TO BECOME LIKE HIS BROTHERS IN EVERY WAY: PRIESTLY SOLIDARITY IN ALBERT VANHOYE*

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Introduction

It appears necessary to address certain preliminary issues before engaging in the actual discussion of Vanhoye's priestly solidarity theme. First, although Vanhoye employs the term *solidarity* copiously throughout his writings on the priesthood, he does not explicitly define it enough in such a way as to create a systematic oeuvre. This, however, does not diminish the significance of the meaning of solidarity, which he thoughtfully sought to render as a key interpretative concept for the appreciation of the novelty of Christ's priesthood as well as for an appraisal of the theology of the priesthood. The term *solidarity* in the writings of Vanhoye appeared for the first time in *Our Priest is Christ* (1977), where it occurred twenty-seven (27) times. Subsequently, it appeared in *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest* (1986) forty-five (45) times; in *Christ Our High Priest* (2010) thirty-three (33) times; in the article *La nouveauté du sacerdoce du Christ* (2010)[1] twelve (12) times; in *A*

*This paper is taken from Chapter 3 of the thesis entitled, "To Become Like His Brothers in Every Way: The Theme of Solidarity in Albert Vanhoye's Theology of the Priesthood."

1. This article has not yet been officially translated into English. For references, this study will rely on the unpublished loose translation provided by the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission of Manila. See "The Innovation of Christ's Priesthood," in *The Clergy and Consecrated Persons* (Manila City, 2018).

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Different Priest: The Letter to the Hebrews (2011) fifty-five (55) times; and in *A Perfect Priest* (2018) seventy-five (75) times. The overwhelming frequency of solidarity in his writings cannot be dismissed as mere indiscrimination on the part of Vanhoye. Instead, the prominent appearance of the term in his writings illustrates the crucial pursuit to express a profound reality, i.e., the novelty of the priesthood of Christ. The attempt to describe the meaning of priestly solidarity will be the subject of this study.

Second, it is rather odd that a biblical exegete like Vanhoye employs a term that does not appear in the scriptures and even applies it as a key concept for Christ's priesthood and the theology of the priesthood. It is challenging to ascertain whether Vanhoye's application of the concept of solidarity aligns precisely with the principle of solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching or introduces a totally new description thereof. However, as will be discussed in the proceeding sections, it is apparent that his interpretation is full of scriptural and doctrinal influences. As a biblical exegete, it can be supposed that his understanding of solidarity and its analogous scriptural concepts significantly shaped his interpretation. Thus, the scriptural correspondence of the concept of solidarity must be considered

Solidarity and the Scriptures

Attention is now given to the scriptural foundations of solidarity. Although the scriptures do not explicitly mention solidarity, parallel ideas that resonate with its meaning and content can be discerned. And it is the task of this present section to extract seed ideas of solidarity embedded in the scriptures.

Old Testament

Sociologically considered, solidarity is a disposition that readily assumes mutual responsibility with the other, the willingness to provide and share resources with the other, and the resolve to share in the common sentiment and fate with the other.[2] This triggers a point of connection between solidarity and the divine characteristics of *hesed* (merciful loving-kindness, covenantal faithfulness) and *hœnan* (gracious inclination, kind-favor).[3] This is expressed in the episode of the story of Exodus which starts with the call of Moses. The fact that Yahweh missioned Moses to lead the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt shows that Yahweh sympathized with the plight of the Israelites. It, thus, suggests an act of solidarity on Yahweh's part. Yahweh assumed the responsibility for the liberation of the Israelites and shared in their suffering fittingly parallels the concept of solidarity thus described above. In similar lines, Schillebeeckx interprets this gracious and kind-favor of Yahweh to Israelites as attesting to the presence of the concept of solidarity in the scriptures. "*Ḥœnan* stresses God's gracious approach, in which the emphasis lies on God's concern for men, above all on *his care for and solidarity* with the weaker and the oppressed, with those in need."[4] He even reads verse 16 of Exodus 3—"I am concerned with you"—as ascribing a new divine appellation, rendering it thus as, "God's name is *solidarity* with the people."[5]

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2. S. Stjernø, *Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 27.

3. Carolyn Wilson, "*Hesed*: An Old Testament Basis for Solidarity in Catholic Social Thought," *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 42, no. 2 (2018): 22.

4. Edward *Schillebeeckx, Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 89. Italics mine.

5. Ibid, 2. Italics mine.

Prompted with the divine characteristics of *hesed* and *hœnan*, Moses, too, displays the kind of solidarity that Yahweh already expressed. Moses identifies himself with the Israelites as he renounced his royal-like status in the household of the Pharoah and shared with them their plight.[6] He represents the Israelites before Yahweh and at times, it is he who pleads with Yahweh to relent His anger toward them. Not only does Moses demonstrate his solidarity with the Israelites by pleading on their behalf before Yahweh, but he also smashes the tablets of the commandments as he stands in solidarity with Yahweh who is enraged by their idolatry.

Jesus and the New Testament

There are a number of other references in the Old Testament that propose an act of solidarity with the poor and strangers: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God," (Lev. 23:22). "Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year and store it within your towns... aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake" (Deut. 14: 28-29). "The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow" (Ps. 146: 9).

While these select passages in the Old Testament anticipate the highly developed concept of solidarity—a kind of solidarity with even those who do not belong to the same kinship and nationality—the social dynamics of the Old Testament solidarity remained heavily characterized by exclusivism and cliquishness. Solidarity at this stage is perceived with

6. Duncan MacLaren, "Solidarity – Beyond the Clichés: A Theological Perspective," *New Blackfriars* 72 (Nov. 1991): 430.

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respect to loyalty to kinsfolk, familial circle, local ethnicity, and nationality, but not extended to humanity as a whole, i.e., group solidarity.[7] "Only your kinsperson is to be treated as another 'self.' To regard some as sisters and brothers always involves enmity towards others."[8] Solidarity will be given a new value by Jesus—radical and revolutionary at that—because the expansion of solidarity now includes even one's enemies.

