

Catholic Introduction to the Letter to the Hebrews

The **Letter to the Hebrews** stands out in the New Testament for its rich theological depth and its focus on the **supremacy of Christ** as the ultimate High Priest and the **fulfillment** of the Old Covenant. This letter is going to be the Second Reading for the next 7 Sundays. While the author of Hebrews is unknown—traditionally attributed to **St. Paul** but with debate among scholars—the letter is addressed primarily to **Jewish Christians** who were familiar with the **Old Testament** sacrificial system.

Purpose and Themes:

The letter aims to encourage Christians, particularly those facing **persecution** or **temptation** to return to Jewish practices, to remain faithful to Christ. Hebrews presents Jesus as the **eternal High Priest**, the **perfect sacrifice**, and the **mediator of a New Covenant**, which is superior to the old Mosaic covenant.

Key themes include:

- **Jesus' superiority** to angels, Moses, and the Levitical priesthood.
- The importance of **faith** in persevering through trials.
- The **finality** and **perfection** of Christ's sacrifice.
- **Christ's humanity and divinity**, and His role in bringing humanity into the fullness of salvation.

In Catholic tradition, Hebrews is important for its teaching on the **sacrificial nature of Christ's death** and His **continuing priestly intercession** in heaven, both of which are central to Catholic understanding of the Eucharist and the **sacrament of Holy Orders**.

Catholic Exegesis on Hebrews 2:9-11

Hebrews 2:9-11 (RSV): "But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers."

Verse-by-Verse Catholic Exegesis

Verse 9: "But we see Jesus... crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

This verse highlights the **humility and exaltation** of Christ. For a time, Jesus was made **lower than the angels**, referring to His **Incarnation**—when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh and entered into the limitations of humanity. His **suffering** and **death** were not signs of failure but the very means through which He achieved **glory** and **honor**.

- **Catholic Perspective:** Christ's **suffering and death** are central to salvation, which is why the Catholic Church venerates the **cross** as the symbol of victory. Christ's "tasting of death" was not just a symbolic action but a real, sacrificial death on behalf of all humanity. The Eucharist, where Catholics participate in Christ's death and resurrection, is a continual reminder of this self-giving sacrifice.

Verse 10: "For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering."

This verse emphasizes that it was fitting for the Creator to achieve salvation through **suffering**. Christ is called the "**pioneer**" (or "**author**" in some translations) of salvation, leading humanity to **glory** through His own suffering. In the Catholic understanding, this verse teaches that **suffering** was not only necessary for Christ but also for those who follow Him.

- **Catholic Perspective:** Catholics embrace the **redemptive value of suffering**, following Christ's example. Suffering, when united to Christ, can lead to spiritual perfection and sanctification. The **saints** often speak of suffering as a path to holiness, echoing this verse's message.

Verse 11: "For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers."

Here, the author emphasizes the **solidarity** between Jesus and humanity. Christ, as the one who **sanctifies**, shares a common origin with those He sanctifies, namely, His **shared humanity**. Because of this shared human experience, Jesus is not ashamed to call us **brothers**.

- **Catholic Perspective:** This verse underscores the **intimacy** of Christ's relationship with us. Catholics recognize that in **baptism**, we are incorporated into the **Body of Christ** and become His brothers and sisters. Jesus, through His humanity, elevates us to a share in His divine life, making us members of God's family. This is celebrated especially in the **Eucharist**, where we are united with Christ in His self-offering.

The Surgeon and His Patients

An analogy to explain these verses might be this: Imagine a skilled surgeon who has the ability to heal a deadly disease but must first **undergo** the same surgery to fully understand the **suffering** of his patients. Only by enduring the pain and recovery himself can he truly lead others to **healing and restoration**.

Similarly, **Jesus**, the divine "surgeon," could only lead us to salvation by **experiencing** suffering and death Himself. He didn't stay aloof from our human condition; He entered into it completely. Through His suffering, He not only **perfected** His role as our Savior, but also made it possible for us to be healed and brought to glory.

Summary:

In Hebrews 2:9-11, we see the **Catholic doctrine of salvation** through **Christ's suffering and solidarity** with humanity. Jesus, fully divine and fully human, became **like us** in every way (except

sin) and embraced the path of suffering to **redeem** us. Catholics view this as the ultimate expression of God's **love** and **mercy**, manifested in the **Paschal Mystery** (Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection).

This passage invites us to embrace our own **sufferings** and unite them with Christ's, recognizing that just as He was made **perfect through suffering**, we too are **sanctified** by following in His footsteps.