

Take-Home: Session 1

A Kingdom of Priests · Before There Were Priests

What We Found

The pattern of priesthood is older than Sinai; we traced it into a garden. Adam was placed in Eden "to till it and keep it," and we found that same Hebrew verb pair, 'abad (serve) and shamar (guard), describing the Levites' work in the sanctuary in Numbers 3:7 to 8. Before there was ever a temple, fathers like Abel, Noah, and Job offered sacrifice for their households. And at Sinai, God named the vocation of the whole people: "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). After the golden calf, that calling was not revoked; in the reading we traced together, it was wounded: the tribe of Levi was taken, in place of the first-born of every family, for sanctuary service under Aaron's priesthood. A priestly people, with a set-apart priesthood inside it. Hold that tension; this study is about what God does with it.

The Sealed Guess

MY GUESS *(write it, seal it, tell no one)*

Tonight we read one strange verse and refused to talk about it: "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High" (Genesis 14:18).

A king, and a priest, who brings out bread and wine, centuries before Moses. Write your guess below: who is this man, and why bread and wine? Then fold this sheet closed. We will open our guesses together later in the study, and no, we will not tell you when.

My guess:

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH **St. John Chrysostom**

"The priesthood is exercised on earth, but ranks among heavenly institutions." A human being, standing on ordinary ground, handling holy things on behalf of others: that pattern is older than every temple.

On the Priesthood, Book 3

VOICE OF THE CHURCH **St. Ephrem the Syrian**

In his Hymns on Paradise, St. Ephrem portrays Eden in the language of a sanctuary: a holy mountain ascending by degrees, with the glory of God at its height, and Adam placed within it as one set apart for communion with God. (A summary of Ephrem's imagery rather than a single quotation.)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Leo the Great

St. Leo teaches, in substance, that all who are reborn in Christ share a royal and priestly dignity: the sign of the cross makes them a kingly people, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit consecrates them as priests. He was preaching to ordinary baptized Christians, people like you.

Sermon 4 (summary of Leo's teaching)

Live It This Week

- Each morning, before your feet hit the floor, offer the day to God in your own words: your work, your family, your frustrations. This is the priestly act of the baptized (the Church calls it a morning offering), and it is Exodus 19:6 in miniature.
- Once this week, out loud and alone if you like, pray for your household by name, interceding for each person the way Job offered for each of his children (Job 1:5).
- Reread Genesis 2 and 3 once, slowly, with a single question in mind: what here looks like a sanctuary?

Memory Verse

"and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Exodus 19:6 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Skim Exodus 28, the vestments of the high priest, and notice what he wears over his heart.

Catechism References

CCC 784; CCC 1539; CCC 1546 to 1547.

Take-Home: Session 2

A Kingdom of Priests · A Kingdom Interrupted

What We Found

We stepped inside the priesthood God gave Israel. The high priest wore the names of the twelve tribes engraved on his shoulders (Exodus 28:12) and set over his heart, "to bring them to continual remembrance before the LORD" (Exodus 28:29): he never entered the sanctuary alone; he carried everyone. In the priestly blessing God dictated in Numbers 6, we found our garden word again: "The LORD bless you and keep you," shamar, the guard-word of Eden. The Levites kept guard around the sanctuary so that wrath would fall on no one. And on the Day of Atonement we heard the system quietly confess its own limit: the high priest had to offer for his own sins first, and the whole thing happened "once in the year," every year, with no finish line anywhere in the text. God gave it and honored it, and by design it never finished. We also faced the prophets' fire against empty ritual, and found Psalm 51 answering itself: God rejects worship without the heart, and still promises delight in "right sacrifices."

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Gregory the Great

In his Pastoral Rule, St. Gregory lingers over the high priest's breastpiece and teaches, in substance, that it is a standing lesson for every shepherd of souls: the one who goes before God for others must carry them engraved on his heart. (A summary of Gregory's teaching.)

Pastoral Rule, Book 2

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"A true sacrifice is every work done in order that we may cling to God in holy fellowship." What God rejected was never the altar; it was the ritual emptied of the offered life it was meant to carry.

City of God, Book 10, chapter 6

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas teaches that the ceremonies of the Old Law were true worship for their own time and prefigurations of Christ: nothing in the Levitical system was fake, and nothing in it was final. (Summary of his teaching on the ceremonial precepts.)

