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Thomas Aquinas and the Priesthood of all the Believers: Aquinas' Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Tomasz z Akwinu i kapłaństwo wszystkich wierzących: Komentarz Akwinaty do Listu do Hebrajczyków

Abstract. Aquinas' Commentary on Hebrews explores the theological understanding of the priesthood of Christ, who alone is the 'true priest'. It as human, homo, that Christ is priest. One of the key insights of the Commentary is the way Aquinas relates Christ's high priesthood and the priesthood of the mystical body, the Church. Aquinas is clear: all the baptised have a share in the priesthood of Christ, all are sealed with the Holy Spirit. The ecclesial implications of this anthropology still are to be fully realised.

Streszczenie. Komentarz św. Tomasza z Akwinu do Listu do Hebrajczyków wyjaśnia teologiczne zrozumienie kapłaństwa Chrystusa, który jest jedynym „prawdziwym kapłanem”, w jaki sposób Chrystus, jako człowiek jest kapłanem. Jednym z kluczowych spostrzeżeń komentarza jest spojrzenie Akwinaty dotyczące arcykapłaństwa Chrystusa i kapłaństwa Mistycznego Ciała, którym jest Kościół. Przekaz Akwinaty jest jasny: wszyscy ochrzczeni mają udział w kapłaństwie Chrystusa, wszyscy są opieczętowni Duchem Świętym. Kościelne implikacje tej antropologii wciąż oczekują na pełną realizację.

Keywords: Hebrews; Priesthood; Christ; High Priesthood; anointing; holiness; divinisation.

Słowa kluczowe: List do Hebrajczyków; Chrystus; arcykapłaństwo; świętość; ubóstwienie.

The surpassing excellence of Christ [*Christi excellentia*], is thus clearly shown in our text; and this is the subject matter of this epistle to the Hebrews. By this subject matter this epistle is distinguished from the other epistles ... in the epistle to the Hebrews he treats of this grace [New Testament], inasmuch as it pertains to the head, namely, Christ. For these three things are found in the body of the Church, just as they are found in the natural body, namely, the mystical body itself, its chief members, namely, prelates and rulers, and the head, namely, Christ, from Whom life flows to all the members.¹

These words of Aquinas serve as an eloquent introduction to his Commentary on Hebrews. They indicate clearly how Aquinas reads this epistle: his concern is the surpassing excellence of Christ, and the life which flows from Christ to all the members.

There are three parts to this paper. Firstly we shall present the current knowledge regarding the composition of Hebrews. Secondly, we shall consider the priesthood of Christ, as understood by Aquinas from his reading of Hebrews, and finally we shall critically engage with the text to see how Aquinas understands the relationship between the high priesthood of Christ and the ‘mystical body itself’.

1. Composition

There are two known versions for the first seven chapters of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The second version is longer than the first (the Mariette edition gives extracts from it in small letters). Jean-Pierre Torrell alerts us to the fact that Antoine Dondaine believed this version to be Reginald of Piperno’s own *re-*

¹ Ergo manifeste in verbis istis demonstratur Christi excellentia, et haec est materia huius epistolae ad Hebraeos, quae ab aliis distinguitur. Quia in quibusdam epistolis agitur de gratia novi testamenti quantum ad totum corpus mysticum Ecclesiae, et hoc in omnibus epistolis quas mittit Ecclesiis, in ea scilicet quae est ad Romanos, ad Corinthios, ad Galatas, et usque ad primam ad Timotheum. In quibusdam vero quantum ad membra principalia, sicut in his quas mittit singularibus personis, scilicet ad Timotheum, ad Titum, et ad Philemonem. In ista vero commendat ipsam gratiam quantum ad caput, scilicet Christum; in corpore enim Ecclesiae ista tria reperiuntur sicut et in corpore naturali, scilicet ipsum corpus mysticum, membra principalia, scilicet praelati et maiores, et caput, a quo vita fluit in totum corpus, scilicet Christus. *In Heb. Prol.* 4 All references to Hebrews accessed at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org> English translation (Fabian Larcher op) accessed at <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/SSHHebrews.htm>.

portatio, that is to say it consists of notes taken while Aquinas was teaching, by Reginald himself.²

The dating of this commentary, as with all his Pauline works, is difficult to ascertain but it seems most likely that it was composed when he was teaching in Rome from 1265–1268.³ This would have been when he was composing the *Prima pars* (he makes an allusion to the *Prima Pars* in Hbw 4, lect. 1 no. 205), and if this dating is accurate it means that while his primary concern was the education of young Dominican friars he was thinking deeply about the priesthood of Christ, a priesthood Aquinas believes to be shared with the People of God. In commenting on the epistle ample use is made of Glosses, hence whenever points are made which are unique to Thomas these need to be noted as particularly insightful.⁴

Aquinas read Paul's work (he believed all the letters to be Pauline) as one corpus, a point he makes clear in the Prologue he placed at the beginning of his commentaries, where he 'proposes a general plan of the Pauline epistles, according to which each one corresponds to a precise design.'⁵

The Apostle wrote fourteen epistles: nine of them instruct the Church of the Gentiles; four the prelates and princes of the Church, as well as kings; the last is addressed to the Hebrews, the sons of Israel. The teaching bears entirely on Christ's grace, which we can consider under a triple modality.

