

A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

A Catholic Journey Through the Letter to the Hebrews

Session 4 • The Throne of Grace • Hebrews 4:14–5:10

LEADER'S GUIDE • NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Part 1 • Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers what a priest is (taken from among men, appointed by God, offering gifts and sacrifices for sins, dealing gently with the wayward), watches Jesus meet every clause of the job description, and hears, at last, the second oracle of Psalm 110: the enthronement psalm contains an ordination. A name not spoken since Genesis surfaces, and is left gleaming and unexplained.

Catholic Touchstone. The throne of grace, and the confessional as its embassy. “Let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy” (4:16): the boldness (*parrhēsia*) the Catechism calls straightforward simplicity and humble boldness before the Father (CCC 2778). Tonight's steelman meets the sincere objection to confessing to a priest, and answers it from this chapter's own definition of what priests are for.

What You Need to Know

The first “we have.” 4:14 opens a new register: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens.” After three chapters of warnings and ifs, the sermon begins declaring possessions, and it will keep doing so to its last page. Tonight starts your private We-Have inventory (4:14 tonight, and watch every session hereafter); its final entry, many weeks out, is the study's last discovery. Log silently.

Sympathy without sin (4:15), and last week's answer confirmed. “We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.” This is Session 2's steelman answer stated as doctrine: the sinless one knows temptation's full weight precisely because he never dropped it. The pastoral corollary is 4:16's therefore: because the one on the throne has our nerves and our scars, approach is not presumption; it is the intended use of the throne. Note the noun: a throne of grace. Thrones dispense verdicts; this one dispenses mercy and timely help.

The job description (5:1–4). The sermon defines the office before claiming it for Christ, and the definition is a gift to Catholic catechesis: every high priest is (1) chosen from among men, one of those he represents; (2) appointed in things pertaining to God on their behalf; (3) an offerer of gifts and sacrifices for sins; (4) able to deal gently (*metriopatheō*, to moderate his feeling, neither indulgent nor harsh) with the ignorant and wayward, because he himself wears weakness; and (5) not self-appointed: “one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was.” Vocation, not ambition. The group builds this list themselves in Question 4, and the steelman cashes it.

The oracle, and the staged reveal. 5:5–6 shows Christ's appointment by stitching two psalms: Psalm 2:7 (“Thou art my Son”, Session 1's coronation) and then, read aloud at last, Psalm 110:4: “Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek.” The psalm the group has been forbidden since Session 1 turns out to contain an ordination: the enthroned King of verse 1 is, by God's own oath, a priest for ever in verse 4. And the order is not Aaron's; it belongs to a name not heard since Genesis. Manage the reveal in stages: tonight the oracle is read and the name arrives (5:6, 5:10), and that is all. Do not open Genesis 14, do not explain who Melchizedek was, do not unseal the guesses. The sermon itself models the restraint: it drops the name twice and then says “about this we have much to say” and changes the subject for a chapter. Session 6 opens the file; the sealed guesses open there. Tonight the mystery is allowed to deepen, which is exactly what the preacher engineered.

Gethsemane in the epistles (5:7–9). “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear.” The clearest reference to Gethsemane outside the Gospels, and note the sermon's verbs: he offered up prayers: the agony in the garden described as a priestly offering. “He was heard”: not by escaping death, but through it, in resurrection. And “he learned obedience through what he suffered... being made perfect”: the consecration language of Session 2 again (teleioō): obedience under agony is what vested him. Handle the precision as before: learning obedience is not correcting disobedience; it is the eternal Son's human will acquiring, experience by experience, what obedience costs in flesh.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 28:1. “Then bring near to you Aaron your brother... to serve me as priests.” Aaron did not apply; he was summoned. The live discovery grounding 5:4: priesthood in Israel was never a career path but a call, which is why Korah's self-promotion (Numbers 16) ended as it did.

Psalm 110:1 and 110:4, together at last. The group has known verse 1 since Session 1. Tonight the whole psalm is read and the second oracle lands: the same figure seated at God's right hand is sworn a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek. One psalm, two offices, one person: king and priest, which no man in Israel could lawfully be at once (King Uzziah tried and left the temple a leper, 2 Chronicles 26). The psalm was always waiting for someone who could hold both.

The garden, alongside. Matthew 26:36–44 or Luke 22:41–44 read next to 5:7–8: the loud cries and tears located, the cup prayed over three times, the obedience learned in the olive press (Gethsemane means oil press; the detail preaches itself).

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom *On the Priesthood*

The priesthood is exercised on earth but ranks among heavenly things, Chrysostom writes, for neither man nor angel nor any created power, but the Paraclete himself, instituted it; and to men God has given a power he gave neither to angels nor archangels, for what priests do below, God ratifies above. Chrysostom is expounding delegated stewardship, never rivalry: the wonder is that the great High Priest shares his work with clay.