The radicality of solidarity that Jesus advances is intriguingly illustrated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37). But just before Jesus acknowledges the dignity of the Samaritan and qualifies the Samaritan as a good neighbor, an episode in the previous chapter (9:52-53) portrays an unfavorable image of a Samaritan as a hostile neighbor to Jesus and his apostles, as they were refused entry into a Samaritan village. The parable serves as a challenge to reassess the qualifications of who to consider a good neighbor. It enigmatically radicalizes the terms of solidarity as it stretches the inclusion of others, i.e., even one's enemies, into the circle of one's *neighbor*. The placement of the hostile encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan before the Parable of the Good Samaritan is an illustration of a dynamic movement from *injuring exclusion* to *saving and healing solidarity*.[9]

God's Incarnation in Jesus is the basis of the orientation of the Christian vision of solidarity. By becoming human, Jesus expressed God's solidarity with humanity. There is no longer any aspect of humanity, except proclivity to sin, that is not embraced by God. This solidarity is consistently expressed in Jesus' teaching and personal example. Jesus' solidarity is

7. MacLaren, "Solidarity – Beyond the Clichés," 460.

8. Albert Nolan, O.P., *Jesus Before Christianity, 25th Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 75.

9. John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Probing the Authenticity of the Parables,* vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 207.

specified in terms of solidarity with the poor as he became poor himself; with the excluded, as he endured the exclusion of the religious and political leaders of his time; with the suffering humanity, as he embraced the scandal of death on the cross; and with the undying hope of humanity, as he rose again from death.

This solidarity of Jesus with humanity is the catalyst for Vanhoye to pursue a perspectival reflection on the newness of Jesus' priesthood, i.e., his priestly solidarity. But while it is ready right away to consider what this newness of Jesus' priesthood consists in, it is deemed primarily necessary to give an account of what this newness is being contrasted with. Thus, a word on the ethos of the Old Testament priesthood is proper.

Solidarity in the Old Testament Priesthood

The office of the priesthood in the Old Testament was exclusively exercised by the Levitical tribe. The claim that the priesthood was the exclusive domain of the Levites was a subject of critique in modern biblical exegesis. Was it a priestly tribe from the very beginning of its tribal formation or was it a secular tribe initially? Old Testament scholar Aelred Cody forwards the position that the Levitical tribe was a secular tribe, on equal footing with other Israelite tribes, on account that an entire tribe could not possibly assume priestly functions.[10] It was only at a later developed stage of Israel that the Levitical tribe assumed a unique and exclusive priestly character.

During the stage of the formation of nascent Israel, i.e., from the Patriarchs up to the time of the Judges, the functions of the priest were far less clear-cut, and non-Levitical characters assumed some priestly functions. "Priesthood at this time was

10. Aelred Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 35.

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not a state but a function or craft, and that a man was a priest not by virtue of any sort of ordination, but because he was actually exercising priestly functions."[11] There are a number of passages in the Pentateuch which, apart from presenting a highly developed theology of Levitical priesthood, attest to the exercise of priestly functions even by non-Levitical individuals: Noah offered prayer and sacrifice to Yahweh after the flood (Gen. 8:20-22); Abraham set up an altar and sacrificed a holocaust (Gen. 22: 13-14); Moses set up an altar and sprinkled blood on it (Ex. 24:4-6); David offered burnt and peace offering and blessed the Israelites in the name of Yahweh (2 Sam. 6:12-20).

At this stage of the development of the Jewish priesthood, one finds also that the responsibility of the priest extends to other sacred functions other than the offering of a sacrifice. "They divined the will of God by casting lots and by other means; they preserved, taught, and interpreted the Mosaic Law, the Torah; they took care of the holy places, guarded the temple treasury, accepted gifts made to God, and officiated over ritual sacrifices."[12] Some of these functions, such as the delivery of oracles, were absorbed later by the prophets and were thus considered the spokesperson of God during the Monarchical period, while the preservation and handing on of the laws and traditions became the exclusive functions of the scribes and rabbis at the Post-Exilic period.[13] It was after the exodus from Egypt, and later re-affirmed in the Post-Babylonian captivity in 520-515 BCE, that the cultic role and

11. Ibid, 59.

12. Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church, Vatican II* Golden Anniversary Edition (Missouri: Liguori Publications, 2014), 467.

13. Ibid.

functions of the priesthood became the exclusive domain of the Levitical tribe.[14]

The transition of the Levites from a secular tribe to an exclusive priestly clan was a clear case of *group solidarity* formation — i.e., primitive solidarity, which is limited to kin and tribe —through the *process of differentiation*. This process of differentiation accounts for the formation of a unique identity of a certain class or group that informs their roles and functions. An institution or society is ready to defer to the competence of a certain class, since it cannot exhaust all its energy in acquiring a body of knowledge or function the way a certain class or group does. Cody was straightforward in pointing out that economic motives were also at play for the exclusive prerogative of the Levitical tribe to the priesthood. He argues that the Levites' economic livelihood depends on group effort, and protection against competition is a matter of the solidarity of a tribe or clan....The natural thing for people in such circumstances to do is to develop as their specialty some craft or activity which does not depend upon land-tenure and for which a demand exists. Some sort of basis for their superiority in the craft has to be established, and this superiority must be vindicated as property of the group.[15]

While this process of differentiation gives a sociological endorsement for the qualification of the Levitical tribe as an exclusive priestly clan, there is certainly a theological validation for allowing such a social and religious setting to arise.

14. Peter Leithart, "Attendants of Yahweh's House: Priesthood in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 85 (1999): 5.

15. Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood*, 59-60.

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"Fill your Hands": Attainment of the Priesthood

An episode in Ex. 32: 25-29 narrates how the Levitical tribe attained the exclusive privilege of the priesthood. Moses, after having witnessed the infidelity of the Israelites through idolatry — enabled nonetheless by Aaron — challenged the fidelity of the Israelites by commanding them to put to the sword all who were guilty of idolatry, including their own kinsmen, friends, or neighbors. It was the Levites who assembled around Moses and proved their fidelity. After having accomplished the slaying, Moses said to the Levites, "Today you have been *ordained* for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day" (Ex. 32:29; italics mine).

The Hebrew word employed for "ordination" in verse 29 (וּמַלֵּאתֶם)[16] is the same word employed in Exodus 28:41 (מַלֵּא), Leviticus 21:10 (מִלֵּא), and Numbers 3:3 (מִלֵּא), all referring to the act of "filling the hands" of the one being "ordained." Thus, other translations render the Hebrew stem word (מִלֵּא) as "filling of hands."[17] The ordination ceremony involved a literal act of "filling the hands." Parts of the slaughtered ram for the sin offering and portions of grain offering "filled" the hands of Aaron and his sons on their ordination (Lev. 8).

