



“Hebrews” was the name given to the Jews who lived in Palestine, unlike the majority who had emigrated to other countries. This letter is addressed to the first Christian communities of Palestine, formed by Jews – by race – who had been persecuted and punished and whose possessions had even been confiscated, all because they had become followers of Christ. They no longer had anything in this world and they had to encourage one another with the assurance that, at the conclusion of their exile, they would find the true Home where Jesus went after his suffering. In this way they were like their Hebrew ancestors who had lived in the desert, hoping and searching for the Promised Land.

It is helpful to know that this letter is addressed to people familiar with the Old Testament: they may well have been Jewish priests who had believed in Jesus and now were going through a serious crisis. Indeed, up until then the Temple had been their whole lives, since they were priests: they would offer sacrifices and would receive part of the sacrificed animals in payment. Now, not only had they been excluded and removed from the temple by the Jews, but Christ had replaced them. For he had come as the New Temple and the perfect victim pleasing to God, as the only Priest capable of putting people in touch with God.

He had relegated the Temple of Jerusalem and its cult to the rank of the out-moded. He, a layman had organized his Church, disregarding the priesthood of the “sons of Aaron,” the Jewish priests. The priest, he who is the link between humans and the all-holy God, was he and he alone.

So Christ had taken their work away from them, as well as their reason for being. At times, these men who had known Jesus, the man, had their doubts: was it certain that everything had changed because of him?

To confirm their faith, this letter shows them that the Jewish religion with its imposing ceremonies in the Temple of Jerusalem, was but the image of something greater. The pardon of sin and the spirit of religion – the aspiration of the entire Old Testament – was

**1** • <sup>1</sup>God has spoken in the past to our ancestors through the prophets, in many different ways, although never completely; <sup>2</sup>but in our times he has spoken definitively to us through his Son.

Gal 4:4

He is the one God appointed heir of all things, since through him he unfolded the stages of the world.

Jn 1:3  
Col 1:16

<sup>3</sup>He is the radiance of God’s Glory and bears the stamp of God’s hidden being, so that his powerful word upholds the universe. And after taking away sin, he took his place at the right hand of the divine Majesty in heaven.

Wis 8:1  
2Cor 4:6  
Col 1:17  
Mk 16:19  
Acts 2:33

<sup>4</sup>So he is now far superior to angels just as the name he received sets him apart from them. <sup>5</sup>To what angel did God say: *You are my son, I have begotten you today?* and to what angel did he promise: *I shall be a father to him and he will be a son to me?* <sup>6</sup>On sending his Firstborn to the world, God says:

Phil 2:9

Ps 2:7

2S 7:14

Ps 97:7  
104:4

4

Ps 45:7

*Let all the angels adore him.* <sup>7</sup>Whereas about angels we find words like these: *God sends the angels like wind, makes his servants flames of fire.* <sup>8</sup>But of the Son we read this: *Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a rule of justice is your rule.* <sup>9</sup>*You loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness, above your fellow kings.*

<sup>10</sup>And also these words: *Lord, in the beginning you placed the earth on its foundation and the heavens are the work of your hands.* <sup>11</sup>*They will disappear, but you remain. They all wear out like a garment;* <sup>12</sup>*you will fold them like a cloak and change them. You, on the contrary, are always the same and your years will never end.*

Ps 102:26

<sup>13</sup>God never said to any of his angels: *Sit here at my right side until I put your enemies as a footstool under your feet.* <sup>14</sup>For all these spirits are only servants, and God sends them to help those who shall be saved.

Ps 110:1  
Acts 2:35  
Mt 4:11  
18:10

**2** • <sup>1</sup>So we must pay the closest attention to the preaching we heard, lest we drift away. <sup>2</sup>If words spoken through angels became law and all disobedience or neglect received its due reward, <sup>3</sup>how could we now escape if we neglect such powerful salvation? For the Lord himself announced it first and it was later confirmed by those who heard it. <sup>4</sup>God confirmed their testimony by signs, wonders and miracles of every kind – especially by the gifts of the Holy Spirit that he distributed according to his will.

2Gal 3:19

<sup>5</sup>The angels were not given dominion over the new world of which we are speaking. <sup>6</sup>Instead someone declared in Scripture: *What is man, that you*

Mk 16:17  
1Cor 12:11  
2Cor 12:12

Col 2:15

to be the work of the authentic priest of all humanity, Jesus, the Son of God. There is now no other sacrifice but his, which begins on the cross and ends in glory.

Are there not many “Hebrews” in today’s world? The sick who no longer have hope, the persecuted Christians, the people who do not accept the injustice and mediocrity of the society in which we live. Although many of them may not understand all the premises and biblical quotations in this letter, they will feel encouraged in the faith.

Besides, the word “priest” has become so important in the Church that it is useful to find here the biblical text which has gone deeper into the meaning of priesthood and its reorientation through the very fact of the sacrifice of Jesus.

*This letter was written in Rome, perhaps in the year 66, when the war in which Jerusalem was destroyed was approaching. These were the last months of Paul’s life; he was imprisoned in Rome for the second time. This letter reflects Paul’s thoughts, but he did not write it. It is quite possible that the author is Apollos, mentioned in Acts 18:24-28, “a man well-versed in Scriptures” and who “proved from the Scriptures (the Old Testament) that Jesus is the Messiah.”*

should be mindful of him, what is the son of man that you should care for him? <sup>7</sup> For a while you placed him a little lower than the angels, but you crowned him with glory and honor. <sup>8</sup> You have given him dominion over all things.

When it is said that God gave him dominion over all things, nothing is excluded. As it is, we do not yet see his dominion over all things. <sup>9</sup> But Jesus who suffered death and for a little while was placed lower than the angels has been crowned with honor and glory. For the merciful plan of God demanded that he experience death on behalf of everyone.

Ps  
8:5

1Cor  
15:25  
Eph  
1:20

Phil  
2:6

<sup>10</sup> God, from whom all come and by whom all things exist, wanted to bring many children to glory, and he thought it fitting to make perfect through suffering the initiator of their salvation. <sup>11</sup> So he who gives and those who receive holiness are one. He himself is not ashamed of calling us brothers and sisters, <sup>12</sup> as we read: *Lord, I will proclaim your name to my brothers; I will praise you in the congregation.* <sup>13</sup> He also says: *I will trust in God; here I am and the children God has given me.* <sup>14</sup> And because all those children share one same nature of flesh and blood, Jesus likewise had to share this nature. This is why his death destroyed the one hold-

Rom  
11:36  
1Cor  
8:6

Jn  
17:19  
Mt  
28:10  
Jn  
20:17  
Ps  
22:23  
Is  
8:18

Wis  
2:24  
Rom  
8:3  
1Jn  
3:8

• **1.1** This chapter shows Christ, *the Son of God*, as superior to angels. See the same controversy in Col 1:15-20 and Eph 1:2-23. Before Jesus was born, the Son was in God, *the radiance of the glory* of the Father. God from God, Light from light, invisible Image of the invisible God, *bearing the stamp of God's hidden being* (Jn 1:1-14).

This comparing Jesus with the angels may surprise us (as in Eph 1 and Col 1). For believers of Jesus' time, it was enough to contemplate nature to presume, beyond the harmony and splendor of creation, the active presence of cosmic powers, beings that they called angels – the distributors of divine riches. In the same degree that the Old Testament had battled against the gods of nature, God remained extremely distant and far above. If people refrained from pronouncing his name, it was an additional reason for seeing the action of heavenly spirits in the constant proofs of divine providence in our favor.