In the first place, according to its existence in the Head himself, Christ, and it is thus that we find it in the Epistle to the Hebrews; then, as it is in the principal members of the mystical body, and it is thus that we find it in the epistles addressed to the prelates (the pastoral epistles); finally, according as it is in the mystical body itself, which is the Church, and it is thus that we find it in the epistles addressed to the Gentiles.⁶

² J.P. Torrell, *St Thomas Aquinas*, p. 254. In footnote 29 Torrell informs the reader that he learnt this from a verbal communication with Fr Bataillon in 1992.

³ For Torrell's suggested datings see *St Thomas Aquinas*, p. 254, 255.

⁴ The Gloss prepared by Peter of Lombard the previous century (*Magna glosatura*) was much used. This gloss itself was influenced by the Gloss of Anselm of Laon, a work in turn enriched by additions from his pupil Gilbert de la Porrée (*Media glosatura*). See G. Berceville, *Le sacerdoce du Christ*, p. 144.

⁵ J.P. Torrell, *St Thomas Aquinas*, p. 255.

⁶ Prol., ed. Cai (Turin–Rome, 1953), no. 11. Torrell's translation from the critical text by Father de Grandpré 256 n. 32 *Scriptis enim quatuordecim epistolas quarum novem instruunt Ecclesiam gentium; quatuor praelatos et principes Ecclesiae, id est reges; una populum Israel, scilicet quae est ad Hebraeos. Est enim haec doctrina tota de gratia Christi, quae quidem potest tripliciter considerari. Uno modo secundum quod est in ipso capite, scilicet Christo, et sic commendatur in epistola ad Hebraeos. Alio modo secundum quod est in*

This plan is referred to at the start of each epistle. The opening paragraphs of the commentary on Hebrews identify the subject matter of the epistle as the surpassing excellence [*Christi excellentia*] of Christ. This is what distinguishes it from the other epistles. As cited at the beginning of this paper, in the epistle to the Hebrews Paul ‘treats of this grace, inasmuch as it pertains to the head, namely, Christ....from whom life flows to all the members.’(Prol. 4)⁷

2. The High Priesthood of Christ

In his opening comments on chapter 7 Aquinas notes:

In Chapter 5 the Apostle proved that Christ is a priest, but in Chapter 6 he interposed certain considerations to prepare the minds of his hearers. Now he returns to his main theme: for he intends to prove the excellence of Christ’s priesthood over the Levitical priesthood.⁸

‘The priesthood of Christ is preferred to the Levitical.’⁹ The argument is that it is a priesthood according to the order of Melchizidek, and not according to Aaron, that is being referred to. This priesthood lasts forever. With this new priesthood a new law is required, for the ‘proper effect of the Law and of the priesthood is to justify. This the Law was unable to do.’¹⁰ Of Christ’s priesthood Thomas is able to tell us that not only has the priesthood of Christ greater efficacy than the priesthood of the Old Testament but that ‘Christ alone is the true priest, but others are his ministers.’¹¹ He contains in an excellent manner

membris principalibus corporis mystici, et sic commendatur in epistolis quae sunt ad praelatos. Tertio modo secundum quod in ipso corpore mystico, quod est Ecclesia, et sic commendatur in epistolis quae mittuntur ad gentiles,

⁷ <http://dhs priory.org/thomas/SSHebrews.htm#14> Henceforth all references to this English translation will be made in the body of the text.

⁸ *In Heb.* 7:1–3 [326]. Supra apostolus, V cap., probavit Christum esse sacerdotem. In VI autem capite interposuit quaedam ad praeparandos animos auditorum; hic redit ad suum propositum. Intendit enim probare excellentiam sacerdotii Christi ad sacerdotium leviticum.

⁹ *In Heb.* 7:12 [349]. Secundo ex hac similitudine praefert sacerdotium Christi levitico,

¹⁰ *In Heb.* 7:11–19 [362]. Proprius autem effectus legis et sacerdotii est iustificare. Hoc autem non lex potuit facere.

