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Typology of the Old Testament Priesthood



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Typology of the Old Testament Priesthood

The Priesthood of the Old Testament

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continued to perform the fundamental priestly function, which is the offering of sacrifice, like the patriarchs before them, such as Abel, Seth, and Noah. They offered sacrifices to adore and propitiate God, and won graces for themselves and their descendants.¹ The Law of Moses put the priesthood and the offering of sacrifice at the heart of the worship of Israel, in a new, divinely prescribed form. These offerings were first made in the Tent of Meeting, and then in the Temple in Jerusalem.

It is easy to miss the reality of priesthood and sacrifice in rabbinical Judaism, because this dimension of Jewish worship was lost with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Since all sacrifice had to be offered in the one Temple in Jerusalem, the destruction of that Temple at the hands of the Roman legions under General Titus²—and the impossibility of rebuilding it—meant the end of the entire sacrificial system of Judaism. The Jews mourn that destruction in an annual fast, *Tisha B'Av* (ninth day of the Jewish month of Av).

The offering of sacrifice is the principal function of the priest. With the loss of the place of sacrifice, the Old Testament priesthood lost its reason for existing. Nevertheless, the line of the priesthood, which is passed down through the sons of Aaron, is preserved in those who have the last name of “priest,” which is “Cohen” in Hebrew (and derivatives such as Kahn, Cohn, Kogan, Kagan, or Kahanowitz).³ Descendants of the priestly line still have the duty of giving the priestly blessing from Numbers 6:24–27: “‘The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.’ The Lord says, ‘So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.’”

God established the priestly line through Aaron in Exodus 28:1: “Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.” Only the descendants of Aaron could be priests. After Aaron, the office of high

priest was passed on to his firstborn, and continued through the firstborn descendants. As Hebrews 5:4 states, “One does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was.”

Aaron was a member of the tribe of Levi. Although only his sons could be priests, the men of the other families of that tribe served under the priests, and were specially consecrated to the Lord. For this reason the Levites were not given a specific part of the land of Israel to cultivate, for their portion was the Lord and His service.

And the Lord said to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel. To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service which they serve, their service in the tent of meeting. And henceforth the people of Israel shall not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations; and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance. For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as an offering to the Lord, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance; therefore I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel.⁴

Numbers 35:1–8 stipulated that the Levites were to have forty-eight cities scattered through the land of the other tribes of Israel. The duties and subordinate service of the Levites are described in Numbers 18:2–7, in which the Lord says to Aaron:

“And with you bring your brethren also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you, and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony. They shall attend you and attend to all duties of the tent; but shall not come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar, lest they, and you, die. They shall join you, and attend to the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent; and no one else shall come near you. And you shall attend to the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, that there be wrath no more upon the people of Israel. And behold, I have taken your brethren the Levites from among the people of Israel; they are a gift to you, given to the Lord, to do the service of the tent of meeting. And you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood as a gift, and any one else who comes near shall be put to death.”

The liturgical service of the sanctuary in Israel was thus divided into two orders: the priests who were descendants of Aaron and served the altar and offered sacrifice; and the other Levites who ministered to the priests and tended the

1 With regard to Abraham, see Gen 15, and above all, Gen 22 recounting the sacrifice of Isaac.

2 Titus was the son of the Emperor Vespasian; he succeeded his father to the throne in 79 AD.

3 The name “Cohen” is the direct transliteration of the Hebrew word for “priest”: כהן. The possession of such a last name is not considered sufficient proof of priestly lineage, but should be backed by more complete genealogical records. Tombstones of priests were marked with a special sign of hands giving the priestly blessing.

4 Num 18:20–24.

sanctuary, but did not offer sacrifice. The characteristic mark of the Levites was service (Num 18:2), and that of the priests was sacrifice. At the head of the entire liturgical service was the High Priest, descended from the eldest son of Aaron. The “Holy Orders” of Israel thus had three grades: high priest, priests, and Levites, parallel to the three grades of Holy Orders in the Catholic Church: bishop, priests, and deacons.

At first the priests and Levites served at the Tabernacle housing the Ark of the Covenant,⁵ and then at the Temple in Jerusalem when it was consecrated by Solomon. After the construction of the Temple, the Levites were put in charge of the liturgical music of the Temple service and of the offerings for the Temple (1 Chr 23–26).

