

Session 11: In the Person of Christ

A Kingdom of Priests: Priesthood in the New Covenant

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The synthesis session. Everything the study has assembled (the one priesthood of Christ, the Supper's "do this," Easter evening's breath, the laying on of hands) converges tonight on the question of what a Catholic priest actually IS. The answer is a phrase the group discovers, to their astonishment, inside Paul's own Greek: the ordained man acts in persona Christi, in the person of Christ. They will notice, many for the first time, whose "my" the priest speaks at the consecration ("this is MY body"), test the claim against Christ's own words ("he who hears you hears me"), and face two pastoral realities head-on and honestly: celibacy (a discipline, not a dogma, and the Church says so) and the scandal of unworthy ministers (answered by a principle the group already owns from Session 7). The night should leave the group looking at the man at the altar with more accurate eyes: smaller in himself, larger in his office, than they ever realized.

Catholic Touchstone

The Catechism teaches that in the ecclesial service of the ordained minister it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body: the priest, by the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts in persona Christi Capitis, in the person of Christ the Head (CCC 1548); that this sacrament configures the man to Christ by a specific grace of the Holy Spirit so as to serve as Christ's instrument for his Church (CCC 1581); that the presence of Christ in the minister does not preserve the minister from human weakness, error, or sin, and that the ministers' unworthiness cannot prevent Christ from acting (CCC 1550, 1584); and, with the honesty this study has practiced throughout, that celibacy in the Latin Church is a discipline of great fittingness while the Eastern Churches ordain married men to the priesthood, both venerable and legitimate (CCC 1579 to 1580). The most beloved line is saved for the Catechism's own quotation of the Curé of Ars: "The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus" (quoted in CCC 1589).

What You Need to Know

Open with the observation hiding in plain sight at every Mass, and let the group find it themselves before you name it. At the consecration, the priest does not say "this is Christ's body," reporting an event at a distance. He says, "Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is MY body, which will be given up for you." First person. Whose "my" is that? It is nonsense as the priest's own statement; his body is standing at the altar in vestments. The words only make sense if, at that moment, another is speaking through him: if the priest has lent Christ his voice and his hands, and Christ, the true priest of every Mass, is doing tonight what he did in the upper room. This is what the Church means by in persona Christi: not playacting, not impersonation, but instrumentality raised to a sacrament; the ordained man configured to Christ the Head so that Christ acts through him (CCC 1548, 1581). The group has been building toward this all study: Session 7 gave them Augustine's principle (Peter baptizes, Christ baptizes); Session 10 gave them the conferral (a gift, through hands); tonight names the result.

And here is the discovery that lands hardest with a group like yours: the phrase itself is Pauline. In 2 Corinthians 2:10, Paul, speaking of forgiving an offender, writes: "What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ." The Greek beneath "in the presence of Christ" is en prosopo Christou, and the ancient Latin Bible rendered it in persona Christi: in the person of Christ. Paul sets his own ministerial act of forgiveness "in the presence (or person) of Christ"; its precise sense in Paul is

debated, and the act is churchly forgiveness in a disciplinary case, not a description of sacramental absolution. What is certain is the genealogy: the Church's technical term was carried into theology from this sentence of Paul as the Latin Bible rendered it. Present this honestly: the English translations say "in the presence of Christ," and the Greek word *prosopon* spans face, presence, person; the point is not a gotcha but a genealogy. The Church's phrase is not medieval invention; it entered through Paul's Corinthian correspondence as the Latin Bible has carried it since the late fourth century. Corroborate it with Christ's own commissioning words, which need no Latin: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16), and Paul again: "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal THROUGH us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador's words, in the act of embassy, are his sovereign's.

