

UNDERSTANDING CATHOLICISM 14: THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS

I. Let's Begin with an Overview

- A. Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony are the two sacraments of *service* ordered to the salvation of others.
 - 1. Spouses are consecrated to love each other and their children with the self-donating love of Jesus.
 - 2. Priests are uniquely conformed to the cross of Christ so they can pour themselves out for the heavenly Bridegroom's bride, the Church, in the Person of Christ.
 - 3. Both priests and married couples contribute to their personal salvation by their loving service to others.¹
- B. The sacrament of Holy Orders consecrates men to continue the sacrificial ministry that Jesus entrusted to the apostles. By definition "a priest is an authorized mediator who offers sacrifice to God on behalf of others."² St. Paul touches on this transformation at the end of his letter to the Galatians when he said: "I bear on my body the *marks* of Jesus" (Ga; 6:17). The Greek word for "mark" is *stigmata*. I do not believe that the Apostle was speaking about a visible stigmata, the marks of Jesus' Passion, but an invisible stigmata imprinted on the day of his ordination to the priesthood, indicating his ability to function in the Person of Jesus.
 - 1. The ordination rite of a priest confers on these men a unique gift of the Holy Spirit that allows them to exercise sacred powers in the Person of Jesus, capabilities that flow from the body of Christ through his Church.
 - 2. The visible sign of their ordination is the laying on of hands by the bishop along with the consecratory prayers.³

II. Let's Start at the Beginning and Consider Priesthood in the Old Covenant

- A. First: *Melchizedekian or Adamic Priesthood*
 - 1. From the creation of Adam until the incident of the golden calf, every father was a priest and could offer sacrifice to God.
 - 2. This natural priesthood is identified with Melchizedek who sacrificed bread and wine when he met Abraham (Gen 14:18-20). He was the first person the Bible specifically identified as a priest (Gen 14:18).
 - 3. Because of the sin of worshipping the golden calf this natural priesthood was taken away from the chosen people as a whole and given to the tribe of Levi (Gen 32:29).
 - 4. However, David and Solomon temporarily restored the Melchizedekian priesthood, but with Solomon's sin and the destruction of the kingdom it was lost until fully restored in Jesus, who is a priest forever "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:6).

¹ CCC, #s 1534, 1535.

² Hahn, Scott, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*: "Priest, Priesthood", p. 725.

³ CCC, # 1538.

5. The book of Hebrews, which I just quoted, views Melchizedek as a foreshadowing of Jesus, citing Psalm 110. The book of Hebrews beautifully focuses on the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus.

B. Second: *Levitical Priesthood under Moses*

1. Initial structure (Exodus 24):
 - a. One: High priest – Aaron
 - b. Three leaders: Aaron, Nadab and Abihu
 - c. The Twelve: Twelve young men, priests, offering sacrifice on twelve pillars representing the 12 tribes.
2. The operation of the Levitical Priesthood
 - a. As was stated earlier, God set apart the tribe of Levi to conduct the sacrifices for the chosen people because of the apostasy of the golden calf (Exod 32:29; Num 3:1-10).
 - b. Aaron served as the High Priest under the leadership of Moses:
 - c. Ministerial Priests were the sons of Aaron (Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar)
 - d. The Priestly Assistants were the other Levites similar to the Church's deacons.
3. The Levitical priests were viewed as spiritual fathers in the Old Testament; indeed, the terms were used interchangeably:
 - a. Micah said to a Levite, "Stay with me, and be to me a *father* and a *priest*" (Jdg 17:10).
 - b. Later, members from the tribe of Dan said to the same Levite, "Come with us, and be to us a *father* and a *priest*. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man [Micah], or to be priest to a tribe and family in Israel [Dan]" (Jdg 18:19)?
 - c. This connection between priesthood and spiritual father was carried over to the priesthood in the new Covenant. For example, when writing to the Corinthians Paul declared: "For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many *fathers*. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your *father* through the gospel" (1 Cor 4:15). Similarly, in his letter to the Thessalonians Paul wrote: "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a *father* with his children" (1 Thess 2:11).
 - d. One of my most memorable experiences with a spiritual father occurred during my freshman year in college. The priest who powerfully impacted my life was the Vincentian, Fr. Joe Finney. This is remarkable because we never had a conversation, and I don't believe he even knew my name. We met only when I was assigned to serve at his private Mass. Fr. Joe was elderly and very frail. He hobbled to the altar, could not genuflect or lift his arms. Before we processed to the altar, I would say, "Good morning, Father" and he would answer in his raspy voice, "Good morning." Back in the sacristy after Mass, Fr. Joe would say, "Thank you," and I would reply, "You are welcome, Father." That was the sum total of our conversation. So, what happened?

