

## THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD

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The priesthood of Christ is treated only by the author of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. In order to renew the vital dynamism of the sorely afflicted communities in danger of giving in to discouragement, the author of the Epistle not only exhorted them and reminded them of the basic teaching about Christ (Heb 6:1), but also offered them a deepening of doctrine that could anchor them in their faith and strengthen their confidence and generosity.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the author chose a new theme 'priesthood' which demanded serious reflection about the relation between faith in Christ and the inspired Scriptures of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Since Jesus did not belong to the tribe of Levi and his ministry was not priestly, he could not be a priest according to the Law of Moses. Though the author knew that Jesus never claimed the title of priest,<sup>3</sup> yet he identifies Jesus the Son of God, as the eminent priest or the High Priest (Heb 4:14; 3:1; 9:11). The author of the Epistle had been deeply impressed by the obedience, compassion and faithfulness to his God-given vocation, which Jesus manifested throughout his life and in his death. Only the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament applies to Christ the titles of 'Priest' and 'High Priest' and attributes to him the quality of priesthood (*hierosyne*).<sup>4</sup> It is the letter to the Hebrews, which writes of Jesus Christ as priestly mediator, and of his death and heavenly intercession as priestly.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, a full and developed teaching on Jesus as high priest is given in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which draws many points

<sup>1</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," *The International Bible Commentary*, ed., William R. Farmer, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 1769.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> This title "Priest" in the time of Jesus designates a definite function reserved to the members of the tribe of Levi. Cf., Augustine George, "Priesthood," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed., Xavier Leon Dufour, (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1995), 462.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1980), 64.

<sup>5</sup> David N. Power, "Priesthood," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed., Nicholas Lossky & Pauline Webb, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 821.

from the early Christian kerygma and which, in doctrines, shows strong affinities with both Pauline and Johannine Christologies.

### A. Nature of Christ's Priesthood

#### i. Name "High Priest"

The Son has inherited the name "High Priest" (Heb 1:4), which includes the divine titles "the Son of God" (Heb 1:5), "First Born" (Heb 1:6), "God" (Heb 1: 8, 9) and "Lord" (Heb 1:10). These divine titles are not enough to define the name "High Priest", because the risen Christ is not only the Son of God but is also a human being who was glorified because of his suffering and death.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective His name is more excellent (Heb 1:4) than the names of angels.<sup>7</sup> The glorified Christ possesses the necessary twofold relationship in its fullness (relationship with God - Heb 1:5-14 and relationship with human beings - Heb 2:5-16). These two relationships are essential characteristics of the High Priest.

Therefore, the "High Priest" as applied to Jesus stands for both the glorification with God and the total identification with humankind.<sup>8</sup> Westcott highlights only one aspect of the name 'High Priest' by assembling only the titles of Son, Sovereign, Creator and Lord.<sup>9</sup> One cannot merely say that Christ is only Son of God, the Firstborn, God and Lord or that Christ is only man, Son of man, Jesus and the pioneer of the salvation of humankind. The name of Christ is defined by the two kinds of relationships and not by one only.<sup>10</sup> Since the priestly function is one of mediation, it requires a twofold relationship with humankind and with God, which is realized in the mystery of Christ.<sup>11</sup> The title High Priest expresses the idea of authority and that of priesthood but with emphasis on priesthood.<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing on priesthood, the author moved traditional Christology from categories of royal Messianism to that of priestly Messianism. Hence the author of the Epistle calls to mind both the passion and the glory.

#### ii. Divine Sonship

<sup>6</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1773.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 86.

<sup>9</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1903), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The eternity and authority of Christ's priesthood result from the divine Sonship, which is his first and fundamental quality (Heb 3:5; 4:14).<sup>13</sup> The Son is the heir of all things (Heb 1:2, Cf., Dan 7:13-14), that is to say, He is the Son and heir of David (2Chr 17:11-14), Abraham (Gen 15:3-4), and Adam (Heb 1:26; Ps 8:5-9).<sup>14</sup> The Son who has a personal relationship with God, can inherit all things, because God has created all things through Him (Heb 1:2).<sup>15</sup> The dignity of Christ's priesthood rests ultimately upon His Sonship (Heb 3:2f; 5:1-10).<sup>16</sup> As Son, Christ existed before the incarnation (Heb 1:10; 13:8) and surpasses the angels (Heb 1:4), the prophets (Heb 1:1), Moses (Heb 3:1-6) and the Levitical priesthood.<sup>17</sup> The eternal Son of God, who is the glorified Christ, is the person who has created heaven and earth and will remain when everything perishes (Heb 1:10-12, 4:14).<sup>18</sup> Since the Son, the proclaimed Son of God (Heb 1:5, Ps 2:7, 1Chr 17:13) is the ongoing radiation of the divine glory, he cannot be separated from it. The Son is not merely the manifestation of a particular attribute of God, but is the exact imprint of God's very being and has his permanent role in sustaining the universe (Heb 1:3b) through his historical intervention in our world.<sup>19</sup> Christ has always been Son; the author never says that he has 'become' Son, but he says repeatedly that he had to become high priest.<sup>20</sup> Priesthood and the divine Sonship are closely interrelated, although there is no immediate link between the divine Sonship and the priesthood, which are not the same. The Son is granted the highest dignity<sup>21</sup> as the citation of Ps 45:6 shows, where the Son is addressed as God, his throne is everlasting and his righteous government has won him supremacy over all other rulers.<sup>22</sup> The divine Sonship, which assures Christ the best possible position for fulfilling the role of mediator, brings to the priesthood of Christ a specific determination that makes it priesthood without peer.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1772.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> John L. McKenzie, "Priest," *Dictionary of the Bible*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), 692.

<sup>17</sup> M.E. Mciver, "Priesthood of Christ," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol.11, 774.

<sup>18</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1772.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 156.

<sup>21</sup> His dignity is messianic dignity, which confers on him a rank above all other rulers. Cf., F.F. Bruce, "Hebrews," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed., Matthew Black & H.H. Rowley, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1967), 1009.

<sup>22</sup> F.F. Bruce, "Hebrews," 1009.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 157-158.