Even when looking at Israel's past, many things were attributed to these spirits: it was an angel that appeared to Moses, not God himself (Acts 7:30), and the angels gave the Law (see 2:2). Those who have a deep sense of the formidable mystery of God are easily tempted to seek a contact with spiritual powers of a lesser order – in fact, much lower. Such was the case in those times, just as it still is in our day. It was then necessary to reaffirm that Jesus surpasses them all although he was not an angel but one of us.

*Lord, in the beginning* (v. 10). Let us pay attention to the method of discussion: from the beginning of the Church, the apostles attributed to Christ all the texts where the Bible says "Lord." In fact, the word "Lord" which they read in the Greek text translated "Yahweh" in the Hebrew text. They consciously attributed to Christ a great number of words addressed to Yahweh-God. This suffices to destroy what we hear sometimes, namely that it was only with time that Jesus was recognized as Son of God

and fully God; and that in the early Church the apostles saw him only as a Messiah.

• **2.1** The author has just reaffirmed the divinity of Christ, but immediately takes other texts from the Old Testament which speak of "man" (*son of man* is the Hebrew term) and this time applies them to Christ. This shows that in God's design, Man and Christ are one. All that he has been, the glory that is his, of all this we are invited to share.

*The new world* (v. 5). Actually the text says: *the world to come*. This does not mean future times, or the end of the world, but the new and definitive times that began with the resurrection of Christ.

The new world is where the risen Christ is. It is the homeland we are hoping for. This new world has already come to us: a believer who lives in the Spirit constantly has experiences which are not of the earth even if in the beginning he is not aware of it.

All the history of Jesus is then both his and ours. *He thought it fitting to make perfect through suffering the initiator of their salvation* (v. 10). There is no other way to human liberation than the way of the cross. Those who are eager to free others must be tested, some through opposition, others through indifference. Suffering is a good teacher and it tests the strength of our surrender.

It is on the cross of Christ that we must discover the love of the Father for his Son, since he did not "condemn him" to suffer on earth, but rather, by way of suffering, he called him to be the Savior and model for everyone.

Jesus *had to share this nature* (v. 14). God uses human solidarity to save us. Christ saves us through sharing *flesh and blood*, and human destiny. In the same way, we are saved if we help in the liberation of the world, if we courageously accept our dependence on and solidarity with others. To work side by side with others, to suffer and rejoice with them is a way of saving them.



ing the power of death, that is the devil,<sup>15</sup> and freed those who remained in bondage all their lifetime because of the fear of death.

<sup>Is 41:8</sup> <sup>16</sup> Jesus came to take by the hand not the angels but the human race.

<sup>Phil 2:7</sup> <sup>17</sup> So he had to be like his brothers and sisters in every respect, in order to be the High Priest faithful to God and merciful to them, a priest able to ask pardon and atone for their sins. <sup>18</sup> Having been tested through suffering, he is able to help those who are tested.

**Christ came as the new Moses**

**3** <sup>1</sup> Therefore, holy brothers, partners in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and High Priest of our faith.

<sup>Num 12:7</sup> <sup>2</sup> He is faithful to God who appointed him, just as *Moses was a faithful steward over God's household* <sup>3</sup> but Jesus <sup>2Cor 3:7</sup> deserves much greater honor than Moses, since he who builds the house is greater than the house. <sup>4</sup> As every house has a builder, God is the builder of all. <sup>5</sup> It is said that *Moses was found faithful as a servant of God over all his household*, and as witness of a former revelation from God. <sup>6</sup> Christ came as the Son, to whom the house belongs; <sup>1Cor 3:9</sup> <sup>Eph 2:19</sup> <sup>1P 2:5</sup> <sup>Ps 95</sup> and we are his household, provided that we stand firm in hope and courage.

We would like, at times, to escape our human condition and to be more independent: it seems to us that we would be better able to serve God, yet this dependence in the details of daily life is the means by which God wants us to *take the human race by the hand*.

- **3.1** It was normal to compare Jesus with Moses; there was no one greater than he in the Old Testament, but in fact the author only mentions the experience of the people under Moses: the Hebrews wandered through the desert searching for the land that God had promised them.

Through Moses, God was inviting them to enter a new world. They were unable to see that they should raise themselves to a higher life. Once their difficulties were less acute they no longer wanted the Promised Land.

Now believers have to begin anew the search for the Promised Land, that is, the *Rest* that God

<sup>7</sup> Listen to what the Holy Spirit says: *If only you would hear God's voice today!*<sup>8</sup> *Do not be stubborn, as they were in the place called Rebellion,* <sup>9</sup> *when your ancestors challenged me in the desert, although they had seen my deeds* <sup>10</sup> *for forty years. That is why I was angry with those people and said: Their hearts are always going astray and they do not understand my ways.* <sup>11</sup> *I was angry and made a solemn vow: They will never enter my rest.*

<sup>Ps 95:8</sup>

<sup>12</sup> So, brothers, be careful lest some of you come to have an evil and unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> Encourage one another, day by day, as long as it is called *today*. Let no one become hardened in the deceitful way of sin. <sup>14</sup> We are associated with Christ provided we hold steadfastly to our initial hope until the end.

<sup>2Thes 2:10</sup>

<sup>Phil 3:12</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Scripture says: *If you hear God's voice, do not be stubborn as they were in the place called Rebellion.* <sup>16</sup> Who are those who having heard still rebelled? They were all those who came out of Egypt with Moses. <sup>17</sup> With whom was God angry for forty years? With those who sinned and whose bodies fell in the desert. <sup>18</sup> To whom did God swear that they would not enter into his rest? To those who had disobeyed. <sup>19</sup> We see

<sup>Num 14:29</sup>  
<sup>Jn 6:58</sup>  
<sup>1Cor 10:5</sup>

offers. The first time, it was Moses, the *servant of God*, who guided his people and was responsible for his *household*. Now it is the Son: they thought they would find rest in a specific place, in Palestine. The true Rest is intimate life with God that we reach through faith and entrance into the Christian community.

Several times this letter will recall the warning given the Hebrew pilgrims in the desert: *If only you would hear God's voice today!* The road is long and the believer grows tired when difficult times come, after the enthusiasm of the first days. Supported by Christ's words, we must continue to hope for that which God promised, but which is invisible to our eyes.

The creation poem spoke of God's Rest after creating the world: this meant that the universe must come to a point of entering into the fullness of the mystery of God. Human sorrow and work on this earth bring a person to her true end, which is "to rest" in the happiness of God.

then that unbelief prevented them from reaching their rest.

**4** <sup>1</sup>Therefore let us fear while we are invited to enter the rest of God, lest any of you be left behind. <sup>2</sup>We received the Gospel exactly as they did, but hearing the message did them no good, because they did not share the faith of those who did listen. <sup>3</sup>We are now to enter this rest because we believed, as it was said: *I was angry and made a solemn vow: they will never enter my rest* – that is the rest of God after he created the world. <sup>4</sup>In another part it was said about the seventh day: *And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.* <sup>5</sup>But now it is said: *They will not enter my rest.* <sup>6</sup>We must conclude that some will enter the rest of God and that those who first received the good news did not, because of their disobedience. <sup>7</sup>Yet God again assigns a day when he says: *today*, and declares through David many years later: *If you hear God's voice today, do not be stubborn.*

Gen  
2:2

Jos  
22:4

Rev  
14:13

<sup>8</sup>So it was not Joshua who let them enter the land of rest; otherwise God would not have assigned another day later on. <sup>9</sup>Then some other rest, or sabbath, is reserved for the people of God.

<sup>10</sup>For those who enter this rest of God rest from all their works as God rests from his work.

<sup>11</sup>Let us strive, then, to enter the rest

and not to share the misfortune of those who disobeyed. <sup>12</sup>For the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and judges the intentions and thoughts of the heart. <sup>13</sup>All creation is transparent to Him; everything is uncovered and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we render account.