Well, in spite of his broken body, Fr. Joe offered the Mass like an angel with great reverence and devotion. Twice during the Roman Canon, now called the first Eucharistic Prayer, Fr. Joe would pour out his love for Jesus surrendering his total self. Hearing his private prayer, I was so powerfully moved that tears would flow down my face. Then I would look up at the lovely statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary behind the altar, and ask our Blessed Lady, “Please teach me to love your Son like that!” It is as prayer I have repeated thousands of times since, thanks to this spiritual father.

4. Now let’s get back to the Levites and the role of the Levitical Priests:
 - a. To mediate for the people with God by sacrifices and prayers
 - b. To proclaim and teach the Word of God
- C. The following is an overview of the rite of ordination of the Levitical priests (Exodus 29, Leviticus 8)
 1. Sacrifice one young bull and two rams.
 2. The candidate was washed with water.
 3. He was vested with priestly garments.
 4. He was anointed with oil.
 5. Lay hands on the bull, then slay it as a substitute for the one being ordained. This sacrifice indicated the vocation of the priest, which was to sacrifice his life for the people.
 6. Anoint the priestly vestments.
 7. Partaking in a communion meal of flesh and bread.

III. Priesthood of the New Covenant

- A. The Catechism confirms: “Everything that the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured finds its fulfillment in Christ Jesus.”⁴
 1. Sacred Scripture teaches that Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek,⁵ who by a single offering “has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”⁶
 2. Remarkably, the unique redemptive sacrifice of Jesus “is made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Church”⁷ – the Mass.
 3. “The same is true of the one priesthood of Christ; it is also made present through the ministerial priesthood without diminishing the uniqueness of Christ’s priesthood: *‘Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers’.*”⁸
- B. Jesus’ intention of reestablishing a Melchizedekian order of priest is evident in his structuring his apostles like Moses did when he went up Mount Sinai (Exod 24):

⁴ CCC, # 1544.

⁵ Heb 5:10.

⁶ Heb 10:14.

⁷ CCC, #1545.

⁸ CCC, # 1545 making its own the words of St. Thomas Aquinas.

1. One prime minister, the head: Peter.
2. The three leaders: Peter, James and John.
3. Twelve: the twelve apostles representing the restored kingdom of David, the Church.

IV. Ordination of the Apostles

- A. The ordination of the apostles took place during the Last Supper on Holy Thursday. Their ordination was anticipated in the rite of foot washing and established by Jesus' command, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*"
- B. *The foot washing*
 1. The foot washing was more than a demonstration of a humble service. It was preparation for the ordination of the apostles. Jesus began this highly symbolic action by laying "aside his garments" (Jn 13:4), which recalls the action of Aaron prior to offering sacrifice: "Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting [tabernacle], and shall *put off the linen garments* which he put on when he went into the holy place" (Lev 16:23).
 2. When Peter objected, Jesus said to him: "If I do not wash you, you have *no part* in me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head" Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you are clean, but not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, 'You are not all clean' (Jn 13:8-11).
 3. The expression, "*no part in me*" that Jesus used with Peter, will be used again in connection with the priesthood when Simon the Magician attempts to buy the priesthood after he witnessed the Holy Spirit given to those upon whom Peter and John laid on their hands. Peter said to him: "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither *part* nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God" (Acts 8:20-21).
 4. Foot washing was also connected with the priesthood in the Old Testament: "You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base of bronze, for washing. And you shall put it between the tent of meeting [the tabernacle] and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall *wash* their hands and their *feet*. When they go into the tent of meeting or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn an offering by fire to the Lord, they shall wash with water, lest they die. They shall *wash* their hands and their *feet*, lest they die; it shall be a statute for ever to them, even to him and to his descendants throughout their generations" (Lev 30:17-21).
 5. There is another connection with foot washing during the Last Supper that adds to our understanding of the priesthood, namely, that foot washing also has a nuptial dimension. Consider the example of King David's conversation with Uriah,

Bathsheba's husband. In an effort to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba, David recalled Uriah from the battlefield in the hope that he would visit and have a sexual relationship with his wife. In that case, Uriah would be deceived to believe that he was the father of the child Bathsheba was carrying:

"Then David said to Uriah, 'Go down to your house, and *wash your feet*.' ... But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, 'Uriah did not go down to his house,' David said to Uriah, 'Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?' Uriah said to David, 'The ark and Israel and Judah dwells in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field, shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife. As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing'" (2 Sam11: 8-11).