Since priesthood is a mediation, which requires twofold relationship in the priest (the relationship with God and with humankind), the divine Sonship obviously concerns the relationship with God and constitutes the closest conceivable bond between God and humans.

### *iii. Divine Oath*

The priesthood of Christ is based on God's own oath (Heb 7:20-22), whereas Levitical priesthood is based on legal ordinance (Heb 7:11, 20f). In order to emphasize the superiority of Christ's priesthood, the author uses the divine oracle of Ps 110:4, where God Himself proclaims the priesthood of the Messiah king (Heb 5:6).<sup>24</sup> The divine oath in Ps 110:4 was addressed to the king-priest, to the true Son of David, to Jesus, innocent, immortal and so unique, minister of the New Covenant, and not to the levitical priests who were sinners and mortal and ministers of an outmoded covenant.<sup>25</sup> The fleshly law (Heb 7:16) can only install men in their weakness as high priests (Heb 7:23,28), but God's oath in which resides the power of an indestructible life (Heb 7:16), entrusts an unalterable priesthood (Heb 5:7f; 7:24,28) to Jesus, the Son of God, who has overcome all weaknesses. The oath of God in Ps 110:4 proclaims the immutable perfection of the definitive priest (Heb 7:20-25). Jesus was appointed by God (Heb 5:5-10) to be the new, the true high priest who can finally deal with human sins. Christ did not glorify himself (Heb 5:5) but God hails the Messiah as His Son (Heb 1:5a; 5) and addresses him in Ps 110:4 as priest forever. Christ, who was established priest forever by God, does not need a substitute or a successor (Heb 7:24). Christ did not assume the high priestly dignity by his own initiative, but was called to it by God. The divine oath assures the priesthood and the mediation of Jesus a validity that will last forever. The Levitical priests became priests without this divine oath, which gives eternity to Christ's priesthood (Heb 7:20-22). The divine oath, which is applied to the glorified Christ, institutes him as High Priest.<sup>26</sup> It was in this way that Christ was made the High Priest by the solemn oath of God.

### *iv. Worthy of Trust*

<sup>24</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1773.

<sup>25</sup> Edward M. Stewart, "Melchizedek," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed., Xavier Leon Dufour, (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1995), 349.

<sup>26</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 167.

To exercise priestly mediation, the high priest must be "worthy of trust" (*pistos*) and accredited by God. The adjective *pistos* is applied to Jesus three times in Hebrews at 2:17; 3:2 and by extension of the adjective applied to Moses in 3:5,6.<sup>27</sup> Being worthy of trust is one of the necessary qualifications for exercising the priestly mediation. Instead of "worthy of trust" many translators<sup>28</sup> have rendered the Greek term *pistos* into 'faithfulness,' which is one of the meanings of the term. But Albert Vanhoye argues convincingly that in Heb 3:2 *pistos* does not refer to fidelity in temptation (the idea of O. Michel) or to obedience to the Father (the idea of C. Spicq) but rather it expresses the trustworthiness of Jesus in his high priestly role. Here the author does not refer to the virtue practiced by Jesus in the past, but to the status he possesses at the present time.<sup>29</sup>

For the author, *pistos* means 'worthy of trust' and not 'faithfulness'. The author invites the Christians to contemplate the glorious Christ who is fully worthy of trust. (Being worthy of trust accurately defines one of the fundamental aspects of the priesthood, which would disappear completely without it.<sup>30</sup> To compare Jesus and Moses, the author refers to the episode in Numbers 12<sup>31</sup> where *pistos* means 'worthy of trust' rather than "faithfulness."<sup>32</sup> Since Christ is worthy of trust, he has the authority of Word and a position in the house of God, which are two constitutive and essential elements of the priestly mediation. The priest, who is worthy of trust and is admitted into the house of God, has his privileged contact with God and is able to speak with full authority in the name of God.) Christians have to recognize this qualification (being worthy of trust) in the glorified Christ in whom the oracle of prophet Nathan<sup>33</sup> was fulfilled. For the author,

<sup>27</sup> Dennis Hamm "Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol.52, no.2, (April 1990), 281.

<sup>28</sup> For Otto Michel '*pistos*' means fidelity in Temptation or faithfulness through trials and tribulation. Cf., Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975). For Celas Spicq, *pistos* means obedience to the Father or faithfulness in fulfilling his mission. Cf., Celas Spicq, *L'epitre aux Hebreux*, (Paris: Gabalda, 1953).

<sup>29</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> In response to Miriam and Aaron, who contested the authority of Moses as God's spokesman (Num12: 2), God proclaims that Moses is worthy of trust in all my house (Num 12:7; Heb 3:5). Cf., Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1774.

<sup>32</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1774.

<sup>33</sup> The prophet Nathan presented Christ as the future builder of the house of God (1Chr 17:12, Heb 3:3), proclaiming his divine filiation (1Chr 17:13; Heb 1:5, 3:6). Cf., Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1774.

since the position of Christ in the house of God is higher than that of Moses, Christ deserves the same characterization (Heb 3:2) by an even better title.

### *v. Radical Transformation*

The Greek term *teleiosis*<sup>34</sup> used by the author, does not signify 'perfection' but 'the action of making perfect' (Heb 7:11). The institution of priesthood should bring about a true *teleiosis* a term found in Leviticus seven times in the same context of the consecration of the high priest (Lev 7:37; 8:22, 26, 28, 29, 31, 33) and in Exodus five times (Ex 29:22, 26, 27, 31, 34) and was applied to the sacrifice of priestly consecration.<sup>35</sup> From these texts we can conclude that the Levitical priesthood possessed the consecration as signified by the sacrifice of the high priest.<sup>36</sup> The author takes the fundamental sense of *teleiosis* 'the action of making perfect' as well as its technical usage 'the consecration sacrifice of a priest'. For the author, a priestly consecration consists in a profound or radical transformation of the whole being, which really makes the priest perfect and worthy to enter into relationship with God.<sup>37</sup> A sinful man cannot approach the all-holy God and cannot exercise priesthood without a radical transformation of his whole being. For the author, a *teleiosis* which Leviticus made obligatory, is indispensable. The ineffectual ritual ceremonies according to the Law of Moses cannot bring about the interior transformation of the whole human being. The animal sacrifices for the priestly consecration (Lev 8:22-28) are only exterior rites, which can only symbolize a profound transformation, but cannot bring it about. The exterior rites, which cannot make perfect, cannot deserve the title *teleiosis*. For the author, an authentic *teleiosis* means a real transformation of flesh and blood nature by which a high priest of a new kind was raised up. This radical transformation can be brought about by a sacrifice, which takes over the whole being so as to open it up to the recreative action of God and introduce the renewed humanity into eternal intimacy with God.<sup>38</sup>

To be a high priest, it was necessary for Christ to submit himself to

<sup>34</sup> The *Nueva Biblia Espanola* has translated it as transformation, which deals well with its active aspect without defining the kind of transformation involved. Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 165.