St. John Vianney *Catechetical Instructions*

The Curé of Ars, patron of parish priests, taught his village that the priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus: when you see a priest, he said, think of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Catechism itself quotes him (CCC 1589). Whatever a poor confessor's personal failings, the office he carries is the gentleness of 5:2 sacramentalized: mercy with an address and office hours.

St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*

The Angelic Doctor teaches that Christ is both priest and victim: in every sacrifice, priest and offering are distinct, but on the cross the offerer and the offered are one, which is why his one sacrifice is definitive and complete, needing no rival and no repetition, while his priesthood remains forever active. The Mass adds nothing to it and competes with nothing in it: the Eucharist is that same one sacrifice of the cross made sacramentally present on the altar (CCC 1367). The oath of Psalm 110:4 (“for ever”) means his priesthood did not retire at the Ascension; it reigns.

Catechism Connection

CCC 2778. The boldness of 4:16 named and defined: parrhēsia, straightforward simplicity, filial trust, humble boldness, the certainty of being loved. The Our Father's opening word rests on tonight's therefore.

CCC 1465. In the sacrament of Penance the priest is the sign and instrument of God's merciful love: fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd, the good Samaritan, the father awaiting the prodigal. Hebrews 5:2's dealing gently, given a chair and a stole.

CCC 1589. The Catechism hands the last word on priesthood to St. John Vianney: the priest continues the work of redemption on earth; the priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.

CCC 612. The agony at Gethsemane: the Son accepts in his human will the Father's saving plan. The Catechism connects that obedience under agony with Hebrews 5:7-8, the same connection tonight draws.

Thread Watch

THREAD 1 · PSALM 110 · THE ORACLE SURFACES (STAGED REVEAL)

Tonight the psalm is finally read whole and the name arrives: Melchizedek, at 5:6 and 5:10. Stage discipline: the name lands, the mystery deepens, and the file stays closed. Do not open Genesis 14, do not characterize Melchizedek beyond what the psalm says, and do not unseal the guesses. The sermon itself changes the subject for a full chapter after dropping the name; so do we. Session 6 opens everything. Announce only this: “The guesses stay sealed one more session.”

THREAD 3 · THE WE-HAVE INVENTORY (OPENS TONIGHT, LEADER ONLY)

First entry: “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens” (4:14). Keep the list private; it runs to the study's final night.

THREAD 2 · THE BETTER TALLY (PUBLIC)

Still no kreittōn tonight; the board holds at one, three weeks running. Tell the group to enjoy the calm: the word is about to start falling like hail.

Session Goals

1. The therefore of 4:14–16 lands: sympathy on the throne makes approach the intended use of it.
2. The group builds the five-clause job description of a priest from 5:1–4 themselves.
3. Psalm 110 is read whole; the king-and-priest fusion astonishes; the name arrives and stays sealed.
4. Gethsemane is heard as a priestly offering, with the teleioō precision kept.
5. The confession steelman is answered from the chapter's own definition, and at least one participant leaves planning to use the throne's embassy.

Time Note

Built for 75 to 90 minutes. If the night runs short, compress the Gethsemane parallel (Question 7) to a single reading with one observation and cut the Dig Deeper box, in that order. Do not cut the job-description build (Question 4), the Psalm 110 reading (Question 5), or the steelman (Question 8). Cap the steelman at fifteen minutes. No ANSWER box is a script.

Part 2 · Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Father, we come with confidence to the throne of grace, because the one who sits there has our flesh, our scars, and our name. Give us tonight the humble boldness of children: honest about our weakness, certain of your mercy, unafraid of your nearness. Teach us what a priest is, and show us the Priest. Through the same Jesus Christ, who ever lives to intercede. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

W1. Whose door can you walk through without knocking, and how did the relationship get to that point? What does that kind of access feel like from the inside?

W2. Homework check: did you find the sentence that begins “we have,” and the name from Genesis? Say the name out loud, everyone who found it, and nothing more about it. Tonight has rules.

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 4:14–16

1. After three chapters of warnings, the sermon changes key: “we have a great high priest.” Two descriptions follow in verse 15, both negatives flipped positive: what is he not unable to do, and what did he not do? Put the two together: what kind of person results?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Not unable to sympathize: he has our weaknesses' full acquaintance, “in every respect tempted as we are.” And: without sinning. Together: perfect sympathy joined to perfect holiness, a combination no merely human helper brings us. (If Our Lady comes to mind, rightly: her sinlessness is her Son's own grace at work in her, and she is not the priest on the throne.) Our sympathizers share our falls; our saints can feel far away. He alone knows temptation's maximum weight (Session 2's discovery: only the one who never yields feels all of it) and holds it with a brother's face. That person is on the throne.

