



HOLY ORDERS

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“Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”
-Ps. 110:4

Why a priesthood?

Why does the Church need a priesthood? The reason a priest exists, in whatever religion, is to offer sacrifice. Though God is capable of hearing the prayers of any person directly, it is fitting because of His dignity and holiness that He should have a special class of men set apart and consecrated to His service and worship alone. In this way they can attend to God with single-mindedness and without the distractions that would be attendant upon a man still living in the world.

In the Catholic Church, this “practical” reason for the priesthood is superceded by a more foundational “sacramental” reason: it is through the priesthood that Christ is made present to the Church and that His grace is distributed through the sacraments. Without the priesthood, we would have no sacraments.¹

The Catholic priesthood, therefore, is one that exists to make Christ present to His Bride, the Church, and likewise to offer the sacrifice of Christ to God the Father on behalf of the Church.

In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, God called the entire Israelites people to be unto Him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Yet, within that people, the tribe of Levi was set apart as a ministerial priesthood, distinguished by birth, to offer sacrifices to the God of Israel.

For over a thousand years this priesthood endured, being passed on in the biological lineage of the family of Levi (and the High Priesthood among the descendants of Aaron in particular). They offered bloody, animal sacrifices for sins at the Temple of God in Jerusalem.

The liturgy of the Church, however, sees in the priesthood of Aaron and the service of the Levites, as in the institution of the seventy elders, a prefiguring of the ordained ministry of the New Covenant. Thus in the Latin Rite the Church prays in the consecratory preface of the ordination of bishops:

*God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . .
From the beginning,
you chose the descendants of Abraham to be your holy nation.
You established rulers and priests
and did not leave your sanctuary without ministers to serve you (CCC 1541).*

¹ Except baptism which can be conferred by anybody.

Not abolished, but transformed

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks out frequently against the corruption of the Temple elders at Jerusalem. He preaches against empty formalism and encourages the Jews to love God with all their heart and mind, not just in the repetition of ritual. At time, He calls the priests and scribes of the Temple hypocrites and vipers. Jesus' message against hypocrisy in religious leadership is very strong indeed.

Nevertheless, we ought not to make the common error of assuming that Jesus's preaching against corrupt religious leadership equates to a condemnation of religious hierarchy as such. Though Jesus rightfully condemns greed, hypocrisy and empty formalism in the religious hierarchy of His day, He does not deny that such hierarchies are good, and He even tells people that they ought to obey the hierarchy:

The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not (Matt. 23:2-3).

The Church has always held that Jesus did not come to abolish the Old Testament priesthood, but to take it up into Himself, transform it, and empower it with the graces of the New Covenant, won by the shedding of His blood. From the earliest times, Catholic Tradition attests to the existence of a hierarchical priesthood in the earliest Christian communities:

"Even here in the Church the gradations of bishops, presbyters, and deacons happen to be imitations, in my opinion, of the angelic glory and of that arrangement which, the scriptures say, awaits those who have followed in the footsteps of the apostles and who have lived in complete righteousness according to the gospel" (St. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6:13:107:2 [A.D. 208]).

Grades of Holy Orders

Following Scripture and Apostolic Tradition, the Church distinguishes three grades of Holy Orders: the diaconate, the presbyterate, and the episcopate (deacons, priests, bishops). These ought not to be confused with the previous seven degrees of Holy Orders from the pre-Vatican II period, which were preparatory steps to the priesthood and usually more of an office than an order.

The fullness of Holy Orders resides in the office of the Bishop. There are several reasons for this: first, because a bishop stands as the successor to the Apostles, who themselves were meant to be extensions of Christ ("He who hears you, hears Me"). As such, he represents Christ. St. Ignatius of Antioch around AD 110 said: "Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest" (*Letter to the Magnesians*, 6:1).

Second, the bishop alone possesses the power to confer all seven of the sacraments, as only one who has the fullness of Holy Orders has the capability of giving it. Hence, only bishops can consecrate other priests and bishops.