¹¹ *In Heb.* 7:20–28 [367, 368]. Et ideo solus Christus est verus sacerdos, alii autem ministri eius.

the four qualities required in the priesthood of the Law. Priests are supposed to be holy, for as Leviticus says: 'They offer the burnt offerings of the Lord and the bread of their God, and therefore they shall be holy' (Lev. 21:6). Christ is holy in a perfect way, being wholly consecrated to God. Priests should be innocent, not sinning against their neighbour. Christ, being One Who did not sin, was completely innocent. The priest was to be unstained, without blemish. Of Christ, Aquinas tells us, it is said in a figure: 'It shall be a lamb without blemish' (Ex. 12:5). The fourth requirement of a priest of the Old Law was that he 'be separated from sinners'. Notably with Christ he was perfectly separated from sinners in so far as 'who' he was, human and divine, but this was not true 'in regard to His dealings with others, because 'He conversed with people' (Bar. 3:38) and this with a view to their conversion: 'Why does your master eat with sinners?' (Mt. 9:11). He is priest par excellence, and yet with us, seeking human salvation. As Aquinas understatingly puts it, 'he is a sufficiently competent priest'.¹²

It is in conversing with people, and eating with sinners that Christ's priesthood is made manifest. His priesthood is because of his humanity, and it derives its power from the fact that he is also the Son of God. It is exclusively this priesthood of the Word incarnate which can gift grace and justify. Aquinas wishes to show us, that not only is Christ's priesthood different from that of the Old Law, Christ is the only priest, Christ is the unique individual of his species, as it says in Hebrews 7:24 'he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever'. Aquinas' commentary on this passage is worth citing at length. Without parallel in the Gloss of Lombard it provides insight into Aquinas' perspective:

For as we notice in natural things, which are signs of spiritual things, incorruptible things are not multiplied under the same species; hence, there is but one sun: so in the spiritual things in the Old Testament, which was imperfect, the priests were multiplied. This was a sign that the priesthood was corruptible, because incorruptible things are not multiplied in the same species. But the priest who is Christ is immortal, for He remains forever as the eternal Word of the Father, from Whose eternity redounds an eternity to His body, because 'Christ rising from the dead, dies now no more' (Rom. 6:9). Therefore, because he continues forever, he holds his priesthood permanently. Therefore, Christ alone is the true priest, but others are His ministers: 'Let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ' (1 Cor. 4:1).¹³

¹² *In Heb.* 7:20–28 [375]. Ergo iste est sacerdos valde sufficiens.

¹³ *In Heb.* 7:20–28 [368]. Ostendit autem, quod iste sit verus sacerdos, quia alii prohibebantur morte permanere, quia omnes necessitatem habebant moriendi. Unde Aaron mortuo, successit Eleazar, sicut patet Num. XX, 26, et sic deinceps.] Sicut autem videmus

Christ's is the new priesthood, announced by the priesthood of Melchizidek. Christ is priest from his conception. His priesthood is one and unique.

Having established definitively the unique nature of the priesthood of Christ, Aquinas proceeds to describe the activities proper to a priest – to act as a mediator and the offering of sacrifice.

3. Mediator

The priests of the Old Law acted as mediators between God and humanity.

Aquinas goes to great length to establish the distinct nature of Christ's priesthood, and to distinguish it from the Aaronic priesthood. Commenting on Hebrews 7:20–28 he reminds his listener that a 'priest is a mediator between God and the people' and the role of the mediator is to 'bring God and the people to concord'.¹⁴ Then utilising his 'tool' of 'fittingness' he notes, 'It was fitting', that another priest should come, to make the new covenant, this priest is the true priest, the eternal priest, and because his priesthood is eternal, unlike the Levitical priesthood it is effective, it can produce an eternal effect for 'his efficacy lies in the fact that the cause is more potent than its effect' and thus 'Christ is able to save for all time'.¹⁵ The Covenant promised through Christ's priesthood is firm, stable and concerned with spiritual goods. The concept of Christ as mediator is linked very tightly with the fact that Christ, with his own blood, entered 'once for all into the Holy Place ... thus securing an eternal redemption' (Heb. 9:12). In Aquinas' commentary we read that 'a high priest is a mediator between God and the people; but Christ [*vero* – truly, assuredly, in

in naturalibus, quae sunt signa spiritualium, quod incorruptibilia non multiplicantur sub eadem specie, unde non est nisi unus sol: ita in spiritualibus in veteri testamento, quod fuit imperfectum, multiplicati fuerunt sacerdotes. Et hoc fuit signum quod illud sacerdotium erat corruptibile, quia incorruptibilia non multiplicantur eadem specie, ut dictum est, sed iste sacerdos, scilicet Christus, est immortalis. Manet enim in aeternum, sicut verbum patris aeternum, ex cuius aeternitate redundat etiam aeternitas in corpus eius, quia Christus resurgens ex mortuis iam non moritur, Rom. VI, v. 9. Et idcirco ex eo quod manet in aeternum, habet sacerdotium sempiternum. Et ideo solus Christus est verus sacerdos, alii autem ministri eius. I Cor. IV, 1: sic nos existimet homo, ut ministros Christi.

¹⁴ *In Heb. 7:20–28* [366]. Et ideo, quia sequester est mediator, sacerdos debet Deum et populum ad concordiam reducere.