Then the two honest hours. Celibacy first, because someone is waiting to ask: it is a DISCIPLINE of the Latin Church, not a dogma, and the Catechism says so plainly, noting that the Eastern Catholic Churches have ordained married men to the priesthood for centuries in full communion, and that the Latin practice is embraced for the kingdom's sake (Matthew 19:12, 1 Corinthians 7:32 to 35: the unmarried man is anxious "how to please the Lord," undivided). Presented accurately (a renounceable good renounced for a greater availability, in imitation of the celibate Christ), celibacy is coherent and even beautiful; presented as dogma or as squeamishness about marriage, it is a slander of the Church's actual position, so do not let either caricature stand, including the Catholic one. Then scandal, and do not flinch: everyone in the room knows the failures, and some carry wounds from them. The study's equipment is already in hand: Augustine's Donatist principle (the sacraments are Christ's acts through instruments, so "Judas baptizes, Christ baptizes"), now stated by the Catechism itself: the ministers' unworthiness cannot prevent Christ from acting; sin can wound the Church terribly, and it does not invalidate the sacraments, because the sacraments were never running on the minister's holiness in the first place (CCC 1550, 1584). Say clearly what this principle is NOT: it is not an excuse, not a minimization, and not a reason to protect anyone from justice; it is the reason a soul absolved by a bad priest is truly absolved, which, for someone in your room, may be a load-bearing consolation. Handle this stretch with pastoral gentleness; leave silence where silence is needed.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight's deepest root is the whole study: the high priest bearing the names on his heart (Session 2) becomes the priest at the altar carrying the parish into the sanctuary; the anointing and vesting of Aaron prefigure the configuration of Orders; and the "my" of the consecration recalls, in a typological echo this study offers rather than a defined equation, the pattern of Numbers 6:22 to 27: appointed priests put God's name on the people, and God himself blesses. If you want one Old Testament text on the table, use that one; the group memorized its blessing in Session 2.

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), alongside his teaching that the priest continues the work of redemption on earth. Vianney, the patron of parish priests, was by every account a limited man: a struggling student, a country pastor. 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

St. Gregory, ordained against his own will, withdrew for a time after his ordination and then wrote a long apology explaining why: the guiding of souls, he teaches in substance, 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. If the priesthood ever looks to your group like ambition's ladder, show them Gregory in flight from it. The saints took in persona Christi seriously enough to be terrified of it. (A summary of his Second Oration.)

Oration 2

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas teaches that the priest consecrates the Eucharist not by his own power but as the minister of Christ, in whose person he speaks: for the words of consecration are spoken as from the person of Christ himself, which is why the sacrament does not fail when the minister is unworthy, since the power at work was never the minister's own. In substance: the "my" of the altar is Christ's "my," and everything tonight hangs on that. (A summary of his teaching on the minister of the Eucharist.)

Summa Theologiae III, q. 82

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1548: in the ordained minister, Christ himself is present to his Church as Head of his Body; the priest acts in persona Christi Capitis.
- CCC 1581: Holy Orders configures the recipient to Christ by a specific grace of the Holy Spirit, to serve as Christ's instrument for his Church.
- CCC 1550 and 1584: the minister's weakness and even sin do not prevent Christ from acting; the guarantee is Christ, not the man.
- CCC 1579 to 1580: celibacy as the Latin Church's discipline, with married priests in the Eastern Churches; both presented honestly by the Church herself.
- CCC 1589: the Curé of Ars quoted: "The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus."

Thread Watch (leader only)

- THREAD B (serve and guard): the priest as guardian of the mysteries and of the flock; one sentence at most, since Session 10 carried it.
- THREAD C (father-priest): "Father" as the natural address for the man who feeds the family from the table; connects to last session; one sentence.
- THREAD D (kingdom of priests): keep the balance explicit tonight: the ministerial priest exists to serve the royal priesthood's offering; if tonight drifts into clericalism, Session 8 is the corrective to quote.
- THREAD A (resolved): fully available: the priest at the altar handles Melchizedek's matter, bread and wine, with Christ's own words. Use freely.

Session Goals

1. The group notices, articulates, and wrestles with the first-person "my" of the words of consecration.
2. The group discovers 2 Corinthians 2:10's en prosopo Christou and hears the honest translation note alongside the genealogy of the phrase.
3. The group can state in persona Christi accurately: instrumentality by configuration, not impersonation, corroborated by Luke 10:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:20.

4. Celibacy is stated accurately as discipline with its scriptural logic, and the Eastern practice is named.
5. The scandal question is faced without flinching and without excuse-making, with CCC 1550 and 1584 in hand, gently.

