

A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

A Catholic Journey Through the Letter to the Hebrews

Session 12 · We Have an Altar · Hebrews 13

LEADER'S GUIDE · NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Part 1 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The sermon lands: love continuing, hospitality entertaining angels, marriage honored, money loosened by the promise “I will never fail you nor forsake you,” and then the sentence the whole study has been inventorying toward: “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat” (13:10). The We-Have inventory is read aloud and completed; the Better Tally is totaled; Jesus Christ is confessed the same yesterday and today and for ever; and the group is sent: outside the camp, bearing his reproach, offering the sacrifice of praise, and multiplying what they have received.

Catholic Touchstone. The altar (CCC 1182 cites 13:10 for the altar of the New Covenant), an altar you eat from: sacrifice and communion in one piece of furniture: handled with hedged honesty about the verse's range of readings; the sacrifice of praise and shared goods as the baptized priesthood's daily offerings (13:15–16; CCC 1368); and the study's commissioning: spiritual multiplication: what you received, you now lead others into.

What You Need to Know

The send-off's texture (13:1–6). After twelve chapters of summit theology, the sermon descends to Tuesday: let brotherly love continue; show hospitality to strangers, “for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Abraham at Mamre, Genesis 18, the live discovery: the man who fed three strangers fed the Lord); remember prisoners “as though in prison with them”; let marriage be held in honor; keep life free from love of money, “and be content with what you have”: and the ground of contentment is a quotation: “I will never fail you nor forsake you,” so that “we can confidently say, The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.” Note the logic for the group: contentment is not budgeting technique but theology: the antidote to grasping is a promise about presence. Greed is fear of abandonment wearing a money clip; “never forsake you” defunds it.

13:8, the study's hinge verse. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.” Placed between remembering dead leaders (13:7) and resisting strange teachings (13:9): leaders change, fashions change, the Priest does not. It gathers the whole sermon: the Son through whom the ages were made (yesterday), the intercessor appearing now (today), the priest for ever by oath (for ever): and it is the memory verse. Let it do its own work.

The altar (13:10–12), with hedged honesty. “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.” The final We-Have, and the strangest: an altar is for sacrifice, yet this one is eaten from: sacrifice and communion in one clause. The sermon's own logic (13:11–12): the Yom Kippur sin

offerings were never eaten: their bodies were burned outside the camp (Leviticus 16:27, the live discovery): so Jesus, the true sin offering, “suffered outside the gate”: and yet, unlike those offerings, this sacrifice is given to be eaten: the one sin offering in history that becomes a meal. Now the honesty: what precisely is “the altar”? Readings differ in the tradition itself: the cross; the heavenly sanctuary; the Eucharistic table: and they are not rivals, since the Church’s altar is precisely where the sacrifice of the cross, presented in heaven, is made present and eaten (the whole architecture of Sessions 7 through 9). The Catechism cites this verse for the Christian altar (CCC 1182: the altar of the New Covenant is the Lord’s Cross, from which the sacraments of the Paschal mystery flow; the altar is also the table of the Lord), and altar language was Eucharistic from the earliest post-apostolic witness (St. Ignatius of Antioch, an independent early voice: one Eucharist, one altar, one bishop). Present the range, then the convergence: whichever wall the verse faces, the room it describes is the one where Catholics kneel. Do not overclaim; the convergence is more persuasive than any forced single reading.

Outside the camp, and the two sacrifices that remain (13:13–16). “Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.” The sermon’s last movement is a door, not a chair: the festal mountain of Session 11 is entered through the city gate’s wrong side, where the reproach is: respectability was never the address. And what do the sent offer? “Through him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God”: the baptized priesthood’s two offerings: praise and shared goods (CCC 1368: the lives, praise, sufferings, and work of the faithful, united to Christ’s offering): the once-for-all sacrifice does not end sacrifice; it ends atonement-by-us and frees every remaining offering to be gratitude.