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 102

Live It This Week

- Write down the names of five people you are responsible for or responsible to, and carry the list with you all week. Pray for them by name once a day. You are practicing Exodus 28.

- When your heart drifts into routine at Mass or prayer this week, stop and pray Psalm 51:17: "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."
- Ask God's blessing over one person out loud this week using the words of Numbers 6:24 to 26.

Memory Verse

"The LORD bless you and keep you: The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

Numbers 6:24 to 26 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read Genesis 14:18 to 20 one more time. Keep your guess sealed.

Catechism References

CCC 1539 to 1541; CCC 433.

Take-Home: Session 3

A Kingdom of Priests · A Priest Forever

What We Found

We went back to the stranger. Melchizedek is king of Salem (which is Jerusalem) and "priest of God Most High," a true priest of the true God before Sinai, before Levi, before Israel. In a book obsessed with genealogy, he has none: no father, no mother, no birth, no death recorded, and the silence is deliberate. Abram, carrying the promise for the whole world, is blessed by him and tithes to him: the lesser honored the greater. Then Psalm 110 detonated: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." Sworn: an oath the Levitical priesthood never got. For ever: a priest who does not die and hand it on. And King Uzziah showed us this was never routine royal privilege: he grasped at priestly work and left the temple a leper. Finally, Jesus himself, teaching in the temple in the last week of his life, put this exact psalm at the center of the question of his identity. One thing stayed sealed: the bread and the wine.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Justin Martyr

In his Dialogue with Trypho, St. Justin argues in substance that Psalm 110 cannot finally rest on any merely human king, and points to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High before circumcision was given, as a sign that God's priesthood was never confined to one bloodline. (A summary of Justin's argument.)

Dialogue with Trypho

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

Expounding Psalm 110, St. Augustine teaches in substance that God's oath is the strongest possible language of promise: what God swears concerning this priest is irrevocable, and the "for ever" of verse 4 already rules out any priest who dies and is replaced. (Summary of his exposition.)

Expositions on the Psalms, Psalm 110 (109 in his numbering)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas teaches that the priesthood of the Old Law was a figure of the priesthood of Christ, in whom alone priesthood reaches its full reality. Melchizedek and Aaron are not rivals; both are sketches, in different colors, of the one Priest to come. (Summary of his teaching.)

Summa Theologiae III, q. 22

Live It This Week

- Pray Psalm 110 once a day this week, out loud. The Church prays this psalm at Sunday Evening Prayer II each week; you are joining her.

- Find one person coming out of a battle this week (an exam, a diagnosis, a brutal shift) and bless them concretely: a meal, a message, a prayer said with them.
- You may not change your sealed guess. You may grin.

Memory Verse

"The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek."

Psalms 110:4 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read Hebrews 4:14 to 16, twice. Bring one honest question about what a priest is for.

Catechism References

CCC 1544; CCC 436.

Take-Home: Session 4

A Kingdom of Priests · A High Priest Able to Sympathize

What We Found

We crossed into the New Testament and met the Priest. Hebrews says the Son was "made like his brethren in every respect" so that he might become "a merciful and faithful high priest" (Hebrews 2:17): the Incarnation grounds his solidarity with us, and the Father's own word confers the office (Hebrews 5:5 to 6). He was tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin, and because of him the invitation stands with no fine print: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (Hebrews 4:16), every believer: an access the Church affirms wholeheartedly, alongside and never against the ministry Christ instituted. He did not seize the office; "one does not take the honor upon himself" (Hebrews 5:4), a rule Israel learned through Korah's rebellion and Aaron's staff that budded overnight: priesthood is conferred by God, never self-claimed. The Father appointed the Son with words we already had memorized: "You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek." And behind Hebrews 5:7, "loud cries and tears," we heard Gethsemane, as the Church's tradition has, and our high priest on the ground, consenting to the cup for our sake. Sympathy was purchased at full price.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Gregory of Nazianzus

"What has not been assumed has not been healed." Whatever the priest does not share, he cannot carry to God. Our whole humanity, body, mind, fear, and tears, went into the sanctuary with him.

Letter 101, to Cledonius

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"He is the priest who offers, and he is himself the offering." At the altar of the cross, priest and victim are the same person. Every son of Aaron offered blood not his own, first for his own sins. This priest has no sins of his own, and the blood is his.