Timed Plan (90 minutes)

- 0:00 Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)
- 0:05 Win questions (10 min)
- 0:15 Build I: Whose "my"? (20 min)
- 0:35 Build II: In the person of Christ, Paul's own phrase (20 min)
- 0:55 Build III: The two honest topics, celibacy and scandal (20 min)
- 1:15 Send (10 min)
- 1:25 Live It, memory verse, closing prayer (5 min)

Pre-chosen cuts for a 75-minute room: drop the Dig Deeper and compress the celibacy segment to your own three-sentence accurate summary with CCC 1579 to 1580 cited for later reading. Never cut the scandal segment; skipping it tells the wounded person in your room that the Church cannot look at it.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, eternal High Priest, you have freely chosen to act through voices and hands. Tonight, help us see what you do through the men you have taken. And where any of us carries a wound from a shepherd's failure, come near first, before any explaining. Amen.

Win

1. Have you ever spoken FOR someone else, with their full authority: signed for them, negotiated for them, delivered their words? What was it like to say "I" on someone else's behalf?
2. What is the best homily, confession, or moment with a priest you have ever experienced? What made it what it was?

Build I: Whose "My"?

Say: "Think of the consecration at Mass. Quote it from memory, together, the bread first." (The room will produce: "Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body, which will be given up for you.") Then ask the question and let it sit:

Q1. Whose body is "MY body"? The priest is speaking. Why does he say MY, and what would have to be true for that sentence to make any sense at all?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

As the priest's own first-person statement, the sentence is absurd; his body is standing there in vestments. The words only make sense if another is speaking through him: if the priest, at that moment, has lent his voice and hands to Christ, and Christ, the true priest of every Mass, is doing what he did in the upper room. Notice that the Church did not paraphrase the Supper into safer third-person words ("this is Christ's body"); she kept the "my," because she means it: the speaker is Christ. Everything else tonight unpacks that "my."

Q2. This study has met this pattern before, without the name. Where? (Think Session 2's blessing, and Session 7's baptizer.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Numbers 6:27: the appointed priests put God's name on the people ("so shall they put my name upon the people of Israel"), and God himself acts: "and I will bless them." Appointed human speech, with divine action riding on it. And Augustine's principle from Session 7: when Peter baptizes, Christ baptizes; even if Judas baptizes, Christ baptizes. The instrument moves; the power is the Lord's. Tonight simply names what the pattern is called when it is conferred by Holy Orders.

Build II: In the Person of Christ

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "The Church's technical name for this is a Latin phrase, in persona Christi, in the person of Christ. Here is tonight's surprise: the phrase has an address in your New Testament. Read 2

Corinthians 2:10, where Paul describes his own act of forgiving an offender, and read the last four words slowly."

Q3. How does Paul describe the setting of his ministerial act of forgiveness? (Leader: give the language note honestly after they answer.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"What I have forgiven... has been for your sake in the presence of Christ." Now the honest note: the Greek is en prosopo Christou; prosopon spans face, presence, and person, which is why English Bibles say "in the presence of Christ" while the ancient Latin Bible rendered it in persona Christi, in the person of Christ. The Church's technical term is not a medieval coinage; it descends from Paul's own phrase, in a sentence about a ministerial act of forgiveness, as the Latin Bible has carried it for over sixteen centuries. Its precise sense in Paul is genuinely debated, and the verse gives the phrase its genealogy, not a proof of sacramental absolution; we flag all of that out loud because this study's claims are stronger honest than inflated; and the concept never rested on the Latin anyway, as the next two texts show.

Read Luke 10:16, then 2 Corinthians 5:20, aloud.

Q4. In Christ's own words, what happens when someone hears his sent ones? And what does Paul's ambassador image add?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me": Christ identifies his voice with the voice of his sent ones, in the act of their sending. And "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal THROUGH us": an ambassador's official words are his sovereign's words; the embassy speaks the crown. In persona Christi is these two verses, conferred sacramentally: not impersonation, not playacting, but instrumentality raised to a sacrament, the man configured to Christ the Head so that Christ acts through him (CCC 1548, 1581). Which is also why the priest goes to confession like everyone else: the office is Christ's; the man remains a man.