<sup>35</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 165-166.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 166.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 167.

this transformation of his human self, achieved in his Passion and manifested in his Resurrection.<sup>39</sup> In the Passion, death and resurrection Christ as man who was effectively and truly transformed and was made perfect; became the man recreated according to God's plan in order to be perfectly united to God and to be open totally to his brethren. For the author, it is not enough to be the Son of God or the Son of God incarnate but he has to undergo a radical transformation of his humanity in order to possess the eternal priesthood. Therefore the author of the letter to the Hebrews does not invoke any rite of consecration or any ceremony of investiture to consecrate a priest, he included the physical wounds and contact with death in the road that leads to priesthood. A complete identification with the sinful humanity and suffering death are the necessary elements for a profound transformation of Christ's humanity or for his priestly consecration, which was not accomplished by any rites of separation. According to the author the Passion and death of Christ function as a priestly consecration and bring about a profound transformation.<sup>40</sup> Through his identification with humankind, suffering and death, Christ was transformed or made perfect and he has become the High Priest in the fullest sense. This glorifying Passion of Christ has transformed Christ and allowed him to transform humankind. (The transformation of Christ is the priestly consecration and the transformation worked by Christ in his brethren, is also a *teleiosis*, a participation in his own consecration.<sup>41</sup> Christ obtained his consecration directly without the intervention of any mediator, but the consecration of the faithful is totally dependent on the intervention of Christ. When seen in this perspective, the glorified passion of Christ established Christ a true and eternal priest.

### *vi. Kingly Priesthood*

For the Christians, Jesus who was acclaimed by God as the Davidic messiah (Ps 2:7), was also acclaimed by God as High Priest (Ps 110:4). For the Christians, there is only one Messiah<sup>42</sup> that is Jesus, who is both

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.73.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.219

<sup>42</sup> Some argue that in the Jewish expectation, there were two messiahs; the lay Messiah (or messiah of Israel or the royal messiah or prince of the house of David) and the priestly Messiah (or the Messiah of Aaron). Cf., K.G. Kühn, "The Two Messiahs of Aaron and Israel," *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed., K. Stendahl, (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1958), 54f.

king and priest. Jesus, who belongs to the tribe of Judah, cannot be a messiah of Aaron, because Aaron belongs to the tribe of Levi. The Old Testament model for Christ's high priesthood is that of the priest-king Melchizedek (Heb 7:26).<sup>43</sup> Melchizedek is both king of Salem (traditionally and in all probability rightly identified with Jerusalem)<sup>44</sup> and priest of God, the Most High (*El Elyon*)<sup>45</sup>. The Name "Melchizedek"<sup>46</sup> can be translated into "king of justice" and his title "king of Salem" can be understood as "king of peace."<sup>47</sup> (Justice and Peace were the gifts expected of the Messiah-King (Is 9:5-6; 11:1-9; Mic 5:4; Ps 45:8, cited in Heb 1:9, Ps 72:7).<sup>48</sup> Melchizedek, as king and priest of Salem, offers Abraham a meal of bread and wine (Gen 14:18), he pronounces a blessing over Abraham (Gen 14:19) and receives a tribute from him in exchange for his protection (Gen 14:20b).<sup>49</sup> There are many interpretations about Melchizedek.<sup>50</sup> For the author of the letter to the Hebrews, Melchizedek is a prefiguration of Christ, because the starting

<sup>43</sup> W.R.F Browning, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 301-302.

<sup>44</sup> In Ps 76:2 Salem stands in synonymous parallelism with Zion; also the interpretation of Salem as Jerusalem in Josephus Antiquities i. 180. Others would identify Salem with Shalem near Schechem (Gen 33:18; cf. Jn 3:23). F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 95.

<sup>45</sup> *El Elyon* is identified with Yahweh in Gen 14:22, *Elyon* and Yahweh also appear repeatedly as synonyms in poetic parallelism in the Psalms (Ps 18:13). According to Philo of Byblus *Elioun* (Most High) was the chief deity among the Phoenicians. Cf., F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 95.

<sup>46</sup> The name appears twice in Old Testament (Gen 14:8; Ps 110:4) and 8 times in New Testament. The meaning of the name is either my king is righteousness or my king is *zedek*, probably king refers to a deity and righteousness is a divine attribute or *zedek* is the name of the deity (Malkiel- Gen 46:17, Num 26:45, 1Chr 7:31). Cf., J.Reiling, "Melchizedek," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed., Karl Vander Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. Van der Horst, (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 1041.

<sup>47</sup> Philo Judaeus, "Legum Allegoriae-III," *The Works of Philo*, trans., C.D. Yonge, no.79, (New York: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993), 59.

<sup>48</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 154.

<sup>49</sup> Edward M. Stewart, 348.