City of God, Book 10, chapter 20

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Leo the Great

In his celebrated Tome, received at the Council of Chalcedon, St. Leo teaches that in the one Christ each nature performs what is proper to it in communion with the other: one person, truly God and truly man. That is the deep grammar of our high priest, and why his single offering can carry every human being in it. (A faithful summary of the Tome.)

Letter to Flavian (the Tome), received at the Council of Chalcedon

Live It This Week

- Once a day, pray one sentence of raw honesty at the throne of grace: the thing you actually feel, not the thing you think God prefers to hear. Hebrews 4:16 is your warrant.
- Read Matthew 26:36 to 46 once this week at night, slowly, as the prayer of your high priest for you.
- When temptation hits this week, pray Hebrews 2:18 in your own words: "You were tempted. Help me now."

Memory Verse

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Hebrews 4:16 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read Hebrews chapter 7, slowly, once. You have already met everything in it.

Catechism References

CCC 1544 to 1545; CCC 612.

Take-Home: Session 5

A Kingdom of Priests · Once for All

What We Found

Hebrews 7 agreed with us. Every argument we built about Melchizedek in Session 3 (the loaded silence, the tithe and the blessing, the oath, the "for ever") is the letter's own argument, and it adds the summit: this priest "holds his priesthood permanently," and "always lives to make intercession" for those who draw near through him. Then Hebrews answered Session 2's "once in the year" with the New Testament's great word: once for all. The Levitical priest stood daily because his work never finished; Christ offered a single sacrifice and sat down. We faced the hard question honestly: then what is the Mass? And we found the beginning of the answer where we did not expect it: in heaven, where John sees "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain": the risen Lamb bearing the marks of his one sacrifice at the center of heaven's unending worship (the abiding presence the Church names at CCC 1085); and in Malachi, who foresaw a pure offering made "in every place" among the nations "from the rising of the sun to its setting." One question stayed open on purpose: by whose command does the Church enter that offering? Next session has a date attached: the night before he died.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Chrysostom

"Do we not offer every day? We offer indeed, but making a remembrance of his death... We do not offer another sacrifice, as the high priest of old, but always the same." One victim, one offering, made present: the fourth century answering our question before we asked it.

Homilies on Hebrews, Homily 17

VOICE OF THE CHURCH The Didache

This early church manual, commonly dated to the late first or early second century, tells Christians to gather on the Lord's day, break bread, and give thanks, first confessing sins "so that your sacrifice may be pure," and it invokes Malachi's pure-offering oracle (adapting 1:11 and 1:14) of that assembly. (An early Church document, not a single saint's writing.)

Didache, chapter 14

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Paul II

St. John Paul II teaches, in substance, that the Mass makes sacramentally present the one sacrifice of the Cross: it does not add to it and does not multiply it; the sacrifice remains one, embracing every generation. (A summary of his teaching in his encyclical on the Eucharist.)

Ecclesia de Eucharistia

Live It This Week

- Once this week, name your hardest situation out loud, then pray: "Jesus, you live for ever to intercede for me. I hand this to the priest who never goes off duty."
- If you attend Mass this week, at the elevation of the host, silently pray Revelation 5:6: "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain."
- Find your sealed guess from Session 1. It comes with you next week. STILL SEALED.

Memory Verse

"Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."

Hebrews 7:25 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Bring your sealed guess sheet from Session 1, unopened. That is the whole assignment. Guard it like a Levite.

Catechism References

CCC 1085; CCC 1364; CCC 1366 to 1367.

Take-Home: Session 6

A Kingdom of Priests · Do This

What We Found

The seals came off. Melchizedek, the first priest in the Bible, king of Salem, brought out BREAD AND WINE and blessed Abraham; God swore the Messiah would be a priest for ever after that man's order; and on the night before he died, Jesus took bread and wine, said "This is my body which is given for you... this cup... poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood," and commanded the Twelve: "Do this in remembrance of me." The Supper was a Passover, and the Passover lamb had to be eaten, and the night was fixed for ever as a memorial each generation enters, not just recalls. The cup-word of Matthew and Mark, "my blood of the covenant," quoted Sinai itself, where Moses sealed the covenant in sacrificial blood; Luke's "new covenant in my blood" carries the same grammar. And we were honest: Genesis 14 never calls the bread and wine a sacrifice; it is the whole sweep, Genesis to Psalm 110 to the upper room to the Church's earliest reading, that lights the verse up, read backward from Christ, the way the Church has always read. We also tested the memorial-only reading, the view that the bread and wine are bare symbols and the Supper only a remembrance, against our earliest witness, and found Paul calling the cup "a participation in the blood of Christ" and warning that unworthy eating makes a person "guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord." Paul's severity is hard to square with a merely symbolic account; stronger Protestant views of spiritual presence deserve their own conversation.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Cyprian of Carthage