DIG DEEPER

Why can only the ordained consecrate? Not because their prayers are louder, but because "do this" was a command with addressees, and the sacrament of Orders is how the addressees' mandate reaches the present (Sessions 6 and 10). The Eucharist is Christ's act through Christ's appointed instrument; an unordained man speaking the words performs a recitation, not a sacrament, for the same reason a private citizen's signature does not conclude a treaty: the words are real, the office is absent. This is not gatekeeping for its own sake; it is what it means that the sacrifice is CHRIST'S and not ours to generate.

Build III: Two Honest Topics

CELIBACY. Say it accurately yourself: "Celibacy is a DISCIPLINE of the Latin Church, not a dogma, and the Church says so herself: Eastern Catholic Churches in full communion with Rome have ordained married men for centuries (CCC 1579 to 1580). The Latin Church asks celibacy of her priests for the kingdom's sake, in Jesus' own category (Matthew 19:12) and Paul's own logic: the unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord, undivided (1 Corinthians 7:32 to 35). It is a renounceable good, marriage, renounced for a total availability, in imitation of the celibate Christ. Not squeamishness about marriage; a

wedding of another kind. If the discipline ever changed, no doctrine would fall; and while it stands, it is coherent, biblical, and costly on purpose."

SCANDAL. Slow down; someone in your room needs this handled with care.

Q5. Here is the hardest question tonight, and it deserves a straight answer: if priests act in the person of Christ, what happens to that claim when a priest sins gravely, even monstrously? Has everything he did sacramentally been poisoned? Were the absolutions real, the Masses real, the baptisms real?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Face the pain first: the failures are real, some are monstrous, and the wound they leave, especially when authority protected the guilty, is among the deepest a Catholic can carry. Nothing tonight excuses any of it or shields anyone from justice; in persona Christi heightens responsibility: sins that exploit the sacred office, or the persons entrusted to it, carry a gravity and a scandal all their own.

But here is the mercy hidden inside tonight's doctrine, and for some people it is load-bearing: because the sacraments were never running on the minister's holiness, the minister's sin does not invalidate them. The Church learned this in blood in the fourth century, when whole communities asked whether sacraments from priests who had failed under persecution were valid, and Augustine gave the answer this study already knows: even if Judas baptizes, Christ baptizes. The Catechism states it flatly: the presence of Christ in the minister is not a guarantee of the minister's holiness, and the ministers' sin cannot impede the fruit of grace, because the one acting in the sacraments is Christ (CCC 1550, 1584). Where the Church's ordinary conditions were in place (valid orders, the Church's matter, form, and intention, and, for absolution, faculties), your baptism is valid, the absolution that freed you was real, and the Masses were Masses. God does not let a man's corruption confiscate what Christ was giving you through him. Leave silence after this if the room needs it; silence is allowed.

Send

1. After tonight, what will you see differently the next time you watch a priest at the altar say the word "my"?
2. Priests carry an office bigger than themselves with a humanity as weak as ours. What is one concrete way you could carry your priest this month: prayer, encouragement, honesty, a meal?

Live It This Week

- At Mass, when the priest says "this is my body," silently name what is happening: "Jesus, that is your my." One sentence; it will change the moment.
- Write a short note of gratitude to a priest who has served you at some point in your life, and send it. Be specific.
- If the scandal discussion touched a wound of yours, do one gentle thing about it this week: a conversation with someone you trust, an honest prayer of anger and grief, or, if you are ready, a conversation with a priest who has earned your trust. The Church's failures are not a door God asks you to pretend is not there.

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)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, you have put your own words in human mouths and your own gifts in human hands. Thank you for every priest through whom you have fed and forgiven us. Heal what your shepherds have wounded, raise up shepherds after your own heart, and teach all of us, ordained and baptized, to disappear into you. Amen.

Leader Reference Card: Session 11

Every passage used tonight, in order:

- The words of consecration (Build I, from memory; Luke 22:19 and parallels behind them)
- Numbers 6:27 (Build I, recalled from Session 2)
- 2 Corinthians 2:10 (Build II, live discovery)
- Luke 10:16 (Build II, read aloud)
- 2 Corinthians 5:20 (Build II, read aloud; memory verse source)
- Matthew 19:12; 1 Corinthians 7:32 to 35 (Build III, celibacy)