¹⁵ *In Heb. 7:20–28* [370]. Efficacia eius est, quia causa est semper potentior suo effectu, et ideo causa temporalis non potest producere effectum aeternum. Sacerdotium vero Christi est aeternum, non autem leviticum, ut est probatum. Ergo Christus potest salvare in perpetuum.

truth] is a mediator' (*Pontifex enim mediator est inter deum et populu: christus vero mediator est*)... 'Christ assists the Father by interceding for us' and 'assists us with his aid.'¹⁶

Two roles pertain to the office of mediator – to judge, which sets Christ over the whole human race, and to intercede with God on our behalf, here Christ acts as an advocate. In a judge, Aquinas teaches, 'mercy is desired particularly by the guilty; but in an advocate fidelity. Now both of these qualities were exhibited by Christ during His Passion. Hence, in regard to the first, he says that by His Passion He was made like unto his brethren, that he might become merciful.'¹⁷

An interesting distinction is being made between the high priest acting as mediator, and Christ. And, just as all the priests of the Old Law should 'by the devotion of prayer reach God as one extreme, so by mercy and compassion he should reach humanity, the other extreme. Hence, he says: who can have compassion on the ignorant and wayward: 'Who is weak and I am not weak?' (2 Cor. 11:29). [246] This too shall be Christ's role. Christ, however, is an intermediary like no other, *christus vero mediator est*. His priesthood is unique, he is able to save for all time because 'He had divine power,' 'He goes by himself to God.'¹⁸ A mediator normally implies that one is distant from the other, so while in his human nature 'it befits Him to come to God, because in it He is distant from God' Christ is not distant from God in his divine nature.¹⁹ He is mediator par excellence, in his very being we are brought to God, we encounter God. In Christ the two 'extremes' are brought together. Christ entered the presence of God on our behalf just as the high priest of old entered the holy of holies 'but not in the same way, because the high priest could not see the holy of holies or any face on account of the smoke ascending from the censer; but Christ appears before the face of God: not that a bodily face is there, or a cloud, but clear vision.'²⁰

¹⁶ *In Heb.* 9:11–14 [436]. Et ideo ipse assistit patri ad interpellandum pro nobis, supra VII, 25; Rom. VIII, 34: Christus Iesus qui etiam interpellat pro nobis. Item assistens nobis ad auxiliandum.

¹⁷ *In Heb.* 2:14–18 [152].

¹⁸ *In Heb.* 7:20–28 [371]. Eum per semetipsum accedere ad Deum.

¹⁹ *In Heb.* 7:20–28 [371]. Scilicet humanam, secundum quam convenit ei accedere, quia in ipsa distat a Deo;

²⁰ *In Heb.* 9:23–28 [466]. Sed ista differenter, quia sacerdos, impediendo fumo qui ascendebat de thuribulo, non videbat sancta sanctorum, nec videbat aliquem vultum; sed Christus apparet vultui Dei, non quod sit ibi facies corporalis, nec aliqua nebula, sed cognitio manifesta.

4. Offering Sacrifice

It pertains to the office of priest that they should offer sacrifice, so Christ too, the mediator, is ordained to offer sacrifice. But Aquinas again makes a distinction for ‘there are two kinds of sacrifice, namely the corporal or temporal, for which Aaron was appointed; the other is spiritual, which consists in the confession of faith ... For this sacrifice Christ was appointed.’²¹ The priesthood that Christ is ordained to is the spiritual sacrifice, the confession of faith. Christ is to offer prayers and supplications for sins (255). Yet there is, if you like, a third type of sacrifice, unique to Christ. He is called to sacrifice his very self. In his commentary on Hebrews 8: 3, ‘For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer’ Aquinas notes that this ‘was a clean oblation, because His flesh had no stain of sin ... (Ex. 12) ... it was suitable, because it was fitting that a human should satisfy for humans ... (Heb. 9:14). It was also fit to be immolated, because His flesh was mortal: ‘God sending his own Son, in the likeness of sinful flesh and sin’ (Rom. 8:3).’²² In this way the sacrifice of Christ was perfect – his mortal life was given for all human life, his lack of sin could cleanse all sin.

According to Aquinas, it is as a heavenly and all powerful intercessor that Christ is presented to us as Priest in the epistle to the Hebrews. Christ is more excellent than the angels, and his priesthood is more excellent than that of Aaron. While Aaron offers sacrifice for his own sin as well as for that of the people, Christ is sinless. (248)

Christ’s blood speaks better than Abel’s blood, which cries for vengeance, while Christ’s blood cried for pardon: ‘Father, forgive them’ (Lk. 23:34); ‘He prayed for transgressors’ (Is. 55:12); ‘This is the blood of the new covenant, which shall be shed for you unto the remission of sins’ (Mt. 26:28). Or speaking better, i.e., making to speak better, because the blood of Abel makes us say that Abel was a pure and just man; (*hominem purum et iustum*) but the blood of Christ makes us say that Christ is true God making us just.²³

²¹ *In Heb.* 3:1–6 [157].