Typology of the Grades of the Old Testament Priesthood

Since the priesthood in Israel had three grades—high priest, priests, and Levites—it was natural for the Christians of the first and second centuries to distinguish the priesthood of the New Covenant according to the same three grades. The bishops were the New Testament successors to the high priests of Israel; the presbyters were successors of the priests who were descendants of Aaron, and the deacons were the successors of the Levites. The Acts of the Apostles and other writings of the New Testament show the distinction between deacons and bishops, and the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch from 107 AD show the threefold distinction of bishops, priests (or presbyters), and deacons.

The most important difference, however, between the hierarchy of Israel and that of the Church is that the Holy Orders of Israel were hereditary, whereas that of the Church is a charism not determined by blood.

The typology between the three grades of Holy Orders in Israel and the Church is brought out in the Church’s liturgies of ordination. The bishops in the Church are frequently referred to in the liturgy with the title “High Priest,” showing the parallel of the bishop with the high priest of Israel. The rite of ordination of a bishop in the current Roman Rite, taken from the *Apostolic Tradition*, which dates from the beginning of the third century, gives the following prayer:

Father, you know all hearts. You have chosen your servant for the office of bishop. May he be a shepherd to your holy flock, and a *high priest* blameless in your sight, ministering to you night and day; may he always gain the

⁵ See Num 1:50–51: “Appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it; they are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it, and shall encamp around the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. And if any one else comes near, he shall be put to death.”

blessing of your favor and offer the gifts of your holy Church. Through the Spirit who gives the grace of *high priesthood*, grant him the power to forgive sins as you have commanded, to assign ministries as you have decreed, and to loose every bond by the authority which you gave to your apostles.⁶

Lumen gentium 21 also uses the term “high priesthood” to refer to the ministry of bishops in the Church:

In the bishops, therefore, for whom priests are assistants, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Supreme High Priest, is present in the midst of those who believe. For sitting at the right hand of God the Father, He is not absent from the gathering of His high priests. . . . By Episcopal consecration the fullness of the sacrament of Orders is conferred, that fullness of power, namely, which both in the Church’s liturgical practice and in the language of the Fathers of the Church is called the high priesthood, the supreme power of the sacred ministry.

The current liturgy for the ordination of priests in the Latin rite refers to the sons of Aaron who assisted the High Priest:

Lord, holy Father, . . . when you had appointed high priests to rule your people, you chose other men next to them in rank and dignity to be with them and to help them in their task. . . . You extended the spirit of Moses to seventy wise men. . . . You shared among the sons of Aaron the fullness of their father’s power.⁷

Similarly in the prayer for the ordination of deacons, the Church mentions the Levites:

Almighty God . . . , you established a threefold ministry of worship and service, for the glory of your name. As ministers of your tabernacle you chose the sons of Levi and gave them your blessing as their everlasting inheritance.⁸

The Levites are the type of the ministry of deacons in the Church. The Levites serve the priests, who alone directly serve the Lord through offering sacrifice. Similarly, service to the bishop and the People of God is the characteristic mark of the order of the diaconate.

An early patristic document that brings out the typology of the three grades of the Old Testament priesthood is the Letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, dated c. 96 AD. This is perhaps the earliest preserved Christian work outside the New Testament. It was so highly esteemed in the early Church that it was read in the liturgical assembly in some places, as if it were part of the canon of Scripture.⁹

The occasion for the Letter was a schism in the Church in Corinth. It seems the authority of the ordained bishops

⁶ *Roman Pontifical*, Ordination of Bishops 26, prayer of consecration (my italics). For the text of the *Apostolic Tradition* from which it was taken, see Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 61.

⁷ *Roman Pontifical*, Ordination of Priests 22, prayer of consecration, quoted in CCC 1542.

⁸ *Roman Pontifical*, Ordination of Deacons 21, prayer of consecration, quoted in CCC 1543.

⁹ See Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3.16.

