

The Sacrament of Holy Orders

Holy Orders is called a sacrament of service. Through the sacred ceremony of this sacrament Catholic men are called by God to serve him by preaching his holy word, giving the sacraments to Catholics and bring salvation to all men.

Jesus Gives Us the Sacrament of Holy Orders

At the Last Supper Jesus made the Twelve Apostles the first priests of his Church. While instituting the Holy Eucharist he said to them: "Do this as a remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19).

The command to "do this" meant that Christ had given them a share in his own priestly power so that they could offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Along with being priests, the Twelve were also made *bishops*. Bishops receive from Jesus the fullness of the priesthood and the duty of ordaining other worthy men to the priestly ministry. Saint Clement of Rome, who was a friend of the apostles and the fourth Pope, wrote about this passing on of the priesthood: *The apostles knew, through Our Lord Jesus Christ, that they were to appoint other men to take their place as bishops in the Church. They told these men to choose successors as well.*

This passing on of Holy Orders is called *apostolic succession*. It assures us that our Catholic bishops today have received their ministry directly from Jesus through the Twelve. This is why we are able to say that our bishops are the successors of the apostles.

A Royal Nation of Priests

We learn from Saint Peter that all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ. In his first letter to all believers he says: "You, however, are a chosen race, a royal priesthood . . . he claims for his own" (1 Pet 2:9).

This reminds us that we are all made priests in Baptism, but we must remember that there are different ways of carrying out this common priesthood. Lay people, including Sisters and Brothers in religious communities, carry out their priesthood by attending Mass and by worshipping God through private prayer. This is known as the *priesthood of the faithful*. This is different from the *ordained priesthood* which men receive through Holy Orders.

To receive this sacrament, a man must be called by God. This special calling is necessary because a priest's life is very demanding. It can only be lived faithfully by those who are chosen by God to serve him in this way of life.

The Levels in Holy Orders

Most Catholics do not realize that Holy Orders has three different levels or parts. These are called hierarchies, which is from a Greek word that means "degrees of authority".

The highest degree of Holy Orders is that of the **bishops**. They receive all the power of the priesthood. This is why only they can ordain men to the priesthood. They are the official teachers of the faith in their *diocese*. Every Catholic owes respect and obedience to the bishop of his diocese.

The next level is the regular **priesthood**. Your pastor and his associates belong to this degree. They are the bishop's helpers in preaching the Word of God, teaching the faith, and administering the sacraments. Every priest makes a promise of obedience to his bishop. The priest is called to become holy because this is the best way of leading others to Heaven.

The members of the lowest level in Holy Orders are the **deacons**. Deacons were first ordained in the Church by the apostles, as Saint Luke tells us: *In those days, as the number of disciples grew, the ones who spoke Greek complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food, as compared with the widows of those who spoke Hebrew. The Twelve assembled the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Look around among your own number, brothers, for seven men acknowledged to be deeply spiritual and prudent, and we shall appoint them to this task. This will permit us to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the Word. . ."* They presented these men to the apostles, who first prayed over them and then imposed hands on them (Acts 6:1-4, 6).

This shows us that the deacons were called to serve the Church by carrying out works of mercy. But they also help out in parishes by assisting the priest at Mass, administering Baptism, distributing the Eucharist, assisting at marriages, officiating at funerals and burial services, and instructing people in the faith. There are two kinds of deacons: those who are studying for the priesthood and those who are called to this way of life as *permanent deacons*. These are often married men who are ordained for service in their own dioceses.

The Sign and Effects of Holy Orders

From the passage from Saint Luke, we see the apostles ordained men by praying over them and laying hands upon them. This is how men are ordained today. As we recall from studying Confirmation, the laying on of hands is an ancient symbol of passing on a spiritual gift. The words of the ordination prayer tell us that this gift is a share in the priesthood of Christ. It asks God to: . . . *give these servants of yours the dignity of the presbyterate (priesthood). Renew the Spirit of holiness*

within them. By your divine gift may they attain the second order in the hierarchy and exemplify right conduct in their lives.

We learn from this prayer that God increases his Spirit in these men, giving them the special powers of the priesthood. The life of God is increased within them, and they receive all the graces they need to become good, holy priests. Like Baptism and Confirmation, Holy Orders puts a sacramental seal (spiritual mark) on the soul. This shows God that they have been united to Jesus, our High Priest.

A Wonderful Calling

The call of God to the priesthood is very wonderful. It is one of the greatest honors which a man can receive in this life. We should pray for our parish priests every day and also ask Jesus to send the Church more good, holy servants.

We should always show respect to our priests and realize that their lives are very hard. They spend all their days celebrating Mass, hearing confessions, counseling people, and attending to the needs of a busy parish. But their life, if it is lived in faith, hope, and love for God will surely lead to everlasting happiness! The holy Father of the Church, Saint Basil the Great once said: "The ministry of the priesthood is a great work which will bring you to the Kingdom of Heaven."