What we commonly mean when we refer to the “priesthood” is more properly called the *presbyterate*, from the Greek word *presbyteros*, meaning “elder.”² The presbyters were originally ordained to assist the bishop and are always spoken of in the New Testament alongside the bishops, though the presbyters are always appointed by the bishops (see: 1 Pet. 5:2, Titus 1:5). A priest is an extension of the bishop and, in union with the bishop, can lawfully administer all of the sacraments a bishop can, with the exception of the ordaining of other priests and deacons.³

The institution of the third grade of Holy Orders, the diaconate (Gk: servants) can be found in Acts 6:1-6, where the Apostles appoint seven men to assist them in charitable works so that they might devote more time to preaching. Deacons are empowered with the ability, as ministers of the Church, to witness marriages and administer baptism. Deacons may also officiate at funerary rites, preach at Mass, and give blessings (including the Eucharistic benediction). They cannot, however, give sacramental absolution, nor confect the Eucharist, nor administer anointing of the sick (and of course, they cannot ordain or confirm).

The indelible character of Holy Orders

Holy Orders, like Confirmation and Baptism, confers an indelible mark on the soul of the recipient. The Catechism says, “This sacrament configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ’s instrument for his Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet, and king. As in the case of Baptism and Confirmation this share in Christ’s office is granted once for all. The sacrament of Holy Orders, like the other two, confers an *indelible spiritual character* and cannot be repeated or conferred temporarily” (CCC 1581-82).

The fact that Orders confers an indelible mark means:

- A. A priest becomes a priest not just because he is authorized to do a certain job, but because he becomes a different sort of person. The change is substantial, a change in kind, not in degree. He is altered in his very being.
- B. The mark is truly indelible; i.e., once ordained, a priest can never go back to being a layman. He is a priest forever (hence, Psalm 110:4: “Thou art a priest forever”). He may be forbidden from exercising his duties, or released from his canonical obligations, but he remains a priest forever, even if he gets married, renounces the faith, etc.
- C. Through this sacrament, the priest receives not only the authority to administer sacraments, but the very *power* to do so, for through this sacrament does he become a partaker in that power which Christ gave to the Apostles themselves.

Form & Matter

Some sacraments have had their form defined *in specie*; that is, the form is very specific words (“I baptize you...”). In other cases, the form is only defined *in genera*, that is, the Church does not have a fixed set of specific words in which the form consists, but she is sure that within her rite are the fullness of the form and matter necessary for conferring the sacraments.

² It is from this Greek word that we get our English word for priest (Gr. *presbyteros*; Lat. *presbyter*; Eng. *priest*).

³ Until the 1940’s, Confirmation as well was restricted to the Bishop to administer.

Holy Orders is one of the sacraments whose form is defined *in genera*. In the 1896 Bull on Anglican ordinations, *Apostolicae Curae*, Pope Leo XIII said that the form and matter of Holy Orders consisted of the imposition of the bishop's hands along with prayers for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained (specifically, to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice). Thus, the Church can be sure that somewhere within her rite, provided hands are laid on and the appropriate prayers are said, the sacrament is truly conferred.

In Persona Christi

The priest is not given the power to administer sacraments in a magical or mechanical sort of way, but because the sacrament of Orders unites him in a special way with Christ, which enables Jesus to act through the priest whenever the priest administers the sacraments. When a priest so acts, he is acting *in persona Christi capitis*, the person (or place) of Christ the head. This is why every sacramental encounter is an encounter with Christ Himself.

Thus, all the veneration due to priests is not because of who they are personally, but because through their office Jesus Himself continues to lead the Church and nourish it. St. Thomas Aquinas said, "Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the Old Law was a figure of Christ, and the priest of the New Law acts in the person of Christ" (*STh* III, 22, 4c).

Priesthood of all believers

There is only one priesthood of Christ. However, this priesthood is expressed in two different ways: in the *ministerial priesthood* (which we have been discussing) and in the *common priesthood*, also called the *priesthood of all believers*. The Catechism says:

"Christ, high priest and unique mediator, has made of the Church "a kingdom, priests for his God and Father. "The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation the faithful are "consecrated to be . . . a holy priesthood."

The ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests, and the common priesthood of all the faithful participate, "each in its own proper way, in the one priesthood of Christ." While being "ordered one to another," they differ essentially. In what sense? While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace—a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit—the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders" (CCC 1546-47).

Insofar as we are baptized, we are all united with Christ in His priestly office, just as all Israel was called to be a priestly nation. But the ministerial priesthood in particular was instituted to channel Christ's grace to the common priesthood for the sanctification of the whole. Thus, both aspects of the priesthood are ordered towards each other.