(*episkopoi*) and “presbyters” was being challenged by some claiming a more “charismatic” authority, based not on the sacrament of Orders and apostolic succession, but on charismatic gifts and a higher knowledge (*gnosis*). Perhaps the schism was the work of incipient Gnosticism, which was the first major heresy to trouble the Church.¹⁰

It is highly significant that the bishop of Rome intervened to settle the conflict with a mixture of authority and theological persuasion, focusing on examples from the Old Testament. It may seem surprising that Clement bases his support for the hierarchy of the Catholic Church so much on the examples of the Old Testament, for the nature of the hierarchy in the New Covenant has changed. It is no longer based on the priesthood of Aaron, but on that of Christ, which is sacramentally continued through the sacrament of Holy Orders. Nevertheless, the hierarchical principle is central to both the Old and the New Covenants! God is a God of order—He is the Logos—and everything He does is hierarchical and orderly.

Clement stresses that this principle of hierarchy is the most important element of continuity between Israel and the Church. As Israel was to obey God through Moses and the high priests, and offer an acceptable worship to God in the way appointed by Him through the hands of the priests and Levites, so Christians must now obey the successors to the Apostles—the bishops—and their presbyters and deacons; for the bishops, presbyters, and deacons take the place of the Old Testament high priest, priests, and Levites.

God instituted hierarchy in the Church, as in Israel, for the sake of beauty and order. God wills that worship be presented to Him by a fitting order of mediation, and not “carelessly or in disorder.” St. Clement shows how the hierarchy established in the Old Testament is the model of the hierarchy of the Church:

Since, therefore, these things are now clear to us and we have searched into the depths of the divine knowledge, we ought to do, in order, everything that the Master has commanded us to perform at the appointed times. Now he commanded the offerings and services to be performed diligently, and not to be done carelessly or in disorder, but at designated times and seasons. *Both where and by whom he wants them to be performed, he himself has determined by his supreme will*, so that all things, being done devoutly according to his good pleasure, might be acceptable to his will. Those, therefore, who make their offerings at the appointed times are acceptable and blessed: for those who follow the instructions of the Master cannot go wrong. *For to the high priest the proper services [liturgy] have been given, and to the priests the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries [diaconate] have been imposed. The layman is bound by the layman’s rules.*¹¹

10 See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.3.

11 Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ch. 40, in Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 99.

The worship of Israel was offered in a way stipulated directly by God in the Mosaic law, such that particular offices are assigned to four classes of men: the high priest, the priests, the Levites, and laymen. True worship is given to God when each one observes the laws pertaining to them. Likewise in the New Covenant, these four classes remain: the bishop in each diocese takes the place of the high priest, and the priests of the New Covenant, referred to usually as “presbyters” in the early Church, take the place of those of the Old. The deacons take the place of the Levites, and the laity are those who have not received any of the grades of Holy Orders. The sacrament of Holy Orders thus structures the People of God into clerics and laypeople. However, this distinction is for the sake of the good of all, so that the one Spirit may vivify the body composed of different members in the harmony of charity.

Using the Old Testament in this way as a means for understanding the hierarchy of the Church is a remarkable acknowledgement of the intimate ties between the two Testaments, showing how Christianity is indeed rooted in Judaism, and is its flower and fruit.

Benedict XVI speaks about this passage in his Wednesday Audience of March 7, 2007:

In this way, referring to the liturgy of ancient Israel, Clement revealed his ideal Church. She was assembled by “the one Spirit of grace poured out upon us” which breathes on the various members of the Body of Christ, where all, united without any divisions, are “members of one another” (46, 6-7). The clear distinction between the “lay person” and the hierarchy in no way signifies opposition, but only this organic connection of a body, an organism with its different functions. The Church, in fact, is not a place of confusion and anarchy where one can do what one likes all the time: each one in this organism, with an articulated structure, exercises his ministry in accordance with the vocation he has received.

In the following decade (107 AD), St. Ignatius of Antioch also clearly teaches the three grades of the sacrament of Holy Orders. In his Letter to the Trallians, he writes:

For when you are subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, it is evident to me that you are living not in accordance with human standards but in accordance with Jesus Christ. . . . It is essential, therefore, that you continue your current practice and do nothing without the bishop, but be subject also to the council of presbyters as to the apostles of Jesus Christ. . . . Furthermore, it is necessary that those who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ please everyone in every respect. For they are not merely deacons of food and drink but ministers of God’s church. Therefore they must avoid criticism as though it were fire.