²² *In Heb.* 8:1–5 [384]. See ST III, q. 22, a.1 Fuit autem talis oblatio munda, quia caro eius nullam maculam peccati habuit. Ex. XII, v. 5: Erit agnus sine macula, masculus, anniculus. Item fuit congrua, quia congruum est, quod homo pro homine satisficiat. Infra IX, v. 14: obtulit semetipsum immaculatum Deo. Item apta ad immolandum, quia caro eius mortalis erat. Rom. VIII, 3: mittens Deus filium suum in similitudinem carnis peccati.

²³ Sed sanguis Christi ibi clamat veniam. Lc. XXIII, 34: pater, ignosce eis. Is. LIII, 12: pro transgressoribus oravit. Matth. XXVI, 28: hic est sanguis novi testamenti, qui pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum. Vel melius loquentem, id est melius loqui fa-

'Christ is true God making us just.' Once more it is this interplay of divine-human that is crucial. This priest who is himself the mediator, is also in his very self the sacrifice offered. His sacrifice was accepted, because

in the head of the book, i.e., in me, according to my divine nature, it is written of me, according to my human nature, I have come to do your will, i.e., this was foreordained that by Your grace I should do Your will, by offering Myself for the redemption of the human race.²⁴

As Aquinas notes 'it was the same as the one to whom it was offered: 'I and the Father are one' (Jn. 10:30). And it unites to God those for whom it is offered: 'That they may be one, as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us' (Jn. 17:21).²⁵ The anointed of God, those termed adopted sons, not only are destined for eternal life but for divinisation.

'Christ is true God making us just.' This sacrifice is not corporeal, it is indeed a bloody sacrifice of a human, but this human is God. This exterior sacrifice is the cause of human salvation. 'The New Testament has been confirmed by the death of Christ: 'this is my blood of the New Testament'.²⁶ The shedding of Christ's blood is unique, unrepeatable, definitive. God will not go back on his promise, God will not change his attitude toward people. This historical event has effect outside of time, for all time and for all peoples.

His priesthood, like his humanity is other. His sacrifice, his blood, is efficacious, it cleanses. Christ shed His blood, Aquinas notes that it is by the Holy Spirit he offered himself, 'by the love of God and neighbour He did this', and the Holy Spirit cleanses, thus we say that the Christ saves people from their sins (444). The blood of Christ 'cleanses the conscience inwardly, which is accomplished by faith: 'Purifying their hearts by faith' (Ac. 15:9), inasmuch as it makes one believe that all who adhere to Christ are cleansed by His blood.'

cientem, quia sanguis Abel facit nos loqui Abel esse hominem purum et iustum, sed sanguis Christi facit nos loqui Christum verum Deum iustificantem. *In Heb.* 12:18–24 [712].

²⁴ *In Heb.* 10:1–18 [490]. Ergo in capite libri, id est, in me, secundum divinam naturam, scriptum est de me secundum naturam humanam, *ut faciam voluntatem*, scilicet *tuam*, id est, hoc praeordinatum est, ut per gratiam tuam faciam voluntatem tuam, offerendo meipsum ad redemptionem humani generis.

²⁵ *In Heb.* 8:1–5 [384]. Item est idem ei cui offertur. Io. X, 30: ego et pater unum sumus. Item unit Deo illos pro quibus offertur. Io. XVII, 21: ut omnes unum sint, sicut tu, pater, in me, et ego in te, ut et ipsi in nobis unum sint.

²⁶ *In Heb.* 9:15–22 [451]. Et isto modo confirmatum est novum testamentum per mortem Christi. Matth. XXVI, 28: hic est sanguis meus novi testamenti, scilicet confirmator et dedicator.

(446) The blood of animals cleansed people in ‘order that they might come to the figurative ministry; but the blood of Christ to the spiritual service of God ... to serve the living God.’²⁷

The priesthood and sacrifices of the Old Testament are not discounted, but shown as preparing the way for the new.

5. Spiritual Sacrifice

Lest we concentrate too much on the blood sacrifice, and limit our attention to Christ’s death on a cross Gilles Berceville invites us to remember: ‘Cependant, ce fut d’abord dans l’offrande de sa vie sure terre que le Christ fut prêtre’ (He 8,3).²⁸ In the very living of his life he was priest, high priest. While ‘it was necessary that Christ have something to offer’ and so ‘He offered Himself’²⁹ supremely so in his passion, it was no less all his life which lead to this last moment.