Disciplines of the Priesthood

When a man becomes a priest, he vows to observe certain disciplines. In the Latin Rite, a diocesan priest (and there are other kinds of priest besides diocesan) must recite the Divine Office five times daily, observe clerical celibacy and pledge fidelity to the Ordinary of his diocese. Clerical celibacy has been practiced in the Church since the very beginning (see the section on consecrated virginity in the lesson on Matrimony), has always been encouraged, and has been mandatory in the Latin Rite for well over a thousand years, if not longer.

It ought to be pointed out that though clerical celibacy is a discipline (i.e., not a dogma and therefore not irreformable) it is of such venerable antiquity, so positively endorsed by the saints and the Scriptures and has enjoyed such widespread support by the Popes and Councils that it is unlikely to go anywhere. Married laymen may be ordained for various reasons, but a cleric can never marry once he has obtained orders. In fact, Holy Orders are a diriment impediment to marriage (i.e., Holy Orders renders any attempted marriage null).

Reserved to males alone

One of the most commonly criticized aspects of the Catholic priesthood is its restriction to men alone. People make the argument that this practice is sexist, that it denies female equality with men, that it is a remnant of medieval thinking and ought to be abolished so that women can become priests (priestesses?) if they choose. Pope St. John Paul II definitively ruled on this matter in his 1994 encyclical *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, declaring that the reservation of the priesthood to men was not a discipline that could be changed, but was rather a dogma of the Church and thus unchangeable. He made the following declaration:

“Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.” (OS, 4)

The following reasons are cited for the decision:

- Argument from Tradition. “Priestly ordination, which hands on the office entrusted by Christ to his Apostles of teaching, sanctifying and governing the faithful, has in the Catholic Church from the beginning always been reserved to men alone” (OS, 1).
- The example of Christ taken as the norm. “[T]his call [to ministry] was made in accordance with God's eternal plan; Christ chose those whom he willed (cf. Mk 3:13-14; Jn 6:70), and he did so in union with the Father, "through the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:2), after having spent the night in prayer (cf. Lk 6:12). Therefore, in granting admission to the ministerial priesthood,(6) the Church has always acknowledged as a perennial norm her Lord's way of acting in choosing the twelve men whom he made the foundation of his Church (cf. Rev 21:14). These men did not in fact receive only a function which could thereafter be exercised by any member of the Church; rather they were specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the Incarnate Word himself (cf. Mt 10:1, 7-8; 28:16-20; Mk 3:13-16; 16:14-15) (OS, 2).

- A calling, not a right. “No one has a *right* to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed, no one claims this office for himself; he is called to it by God.” (CCC 1578)

John Paul II also makes the following points in *Ordination Sacerdotalis*:

- 1) “The fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them” (OS, 3).
- 2) Christ did not simply choose twelve men for Apostles because that was the custom of His culture: “In calling only men as his Apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner. In doing so, he exercised the same freedom with which, in all his behavior, he emphasized the dignity and the vocation of women, without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time” (OS, 2).

In short, the ordination of men alone is intimately connected with Christ’s Incarnation as a man and His selection of men as His Apostles. Therefore, John Paul II makes the statement that the Church has “no authority” to ordain women. It is not a matter of refusing the sacrament, nor of thinking women could not do the job as well. Rather, it is a matter of understanding that the reasons for restricting the priesthood are theological (not cultural) and hence (dogmatic) not disciplinary, and thus can never be changed.

Conclusion

Created on Holy Thursday alongside the institution of the Eucharist, the priesthood is one of Christ’s greatest gifts to the Church. It is through this sacrament that the Eucharist is possible, and because of the Eucharist that this sacrament exists. Through Holy Orders, Christ’s presence to the Church is perpetuated in a very personal way and He fulfills His words to the Apostles: “He who hears you hears Me” (Luke 10:16).

For Further Reading: Pope Leo XIII, *Apostolicae Curae* (1896); Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (1947); Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) and *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1536-1600; St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians* (c. 110); Psalm 110; Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 5:17; Jas. 5:14–15; St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh*, III, 22; also III (supp), 34-40; *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy* by Fr. Christian Cocchini, SJ.