<sup>50</sup> According to Vanhoye, such interpretations stem from an error of perspective in the reading of the Epistle and more precisely, from a lapse of memory concerning the earlier context. Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 151. Melchizedek is both priest and king of Salem, but is certainly not Israelite. Cf., Jose Ramon Busto, "A Kingdom of Priest," *Theology Digest*, vol.39, no.3, (Fall 1992), 215. According to Josephus, he is the founder of priest of Jerusalem (War 6:438, Ant.1: 180f). For Philo, he is self-taught in knowledge of God and image of reason of the King and the priest, logos who transports the soul aloft as in ecstasy to the vision of God. For Enoch, he is an eternal priest in paradise, the great High Priest, the word of God, the miraculous power, holding sway as High Priest at the center of the earth. Cf., J. Baehr, 36. Melchizedek was made an eternal being, a great supernatural power, and a first incarnation of the word of God or even a divine being superior to Christ or again an apparition of the Holy Spirit. Many references are found in Spicq's Commentary vol. II, 205-206. A.T. Hanson has recently defended once more the opinion according to which "Melchizedek" was the pre-existent Christ. *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London: Macmillan and co.Ltd., 1965), 65-72. Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and New Priest*, 151.

point of the author was not the contemplation of Melchizedek but that of Christ in whom the author found the fulfillment of Ps 110:4 and of the figure in the story of Genesis (Gen 14:18-20). For the author, Jesus and the glorified Christ were the starting points. Therefore, the author invites the Christians to recognize in the biblical personage of Melchizedek a prefiguration of the glorified Christ, high priest for eternity.<sup>51</sup> The character, the name and the titles of Melchizedek (Heb 7:1-3) represent Christ, messiah-king and priest. When the other title of Melchizedek "Priest of the Most High God" is added, we obtain the union of the priesthood with the royal authority, which corresponds, exactly with the position of the glorified Christ, proclaimed "High Priest" which means both King and Priest.<sup>52</sup> Therefore the logical conclusion is that the priesthood of the glorified Christ is kingly priesthood.

### *vii. Eternity of Priesthood*

The priest "after the order of Melchizedek" needs to be seen as the priest "for eternity" (Heb 6:20), because Melchizedek in Genesis is presented as priest for all time (Heb 7:1-3).<sup>53</sup> The attribution "for eternity" taken from Ps 110:4 and applied in Heb 6:20 to the priesthood of the glorified Jesus, is echoed in Heb 7:3, in the qualification "for all time" based on the text of Genesis and applied to the priesthood of Melchizedek.<sup>54</sup> The attribution to the priesthood of the glorified Jesus and to that of Melchizedek is not identical, because the attribution to the priesthood of Melchizedek, which is weaker and only the absence of interruption, does not express eternity. That is why the author considers Melchizedek as a prefiguration of the eternal high priest and as a sketch, which represented Christ in an imperfect suggestive fashion. Melchizedek was not the Son of God, but has been made like the Son of God. According to the Genesis (Gen 14:18-20) the figure of Melchizedek suggests the person of the Son of God.

The real point of the author's departure is "Jesus the Son of God is

<sup>51</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 152. Melchizedek is interpreted as a prefiguration of the eternal priesthood of the risen Christ (Heb 7:3). Cf., Elaine M. Wainwright, "Priest," *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed., Carrol Stuhlmüller, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 778.

<sup>52</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 154.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 153.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

the eminent high priest and has passed through the heavens" (Heb 4:14, Cfr., 3:6; 1:2-5). His discernment is that "only the Son of God could really become the high priest for eternity proclaimed by Ps 110 and could present himself as the one who had been prefigured in a mysterious fashion in Genesis 14 in the portrayal of Melchizedek."<sup>55</sup> The priesthood of Melchizedek is different from and superior to the Levitical priesthood because he is without father, mother and genealogy and without beginning of days and end of life. But normally a priest must take into account his genealogy to prove his priestly line. After the exile some priests who were unable to rediscover their family tree were excluded from the priestly functions (Ezr 2:61-63). Though the absence of genealogy and of temporal limitations make Melchizedek similar to the Son of God who is eternal (Heb 1:11-12),<sup>56</sup> yet those two omissions show the divine Sonship negatively. Jesus, whose priesthood is not based on a genealogical relationship, belongs to the tribe of Judah, which was not a priestly tribe. The absence of genealogy and of temporal limitations cannot establish a solid link between Christ and Melchizedek and also cannot constitute a title to possess the priesthood. The eternity of priesthood is not a negative trait but a positive trait, which effects a transition from a simple external classification (a priest who evokes Melchizedek) to a real fulfillment (a priest according to the likeness of Melchizedek Heb 7:15).<sup>57</sup> The Levitical priesthood is based on the law of carnal descent or the law of hereditary transmission, which has a genealogy and its limitations of mortal existence. The eternity of Christ's priesthood is, on the contrary, based on the power of an indestructible life.<sup>58</sup> The power of life reveals itself in the resurrection of Christ and makes of him a living priest for eternity (Heb 7:8,17). This difference brings the superiority of Christ's priesthood.

## **B. Functions of Christ's Priesthood**

### *i. Solidarity with Humankind*

According to the author of the letter to the Hebrews, the solidarity of Jesus with humankind constitutes the fundamental characteristic of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1777.

<sup>57</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 162.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

the plan of salvation (Heb 2:4).<sup>59</sup> There exists a double bond of solidarity between the high priest and humankind. Since the high priest is taken from among men and established for the sake of humankind (Heb 5:1-4), he is closely united to the human family by his origin and destination.<sup>60</sup> The weakness and malice of humankind form an obstacle to the relationship with God. Though the main function of the priest is to offer sacrifice for atonement, he has to identify himself also with the sinful humanity. Christ came to this world not to help angels but to become part of the human family by having a human name 'Jesus' (Heb 2:9) and having the corresponding designations 'mortal and human being' (Heb 2:6), and 'pioneer of human salvation' (Heb 2:10).<sup>61</sup> Human beings are his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:11-12). The risen Christ is not only the Son of God, but also a human being who is glorified because of his human sufferings and death. By sharing flesh and blood (Heb 2:14) and accepting suffering and death (Heb 2:9), the Son, who was first superior to angels (Heb 1:3), was made lower than the angels. This lowering led him to the paschal glorification. By insisting on the necessary solidarity between Christ and human beings God wanted to bring to glory (Heb 2:10), declaring that the sanctifier (Christ) and the sanctified (human beings) have the same origin (Heb 2:11); otherwise the sanctification could not be communicated.<sup>62</sup> It was not a matter of shame for the risen Christ to call human beings brothers and sisters (Heb 2:11-12), because a double bond of solidarity between Christ and human beings was willed by God (Heb 2:13) and was established by the incarnation of Christ (Heb 2:14) with a view to a liberating mission whereby death is overcome by way of solidarity, even unto death (Heb 2:14-15).<sup>63</sup> Christ was taken from among humans and was established for the sake of humankind. Here Christ is fully human and the only man in whom the human vocation has been perfectly fulfilled.<sup>64</sup>