Writing around the year 253, St. Cyprian teaches that in Melchizedek, priest of God Most High who offered bread and wine and blessed Abraham, the sacrament of the Lord's sacrifice was prefigured: what Melchizedek carried in figure, Christ the true priest fulfilled, offering his own body and blood. You made his argument before you heard his name. (Faithfully summarized from his letter on the Eucharist.)

Letter 63

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Ignatius of Antioch

On the road to martyrdom around the year 107, St. Ignatius warned against those who "abstain from the Eucharist... because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins." Within one lifetime of the upper room, this was the test.

Letter to the Smyrnaeans

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Justin Martyr

Describing Sunday worship to the Roman emperor around the year 155, St. Justin wrote that "not as common bread and common drink do we receive these," but as the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus, over which thanksgiving has been made by the word of prayer that comes from him. The surrounding chapters (65 and 67) describe what your parish still does.

Live It This Week

- At Mass this week, listen for tonight's exact words in the Eucharistic Prayer. You will recognize where its central words were born, especially in the institution narrative.
- Read the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13 to 35) slowly: Scriptures opened, bread broken. Which half of that rhythm is stronger in your life right now?
- Keep your opened guess sheet in your Bible at Genesis 14. Someday, show someone and tell them this story.

Memory Verse

"This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Luke 22:19 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read John 20:19 to 23, twice: the evening of Easter.

Catechism References

CCC 611; CCC 1337; CCC 1363 to 1364.

Take-Home: Session 7

A Kingdom of Priests · Whose Sins You Forgive

What We Found

Easter evening, locked doors, and the risen Christ saying "Peace be with you." Then: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," his own mission, extended through sent men. He BREATHED on them, and we found the ancestry of that gesture in Genesis 2:7: as God's breath once made dust into a living man, Christ's breath now begins the new creation, making ministers who carry the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Forgive or retain: a two-sided authority exercised case by case. Behind Peter's keys we found Isaiah 22, the steward's office in David's house: the background the Church has long heard beneath the keys, a delegated royal authority that outlives its holder. We faced the scribes' own objection, "who can forgive sins but God alone?", and found that Jesus never denied their premise; he proved "the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins," and Matthew records the crowd glorifying God "who had given such authority to MEN." And we were honest about history: the confessional box and frequent private confession developed over centuries, and the Church says so herself (CCC 1447); what Easter evening gave was the authority. The furniture came later; the gift did not.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Chrysostom

Chrysostom marvels, in substance: God has given to priests an authority he gave neither to angels nor archangels; what they carry out below, God ratifies above. He wrote *On the Priesthood* largely to explain why this office frightened him. (Faithfully summarized.)

On the Priesthood, Book 3

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Ambrose of Milan

Writing *On Penance* against those who denied the Church could absolve grave sinners, St. Ambrose argues in substance: the Church does not presume this power, she obeys it. Christ said "whose sins you forgive"; why would he grant a power he intended no one to use? (A summary of his argument.)

On Penance

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"When Peter baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes... even when Judas baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes." (A close paraphrase of his teaching.) In the sacraments the minister's hands move, but the power is never his. The forgiving in the confessional is Christ's, which is why no minister's unworthiness can poison the gift.

Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 6

Live It This Week

- Go to confession this week if you are able, and hear the absolution as Easter evening, still happening. If it has been years, tell the priest exactly that; it is his favorite sentence to hear.
- Speak one out-loud forgiveness to someone who needs the words, not the vibe.
- Pray John 20:21 to 23 once each day, and thank Christ by name for one person through whom his forgiveness has reached you.

Memory Verse

"Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

John 20:21 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read 1 Peter 2:4 to 10 once, with a pen in hand. Circle anything that looks familiar. Trust your memory.

Catechism References

CCC 1441 to 1442; CCC 1444 to 1445; CCC 1447; CCC 1461.