In the context of Exodus 32:25-28, "filling the hands" takes on a somewhat ominous meaning as the Levites took into their *hands* Moses' sentence of death upon those guilty of idolatry without sparing their own family, friends, and neighbors. With this incident in Exodus as the background, a dual significance is then intimated by the expression "filling the hands": the

16. The parallel Hebrew text used in this section is taken from https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Tanakh.

17. David Stein, *The Contemporary Torah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 369-370.

Levites, on account of "filling their hands" with the blood of their kinsmen, have "filled their hands" in the sense of being ordained as priests.[18] This partially explains non-conferral of the priesthood other than to the Levites as "it was their fidelity to Yahweh which led to their being ideal priests in the first place, and this fidelity is what basically is being contrasted with the infidelity of other tribes claiming priesthood."[19]

Holiness: A Setting Apart

The emerging theology of holiness as a *setting apart* sets the direction for developing a concomitant reality, i.e., the Levitical priesthood. God alone is holy, and His holiness, i.e., His separateness, "that characterized His being one true God, as opposed to all the pagan gods."[20] This holiness/separateness of God had to be characterized in the dimensions of the life of Israel. In order to approach God, one had to be holy, that is, to be separated or cut off. The urgency of separation in pursuit of holiness cannot be simply stated.

Separation is the concrete, visible expression of the inviolable holiness of God. One must remember that, in temple worship and in Israelite religion in general, "to make holy" ... meant separation from the ordinary world precisely in order to belong to God and his service. The ultimate purpose of all consecration was thus positive, though it did involve separation, spatial and/or moral, as a necessary component.[21]

Hence, this accounted for setting up the ritual purity system, with the priest as the determiner of purity. In the case

18. Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood*, 145.

19. Ibid., 155.

20. John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Law and Love,* vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 350.

21. Ibid., 345. Italics mine.

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of leprosy, it was up to the priest to verify the diagnosis of the patient and declare if the patient was "impure" or "pure," and eventually allow or refuse participation in social life and worship.[22] The state of being impure did not only mean exclusion from cultic participation; exclusion was even enforced on social participation. These varying degrees of impurity exclusion or restriction followed a gradation: initially, exclusion from religious worship; then, exclusion from proximity to sacred habitations such as the temple and synagogues; finally, exclusion of the impure person from social participation.[23]

The reservation of priestly function to the Levitical tribe of offering sacrifice on the altar was a consequence of this idea of holiness as a setting apart from anything that was perceived as profane and secular, which also gave rise to the notion of the superior holiness of priests over the rest of the people.[24] The more the priest aspired to reach holiness, the more he needed to be separated from the secular reality. Because of this, only the Levitical priests were given the responsibility of taking charge of anything related to temple worship since the temple was hallowed as God's dwelling place .

Holiness had to extend even to the objects of sacrificial offerings. For these offerings to be accepted, they must be carefully scrutinized as pure and not abhorrent to God. They need to be consecrated, that is, to be made sacred, sacrificed, consecrated, and set apart. Vanhoye recognizes that the acceptance of the offerings was also mainly due to the holiness

22. Albert Vanhoye, S.J., *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest According to the New Testament*, trans. Bernard Orchard, OSB (Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publication, 1988), 25.

23. David P. Wright, "The Spectrum of Priestly Impurity," in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, edited by G. Anderson & S. Olyan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 164.

24. Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood*, 191.

of the priest. He points out that "as the priest was precisely a person consecrated to go and permitted to enter into a relationship with God, it seemed obvious that he should be the one through whom sacrifices should be made."[25] The system of ritual purity defined the rules of engagement of priests with others. It obliged them to avoid any contact with sin, with whatever would contaminate or defile them, because any contact with the slightest profanation would bar them from exercising their priestly duties. Stretching the interpretation further, the priest had to remain holy, that is, separated/cut off from others.[26]

The acuteness of this separation finds its accentuation in the office of the high priest. Chapter 21 of the book of Leviticus lists the series of prohibitions for the high priest in view of preserving purity and holiness. One of the startling prohibitions forbids the high priest any proximity to the dead, regardless of whether the dead is a nonrelative or his own parents: "He shall not go where there is a dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father or mother" (v. 11). "Contact with the dead was absolutely prohibited to the high priest since it was conceived that there was an incompatibility between the corruption of death and the holiness of God. The high priest did not have the right to mourn for anyone, not even for his mother/father because that would have meant contact with death."[27]

Separateness from anything profane marked the peculiar status of the priest. To maintain the ritual separation was of utmost observance. Becoming a priest necessitated "separating

25. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 24.

26. Ibid., 25.

27. Vanhoye, *Let Us Confidently Welcome: Christ our High Priest*, trans. J. Wallace (Melbourne, Ballan: Modotti Press, 2010), 53.

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the priest from other men."[28] Priests were to remain separate and not of the same level as anyone else, they must be distinguished by a mystique of "otherness" because that was what being consecrated to God meant, i.e., to be set apart. This separateness was further illustrated right at the ceremonies of ordination where the high priest, after having been bathed that signified being cleansed from worldly contacts, was clothed with *special* vestments followed by anointing with oil (Ex. 29, Lev. 8 & 9). Returning to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, one can observe how ritual purity impacts the behavior of both the Levite and the priest toward the wounded man, in so far as contact with blood would render them impure and, thus, would restrict them from performing their respective temple duties.

