

**Throne of Mercy**  
**29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time (B)**  
**(Hb 4:14-16)**

In the Old Testament, worship of God was centered in the temple of Jerusalem, where the Levitical priests ministered by offering the sacrifices prescribed in the Law of Moses. God gave Moses a vision of heavenly realities (Hb 8:5, Ex 25:40) and commanded him to construct the temple on earth as a copy of what he saw. Worship required three things: temple, priest, and sacrifice.

The temple had three sections, each separated by a veil or divider. The outer gate led the people of the covenant into a courtyard area of the temple compound. Here they would present their sacrifices to the Levites, who assisted the priests. Only the priests could pass through the second curtain to the area where the sacrifices were offered upon an altar. This altar stood before the innermost section called the “Holy of Holies,” where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.

The Holy of Holies represented heaven. It was the place of God’s throne, before which the priest, interceding for man’s sin by means of sacrificial blood, pleaded for mercy and forgiveness. Inside the golden Ark were the tablets of the 10 Commandments as well as a jar of Manna. On top of the Ark was an ornate solid gold Throne or “Mercy Seat,” flanked by two angels with outstretched wings. Almost no one passed through the third veil into the Holy of Holies.

Moses would come into the Holy of Holies and speak with God before His throne during the time of the Exodus in the desert, when the temple was still just a portable tent (Ex 25:22). But once the people settled in the Holy Land, Solomon built a permanent temple in Jerusalem. At this point, only the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies to intercede before God’s throne for mercy upon the people, and this would take place only one day of the year, on the Feast of the Atonement, “Yom Kippur” (Lv 16). Jews still observe Yom Kippur, even though there is no longer a temple or high priest; this year it fell on October 9.

This Old Testament background helps explain what the Letter to the Hebrews means when it says Jesus is the great high priest “*who has passed through the heavens*” (Hb 4:14). Jesus never entered the temple in Jerusalem as an earthly high priest. Instead, by his Resurrection and Ascension Jesus enters heaven itself, the true “Holy of Holies” of which the earthly one was a mere copy (Hb 9:24)!

When Jesus died, the veil in the Jerusalem temple was torn from top to bottom (Mt 27:51). This was the third veil of the Holy of Holies. Heaven itself was now opened to us, and the purpose of the earthly temple of Moses and Solomon is now fulfilled; it is no longer needed. The temple, the Levitical

priesthood, the animal sacrifices – they all pass away in 70 A.D. Christ has fulfilled their symbolism and inaugurated true worship.

With the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is a new temple, a new priesthood, and a new sacrifice. It is no longer a *copy* of the heavenly reality, an earthly *symbol* of the heavenly reality, it *is* now the heavenly reality on earth. The new temple is Jesus, the priest is Jesus, and the sacrifice is Jesus.

The new Temple built by Christ in three days (Jn 2:19) is his resurrected Body, of which the baptized are members. The new temple is the “Mystical Body of Christ,” the Church. It is no longer located in one place such as earthly Jerusalem. It is found in every city, and in any church building where the Church gathers for worship. In this new temple of Christ’s Body, the baptized faithful participate in the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ, which gives true and perfect worship to the Father, and makes full and perfect atonement for man’s sin.

In the Old Testament God was worshipped by many animal sacrifices. In the New Testament there is one perfect sacrifice, that of the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world: the sacrifice of himself which Jesus offered on the altar of the Cross. By his Ascension, Jesus now passes the veil into heaven itself, and comes before the Throne of Mercy to make intercession before the Father, bearing his own Blood (Hb 9:11-14).

It is in this worship that Christians participate. As members of his Mystical Body, the baptized faithful share in his priesthood, and in his offering. There is only one High Priest in the New Testament, and only one Sacrifice. The sacramentally ordained priest who leads the Mass on earth is an instrument of the Lord, to make *his* eternal priesthood present to the faithful on that given occasion. Christ offers the Mass, through the ordained priest, and through the baptized faithful. Or rather, we can say that through the Mass offered by the ordained priest, the faithful gathered for that occasion are able to *participate again* in Christ’s singular and eternal priestly sacrifice. The Mass is an “*anamnesis*,” a memorial which “makes present” the reality being remembered. The Mass doesn’t simply recall the Last Supper and Calvary, it makes the reality of the Last Supper and the Sacrifice of the Cross present again. Christ is not sacrificed repeatedly; our participation in that sacrifice is repeated.

In the New Testament the Temple is built of living stones (1 Pt 2:5). The temple is not the church building, but the faithful. Nevertheless, the church building is still important as an expression of what the church is, and in what worship consists. The traditional shape and structure of the church is based on the Old Testament temple, by which God gave Moses the proper “template” for heavenly worship.

A properly built Catholic church should have the three-fold hierarchy. The main entrance serves as the first veil, through which the faithful are gathered into God's temple. The second veil corresponds with the communion rail, separating nave from sanctuary. It is in the sanctuary that the priestly activity takes place, the offering on the altar. Moreover, the traditional practice of locating the altar before the tabernacle is correct, and corresponds with the Old Testament model: the priest stands before the Holy of Holies as he offers sacrifice, interceding before God's heavenly throne. The older practice is the proper one: priest facing tabernacle, not the people. It is the tabernacle which is the new Holy of Holies, its door is the third veil, and within it is the true Manna and the very Presence of God.

What is unique about the New Testament worship and the replacement of the old Temple-Priesthood-Sacrifice with the Temple-Priesthood-Sacrifice of Christ, is that all the faithful are now able to pass through the third veil, and enter heaven itself. As our second reading proclaims today, Christians can "*confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help*" (Hb 4:16). In the Liturgy of the Word by which Mass begins we pass through the first veil. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist by which the priestly sacrifice is offered on the altar (and our offerings united with it) we pass through the second veil. In the reception of Holy Communion, we pass through the third veil, "entering the tabernacle" by becoming the tabernacle.

The Mass is no longer an earthly copy or symbol of the heavenly liturgy, it is in reality our participation in the heavenly worship. In the Mass heaven and earth are united, it is the fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer: "*on earth as it is in heaven.*" In the Mass we are before God's heavenly throne in the company of angels and saints. Through the Mass we have access to all grace and mercy, for ourselves and the world. There is nothing more important than for the Mass to be celebrated in every town and village.

Worship, then, is much greater than we expect or imagine. It is not something we accomplish by our power, but something Christ accomplishes in and through his Body the Church.

*"So let us now confidently approach the heavenly Throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help"* (Hb 4:16).