

The Sacrament of Holy Orders
ICCEC U.S. Theological Commission
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The succession of the apostolic ministry is preserved in this world through the Sacrament of Ordination into Holy Orders given to the Church, specifically in the orders of bishops, priests, and deacons.¹ Our understanding of Ordination and Holy Orders in the CEC is predicated on the teachings of Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers, along with the practices and traditions of the historic Church. Our understanding presupposes a male diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopacy under apostolic succession, where men who have an anointing and calling of God on their lives are acknowledged, set apart, and ordained by the leadership of the Church into the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Within the Church Christ has established Holy Orders, which God has given for the preaching of the Word, the faithful and orderly administration of the sacraments, and the governance of the Church.²

St. Thomas Aquinas says that Order primarily refers to a relation or rank.³ The meaning of “Orders” was restricted later to the church hierarchy as a whole or to the various ranks of the clergy.⁴ Tertullian and some of the early writers had already applied the word in that sense.⁵ Order is used to signify not only the particular rank or general status of the clergy, but also the outward action or process by which they are raised to that status, and thus this term stands for ordination. “The Sacrament of Order is the sacrament by which grace and spiritual power for the discharge of ecclesiastical offices are conferred.”⁶ Ordination is also involves an ontological change⁷ in the person ordained and his being ordained in apostolic succession.

Biblical Foundation of Holy Orders

Christ founded His Church as a supernatural society, the Kingdom of God. In this society there must be authority by which the members may receive supernatural truth by faith, and supernatural grace given sacramentally. Thus, besides the power of jurisdiction, the Church has the power of teaching (*magisterium*) and the power of conferring grace. This is the power of

¹ ICCEC Catechism Q-193

² Ibid. Q-195. What is the sacrament of Holy Orders?

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, Supplement 34.2 ad 4um

⁴ St. Jerome, “In Isaiam”, XIX, 18; St. Gregory the Great, “Moral.”, XXXII, xx

⁵ Tertullian, *Exhortation to Chastity* 7, ordo sacerdotalis, ordo ecclesiasticus; St. Gregory of Tours, “Vit. patr.”, X, ordo clericorum

⁶ Ahaus, H. (1907–1913). *Holy Orders*. In C. G. Herbermann, E. A. Pace, C. B. Pallen, T. J. Shahan, & J. J. Wynne (Eds.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church: Vols. I–XV*. The Encyclopedia Press; The Universal Knowledge Foundation.

⁷ This ontological change is addressed in Addendum 2.

order that was committed by our Lord to His Apostles, who were to continue His work and to be His earthly representatives. The Apostles received their supernatural grace from Christ who said: “as the Father has sent me, I also send you” (Jn 20:21). Christ possessed fullness of power in virtue of His priesthood and of His office as Redeemer and Mediator. He gave His Apostles the power to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Lk 22:19), and dispense the sacraments (Mt 28:18; Jn 20:22, 23); thus making them priests. It is true that every Christian receives sanctifying grace which confers priesthood to believers.⁸ Even as Israel under the Old Covenant was to God “a priestly kingdom” (Ex 19:4–6), thus under the New, all Christians are “a royal priesthood” (1 Pe 2:9). Now as then a special and sacramental priesthood under Holy Orders teaches, strengthens, and compliments the universal priesthood of all believers.⁹

From Scripture we learn that the Apostles appointed men to an office in the church by the imposition of hands, as a means of conferring inward grace. One of the marks of the new-born Church is steadfast continuance in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship. Their teaching is the authoritative standard and association with them provided unity and continuity to the church. The normal channel by which the full authority and ministerial anointing of the ascended Lord is conferred was by the hands of the Apostles. This did not necessarily make men ‘Apostles,’ but empowered them thereby to exercise to a greater or less extent the functions of the Apostles.¹⁰

