaiah (cf. Is. 53) appears to be the living synthesis of a prophet and a priest in his prophetic and priestly mediation. He adds intercessory prayer to his sacrifice and thus enters the prophetic mainstream. He becomes like Ezekiel, a prophet-priest.⁷² In the gospels, Christ carries out spiritualizations of events which one finds in the servant of Yahweh. Mosaic institutions are transformed while prophecies are fulfilled. These allow us to see in Jesus the sacrificial victim and the priest of the New Testament. The elements that show this in the gospel according to John include: the designation of Christ as the Lamb of God, his consecration by the Father, his consecration of himself, and the great prayer of unity (in John 17).⁷³

Isaiah 53 is extended in John 10: 36. It shows Christ consecrated a priest at the moment of his being sent into the world. Moreover, the use of the term lamb, not only refers to the Passover Lamb of the Old Testament but to the lamb of Is. 53: 7 who “like a lamb... is led to the slaughter-

⁷⁰ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 84.

⁷¹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 84-87.

⁷² Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 88-89.

⁷³ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 92 - 95.

house.” The Apocalypse which is a part of the Johannine corpus shows Christ as king, priest and sacrifice (cf. Rev. 1: 5, 17: 14). His appearance to St. John in a long white robe shows him dressed like a priest.⁷⁴ The point is that a deepened study of the New Testament reveals more than is obvious at first glance. The Letter to the Hebrews for instance seems to suggest that every prayer of Jesus on earth is his prayer as Christ the priest. It refers back to the Servant of Yahweh through the gospel tradition of the synoptic accounts that is soaked with the ideas of priesthood and sacrifice.⁷⁵

The priesthood of Christ’s ministers and the consecration of the Apostles is the real nucleus of the matter. While having pointed out the similarity between the Letter to the Hebrews and John 17, there are essential distinctions as well. The Letter to the Hebrews mentions the sanctification of all Christians without distinction. John 17 is rather divided into three parts. In part one, Jesus prays for himself asking for the glorification of the Father and indicating his own consecration. In part two, he prays for the consecration or sanctification only of the apostles, while in part three, he prays for the sanctification of all Christians who would come to believe in him through the apostles (John 17: 20 – 26).⁷⁶

Furthermore, since God does not rescind his gift, and his choice is irreversible (cf. Rm. 11: 29), it means that his offering them this special privilege will remain. He asks the Father, I have consecrated myself so that they too may be consecrated. This means that their consecration derives from his. When he tells them, “do this as a memorial of me” (cf. Lk. 22: 19; 1 Cor. 11: 24-25) and asks the Father to “consecrate them ...I consecrate myself” (cf. Jn 17: 17 – 18), both statements clarify each other. The Father consecrates the apostles as priests. One of the essential purposes of that petition is to be able to act in the person of Christ and to consecrate him as a victim under the signs of bread and wine as a memorial of the one sacrifice of Golgotha.⁷⁷ When compared with the

⁷⁴ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 102 -105.

⁷⁵ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 117 -119.

⁷⁶ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 122 - 125.

⁷⁷ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 126-127.

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Old Testament, evidently the priesthood of all God's people under the new covenant does not contradict or exclude a priestly ministry strictly reserved for certain individuals. One sees God making the whole of Israel as priests (in Is. 61: 6) but also identifying some (as in Is. 66: 21) as priests and Levites to help Israel maintain its sacred character. These are neither exclusive nor identical realities even in the Old Testament. "In fact, the serious sin of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, which led to their death, was to deny the distinction between the two kinds of priesthood" (cf. Nm. 16: 3, 31 – 32).⁷⁸