Eph  
6:17  
Wis  
18:25

Jer  
17:10  
Ps  
139  
Rom  
14:12

### Christ is our High Priest

• <sup>14</sup>We have a great High Priest, Jesus, the Son of God, who has entered heaven. Let us, then, hold fast to the faith we profess. <sup>15</sup>Our high priest is not indifferent to our weaknesses, for he was tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sinning. <sup>16</sup>Let us, then, with confidence approach the throne of grace; we will obtain mercy and, through his favor, help in due time.

Jn  
8:46  
Gal  
4:4  
2Cor  
5:21

10:19

**5** <sup>1</sup>Every High Priest is taken from among mortals and appointed to be their representative before God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin. <sup>2</sup>He is able to understand the ignorant and erring for he himself is subject to weakness. <sup>3</sup>This is why he is bound to offer sacrifices for his sins as well as for the sins of the people. <sup>4</sup>Besides, one does not presume to take this dignity, but takes it only when called by God, as Aaron was.

8:3

Lev  
9:7

Ex  
28:1

<sup>5</sup>Nor did Christ become High Priest

• **4.14** For the Jews, the High Priest – despite his personal defects – was a sacred person protecting the people from the punishment deserved by their sins. The people needed not only leaders to govern them, but an advocate before God. Aaron, Moses' brother, the first priest of the Jews, had been such a man. His successors, the High Priests, were to be the same.

This idea is developed here: the *High Priest* is the people's representative before God, and he must be weak as they are but accepted by God. Christ is just that and perfectly so. Forgetting that Jesus is a man among humans is as serious for the faith as forgetting that he is the Son of God.

It is helpful to look at the role of Christ, the High Priest, at this time when the Church re-

minds us that all the faithful are associated with the priestly role of Christ. We must represent humanity before God; we are consecrated to God for that purpose.

In the Eucharist we thank God in the name of everyone. In daily life we must be instruments of the grace of God by being people who promote truth, encourage love and establish peaceful relationships.

He offered his sacrifice with *tears and cries* (v. 7). In the Bible, these words are used to express the insistent prayer of the oppressed children of God: they cry to God in such a loud voice that he listens to them. Thus, the night before his death, Jesus identified with men and women who suffer and do not want to die.

in taking upon himself this dignity, but it was given to him by the One who says: *You are my son, I have begotten you today.*<sup>5</sup> And in another place: *You are a priest forever in the priestly order of Melchizedek.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Christ, in the days of his mortal life, offered his sacrifice with tears and cries. He prayed to him who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his humble submission.<sup>8</sup> Although he was Son, he learned through suffering what obedience was,<sup>9</sup> and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for those who obey him.<sup>10</sup> This is how God proclaimed him Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

**You should be teachers**

• <sup>11</sup> About this we have much to say, but it is difficult to explain, for you have become dull in understanding.<sup>12</sup> You should be teachers by this time, but in fact you need to be taught again the

basic elements of God’s teaching. You need milk, not solid food.<sup>13</sup> Those fed with milk are still infants: this refers to those who have not been tested in the way of righteousness.<sup>14</sup> Solid food is for adults who have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

**6**<sup>1</sup> Therefore let us leave the elementary teaching about Christ and move forward to a more advanced knowledge without laying again the foundation, that is: turning away from dead works, faith in God,<sup>2</sup> the teaching about baptisms and laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment.<sup>3</sup> This is what we shall do, God permitting.

<sup>4</sup> In any case, it would be impossible to renew again through penance those who have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and received the Holy Spirit,<sup>5</sup> tasted the beauty of the word of God and the wonders of the supernatural world.<sup>6</sup> If in

1Cor 2:6 Phil 1:10

1P 2:3

10:26 12:25

• **5.11** *You should be teachers.* There are different stages in the development of faith. We cannot begin again to take our first steps. To be in the Church for years, without achieving a more enlightened faith and a richer experience, is to grow old and to become incapable of progress.

This letter tells us briefly the basic points of Christian teaching (6:1-3).

Teaching on *baptisms*: it was perhaps an explanation of the different ways offered to those searching for a religion. There were Jewish baptisms, John’s baptism and also Christian baptism. It was also perhaps an instruction on baptism and the gift of the Spirit. For us, usually, it is clear: there is a baptism, and later at confirmation we especially receive the gifts of the Spirit. At that time, things were not so evident: people spoke of several baptisms, baptism of water, baptism of the Spirit.

*The laying on of hands.* This was the primitive name of confirmation.

In these basic points the seriousness of human life stands out: there are only two roads that lead to judgment and they go in opposite directions. If one does not decide for the road leading to Christ, one loses one’s life.

*Those who have once been enlightened* (v. 4). In the early Church, baptism was often called “enlightenment.” Not only because people had been instructed in the true faith, but also because, very often, the Lord grants a very tangible experience of his presence to a person who

enters the Church after an authentic conversion. It is the same experience of God which people who take part in spiritual exercises with very sincere dedication often have.

Such an experience is explained more extensively in 12:18-24.

Those who have tasted the wonders of the supernatural world (v. 5). Let us remember that up until a few centuries back, everyone believed that the earth was the center of the universe. They thought heaven was above the earth, like a vault, and beyond this vault were the “high heavens” also called the heavenly world. They thought that God dwelt there with those who have a share in his glory.

Thus, heavenly things were also *supernatural* things as we say now, or divine. For this reason, in this letter we use supernatural wherever we might also say: *heavenly* (3:1; 8:5; 9:23; 11:16), because the author is referring to divine things that are already experienced on earth.

*An anchor that is thrust beyond the curtain* (v. 19). In the Temple of Jerusalem only the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, separated from the adjoining room by a veil. This is the image of heaven, the authentic Holy of Holies, which Jesus alone has entered. We remain behind, but our hope is already in heaven: this is not human illusion; Jesus is incapable of deceiving us. We will surely arrive there where we have placed our hope.

<sup>1Jn 5:16</sup> spite of this they have ceased to believe and have fallen away, it is impossible to move them a second time to repentance when they are crucifying, on their own account, the Son of God, and spurning him publicly. <sup>7</sup>Soil that drinks the rain falling continually on it and produces profitable grass for those who till it, receives the blessings of God, <sup>8</sup>but the soil that produces thorns and bushes is poor soil and in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

### Remain firm in our hope

<sup>9</sup>Yet even though we speak like this, we are more optimistic, dear friends, regarding you and your salvation. <sup>10</sup>God is not unjust and will not forget everything you have done for love of his name; you have helped and still help the believers. <sup>11</sup>We desire each of you to have, until the end, the same zeal for reaching what you have hoped for. <sup>12</sup>Do not grow careless but imitate those who, by their faith and determination, inherit the promise.

<sup>13</sup>Remember God's promise to Abraham. God wanted to confirm it with an oath and, as no one is higher than God, <sup>14</sup>he swore by himself: I shall bless you and give you many descendants. <sup>15</sup>By just patiently waiting, Abraham obtained the promise.

Gen 22:17-20  
Rom 4:20

<sup>16</sup>People are used to swearing by

someone higher than themselves and their oath affirms everything that could be denied. <sup>17</sup>So God committed himself with an oath in order to convince those who were to wait for his promise that he would never change his mind. <sup>18</sup>Thus we have two certainties in which it is impossible that God be proved false: promise and oath. That is enough to encourage us strongly when we leave everything to hold to the hope set before us. <sup>19</sup>This hope is like a steadfast anchor of the soul, secure and firm, thrust beyond the curtain of the Temple into the sanctuary itself, <sup>20</sup>where Jesus has entered ahead of us – Jesus, High Priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek.