Separateness marked the ethos not only of the Old Testament priesthood but also of the Israelite religion as a whole; and it was deeply infused into its *modus vivendi* and *operandi*. This separateness is expressed on so many levels. First, Israel is a people set apart for God, "Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Ex. 19: 5-6). Then the selection of individuals being qualified for holiness and service before God was restricted to the tribe of Levi, as "the Lord, set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister to him, and to bless in his name" (Deut. 10: 8). Holiness and admittance to the service of God were further narrowed to Aaron and his sons as God commanded Moses to anoint and consecrate them, in order that they may serve God as priests (Ex. 30:30). Finally, holiness and being set

28. Albert Vanhoye, S.J., *Our Priest is Christ: The Doctrine of the Epistle to the Hebrews,* trans. Sr. M. Innocentia Richards (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1977), 28.

apart found its highest expression in the person of the high priest, who alone was permitted to enter the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement, a monumental event that occurred only once a year (Lev. 16). Vanhoye stresses that this function on the annual Day of Atonement must surely have been the high priest's most significant act among his liturgical functions.[29]

The foregoing discussions should have led to at least two noticeable observations. First, solidarity between the priest and other people outside the priestly circle seemed to contradict the Old Testament concept of the priesthood and holiness.[30] Priesthood was rather characterized by separateness and peculiarity that rendered it superior and exclusive. Being hallowed, consecrated, or ordained signified being set apart. "The priest's encounter with God requires even further rites of separation."[31] Second, the attainment of the Old Testament priesthood and the pursuit of holiness, whose highest exponent was demonstrated in the office of the high priest, came at a cost: *solidarity* that transcends the boundaries of the affiliated group or class. The Old Testament priesthood, whose function included regulation of the system of ritual separation, inadvertently resulted in a *mutual exclusion* of the pure and those perceived profane. The attitude displayed by the Levite and the priest toward the wounded man in the Parable of the Good Samaritan is but a demonstration of an unyielding adherence to ritual purity at the expense of a far greater divine trait: *solidarity* with the other.

29. Albert Vanhoye, *A Perfect Priest: Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 184.

30. Vanhoye, *Let Us Confidently Welcome: Christ our High Priest*, trans. J. Wallace (Melbourne, Ballan: Modotti Press, 2010), 54.

31. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests,* 31.

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The Priestly Solidarity of Christ

At the very outset of this section, it is important to note that Vanhoye makes a straightforward caveat prior to expounding a reflection on the priesthood of Christ. The statement that Jesus is a priest, and even a high priest, is a startling claim. The gospels are silent on applying priestly terminologies and functions to Jesus. "In the Gospels, many titles are given to Jesus: teacher, prophet, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God, *but never the title of Priest*."[32] As the only book in the New Testament that explicitly refers to Jesus as a priest, the Letter to the Hebrews engages in a painstaking hermeneutical jigsawing and theological exploration for applying priestly categories to Jesus and qualifies him as a High Priest. The theme of solidarity appears within this larger context of the Priestly Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Jesus and the Levitical Priesthood

The preceding sections on the scriptural antecedents of solidarity and the Old Testament priesthood must have led to a realization that *Jesus does not belong to the group solidarity of the Levitical Priesthood*. "It is the simple fact that Jesus was born a Jewish layman, conducted his ministry as a Jewish layman, and died a Jewish layman. There is no reliable historical tradition that he was of Levitical or priestly descent."[33] He came from the tribe of Judah, which outrightly disqualifies him from the priesthood. The obscurity and the notoriety of his Nazarene origins illustrate his—in the description of the renowned

32. Vanhoye, *Let Us Confidently Welcome*, 28. Italics mine.

33. John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: The Roots of the Problem and the Person,* vol. 1 (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1991), 345.

biblical scholar John Meier—"marginal"[34] status within the religious circles in Jerusalem.

Moreover, the gospels portray a rather negative image of priests and seem to pit them against Jesus. As a case in point, the chief priests are shown to have some share of responsibility for the passion and death of Jesus. Their involvement in the betrayal of Judas, the arrest and trial of Jesus, and his eventual crucifixion are avowedly attested to in the gospels.[35] Jesus himself predicted that he would suffer greatly at the hands of the *priests*, the elders, and the scribes (Mt. 20: 17-19). Concerning the practice of ritual purity and separation, which principally fall under the domain of the priests, certain passages in the gospels indicate Jesus' recognition of the significance of such a system. While Jesus emphasizes the priority of reconciliation and conversion over the cultic system of his times, he acknowledges its significance (Mt. 5: 24). On two occasions, Jesus instructed those he cured of leprosy to submit themselves to the priests, who are responsible for purity and sanitary supervision of the lepers, and to make the offering for healing as prescribed by the Mosaic law (Mk. 1:44; Lk. 17:12-14). However, beyond these instances, the attitude of Jesus concerning ritual purity and separation remains largely controversial and often suggests a polemical import. The admonition "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt. 19:13) stands as the *fundamental evangelical option*.[36]

Recalling again the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus here recoils the sheer indifference of the *priest* and the Levite

34. Ibid.

35. The chief priests plot to kill Jesus, Luke 22: 1-2, John 11:47-48. They bribed Judas to betray Jesus, Mt. 26:14. They put Jesus on trial, Luke 22: 66-71. They pressured Pilate to sentence Jesus to death, John 18: 28-40.

36. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 7.

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to the wounded man. Legalism to the observance of ritual purity is used to hide their failure to render help and love to a neighbor. Through this parable, Jesus rebuffs the limitations imposed by ritual purity and prioritizes compassion and *solidarity* over ritualistic holiness. Solidarity with those considered impure and sinners "is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk. 12:33). There are still several occasions in the gospel that show Jesus prioritizing the restoration of *solidarity* with the community to those deemed ritually impure and separated: he touched those inflicted by leprosy (Mt. 8:1-5), he talked with a Samaritan whom the Jews considered defiled as a result of intermarriage with the Assyrians (Jn. 4), and he committed the most abhorrent of the ritual restrictions: he had contact with the dead on two occasions (Mk. 5:21-43; Lk. 7:11-17). Jesus' teachings and actions challenged traditional expectations and emphasized the importance of compassion and solidarity with others, regardless of social or religious boundaries. These differences in mindset and attitude of Jesus and the Levitical priesthood help to understand better the reason "why Jesus purposely recoils from any *solidarity* with the positions taken by the Jewish priesthood and why he does not call himself a priest."[37] Vanhoye's exploration of the thorny topic of the priesthood of Christ stems from the acknowledgment of this conflict. The ritual preoccupation for purity and holiness "must give way to the dynamism of a generous love"[38] and a more inclusive solidarity. "A radical re-formulation of the priestly categories was essential in order to make their application to the mysteries of

37. Jean Gallot, S.J., *Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 37. Italics mine.

38. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 7.

Christ possible."[39] This, then, gives rise to a new type of priesthood and a new concept of holiness *as* solidarity.

