

HOLY ORDERS: Sacrament of Ministerial Service to God's People (C 1536-1600, USC Ch. 20)

In the Church's sacramental system, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are called sacraments of initiation; and Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick, the sacraments of healing. The other two sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are called the sacraments in service of communion because they minister to our salvation. *The Catechism* (1534) states that if these sacraments help us with our personal salvation, it is because of our service to others.

In this article we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Priesthood
- Two Participations in the One Priesthood of Christ
- Bishop, Priest and Deacon
- Who May Be Ordained
- Effects or Graces of Priesthood

Biblical Roots (C 1539-1553, USC p. 264)

The Church borrowed the word *order* from the Roman Empire, which used the term to designate a governing body. In the sacrament of Holy Orders, the Church speaks of three degrees or "orders": bishop, priest and deacon.

The origin of the priesthood goes back to the Old Testament. The first priest figure we encounter is Melchizedek, who offers a sacrifice of bread and wine on behalf of Abraham (Gen 14:18-20). He symbolizes the *permanence* of priesthood: "Like Melchizedek you are a priest forever" (Ps 110:4).

When God chose Israel, he calls them to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," a people who would offer God true worship. "Within the people of Israel, God chose one of the twelve tribes, that of Levi, and set it apart for liturgical service..." (C 1539). The role of the tribe of Levi is to guard the Ark of the Covenant and to offer sacrifice and gifts for the people's sins. They also proclaim God's Word and interpret the Law of the Covenant and lead the people in communal worship of God. These priests of the Old Covenant prefigure the priests of the New Covenant.

The priesthood of the Old Covenant finds its perfect fulfillment in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, who is the one Mediator between God and us. "Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the Cross is a priestly act of perfect self-offering accepted by the Father and culminating in his Resurrection from the dead so that,

as Risen Lord and High Priest, he continues to offer salvation to all" (USC p. 264).

Two Participations in the One Priesthood of Christ (C 1546-1553, USC p. 264)

Just as the whole of Israel was a priestly people, so is the whole Church a priestly people. The Church speaks about two priesthoods: the "priesthood of all the faithful" and the "priesthood of the ordained." The common priesthood is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace (C 1547). The ministerial priesthood is rooted in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Both priesthoods share in the priesthood of Christ.

While the two priesthoods differ from each other, they are interrelated. The ordained priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood and is the means by which Christ builds up and leads his Church (C 1547). Both the baptized and ordained are called to live a life of holiness, a life surrendered to God, a life of service to others. Both are called to participate in Jesus' saving work by living holy lives, by witnessing to Gospel values.

While every Christian by reason of baptism, represents Christ and acts in the person of Christ, only the ordained priest represents Christ as *head* of his Church—teaching, shepherding and sanctifying God's people (C 1549). The priest also *represents the whole Church and acts in her name* when he offers the sacrifice of the Mass, in his whole ministry and, hopefully, in the way he lives his life. The priest is not a stand-in for Christ like a substitute teacher in a school. The priest, by reason of his ordination, makes Christ present in a way similar to the way Christ is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass. "While the sacrament of Holy Orders does not preserve the ordained from weakness and sin, the Holy Spirit guarantees that the minister's sin does not impede the effectiveness of the Sacrament and its graces" (USC p. 265).

***Pause:** To what extent do you think that baptized Catholics have a sense of their priestly status? To what extent do you have this sense?*

Origin of Bishop, Priest and Deacon

As we read the Acts of the Apostles and letters of the New Testament, we learn that the Apostles took on a leadership role in the early Christian communities.

They represented Christ in these communities. In Lk 10:16, Jesus says to his representatives: “Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you, rejects me and rejects the one who sent me.”

When the Apostles started to die, they appointed successors who came to be known as bishops. Bishops acted as overseers of the first Christian communities.

When the Apostles were still alive, they appointed some men to assist them, especially in caring for the needy. These men became known as deacons. In 1Tim 3:1-3, Paul outlines the qualifications needed for bishops and deacons, indicating that these two ministries had become established in the early decades of the Church.

The development of the order of priest is less clear in the New Testament. But by the end of the first century, three roles or “offices” of leadership and service came to be recognized in local Christian communities: the bishops, presbyters, and deacons (C 1554). Certain New Testament verses testify to the beginnings of what became known as the *Sacrament of Holy Orders*. For example, in 1Tim 3:1, Paul speaks about the office of bishop being a worthy way to serve God’s people. In 2Tim 1:6, he speaks about the laying on of hands. In Titus 1:5, Paul directs his collaborator Titus to ordain priests to assist the Church in Crete. Let us examine these three ministries a little closer.

