

The Priesthood – A Catholic Response

(A Catholic response to Protestant objections)

The Protestant objection to human intercession is based largely on a single line of Scripture that says, “*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...*” (1 Tim. 2:5). However, we also read in the Bible that we are called upon to intercede in prayer for one another (1 Cor. 3:9, 1 Tim. 2:1-3, Eph 6:18, James 5:16, 1 John 5:16). Whereas, Jesus *is* our only mediator because only *his* blood is the perfect sacrifice before the Father for our sins, our intercession for one another is commanded in the Scriptures.

Objectors present Heb. 7:22-25 as proof for the end of the necessity for an earthly priesthood: “*This makes Jesus the surety of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.*”

In an apparent contradiction of the text in Hebrews, Peter states: “*like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people . . .*” (1 Peter 2:5-9). However, Peter and Paul aren’t contradicting each other - but are making complimentary points. Peter is making the point that we are all in a sense, part of a royal priesthood because we all make spiritual sacrifice. The very definition of a priest is one who makes sacrifices on behalf of others. Whereas Paul is speaking of Christ’s priesthood being superior to man’s because it is only by his sacrifice that we are saved.

This same kind of semantic distinction can be found in (Matt. 23:9). Protestants use this verse to object to the fact that Catholics refer to our priests as, “*Father*”. They point out that in this verse, Jesus tells the crowd not to refer to anybody on earth as “*Father*” because we have only one Father in heaven. What these objectors don’t mention is that Jesus is using hyperbole (*exaggeration*) to make a point and does so many times in Scripture. In the verse that precedes this (Matt: 23:8), Jesus admonishes us not to refer to others as “*Teachers*”. Is Jesus telling us that there are no fathers or teachers on earth? That is not what he is saying at all. He is telling us that no man is to be considered father *above* our Father in heaven and no person is to be considered teacher *above* our Teacher in heaven.

Acts 1:15-26 *clearly* shows the prophetic fulfillment of Apostolic succession (Psalm 109) when the 11 remaining Apostles choose another to take the place of Judas. In Acts 15:24, the Apostles make it abundantly clear that only those teachers who are sent out by them (*the Church*) should be obeyed.

The Rock and the Priesthood

Matt. 16:15-19 seems to be a bone of contention with many Protestants. In it, Jesus calls Peter the “*Rock*” upon which he will build his Church. They point out that the Greek word *Petros* means “*small stone*” and *Petra* means “*large mass of rock*” or “*large boulder*”. The Greek text states, “*You are Petros (Peter) and on this Petra (Jesus), I will build my church.*” They say that if Jesus was speaking about Peter, he would have used

Petra in both instances. That would make sense – *if Peter was a woman*. Matthew would not have referred to Peter using the feminine noun, *Petra*. *Petra* was therefore transliterated and rendered as the masculine *Petros*.

However, to understand the Greek used here – we must go back to the Aramaic language which Jesus and the Apostles spoke. Jesus actually said to Peter, “*You are **Kepha** and on this **Kepha**, I will build my church.*” We know this because Peter is referred to in some of Paul’s letters as *Kephas* or *Cephas*, (which is the Greek transliteration of *Kepha* or “*massive rock*”).

When read in context, we see that Jesus is exalting Peter, *not* rebuking him. The Protestant rendering of this text goes something like this:

A blessing - “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.*”

An insult - *And so I say to you, you are a **small worthless pebble**, and upon this **giant mass of rock** I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.*

A promise and exaltation - *I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*”

Jesus wouldn’t have *blessed* Peter in verse **17**, only to *insult* him in verse **18**, then, *exalt* him with the blessing of Eliakim (**Isaiah 22:20-22**) in verse **19**. Given the context of these verses, the Protestant position falls to pieces. A deeper examination of these verses shows this blessing to be ongoing or successive in nature.