Solidarity: A Paradoxical Novelty

That Jesus was a Jewish layman by all historical accounts triggers a curious question about his priestly status: What kind of priesthood is being referred to here? His non-Levitical ancestry already disqualified him from any priestly link. To this, the Letter to the Hebrews has to account for its claim that Jesus is a High Priest by invoking the figure of Melchizedek. It is quite intriguing that the priesthood of Jesus, a daring theological claim, should be likened to the priesthood of Melchizedek, whose scant appearance in the Old Testament evokes a more inquisitive restlessness than the present subject at hand.[40] But transcending this predicament, the invocation of the figure of Melchizedek in the Letter to the Hebrews as a *typology* simply serves to establish the divine sonship of Jesus, i.e., filial rela-

39. Albert Vanhoye, S.J., "La nouveauté du Sacerdoce du Christ," *Église et Vocations: La Revue De La Pastorale Des Vocations* no. 9 (Février 2010): 9.

40. For the sake of pressing the discussion a little further, the appeal to the figure of Melchizedek as a prefiguration of the priesthood of Christ serves several interpretations. "This 'Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him,' and to him Abraham apportioned 'one-tenth of everything'" (Hb. 7:1-2). This passage argues for the superiority of Melchizedekan priesthood over the Levitical priesthood which belongs to the Abrahamic ancestry. By invoking Melchizedek, the Letter to the Hebrews illustrates in the same way the superiority of the priesthood of Christ over the Levitical priesthood. In another passage, "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever" (Hb. 7:3). The omission of the ancestral genealogy of Melchizedek, and the silence on his birth and death illustrates the divine origin of his priesthood as it was not acquired hereditarily. Applied to Christ, his priesthood is a totally new order as his origins do not indicate linkage with the Levitical clan.

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tionship with the Father; one of the necessary conditions for the attainment of the high priesthood.[41] "So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you,' as he also says in another place, 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek'" (5:5-6). This passage alludes to the promise of the eternal kingship of David and his offspring.

Moreover, the allusion to the oracle of David suggests the promise of the coming of a priestly-kingly messiah. "In accord with the concept of sacral monarchy, the king was regarded as the ultimate authority in both civil and religious spheres, and so exercised some priestly roles."[42] Therefore, Jesus, the son of David and the promised Messiah, possesses this dual identity and function.[43] "Melchizedek became an antitype which described some of the attributes and roles of the royal and priestly Messiah."[44]

Having established the priesthood of Christ by surpassing the Levitical priesthood and by linking it to the likeness of the Melckizedekan priesthood, the Letter to the Hebrews now describes how Christ attained the office of the high priest through *solidarity with the human condition*. Vanhoye proceeds to consider how Christ attained the priesthood through solidarity by explicating the *antitheses* presented in the Hebrews. He identifies at least two antitheses propounded therein: an innovation in the concept of *priestly mediation* and *holiness*.

41. Vanhoye, *A Different Priest: The Letter to the Hebrews* (Florida, Miami: Convivium Press, 2011), 206.

42. Fruto Ramirez, S.J., "Melchizedek: A Minor Character of Great Importance to Biblical Theology." *Landas* 33, no. 1, (2019): 27.

43. Vanhoye, *A Different Priest*, 207.

44. Ramirez, "Melchizedek," 30.

I. First Antithesis

Priestly Mediation: Trustworthiness before God and Solidarity with Humanity

Whenever Vanhoye refers to "priestly solidarity," it is almost always bonded with another theme of "filial docility with the Father." The latter describes Jesus' filial relationship of Jesus with the Father, i.e., his trustworthiness before God, while the former describes Jesus' fraternal relationship with humanity, i.e., his solidarity with humanity.[45] This composite phrase—trustworthiness before God and solidarity with humanity—indicates the reputation of Jesus as the priestly mediator.

The function of mediation has been considered a fundamental feature of the priesthood.[46] In the Old Testament priesthood, this mediatory function was demonstrated in the passing on and interpretation of the Law in which the priest was regarded as *mediating* God to humanity. The offering of holocausts was also considered a role of *mediating* humanity to God.[47] Vanhoye argues that the concept of priestly mediation remains valid in the New Covenant. "The essential goal of priesthood has always been the establishment of mediation between God and humankind. This is true in the Old Testament, and is confirmed all the more in the New."[48] It is even made perfect by Jesus, whose person the divine and human find unity; thus, he is the perfect mediator. Jesus' priestly meditation is most excellently

45. Vanhoye, *Let Us Confidently Welcome*, 25.

46. Leithart, "Attendants of Yahweh's House: Priesthood in The Old Testament," 9.

47. Ronald de Vaux, O.P., *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961), 357.

48. Vanhoye, *A Perfect Priest*, 31.

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established because it is a mediation of a man who is consubstantial with the Father.

Pertinent to the current discussion is the need to elaborate on the novelty of Jesus' mediatory role *through* his solidarity with humanity, given that his "trustworthiness before God," i.e., his filial relationship with the Father, is already overwhelmingly established. The essential purpose of the priesthood has always been to establish a mediation between humanity and God.[49] However, the vertical relationship with God was primary in the Levitical priesthood. The priesthood was esteemed as the greatest honor in society, as he alone had the exclusive privilege of a relationship with God through the temple sacrificial system. The unilateral accent of the Levitical priesthood had foundations on the command of God to Moses to "bring near to you your brother Aaron and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, *to serve me as priests*" (Ex. 28:1). Priests were ordained for nothing else than for the service of God. This being set apart for God was regulated through the system of ritual purity and separation and was most apparent in the office of the high priesthood. "To go into the sanctuary he had to be alone. Cut off from other people…he did not effectively fulfill the role of mediator."[50]

It is in this situation that the priesthood of Christ stands out as a paradoxical novelty. "In order to become a high priest, it is not written that Christ had to separate himself from other men."[51] On the contrary, Hebrews states that "he had *to become like his brothers in every way*, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God" (Hb. 2:17). The following verse says that, "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered,