Similarly, let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God’s council and as the band of the apostles. Without these no group can be called

a church.¹²

Rebellion against the Authority of the Old Testament Priesthood

The threefold priestly hierarchy established in Israel through Aaron and his eldest son, the rest of his sons, and all the members of the tribe of Levi, was, not surprisingly the object of contention among the Israelites in the desert. Those who were not sons of Aaron or Levites felt that they were subjects of discrimination. This resentment was expressed by three Israelites named Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who challenged the authority of the Aaronic priesthood, saying to Moses: “You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?” (Num 16:3). Korah was a Levite, and thus he was challenging the distinction of priests and Levites. The other rebels were from other tribes, and they were challenging the entire hierarchy. Moses responds to Korah:

“Hear now, you sons of Levi: is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them; and that he has brought you near him, and all your brethren the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? Therefore it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together; what is Aaron that you murmur against him?”¹³

God Himself responded to the rebellion in a very dramatic way to manifest the fact that the sacred priesthood with its three grades comes from God and not from man. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were swallowed up alive by the earth with 250 of their followers:

And the Lord said to Moses, “Say to the congregation, Get away from about the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.” Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram; and the elders of Israel followed him. And he said to the congregation, “Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins.” So they got away from about the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones. And Moses said, “Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. If these men die the common death of all men, or if they are visited by the fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth, and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.” And as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them

split asunder; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel that were round about them fled at their cry; for they said, “Lest the earth swallow us up!”

And fire came forth from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense. . . . So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned had offered; and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar, to be a reminder to the people of Israel, so that no one who is not a priest, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord, lest he become as Korah and as his company -- as the Lord said to Eleazar through Moses.¹⁴

The dramatic consequences of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram manifest the most grave nature of the sin of schism, which divides the unity of worship of Israel and the Church. St. Thomas Aquinas classifies it as the gravest of sins against fraternal charity, because it is opposed to the supernatural unity of the People of God.

After the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, God reinforced the priestly authority of Aaron and his family to serve as priests in Israel by the miracle of the rod of Aaron that blossomed:

The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them rods, one for each fathers’ house, from all their leaders according to their fathers’ houses, twelve rods. Write each man’s name upon his rod, and write Aaron’s name upon the rod of Levi. For there shall be one rod for the head of each fathers’ house. Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony, where I meet with you. And the rod of the man whom I choose shall sprout; thus I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the people of Israel, which they murmur against you.” Moses spoke to the people of Israel; and all their leaders gave him rods, one for each leader, according to their fathers’ houses, twelve rods; and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses deposited the rods before the Lord in the tent of the testimony. And on the morrow Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord to all the people of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. And the Lord said to Moses, “Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their murmurings against me, lest they die.” Thus did Moses; as the Lord commanded him, so he did. And the people of Israel said to Moses, “Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Every one who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die. Are we all to perish?”¹⁵

12 St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians* 2–3, in Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 215–217.

13 Num 16:8–11.

14 Num 16:23–40.

15 Num 17:2–13.

St. Clement of Rome, in his Letter to the Corinthians, sees this episode of rebellion as a type of schism in the New Covenant. As Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebelled against the priestly authority of Aaron, his sons, and the Levites, so the New Covenant is not exempt for schism and rebellion against those who hold the priesthood of the New Testament. And as God rebuked Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, so He will not hold guiltless those who upset the right order of supernatural governance in the Church through the most grave sin of schism. Speaking of the miraculous blossoming of Aaron's rod, St. Clement writes:

Did not Moses know beforehand that this would happen? Of course he knew. But in order that disorder might not arise in Israel, he did it anyway. . . . Our apostles likewise knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the bishop's office. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the leaders mentioned earlier and afterwards they gave the offices a permanent character; that is, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. . . . For it will be no small sin for us if we depose from the bishop's office those who have offered the gifts blamelessly and in holiness.¹⁶

In this well-known text, St. Clement, towards the end of the first century, clearly affirmed the principle of apostolic succession, and its great importance in the life of the Church.