To become a high priest Christ identified himself completely with human beings in every respect and accepted suffering and death (Heb 2:14, 17-18). Here the author implicitly says that the Son's incomparable relationship with God in glory (Heb 1:3) did not make him a high

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>61</sup> Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews," 1773.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 81

priest, but an indispensable and a complete identification with humanity made him the High Priest. Since the priestly mediating function required excellent rapport between God and humans the glorified Christ, but not the pre-existing Son, had it in its fullness. Since Christ carried out God's plan for humankind to its conclusion (Heb 2:9) for the benefit of all, his fraternal solidarity with humankind is total. Complete identification with humans was the necessary way of becoming high priest, of sitting at God's right hand and of becoming the living link with God. If the high priest is to represent the people adequately in the presence of God and to remove their sins, he has to completely identify himself with humankind.<sup>65</sup> Solidarity with humankind forms the basis of the compassionate high priesthood.<sup>66</sup> This compassion of Jesus is found in his direct experience of all our trials.<sup>67</sup> Thus Christ acquired a profound capacity for compassion by possessing the experience of human difficulties and knowing the human condition. The identification with wretched humankind leads to humility.<sup>68</sup> The author speaks not only of the suffering but also of the humiliation of Jesus, which Paul emphasizes in his letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:8).<sup>69</sup> Christ, the High Priest had to renounce all the privileges and to descend to the lowest level by accepting complete likeness to his brothers and sisters and by sharing their sufferings and death.<sup>70</sup> The author emphasizes here that Christ has renounced glorifying himself personally. For the author, the priest should have humility, he emphasizes on the internal quality of the glory than the glory itself. For Christ, his humiliation consisted in undergoing his Passion (Heb 2:9).

### *ii. Intense Prayer*

Jesus prays, cries and beseeches the one who can save him from death. The prayers and supplications were addressed to God who has the power to save him from death. According to the letter to the

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<sup>65</sup> F.F. Bruce, "Hebrews," 1010.

<sup>66</sup> Elaine M. Wainwright, 777.

<sup>67</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 120.

<sup>69</sup> In Phil 2:5-11 Christ was portrayed in the attitude of man who begs, suffers and learns obedience and an attitude of extreme humility. Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 122.

<sup>70</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 71.

Hebrews, prayer, which springs from the agony itself, is not a matter of conventional liturgy with its rites fixed in advance, but of the violent reaction of a man whose very existence is in danger.<sup>71</sup> Jesus confronts the worst trials like treachery, abandonment, denial, an iniquitous trial, an unjust condemnation, blows and insults, scourging and crucifixion. These tragic events which threatened the whole work or mission of Jesus and his individuality and which threatened to engulf him entirely in death, brought about in him an intense prayer, which constituted the priestly offering.<sup>72</sup> The dramatic situation (the trials and death of Jesus), which was taken into prayer and transformed by it, became an offering. His prayer was heard and his offering was accepted. "Jesus prayed to the one who had the power to save him from death" suggests that the prayer of Jesus was a request for deliverance.<sup>73</sup>

The Greek term for agony *Eulabeia* normally describes religious fear but not an attitude of agony. Jesus' prayer was answered because of the attitude of profound respect toward God which makes a prayer authentic and opens the soul to the action of God.<sup>74</sup> The instinctive urge from death, which Jesus experienced in the agony, he presented to God in a suppliant prayer that springs forcefully from his human will to live.<sup>75</sup> Vanhoye says:

The prayer, however, was totally imbued with profound respect toward God and in consequence avoided imposing any predetermined solution on God. One, who prays, refrains from deciding for himself to God's action and consents to the interpersonal relationship. He submits himself at the same time to a magnetic force, which works a transformation in him, though not without a painful struggle. The object of the prayer

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.125.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> About deliverance or the object of Jesus' prayer there are different opinions. For some like Joachim Jeremiah, "saved from death" or 'deliverance' consists in triumphing over it definitively after having endured it. If we accept this idea, a question arises, "did Jesus pray for his resurrection?" But it is difficult to answer this question. For some Jesus was freed from the fear of death (*eulabeia*) and he has obtained the strength to overcome his agony and face death without flinching. But Jesus' prayer was answered after his agony. Cf. Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 126-127.

<sup>74</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 127. This idea is clearly expressed in Ps.144: 19, "God will do the will of those who fear him, he will listen to their petition and will save them."

<sup>75</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 127.

becomes secondary what matters above all is the relationship with God.<sup>76</sup>

Jesus prayed and begged for deliverance, but finally accepted the will of God (Mt 26:39, 42). His prayer transformed the desire according to the will of God. The one, who prays to God, desires the union of the will of God and his will in love. Here Jesus did not give up asking for victory over death, but he leaves the choice of the path to be followed entirely to God.<sup>77</sup> This kind of prayer will be certainly heard, because it is open with a total respect to God's action and puts no obstacle in the way of the divine generosity.<sup>78</sup> The answer to the prayer of Jesus consisted in the complete victory over death, a victory won by means of death itself (Heb 2:14f).<sup>79</sup> By death Christ reduced the devil, the prince of death, to powerlessness.

### *iii. Educative Suffering*

The answer to Jesus' prayer did not mean that Jesus escaped the testing but it represented a transformation of the suffering into a path of salvation.<sup>80</sup> Jesus learned obedience through his sufferings,<sup>81</sup> which has an educative value. Learning in suffering<sup>82</sup> is a matter of universal experience. The Bible gives a new depth to this fundamental fact of human experience by drawing attention to the role played in suffering by the personal relationship with God.<sup>83</sup> By means of this testing, God reveals himself to the person, either as a judge from whom no one can escape (Ezr 6:7, 10,14; 7:4,9,27; Job 19:29) or as a Father who wishes to help his children to improve (Prov 3:11f cited in Heb 12:5f, Ps 119:64, 67, 71).<sup>84</sup> Vanhoye says:

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 127-128

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 128.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Cf., Attridge who also confirms that Jesus learned obedience through sufferings (Heb 5:8). Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed., Helmut Koester, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 153.

