

The Image of High Priest First Week in Ordinary Time Saturday, January 14, 2017
8:15 AM **Heb 4:12-16;** Mk 2:13-17 BVM (What the Letter to the Hebrews is saying is that in the incarnation the Word of God became human so that there could be this connection between the heavenly and the earthly.)

Today we are reading from the Letter to the Hebrews; and since we only read every two years, I thought we could dwell for a moment on one of the images, **the image of the great high priest**. This is largely misunderstood by the vast majority of people. We have to go back to the time of Moses. **Moses had a vision of some sort of heavenly temple**, and it's out of this vision that he got the idea or the **instruction to build an earthly temple**, although the earthly temple was tiny in comparison, tiny and poor, originally a tent. I have seen a replica of what the Bible actually describes; it is incredibly small. It has seven different parts, which I will not go into.

One of the most important parts, if you want to say parts, of this scene is the high priest. In fact there's no point in having a temple without a high priest. **The high priest is the one who mediates between the inner sanctum, which represents the presence of God, and the outer world**. So there is first of all this heavenly reality, and then there's the earthly copy. Many of the prophets have visions of this heavenly temple. Ezekiel does. Isaiah does, several others also do. And there's all kinds of visionaries outside of the Bible who also have or claim to have **visions of this heavenly temple. So this is part of the mystical tradition of Israel. Then there's the earthly version**, at first a little tent, then a house of cedar, and then a huge, humongous stone edifice built in Jerusalem by Herod. All the time what's principal is the high priest. **You have to have a high priest. But the earthly high priest is simply a copy of the heavenly one.**

Now what the Letter to the Hebrews is saying is that in the incarnation the Word of God became human so that there could be this connection between the heavenly and the earthly. Jesus is really from God and he returns to God in the resurrection and the ascension. Meanwhile he's become the high priest, not in the earthly sense. He is not of the tribe of Levi or anything like that. He does not belong to the proper priestly family or anything like that. But **he becomes the high priest through his incarnation. And through his death he provides the actual blood of atonement**, which he then takes to the Father, not in the earthly temple. He is not an earthly priest; he is a heavenly priest. But he is fully human, so he is the new heavenly high priest, fully human, which then does away with the need for the temple. That's actually what he is getting at. **We don't need a temple anymore. We don't need any earthly high**

priest anymore. We have Jesus, the Word of God who has come, who has offered the atonement, who has returned to the Father with the **atonement blood, poured it forth in the everlasting sacrifice**. It continues to exist in eternity. **It is this that the Christians celebrate when they gather and they share the cup of the Eucharist**, because Jesus said, “Take and drink, this is my blood.” This is the blood of the atonement. This is the blood that will be poured out. Now it was pouring out blood that was the role of the high priest. **So Jesus identified himself as high priest** when he said, “which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.” That means for the atonement.

So the Letter to the Hebrews is showing how the work of Christ completes and incorporates the whole meaning of the temple. So now the Church gathers; **the Church is now the living Temple**. You see this found in Ephesians and various New Testament references. The Church, the people, are the living stones of the temple of God, who now dwells among people. And **when they gather for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper they are making present the very blood of the atonement, which is the eternal sacrifice**. So it’s not duplicating anything. **It’s making present on earth a heavenly reality**, which is why in the Eastern churches the sanctuary is always divided by a curtain so that people get the idea that this is a heavenly reality; they shouldn’t even look at it. That never became a custom in the West.

So this is what the Letter to the Hebrews is talking about: the heavenly high priest is the **Word of God incarnate, fully human, able therefore to sympathize with us** in a way that the original high priest could not, whoever that was, whatever that was: an angel, an image, an idea, whatever. But whatever that was could never sympathize with us because that being whatever it may have been couldn’t feel or experience our life. But the new high priest does, the heavenly high priest now, coming down from heaven, becoming human, now **knows all that we experience**, has felt it, has known it. And **all of that becomes part of his offering to the Father**. **So we then join together offering ourselves and our lives to the Father in union with him, because we’ve been united by Baptism**. And that is really the beginning of the sacramental theology in the Catholic Church right here, the Letter to the Hebrews.