The threads retire; the benediction sends. Total the Better Tally with ceremony (the common count lands around thirteen: better things (6:9), better hope (7:19), better covenant (7:22), better promises (8:6, with the covenant making it two), better sacrifices (9:23), better possession (10:34), better country (11:16), better life (11:35), something better (11:40), a better word (12:24), plus the contested 1:4 (superior to angels: same Greek word: award it) and 7:7 if the group logged it: let their number stand; the point is the pattern: the whole sermon is a comparative adjective with a doxology attached). Read the We-Have inventory aloud, slowly, as the study’s final liturgy: a great high priest who has passed through the heavens (4:14); an anchor of the soul entering behind the veil (6:19); such a high priest, seated and serving (8:1); confidence to enter the sanctuary (10:19); a great priest over the house of God (10:21); an altar (13:10): and, from tonight, no lasting city here (13:14): the inventory of a rich people traveling light. Then the benediction (13:20–21), one of Scripture’s most beautiful: “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will”: pray it over the group by name if the room allows. And the commissioning: spiritual multiplication: this study was never meant to terminate in its participants: identify who will lead next, and what they will lead: the natural pairing is Revelation (the liturgy Hebrews explains is the liturgy John saw): Hebrews tells you what the Mass is; Revelation shows you what it looks like from the other side of the veil. Send in twos.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 18:1–8. Abraham at the oaks of Mamre: three strangers, a rushed feast, and the Lord at the table unawares: the charter of 13:2's hospitality. The tradition has always heard more than etiquette here; hospitality is a sacrament of encounter.

Leviticus 16:27. The Day of Atonement's disposal clause: the sin offerings' bodies carried outside the camp and burned: no one ate them. The live discovery that detonates 13:10–12: Jesus fulfilled the pattern (outside the gate) and shattered it (his offering is eaten).

Joshua's and David's refrain. “I will never fail you nor forsake you” gathers Deuteronomy 31:6, Joshua 1:5: the commissioning promise, now applied to bank accounts: leader background for 13:5–6.

Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Philadelphians*

Writing in the early second century, while the apostles' own students still lived, the martyr-bishop urges: be careful to observe one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his blood; one altar, as there is one bishop. Ignatius is not quoting Hebrews, and his witness is the more striking for that: independently of this sermon, the earliest post-apostolic Church already treated her altar as a present-tense fact of her worship, not a metaphor she remembered but a table she gathered at, and its oneness guarded her unity.

St. Augustine *The City of God*

The great architecture of Augustine's mind is 13:14 expanded to twenty-two books: two cities, built by two loves, and the Christian a pilgrim of the city which is to come, using the earthly city's peace without settling for it. Here we have no lasting city: Augustine watched Rome itself fall while he wrote, and testified that the pilgrim people lost nothing that was truly theirs.

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews*

Closing his own course of sermons on this letter, Chrysostom presses the sacrifice of praise on his hearers: this offering needs no knife, no fire, no altar of stone: only a grateful heart and lips that confess: and it is the one sacrifice a poor man can offer as magnificently as an emperor. Do good and share what you have, he echoes: God is not worshiped past the church door less than within it.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1182. The altar of the New Covenant is the Lord's Cross, from which the sacraments of the Paschal mystery flow; on the altar, the sacrifice of the Cross is made present under sacramental signs; and the altar is also the table of the Lord. The Catechism's own gloss on tonight's final We-Have: sacrifice and communion, one piece of furniture.

CCC 1368. The Church unites her offering to Christ's intercession: the lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value. The sacrifice of praise and the shared goods of 13:15–16, doctrinally located.

CCC 2544–2547. Poverty of heart and abandonment to providence: freedom from love of money grounded in trust: 13:5–6 as the Catechism teaches it.

CCC 1544 (revisited). The study's first Catechism paragraph returns for its last night: everything the old priesthood prefigured finds fulfillment in Christ, the unique high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Twelve weeks later, the group can now teach this sentence.

Thread Watch

THREAD 3 · THE WE-HAVE INVENTORY · COMPLETES AND IS READ TONIGHT

Final entries: “we have an altar” (13:10) and the inversion “here we have no lasting city” (13:14). Read the full inventory aloud at Question 8, slowly, as liturgy: high priest, anchor, seated priest, confidence, great priest over the house, altar: and no lasting city. The strangest possession list in literature: everything needed for worship and pilgrimage, nothing for settling.

THREAD 2 · THE BETTER TALLY · TOTALED TONIGHT

Bring the board. Collect predictions before the count, then total: the common count runs about thirteen (1:4's “superior” is the same Greek word *kreitton*: award it; rule generously on 7:7 and 12:24). Let the group's number stand: then ask the only question that matters: better than what, and for whom? The whole sermon is that adjective, aimed at drifting hearts.

THE COMMISSIONING (THE STUDY'S LAST MOVE)

Multiplication is the final Send: identify by name who will lead next and what they will lead. The natural pairing is a study of Revelation: Hebrews explains what the Mass is; Revelation shows what it looks like from heaven's side. Send leaders in twos; set a start month before anyone leaves the room.