Bishops (C 1555-1561, USC p. 265). Church teachings speak of the bishop as having the “fullness of the priesthood.” This does not mean that he has *more* priesthood than the lay person or a priest or deacon. Rather, it means that he has received the *fullness of the responsibilities* of Holy Orders. Through the Ordination Rite, the bishop becomes a successor to the original Apostles and takes on all the responsibilities Christ entrusted to them: teacher, shepherd, guardian of the flock and the Gospel of Christ. A bishop is ordained by another bishop assisted by two other bishops. Every bishop belongs to the College of Bishops, and with them and in union with the Bishop of Rome, he has responsibility for the entire mission of the Church. He usually oversees a territory called a diocese. A bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation (which can be delegated to priests). Only a bishop can ordain priests and deacons. He also blesses the sacred oils used in the sacraments.

Priests – coworkers of the bishops (C 1565-1568, USC p. 266). When a bishop ordains a priest, he is extending to him a portion of his apostolic authority. This makes the priest a coworker with the bishop of a diocese. With the bishop, priests are responsible for preaching and teaching the Gospel, shepherding God’s people, and leading the community in worship, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. The priest promises obedience to the bishop in service to God’s people. Priests normally serve in parishes or in other diocesan ministries.

Diocesan and religious priests. Most priests are diocesan priests. They belong and serve within a particular diocese. Other priests belong to a religious community, e.g., Benedictines, Franciscans, Jesuits and Dominicans. They belong to a religious order founded by a priest or brother in response to a special need of the Church at a particular time in the Church’s history. Religious order priests belong to a Province, which in this country normally includes several states. With the permission of the bishop, they may serve as parish priests.

Permanent deacons (C 1569-1571, USC p. 266). Deacons receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders from a bishop and are ordained, not to ministerial priesthood but to the ministry of service. Through ordination, the deacon is conformed to Christ, who came to serve and not to be served” (USC p. 266). Deacons can baptize, bless marriages, preside at funerals, proclaim the Gospel, preach, and dedicate themselves to other works of charity. The Church has “transitional” deacons (men on their way to priesthood) and permanent deacons. Both married and single men can be ordained to the permanent diaconate.

Pause: What qualities do you look for and hope to see in ordained clergy, be it bishop, priest or deacon?

Essential rite of Holy Orders (C 1573). The essential or central rite of the ordination ceremony for bishops, priests and deacons occurs when the bishop lays hands on the head of the person being ordained and invokes a special prayer of consecration during which he asks God for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts upon the ordinand so that he may serve God and his people with love and fidelity.

Who May Be Ordained (C 1577-1580, USC p. 267)

Only male baptized Catholics may be ordained in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Even though Jesus often

broke with the customs of his time in his attitude towards women, he only chose men to become part of the twelve Apostles – the ones who would become the foundation of the ministerial priesthood. After the Ascension of Jesus, Mary played a special role amongst the leaders of the Church. Yet, she was not invited to enter the college of the Twelve when Matthias was appointed to replace Judas (Acts 1:12-26). The Apostles chose men to be their successors and this tradition continued down through the centuries.

One may ask the question: What about women who feel called to ordination to the priesthood? In a *Pastoral Letter* on the subject of **Ten frequently asked questions about the reservation of priestly ordination**, the Catholic bishops state: “*The only calling that is universal – embracing all women and men – is the call to holiness*” (para 9). In paragraph 8, the *Pastoral Letter* states: “*No one has a right by baptism to ordination, for this sacrament is not essential for any person in his response to the call to holiness. The Church has clearly affirmed the equal dignity of women and men, and the equality of baptized women with baptized men. Ordination to the ministerial priesthood, however, is a distinct gift. It is not essential for salvation and is given not for one’s own salvation but for the service of God and of the Church.*”

Paragraph 8 further states: “*The Church must follow the example of Christ who called women to discipleship but not to membership in the Twelve.*”

When the late Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the long tradition of the Church in reserving priesthood for men, he also spoke about the wonderful achievements of women in promoting the mission of the Church. He writes: “*The New Testament and the whole history of the Church give ample evidence of the presence in the Church of women, true disciples, witnesses to Christ in the family and in society, as well as in total consecration to the service of God and of the Gospel. “By defending the dignity of women and their vocation, the Church has shown honor and gratitude for those women who, faithful to the Gospel, have shared in every age in the apostolic mission of the whole People of God. They are the holy martyrs, virgins and mothers of families, who bravely bore witness to their faith and passed on the Church’s faith and tradition by bringing up their children in the spirit of the Gospel”* (USC p. 269).

