

# Sacrament of Holy Orders

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## Transformed for Ministry

When the Church gathers for an important sacramental celebration, the people present and participating, indeed the whole Church are transformed. One such transformative experience is the celebration of an ordination—whether to the diaconate, to the priesthood, or to the episcopacy (bishops).

The entire Church is transformed, not only those receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders or participating in the Liturgy. The Church is transformed because the sacrament is oriented in a special way toward the service of the Church.

Those ordained and those participating in the rite will find many rituals, actions, sights, and smells to remember. For some the lights, vestments, great clouds of incense, and majestic music will stir their hearts. Others are deeply moved when those to be ordained prostrate themselves, and the entire congregation prays with the Church gathered in heaven through the Litany of the Saints. Still others, recall the silent laying on of hands. With this ritual there is no music, no shout of acclamation. All is still. God is present, active, creating anew in the world and the hearts of all those who are present.

This particular experience of the Church at worship, and of God at work, is not necessarily available to all. It might take place at a distant Cathedral, and might involve persons not widely known to most parishioners. To explore this powerful sacramental action, we must look at a deeper understanding of the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

## God Sends Word

After God's creative Word of creation at the beginning or recorded history, and Adam and Eve's subsequent word of disobedience, God, ever merciful, slowly shaped a people and, by means of the Covenant at Sinai, said to them, "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). God wanted to live in union with a human creation which was slow to appreciate such a relationship. "You shall be my people and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:28).

Throughout the Old Testament God called individuals and gave them a mission to his "priestly kingdom and holy nation." He called Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Samuel and David. He called leaders, kings, priests, and prophets. Those summoned to proclaim God's Word were set apart and consecrated for their mission to instruct, guide, and care.

Priests of the Old Testament served at the altar of the Temple by offering sacrifices and prayers for the people. They were assisted in turn by the Levites. Both priests and Levites were primarily in service to God and their duties were primarily cultic, that is, in offering worship to God.

The urgency of God's care increased until finally he sent not just those to bear the Word, but the Word himself. The Word Incarnate was sent to save. "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14).

## The Mission and Ministry of Jesus

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

God sent the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ with a mission in the line of the prophets, kings and priests of old. He was sent to "bring to speech" the saving will of God, to make present and effective "the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1: 1-3).

"Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus was sent to teach, preach the Good News, heal, lead, serve and save. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Ultimately, Jesus completed his mission by his saving death and Resurrection. He offered the single sacrifice of his life, "once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:27). But before he gave his disciples his Body and Blood and said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Jesus was to continue his mission to bring all people into union with himself, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, and in union with one another. He did this by the commissioning and sending of his Apostles (*apostolos* in Greek means sent).

Jesus said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Those sent, then, not only were to serve God, but they were also to serve others. They were to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus.

## A New Being

Those called to service as priests of old were called to a service that was truly ministerial, that is, directed to all. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The word that is used for "serve" in Latin is "*ministrare*" (from which comes the English word "minister") and in Greek "*diakonein*" (from which comes the word "deacon").

Some years ago the priests of a diocese in the Western United States had gathered for a week long workshop on Baptism. For a week they heard nothing but Baptism: its importance, theology, history, meaning, celebration, effects. Toward the end of the week the speaker asked for a show of hands on how many knew the date of their ordination. Every hand went up. Then he said, "Now, considering what we've said about how Baptism is much more important than your ordination, how many of you know the date of your Baptism?" Not even a handful of hands went up.

Why is Baptism so important? Baptism and Confirmation are two sacraments that give a whole new identity to a person. They are called Sacraments of Christian Initiation or, sometimes, Christian Identity. Through these sacraments, there is a change in the "who" of a person and, because of that change, there is a change in the "what," in what a person does, or how a person behaves. God gives a call, calls by a new name, but also gives a capacity for living a new life.

By Baptism and Confirmation one is conformed to Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King. Just as the people of old were called to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation," so now by Christ's sacramental action they "are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9).

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the third sacrament that gives a new identity. Just as with Baptism and Confirmation, because of this new being, this new identity, the Sacrament of Orders cannot be repeated. Just as Christ is the "exact imprint of God's very being" ("*charakter*" in Greek), so there is an "imprint," a "character," an "indelible mark" that is bestowed on the one ordained. This new being gives the call and capacity to manifest the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

In the chapel of the old St. Joseph Seminary in California there was an inscription over the main altar that read: "Deus providebit sibi victimam." The translates to "God himself will provide the victim" (Genesis 22:8). Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. When Isaac asks, innocently, "Where is the victim?" Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the victim." This rich and illusive expression is most fitting for a seminary chapel. For those who are ordained are conformed in a special way not only to Christ who "came not to be served but to serve," but also conformed to Christ who came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The wise old priests of the seminary used to say: “If you want to be priest with Christ at the altar, you must also be victim with Christ on the altar.” The new identity, in both call and capacity, is not only to Christ the minister and priest, but to Christ the victim.