Session Goals

1. The Tuesday commands land: hospitality, prisoners, marriage, money, each grounded in the God who does not forsake.
2. 13:8 gathers the sermon: the same yesterday, today, for ever.
3. The altar discovery fires with hedged honesty, Leviticus 16:27 detonating 13:10–12: the sin offering that became a meal.
4. The threads retire in ceremony: inventory read, tally totaled.
5. The group is sent: outside the camp, offering praise and shared goods, with next leaders named and commissioned.

Time Note

Built for 90 minutes; the finale earns the full evening. If forced, compress the leaders-and-teachings questions (fold 13:7 and 13:9 into Question 4's frame) and cut the Dig Deeper, in that order. Do not cut

the altar discovery (Questions 5 and 6), the thread ceremonies (Questions 8 and 9), or the commissioning (the Send). No ANSWER box is a script: and tonight, more than any night, the leader's own gratitude is the best exegesis in the room.

Part 2 · Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant: you have fed us for twelve weeks from an altar the old order could not eat from. Tonight, complete the inventory, total the mercies, and equip us with everything good to do your will. Then send us: outside the camp, bearing his reproach, seeking the city which is to come. Through Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and for ever. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

W1. Twelve weeks ago you were told this sermon was preached to people drifting from a treasure they had stopped seeing. Where did this study catch you drifting, and what do you see now that you did not?

W2. Predictions on the table before the count: what is your final Better Tally number, and which single “better” meant the most to you personally?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 13:1–3

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to find and read Genesis 18:1–8.

1. After twelve chapters at the summit, the sermon descends to Tuesday: brotherly love, hospitality, prisoners. Who showed up at Abraham's tent, how did he treat them, and what does 13:2 conclude: “some have entertained angels unawares”? Why does the sermon believe the doorway is holy ground, and what does “as though in prison with them” demand beyond sympathy?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Three strangers at Mamre; Abraham runs, bows, washes feet, and empties the pantry: and the guest was the Lord. Unawares is the operative word: hospitality is faith's wager that the stranger might be the visit: you cannot know in advance, which is precisely why the door must open first and audit later (and Christ raised the stakes: I was a stranger and you welcomed me). And prisoners “as though in prison with them”: not pity from a distance but imaginative solidarity: the congregation had done this literally (10:34, joyfully visiting the imprisoned at cost). The summit theology of this sermon cashes out at a front door and a visiting room: mark how unembarrassed the preacher is by that descent.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 13:4–6

2. Two more Tuesday commands: marriage held in honor, and life kept free from love of money, “content with what you have.” Watch the ground the contentment stands on: a quotation: “I will never fail you nor forsake you.” What is the sermon diagnosing about greed: what is the love of money actually afraid of, and how does the promise defund it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Greed is fear wearing a money clip: the hoard is a hedge against abandonment: if no one will catch me, I must build the net myself, and no net is ever thick enough, which is why the love of money is insatiable by design. The promise attacks the root, not the symptom: “I will never fail you nor forsake you”: the commissioning words spoken to Joshua at the Jordan, now applied to rent and retirement: presence is the antidote to grasping. Hence the confident reply the sermon puts in our mouths: “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?” Contentment is not lowered expectations: it is theology: the settled conviction that the future has a shepherd (CCC 2547: abandonment to the providence of the Father frees from anxiety).

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 13:7–9

3. Between remembering departed leaders (13:7) and refusing strange teachings (13:9) stands the study's hinge verse: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (13:8). Map the three tenses onto the sermon we have spent twelve weeks in: what is his yesterday, his today, his for ever? And why is this verse placed exactly between dead leaders and live fads?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Yesterday: the Son through whom God created the world, who spoke in these last days, who offered himself once for all (Sessions 1, 8). Today: the intercessor who always lives, appearing now in the presence of God on our behalf, seated and serving (Sessions 6 through 9): the today of Psalm 95, still open. For ever: priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek, by the oath that does not change (Sessions 4 and 6). And the placement: leaders die (remember them, imitate their faith): teachings mutate (do not be led away): between the mortal and the trendy stands the immutable: institutions and fashions are shakable; the Priest is not. Twelve weeks of this study, gathered into eleven words: it is the memory verse for a reason.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 13:10, and let it hang in the air.