Num 23:19

10:20  
Lev 16:2  
Mt 27:51

### Melchizedek, a figure of Christ

**7** <sup>1</sup>Scripture says that *Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, came out to meet Abraham who returned from defeating the kings. He blessed Abraham and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything.*

Gen 14:17

<sup>2</sup>Let us note that the name *Melchizedek* means King of Justice, and that *king of Salem* means king of Peace. <sup>3</sup>There is no mention of father, mother or genealogy; nothing is said about the beginning or the end of his life. In this he is the figure of the Son of God, the priest who remains forever.

Jn 7:27

<sup>4</sup>See then how great Melchizedek

• **7.1** The author has already quoted thrice the verse of Psalm 110 which mentions Melchizedek and now he sets out to show that, what is said of this legendary person prophesies a radical reform of the priesthood. Let us not forget that this letter is addressed to Jewish priests, descendants of Aaron: they were priests from father to son and thought this privilege would last forever (the Bible itself says so in Num 18:19). Here they are told that God himself has announced their replacement.

We can admire the way this Melchizedek event, which occupies such a minor place in the Bible, is probed in depth to prove with irrefutable logic that Christ had to renew and bring to fulfillment the whole worship of Israel. We said in the introduction that Apollos, a prophet of the early Church, may have written this letter. His gifts as a prophet are obvious here.

The only Bible the Church had in the beginning was the Old Testament. Yet this book did not seem to mention Jesus and many Jews even thought, in good faith, that Christ was destroying the teaching of the Bible. The task of these Christian prophets was to demonstrate how the Bible led to Christ, and to refute the Jews' arguments they provided the Church with a Christian understanding of the Old Testament. When Christians read the Old Testament now, they are no longer able to look on it as do the Jews who see in it their own history in the land of Palestine. They await a fulfillment of God's promise that Jesus brushed aside. For us, the key to the truth of the Old Testament is in the person of Jesus: without him the book no longer holds God's message.

Melchizedek is clearly in the Bible, but how did he come? In fact, the texts that mention him are



was. Even Abraham gave him a tenth of the spoils!<sup>5</sup> When the descendants of Levi are consecrated priests, they are commanded to collect tithes from their people, that is from their kindred, who are too, are descendants of Abraham.<sup>6</sup> Here, however, Melchizedek, who does not belong to the family of the Levites, is given tithes from Abraham. Still more, he blesses him, the man of God's promise.<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that he who blesses is higher than the one who is blessed.<sup>8</sup> In the first case we see that tithes are received by those who are mortals; here instead, Melchizedek is mentioned as one who lives on.

<sup>9</sup>When Abraham pays the tenth, it is, so to speak, the Levites, receivers of the tithes, who pay the tithe,<sup>10</sup> because, in a way, Levi was still in the body of Abraham, his ancestor, when Melchizedek met him.

<sup>11</sup>The institutions of the chosen people are founded upon the Levitical priesthood, but with it they could not attain what is perfect and permanent. If that were possible, why would there be need of another priest *after the order of Melchizedek* instead of Aaron's?<sup>12</sup> If there is a change in the priesthood, the Law also has to be changed.<sup>13</sup> Jesus, to whom all this has reference, was from a tribe that never served at the altar.<sup>14</sup> All know that he belonged to the tribe of Judah that is not mentioned by Moses when he speaks of the priesthood.

<sup>15</sup>All this, however, becomes clear if this priest after the likeness of Melchizedek <sup>16</sup>has in fact received his mission, not on the basis of any human law, but by the power of an immortal life.

<sup>17</sup>Because Scripture says: *You are a priest forever in the priestly order of Melchizedek.*<sup>18</sup> With this the former disposition is removed as insufficient and useless<sup>19</sup> (for the Law did not bring anything to perfection). At the same time a better hope is given to us: that of drawing near to God.

<sup>20</sup>This change is confirmed by God's oath. When the others became priests, God did not compromise himself with an oath,<sup>21</sup> but Jesus is confirmed with an oath, as it is said: *The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: you are a priest forever.*<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Jesus is our assurance of a better covenant.

<sup>23</sup>The former priests were many since, as mortal men, they could not remain in office.<sup>24</sup> But Jesus remains forever and the priesthood shall not be taken from him.<sup>25</sup> Consequently he is able to save for all time those who approach God through him. He always lives to intercede on their behalf.

<sup>26</sup>It was fitting that our High Priest be holy, undefiled, set apart from sinners and exalted above the heavens;<sup>27</sup> a priest who does not first need to offer sacrifice for himself before offering for the sins of the people, as high priests do. He offered himself in sacrifice once and for all.<sup>28</sup> And whereas the Law elected weak men as high priests, now, after the Law, the word of God with an oath appointed the Son, made perfect forever.

**A new sanctuary and a new covenant**

**8**<sup>1</sup> The main point of what we are saying is that we have a high priest. He is seated at the right hand of

later ones: they were doubtless written two centuries before Jesus to serve the cause of the Maccabees. Many among the Jews did not pardon these sovereigns for usurping the place of the high priest when they belonged to an ordinary priestly family. The story of Melchizedek was intended to justify the sovereign who, like him, was both king and priest at the same time. The texts were then written to

justify a dictatorship; but in fact they ended up in the Bible and were accepted as the word of God; and later it was found that they told of something that had not been thought of at the time: one of the ironies of the Word of God!

• **8.1** For the people of Israel, the institution of priests – and high priest – were closely linked to God's covenant with his people; it could not

Dt 14:22

Ps 110:4

Mt 1:1  
Rom 1:3  
Rev 5:5

2Cor 3:6

5:3



the divine majesty in heaven, <sup>2</sup> where he serves as minister of the true temple and sanctuary, set up not by any mortal but by the Lord.

<sup>3</sup> A high priest is appointed to offer to God gifts and sacrifices, and Jesus also has to offer some sacrifice. <sup>4</sup> Had he remained on earth, he would not be a priest, since others offer the gifts according to the Law. <sup>5</sup> In fact, the ritual celebrated by those priests is only an imitation and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary. We know the word of God to Moses with regard to the construction of the holy tent. He said: *You are to make everything according to the pattern shown to you on the mountain.*

<sup>6</sup> Now, however, Jesus enjoys a much higher ministry in being the mediator of a better covenant, founded on better promises. <sup>7</sup> If all had been perfect in the first covenant, there would have been no need for another one. <sup>8</sup> Yet God sees defects when he says:

*The days are coming – it is the word of the Lord – when I will draw up a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.*

be questioned without questioning the bond uniting Israel with its God. No one would have dared to do it. However, the author quotes a central text of Jeremiah announcing a new covenant with his people. When we speak of covenant, we speak of the way God treats us and the way we treat him. Jeremiah says: God will make himself known to believers in a personal way and no longer will it be a duty for them to love him, because they will have him present at every moment. This word of Jeremiah was known but it was given little attention: was he not speaking for a later time than his own? Here, the author says: with Jesus, we have this new covenant.

*Jesus also has to offer some sacrifice* (v. 3). The passage 1-5 draws our attention to the priesthood that is now Christ's in God's world. Is there a connection between that and the Eucharist we celebrate every day or every Sunday?

In 1 Cor 11:23-26, Paul closely united the Eucharist of today with the death of Jesus that truly appears as *the sacrifice*. In so doing he gives the orientation that has prevailed everywhere in the Church of the West. For us the mass is linked most of all to the crucifix which is above the altar. Here, we are invited to look towards this "heavenly cult" that Christ celebrates in glory. There the world of eternity with all the elect assembled

*<sup>9</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. They did not keep my covenant, and so I myself have forsaken them, says the Lord.*

*<sup>10</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel in the days to come: I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.*

*<sup>11</sup> None of them will have to teach one another or say to each other: Know the Lord, for they will know me from the least to the greatest. <sup>12</sup> I will forgive their sins and no longer remember their wrongs.*

<sup>13</sup> Here we are being told of a *new covenant*; which means that the first one had become obsolete, and what is obsolete and aging is soon to disappear.

