

The Church adopted the term *order* from its use in the Roman Empire, where it referred to a governing group. In the Sacrament of Holy Orders, there are three degrees or "orders": bishop, priest, and deacon. The rite of ordination is the sacramental act that makes this possible. Ordination "confers a gift of the Holy Spirit that permits the exercise of a 'sacred power' . . . which can come only from Christ himself through the Church" (CCC, no. 1538).

The first priest figure to appear in the Old Testament is Melchizedek, who offered a sacrifice of bread and wine on behalf of the patriarch Abraham (Gn 14:18-20). He symbolized the permanence of priesthood: "Like Melchizedek you are a priest forever" (Ps 110:4). God also chose Aaron and his sons to be priests (Ex 28:1ff.) and designated the tribe of Levi for liturgical service. They acted on behalf of the people and offered gifts and sacrifices for sins. They proclaimed God's Word and led people to communion with him through sacrifices and prayers.

But these priests were unable to provide the fullness of salvation or definitive sanctification for the people. Only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ could bring this about. The priesthood of Melchizedek, Aaron, and the Levites prefigured the priesthood of Christ, as is seen in consecration prayers for the ordination of bishops, priests, and deacons.

The priesthood of the Old Testament found 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 was 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.

By Baptism, all the members of the Church share in Christ's holy priesthood. It is called "the common priesthood of the faithful" because the entire Church shares in it. To build up this priesthood, Christ gives to his Church the ordained ministries of bishops, priests, and deacons through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Only the ordained bishop and priest may be ministers of Confirmation (or Chrismation), the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Only bishops may ordain deacons, priests, and other bishops. "The ministerial priesthood differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful. The ordained ministers exercise their service for the People of God by teaching (*munus docendi*), divine worship (*munus liturgicum*) and pastoral governance (*munus regendi*)

)" (CCC, no. 1592). Deacons in the Latin Church can baptize and witness the Sacrament of Marriage, as do priests and bishops.

The ordained bishop and priest serve the Church in the person of Christ as head of the Body. "Through the ordained ministry, especially that of bishops and priests, the presence of Christ as head of the Church is made visible in the midst of the community of believers" (CCC, no. 1549). The Sacrament does not preserve the ordained from weakness and sin, but the Holy Spirit guarantees that the minister's sin does not impede the effectiveness of the Sacrament and its graces. The ordained are called to a holiness of life and an attitude of humility that conforms them to Christ whose priesthood they share. The priest acts not only in the person of Christ, the Head of the Church, but also in the name of the Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, especially in the Eucharist.

### **ORDINATION**

*Let everyone revere the deacons as Jesus Christ, the bishop as image of the Father, and the presbyters as the senate of God and the assembly of the apostles. For without them, one cannot speak of the Church.*

-CCC, no. 1554, citing St. Ignatius of Antioch, Ad. Trail. 3, 1

### **Bishops**

By ordination to the episcopacy, bishops receive the fullness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders and become successors of the Apostles. Through this Sacrament, a bishop belongs to the college of bishops and serves as the visible head or pastor of the local church entrusted to his care. As a college, the bishops have care and concern for the apostolic mission of all the churches in union with and under the authority of the Pope-the head of the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome, and the successor of St. Peter.

### **Priests**

By ordination, "priests are united with the bishops in [priestly] dignity and at the same time depend on them in the exercise of their pastoral functions; they are called to be the bishops' prudent co-workers" (CCC, no. 1595). With the bishop, priests form a *presbyteral* (priestly) community and assume with him the pastoral mission for a particular parish. The bishop appoints priests to the pastoral care of parishes and to other diocesan ministries. The priest promises obedience to the bishop in service to God's people.

### **Deacons**

The title *deacon* comes from the Greek word *diakonia* meaning "servant." A deacon has a special attachment to the bishop in the tasks of service and is configured to Christ, the Deacon-or Servant-of all (d. CCC, nos. 1569-1570).

"There are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them" (CCC, no. 1554). The three degrees of the Sacrament of Holy Orders-bishop, priest, and deacon-are all conferred by ordination.

Deacons receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders from a bishop and are ordained not to the ministerial priesthood but to the ministry of service. Through ordination the deacon is conformed to Christ, who came to serve, not to be served. In the Latin Church, deacons may baptize, proclaim the Gospel, preach the homily, assist the bishop or priest in -the celebration of the Eucharist, assist at and bless marriages, and preside at funerals. They dedicate themselves to charitable endeavors, which was their ministerial role in New Testament times.

Whether they are involved in the Church's liturgical or pastoral life or in her social and charitable endeavors, deacons are "strengthened by the imposition of hands that has come down from the apostles. They would be more closely bound to the altar and their ministry would be made more fruitful through the sacramental grace of the diaconate" (AG, 16, no. 6).