The Vestments of the High Priest

Exodus 28 gives a very detailed description of the vestments of Aaron as High Priest of Israel. The vestments manifest the mission of the High Priest, for they are inscribed with the names of the tribes and borne on his person to symbolize the responsibility he has for them.

The ephod was a vestment like a chasuble, ornamented with twelve precious stones. Two of these stones were engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, six on each stone, and set above the shoulders:

And you shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. As a jeweler engraves signets, so shall you engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel; you shall enclose them in settings of gold filigree. And you shall set the two stones upon the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel; and Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord upon his two shoulders for remembrance.¹⁷

An additional vestment, the breastpiece of the high priest, a ten-inch square covering the chest, also bore twelve precious stones, and each stone was engraved with the name of a tribe:

There shall be twelve stones with their names accord-

16 Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* 43–44, in Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 103–105.

17 Ex 28:9–12.

ing to the names of the sons of Israel; they shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes. . . . So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment upon his heart, when he goes into the holy place, to bring them to continual remembrance before the Lord. And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the Lord; thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually.¹⁸

Pope Francis explains the typology of Aaron's vestments in his homily for the Chrism Mass on March 28, 2013:

The sacred robes of the High Priest are rich in symbolism. One such symbol is that the names of the children of Israel were engraved on the onyx stones mounted on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, the ancestor of our present-day chasuble: six on the stone of the right shoulder-piece and six on that of the left (cf. Ex 28:6–14). The names of the twelve tribes of Israel were also engraved on the breastplate (cf. Ex 28:21). This means that the priest celebrates by carrying on his shoulders the people entrusted to his care and bearing their names written in his heart. When we put on our simple chasuble, it might well make us feel, upon our shoulders and in our hearts, the burdens and the faces of our faithful people, our saints and martyrs of whom there are many in these times.¹⁹

Under the ephod, the High Priest was to wear a seamless robe of blue, the hem of which was decorated with woven pomegranates alternating with golden bells. Thus “its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out, lest he die” (Ex 28:35).²⁰ Pomegranates, on account of their many seeds, are a symbol of fruitfulness and eternal life. The rabbinical tradition also sees the pomegranate as a symbol of righteousness on account of the great number of seeds, which represent the 613 commandments of the Torah. The bells are a symbol of the sweet sound of the Word of God proclaimed and taught by the priest, and of divine worship.

The High Priest also wore a turban, on the front of which there was a plate of pure gold engraved with the inscription, “Holy to the Lord.”

The most mysterious part of the vestments were two objects, the Urim and the Thummim, which went on Aaron's breastpiece and were used as sacred lots to discern the will of God. The judges or kings who led the people could thus consult God's will in difficult matters. In Numbers 27:21, God commands that Joshua be invested with some of Moses' authority to lead the children of Israel after him: “And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall

18 Ex 28:21, 29–30

19 Available at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-chrism-mass-homily>. Accessed on April 9, 2013.

20 Christ's tunic mentioned in John 19:23, recalls this priestly robe in that it too was “without seam, woven from top to bottom.” Christ, of course, is the eternal High Priest prefigured by Aaron and his sons.

inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord; at his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in.”

We see King David in 1 Samuel 23 consulting the Lord through the high priest Abiathar’s ephod, which contained the Urim and Thummim. When David was seeking refuge from Saul in the city of Keilah, he consulted the ephod of Abiathar as to whether Saul would besiege the city of Keilah. On receiving a positive answer, he asked whether the men of Keilah would then hand him over to Saul. Once again the answer was positive, and David fled immediately from that city.

The Urim and Thummim were still being used to discern God’s will in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65 recount an episode in which the Urim and Thummim were consulted regarding certain men who claimed to be of priestly descent but whose names were not found in the genealogies: “The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food [reserved for priests], until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.”

In Acts 1, Peter used lots in a similar way to determine God’s will for a successor to Judas. This strikes modern ears as very strange, but it should be connected with the tradition of the Urim and Thummim. Peter has become high priest of the New Covenant, and so he not unnaturally took up a prerogative of the Aaronic high priest.