Mt  
26:28  
1Cor  
11:25  
2Cor  
5:17  
Rev  
21:4

### The temple in Jerusalem

**9** <sup>1</sup> The first covenant had rites and regulations. There was also a sanctuary – an earthly one. <sup>2</sup> A first tent

Ex  
25:26

in God meets the world of time, where they succeed each other, each one in its own time. The Apocalypse of John will invite us to look towards this celestial liturgy and it is precisely this understanding of Jesus' sacrifice that is stressed in the liturgy of the Eastern Church. It is not a matter of opposing, but of discovering the multiple richness of the faith.

*Jesus enjoys a much higher ministry* (v. 6). Our liturgical service on earth is glorious inasmuch as we try to associate with the perfect praise of God in his "heaven." It is the sunshine of our week, but it cannot be our essential duty unless we have received a special charism. Here below, we must follow Jesus who did not envy the priests of his time but labored and died to reconcile humans with one another and with God.

Those who wish to meet Jesus in real life where truth must be observed will be easily accused of meddling in politics (which is not a sin). However it is a fact that Jesus did not die to defend religious practice, but to show that it is not what is most important. His "baptism" was a real death, likewise his "eucharist": this did not resemble a beautiful liturgy, in which no one (of course) risks life.

• **9.1** Chapter 8 established that Jesus replaces the priests of the people of God, and that

was prepared with the lampstand, the table and the bread of the presence, this is called the Holy Place. <sup>3</sup>Behind the second curtain, there is a second sanctuary called the Most Holy Place, <sup>4</sup>with the gold altar for the burning of incense, and the ark of the Covenant, fully covered with gold. The ark contained a golden jar holding the manna, Aaron's rod that had sprouted leaves and the two slabs of the covenant. <sup>5</sup>Above the ark the two cherubim of glory overshadowed the Seat of Mercy. But we cannot here describe it in detail. <sup>6</sup>With everything arranged as de-

Ex  
16:34  
Num  
17:23

scribed, the priests continually enter the first room to fulfill their ministry; <sup>7</sup>but the High Priest enters only once a year the second one, and not without bringing the blood which he will offer for himself and for the sins of the people. <sup>8</sup>By this, the Holy Spirit teaches us that the way into the inner sanctuary is not open as long as the first tent still stands. <sup>9</sup>Here is a teaching by means of figures for the present age: the gifts and sacrifices presented to God cannot bring the people offering them to interior perfection. <sup>10</sup>These are no more than food, drink and different

Lev  
16:2

Col  
2:16  
3:23

with his "priesthood" our relation with God has changed. Chapter 9 compares the celebrated cult in the Temple of Jerusalem and the new cult celebrated by Christ-priest.

The sacrifice offered by Christ, his death, were not like the ancient sacrifices to appease the anger of God. His death has been his final testimony and his way of sowing among people what they did not want to receive; with this testimony, he gave himself into his Father's hands.

Knowing who the author of this letter was and to whom it was addressed, we understand that he relates the *blood* of Jesus and his *death* to that of the victims that were offered in the Temple, since for them these things were very important. Yet today we have the right to relate the blood and the death of Christ to the death of all the murdered innocent, as Jesus himself gave us to understand (Mt 23:35): their blood is sacred, too (Rev 6:9).

#### THE ONE AND ONLY PRIEST AND "PRIESTS"

Jesus is the unique priest, and we speak of priests in the Church. Let us understand clearly, especially when, almost everywhere, the priesthood is in crisis.

In Latin there is the word "sacerdos" which signifies both the priests at the service of Roman gods and the priests of the Jewish people. When the Church came to be, not for an instant did it think of priests of this kind, holy persons who were privileged in being able to approach God to offer sacrifice. Christ alone was "sacerdos," and all that the Church had were "presbyters," meaning elders, the same title that the Jews used for those responsible for communities. Yet it is fact that now presbyter has become priest and this word has revived the meaning of the ancient "sacerdos" which had been put aside.

It is not the result of chance. From the fourth century the Church adopted the term "sacerdos" for its use, the man of the sacred and the consecrated man. Why this going backwards?

One reason was that times had changed: the Church of the catacombs had developed into a

Christianity recognized by authority, with the Christian population grouped and cared for by an organized clergy (see commentary on Numbers 4).

There were other profound reasons. It was recognized that the Church was not a human society and that its organization must reflect the very order that is in God. The bishops, therefore, must incarnate the authority of the apostles chosen by Jesus. They were, in their turn, official witnesses of Christ and guided the Church without having to bend to the will of the majority; in so doing, they were maintaining in the Church the principle of fatherhood (see commentary on Eph 3:14). The Church, moreover, considered the ordination of priests and bishops as a sacrament: they were not functionaries who assumed service for a time, and for a part of their life, keeping for themselves the rest of their life, as the term "ministers" might lead us to believe. Their responsibility in the Church was inseparable from an attachment and a consecration of their person to Christ.

The ministers, successors of the apostles, were then priests in a certain sense but it is difficult for these strongly opposing terms to have a happy marriage. It was essential for them to have spiritual authority but not tolerate any exterior marks that neither Jesus nor his apostles accepted. They would have to be on their guard not to allow their recognized authority to serve our innate aspiration to have the last word, or to be different from others, or served by others. They must be masters in faith, but without deciding for others; be leaders but not obligatory intermediaries between God and the baptized.

All that is asking for something impossible, if it is not through the imitation of Christ-priest: the renunciation of self even to death.

These chapters allow us to see at close range what the unique priest has been – far removed from the liturgies of the earth. It helps us to see the priesthood of Christ in all the baptized who "do not say mass" in the measure of their involvement in the life of the Church, be it in the apostolate, preaching, service of neighbors, or quite simply in a silent or suffering life.

kinds of cleansing by water; all these are human regulations awaiting a reformation.

### Jesus entered with his own blood

<sup>11</sup>But now Christ has appeared as the high priest with regard to the good things of these new times. He passed through a sanctuary more noble and perfect, not made by hands, that is, not created. <sup>12</sup>He did not take with himself the blood of goats and bulls but his own blood, when he entered once and for all into this sanctuary after obtaining definitive redemption. <sup>13</sup>If the sprinkling of people defiled by sin with the blood of goats and bulls or with the ashes of a heifer provides them with exterior cleanness and holiness, <sup>14</sup>how much more will it be with the blood of Christ? He, moved by the eternal Spirit, offered himself as an unblemished victim to God and his blood cleanses us from dead works, so that we may serve the living God.

<sup>1P</sup>  
<sup>1:19</sup>  
<sup>1Jn</sup>  
<sup>1:7</sup>

<sup>Mt</sup>  
<sup>26:28</sup>

<sup>Gal</sup>  
<sup>3:15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>So Christ is the mediator of a new covenant or testament. His death made atonement for the sins committed under the old testament, and the promise is handed over to all who are called to the everlasting inheritance. <sup>16</sup>With every testament it is necessary to wait until its author has died. <sup>17</sup>For a testament infers death and has no value while the maker of it is still alive.

<sup>18</sup>That is why the first covenant was not ratified without blood. <sup>19</sup>Moses proclaimed to the assembled people all the commandments of the Law;

then he took the blood of bulls and goats and mixed it with water, and with these he sprinkled the book itself and all the people using scarlet wool and hyssop <sup>20</sup>saying: *This is the blood of the Covenant that God commanded you.* <sup>21</sup>In the same way he sprinkled with blood the Sanctuary and all the objects of the ritual. <sup>22</sup>According to the Law, almost all cleansings have to be performed with blood; there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood.