C. Let's now turn to the actual ordination of the Apostles:

1. The apostles were ordained on Holy Thursday when Jesus commissioned them: "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24).
2. In this passage the inspired authors used the verb "*do*" (*poieo* in Greek) that means "*to offer sacrifice*" (Exod 29:38-39; Lev 9:7; Num 10:10, Psalm 66:15).
3. This verb, "*do*", is a sacrificial term that is used in a sacrificial sense "over 70 times in the Old Testament."⁹
4. So, the words "*do this*" (*touto poieite*) has the meaning is "offer this," or "sacrifice this."
5. Furthermore, the command, "*do*" (present active indicative) means to offer repeatedly or continually.
6. "*This*," that these newly ordained priests are to repeat, of course, is the offering Jesus' glorified body, now present on the altar at the words, "*This is my body*," and "*This is my blood*." There are two vital points to be made here:
 - a. First, the sacrifice of the Mass is never another sacrifice, but Jesus' singular sacrifice made present.
 - b. Secondly, Jesus is the eternal high priest acting in his ordained priest. Thus, the priest says "*my*" body and "*my*" blood.

V. There two Levels of Participation in Christ's Priesthood

A. One is the *Baptismal or Common Priesthood of all the Faithful*¹⁰

Through the sacrament of baptism all the faithful participate in the one priesthood of Christ. The laity exercise the common priesthood by the grace of baptism. Thus, they

⁹ Jason Evert, "Is the Mass a Sacrifice?", *This Rock*, September 2001.

¹⁰ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

share in the mission of Jesus as priest, prophet, and king by living out their respective vocations in a life of faith, hope, and charity.¹¹

Thus St. Peter writes: “Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house [temple], to be a holy *priesthood*, to offer spiritual *sacrifices* acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5).

Similarly, St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living *sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual *worship*” (Rom 12:1).

- B. The second division is the *Ministerial or Hierarchical Priesthood* – Its power comes from the sacrament of Holy Orders
1. Some men are set apart and consecrated to the service of the faithful as Christ’s ministers operating *in the person of Christ the Head*. They become Christ’s instruments to unfold the grace of baptism of all Christians as they build up and lead his Church.¹²
 2. Therefore, they function in the Person of “Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, High Priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth.”¹³
 - a. The presence of Christ operating in his priests and in his Person guarantees the power of the sacraments.
 - b. Even their sinfulness cannot impede the fruit of sacramental grace of ordination because they are mere instruments; the grace come from Jesus.
 - c. However, like all men priests are subject to sin and human weaknesses. Ordination is a call to holiness, but it does not automatically make someone holy.
 - d. Nevertheless, their lack of personal holiness can harm the faithfulness of the members of Christ’s Church by bad example and scandal. This is a reality that should motivate the faithful to pray continually for their priests.¹⁴ Holy priests lead us to holiness.

VI. There are Three Degrees of Holy Orders

- A. Highest Degree – the **Bishops** from the Greek word *episkopos* meaning *overseer*.
1. Bishops are consecrated with the fullness of Christ’s priesthood.
 2. Their office embraces an office of *sanctifying, teaching* and *ruling* to such an extent that bishops “in an eminent and visible manner, take the place of Christ himself, teacher, shepherd, and priest, and act as his representative.”¹⁵

¹¹ CCC, # 1546.

¹² CCC, # 1547.

¹³ CCC, # 1548

¹⁴ CCC, # 1550.

¹⁵ CCC, # 1558.

3. As a result there is special significance of the bishop's Mass. In attendance we are gathered around him who fully and uniquely by virtue of his ordination, "represents Christ, the Good Shepherd and Head of his Church."¹⁶
 4. Bishops are also the unbroken successors of the apostles.¹⁷
- B. Next degree - **Priests** from the Greek word *presbyteros* meaning *elder*.
1. The function of the bishops' ministry is handed over in a subordinate degree to men consecrated as priests so they could be the bishop's *co-workers* in the apostolic mission that had been entrusted to the bishops by Christ."¹⁸
 2. Therefore, priests depend on the authority of the bishops in the exercise of their office. They are not free agents who can act on their own.
 3. However, they are "true priests of the New Testament."¹⁹
 4. Their mission is "to preach the Gospel everywhere."²⁰
 5. Note: The New Testament does not explicitly refer to Christian ministers as "priests" (Greek *hiereis*), but as bishops (Greek *episkopoi*) and presbyters" (Greek *presbyteroi*), but it is from this term that the English word priest is derived.²¹
- C. Lowest decree - **Deacons** from the Greek word *diakonos* meaning *servant*.
1. "The sacrament of Holy Orders marks them with an *imprint* ("character") which cannot be removed and which configures them in a special way to Christ, who made himself the "deacon" or servant of all."²²
 2. However, only bishops and priests can be properly called *sacerdos* – "priests."
 3. Nevertheless, the rite ordination applies to bishops, priests and deacons.²³
 4. Deacons assist the bishop in:
 - a. The celebration of the Eucharist
 - b. Distribution of Holy Communion
 - c. Assisting at and blessing marriages
 - d. Proclaiming the Gospel
 - e. Preaching
 - f. Presiding over funerals
 - g. Dedicating themselves to various ministries of charity
 2. *Permanent Diaconate*
The permanent diaconate can be conferred on married men.