Relying largely on the gloss of Lombard Aquinas notes:

According to a Gloss it is read in the following way: Then, namely, when you did prepare a body for me, i.e., in the conception, I said: Lo, I come, i.e., I propose to come, namely, to the passion: ‘This is he that came by water and blood, Jesus Christ’ (1 Jn. 5:6). Or it is better referred to His coming into the world, thus: Then, namely, when holocausts were not pleasing to you, I said: I come by the Incarnation: ‘I came forth from the Father and am come into the world’ (Jn. 16:28), and this in order to offer myself in the passion; therefore, he says, Lo.³⁰

In other words, according to the Gloss, it was Christ’s resolution, from the moment of conception, to go to his Passion.³¹ The Word became flesh in order to offer his humanity in the Passion. Christ is priest from his conception, his is a perfect sacrifice. He is perfectly holy, consecrated to God, one might say, from his conception; he is completely innocent, being without sin; unstained, a lamb

²⁷ *In Heb.* 9:11–14 [446].

²⁸ G. Berceville, *Le sacerdoce du Christ*, p. 149.

²⁹ *In Heb.* 8:1–5 [384].

³⁰ *Heb.* 10:1–18 [489]. *Secundum Glossam sic legitur: tunc, scilicet quando aptasti corpus mihi, scilicet in conceptione, dixi: ecce venio, id est, venire proposui, scilicet ad passionem. I Io. V, 6: hic est qui venit per aquam et sanguinem Iesus Christus. Vel melius est quod referatur ad adventum in mundum sic: tunc, scilicet quando holocausta non placuerunt tibi, dixi: venio per incarnationem. Io. XVI, 28: exivi a patre, et veni in mundum. Et hoc ut offerrem me ad passionem. Et ideo dicit: ecce.*

³¹ G. Berceville, *Le sacerdoce du Christ*, p. 149.

without blemish, and while not a sinner, he shares our human flesh, but leads a radically different life. As cited before: 'he is a sufficiently competent priest.'³² Christ alone is the true priest.³³

So, while on the one hand the Old Testament priesthood is being surpassed (not replaced), at the same time Christ's priesthood is linked to that of Melchizedek, in this way indicating that for Aquinas what is central to Christ's priesthood is that it is a priesthood ordained to 'spiritual sacrifice', to prayer, it offers bread and wine, not animals.³⁴ Christ, as priest, prayed for himself frequently. This point puzzled Aquinas and so he linked this act to Christ's human nature, for while the Son of God is supreme, 'his supremacy resides within his incarnate glorified state as well.'³⁵ It was 'as human (*homo*), he has been appointed heir of all things.'³⁶ It is as human, *homo*, he is priest. In the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas shows that it is the sacraments of the New Law which assure our incorporation into the body of Christ. (ST III, q. 62, a.1) This is a continuation of Christ's work, for 'his priesthood will continue forever.'³⁷ This priesthood of the New Testament, Christ's priesthood, is according to the likeness of Melchizedek, and 'consists of spiritual things: for it is founded upon a spiritual power, by which a perpetual life is produced in us ... it is according to the power of an indestructible life. [359]

6. The People of God

It is in his incarnated state that Christ is priest. Indeed, as Aquinas writes, the 'cause of the incarnation is God's care of people [*Causa autem incarnationis est memoria Dei de homine*].³⁸ It is because God is mindful for us that the Son of God became flesh, and 'deigned to suffer and undergo death He was made a little less than they [angels]; not that he had lost His fullness or was diminished in any way, but because He joined our smallness to Himself' (*sed parvitatem nostram sibi assumpsit*).³⁹ This remarkable phrase is completely Aquinas, it is not found in Lombard's gloss. It speaks of the mysterious assumption of our

³² *In Heb.* 7:20–28 [375].

³³ *In Heb.* 7:20–28 [368].

³⁴ *In Heb.* 5:1–7 [255].

³⁵ T. G. Weinandy, *The Supremacy of Christ*, p. 228.

³⁶ *In Heb.* 1: 1–2 [20].

³⁷ *In Heb.* 7: 20–28 [376].

³⁸ *In Heb.* 2:5–8 [107].

³⁹ *In Heb.* 2:7 [109].

humanity by God, of a willingness to take on our deepest misery. It is through God's natural Son, that we become 'sons' of God and are brought into our inheritance. We depend on Christ 'for the one sanctified depends on the sanctifier ... He is the author and sanctifier, we depend on him; but he depends on the Father, from whom He has power to sanctify.'⁴⁰ The priest's role as mediator is central – as mediator Christ is the author of salvation. Christ is our priest, 'a merciful and faithful high priest' (*fidelis pontifex*) (Heb. 2:17), a priest 'in the service of God' (Heb. 2: 17) and he can be this precisely because he has joined our smallness to Himself, and suffered (Heb. 2:18). Of course Christ had the quality of mercy from the beginning, but as Aquinas puts it, 'in suffering and being tempted He has a kinship to mercy.'⁴¹ In this sense we may say that he *became* merciful. God, as Aquinas always maintains, works through intermediate causes, 'as being closer to their effects, so He judges through a man in order that the judgment may be gentler. For we have not a high priest who cannot have compassion on our infirmities.'⁴² This idea of compassion features again and again. A little later he writes that 'God willed that man have someone like himself to whom he might run.'⁴³