Take-Home: Session 8

A Kingdom of Priests · A Royal Priesthood

What We Found

The title of this study turned out to be your name. "You are a chosen race, a ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, a holy nation, God's own people": Peter, echoing our first memory verse, Exodus 19:6, by way of the Greek Old Testament, over the whole Church. The vocation spoken at Sinai, the arc this study traced, is proclaimed by Peter over the whole Church in Christ, and if you are baptized, that is you. And the priesthood is not a compliment; it has offerings: your body presented as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), a sacrifice of praise, good done and goods shared (Hebrews 13:15 to 16), your work, your family, your patient endurance, offered through Jesus Christ (CCC 1546; for the lay faithful's daily sacrifices, CCC 901). We also gave the Reformation's reading of this verse its full weight, and answered it with two discoveries of our own: Israel held its corporate priestly vocation and an ordained priesthood side by side at God's command (Exodus 19; Exodus 28 to 29; Numbers 16); and 1 Peter itself opens from an apostle and closes with orders to the elders who tend the flock. The letter of the royal priesthood is an officer's letter, and Peter felt no tension, because there is none: the ministers exist AT THE SERVICE of the priestly people (CCC 1547). Both priesthoods at full strength, differing essentially and ordered to one another, with no rivalry.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Leo the Great

Preaching to ordinary baptized Christians in the fifth century, St. Leo teaches in substance that all the reborn share a royal and priestly dignity: the sign of the cross makes them a kingly people, and the anointing of the Spirit consecrates them as priests. This verse was never lost; it was the Church's own preaching all along. (A summary of Leo's teaching.)

Sermon 4

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"The whole redeemed city, that is, the congregation and society of the saints, is offered to God as a universal sacrifice through the great High Priest." Your life is not beside the sacrifice; it is in it.

City of God, Book 10, chapter 6

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thérèse of Lisieux

St. Thérèse teaches, in substance, that the smallest acts, done with great love, become great offerings: a difficult person loved, a hidden chore done, a discomfort accepted without complaint. She is the royal priesthood's field manual for an ordinary Tuesday. (A summary of the heart of her Story of a Soul.)

Story of a Soul

Live It This Week

- Each morning, name one concrete thing from the coming day and offer it out loud: "Father, through Jesus Christ, I offer you this." Watch what it does to the thing.
- At Mass, at the preparation of the gifts, place your week on the paten in your mind: your work, your family, your hardest thing.
- Memorize the memory verse with someone. It is long. It is your name.

Memory Verse

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

1 Peter 2:9 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read 1 Timothy 2:1 to 6 once.

Catechism References

CCC 901; CCC 1546 to 1547.

Take-Home: Session 9

A Kingdom of Priests · One Mediator, Many Fathers

What We Found

We read the two most-quoted verses against Catholic priesthood, whole. 1 Timothy 2:5, "one mediator between God and men," turned out to sit in the same paragraph where Paul COMMANDS "supplications, prayers, intercessions... for all men" and calls it pleasing to God: the one mediation of the ransom is the spring; our intercessions are water from it, not rival wells (the Council states the principle, *Lumen Gentium* 62, quoted at CCC 970: the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but gives rise to, a shared cooperation from the one source). And Matthew 23:9, "call no man father," read in context, forbids three titles (teacher, father, master) as trophies of religious vanity, while the New Testament itself is full of gospel fathers: Paul ("I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel"), Stephen ("our father Abraham," honored ancestral fatherhood), John (writing to "fathers"), and Jesus' own parable ("Father Abraham," twice, uncorrected; Luke 16:24, 30). The positive teaching is Ephesians 3:14 to 15: "every family" (the Greek *patria*, from *pater*, traditionally also rendered "every fatherhood") in heaven and on earth is NAMED from the Father: derived, real, and pointing at the source. And the loop closed: among the first offerers this study met were parents offering for their households; baptized parents still take up that pattern through the common priesthood.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thomas Aquinas

Christ alone is the perfect mediator, who reconciled the human race to God by his death; yet nothing prevents others being called mediators in a qualified sense, as ministers and cooperators participating in the one mediation. Subordinate mediation does not compete with Christ; it hangs from him. (A summary of his teaching on Christ the Mediator.)

Summa Theologiae III, q. 26

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Cyprian of Carthage

"He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother." God fathers his children through a family, the Church our mother; Paul's "I became your father in Christ Jesus" fills in the household.