The *Catechism* also states that no one has a right to ordination. One who believes he has a call to the priesthood must submit his desire to the Church, which has the responsibility to discern whether the

call is genuine or not. Normally, this process takes place during the period the candidate spends in a seminary, where he receives theological, pastoral and spiritual formation. The bishop has the final say as to the suitability of the candidate.

Pause: *The article gives the reason why the church cannot ordain women. What do you think about this issue?*

Celibacy (C 1579-1580). Even though bishops, priests and deacons were married in the early centuries of the Church, since the twelfth century, bishops and priests in the Latin Rite may not be married. But the practice of a celibate priesthood in the Latin Rite started in the fourth century. In recent years, Rome, under a special Pastoral Provision, has made it possible for some married Anglican and Lutheran clergy who have converted to Catholicism, to be ordained as Catholic priests. The rule of priestly celibacy is a *discipline* of the Church and not a doctrine. This means that the Church, for grave reasons, could make priestly celibacy optional.

Men who are married may be ordained deacons. But they cannot remarry if their wife dies. Nor can men, ordained as deacons while single, ever marry.

In the Eastern Church, only bishops must remain celibate. Priests and deacons may marry. In the Eastern Church, the practice of celibacy is highly regarded. Many priests freely choose this option.

The symbolic and practical meaning of celibacy

- By choosing not to marry, the priest is conforming himself more to Christ who was not married, so that he can totally dedicate himself with undivided heart to the Lord.
- In living a celibate life for the sake of the Gospel, the priest is a living manifestation of our state in the next life, where there will be no marriage.
- In not having to care for a wife and children, a celibate priest can dedicate himself more fully to Christ and to the service of God’s people (1Cor 7:32-34).

Pause: *For many centuries, the Church admitted married men to the priesthood. Should the Church rethink its stance on this issue considering the shortage of priests?*

Effects/Graces of the Sacrament of Holy Orders
(C 1581-1589, USC p. 271)

- Holy Orders, like the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, confers an indelible spiritual character (often called a “seal”) on the soul of the recipient. These three sacraments configure the recipient to Christ in a special way, enabling him to act for the Lord in his threefold office of priest, prophet and king. These three sacraments can only be received once.

In the case of the priest, the special indelible character enables the priest to celebrate Eucharist and to represent Christ as Head of the Church and to act in the name of the whole Church.

A priest who has left active priesthood, or who has been forbidden to exercise his priestly duties, or who has been laicized, is still a priest and, in cases of emergency, could hear confession and administer the Anointing of the Sick.

- Since it is ultimately Christ who acts in the sacraments through the ordained minister, the sinfulness or unworthiness of the ordained person does not prevent Christ from giving us his graces in the sacraments. St. Augustine writes: *“The spiritual power of the sacraments is indeed comparable to light: those to be enlightened receive it in its purity, and if it should pass through defiled beings, it is not itself defiled”* (C 1584).
- The Holy Spirit offers each bishop, priest and deacon the graces and gifts necessary to live a holy life and to faithfully carry out the duties of his state in life. Having said that, ordination does not automatically confer holiness. Holiness is the lifelong call of every baptized person. It only occurs when one generously cooperates with the movements of the Holy Spirit in one’s life.

Suggested Actions

Pray for all ordained persons. Pray that those who are being called to ordained ministry and religious life may hear and answer God’s call. If your parish does not have a vocations committee, approach your pastor about starting one.

————— **Meditation** —————

*To live in the midst of the world
with no desire for its pleasures;
to be a member of every family
yet belonging to none;
to share all sufferings;
to penetrate all secrets;
to heal all wounds;
to daily go from men to God
to offer him their homage and petitions;
to return from God to men
to bring them His pardon and His hope;
to have a heart of iron for chastity
and a heart of bronze for charity;
to teach, instruct, pardon and console;
to bless and be blest forever!
O God, what a life, and ‘tis thine –
O priest of Jesus Christ!*

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