Ex  
24:8

<sup>23</sup>It was necessary that mere copies of supernatural realities be purified, but now these realities need better sacrifices. <sup>24</sup>Christ did not enter some sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself. He is now in the presence of God on our behalf. <sup>25</sup>He had not to offer himself many times, as the High Priest does: he who may return every year, because the blood is not his own. <sup>26</sup>Otherwise he would have suffered many times from the creation of the world. But no; he manifested himself only now at the end of the ages, to take away sin by sacrifice, <sup>27</sup>and, as humans die only once and afterwards are judged, <sup>28</sup>in the same way Christ sacrificed himself once to take away the sins of the multitude. There will be no further question of sin when he comes again to save those waiting for him.

Jn  
1:29  
Gal  
4:4

Is  
53:12  
Phil  
3:20  
1Thes  
1:10  
1Tim  
6:14

### The old covenant prefigures the new

**10** <sup>1</sup>The religion of the Law is only a shadow of the good things to

• **10.1** These paragraphs (10:1-8) say that we passed from a religion where everything is a continual beginning again to a new state where we are in the definitive now. Here we have an aspect of the Christian faith that is not easy to accept. Are we alone holding the definitive truth in the midst of so many religions in which all presume to have the truth? Are we in a definitive situation when every day we fall into the same sins? Are we the definitive people of God when the Christian witness in the world is so far from convincing? No one will answer our doubts on this point: our only hope is to personally enter more deeply into the Christian experience.

*If they had been cleansed once and for all (v. 2). If they multiplied sacrifices for pardon, it proves that no one would have freed them of sin. As for ourselves, do we not often receive the sacrament of pardon? How then can we affirm that Christ's sacrifice has freed us?*

The sacraments we receive – and the pardon we receive in the Church – are never more than the application at the present moment of that which has been done once and for all. For a baptized person, there is no further rite, commitment, new baptism (baptism with a lot of water, baptism “in the spirit”...) that can give more. All has been given in Jesus. John does not hesitate



Col 2:17  
 come; it has the patterns but not the realities. So, year after year, the same sacrifices are offered without bringing the worshipers to what is the end. <sup>2</sup>If they had been cleansed once and for all, they would no longer have felt guilt and would have stopped offering the same sacrifices. <sup>3</sup>But no, year after year their sacrifices witness to their sins <sup>4</sup>and never will the blood of bulls and goats take away these sins.

Ps 40:7  
<sup>5</sup>This is why on entering the world, Christ says: *You did not desire sacrifice and offering; <sup>6</sup>you were not pleased with burnt offerings and sin offerings. <sup>7</sup>Then I said: "Here I am. It was written of me in the scroll. I will do your will, O God."*

<sup>8</sup>*First he says: Sacrifice, offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire nor were you pleased with them – although they were required by the Law. <sup>9</sup>Then he says: Here I am to do your will.*

This is enough to nullify the first will and establish the new. <sup>10</sup>Now, by this will of God, we are sanctified once and for all by the sacrifice of the body of Christ Jesus. <sup>11</sup>So, whereas every priest stands daily by the altar offering repeatedly the same sacrifices that can never take away sins, <sup>12</sup>Christ has offered for all times a single sacrifice for sins and has taken his seat *at the right hand of God*, <sup>13</sup>waiting until God *puts*

*his enemies as a footstool under his feet.* <sup>14</sup>By a single sacrifice he has brought those who are sanctified to what is perfect forever.

<sup>15</sup>This also was testified by the Holy Spirit. For after having declared: <sup>16</sup>*This is the covenant that I will make with them in the days to come – says the Lord – I will put my laws in their hearts and write them on their minds.* <sup>17</sup>He says: *Their sins and evil deeds I will remember no more.* <sup>18</sup>So, if sins are forgiven, there is no longer need of any sacrifice for sin.

### Be confident in God

• <sup>19</sup>So, my friends, we are assured of entering the Sanctuary by the blood of Jesus <sup>20</sup>who opened for us this new and living way passing through *the curtain*, that is, his body. <sup>21</sup>Because we have a high priest in charge of the House of God, <sup>22</sup>let us approach with a sincere heart, with full faith, interiorly cleansed from a bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

<sup>23</sup>Let us hold fast to our hope without wavering, because he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup>Let us consider how we may spur one another to love and good works. <sup>25</sup>Do not abandon the assemblies as some of you do, but encourage one another, and all the more since the Day is drawing near.

<sup>26</sup>If we sin willfully after receiving

to say that whoever is in Christ does not sin (Jn 3:6): he does not commit a sin that leads to death (1 Jn 5:17). Only sins that cause a total rupture with Christ can bring us back to our former state of "death." Although it is certain that confession is of great help to overcome sin, let us not think a Christian continually passes from mortal sin to grace by confessing, sinning again, and confessing again.

• 19. The paragraph 19-39 draws the conclusion to what has just been said: if we have entered the definitive now, beware of the real sin that would be to lose hope. True sin is to lose the taste for what we have already partly shared. The only remedy is to advance. Remember the word of St. Gregory: "We desire the pleasures of the world when we do not possess them, when we have them we tire of them; as long as we have

not discovered spiritual joy we do not desire it, but we desire it in the same degree that we possess it."

*Do not abandon the assemblies* (v. 25). When our hope is sick, we find reasons for not attending our Sunday celebration or the assembly of the community to which we belong. If it becomes general, the Christian community falls apart. As for ourselves who are not angels, are we going to live Christ if we have no community? In vain shall we be present with those who do not share our faith in every kind of excellent activity; we will lack what is essential: to be among them as witnesses to what they do not know.

*A little longer* (v. 37). This is taken from Habakkuk 2:3 and refers to the judgment of God which is approaching. The author of the letter may have wished to allude to the crisis that, very soon, was going to destroy the Jewish nation.



knowledge of the truth, there is no longer sacrifice for sin, <sup>27</sup> but only the fearful prospect of judgment and of fire which devours the rebellious. <sup>28</sup> For whoever violated the law of Moses there is no mercy: is put to death by the testimony of two or three persons. <sup>29</sup> What, then, do you think it will be for those who have despised the Son of God? How severely shall he be punished for having defiled the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified and for having insulted the Spirit given to them? <sup>30</sup> For we know the One who says: *Revenge is mine, I will repay.* And also: *The Lord will judge his people.* <sup>31</sup> What a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

<sup>32</sup> Remember the first days when you were enlightened. You had to undergo a hard struggle in the face of suffering. <sup>33</sup> Publicly you were exposed to humiliations and trials, and had to share the sufferings of others who were similarly treated. <sup>34</sup> You showed solidarity with those in prison; you were dispossessed of your goods and accepted it gladly for you knew you were acquiring a much better and more durable possession.

• **11.1** Doubts overcome those who isolate themselves. Why do we not look at those who have gone before us, not just one or the other but the mass of witnesses: all cannot be illusory.

*Faith is the way of holding onto what we hope for, being certain of what we cannot see.* The examples chosen show that faith cannot remain within us as an intimate conviction. What matters is to act according to faith and make decisions inspired by faith. That is why this chapter offers so many biblical examples of men and women who risked everything for faith. We cannot understand the obedience of Abraham unless he had trust in God against all hope. The same when Moses gave up a promising future for the impossible task of leading his people: his faith made him act in the present as if he saw what was invisible (v. 27).