In, ***The Priesthood Is Both Ministerial and Universal***, (*This Rock Magazine*), former Protestant minister-turned-Catholic Apologist Tim Staples makes the following observation:

Matthew 16:18-19: “*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*”

Catholics are generally well-acquainted with this text and its meaning with regard to papal infallibility. Here Jesus promises Peter the power to proclaim the gospel on earth with the infallible authority of heaven to back him up. But fewer consider its implications in relation to the forgiveness of sins (see CCC 553). In both cases, we are talking about priestly functions; that is, Peter and his successors are here promised the power to be mediators of both the message of God’s truth and the healing communicated through God’s forgiveness.

The text itself is clear in that it uses a very rare Greek construction that profoundly brings out the sacerdotal nature of the Petrine office. It uses the future perfect periphrastic tense, which employs the future tense of the verb “*to be*” along with the perfect participle. According to Dr. James Allen Hewett:

This tense . . . occurs rarely in the [Greek New Testament], but the student will do well to be familiar with it. Consider **Matthew 16:19** (two examples) and **18:18** (two examples): “*Whatever you bind on the earth will have been bound [estai dedemenon] in heaven and whatever you loose on the earth will have been loosed [estai lelumenon] in heaven.*” The construction declares that a completed heavenly action and its continuing results will come to exist on earth upon the completion of a future earthly event. (**New Testament Greek: A Beginning and Intermediate Grammar, 152**)

To put it simply: God’s power being released “*from heaven*” is contingent upon a future event of Peter and his successors acting on earth. That, in a nutshell, could be a dictionary definition of **priest**.

Two chapters later, Jesus tells the Apostles that the Church has final authority in matters of forgiveness and reconciliation (**Matt. 18:15-17**). In the very next verse, he repeats what he told Peter in **Matt. 16:19** when he says, “*Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*” (**Matt. 18:18**).

Finally, in **John 20:21-23**, we read the account of what took place in the upper room on the day of the Lord’s Resurrection. *Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

The fact that Jesus breathed on them when he gave them this power is very significant because, in all of Scripture, there are only **two** places where God breathes on man. The first is when he breathed life into Adam (**Gen 2:7**). The second place is here in John’s Gospel, where he gives the Apostles the power to forgive sins or hold them bound.

In all three cases, Jesus was not speaking to the crowds in general but to his Apostles and disciples. Contrary to Protestant claims that we **all** have this power, the general hermeneutic rule is that when Jesus spoke to the crowds, he was speaking to the whole of mankind. When he addressed the Apostles, he was more specific.

In 2 Cor. 2:10, Paul tells speaks of the ministerial priesthood and the ministry of Reconciliation when he writes: “*Whomever you forgive anything, so do I. For indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven for you in the presence of Christ.*”

Three chapters later he further illustrates this priestly power in **2 Cor. 5:18-20**: “*And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*”

James 5:14-15 “*If anyone is sick, let him call on the **elders (presbuteros/priests)** of the Church. They shall pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. **The***

prayer said in faith will save the sick person; the Lord will raise him up and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.”

In the Old Testament, there were **three** levels of Priests: Aaron, the High Priest, the Levitical Priesthood, and the rest of the people were a general priesthood of believers.

In the New Testament, there are *also* three levels of Priests: Jesus, our High Priest (**1 Tim. 2:5, Heb. 7:22-25**), the Ministerial/Levitical Priests (**James 5:14-15**) and the general priesthood of all Christians (**1 Peter 2:5-9**).

Just as with all New Testament fulfillments, the fulfillment is *always* more glorious than the Old Testament type.

Finally, in the Epistle of Jude, we read the warning about those who would usurp Church Authority by assuming the ministerial priesthood without the Church’s consent (**Jude 1:11**). In this passage he compares them to the rebellion of Korah and their subsequent punishment (**Numbers 16:1-35; 31:16**).

Early Church Teachings on Confession

It is a common practice among those who disagree with the Catholic Church’s dogmatic positions to dismiss the testimonies of the Early Church Fathers on various subjects. If they agree with the Fathers, they will have to admit that the Church is the same Body of Christ established by Jesus himself. A rudimentary study of the Early Church illustrates *clearly* their adherence to belief in doctrinal matters such as the Real Presence in the Eucharist, Confession, the Mass, and priestly Apostolic succession:

Clement of Rome

Our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, *they appointed those who have already been mentioned, and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry* (*Letter to the Corinthians 44:1 [A.D. 95]*).