After Pentecost, however, lots were never used again to determine the will of God. Prayer and the gift of counsel, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, fully poured out on Pentecost, take the place of the casting of lots. The Urim and Thummim can thus be seen as types of the gift of counsel which is given to all the confirmed faithful in the Church through the Holy Spirit. It remains in all who are in a state of grace, and fully blossoms in the lives of the saints.

Consecration of the High Priest

The rite of ordination is described in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8. Aaron and his sons were ritually washed, and then clothed in their priestly vestments. Moses then took holy oil and poured it on Aaron’s head. The anointing is described in Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life for evermore.

This shows that the priest was consecrated to be the principle of unity for the children of Israel, for whom there was to be one sacrificial system mediated by the sons of

Aaron. The blessing of unity is thus connected with the anointing of Aaron.

Pope Francis, in the homily for the Chrism Mass of March 28, 2013, explains another aspect of the typology of the anointing of Aaron. The oil was to go from the turban on his head to the hems of his robe (decorated with pomegranates and bells) and from there to overflow to the ground. This can be taken to mean that the anointing received by the priest has to overflow onto others. Pope Francis connects this with the episode in the Gospel in which a woman suffering from a hemorrhage touches the hem of Jesus’ garment and is healed.

The precious oil which anoints the head of Aaron does more than simply lend fragrance to his person; it overflows down to the edges. The Lord will say this clearly: his anointing is meant for the poor, prisoners and the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone. The ointment is not intended just to make us fragrant, much less to be kept in a jar, for then it would become rancid and the heart bitter.

A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed. This is a clear test. When our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news. Our people like to hear the Gospel preached with unction, they like it when the Gospel we preach touches their daily lives, when it runs down like the oil of Aaron to the edges of reality, when it brings light to moments of extreme darkness, to the outskirts where people of faith are most exposed to the onslaught of those who want to tear down their faith. People thank us because they feel that we have prayed over the realities of their everyday lives, their troubles, their joys, their burdens and their hopes. And when they feel that the fragrance of the Anointed One, of Christ, has come to them through us, they feel encouraged to entrust to us everything they want to bring before the Lord: Pray for me, Father, because I have this problem, Bless me, Pray for me these words are the sign that the anointing has flowed down to the edges of the robe, for it has turned into prayer.

The prayers of the people of God. When we have this relationship with God and with his people, and grace passes through us, then we are priests, mediators between God and men. What I want to emphasize is that we need constantly to stir up God’s grace and perceive in every request, even those requests that are inconvenient and at times purely material or downright banal but only apparently so, the desire of our people to be anointed with fragrant oil, since they know that we have it. To perceive and to sense, even as the Lord sensed the hope-filled anguish of the woman suffering from hemorrhages when she touched the hem of his garment. At that moment, Jesus, surrounded by people on every side, embodies all the beauty of Aaron vested in priestly raiment, with the oil running down upon his robes. It is a hidden beauty, one which shines forth only for those faith-filled eyes of the woman troubled with an issue of blood. But not even the disciples, future priests, see or understand: on the existential outskirts, they see only what is on the surface: the crowd pressing in on Jesus from all sides (cf. Lk 8:42).

The Lord, on the other hand, feels the power of the divine anointing which runs down to the edge of his cloak.

We need to go out, then, in order to experience our own anointing, its power and its redemptive efficacy: to the outskirts where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight, and prisoners in thrall to many evil masters. It is not in soul-searching or constant introspection that we encounter the Lord: self-help courses can be useful in life, but to live by going from one course to another, from one method to another, leads us to become pelagians and to minimize the power of grace, which comes alive and flourishes to the extent that we, in faith, go out and give ourselves and the Gospel to others, giving what little ointment we have to those who have nothing, nothing at all.

A priest who seldom goes out of himself, who anoints little—I won't say not at all because, thank God, our people take our oil from us anyway—misses out on the best of our people, on what can stir the depths of his priestly heart. Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers.²¹

One of the great problems afflicting the priesthood in our time is that so many priests understand their role more as managers, administrators, or social workers, than as apostles and mediators between God and man, sacramentally configured to the one perfect Mediator, Christ. As Christ was anointed with the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation, the priest at his ordination receives an anointing with the Spirit that is meant to be passed on to all the Christian faithful, above all through the administration of the sacraments and the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass.

²¹ Available at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-chrism-mass-homily>.