It is not so simple to say what a believer believes, what she hopes for and what she does not want: the given examples show many different attitudes. Enoch searched for God, Noah prepared for the future of the world on the eve of a catastrophe, some lived on earth without looking for a fixed abode, others gave their lives in defense of an earthly homeland. All were certain that God wanted to do something with

<sup>35</sup> Do not now throw away your confidence that will be handsomely rewarded. <sup>36</sup> Be patient in doing the will of God, and the promise will be yours: <sup>37</sup> *A little, a little longer – says Scripture – and he who is coming will come; he will not delay.* <sup>38</sup> *My righteous one will live if he believes; but if he distrusts, I will no longer look kindly on him.*

<sup>39</sup> We are not among those who withdraw and perish, but among those who believe and win personal salvation.

### Remembering the heroes of faith

**11** • <sup>1</sup> Faith is the assurance of what we hope for, being certain of what we cannot see. <sup>2</sup> Because of their faith our ancestors were approved.

<sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the stages of creation were disposed by God's word, and what is visible came from what cannot be seen.

<sup>4</sup> Because of Abel's faith his offering was more acceptable than that of his brother Cain, which meant he was upright, and God himself approved his offering. Because of this faith he *cried to God*, as said in Scripture, even after he died.

them: their life would be fruitful in one way or another. The contrast in verse 35 is to be noted: some through faith obtained from God the resurrection of a dead child (1 K 17:23) but the faith of others led them to choose torture and death, expecting from God a resurrection in the future.

This selection of heroes of faith gives a place of honor to leaders and valiant people who have wished to free and serve their people. In so doing they were perhaps unconsciously seeking their real homeland. How many people today, unbelievers perhaps, shunned by the churches, are in fact on the road to the city of God when they sacrifice themselves in preparing for the future of the world! They are the Hebrews of the modern world and *God is not ashamed of being called their God* (v. 16).

These heroes of the faith died without having seen what God promised; it would seem that many have failed but their successors will discover that it is they who have made authentic history. The author addresses the Christians saying: "We are people of faith and we shall save our soul," which means: we shall fulfill all that is in us, and await what God has reserved for us in eternity.

Is 26:11

Dt 17:6

Mt 26:28  
1Cor 11:27Dt 32:35  
Mt 10:28

Hb 2:3

Gen 17:19

1P 1:9

Rom 8:24

Gen 4:4

Gen 5:24 <sup>5</sup>By faith Enoch was taken to heaven, instead of experiencing death: *he could not be found because God had taken him.* In fact, it is said that before being taken up he had pleased God. <sup>6</sup>Yet without faith it is impossible to please him: no one draws near to God without first believing that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him earnestly.

Gen 6:8 <sup>7</sup>By faith Noah was instructed of events which could not yet be seen and, heeding what he heard, he built a boat in which to save his family. The faith of Noah condemned the world and he reached holiness born of faith.

Gen 12 <sup>8</sup>It was by faith that Abraham, called by God, set out for a country that would be given to him as an inheritance; for he parted without knowing where he was going. Gen 26:3 <sup>9</sup>By faith he lived as a stranger in that promised land. There he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, beneficiaries of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>Indeed, he looked forward to that city of solid foundation of which God is the architect and builder.

Gen 15:5 <sup>11</sup>By faith Sarah herself received power to become a mother, in spite of her advanced age; since she believed that he who had made the promise would be faithful. <sup>12</sup>Therefore, from an almost impotent man were born descendants as numerous as the stars of heavens, as many as the grains of sand on the seashore.

Gen 47:9 <sup>13</sup>Death found all these people strong in their faith. They had not received what was promised, but they had looked ahead and had rejoiced in it from afar, saying that they were *foreigners and travelers* on earth. <sup>14</sup>Those who speak in this way prove that they are looking for their own country. <sup>15</sup>For if they had longed for the land they had left, it would have been easy for them to return, <sup>16</sup>but no, they aspired to a better city, that is, a supernatural one; so God, who prepared the city for them is not ashamed of being called their God.

Jas 2:21 <sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham went to offer Isaac when God tested him. And so he who had received the promise of God offered his only son <sup>18</sup>although God had told him: *Isaac's descendants will bear your name.* <sup>19</sup>Abraham reasoned that God is capable even of raising the dead, and he received back his son, which has a figurative meaning.

Gen 48:15 <sup>20</sup>By faith also Isaac blessed the future of Jacob and Esau. <sup>21</sup>By faith Jacob, before he died, blessed both children of Joseph and worshiped as he leaned on his staff. <sup>22</sup>By faith Joseph, when about to die, warned the children of Israel of their exodus and gave orders about his remains.

Ex 2:2 1:22 <sup>23</sup>By faith the parents of the newly-born Moses hid him for three months, for they saw the baby was very beautiful and they did not fear the order of Pharaoh. <sup>24</sup>By faith Moses, already an adult, refused to be called son of Pharaoh's daughter. <sup>25</sup>He preferred to share ill treatment with the people of God, rather than enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. <sup>26</sup>He considered the humiliation of Christ a greater riches than the wealth of Egypt, and he looked ahead to his reward. <sup>27</sup>By faith he left Egypt without fearing the king's anger, and he persevered as someone who could see the Invisible.

Ex 12 <sup>28</sup>By faith Moses had the Passover celebrated, sprinkling the doors with blood so that the Destroyer would not kill their firstborn sons. <sup>29</sup>By faith they crossed the Red Sea, as if on dry land, while the Egyptians who tried to cross it were swallowed by the waters and drowned.

Jos 6:20 <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho crumbled and fell, after Israel had marched round them for seven days; <sup>31</sup>by faith, also, the prostitute Rahab escaped death which befell the unbelievers for having welcomed the spies.

Jdg 6:11 4:6 1S 12:11 <sup>32</sup>Do I need to say more? There is not enough time to speak of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, as

well as Samuel and the prophets. <sup>33</sup>Through faith they fought and conquered nations, established justice, saw the fulfillment of God's promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the sword, were healed of their sicknesses; they were weak people who were given strength to be brave in battle and repulse foreign invaders.

<sup>1K</sup>  
<sup>17:23</sup>  
<sup>2Mac</sup>  
<sup>6:18</sup>

<sup>Jer</sup>  
<sup>20:2</sup>  
<sup>37:15</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Some women recovered their dead by resurrection but there were others – persecuted and tortured believers – who, for the sake of a better resurrection, refused to do what would have saved them. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered chains and prison. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword. They fled from place to place with no other clothing than the skins of sheep and goats, lacking everything, afflicted, ill-treated. <sup>38</sup>These people of whom the world was not worthy had to wander through wastelands and mountains, and take refuge in the dens of the land.

<sup>39</sup>However, although all of them were praised because of their faith, they did not enjoy the promise <sup>40</sup>because God had us in mind and saw beyond. And he did not want them to reach perfection except with us.

#### Accept the correction of the Lord

**12** • <sup>1</sup>What a cloud of innumerable witnesses surround us! So let us be rid of every encumbrance, and especially of sin, to persevere in running the race marked out before us.

<sup>13:13</sup>  
<sup>Phil</sup>  
<sup>2:6</sup>

<sup>Lk</sup>  
<sup>2:34</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Let us look to Jesus the founder of our faith, who will bring it to completion. For the sake of the joy reserved for him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and then sat at the right of

the throne of God. <sup>3</sup>Think of Jesus who suffered so many contradictions from evil people, and you will not be discouraged or grow weary. <sup>4</sup>Have you already shed your blood in the struggle against sin?

<sup>5</sup>Do not forget the comforting words that Wisdom addresses to you as children: *My son, pay attention when the Lord corrects you and do not be discouraged when he punishes you.* <sup>6</sup>For the Lord corrects those he loves and chastises everyone he accepts as a son.