Already in the Old Testament this distinction is linguistically noted. The Septuagint translation uses *hierateuma* for the priesthood of all the people (cf. Ex. 19:6; 2Mc. 2: 17). For the priesthood restricted to a definite group it uses *hierateia* (cf. Ex. 29: 9; 39: 19; 40: 15; Nm. 3: 10; 18: 1, 7; Jos. 18: 7; 1Kg. 2: 26; Ezr. 2: 62; Ne. 7: 64; 13: 29). The New Testament directly borrows this distinction in terms. For Zecharia, it uses *hierateia* (cf. Lk. 1: 9) or the sons of Levi (cf. Heb. 7: 5) and uses *hierateuma* for the priesthood of the Christian faithful (in 1 Pet. 2: 5, 9). Similarly, the consecration of Jesus as priest precedes his being sent on mission (cf. Jn. 10: 36). As an exact and willed parallel, the consecration of the apostles and their being consecrated as priests (cf. Jn. 17: 17 – 20) precedes their being sent into the world. This happens after the resurrection (cf. Jn. 20: 21) since they were consecrated at the last supper after their formation in the time before the passion (cf. Mt. 28: 18-19; Mk. 16: 15).⁷⁹

From the foregoing, it is evident that the priesthood in the new covenant is in line with that of Is. 53 and of Christ himself. This means that it is a synthesis of both the priestly and prophetic conceptions of the Old Testament. Just like in the Old Testament, only Yahweh teaches and Moses and the prophets are only his instruments, so in the New Testament, there is only one priest, Christ. But he communicates and acts in the Church through many priests who are simply his chosen

⁷⁸ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 130.

⁷⁹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 130 - 132.

instruments. They can only act in dependence on him since their priesthood and mission derive from his.⁸⁰

Again the scene where Christ appears to the apostles on the evening of the resurrection and breathes on them, giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit and empowering them to forgive sins (cf. Jn. 20: 23) as different from the Pentecost (recorded in Acts 2) is a complement of the priesthood that Christ bestowed on the apostles in sacrificing himself. The letters to the angels of the seven Churches in Rev. 2-3 when analyzed, show as well that these are leaders of Christian communities with an eminent dignity that is not exactly that of the rest of the members of the Church. According to Feuillet, they are the hierarchic leaders of the Church.⁸¹ This implies that succession in ministerial priesthood was already operative and therefore, guaranteed.

Since the Vatican II, the terminology, ministerial priesthood has come into use. It distinguishes bishops and priests from the priesthood of all the baptized. It stands for the connection between consecration and mission in the life of Christ which has been shown as well to be in the life of the apostles (cf. Jn. 17: 18). The priesthood of the apostles is a synthesis of the priestly and prophetic traditions of the Old Testament.

There are other events scattered in the New Testament and in the gospels especially whose strict study reveal the priestly character and choice of Christ in priestly lines. One of them is the washing of the feet at the last supper. This could be interpreted as a spiritualization of the washing demanded of Yahweh in the Old Testament before the consecration of priests (cf. Ex. 29: 4; Lev. 8: 6; Nm. 8: 6-7). The ministerial priesthood is instituted by Christ as the ministry of the apostles, situated within the community of which they are a part and existing for the service of the community. Paul even understands this and interprets his ministry in priestly terms (cf. 1 Cor. 9: 13-14; Rm. 15: 15-16; Phil. 2: 17).⁸²

⁸⁰ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 136.

⁸¹ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 178-181, 221.

⁸² Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 231-233.

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Finally, the main point of these reflections has shown that Jesus was a priest. This is not according to the classical notion of the Old Testament. In him – Jesus – is the perfection of what the priestly and prophetic traditions had prepared and foretold of the Messiah. He wanted also to bestow upon his apostles and their successors a priesthood that is quite distinct from the priesthood common to all the baptized.⁸³ One can only come to grasp this if one is open and docile to the prompting of the Holy Spirit in studying the person and work of Christ who is the sole priest of the new covenant. The priestly and sacrificial dimension of his life is the dimension of his love for us. This is from where the gift of ministerial priesthood will be appreciated. In this manner, the priesthood will be seen as an immense treasure of God's love for man and in turn an offering after the example of Christ, prompted by the grace of the Holy Spirit, of man to God.

⁸³ Cf. Andre, Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, 239.