¹⁶ CCC, # 1561.

¹⁷ CCC, #s 1558, 1555, 1557.

¹⁸ CCC, # 1562

¹⁹ CCC, # 1564.

²⁰ CCC, # 1565

²¹ Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, "Priest, Priesthood," p. 729.

²² CCC, # 1570.

²³ CCC, # 1554.

VII. The Rite of Ordination²⁴

The essential rite of ordination consists in two parts:

- A. The bishop's imposition of hands on the head of the one to be ordained.
- B. The bishop's specific consecratory prayer asking God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the specific gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.
- C. Only a bishop can confer the Sacrament of Orders.
- D. There are two parts of the ordination rite that are particularly moving:
 - 1. The first is praying the litany of the saints, when all the ordinandi are fully prostrate, face down on the sanctuary floor.
 - 2. The second is the moment of ordination when each candidate kneels before the bishop who places both hands on his head with the intention of ordaining but without saying a single word. Once completed, then all the priests present pass by the ordinandi one-by-one placing both their hands on each head. This marvelously captures their brotherhood.

IX. Who Can Receive This Sacrament?²⁵

Only a baptized male (*vir*) can validly receive sacred ordination.²⁶

- A. The Church is bound by the choice made by Christ himself, who limited ordination to men (*veri*).
- B. This is readily understandable when one recognizes that a priest stands in the *Person* of Jesus Christ, who was fully a man (*vir*).
 - 1. The essential character of a priest is radically different from that of a Protestant minister. The minister's role consists in functions: preaching, evangelizing, organizing, and administration.
 - 2. Therefore, from the viewpoint of functions, women are certainly capable of fulfilling these duties as well as men, sometimes better.
 - 3. However, a priest uniquely operates in the Person of Jesus, not just in his name. Thus, he says: "This is *my* body ... This is *my* blood." "*I* absolve you of your sins."
- C. The male only priesthood is also uniquely connected with image of Christ the bridegroom wedded to the Church, a role that only a man can fulfill (Mt 9:15, Mk 2:19-20; Lk 5:34-35; Jn 3:29; Rev 18:23).
- D. The selection of males is firmly rooted in the Bible, which depicts, as we saw earlier, priests as spiritual *fathers*, a role exclusive to men. This explains why Catholic priests are called "Father".

²⁴ CCC, # 173.

²⁵ CCC, #s 1557-1580.

²⁶ The Latin language uses two words for man: *vir*, which always refers to a male person, and *humanus*, which refers to a person of the human race, male or female.

X. Celibacy²⁷

- A. In an age when so many people have lost its way in regard to sexual matters, celibacy seems an absurd idea. Yet, celibacy was a practice that began with the apostles.
1. There is ample evidence to show that in the apostolic Church married men took a vow of celibacy prior to their ordinations, which expressed their determination to live a life of continence.²⁸
 2. In the *Eastern Churches*, bishops are chosen solely from celibates. However, married men are ordained as deacons and priests. Nevertheless, among priests in the East, celibacy is common.
 3. In the *Western or Latin Church*, all those chosen for the priesthood are normally selected from among men who live a celibate life and who intend to remain celibate “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:12).²⁹ However, the Church can and does make exceptions to the rule of celibacy.
- B. The biblical basis for celibacy is founded on Jesus’ words. Christ’s teaching regarding the absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage (Mt 19:3-9) so shocked the disciples that said to Jesus: “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry” (Mt 19:10). Jesus responded with a teaching regarding celibacy: “But he said to them, ‘Not all men can receive this precept [to be celibate], but only those to whom it is given [it’s a special grace]. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven [celibacy]. He who is able to receive this [God’s grace to be celibate], let him receive it’” (Mt 19:11-12).
- C. It is eminently fitting that bishops and priests are celibate, because they function in the Person of Jesus Christ, and they are an image of the heavenly Bridegroom’s wedded union with the Church.

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²⁷ CCC, # 1579-1580.

²⁸ For a detailed and scholarly investigation of this subject consult the following two books: Christian Cochini, *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), c. 1960, and Stefan Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church: The Beginnings of a Discipline of Obligatory Continence for Clerics in East and West* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press) c. 2000. Both books, written independently of each other, make extensive use of the Bible, early Church councils and synods together with the writings of the Church Fathers. Their research is extensive and their statements are carefully documented.

²⁹ CCC, #’s 1580, 1579.