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Latin Church has restored the diaconate as a permanent rank of the hierarchy. Now, diaconate as a permanent office may also be conferred on both married and unmarried men. The Eastern Churches have always retained it. Seminarians preparing for priesthood have always been ordained to the diaconate before ordination to priesthood.

### **THE ESSENTIAL RITE OF HOLY ORDERS**

*The essential rite of the sacrament of Holy Orders for all three degrees consists in the bishop's imposition of hands on the head of the ordinand and in the bishop's specific consecratory prayer*

*asking God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.*

-CCC, no. 1573

The additional rites surrounding this core ordination rite vary greatly among differing liturgical traditions, but all have in common the expression of aspects of sacramental grace. The only valid minister of ordination is a bishop. Now ascended to the Father, Christ continues to guide the Church through the bishops, who confer this Sacrament of apostolic ministry and hand on the gift of the Holy Spirit.

### **WHO MAY BE ORDAINED?**

Only a baptized man may be ordained in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Jesus Christ chose men to become part of the Twelve. Throughout his ministry, his attitude toward women was different from the culture, and he courageously broke with it. For example, he did not hesitate to speak with the Samaritan woman even though custom forbade it (d. In 4:4 42). But it was only men whom he chose to be the Twelve Apostles and the foundation of the ministerial priesthood.

Although after the Ascension, Mary occupied a privileged place in the little circle gathered in the Upper Room, she was not called to enter the college of the Twelve at the time of the election of Matthias. The Apostles continued Christ's practice and so, too, did their successors through the centuries.

The Church has the power to determine the way in which the Sacraments are to be celebrated, but she has no ability to change the essential aspects established by the Lord Jesus. Sacramental signs are natural, but they also carry a divine meaning. Just as the Eucharist is not only a communal meal, but also makes present the saving sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, so too ministerial priesthood is more than pastoral service: it ensures the continuity of the ministry Christ entrusted to the Apostles.

The priesthood has a sacramental nature. The priest is a sign of what is happening. Sacramental signs represent what they signify by a natural resemblance. This resemblance is as true for persons as for things. When the priest acts in the person of Christ, he takes on the role of Christ, to the point of being his representative. He is a sign of what is happening and must be a sign that is recognizable, which the faithful can see with ease.

An image used to explain this reality talks of a priest as an "icon" of Christ. An icon is a religious painting that is considered to make present the mystery of salvation or the saint it depicts. To say a priest is an icon of Christ means, then, that a priest is not just a reminder or image of Christ but is also a real means by which a person can be touched by Christ. Because Christ is a man, it is fitting that a priest as the icon of Christ should also be a man.

Another reason why the Church understands that ordination is reserved to men is the recognition of the priest's responsibility to reflect Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church. This image and understanding can be reflected most truly only when the priest is a man.

The teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church (d. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood [Inter Insigniores]*, nos. 9-10, 13, 20-21, 26-27). Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this teaching in these words: "In order that all doubt may be removed, 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" ( *On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone [Ordinatio Sacerdotalis]* , no. 4). In that same document, the Pope underlined the incomparable achievements of women for the benefit of the People of God:

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." ( *On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone*, no. 3, citing *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women [Mulieris Dignitatem]*, no. 27)

Ordination to the priesthood is always a call and a gift from God. Christ reminded his Apostles that they needed to ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the harvest. Those who seek priesthood respond generously to God's call using the words of the prophet, "Here I am, send me" (Is 6:8). This call from God can be recognized and understood from the daily signs that disclose his will to those in charge of discerning the vocation of the candidate.

When God chooses men to share in the ordained priesthood of Christ, he moves and helps them by his grace. At the same time, he entrusts the bishop with the task of calling suitable and

approved candidates and of consecrating them by a special seal of the Holy Spirit to the ministry of God and of the Church (*Admission to Candidacy for Priesthood*, 5).

## FROM THE CATECHISM

### **1. What does the prayer from the Byzantine Rite say about the spiritual gift a priest receives at ordination?**

The prayer reads: Lord, fill with the gift of the Holy Spirit, him whom you have deigned to raise to the rank of the priesthood, that he may be worthy to stand without reproach before your altar, to proclaim the Gospel of your kingdom, to fulfill the ministry of your word of truth, to offer you spiritual gifts and sacrifices, to renew your people by the bath of rebirth. (CCC, no. 1587)

### **2. What is the essential rite of ordination?**

The sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred by the laying on of hands by the bishop followed by a solemn prayer of consecration asking God to grant the man being ordained the graces of the Holy Spirit required for his ministry. (CCC, no. 1597)

### **3. What does it mean to say that the priest acts "in the person of Christ"?**

In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of the Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi capitis* (in the person of Christ the head). (CCC, no. 1548)

All candidates for ordination in the Latin Church-with the exception of permanent deacons, who can be married at the time of their ordination-are chosen from among those who intend to remain celibate "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12). Their celibacy is a sign of their intention to imitate Christ's own celibacy and to serve God in the Church's married clergy of other Christian churches who convert to Catholicism have been admitted to Holy Orders. In the Eastern Churches, only the bishops must be celibate. Priests and deacons may be married; however, in the United States, priests in Eastern Churches are normally celibate.

