

UNIT SEVENTEEN

JESUS THE PRIEST

1 Jesus as Priest Reveals Our Proper Activity

We have learned that Jesus is a prophet, priest, and king. By acting as a prophet, priest, and king, Jesus revealed to us who we are and how we should act. We have already examined the prophetic office of Jesus. We studied some of the important words and actions of Jesus that reveal our identity as images of God. We have also examined the kingly office of Jesus and Jesus' revelation to us of one aspect of our proper activity: to exercise proper dominion over creation, whether that be with regard to our bodies or to the rest of earthly creation.

In this unit we will examine Jesus' priestly office. We will study some of the important words and actions of Jesus that reveal another aspect of our proper activity: to love God in a self-sacrificing way.

By studying about Jesus' prophetic and kingly work, we covered some of the important aspects of Jesus' life on earth. Now, we turn to the end of His life on earth, the time of His suffering and death, in order to examine Jesus' priestly office in detail.

As a priest, Jesus loved, and He offered sacrifices to His Father to show His love for His Father and for us. The greatest sacrifice of love offered by anyone to God is Jesus' sacrifice of love on the Cross. This sacrifice was such a powerful and perfect act of love that it returned the love shown by God the Father and restored the friendship between God and mankind—a friendship that had been lost by Adam and Eve in the beginning.

The Preface for the feast of Christ the King refers to the priesthood of Jesus: "As priest he [Jesus] offered his life on the altar of the cross and redeemed the human race by this one perfect sacrifice of peace" (*The Sacramentary*).

After nearly three years of following Jesus and being privileged to experience His words and actions, the Apostles were alone. Jesus' death on the Cross left the Apostles feeling lost and confused because of the close, personal bond they had formed with Him.

On the next page is a story about the parting of a teacher from her students. It gives us some idea of what the Apostles might have experienced with the death of Jesus.

VOCABULARY

priest: someone who offers sacrifices to God to show love for God and others.

GOODBYE, MRS. LEWIS

Mrs. Lewis was a seventh-grade teacher at Holy Trinity Grade School. She had taught language arts in the school for thirty years. She was admired by her students and their parents, some of whom had also been in her class at one time.

A day did not pass without Mrs. Lewis greeting her students with a poem or a line from some great piece of literature. When Mrs. Lewis taught, she made the characters of a story come alive, and she made the words of a poem mean so much more than letters printed on a page.

Because Mrs. Lewis was so well liked by everyone, the whole school community was saddened and upset when she decided to retire from teaching. She certainly deserved her retirement, but her presence in the classroom would be greatly missed.

Mrs. Lewis' students didn't understand why she wanted to leave teaching. It wasn't because she couldn't teach. She was the best! Her students couldn't see how her retirement would help her or them. The students refused to accept the fact that she would be leaving them, and they even tried to deny that she would. Still, they paid very close attention to her and enjoyed their final days in her class.

On the last day of class, Mrs. Lewis said her goodbyes. She told the students that they were now able to share with others what they had learned in her classroom. She reminded them that the knowledge they had gained would not leave them but would serve them well throughout their lives.

We have seen that, with the announcement of her retirement, Mrs. Lewis' students were at first lost and confused. They even tried to deny that Mrs. Lewis was retiring. The students felt this way because of the close, personal bond they had formed with their teacher.

We might compare the response of Mrs. Lewis' students to the announcement of her retirement with the response of the Apostles when Jesus announced to them that He would be leaving them.

2 The Final Meal with Jesus

After having been warned that Jesus was to suffer and die, the Apostles spent one last night with Him, celebrating a holy meal. It was the first Holy Thursday, and the meal was the Last Supper. The Last Supper was the beginning of Jesus' most important priestly act, His suffering and death on the Cross.

At the Last Supper Jesus gave to the Church, through the Apostles, two of the seven sacraments: the Holy Eucharist and Holy Orders.

The Last Supper was the first Mass. It was a sacred meal. At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to His Apostles. He told them to eat it, because it was His Body. Then Jesus took a cup filled with wine and gave it to His Apostles. He told them to drink it, because it was the cup of His Blood.

By changing the bread and wine into His Body and Blood, Jesus celebrated the first Mass with His Apostles. He made present for them, under the appearances of bread and wine, the one sacrifice of love that He was to offer to His Father, in the Holy Spirit, the very next day on the first Good Friday. At the Last Supper, He made present for them, without shedding His Blood, His sacrifice of love on the Cross. Not only was the Last Supper a sacred meal, it was also a holy sacrifice. As a holy sacrifice, the Last Supper revealed Jesus' priesthood.

At the Last Supper, then, Jesus gave the Church the Eucharist: His Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine. Pope John Paul II has written: "For by Christ's will there is in this Sacrament [the Eucharist] a continual renewing of the mystery of the Sacrifice of himself that Christ offered to the Father on the altar of the Cross, a Sacrifice that the Father accepted" (*The Redeemer of Man*, no. 20).

At the Last Supper Jesus also gave the Church, through the Apostles, another sacrament, Holy Orders. At the Last Supper Jesus made the Apostles the first priests. He told them to repeat in His memory what he had done. In other words, the Apostles and all priests after them were to

celebrate the Mass. They were to act in the person of Jesus Christ the Priest and re-present, under the appearances of bread and wine, Jesus' sacrifice of love on the Cross.

The Mass is offered for the people of God, for the Church. As Pope John Paul II wrote to priests on Holy Thursday 1979, the sacrament of Holy Orders reminds the faithful "that they are the People of God and enables them 'to offer spiritual sacrifices', through which Christ himself makes us an everlasting gift to the Father. This takes place, above all, when the priest 'by the sacred power that he has . . . in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*) effects the Eucharistic Sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people' " (*Letter to All Priests*, no. 4).