## Order and Ordination

What the word “order” means in the expression “Holy Orders” is a grouping or body of persons set aside, consecrated for a particular work and way of life. There are three such bodies or “orders” in the Church: the order of deacons (diaconate), the order of priests (presbyterate) and the order of bishops (episcopate). All three orders share in a triple ministry that is evangelical, ministerial, and liturgical. It is a ministry to teach, to lead, and to make holy; a ministry of prophet, of king, and of priest.

Ordination is the rite of the Church by which the recipient is incorporated into one of these orders. The central part of the ordination combines the ancient and powerful gesture of the laying on of hands and the prayer of consecration. The very word *consecration* implies a being set apart, in this instance a being set apart for the purpose of service.

The priests and Levites of old had God alone as their lot or inheritance: “[T]he LORD is their inheritance” (Deuteronomy 18:2). The word for lot or inheritance in Greek is “*kleros*” from which comes the English word “clergy.” By ordination, then, one becomes a “cleric,” a member of the clergy.

Traditionally in the Western Church one sign of that clerical status—the decision that God alone is one’s lot or inheritance, has been celibacy. Of course the restoration of the permanent diaconate has made it possible for married men to be ordained permanent deacons. In the Eastern Church and in very particular instances in the West, married priests have been permitted. However, in both East and West bishops are celibate.

There are three “orders” of consecrated life. All three orders share in the evangelical, pastoral, and liturgical ministries of the Church, each in a different manner.

## The Order of Deacons

Before the Vatican II, in the Latin Church only “transitional” deacons. These were men on their way to being ordained priests and this final step of diaconate might last only a few days. When the Second Vatican Council restored the permanent diaconate, the question on everyone’s lips seemed to be “What do deacons do?”

The Church was familiar with what priests and bishops did. Deacons were new. The tendency was to define a person by function. The question was rather, “How does a deacon be? Who is the deacon?” The answer is that the deacon is the quintessential minister. His very name, “deacon,” says as much. The ordination rite, then, consecrates the recipient for service in the

Church. Jesus came to serve and the deacon manifests that serving and saving Christ in the midst of the Church.

There is a telling moment in the ordination of a deacon when the newly ordained deacon is handed the Book of the Gospels and is instructed by the bishop: "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach" (*Ordination of a Deacon*, 24). This brief ceremony underscores the centrality of the Scripture and, above all, the Gospel in the life and ministry of the deacon. It is that Gospel that tells of Jesus who said: "[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

## The Order of Priests

The priest finds his identity, his new being in relationship to the bishop, the one who is the successor of the Apostles. As such, it is primarily in the Eucharist that he manifests who he is and who he is called to be.

One of the ceremonies in the rite of priestly ordination stresses this new Eucharistic identity. After the newly ordained priest has had his hands anointed and has been vested in chasuble and stole, the bishop says to him as he hands to him the gifts of bread and wine brought by the people: "Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to him. Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross" (*Ordination of a Priest*, 26).

The priest is to become in a particular way this ecclesial, Christological mystery of the Mass. But the priest also imitates the mysteries he celebrates in the other sacraments: bringing new life to the Church in Baptism, proclaiming the Word of God, being the official witness of the Church for Matrimony, extending the healing mission of Christ in the Anointing of the Sick, and offering the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

## Order of Bishop

In a sense it is the Order of Bishop that comes first. The bishops are the successors of the Apostles, and, consequently, the commissioning at the end of Gospel according to Matthew (See Matthew 28:18-20) is handed on especially to them. Thus this fullness of shepherding is found in the bishops and they, in turn, associate others in their ministry, namely the priests (see *Lumen Gentium* 28), and the deacons who assist the priests and bishop, in the mission of the local Church.

The spiritual gift that is bestowed on the bishop is the gift of governance and leadership. At the ordination of a bishop, when his crosier is handed to him, these words are said: "Take this staff as a sign of your pastoral office: keep watch over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you to shepherd the Church of God" (*Ordination of a Bishop*, 32). These words

demonstrate the new being of the bishop. The bishop is specially conformed to Christ the Good Shepherd in his mission to bring care and salvation to Christ's own flock.