<sup>82</sup> We find this expressed particularly in Greek literature, which for this purpose deliberately uses the assonance *paqein* (*Pathein*) or *maqein* (*Mathein*), adopted here by the author; in suffering one learns. Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 128.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 128.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

Suffering serves to establish a closer and more authentic relationship between mankind and God. Through suffering, God purifies a person and transforms him, imbues him with his sanctity (Heb 12:10), in order to be able to bring him close to himself. He gives him docility and true availability, the condition of perfect union in love. Such is the path of humility; by suffering we learn the obedience that unites us to God.<sup>85</sup>

Though Jesus was the Son of God (Heb 5:8) he submitted himself to this suffering. Not only Christ suffered but he was also transformed by his suffering through which he learned obedience.

This daring assertion reveals the whole seriousness of the incarnation and of the redemption. Suffering was not a punishment for the sins of Jesus,<sup>86</sup> because Jesus was spotless or without sin (Heb 4:15). He never disobeyed God but he always did the will of God (Heb 10:5-9, Jn 4:34; 6:38; 8:29). In order to set right human nature, which was deformed by disobedience, Christ submitted himself to the crucible of suffering and he was transformed by the action of God. No man was capable of accepting this terribly trying divine action in the way required, except Christ who actually submitted himself to this suffering and accepted the terribly trying divine action, although he had no need of it for himself. In him, therefore, a new man has been created who corresponds perfectly to the divine intention, because he has come to be by accepting the most complete obedience.<sup>87</sup> Now learning obedience (the action of Christ) and the answering of his prayer (the action of God) come together in an admirable unity. The action of Christ consists in calling for the action of God in his prayer and in welcoming it in obedience.<sup>88</sup> The answering of the prayer is precisely the transformation of Christ wrought by God through an educative suffering to which Jesus offered himself.<sup>89</sup> These concepts developed by the author throw an inexhaustible light on the mystery of Christ as well on the depth of all spiritual life.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 129.

<sup>86</sup> That is why the vocabulary of discipline (*paqeia*) was not applied to Jesus, because *paqeia* implies the punishment element. Cf., Dennis Hamm, "Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 288.

<sup>87</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 129.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 129-130.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 130.

*iv. Glorified Body of Christ*

Christ's paschal mystery gave humans access to the divine sanctuary to have relationship with God. Christ entered into the holy place having found an eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-12) through the tent and with (that is, by means of) his blood. Jesus foretold the destruction of the Temple (Mt 24:1-2; Mk 13:1-2; Lk 21:5-6) and announced the rebuilding in three days of another Temple that was not made by human hands (Mk 14:58). John identifies this temple with the glorified body of Christ (John 2:19-22). He who sits on the right hand of God<sup>90</sup> is indeed the Messiah, the Son of David and the Son of God whose task is to build the temple of God (2 Sam 7:12-14; 1Chr 17:11-14).<sup>91</sup> Therefore, "the greater and more perfect tent," is the temple constructed in three days, not made by human hands, but a divine work realized in the Passion and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>92</sup> The glorified body of Christ is the more perfect tent. Christ by means of his glorified body entered into God's intimacy.

By referring to the Gospel tradition about the sanctuary constructed by Christ, the author solves the problem of human relationship with God. It is not a matter of building a sanctuary, but a dwelling for God, because such a sanctuary always exists and it is God's holiness, which constitutes the only true sanctuary.<sup>93</sup> Human language places this sanctuary in heaven in order to describe its transcendence. When the tent is proportioned to the divine sanctuary and fully suited to it, human beings by means of the tent can truly enter into the intimacy of God. The Old Testament tent could not solve this problem of having communion with God except by the glorified body of Christ, because the tent was built by human hands. Since the Old Testament tent could not lead human beings into the true sanctuary, human beings could not transport themselves into the communion

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<sup>90</sup> Sitting does not describe an acquired state but an action. The verb *kathemai* indicates a state (being seated) in Ps 110 and the other christological texts, but the verb *kathemai* reinforces the aspect of action. One might translate 'a high priest has taken his seat at the right hand of the Majesty. This title brings the dynamic sense, and suggests activity, not repose. Christ is named celebrant (*leitourgos*) a word derived from Work (*ergon*). Christ has taken his seat at the right hand of God by accomplishing an act of worship, a liturgy. Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 174.

<sup>91</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 193.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*. 194.

with God and they would always reach a dead end. Since there was a mysterious identification between the mortal body of Jesus and the Temple of Jerusalem, by condemning Jesus the Jews condemned the Temple to destruction (Mt 23:38; Lk 19:44, Mt27: 51; Jn2: 19).<sup>94</sup> By transforming his own death into a perfect sacrifice Jesus overcame the destruction and brought a divine construction of a New Temple.<sup>95</sup> The resurrection, which opens new possibilities for human beings, was not simply a return to life of man, but a radical transformation of the existential situation of the whole humankind. This transformation was obtained through the complete docility of Christ, in prayer and suffering (Heb 5:7-9). Because of this transformation, the tent becomes more perfect (Heb 9:11) and Christ becomes 'rendered perfect' (Heb 5:9). By his Passion and resurrection, Christ obtained the capacity to reunite all the faithful people into one organism, which is his glorified body.<sup>96</sup> All those who become participators of Christ and form his house (Heb 3:6,14) were introduced by Christ into the intimacy of God (Heb 4:3, 16; 7:19, 25: 13:15). Hence one can say that Christ has found an eternal redemption.

#### *v. Effective Sacrifice*

The blood, like the tent, is another means that leads the people to enter into the sanctuary. Like the Jewish high priest, Christ did not offer external gifts and offerings or shed the blood of goats and calves but He offered Himself (Heb 9: 14) and shed His own blood. This personal offering of Christ goes beyond the Jewish external offerings. The sacrifice of Christ is a personal and existential sacrifice, and not a ritual one. In Christ's offering himself, the author combines two elements of the catechesis of the New Testament: the presentation of Christ as sacrificial victim (1Chr 5:17; 1Pet 1: 19) and the aspect of voluntary commitment, which characterizes the Passion of Jesus.<sup>97</sup> We can find this aspect in the acts and words of Jesus, especially in the institution of the Eucharist and in the attitude of Jesus at Gethsemane (Mk 10:45; Jn 10: 18, Mt 26:26-28). When the author says that Christ offered Himself, he means that Christ did not kill Himself but he was condemned and executed. For Christ, the event of Calvary contains first of all the

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.195.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.197.