Ignatius of Antioch

You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as you would the Apostles. Reverence the deacons as you would the command of God. Let no one do anything of concern to the Church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8:1 [A.D. 110]*).

Irenaeus

It is possible, then, for everyone in every Church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the Apostles which has been made known throughout the whole world. *And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the Apostles, and their successors to our own times:* men who neither knew nor taught anything like these heretics rave about. For if the Apostles had known hidden mysteries which they taught to the elite secretly and apart from the rest, they would have

handed them down especially to those very ones to whom they were committing the self-same Churches. *For surely they wished all those and their successors to be perfect and without reproach, to whom they handed on their authority* (*Against Heresies 3:3:1 [A.D. 180-199]*).

It is necessary to obey those who are the presbyters in the Church, those who, as we have shown, have succession from the Apostles; those who have received, with the succession of the episcopate, the sure charism of truth according to the good pleasure of the Father. But the rest, who have no part in the primitive succession and assemble wheresoever they will, must be held in suspicion (ibid 4:26:2).

Tertullian

Moreover, if there be any [heresies] bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, so that they might seem to have been handed down by the Apostles because they were from the time of the Apostles, we can say to them: *let them show the origin of their Churches, let them unroll the order of their bishops, running down in succession from the beginning, so that their first bishop shall have for author and predecessor some one of the Apostles or of the apostolic men who continued steadfast with the Apostles. For this is the way in which the apostolic Churches transmit their lists: like the Church of the Smyrnaeans, which records that Polycarp was placed there by John; like the Church of the Romans where Clement was ordained by Peter. In just this same way the other Churches display those whom they have as sprouts from the apostolic seed, having been established in the episcopate by the Apostles.* Let the heretics invent something like it. After their blasphemies, what could be unlawful for them? But even if they should contrive it, they will accomplish nothing; for their doctrine itself, when compared with that of the Apostles, will show by its own diversity and contrariety that it has for its author neither an Apostle nor an apostolic man. The Apostles would not have differed among themselves in teaching, nor would an apostolic man have taught contrary to the Apostles, unless those who were taught by the Apostles then preached otherwise.

Therefore, they will be challenged to meet this test even by those Churches which are of much later date – for they are being established daily – and whose founder is not from among the Apostles nor from among the apostolic men; for those which agree in the same faith are reckoned as apostolic on account of the blood ties in their doctrine. Then let all heresies prove how they regard themselves as apostolic, when they are challenged by our Churches to meet either test. But in fact they are not apostolic, nor can they prove themselves to be what they are not. Neither are they received in peace and communion by the Churches which are in any way apostolic, since on account of their diverse belief they are in no way apostolic (*The Demurrer Against the Heretics 32:1 [A.D. 200]*).

Clement of Alexandria

After the death of the tyrant, the [Apostle John] came back again to Ephesus from the Island of Patmos; and, upon being invited, he went even to the neighboring cities of the pagans, here *to appoint bishops*, there to set in order whole Churches, *and there to ordain to the clerical estate such as were designated by the Spirit* (*Who is the Rich Man that is Saved? 42:2 [inter 190-210 A.D.]*).

Firmilion of Caesarea

But what is his error, and *how great his blindness, who says that the remission of sins can be given in the synagogues of the heretics, and who does not remain on the foundation of the one Church which was founded upon the rock by Christ* can be learned from this, which Christ said to Peter alone: “Whatever things you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth, they shall be loosed in heaven;” and by this, again in the gospel, when Christ breathed upon the Apostles alone, saying to them; “Receive the Holy Spirit: if you forgive any man his sins, they shall be forgiven; and if you retain any mans sins, they shall be retained.” Therefore, *the power of forgiving sins was given to the Apostles and to the Churches which these men, sent by Christ, established; and to the bishops who succeeded them by being ordained in their place* (Letter to Cyprian 75:16 [A.D. 255-256]).