## Apostle: Hand, Heart, Head

The ordained are called to make clear what is the basic apostolic meaning of the Church. The ordained are called to "sacramentalize," that is, to make concrete and effective, the reality of the Apostle: hands, heart, and head.

The deacon is the most fundamental level of continuing Christ's apostolic ministry. Although he is called to the ministry of the altar, of the proclamation of the Word, and of service, his most defining element is his service. It gives him his very name. The deacon makes visible to the whole Church through his sacramental identity and functioning the call to service that is the basis of the entire Christian identity. The deacon is the *hands* of the apostle.

There is a wonderful story told of the deacon of Rome—Saint Lawrence—during the third century. Lawrence was responsible for the distribution of Church goods to the poor. Lawrence was summoned before the magistrates and ordered to turn over the treasures of the Church before he was executed. Lawrence went to obey that command. He returned with all the poor and needy and widowed and orphans and said, "Here is the Church's treasure." He was martyred, but had given witness to (that's what the Greek word "*martyr*" means) the dignity of diaconate in loving service.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* ("I Will Give You Shepherds") Saint John Paul II indicates that the defining characteristic and motivating force of the priest is pastoral charity, that is, the love and care of a shepherd: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). The very word *pastor* is simply the Latin word for "shepherd." The ordained priest, then, is called to live out and to make visible in his sacramental identity and functioning that loving care of the Good Shepherd. The priest is the *heart* of the apostle.

There is a particular affinity of priests for St. Thérèse of Lisieux. She wanted to be a priest. She wanted to know where she fit in the Body of Christ, what member she could identify herself as. Finally, she knew. She would be the heart and she would love. This woman who died so young, who lived a totally cloistered life became a model for parish priests and the patroness of the Church's missions.

Finally, the Apostle must have vision and be able to lead the way. The baptized must know where to go and how to witness. Some are ordained, consecrated for this service in the Church. They bear a special bond with the New Testament Apostles and are their successors. These are the bishops. In his sacramental identity and functioning, the bishop makes visible the leadership and governance of the Apostle. The bishop is the *head* of the Apostle.

There is a delightful legend about Saint Denis, the first bishop of Paris. Denis was sent to Paris at a time when persecution was rampant. He was to provide leadership to a tormented Church. He was closely associated in his difficult episcopal ministry of reconciliation, healing, and shepherding with the priest Rusticus and the deacon Eleutherius. They were martyred together at Montmartre (the “Mount of Martyrs”).

According to the legend, after Denis was beheaded he picked up his head and walked two miles, accompanied by choirs of angels, to his final resting place! This legend seems to show the faith of the Church in the headship of the bishop. Evil might strike at the head of the local Church and seek to destroy it, but the bishop represents and makes visible to the local Church Christ who is the true head, and it is Christ who gives the victory.

## Pray for Him

When the Church gathers together to become Church, that is, when the Church gathers together in Eucharist, the Eucharistic Prayer features prominently prayers for bishops, priests, clergy. It is important to understand how important these ministers are to the whole life of the Church, in this understanding, prayer is seen as vital to the life of the Church. Prayer for the Church’s ministers is prayer for the Church. They do not get more prayers because they deserve more prayers, but because they need more.

The new identity of ordination does not “angelize” the ordained into something nonhuman. Each age of the Church shows the need for fervent prayer for the ordained in order that they might respond to their calling and exercise their capacities. This age is no exception. The Church must pray to realize her apostolic reality: hands, heart, head.

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## The Rite of Ordination

Many of us have never witnessed the sacramental celebration of ordination. If ever you have the opportunity to attend the ordination of a deacon, priest, or bishop don't pass it up! When you go, you will notice the following ritual actions as unique to the ceremony. These actions follow after the Liturgy of the Word and precede the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

1. Calling of the Candidates
2. Presentation of the Candidates
3. Election by the Bishop and Consent of the People
4. Homily
5. Examination of the Candidate
6. Promise of Obedience to the bishop and his successors
7. Invitation to Prayer (Litany of Saints while candidates lie prostrate)
8. Laying on of Hands
9. Prayer of Consecration
10. Investiture with Stole and Chasuble
11. Anointing of Hands
12. Presentation of the Gifts
13. Kiss of Peace

## Prayer of Consecration

The candidate for priesthood kneels before the bishop. With his hands extended over the candidate, the bishop sings the prayer of consecration.

. . . 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.

May he be faithful in working with the order of bishops,  
so that the words of the Gospel may reach the ends of the earth,  
and the family of nations, made one in Christ, may become God's one, holy people.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, you Son, who lives and reigns with you and  
the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen  
(*Ordination of a Priest 22*).