

# Holy Orders

*We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor; in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. ~ 2 Corinthians 6:3-11*

**T**HE OLD TESTAMENT priests were messengers of the Lord (see Mal 2:7), “appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Heb 5:1), but their offerings could never “take away sins” (Heb 10:4). Nevertheless, the Old Testament priesthood was “a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb 10:1), when the one high priest, Jesus, would offer his own Body and Blood to the Father once for all, a single sacrifice offered for all time for the sins of the whole world (see 1 Tm 2:5; Heb 9:26; Heb 10:10-14).

Jesus passed on his authority to Peter and the other

apostles by giving Peter the “keys of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 16:19) by making them priests at the Last Supper when he commanded “do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22:19), and by sending them out “to all the nations” to preach and baptize in his name (see Mt 28:18-20). When the need arose, the apostles ordained other men to

***“Holy Orders is a call, neither a right nor a career choice.”***

*A priest celebrates Mass*

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*A bishop greets parishioners at the end of Mass*

be their successors (see Acts 1:20-26; Acts 6:1-6), and likewise, their successors ordained others to follow after them (see 1 Tm 3:1-13; 2 Tm 1:6; Ti 1:5).

### Three Degrees of Holy Orders

Holy Orders is a call, neither a right nor a career choice. Unlike the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist) to which God calls everyone, the call to receive Holy Orders is placed in the hearts of only some. In the Latin Rite, the priesthood is also a call to be celibate (unmarried) *“for the sake of the Kingdom”* (Mt 19:12). This celibacy helps those called to be more completely devoted to *“the affairs of the Lord”* (1 Cor 7:32), particularly with regard to their role as “father” to the family of God, the Church (see handout on Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom).

As soon as the need arose, the early Church conferred (gave) and exercised the sacrament of Holy Orders in three different degrees: bishop, priest, and deacon (see Acts 6:1-6; Phil 1:1; 1 Tm 3:1-2; Ti 1:7). Bishops receive the fullest degree of Holy Orders

and can trace their ordination in apostolic succession back to the apostles. Timothy, whom Paul calls his son (see 1 Tm 1:2; 2 Tm 2:1), was commissioned by Paul to stay in Ephesus and become its first bishop (see 1 Tm 1:3). Scripture makes it plain that Timothy’s authority was conferred by Paul through the laying on of his hands (see 2 Tm 1:6). And already in the second century, the importance of apostolic succession for the preservation and purity of the Church’s doctrine is demonstrated by St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, France who lists the unbroken chain of succession in Rome from St. Peter down to the pope of his day.

In Holy Orders, the bishop receives the offices of Jesus for sanctifying, teaching, and guiding (or governing) the faithful as priest, prophet, and king. Most bishops are also assigned by the pope to serve a certain portion of the Church called a diocese or archdiocese. Bishops also share in the pope’s responsibility for the whole Church as brother bishops.

Priests are also ordained into Jesus’ ministerial priesthood, but to a lesser degree than that of the bishop (episcopate). Normally, priests are ordained by the bishop of the diocese they will be serving in or the religious order of which they will be a part. They are to be the bishop’s co-workers, and when they are ordained, they make a promise of obedience to him. Priests may be given responsibility for any of a bishop’s works or for parishes under his authority. As priests, they are given the power to forgive sin and to offer the Mass.

Deacons are ordained by the bishop “not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry”<sup>1</sup> (CCC 1569). This ministry and service of a deacon enables the bishops and priests to focus on the specific duties of the ministerial priesthood (see Acts 6:1-6). Deacons assist at the Mass, preach and teach, witness and bless marriages, preside at funerals, baptize and carry out significant works of charity. Although they are not members of the ministerial priesthood, through their call and ordination to service they constitute the diaconate, that is, the third degree of Holy Orders, and assist in the sanctifying, teaching, and shepherding functions of priests and bishops.

*“In Holy Orders, the baptized man becomes ‘another Christ.’ He is changed not because of what he can do, but because of what he has become.”*

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 29; cf. *Christus Dominus* 15

## Rite of Holy Orders

Bishops administer the sacrament of Holy Orders. The essential rite of Holy Orders is the laying on of hands by the bishop in silence followed by the prayer of consecration proper to each degree of ordination (see Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tm 4:14; 2 Tm 1:6).

The prayer of consecration for a bishop reads, in part: “So now pour out upon this chosen one that power which is from you, the governing Spirit whom you gave to your beloved son, Jesus Christ, the Spirit given by him to the holy apostles, who founded the Church in every place to be your temple for the unceasing glory and praise of your name” (*Rites of Ordination* 26). A bishop serves his diocese as its chief shepherd and pastor. At his ordination, the newly ordained bishop is presented with a gold ring, a tall pointed hat called a miter, and a pastoral staff, all symbols of his new role as chief shepherd and pastor.

The prayer of consecration for a priest reads, in part: “Almighty Father, grant to this servant of yours the dignity of the priesthood. Renew within him the Spirit of holiness. As a co-worker with the order of bishops may he be faithful to the ministry that he receives from you, Lord God, and be to others a model of right conduct” (*Rites of Ordination* 22). To symbolize the ministry he will perform at the altar, the newly ordained priest is presented with a chalice and dressed in a priestly garment called a chasuble (a long, sleeveless overgarment worn by priests when celebrating the Mass).

The prayer of consecration for a deacon reads, in part: “Lord, look with favor on this servant of yours, whom we now dedicate to the office of deacon, to minister at your holy altar. Lord, send forth upon him the Holy Spirit, that he may be strengthened by the gift of your sevenfold grace to carry out faithfully the work of the ministry” (*Rites of Ordination* 21). Because of his proper ministry to the Word, the newly ordained deacon is presented with the book of the Gospels. He also receives special garments that he will wear when assisting at Mass and presiding over other liturgical ceremonies.

### What are the Effects of Holy Orders?

In Holy Orders, the baptized man is configured to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit. He becomes “another Christ.” In the most profound way possible, ordination creates a new man, one who, if living his vocation faithfully, can say with St. Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). He is changed not because of what he can do, but because of what he has become. This grace



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*A deacon preparing the Sacramentary (also called the Roman Missal) for Mass*

makes a permanent seal or spiritual character on his soul that conforms him in a deeper way to Christ and enables him to act *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”) by carrying out the threefold office of priest, prophet, and king. Like Baptism and Confirmation, the effect of this sacrament is permanent and therefore cannot be repeated or given temporarily.

Also, the Holy Spirit gives specific sacramental graces to each recipient according to the office to which he is being ordained. Bishops receive specific graces that help them guide and defend the Church as shepherds and pastors of God’s people. Priests receive those graces that are proper to the duties of their office, among which are principally the responsibility to proclaim the Gospel, to baptize, to offer the Mass, and to forgive sins. And deacons, who have been ordained to service, receive graces to help them carrying out their service toward the liturgy, the Gospel, and works of charity. While the sacramental graces differ, all three offices of bishop, priest, and deacon constitute the hierarchical ministry of the Church that is directed toward worship of God and the teaching, pastoring, and governing of his people.

*“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pt 5:1-4).*

(CCC 858-862, 1534-1589, 2686)