On the Unity of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Irenaeus of Lyons

St. Irenaeus teaches, in substance, that the one taught the faith from another's mouth is called the son of his teacher, and the teacher his father: begotten in the order of grace. In the second century, gospel fatherhood was ordinary Christian vocabulary. (A summary from his work against the heresies.)

Against Heresies, Book 4

Live It This Week

- Pray 1 Timothy 2:1 to 2 literally once a day: intercede by name for one person in civil authority, whether or not you voted for them.
- Thank one spiritual father or mother in your life this week, specifically.
- If you are a parent or hope to be: bless your children aloud once this week with the Numbers 6 blessing: parents exercising the baptismal priesthood of the domestic church.

Memory Verse

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named."

Ephesians 3:14 to 15 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read 2 Timothy 1:3 to 14 once. Notice what Paul says was given, and how.

Catechism References

CCC 970; CCC 2634 to 2636.

Take-Home: Session 10

A Kingdom of Priests · The Laying On of Hands

What We Found

We watched the ministry get handed on, on the page. The Church's first item of business was filling Judas' vacant OFFICE (Acts 1:20, the overseership word), an office that outlives its holder, a pattern this study heard alongside the steward's key of Isaiah 22. Elders were appointed "in every church" (Acts 14:23); the Ephesian elders were made overseers "to care for the church of God" (Acts 20:28); and the Pastorals gave us the ordination grammar: a GIFT, given THROUGH the laying on of hands (2 Timothy 1:6), guarded by the warning "do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Timothy 5:22). We counted four generations in one verse: Paul, to Timothy, to faithful men, to others also (2 Timothy 2:2). We conceded honestly that the New Testament never calls a Christian minister hieres (a sacrificing priest); through much of that period the Temple still stood, and the word-family had gone to Christ and, collectively, to the whole baptized people. But Paul described his own ministry as "the PRIESTLY SERVICE of the gospel of God, so that the OFFERING of the Gentiles may be acceptable" (Romans 15:16); and in the generation after the apostles (traditionally around 96), Clement of Rome described succession as the apostles' own arrangement. One delight to keep: the English word "priest" descends from presbyteros, the New Testament's own word for these men.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Clement of Rome

Writing traditionally around the year 96, St. Clement teaches in substance: Christ from God, the apostles from Christ; the apostles appointed bishops and deacons, and provided that when these men died, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. (A faithful summary of his letter.)

Letter to the Corinthians (1 Clement), chapters 42 and 44

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Ignatius of Antioch

"Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he has entrusted it... where the bishop is, there let the people be." Around the year 107, ordered ministry and the Eucharist are already one fabric.

Letter to the Smyrnaeans

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against secret Gnostic "traditions," St. Irenaeus teaches in substance that the Church's answer is public and checkable: we can enumerate the men appointed bishops by the apostles, and their successors, down to our own day. Succession was the second century's receipt. (A summary from his work against the heresies.)

Against Heresies, Book 3

Live It This Week

- Pray daily for your pastor and your bishop by name.
- Take one step in your own relay: teach one thing you have received to one specific person.
- If you have ever felt a pull toward priesthood or religious life, or love someone who might, say one honest prayer about it this week.

Memory Verse

"Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands."

2 Timothy 1:6 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read John 13:1 to 15 once: the Teacher and Lord with a towel around his waist, the night everything was handed over.

Catechism References

CCC 861 to 862; CCC 1578.

Take-Home: Session 11

A Kingdom of Priests · In the Person of Christ

What We Found

We finally asked whose "my" the priest speaks at the consecration: "this is MY body." As the priest's own sentence it is absurd; it only makes sense if Another is speaking through him, the true priest of every Mass doing what he did in the upper room. The Church calls this in persona Christi, and we found the phrase's address in the New Testament itself: 2 Corinthians 2:10, where Paul forgives "in the presence of Christ," en prosopo Christou, which the Latin Bible has rendered "in the person of Christ" since the late fourth century (we noted honestly that the Greek word spans face, presence, and person, that its sense in Paul is debated, and that the verse gives the phrase its genealogy, not a proof). Christ's own words carry the concept with no Latin needed: "he who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16), and "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). We handled two honest topics: celibacy is a discipline of the Latin Church, not a dogma (the Eastern Catholic Churches ordain married men, and the Catechism says so at CCC 1579 to 1580), embraced for the kingdom's sake in Jesus' and Paul's own categories; and the scandal of unworthy ministers, faced without excuses: sins that exploit the sacred office or the persons entrusted to it carry a gravity and scandal all their own; and yet a minister's sin does not invalidate the sacraments, because they never ran on his holiness: even if Judas baptizes, Christ baptizes. Where the Church's ordinary conditions were in place, your baptism is valid and the absolution that freed you was real.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Vianney

"The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus." The Catechism itself quotes the holy Curé of Ars saying it (CCC 1589). Vianney was by every account a limited man; in persona Christi is why his confessional needed a sixteen-hour line. The office was never about the size of the man.

