

Shortly before I was ordained a priest I met with a counselor at the seminary about the internship part of my preparation. Seminarians spend most of their time in the classroom, but some of their time practicing ministry. Then we'd meet with a counselor and talk about what we did. More accurately, we talked about what we should have done, because it seems we never did it right. One day, while talking about how to do it differently the next time, this priest counselor told me there was a definition of priesthood in the bible. He pointed to the passage we just heard as the second reading. Now, today, I would argue with him; Hebrews concerns a first century Jewish high priest, not the contemporary Catholic parish priest, but at the time -- over twenty years ago -- this passage brought me great comfort.

It defines a high priest. He represents people before God and offers sacrifice for their sins. The reason the priest can do this, Hebrews says, is that "he himself is beset by weakness and must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people." It goes on to say that Jesus is like a high priest because the high priest does not appoint himself to this task; rather, God picks the priest. Similarly, God chose Jesus as the priest to offer sacrifice for the sake of the people. Jesus, of course, had no sin and no need to offer sacrifice for himself, but the priest of the local temple was a sinner like the people.

This was the point my counselor was making when we talked about how you can always do better as a priest. He said, you don't go into the job being perfect. You go into it as a sinner like everyone else. When you pray, you pray for your own forgiveness, not just for the forgiveness of the people. I found it comforting to know it was OK to make mistakes, as long as you learned from them, repented of them, and grew from them.

Priests are imperfect but Jesus is perfect. Earlier this fall the Vatican issued a document on Jesus and the church that stirred some controversy. We restated our belief that Jesus is the sole means of salvation, and that salvation happens through his Body, the Church. Many people concluded from it that if you're not a Catholic you're going to hell. That's not what the document states. It admits that anyone can be saved, but that the Church is instrumental to salvation even for people who are not members. That shouldn't have been as controversial as it was, but the tone of the document is much more restrictive in its language than was Vatican II's decree on ecumenism, and this recent statement fell with a thud on ecumenical dialogue.

Today is Reformation Sunday in Protestant churches, a day that remembers Martin Luther posting 95 theses of reform for the church on the door of the Wittenberg cathedral. Today those theses don't look as startling as they did at the time, but we still have not reached reunion with our Protestant brothers and sisters. We hope it will come soon. Luther had this much right: Reforms in the church need to be rooted in the gospel; they need to have Jesus Christ as the center. When we face our weaknesses as individuals or as a church, we find comfort in knowing that Christ the high priest is without sin, even though we are sinners, and his sacrifice will bring salvation to us all.