element of passivity.<sup>98</sup> Passivity, however, paradoxically enough became the occasion of the most effective activity possible: by the way in which He bore suffering and death, Christ was extremely active in His Passion and carried out a work of positive transformation which surpasses the first creation in value.<sup>99</sup> This work of Christ is a sacrifice or a transformation through establishing a relationship with God. For the author, to sacrifice means to make sacred or to permeate with the sanctity of God.<sup>100</sup>

When the author says that Christ sacrificed Himself, he means that Christ was at one and the same time active and passive or the victim and the priest or the offerer and the offered. Since Christ was spotless (the Greek term *amomos* Heb 9:14) or sinless, he had no need to look beyond Himself for a sacrificial victim like the blood of goats and of calves. Christ sacrificed Himself and His offering was accepted by God. It is not enough to have a victim worthy to be offered to God (the passive aspect of sacrifice) but also the priest should be capable of making the offering or of raising the victim up to God (the active aspect of sacrifice).<sup>101</sup> Christ, who was the competent priest, had the eternal Spirit who gave Him the necessary upward strength to raise Himself up to God. The eternal Spirit takes the place of "the fire from Heaven" or "the fire of the Lord" in the Old Testament sacrifices (Lev 9:24; 1Kg 18:38, 2Chr 7:1; 2Mac 2:10).<sup>102</sup> The eternal Spirit or the fire is indispensable for the accomplishment of the sacrifice, because it involves transforming a creature by imparting to it the divine holiness.<sup>103</sup> The eternal Spirit is the Holy Spirit<sup>104</sup> who alone is capable of bringing about sacrificial transformation. Heb 5:7-8 describes how the action of the Spirit was inserted into the Passion of Christ. Supported and guided by the Spirit, Jesus' prayer opened His human condition to the action of God who, through the Spirit, gave Him the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> It cannot be doubted that the eternal Spirit is the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Why did the author say 'eternal' rather than 'Holy'? No doubt in order to emphasize the relationship with eternal redemption (Heb 9:12) and the eternal inheritance (Heb 9:15) obtained through the Holy Spirit and in order to express the relationship with the eternal priesthood (Heb 7:16-17). Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 210.

victory through painful obedience.<sup>105</sup> The power of the Spirit was shown in two closely connected ways; by inspiring a perfect conformity to the will of God (Heb 5:8; 10:4-10) and by maintaining his fraternal solidarity with humanity, even to the point of death (Heb 2:14-18; 4:15).<sup>106</sup> The efficacy and scope of Christ's offering is to assure that the blood of Christ has the power to act in humankind at the deepest level by purifying the conscience and establishing authentic communion with God.

### *vii. Cause of Salvation*

The transformation of humanity and the proclamation of priesthood (Ps 110:4) enabled Christ to offer salvation to all. Since Jesus suffered and learned obedience and was radically transformed by God, he was proclaimed High Priest. Since in the perfection of Jesus, God played a vital role, God is the author of this transformation. The perfection received by Christ led to the salvation to be procured by Christ. The transforming action of God was asked for by Christ in his prayer and accepted by him with docility.<sup>107</sup> The transformation consists in a radical renewal of human nature, which leads to perfect communion with God, who renews humankind in Christ in order to introduce him forever into his presence (Heb 9:24).<sup>108</sup> In this way, Christ, the initiator of salvation was saved from death by passing through the throes of death. There is a profound connection between the transformation accepted by Christ and the capacity that he has obtained to save humankind. In other words, by accepting the transformation, Christ received the capacity to save all human beings. Christ did not make prayer on behalf of the people, but made prayer from his own agony to save him from death. Therefore, Christ himself was transformed by the divine glorifying action. For the author, this transformation is a priestly consecration.

### *viii. House of God*

The author connects Christ with the house of God (Heb 3:1-6). This connection defined the level of his relationship with God and

<sup>105</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 199.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

constitutes the basis of his priestly authority.<sup>109</sup> The word "house" (*oikos*) occurs six times in this passage (Heb 3:1-6). In the Old Testament the word 'house' (the Hebrew term 'beth' and the Greek term *oikos*) usually designates the Temple of God. In Num 12:7 it explains the relationship between the position of Moses and that of the priest.<sup>110</sup> Here the priest is attached to the sanctuary in order to communicate the laws of the Lord. When the book of Numbers 12:7 adds the qualification 'all' (worthy of trust in all my house), the term 'house' means not only the sanctuary, but all the objects and all people who are connected with the sanctuary.<sup>111</sup> Though the interpretation of the Targum Onkelos sees in 'my house' an equivalent of 'my people' yet the people can be called house of God only to the extent of their relationship to the sanctuary where God dwells.<sup>112</sup> Heb 3:3 says that Moses who was not in essence distinct from the house of God, continued to be part of this house.

Christ is the builder of the house. His authority is the authority of a builder.<sup>113</sup> Heb 3:4 does not say that it is God who created everything, but he who created everything must be acknowledged as God.<sup>114</sup> His position is much superior to that of the house. The house of God built by Christ is not simply a component of the created universe;<sup>115</sup> it constitutes a new creation of greater value than the first creation, which will perish (Heb 1:11f; 12:26f).<sup>116</sup> The house of God is not a material building like the temple of Solomon, but a construction of living stones or all the believers (1Pet 2:5), who themselves become the sanctuary of God by adhering to Christ.<sup>117</sup> As high priest, Christ is the man of the sanctuary. Now all the people have the possibility of becoming the house of God by becoming the house of Christ, by being obedient to the voice of God and by persevering in their faithfulness to him (Heb 3:6b).

Christians, who have become sharers in Christ, form a community,

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.99.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.102.

<sup>115</sup> It is a component, which would obviously be interior to the whole of which it would be only a part (Is 66:1-2). Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 103.

<sup>116</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 103.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.104.

which is called God's dwelling place. The notion of all the people becoming God's sanctuary, had its origin in the Old Testament and in the Jewish tradition where the Psalmist calls "Judah became Yahweh's sanctuary" (Ps 114:2) and in the Qumran community where the people had ambitions to become the house of holiness for Israel, the society of highest holiness for Aaron.<sup>118</sup> On the one hand, Christians are the house of God (Heb 3:6b) by virtue of their belonging to Christ (Heb 3:6,14); on the other hand, they are not fully introduced into the house of God, because no one enjoys the rest of God except Christ who himself enjoys it (Heb 4:10). In order to enjoy the rest of God and to enter permanently into the intimacy of God, Christians need to listen to the voice of Christ and follow the road opened by Christ for them (Heb 4:14). Here the author explains the eschatological dynamism of the house of God.