Quoted in CCC 1589

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Gregory of Nazianzus

Ordained against his will, St. Gregory withdrew for a time, then wrote in substance: the guiding of souls is the art of arts and the science of sciences, and the man who must stand between God and the people ought to tremble first. The saints took this office seriously enough to be terrified of it. (A summary of his Second Oration.)

Oration 2

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thomas Aquinas

The priest consecrates not by his own power but as the minister of Christ, in whose person he speaks; which is why the sacrament does not fail when the minister is unworthy, since the power at work was never the minister's own. (A summary of his teaching on the minister of the Eucharist.)

Summa Theologiae III, q. 82

Live It This Week

- At Mass, when the priest says "this is my body," silently pray: "Jesus, that is your my."
- Write and send a short, specific note of gratitude to a priest who has served you.
- If the scandal discussion touched a wound of yours, do one gentle thing about it this week: a trusted conversation, an honest prayer of anger and grief, or a conversation with a priest who has earned your trust.

Memory Verse

"So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

2 Corinthians 5:20 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read Revelation 1:1 to 8 once. Last session, we go to heaven. Bring your Session 1 Take-Home if you still have it.

Catechism References

CCC 1548; CCC 1550; CCC 1579 to 1581; CCC 1584; CCC 1589.

Take-Home: Session 12

A Kingdom of Priests · A Kingdom of Priests

What We Found

We ended in heaven, and everything was there. John opens the Bible's last book singing our first memory verse over the persecuted Church as accomplished fact: he "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father." In the throne room: the Lamb **STANDING**, as though slain, the risen Lamb bearing the marks of his once-for-all sacrifice at the center of a liturgy that never ends; twenty-four **ELDERS** (presbyteroi, the word we traced through Acts) enthroned around the throne; and golden bowls of incense "which are the prayers of the saints": your prayers, arriving as liturgy. The new song gathers every thread: ransomed from every tribe and tongue, "made them a kingdom and priests to our God." And the last two chapters return to the garden: the river, the tree of life, no more curse, gates that never shut because "nothing unclean shall enter": the serving and the guarding this study traced from Eden, kept at last in the Lamb, and his servants "shall see his face." We tested our whole method one final time and found that at every load-bearing joint, Scripture drew the connections and we discovered them with the texts open: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." And we were sent: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Teaching the newly baptized, St. Cyril says in substance: when the priest cries "Lift up your hearts," answer truly, for in that most awesome hour the heart belongs with God on high; and the Holy, Holy, Holy is the seraphim's own hymn, so that our song and heaven's are one. The Sunday liturgy participates in the heavenly liturgy (CCC 1090). (A summary of his mystagogical instruction.)

Mystagogical Catecheses

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Irenaeus of Lyons

"The glory of God is a living man, and the life of man is the vision of God." The end of the whole priestly story, from Eden's first charge to the last page, is a face seen, and human beings fully alive in the seeing.

Against Heresies, Book 4

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what shall be in the end without end." The final sentence of the City of God describes the final state of the kingdom of priests: rest, vision, love, praise, without end.

City of God, Book 22, chapter 30

Live It: From Here On

- Keep the one practice you named at the commissioning for the next ninety days. Priesthood is a daily office, not a study topic.
- Next Sunday, enter Mass through Revelation's door: the throne, the Lamb standing as slain, the bowls of incense. Arrive early enough to remember where you are.
- Hand it on: invite someone specific into the next study, or lead one. "Entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2) is now yours, and the relay belongs to the whole priestly people, women and men alike.

Memory Verse

"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

Revelation 1:5 to 6 (RSV2CE)

Where to Go from Here

Read the Letter to the Hebrews straight through in one or two sittings; after these twelve weeks, it will read like a letter written to you. And keep the first memory verse where you can see it. It was never just Israel's vocation. It is your name: a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Catechism References

CCC 128 to 130; CCC 1090; CCC 1137 to 1139.