### **EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT**

This Sacrament configures the bishop and priest to Christ as the Head of the Church in Christ's threefold office of priest, prophet, and king. This Sacrament configures the deacon to Christ as servant.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders, like that of Baptism and Confirmation, confers an indelible or permanent character on the recipient. This means that this Sacrament cannot be received again. The indelible character is a reminder to the bishop, priest, or deacon that the vocation and mission he received on the day of his ordination marks him permanently. Like Baptism and Confirmation, which also confer a permanent character, Holy Orders is never repeated.

A bishop is given the grace to teach in the name of Christ; to sanctify the Church through the celebration of the Sacraments; to guide, govern, and defend the Church; and to be a sign of the unity of the Church.

A priest is given the grace to proclaim the Gospel and preach, to celebrate the Sacraments (except Holy Orders), and to shepherd the people entrusted to him.

A deacon in the Latin Church is ordained to proclaim the Gospel and preach, to baptize, to assist the bishop or priest in the celebration of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages, to preside at funerals, and to serve the community through works of charity.

### **THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PRIEST**

[Priests] should be taught to seek Christ. This along with the *quarere* Deum [the search for God] is a classical theme of Christian spirituality. It has a specific application in the context of the calling of the Apostles. When John tells the story of the way the first two disciples followed Christ, he highlights this "search." It is Jesus himself who asks the question: "What do you seek?" And the two reply, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see."

They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day" On 1:37-39). In a certain sense, the spiritual life of the person who is preparing for priesthood is dominated by this search; by it and by the "finding" of the Master, to follow him, to be in communion with him. So inexhaustible is the mystery of the imitation of Christ and the sharing in his life that this "seeking" will have to continue throughout the priest's life and ministry. Likewise this "finding" the Master will have to continue in order to bring him to others, or rather in order to excite in others the desire to seek out the Master. But all this becomes possible if it is proposed to others as a living "experience," an experience that is worthwhile sharing. This was the path followed by Andrew to lead his brother Simon to Jesus. The evangelist John writes that Andrew "first found his brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah (which means Christ)" and brought him to Jesus On 1:41-42). And so Simon too will be called, as an apostle, to follow the Messiah: "Jesus looked at him and said, 'So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)" On 1:42). . . . An essential element of spiritual formation is the prayerful and meditated reading of the Word of God, a humble and loving listening to him who speaks. . . . Familiarity with the Word of God will make conversion easy, not only in the sense of detaching us from evil, so as to adhere to the good, but also in the sense of nourishing our heart with the thoughts of God, so that faith (as a response to the word) becomes our new basis for judging and evaluating persons and things, events and problems. (Pope John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds [Pastores Dabo Vobis]*, nos. 46-47).

### DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- Through Baptism all the members of the Church share in the priesthood of Christ. This is known as the "common priesthood of the faithful."
- Through Holy Orders there is another participation in Christ's priesthood, the ministerial priesthood of bishop and priest. This differs in essence from the common priesthood because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful.
- The ordained ministry occurs in three degrees or orders: bishop, priest, and deacon. These ministries are essential for the life of the Church.
- Bishops receive the fullness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. They are the chief teachers, sanctifiers, and shepherds in their dioceses.
- "Priests are united with the bishops in priestly dignity and at the same time depend on them in the exercise of their pastoral functions; they are called to be the bishops' prudent co-workers"

(CCC, no. 1595). With the bishop, priests form a presbyteral (priestly) community and assume with him the pastoral mission for a particular parish.

- Deacons receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders, but not the ministerial priesthood. Through ordination, the deacon is conformed to Christ, who came to serve, not to be served. Deacons in the Latin Church may baptize, read the Gospel, preach the homily, assist the bishop or priest in the celebration of the Eucharist, assist at and bless marriages, and preside at funerals. They dedicate themselves to charitable endeavors, which was their ministerial role in New Testament times.

- "The essential rite of the Sacrament of Holy Orders for all three degrees consists in the bishop's imposition of hands on the head of the ordinand [man to be ordained] and in the bishop's specific consecratory prayer" (CCC, no. 1573). Ordination confers a permanent sacramental character.

- Only men may be ordained.

- Normally in the Western Church, ordination to priesthood is conferred only on those men who freely promise lifelong celibacy.

- Only bishops may confer the Sacrament of Holy Orders in the three degrees.