49. Vanhoye, "La nouveauté du Sacerdoce du Christ," 11.

50. Vanhoye, *A Perfect Priest*, 31.

51. Vanhoye, *Our Priest is Christ*, 29.

he is able to help those who are being tested" (v. 18) and this immediately evokes the remembrance of the passion and death which is the price for his solidarity with humanity. It may be a little bit soon for the Hebrews to allude to the mystery of the passion and death of Jesus as the ultimate manifestation of his solidarity with humanity. It is rather crucial to put this episode of passion and death under the overarching mystery of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is the pivotal aperture to understanding Christ's priestly solidarity. Jesus is a High Priest as far as Hebrews are concerned, and this is already apparent in its application of priestly categories to the death of Jesus on the cross. However, Hebrews does not explicitly address the crucial question of *when* Jesus became a high priest. To this question, John Chrysostom forwards the position that the Incarnation itself implies that Jesus' human existence is already priestly.[52] He argues that "He [Jesus] did not come first and then become High Priest, but came and became [High Priest] at the same time."[53] In other words, Jesus Christ is a High Priest only insofar as he was incarnated. For it is through his flesh, his incarnate existence, that Jesus was able to offer a sacrifice to the Father. Through his earthly existence, Jesus obtained the office of the high priest. The incarnation is the very first instance of Jesus' manifestation of solidarity with humanity, and has become an essential characteristic of his new high priesthood. Priestly solidarity in passion and death follows the trail of the Incarnation.

After having placed the death and passion of Jesus within the framework of the mystery of the Incarnation, one can now

52. Gerard O'Collins, S.J., *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 80.

53. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on Hebrews," trans. F. Gardiner, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Library of the Christian Church*, vol. 15, edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 455.

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advance to the consideration of interpreting them as Christ's priestly solidarity, thus gaining a novel imprint on the concept of mediation. To illustrate this, Vanhoye designates the following verses as *textual keys* to understanding Christ's priestly solidarity:

Heb. 2:10-11 It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect *through sufferings*. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters (italics mine).

Heb. 2:17-18 Therefore, he had to become like his brothers in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people. Because he himself was *tested through what he suffered*, he is able to help those who are being tested. (NABRE; italics mine).

Heb. 5:7-10 In the *days of his flesh*, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, *with loud cries and tears*, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned *obedience through what he suffered*, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (italics mine).

Following the line of thought of these verses, it is discernible that suffering and death is a necessary precondition for the attainment of the high priesthood. Christ's passion and death "is the consequence of his *solidarity* with humanity and, at the same time, the means by which he establishes a *new* solidarity. By accepting suffering and death like every other human being, the Son of Man shows that the incarnation was no mere game."[54] This is in stark contrast to the Levitical priesthood, which identifies the priest as an exulted being among others. As

54. Vanhoye, *A Perfect Priest*, 25.

a recapitulation of the topic of Levitical accession to the priesthood — as had already been discussed in the preceding sections — one gets the impression that the priest, and especially the high priest, is like "a being exalted above normal mortals."[55] This exalted impression was pronouncedly marked out at the ordination rites where the *ordinandi* had to be washed, clothed with special vestments, anointed, and "filled the hands" with the sacrifices. Thus, when recalling the memory of the priesthood of Aaron, the book of Sirach acknowledges that God "exulted Aaron" (Sir. 45:6). One has to follow the succeeding verses to gain insight into how Sirach goes on to describe the splendor and glory of such a priesthood. So glaring was the honor of the priesthood that it became a source of ambition and jealousy among the Israelites. An episode in the book of Numbers narrates the revolt of Korah against Aaron as they were perceived to have "privatized" the priesthood. Korah, together with Dathan and Abiram "assembled against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. *So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?*'" (Num. 16:3). In the book of Maccabees, the high priesthood was such a coveted position. Jason obtained the high priesthood by corruption (2 Macc. 4:7) and was later outbid by Menelaus by three hundred talents of silver for the position of the high priest (2 Macc. 4:24).

The accession of Jesus to the priesthood takes on an opposite direction. In order to become high priest, "Christ must reject all privilege and, instead of remaining above the people, 'he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every way', even to the point of accepting the extreme humiliation of

55. Ibid., 30.

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the passion."[56] Jesus, far from seeking to exalt himself above others, renounced the appearance of divinity and descended to the lowest level of sharing, even in humanity's suffering and death.[57] The statement of Hebrews in 2:17, "he had to" is the only instance in the New Testament where the verb *opheilō* ('had to, ought to') is applied to Christ. This word alludes to a moral obligation concerning financial debt.[58] Such employment of the term to illustrate the extent of Jesus' new mediation through solidarity with humanity, i.e., to become like his brothers in every way, parallels the description of solidarity referred to in its legal, moral, and social aspects.[59] Solidarity in the legal sense is described in terms of the *assumption of a common responsibility* for the insurance of members in a group and the security of *repayment of debt.* Applied to the concept of priestly solidarity, Christ has shown his solidarity with humanity in his passion and death on the cross and has thus *repaid the debt* sinners owe.[60] As regards the moral aspect of solidarity — described in terms of readiness to *supply and share* assistance with those in need — Jesus has demonstrated his solidarity by *supplying and sharing,* as he continues to intercede on humanity's behalf. "He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hb. 7:25).

Moreover, Hebrews is insistent on assigning a profound value to the aspect of suffering as a condition of perfect solidarity of Jesus with humanity: "he *learned* obedience through

56. Ibid.

57. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 71.

58. Ibid, 24.

59. See Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 21.

60. One may refer to the literature of soteriological theories to gain a more comprehensive grasp of the various theological schools of thought concerning the mystery of salvation.

what he suffered" (Hb. 5:8). The educative value of Jesus' embrace of suffering enables him to *supply and share* help with those being tested as well. "Because he himself was tested by what he *suffered*, he is able *to help* those who are being tested," (Hb. 2:18; italics mine). Lastly, concerning solidarity's social aspect—which pertains to a common sentiment, a sense of being a community, and sharing in their fate—Jesus' identification with sinful humanity illustrates such an aspect. Hebrews states that Jesus "is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (2:11) and, through his incarnation, shared with them their "flesh and blood" (2:14) as well as their death (2:9). Priestly solidarity is Jesus' total assimilation of anything human except sin. One might falsely think that this diminishes his solidarity inasmuch as he never sinned. In response to this, Vanhoye argues that sin "makes no contribution at all to the establishment of true solidarity"[61] because sin always sows division, which is in stark contrast to solidarity. Furthermore, Vanhoye insists that "real solidarity with sinners does not consist in making oneself an accomplice in their fault; it consists in generously taking the disastrous consequences of the sin along with them."[62]

A. Merciful High Priest

More than qualifying Jesus as a high priest, Hebrews introduces a profoundly new quality to this priesthood: Jesus is a *merciful* High Priest. He is a merciful high priest because the Levitical high priesthood seemed to have manifested a rather stringent and unyielding attitude toward sinners. "To emphasize that God had set the priest apart,"[63] he had to stand

61. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 114.