<sup>Pro</sup>  
<sup>3:11</sup>

<sup>7</sup>What you endure is in order to correct you. God treats you like sons and what son is not corrected by his father? <sup>8</sup>If you were without correction which has been received by all, (as is fitting for sons), you would not be sons but bastards. <sup>9</sup>Besides, when our parents according to the flesh corrected us, we respected them. How much more should we be subject to the Father of spirits to have life? <sup>10</sup>Our parents corrected us as they saw fit, with a view to this very short life; but God corrects us for our own good that we may share his holiness.

<sup>11</sup>All correction is painful at the moment, rather than pleasant; later it brings the fruit of peace, that is, holiness to those who have been trained by it.

<sup>Is</sup>  
<sup>35:3</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Lift up, then, your drooping hands, and strengthen your trembling knees; <sup>13</sup>make level the ways for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but healed.

<sup>Pro</sup>  
<sup>8:26</sup>

#### Strive to be holy

• <sup>14</sup>Strive for peace with all and strive to be holy, for without holiness no one will see the Lord.

<sup>Dt</sup>  
<sup>29:17</sup>

• **12.1** Three reasons for remaining steadfast under testing:

- think about Jesus and his sufferings;
- think about “the communion of saints,” that is to say, the mysterious bonds uniting all believers;
- think of the trial as a test coming from the Father.

*The Father of spirits* (v. 9). In Numbers 16:22, Moses begs the *God of the spirits of all humankind*: it is a way of saying that, since God knows the inner core of all people, he knows their misery and he will not punish them severely.

- 14. After this long invitation to live by faith,

Gen 25:33 <sup>15</sup> See that no one falls from the grace of God, lest a *bitter plant spring up and its poison corrupt* many among you. <sup>16</sup> Let no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> You know that later, when he wished to get the blessing, he was rejected although he pleaded with tears.

Ex 19:16 <sup>18</sup> What you have come to is nothing known to the senses: nor heat of a *blazing fire, darkness and gloom and storms*, <sup>19</sup> *blasts of trumpets* or such a *voice* that the people pleaded that no further word be spoken. <sup>20</sup> All this was intended to have them respect the order not to approach: *Every man or beast reaching the mountain shall be stoned*. <sup>21</sup> The sight was so terrifying that Moses said: I tremble with fear.

Ex 19:12 <sup>22</sup> But you came near to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem with its innumerable angels. You have come to the solemn feast, <sup>23</sup> the assembly of the first-born of God, whose names are written in heaven. There is God, Judge of all, with the spirits of the upright brought to perfection. <sup>24</sup> There is Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, with the sprinkled blood that cries out more effectively than Abel's.

Ps 82:2

Gen 4:26  
Rev 21:2

<sup>25</sup> Be careful not to reject God when he speaks. If those who did not heed the prophet's warnings were not spared on earth, how much more shall we be punished if we do not heed the One warning us from heaven? <sup>26</sup> His voice then shook the earth, but now he says: *Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens*.

<sup>27</sup> The words *once more* indicate the removal of everything that can be shaken, that is, created things, and only those that cannot be shaken will remain. <sup>28</sup> Such is the kingdom that we receive. Let us then be grateful and offer to God a worship pleasing to him with reverence and awe. <sup>29</sup> Our God is indeed a *consuming fire*.

**Words of encouragement**

**13** <sup>1</sup> Let mutual love continue. <sup>2</sup> Do not neglect to offer hospitality; you know that some people have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup> Remember prisoners as if you were with them in chains, and the same for those who are suffering. Remember that you also have a body.

<sup>4</sup> Marriage must be respected by all and husband and wife faithful to each other. God will punish the immoral and the adulterous.

the author intends to deal with more practical matters (14-15). In fact, he immediately returns to the exceptional gift that is faith in Christ. He reminds his readers of what they experienced in baptism when they received the gifts of the Spirit.

*You came near to Mount Zion* (v. 22). This mountain on which Jerusalem was built was for the Jews the image of the heavenly city. At the time of their baptism the believers experienced to different degrees a transformation giving them a joyful awareness of belonging to God. They experienced it in a community context where they became aware of what the holy Church is. They became one in the family of God, of saints and angels. Perhaps they came to know something of this mysterious center where the destiny of the world is decided and where Jesus himself is present. They must not forget later the experiences given them in enlightened times.

- **13.1** Faith is great, but it is lived in the little

Eph 5:5

Hg 2:6

Dn 7:18

Dt 4:24  
Is 33:14

Gen 18:2

1Cor 6:13  
1Thes 4:4

1Tim 6:6

things of daily life. The persecuted people to whom this letter is addressed need not undertake new tasks. They will manifest their faith through an upright and generous life. They will also have to accept their situation of being marginalized, *sharing the shame* of Christ.

*Jesus suffered his Passion outside the holy city* (v. 12). The Bible required that victims sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins be burned outside the *sacred area* of the Temple: that was a way of showing that the sin of the people had been transferred to those victims, then thrown out to take all evil and sin away from the people. This rite somehow already announced what was to happen with Jesus who died outside the holy city of Jerusalem: he was the true victim for sin.

We can draw another lesson, as well: believers must leave the holy area, that is, a comfortable and respected life, in order to seek the Kingdom of Justice to which little care is given. Believers oppose the present world, and "are not of this world"; and they refuse to enjoy this world as if it were their final homeland.



<sup>Dt 31:6</sup> <sup>Ps 118:6</sup> <sup>Eph 4:14</sup> <sup>Col 2:17</sup> <sup>118:6</sup> <sup>6</sup> <sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Do not depend on money. Be content with having enough for today for God has said: *I will never forsake you or abandon you,* <sup>6</sup>and we shall confidently answer: *The Lord is my helper, I will not fear; what can man do to me?* <sup>7</sup>Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Consider their end and imitate their faith. <sup>8</sup>Christ Jesus is the same today as yesterday and forever.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be led astray by all kinds of strange teachings. Your heart will be strengthened by the grace of God rather than by foods of no use to anyone. <sup>10</sup>We have an altar from which those still serving in the Temple cannot eat.

<sup>11</sup>After the High Priest has offered the blood in the Sanctuary for the sins of the people, the carcasses of the animals are burnt outside the camp. <sup>12</sup>For this same reason Jesus, to purify the people with his own blood, suffered his Passion outside the holy city. <sup>13</sup>Let us, therefore, go to him outside the sacred area, sharing his shame. <sup>14</sup>For we have here no lasting city and we are looking for the one to come.

<sup>15</sup>Let us, then, continually offer through Jesus a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips celebrating

his name. <sup>16</sup>Do not neglect good works and common life, for these are sacrifices pleasing to God. <sup>17</sup>Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are concerned for your souls and are accountable for them. Let this be a joy for them rather than a burden, which would be of no advantage for you.

<sup>18</sup>Pray for us, for we believe our intentions are pure and that we only want to act honorably in all things. <sup>19</sup>Now I urge you all the more to pray for me that I may be given back to you the sooner.

<sup>20</sup>May God give you peace, he who brought back from among the dead Jesus our Lord, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, whose blood seals the eternal covenant.

<sup>21</sup>He will train you in every good work, that you may do his will, for it is he who works in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom all glory be for ever and ever. Amen!

<sup>22</sup>Brothers, I beg you to take these words of encouragement. For my part, I will add few words. <sup>23</sup>Know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he comes soon I will visit you with him. <sup>24</sup>Greetings to all your leaders and to the saints. Greetings from those in Italy.

<sup>25</sup>Grace be with you all.

<sup>1Cor 16:16</sup>  
<sup>Phil 2:29</sup>  
<sup>1Thes 5:12</sup>  
<sup>1Cor 6:13</sup>  
<sup>1Thes 4:4</sup>

<sup>Jn 10:11</sup>  
<sup>1P 2:25</sup>