2. Therefore (4:16): “let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.” Weigh each word: why a throne, why of grace, why confidence (the Greek *parrhēsia* means the bold, free speech of a child at home), and what two things are dispensed there? What does this verse do to the instinct that says clean yourself up first, then approach?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

A throne: authority is not suspended for mercy's sake; mercy reigns from it. Of grace: the throne's business is gift, not audit. Confidence: *parrhēsia*, the unguarded speech of family (CCC 2778 defines it as humble boldness, the certainty of being loved). And what is dispensed: mercy for what is behind you, grace to help for what is ahead, “in time of need”: not after the need has been survived. The clean-up-first instinct has the direction backwards: the throne is where the cleaning happens.

You do not wash before this bath.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 5:1–4

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to find and read Exodus 28:1.

3. How does Aaron become a priest, according to Exodus: whose initiative, whose choice? And Hebrews 5:4 makes it a rule: “one does not take the honor upon himself.” Why would self-appointed priesthood be a contradiction in terms?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God tells Moses to bring Aaron near; Aaron is summoned, not self-made. A priest represents men before God, and representation is meaningless if it is seized: only the one being approached can say who approaches on others' behalf. Priesthood is vocation all the way down, which is why Israel's one famous self-promotion (Korah, Numbers 16) is remembered as the ground opening. Hold this clause; verse 5 is about to apply it to someone surprising.

4. Now build the full job description from 5:1–4 on paper: list every clause of what a high priest is. There are five. Which clause surprises you most, and why is the gentleness clause (5:2, dealing gently with the ignorant and wayward, “since he himself is beset with weakness”) built on weakness rather than in spite of it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The five: chosen from among men, one of those he represents; appointed to act on their behalf in things pertaining to God; offering gifts and sacrifices for sins; dealing gently (*metriopatheō*, feeling in measure, neither harsh nor indulgent) with the ignorant and wayward; and called by God, never self-appointed. The gentleness clause is the jewel: a priest's own weakness is not an embarrassment to the office but an ingredient of it, the thing that teaches his hands to be careful. Keep this list visible; the steelman will need it, and so will verse 5.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 5:5–6, and then, at last, ask someone to read Psalm 110 whole, verses 1 through 7.

5. Three sessions ago we read verse 1 of this psalm and closed the book. Now hear the whole of it. What does verse 4 add to the figure of verse 1, how is it sworn, and for how long? And put the two oracles together: what impossible combination does this psalm demand, and why impossible? (One king of Judah tried it: 2 Chronicles 26:16–21.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Verse 1 enthrones a king at God's right hand; verse 4 ordains the same figure a priest, by God's own oath, for ever, “after the order of Melchizedek.” King and priest in one person: which Israel's constitution forbade absolutely. Kings came from Judah, priests from Levi, and the offices were walled apart; when King Uzziah seized a censer, he left the temple a leper. The psalm has been demanding, for a thousand years, a person who could lawfully hold both crowns, and demanding him from an order older than Levi, under a name that has not been spoken since the fourteenth

chapter of Genesis. Hebrews 5:5–6 says God addressed both oracles to Christ: not self-appointed (the rule of 5:4 holds even for him), but called, by the same voice that said “Thou art my Son.”

SPOILER GUARD: The name is on the table and the file stays closed. Do not open Genesis 14, do not describe Melchizedek, do not unseal the guesses. If the room begs, and it should, say: “The

sermon drops this name twice tonight and then changes the subject for an entire chapter, on purpose. So will we. Next session but one, we open everything.”

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 5:7–10

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to read Luke 22:41–44 alongside.

6. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears.” Where are we, and notice the sermon's verb: offered up. What is the agony in the garden being described as, and what does “he was heard” mean, given that the cup was not taken away?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Gethsemane, the oil press, where the obedience was pressed out of him drop by drop. And the verb is sacrificial: he offered his prayers, loud cries, and tears: the garden was already liturgy, the priest presenting the first matter of his sacrifice, himself: an offering begun in the olive press and consummated on Calvary, and nowhere else. “He was heard for his godly fear”: not by exemption from death but through death, in resurrection: the Father's answer to “remove this cup” was an empty tomb, which is a larger yes than the one requested. Some prayers are heard at a depth the asker could not have specified.

7. “He learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation” (5:8–9). Careful now, with Session 2's precision in hand: what does the sinless, eternal Son learn, and what does “made perfect” mean here? What did suffering add?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Not correction: he had no disobedience to unlearn. The eternal Son, having assumed a real human will, acquired in it, experience by experience, what obedience costs in flesh: knowing obedience as God knows all things is not the same as having obeyed, in nerves and hours, under agony. And “made perfect” is *teleiōō* again, the consecration word: the suffering did not repair him; it vested him, completing his qualification as the priest who has been where the represented are. Suffering added nothing to his divinity and everything to his credentials as our high priest: designated by God, the verse finishes, after the order of that name again (5:10).