62. Vanhoye, *A Different Priest*, 159.

63. Vanhoye, *Let Us Confidently Welcome*, 48.

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firmly against sinners and the defiled who were considered abominable to God. To be on the side of God and on the side of those considered profane and sinful at the same time was an impossibility. This situation describes the relationship between God and sinners as one of enmity, with God's wrath directed towards sinners. Some passages in the Old Testament seem to confirm this view, as in the episode of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32, where the Levites, to prove their loyalty to God, had mercilessly "filled their hands" with the blood of those guilty of the abominable sin of idolatry. In a similar unmerciful way, Phinehas acquired a "perpetual priesthood" for himself and his sons after manifesting his religious zeal by putting to death a Midianite woman and an Israelite caught sinning with her (Nm. 25:6-2).

Jesus, however, is a high priest with a quality of mercy because he is able to sympathize with their weakness through what he suffered and has thus attained the glory of the high priesthood. Mercy towards humanity, which is wounded by sin, is an indispensable disposition of a priest. Far from a mere superficial sentiment that is very often caricatured as *mercy*, the mercy of Jesus' priestly solidarity involves a total and *personal* experience of suffering.[64] "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to *sympathize with our weaknesses*, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15. Italics mine). The extent of Jesus' priestly solidarity led him to take upon himself the consequences of human sin.

In the final analysis of this first antithesis, Jesus replaces the pronouncedly unilateral view of the Old Testament priesthood, i.e., priests solely set apart for God, with a "bilateral

64. Ibid.

perspective."[65] Aware of this profound novelty, Hebrews, instead of saying that priests were set apart for the service of God, says rather that "priests were taken among men, and made their *representative before God*" (Hb.5:1). He is a priest, i.e., representative of humanity before God, rightly so, because he alone could *credibility* (because of his total solidarity with humanity, even accepting the death that is theirs) and *authoritatively* (because he is God's own Son, sharing fully God's divinity) present before God God's most wondrous salvific work, his self. The act of Jesus' self-abasement with his wretched flesh on the cross, i.e., his solidarity with all that is wretched in humanity, would effect a totally novel understanding of the concept of *holiness*.

II. Second Antithesis:

A New Concept of Holiness

Jesus' priestly solidarity stands as a startling contrast to the concept of holiness as regulated by ritual purity and separation. The whole of Jesus-event, especially shown in the Paschal mystery, illustrates that "ordination" to the priesthood is in no way accomplished through the rites of purity and separation.[66] Solidarity with humanity, embracing its blessings and woes, now marks the new ethos of attaining the priesthood and achieving holiness.

It need not be reiterated here how the insistence on the necessity of separation guaranteed the ethos of the Old Testament attainment of holiness. However, to forward a vivid presentation, mentioning select practices for securing holiness in the Levitical priesthood might prove helpful. The

65. Vanhoye, "La nouveauté du Sacerdoce du Christ," 12.

66. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 73.

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annual entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies was the most demonstrative act of his holiness. There, he was totally cut off from people as he could enter it alone. The worthiness of the high priest to enter the holy of holies was secured by the stringent prescriptions laid down in Leviticus 16. These preparations for the Day of Atonement were nothing more than a series of *separations*, the apex of which was the high priest's separation from the people in order to enter the Holy of Holies.[67]

In this context, Hebrews introduces the new concept of holiness as the priestly solidarity of Christ, which is strongly accentuated in his Paschal Mystery. Rather than resulting in separation, Jesus' holiness leads to contact and engagement with others.[68] Unlike a kind of holiness that is achieved through withdrawal from the world, Jesus' holiness is established in his *entrance* into the world. Holiness through rituals of separation is radically replaced by the dynamism of communion with those deemed profane and forsaken by God. "To become like his brothers in every way" not only refers to the assumption of Jesus of human nature in the Incarnation but also involves the aspects of humanity that are most tragic and humiliating: suffering and death.[69]

Jesus' total commitment to solidarity brought him filial obedience and willing acceptance of the humiliating death on the cross. He died "outside of the gate" (Hb. 13:12) which meant that he did not die on sacred grounds and died an accursed death. The cross was anything but holy. It did not present any resemblance to a liturgical sacrifice. *Jesus tasted death and had descended to the dead*, as the Creed confesses. As already

67. Vanhoye, *A Perfect Priest*, 31.

68. Gallot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 44.

69. Vanhoye, "La nouveauté du Sacerdoce du Christ," 13.

indicated in the previous sections, the prohibition against priests having any contact or least proximity with the dead would render them profane and thus could not achieve holiness through ritual worship. Vanhoye points out that "complete incompatibility was seen between the corruption of *death* and holiness of the *living* God."[70] Death is the total separation, and the "abode of the dead," i.e., Sheol, is a place of *godforsakeness*. H. von Balthasar cannot more emphatically state the horror of this separation,

> [A]ccording to the sense of the classical Old Testament texts, the dead person is lifeless, powerless, without effect, and above all without contact with God or thus either with his fellow human beings. In Sheol, in the Pit, all that reigns is the darkness of perfect loneliness. But to be without contact with God *means* to be without the inner light of faith, hope and love—which, as long as the bonds of death have not been broken through, are limited in the Old Covenant to earthy and mortal life (Is 38:11; Ps 6:6, 88:11-13): "For Sheol does not praise you; death cannot extol you" (Is 38:18).[71]

The extent of Jesus' solidarity led him to the unimaginable abode where holiness unimaginably asserted its potency through his descent. If in the former priesthood, perfection in holiness was attained through being "set apart" from the slightest profanity—much more death—now, it is through entering into the *godforsakeness* that is death by which Jesus paradoxically was "made perfect" in holiness (Hb. 5:8-9). This solidarity was brought to its farthest limit, i.e., death as total separation, but now embraced by Christ so that one who is at the point of death, would be guaranteed a promise of solidarity with God in Jesus Christ.

70. Ibid. Italics mine.

71. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Descent into Hell," in *Explorations in Theology: Spirit and Institution*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 408.

