

The Letter to the Hebrews Handout #2, Lesson 14

The Letter of Hebrews and the Canon of the Roman Mass

In Father Swetnam’s article “*A Liturgical Approach to Hebrews*,” he makes several insightful connections between the structure of Hebrews chapter 13, the mention of the “sacrifice of praise” in 13:15 and the liturgy of the “sacrifice of praise” –*sacrificium laudis* found in the Roman Mass. It is a term, Fr. Swetnam points out, which occurs in the remembrance of the living: *Remember, Lord, your people. Remember all of us gathered here before you. You know how firmly we believe in you and dedicate ourselves to you. We offer you this sacrifice of praise for ourselves and those who are dear to us. We pray to you, our living and true God, for our well-being and redemption. [Daily Roman Missal].*

Fr. Swetnam writes: *The use of the phrase “sacrifice of praise: in the heart of the Latin Rite Mass would seem to indicate that the Mass was considered such a sacrifice. [..]. For the structure of chapter 13.... seems to mirror the basic structure of the Latin Rite Mass:* He then provides an outline of the similarities between Hebrews chapter 13 and the structure of the Mass which I have reformatted in this chart:

Verses 1-5a	Mirror the examination of conscience which is part of the beginning of every Latin Mass
Verses 5b-6	Mirror the second main part of the Mass, the readings from Scripture
Verses 7-17	Mirror the central, sacrificial part of the Mass
Verses 18-19	Mirror the “Remembrance of the Living” in which the phrase <i>sacrificium laudis</i> occurs, as cited above
Verses 20-21	Mirror the final blessing given by the priest at each Mass

Swetnam, page 178-9

There is a problem with Fr. Swetnam’s outline, however, because verses 18-19 do not include the phrase “sacrifice of praise”, that phrase appears in verse 15. His theory has merit but perhaps this is a better depiction of the link between chapter 13 and the Mass:

Hebrews Chapter 13	The Mass
Verses 1-5a: Appeal to examine Christian walk of faith	The examination of conscience in the Penitential rite
Verses 5b-6: Scripture quotations	Liturgy of the Word
Verses 7-9a: Moral admonitions	The homily
Verses 9b-19: The “food”, the sacrifice of Christ, the blood, the altar, the “sacrifice of praise”	Liturgy of the Eucharist: the sacrifice Remembrance of the Living [phrase “sacrifice of praise”]
Verses 20-21: Benediction and blessing	Concluding rites: benediction and blessing

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Hebrews Handout Lesson 14: Chapter 13

Father James Swetnam, J.S. in his article “A Liturgical Approach to Hebrews 13” [*Letter and Spirit volume 2*, 2006; pages 159-173], divides the chapter into two sections:

1. Hebrews 13:1-21: main body of the passage
2. Hebrews 13:22-25: additional closing remarks

Father Swetnam studies Hebrews 13:1-21 from 3 perspectives:

1. Viewed in terms of the structure of the passage
2. Viewed from the perspective of the Old Covenant communion sacrifice known in Hebrews as the *toda*, or “thank” offering
3. Viewed in context of the sacrifice of the Mass

As far as structure is concerned, Father Swetnam divides the passage into five sections:

1. Hebrews 13:1-5: series of admonitions addressed to right Christian conduct
2. Hebrews 13:5b-6: two citations from Old Testament Scripture
3. Hebrews 13:7-17: main body of the passage addressing the necessity of obedience to Christians leaders
4. Hebrews 13:18-19: the author’s appeal for prayer for Church leaders and for himself
5. Hebrews 13:20-21: the closing blessing

Hebrews 13:5b-6: two Old Testament Scripture citations:

1. “*I will never forsake you or abandon you*” is a reference to Deuteronomy 31:6: *Be brave and steadfast; have no fear or dread of them, for it is the LORD, your God, who marches with you; he will never fail you or forsake you.* It is a statement of God’s faithfulness which is repeated to Joshua in Joshua 1:5: *No one can withstand you while you live. I will be with you as I was with Moses: I will not leave you nor forsake you.*
Thus we may say with confidence:
2. “*The Lord is my helper, [and] I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?*” This is a quote from Psalm 118:6: *The LORD is with me; I am not afraid; what can mortals do against me?*

Hebrews 13:6 quotes Psalm 118: 6. Psalm 118 was sung on the Feast of Tabernacles and during the week long Feast of the Passover. It was sung by Jesus and His disciples the night of the Last Supper. The hymn was part of the Temple liturgy offered as a hymn of thanksgiving as the king and the people process into the Temple precincts and is divided into 7 parts.

- Part I: the invocation [verses 1-4]
- Part II: the people with confidence petition God’s assistance in time of danger [verses 5-9].
- Part III: Hostile foreign nations threaten but God’s people are victorious [verses 10-14].
- Part IV: an account of God’s rescue, even though the faithful may suffer [verses 15-18].
- Part V: Song of thanksgiving at the gates of the Temple as the faithful enter the Temple to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving. [verses 19-25]
- Part VI: The priests give their blessing to the people [verses 26-27].
- Part VII: The people sing in gratitude