8. Now tonight's steelman, at full strength, because it is asked in love by Protestant friends and by half the Catholics who have drifted from the confessional: why confess to a priest? There is one mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5); this very chapter says draw near to the throne with confidence; God can forgive me directly on my couch. Doesn't a man

in a box interpose exactly what Hebrews removes? Give it full weight. Then bring tonight's own material: the job description of 5:1–4, the gentleness clause, John 20:21–23, and what a concrete word of absolution does that a couch cannot.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The objection guards the right treasure: the one mediation of Christ and the open throne, both non-negotiable. But test its picture of priesthood against tonight's chapter: a priest, by this sermon's own definition, is not a barrier between men and God; he is "chosen from among men... to act on behalf of men in relation to God," appointed precisely to be the shape mercy takes among the people. And the risen Christ, with Easter's first breath, built exactly that shape into his Church: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven" (John 20:21–23): a sentence with no meaning unless some men were commissioned to forgive in his name. The confessor does not compete with the throne of grace; he is its embassy: the sacrament in which the High Priest's gentleness with the ignorant and wayward (5:2) acquires a voice, a face, and a verdict you can hear with your ears. That last point is the pastoral heart. Say it plainly first: God does forgive outside the confessional; the Church herself teaches that perfect contrition, joined to the firm intention to confess grave sin sacramentally as soon as possible, obtains forgiveness even before absolution (CCC 1452). But notice what the sacrament adds: the couch leaves you searching your own heart for assurance, while the absolution is forgiveness you can hear when you feel nothing, spoken by Christ through the man he sent (CCC 1465: the priest as sign and instrument of the Father awaiting the prodigal); and for grave sin the road of contrition itself runs, by the Church's own teaching, to the confessional. Confession is not a detour around 4:16. It is 4:16 with an address, and the confidence to draw near is exactly what it manufactures. If it has been a while for anyone in this room: the throne keeps office hours nearby.

DIG DEEPER

Christ "passed through the heavens" (4:14): the high priest of Israel passed through the courts and the veil into the Holy of Holies once a year; this high priest passed through the created heavens themselves into the true sanctuary. If the group has one more breath, ask what the Ascension is, on this sentence's terms: not a departure but an entrance, the priest going in. The thought will be waiting for us again in a few weeks.

SEND · TAKING IT OUT THE DOOR

S1. "With confidence": is that honestly how you approach God after a fall, or do you self-quarantine first? What would using the throne as designed look like this week, the day of the fall instead of three days after?

S2. When did you last draw near through the throne's embassy? If the answer embarrasses you, no one here is auditing; but 5:2 promises gentleness, and the office hours stand. What is actually between you and going?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray Hebrews 4:16 each morning as your approach: “I draw near with confidence to the throne of grace,” and bring the day’s actual need with it, in time of need, not after.
2. Go to confession this week if you can, or make the plan concrete: parish, day, time. Bring 5:2 in with you.
3. Read Hebrews 5:11–6:20 before next session. Fair warning: the preacher is about to scold his congregation, and then say something that has frightened readers for two thousand years. Read it anyway, all the way to the last verse, and notice what the last verse holds.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

HEBREWS 4:16 (RSV2CE)

“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.”

CLOSING PRAYER

Great High Priest, who passed through the heavens and did not pass us by: you were tempted in every respect, you wept in the garden, you learned in our flesh what obedience costs, and you were not ashamed of any of it. Give us the confidence you died to purchase. Bring each of us, soon, to the throne of grace and to its embassy, and deal gently with us there, as you promised. In your name, priest for ever. Amen.

Part 3 • Leader Reference Card

Every passage used or assigned in Session 4, in order of appearance.

PRIMARY TEXT

Hebrews 4:14–16 • 5:1–4 • 5:5–6 • 5:7–10

LIVE DISCOVERY PASSAGES

Exodus 28:1 (Aaron summoned) • Psalm 110, entire, at last • Luke 22:41–44 (Gethsemane)

STEELMAN PASSAGES (QUESTION 8)

1 Timothy 2:5 (the objection) • Hebrews 5:1–4 and John 20:21–23 (the answer) • CCC 1465

LEADER BACKGROUND

Numbers 16 (Korah) • 2 Chronicles 26:16–21 (Uzziah's censer) • Matthew 26:36–44 • CCC 612

CATECHISM

CCC 2778 • CCC 1465 • CCC 1589 • CCC 612

MEMORY VERSE

Hebrews 4:16

NEXT SESSION

Session 5 covers Hebrews 5:11–6:20: the rebuke, the warning that has frightened readers for two millennia, and the anchor. The night ends on a cliffhanger; prepare to enforce it.