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A. Existential Priesthood

Another concurrent novelty under the second antithesis is the concept of *sacrifice,* which the priest is appointed to offer God. The Hebrews interpreted the death of Jesus on the cross in the light of ritual sacrifice categories. Sacrificial offering primarily belongs to the office of the priesthood. Priests are "appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer (Hb. 8:3). Whereas in the system of Levitical priesthood, the priest's offering is external to his person, Jesus' priestly offering is his personal and filial obedience even unto death, i.e., the offering of his very existence.

The crucifixion of Jesus on the cross had no resemblance to a liturgical ceremony of offering a sacrifice. On the contrary, it stood in stark contrast to a liturgical sacrifice insofar as it was a punishment imposed as a consequence of a legal condemnation. Unlike a sacrifice, which is a ritual act of glorification that lifts the offering to God — thus, the necessity that the offering be unblemished — and establishes a relationship of the *offerant* with God, a legal penalty e.g., crucifixion, severs the condemned from the community, as well as separates him/her from God.[72] For a priest to be made worthy to offer sacrifices, he had to maintain separation from defilement (Lev. 16). But his offering of sacrifices posed the question of its efficacy on the grounds that he remains a sinner as anyone else. No matter how exalted the office of the priesthood used to be, it could not offer a perfect, innocent, and undefiled offering. Speaking on the inefficacy of the priestly ritual offering, Vanhoye asserts that the "priest remained imperfect and tainted by sin (Hb. 7.18–19, 27–28). The sacrifices he offered did not really give him access to God. When he ceremonially entered the Holy of Holies, his

72. Vanhoye, *A Perfect Priest*, 28.

approach had only symbolic value."[73] Due to this unfitness to offer a perfect offering, the priest resorted to offering an external and impersonal oblation. He could not present himself as an offering because he lacked worthiness. He lacked credibility because he was a sinner himself. And so, his ministry consisted of performing exterior rituals. The relative efficacy of the priestly offering was even acknowledged right in the prescriptions for the high priest on the Day of Atonement; Aaron had to atone, first for his own sins, and then for his household (Lev. 16).

What the ritual offerings sought to effect remained at the level of external transformation, i.e., ritual purity and holiness through separation. The immolation of animals could not accomplish an integral personal transformation because the offering stood outside the constitution of the person. It is due to this that "one is bound to admit the powerlessness of the Old Testament worship and its radical ineffectiveness."[74] In similar lines, H. von Balthasar is convinced of the time-conditioned character of ritual sacrifices, as they could not establish an interior religious transformation.[75]

Prescinding from this external ritual system, Hebrews insist on the need for an offering that can effect an integral transformation. In a tone of critique on the ancient sacrificial system, Hebrews argues that its repetitious offering indicates that these "gifts and sacrifices...cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper" (Hb. 9:9). Jesus' offering rendered the ancient sacrificial offering ineffectual in respect to two qualifications: he is the unblemished sacrifice (Hb. 4:15), and he offered his sacrifice once for all (Hb. 9:12).

73. Ibid, 31.

74. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 188.

75. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Priestly Existence," in *Explorations in Theology: Spouse of the Word*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 377.

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These key texts in Hebrews prepare the concept, described by Vanhoye as the *existential priesthood*. The New Covenant does not totally abolish the offering of sacrifice, for, in fact, the New Covenant was established in the blood of Jesus (Mt. 26:27-29; Mk. 14:23-24; Lk. 22:20). There remains a sacrifice, but for Jesus, "it is a matter of a personal, existential sacrifice and not a ritual sacrifice."[76] In the old sacrifice, one finds a maintained distinction between the sacred and the profane, priesthood and sacrifice, and the office of the priesthood and the person of the priest. In the priesthood of Jesus, however, these distinctions collapsed. Instead, there is a sanctification of suffering through his death, interior transformation through personal offering, and unity of office and person. There can be no apt description of the *solidarity* of all these aspects than the *existential priesthood*. The integration of these aspects forms the basis for authentic worship. To be pleasing to God, an oblation must be an offering of the whole heart, as God cannot be satisfied with an exterior oblation that conceals the docility of the heart.[77] Jesus' self-offering on the cross illustrates this offering of his whole heart. His filial obedience unto the point of death on the cross shows the docility of his heart.

In Christ, all those separations are henceforth abolished. Christ does not need to look for victims outside himself; he has offered himself. He offered his personal obedience, even unto death. He did not look for symbolic, conventional, ceremonies but he *offered his own existence*. The distinction between priest and the victim is abolished, as also between worship and life.[78]

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76. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests*, 197. Italics mine.

77. Vanhoye, "La nouveauté du Sacerdoce du Christ," 22.

78. Albert Vanhoye, S.J., "Common Priesthood and Ministerial Priesthood: Difference and Relations," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 23 (2016): 6. Italics mine.

Conclusion

Bishop Pablo David of the Diocese of Caloocan relates a story wherein he was led to reflect on the significance of calling the Black Nazarene image of Quiapo as *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno*. He was perplexed as to why the Black Nazarene is called Nuestro *Padre* whereas Jesus is the *son* of God and our *brother*. Would it be better to call him Nuestro *Hermano* (Our brother)? Bishop David asked a Nazareno devotee regarding this. He got this reply: "It is because Jesus is a priest, isn't he? Don't we call our priests '*padre*?' So Jesus is *Nuestro Padre*!"[79]

Jesus carrying and enduring the weight of the cross, suffering with humanity the burden of its pain and sin—how could not it be a perfect image of solidarity with humanity? No wonder millions of Filipinos identify themselves with that image of the Black Nazarene. He is rightly, then, the Nuestro Padre, he is our priest because through his solidarity with our human condition, he proved himself to be worthy to become a merciful high priest (See Heb. 2:17). And this paper on the theme of priestly solidarity of Vanhoye has considerably pondered on that; Jesus attained the priesthood, not because he distanced himself from the lowly human state and thus preserved his purity to be able to have access to God, but precisely because he chose in love, through his incarnation, to be in solidarity with everything human except sin and taste death (See Heb. 2:9), making his obedience a priestly sacrifice of worship to the Father.

79. Pablo Virgilio David, "Homily for the Feast of the Black Nazarene," 9 January 2021, *Veritas.ph*, accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.veritasph.net/ang-padre-nazareno/.

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