7. The Meaning for Us

So, what is the meaning of all this, the meaning for us, for the Church? Firstly, we are reminded again that this very 'taking hold of human nature onto the unity of the person of the Son of God exalts our nature beyond measure.'⁴⁴ Christ is our high priest, and so we are made holy by means of the sacraments. The sacraments of the New Alliance, of the New Covenant, are the memorial of the priestly consummation of our high priest, the making present, in the 'now' of his intercession and a foretaste of the eternal glorification. All this because,

⁴⁰ *In Heb* 2:9–13 [130]. Sanctificatus enim dependet a sanctificato, Christus autem est sanctificans. *Infra XIII*, 12: Iesus ut sanctificaret per suum sanguinem, et cetera. Bene ergo dictum est, quod quia est actor et sanctificator, dependemus ab ipso, ipse vero a patre, a quo habet quod sanctificet,

⁴¹ *In Heb.* 2:14–18 [154]. ideo factus est misericors et fidelis, quia in eo quod passus et tentatus est, habet quamdam convenientiam ad hoc quod misereatur.

⁴² *In Heb.* 4:9–13 [232]. Sicut enim Deus per causas medias, tamquam propinquiores effectibus, operatur, ita iudicat per hominem Christum, homines, ut sit suavius iudicium. Non enim habemus pontificem, qui non possit compati,

⁴³ *In Heb.* 5:1–7 [241]. Voluit autem Deus, ut homo habeat similem sui, ad quem currat. *In Heb.* 5:1–7 [241].

⁴⁴ *In Heb* 2:14–18 [148].

as Hebrews says, 'we share in a heavenly call'. Aquinas explains that our vocation, our heavenly call,

can be understood to be heavenly in two ways: by reason of its end or by reason of its source. By reason of the end, because they are not called to a earthly reward as in the Old Testament, but to a heavenly kingdom ... By reason of its source, because it is not due to our merits but to grace.⁴⁵

This 'heavenly call' brings to mind the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the 'universal call to holiness' (Lumen Gentium chapt.5). The path to this holiness is sacramental – because of Christ, because Christ came, because of the New Testament, 'we are partakers of grace, first, by accepting the faith...secondly, by the sacraments of faith: 'As many of you as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ' (Gal. 3:27); thirdly, by partaking of the body of Christ: 'The bread which we break, is it not the partaking of the body of Christ' (1 Cor. 10:16)?'⁴⁶ [188] Indeed,

Just as the priest (OT) entered into the Holy of Holies through the veil, so we, if we should enter the holy of glory, must enter through Christ's flesh, which was a veil of his divinity: 'Verily, you are a hidden God' (Is.45: 14). For faith in the godhead is not enough without faith in the incarnation ... Or, through the veil, i.e., through His flesh given to us under the veil of the appearance of bread in the sacrament. He is not offered to us under His own form because of dread and to obtain the merits of faith.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *In Heb.* 3:1–6 [156]. Tertio describit eos ex vocatione, cum dicit vocationis caelestis participes. Ista autem vocatio dupliciter potest intelligi caelestis esse. [fragmentum interpolatum ex reportatione altera a Remigio Nanni:] Vel ratione finis, vel ratione principii. Ratione quidem finis, quia vocati sunt non ad terrena, sicut in veteri testamento, sed] vocati sunt ad caelestia regna. I Thess. II, v. 12: vocavit nos ad suum regnum et gloriam. [fragmentum interpolatum ex reportatione altera a Remigio Nanni:] I Petr. II, 9: Qui de tenebris vocavit in admirabile lumen suum. Ratione vero principii, quia non est ex meritis nostris,] nec ex humana adinventione, sed sola caelesti gratia.

⁴⁶ *In Heb.* 3:12–19 [188].

⁴⁷ *In Heb.* 10:19–25 [502]. Sicut enim sacerdos per velum intrabat in sancta sanctorum, ita si volumus intrare sancta gloriae, oportet intrare per carnem Christi, qui fuit velamen deitatis. Is. XLV, 15: vere tu es Deus absconditus. Non enim sufficit fides de deitate, si non adsit fides de incarnatione. Io. XIV, 1: creditis in Deum, et in me credite. Vel per velamen, id est, per carnem suam datam nobis sub velamento speciei panis in sacramento. Non enim proponitur nobis sub specie propria propter horrorem, et propter meritum fidei.