4. The last “we have,” and the strangest: “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.” Two oddities before any interpretation: what is an altar for, and what does this sentence say you do at this one? Why is that combination strange: and inventory keepers, what just happened?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

An altar is for sacrifice: it is where offerings are made to God: and this sentence says we eat from it: sacrifice and communion in one clause, an altar that is also a table. The combination is strange because the old order kept those functions carefully apart, and strangest of all for sin offerings, as the next verses will show. And yes: the We-Have inventory, running silently since Session 4, just took its final entry: an altar: present tense, a possession of the Christian people. Hold the strangeness; the sermon is about to explain it with a verse from Leviticus.

LIVE DISCOVERY: Ask someone to find and read Leviticus 16:27, then read Hebrews 13:11–12 together.

5. The Day of Atonement's disposal clause: what happened to the bodies of the sin offerings, and, critically, did anyone eat them? Now Hebrews 13:11–12: where did Jesus suffer, fulfilling that pattern: and what did he do at supper the night before that shattered it? What is the one sin offering in history that became a meal?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The Yom Kippur sin offerings were never eaten: their blood went into the sanctuary and their bodies were carried outside the camp and burned: the sacrifice that dealt with sin was, by law, inedible. Jesus fulfilled the pattern to the letter: he “suffered outside the gate”: Golgotha lay outside Jerusalem's wall, the true sin offering consumed outside the camp: and he shattered the pattern the night before, taking bread: this is my body, given for you (Luke 22:19); take, eat (Matthew 26:26). The one atonement sin offering in all of history that is given as food: which is exactly why “those who serve the tent have no right to eat” from our altar. Be precise here: priests did eat many ordinary sin offerings (Leviticus 6:26, 29); but the offerings Hebrews 13:11 names, the ones whose blood was carried into the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement, were by law never eaten (Leviticus 16:27). That is the exception the sermon invokes: the sin offering that dealt with sin at the sanctuary's heart was the one no one could eat, and it is precisely that offering Christ gives as a meal. The altar we have is the altar you eat from: the sermon's twelve chapters of priesthood and sacrifice land on a table with food on it.

6. Now the honest question: what exactly is “the altar” of 13:10? The tradition itself reads it several ways: the cross, where the sacrifice was offered; the heavenly sanctuary, where it is presented now; the Eucharistic table, where it is eaten. Are these rivals? And hear two witnesses: the Catechism (CCC 1182) and St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the early second century (read his voice box aloud). Where does every reading converge?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Not rivals: one altar seen from three sides, and this study built the architecture that unites them: the sacrifice offered once on the cross (Session 8), presented always in the true sanctuary (Sessions 7 and 8), made present and eaten at the Church's table (Session 8's whole steelman). The Catechism holds all three in one paragraph: the altar of the New Covenant is the Lord's Cross; on the altar the sacrifice of the Cross is made present; and the altar is also the table of the Lord (CCC 1182, citing this verse). And St. Ignatius, writing while the apostles' students still lived, speaks of the one altar as the Church's present, physical gathering point: one Eucharist, one altar, one bishop. Be honest about the verse's range: and then notice that every road in the range ends at the same piece of furniture, the one standing in your parish, where the outside-the-camp sacrifice is eaten by the baptized every day of the week. The convergence is the argument. Hold the claim with open hands and it holds itself.

READ ALOUD: Hebrews 13:13–16

7. The sermon's last movement is a door: “let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for him: for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.” Then

two sacrifices for the road: what are they (13:15–16), who offers them, and what happened to sacrifice now that the once-for-all offering is complete?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The direction of discipleship is outward, toward the reproach: he is outside the camp, where respectability is not, and the study that began with drifting ends with marching: and the inventory takes its wry final line: here “we have no lasting city”: the rich pilgrim's possession list ends with a non-possession, on purpose (St. Augustine built the City of God on this verse while Rome fell around him). And the road's liturgy: the sacrifice of praise, “the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name,” continually: and doing good and sharing what you have, “for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” The once-for-all offering did not abolish sacrifice: it abolished atonement-by-us, and thereby set every remaining offering free to be gratitude: the baptized priesthood (all of you) offering praise, goods, work, and sufferings, united to the one offering (CCC 1368). Atonement is finished: thanksgiving is just getting started: which is, not incidentally, what Eucharist means.

8. THE INVENTORY. Leader: produce the list the study has kept since Session 4, and read it aloud, slowly, entry by entry, with the references. Group: after each entry, recall in one sentence the night it was found. Then the question: what kind of people does this possession list describe?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The list: we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens (4:14): we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, entering behind the veil (6:19): we have such a high priest, seated at the right hand, minister in the true tent (8:1): we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus (10:19): we have a great priest over the house of God (10:21): we have an altar from which the old order has no right to eat (13:10): and here we have no lasting city (13:14). The strangest estate in literature: a priest, an anchor, a confidence, an altar: and no real estate. It describes a people equipped entirely for worship and pilgrimage and not at all for settling: rich beyond audit in access to God, traveling light through everything else. The sermon spent twelve chapters transferring this inventory to a congregation that had forgotten it owned any of it. Tonight it is transferred again. It is yours: the deed is blood, and the title does not shake.

