

Melchisedek in the Liturgy of the Western Church
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Abstract

This paper examines the discussion of the Aaronic and Melchisedech understandings of priesthood in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. It notes that Jesus Christ is traditionally understood as belonging to both the orders of Levitical (by descent) and Melchisedech (by begottenness) priesthoods. It begins by indicating a place in contemporary liturgy where the name of Melchisedech has recently appeared for the first time, namely the 2001 edition of the Martyrology, and suggests that the Martyrology, which has long commemorated the deposition of the body of Aaron the High Priest might have had a reason for not mentioning Melchisedech before, so that his appearance is indication of a loss of understanding of Melchisedech in the Western tradition.

The paper then examines the traditions behind Melchisedech which are mentioned liturgically: the use of Hebrews, the implicit Dominical references to Melchisedech, and shows how this understanding is developed in St. Ambrose's *De sacramentiis*, as the prefiguration of the eternal high priesthood of Christ. The covenant of Abraham is understood, by this means, as being grounded in the Holy Eucharist, such that St. Ambrose actually implies that Abraham may even have been offered and received the sacred banquet itself in the person of Melchisedech. The paper shows how the ordination rites of the Catholic Church have traditionally concentrated on ordination into the Levitical rather than Melchisedech order of priesthood for all grades of ordination, with the exception of the ordination of subdeacons, where no mention of either order of priesthood is to be found.

The paper examines those places where Melchisedech is mentioned, both in the very ancient (at least fourth century) Canon (Eucharistic Prayer) of the Roman Mass, and then both the modern and traditional places in the Mass Lectionary. The paper then examines the place of Melchisedech in the readings at Matins in the (now suppressed) Octave of the Feast of Corpus Christi, from a sermon of St. Cyprian, and shows how they are linked to the offertory rites of the pre-1970 Roman Mass and the person of St. Leo the Great.

The paper concludes by offering a reading of the Mass and Office texts of the Feast of the Epiphany, indicating that this ancient feast contains a full theology of Christ's inclusion in the two orders of priesthood (Levitical and Melchisedech) and concludes that an authentic, but muted, interpretation of the Melchisedech priesthood in the Catholic Church functions in the same way as the relation of a church building to the descent of the heavenly Temple onto the earth, as being visible *through* the actions of the Levitical order.