Another major contribution of Vatican II theology to Church life is the recognition of the priesthood of all the believers, at the time this was popularly thought to have been a 'Protestant' belief until recognised by the Latin Church in the 1960's. *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, spoke eloquently of the priesthood of the faithful, of all believers:

Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among people, made the new people "a kingdom and priests to God the Father". The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light. Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. [LG 10]

These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. [LG 31]

This is a teaching which has been applauded for its deep significance and the influence it might have on Church. However it was not new. Aquinas, in line with the thought of many of the Fathers of the Church,⁴⁸ related the anointing of priests in the Old Testament and the anointing of Christ in the New with the anointing of those who follow Christ:

to show Christ's excellence, he says that He was anointed with the oil of gladness. For He is a king: 'Behold the king shall reign in justice' (Is. 32:1); 'For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, and he shall save us' (Is. 33:32). He is also a priest: 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedech' (Ps. 109:4). He was also a prophet: 'The Lord, your God, will raise up to you a prophet of your nation and of your brethren like unto me' (Dt. 18:15). It also befits Him to be anointed with the oil of holiness and gladness: for the sacraments, which are vessels of grace, were instituted by Him: 'And they shall hang upon him all the glory of his father's house, diverse kind of vessels' (Is. 22:24). This anointing also befits Christians, for they are kings and priests: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood' (1 Pt. 2:9); 'You have made us a kingdom and priests for our God' (Rev. 3:10). Furthermore, He has the Holy Spirit, Who is the spirit of prophecy: 'I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy' (Jl 2:28). Therefore, all are anointed with an invisible anointing: 'Now he that has confirmed us

⁴⁸ L. Ryan, *Patristic Teaching on the Priesthood*, p. 25 –51.

with you in Christ and that has anointed us is God: who has also sealed us and given the pledge of the Spirit in our hearts' (2 Cor. 1:21); 'But you have the unction from the Holy One and know all things' (1 Jn. 2:20).⁴⁹

This is a remarkable passage, particularly when one takes account the fact that it was written in the thirteenth century. It makes of all the baptised a priestly people, all sharing in the priesthood of Christ. All Christians are kings and priests, and all are sealed with the Holy Spirit. This anointing is a gift, which comes through our High Priest, Christ. Christ, the anointed one, shares his anointing with his followers: 'He has it principally and first, but we and others have it from Him: 'Like the precious ointment on the head that ran down upon the beard, the beard of Aaron' (Ps. 132:2).⁵⁰ Likewise we share in his holiness, for while 'others are called holy, but He is the Holy of holies; for He is the root of all holiness.'⁵¹ Likewise, this anointing is an anointing with the 'oil of gladness, because spiritual gladness proceeds from that anointing: 'The kingdom of God on not meat and drink, but justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17); 'The fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, peace...' (Gal. 5:22).⁵²

Thus in conclusion I would like to summarise by emphasise the two chief points being made in this paper on Thomas' commentary on Hebrews. Firstly, Aquinas had an extraordinary depth of understanding of the inclusion of all people in the priesthood of Christ, an understanding we think of today as the priesthood of all the faithful; secondly, and most importantly, Aquinas presents Christ's priesthood, and thereby, the priesthood of all the faithful as a supreme

⁴⁹ Ideo ad ostendendum excellentiam Christi, dicit eum unctum oleo exultationis. Ipse enim est rex. Is. XXXII, 1: ecce in iustitia regnabit rex. Et XXXV: dominus enim iudex noster, dominus legifer noster, dominus rex noster, ipse veniet et salvabit nos. Est etiam sacerdos. Ps. CIX, 4: tu es sacerdos in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisedech. Fuit etiam propheta. Deut. c. XVIII, 15: prophetam de gente tua et de fratribus tuis sicut me suscitabit tibi dominus. Et convenit sibi ungi oleo sanctificationis et exultationis. Ab ipso autem sunt sacramenta, quae sunt vasa gratiae. Is. XXII, 24: suspendam super eum omnem gloriam domus patris eius vasorum diversa genera, et cetera. Convenit etiam ista unctio Christianis. Sunt enim reges et sacerdotes. I Petr. II, 9: vos estis genus electum, regale sacerdotium. Apoc. c. V, 10: fecisti nos Deo nostro regnum et sacerdotes. Item habet spiritum sanctum, qui est prophetiae spiritus. Ioel II, 28: effundam de spiritu meo super omnem carnem, et cetera. Et ideo omnes uncti sunt, invisibili unctione. II Cor. I, 21: qui autem confirmat nos vobiscum in Christo, et qui unxit nos Deus, et qui signavit nos, et dedit, et cetera. I Io. II, 20: vos unctionem habetis a sancto, et nostis omnia. *In Heb* 1:8,9 [64].

⁵⁰ *In Heb*.1: 8,9 [65] *Ista, scilicet quia ipse habet eam principaliter et primo, nos autem et alii ab ipso effusam. Ps. CXXVII: sicut unguentum in capite, et cetera.*

⁵¹ *In Heb*.1: 8,9 [65].

⁵² *In Heb*.1: 8,9 [65].

gift of the Holy Spirit, that enriches our humanity with a surpassing excellence ... in other words his concept of our salvation is a concept of the divinisation of our humanity by the gift of the Spirit.

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