### *ix. Word of God*

The authority of the Word of God constitutes one of the essential elements of the priestly mediation. Since the priest has privileged contact with God by his admission into the house of God, he can speak with full authority in the name of God. The author wants to affirm the priestly authority of the glorified Christ by referring to the authority of Moses (Num 12:1-8). Christ transmits the definitive Word of God and has the right to the unreserved allegiance of the believers.<sup>119</sup> As high priest, Christ speaks to humankind in the name of God and his word demands the allegiance of faith and makes it possible.<sup>120</sup> Christ takes our profession of faith to God and through Christ we are truly united with God in faith (Heb 13:15). The allegiance of faith puts the believer into a personal relationship with God through the mediation of Christ glorified and brings him into a house or a community animated by faith.<sup>121</sup>

The text of Malachi 2:7 calls the priest messenger of Yahweh.<sup>122</sup> Heb 3:1 calls Jesus the apostle and high priest of our profession of faith. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wants to underline the teaching function of Christ and the authority of his word. By using the term

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.97.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.98.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 104-105.

<sup>122</sup> The Greek term *angelos* was used to explain the Hebrew term 'messenger,' which is the first meaning of 'angelos.' But the term "*angelos*" normally denotes 'angel' in the biblical texts. Since the term 'angelos' is ambiguous, the author uses another term 'apostolos' with an equivalent meaning. Cf., Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 98.

'apostolos' he gives greater prominence to the aspect of transmission of the word of God and to the aspect of authority in the priesthood of the glorified Christ.<sup>123</sup> Christ who speaks from the heavens (Heb 12:25) has become the spokesman and high priest of our profession of faith by his glorification. Christ reveals to us our heavenly vocation (Heb 3:1), invites humankind to enter into God's rest (Heb 3:7-4:11) and asks for our allegiance of faith and our profession of faith. When we hear the Word of God, we must respond with an unreserved allegiance holding firm to the profession of faith. As apostle, Christ is God's messenger to human kind and as high priest he is humankind's representative before God.<sup>124</sup> In order to attain salvation Christians need to listen to the voice of Christ (Heb 5:9).<sup>125</sup> The voice, which we must now receive with total faith, is the voice of the glorified Christ, established as Son over the house of God (Heb 3:6) and thus speaking with authority of God himself.<sup>126</sup> By being eminent high priest and Son of God and worthy of trust and by traversing the heavens, Christ thus laid the foundation for the authority of his priestly word.

#### *x. Mediation of Christ*

The twofold relationship (relationship with God and with humankind) is necessary for the exercise of priestly mediation. In Christ the mediator this twofold relationship is always combined together. The relationship with humankind is not absent from the relationship with God, because the relationship with God has an important place in the relationship with humankind. What distinguishes these two relationships is the direction of the movement of mediation. In the relationship with God, Christ as the high priest invested with the divine authority speaking in the name of God, is in a descending movement, from God to humankind. In the relationship with humankind, Christ as the high priest truly taking on our human condition and raising it up to God is in an ascending movement, from humankind to God.

Since these two movements are grounded in a unique dynamism

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>124</sup> F.F. Bruce, "Hebrews," 1010.

<sup>125</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 106.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 99.

and they assure a perfect mediation, the believers have relationship with God or access to God only through the mediation of Christ.<sup>127</sup> This mediation is there once and for all through Christ's life and death on the cross (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 25-28, 10:10-18),<sup>128</sup> which made possible for human beings to have relationship with God. Since Christ was called by God to be a mediator between Him and the people (Ps 2:7),<sup>129</sup> his mediation was already ordained by God. As it is Christ, who communicates to the believers the purifying and renewing power of the Spirit through his priestly mediation, the life of charity is always situated in an atmosphere of thanksgiving. The faithful receive everything through Christ and offer through him at all times a sacrifice of praise to God (Heb 13:15). Without passing through Christ, the believers instead of transforming life, fall into the illusion of human pride and commit themselves to failure (Heb 10:19-25). No one can bypass Christ and arrive at God or no one can claim to act as a substitute for Christ to lead other men to God.<sup>130</sup> The Church cannot receive any grace without the mediation of Christ.<sup>131</sup>

Human beings need the right to entry, a way leading them to the true sanctuary and finally a priest to usher them into God's presence (Heb 10:19-22). The triple condition, which is very essential for entering into God's presence, is realized only in Christ who fulfills the triple condition by his death. The death of Jesus removed all the obstacles, which prevented their communion with God, and brought them the right of entry. The glorified humanity of Christ is the new and living way to the authentic sanctuary. The role of the tent is the means of access to God. On our way to God, we have Christ, the eminent priest, an experienced guide and the pioneer of our salvation, the high priest who introduces us to God. Mediation is understood here in the strong sense of an intervention, which establishes a relationship while

<sup>127</sup> Alois Stöger affirms that we have access to God through Christ alone (Rom 5:2; Eph 2:18; 3:12; 1Pet 3:18). "Priesthood," *Sacramentum Verbi*, ed., Johannes B. Bauer, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 706.

<sup>128</sup> Ernest Niermann, "Priest," *Sacramentum Mundi*, ed., Karl Rahner & Juan Alfaro, vol.5, (London: Burns & Oater, 1970), 98.

<sup>129</sup> Since such mediation even for the earthly high priest was a sacred task, within Judaism an authentic holder of this office did not choose this role for himself but was seen as called by God (Heb 5:4). Cf., Elaine M. Wainwright, 777.

<sup>130</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 222.

<sup>131</sup> Romanus Cessario, "Priesthood of Christ," *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine* ed., Russel Shaw (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1997), 530.

suppressing the obstacles opposed to it and it is a matter of mediation between human beings and God.<sup>132</sup> Thus the priest is the man of the sanctuary and is worthy of trust and has authority to speak in the name of God to those who constitute his house.

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<sup>132</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 236.