9. THE TALLY. Bring out the board and total it against the predictions. Then the question the number exists to raise: the sermon's favorite word, kreitton, better: better than what, exactly: and what was the preacher trying to do to his drifting congregation by saying it a dozen times? What is he trying to do to us?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Count generously and let the room's number stand: the common tally runs to about thirteen: better things, hope, covenant, promises, sacrifices, possession, country, resurrection-life, something-better, a better word, with 1:4's “superior” and 7:7's blessing logic as the contested entries (same Greek word: award them). Better than what: than angels' mediation, than Aaron's priesthood, than the tabernacle's copies, than the old covenant's arrangements: never better than nothing: the sermon honors everything it surpasses. And the strategy: drift happens when the treasure stops

looking like treasure: nobody drifts from what they can see is better: so the preacher's whole method was comparative re-enchantment: hold the old glory up honestly, then show the new outshining it, twelve times, until the congregation's eyes readjusted. That is also this study's method, and the question it leaves each of us: now that you have counted the betters: what, this year, has been quietly outbidding them in your actual week?

DIG DEEPER

13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account." The sermon's ecclesiology in one verse: real shepherds, really accountable, watching for souls: and 13:18's disarming coda: "pray for us." If the group has one more breath: name your actual shepherds: pastor, bishop, this study's leader: and pray 13:20–21 over them tonight. Watchmen who must give account need the watched to pray.

SEND • TAKING IT OUT THE DOOR • THE COMMISSIONING

S1. Outside the camp: where, concretely, is the reproach of Christ located in your world: the room, the topic, the association that costs respectability? What would going to him there look like this month?

S2. MULTIPLICATION. This study was never meant to end in this room. Twelve weeks ago you could not have explained Melchizedek; now you can lead a night on him. Who will lead next, and what: and when? (Leader: the natural next study is Revelation: Hebrews explains what the Mass is: Revelation shows what it looks like from heaven's side of the veil. Pair the willing in twos: set a start month before anyone stands up: and pray the benediction of 13:20–21 over the new leaders by name.)

LIVE IT THIS WEEK • AND BEYOND

1. Offer the two road sacrifices daily this week: the fruit of lips (praise, out loud, at least once a day) and shared goods (one concrete act of doing good and sharing, planned tonight).
2. At Mass this Sunday, stand at 13:10 knowingly: the altar you have, the sin offering you eat: and bring your whole inventory to the rail.
3. Commit to the multiplication decision made tonight: leader, co-leader, study, start month: and pray Hebrews 13:20–21 daily for the ones who said yes.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

HEBREWS 13:8 (RSV2CE)

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever."

CLOSING PRAYER • THE BENEDICTION OF THE LETTER

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will,

working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20–21)

Part 3 • Leader Reference Card

Every passage used or assigned in Session 12, in order of appearance.

PRIMARY TEXT

Hebrews 13:1–6 • 13:7–9 • 13:10–12 • 13:13–16 • 13:17–19 • 13:20–21

LIVE DISCOVERY PASSAGES

Genesis 18:1–8 (Mamre) • Leviticus 16:27 (the sin offering burned outside) • the We-Have inventory and Better Tally board (the study's own artifacts)

ALTAR MATERIALS (QUESTIONS 4–6)

Hebrews 13:10–12 with Leviticus 16:27 • CCC 1182 (read aloud) • St. Ignatius of Antioch, Philadelphians (read aloud) • Matthew 26:26 (take, eat) • Luke 22:19 (this is my body, given for you)

LEADER BACKGROUND

Deuteronomy 31:6 and Joshua 1:5 (never forsake) • Matthew 25:35 (the stranger) • CCC 2544–2547 • CCC 1368

CATECHISM

CCC 1182 • CCC 1368 • CCC 2544–2547 • CCC 1544 (revisited)

MEMORY VERSE

Hebrews 13:8

AFTER THE STUDY

Multiplication: new leaders named, paired, and commissioned with a start month. Recommended next study: Revelation (the heavenly liturgy Hebrews explains). Pray Hebrews 13:20–21 over the new leaders weekly.