The imposition of hands was, in the Old Testament, a symbolical ceremony by which one intends to communicate to another some favor, quality or office to another person. The rite has had a profane or secular as well as a sacred usage. It is extremely ancient, having come down from patriarchal times. Jacob bequeathed a blessing and inheritance to his two sons Ephraim and Manasses by placing his hands upon them (Gen 48:14) and Moses conferring on Joshua the leadership of the Hebrew people in the same manner (Num 27:18, 23). In the New Testament Our Lord employed this rite to restore life to the daughter of Jairus (Mt 9:18) and to give health to the sick (Luke 6:19). The religious aspect of this ceremony first appeared in the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the office of priesthood. The priests in Israel’s Temple laid hands upon the heads of the sacrificial animal (Ex 29; Leviticus 8:9); and conferred the sins of the people onto the scapegoat (Lev 16:21).¹¹ The imposition of hands has become the outward sign of sacramental grace in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.¹²

Ordination by imposition of hands was in use well before the middle of the third century. The Apostles imposed hands upon the Deacons as they prayed for them” (Acts 6:6). In 2 Timothy

⁸ See Adendum 4 The Priesthood of All Believers.

⁹ cf. 2 Cor 3:3, 6; Rom 15:16

¹⁰ Whitham, A. R. (1910). *Holy Orders* (W. C. E. Newbolt & D. Stone, Eds.; p. 25). Longmans, Green, and Co.

¹¹ Heb 6:2

¹² ICCEC Catechism Q-196.

1:6, St. Paul reminds Timothy that he was given an Episcopal office by the imposition of St. Paul's hands (cf. 1 Tim 4:4), and Timothy is exhorted to appoint presbyters by the same rite (1 Tim 5:22; cf. Acts 13:3; 14:22). Sacramental Grace was given to Timothy through the laying on of hands by the St. Paul or the church eldership. The context clearly shows that this grace which enables Timothy to rightly discharge the office imposed upon him is something permanent. The text indicates that the grace imparted to him had become part of him.

Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. (2 Tim 1:6 NKJV)

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. (1 Tim 4:14 NKJV)

Jesus chose the twelve apostles to serve as the heads of the new People of God (Mt 19:28; Rev 21:12–14). The apostles eventually came to serve as the priestly firstborn sons, acting as fathers to the communities under their charge.¹³ (cf. Acts 15:23; 1 Cor 4:15). In turn, the apostles appointed to succeed them elders or presbyters over the churches they had founded (Acts 14:23). It should also be noted that these offices were raised up and appointed out of a local congregation, although there is no evidence that the congregation democratically elected them. As the father of the next generation came from within the natural family, the next generation of spiritual fatherhood came from within the spiritual family; the local congregation or the Apostolic Ministry. The man being ordained had to know the sheep of which he was shepherd.

From the very beginning, bishops and presbyters of the Christian community offered the sacraments, taught and proclaimed sound doctrine, and governed as shepherds. By their ordination, they participated in the universal mission that Christ entrusted to the apostles. They were empowered not only to be at the service of the community but also to participate in the universal mission of salvation for the whole world (Acts 1:8). The exercise of priestly ministry is always measured against the supreme model of Christ.¹⁴ It is a gift from God Himself received by the Church through the unbroken line of Apostolic Succession.

Holy Orders in Church Tradition

St. Irenæus, speaking of Acts 20:17, says, “For as Miletus, having convoked the bishops and the presbyters,” etc., thereby showing that he does not recognize the two as synonymous. “The degrees in the Church on earth of bishops, presbyters, deacons, are, in my opinion, imitations of the angelic glory, and of that dispensation which is said in Scripture to await all who, walking in the steps of the Apostles, live in perfect righteousness according to the Gospel” (Clem. Alex.,

¹³ cf. Acts 15:23; 1 Cor 4:15.

¹⁴ Mk 10:43–45; 1 Pe 5:3) (CCC 1544–68)

Strom., lib. VI. n. 13).¹⁵ St. Ignatius stated that those who were appointed by the Apostles, or afterwards by other distinguished men, with the consent of the whole Church, “have ministered to the flock of Christ with lowliness, in peace, and without arrogance, and have been witnessed to at many times by all men.”¹⁶

Living Icons of Christ

Christ is God’s “Word and Icon” par excellence. God not only authors His definitive Word by His Holy Spirit, He also fashions His image in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, Jesus as His Father’s *eikon* is the visible image of the invisible God (Col 1:15).¹⁷ The Holy Orders of deacon, priest, and bishop are living icons of Christ that are visible images of and representations of Christ. In scripture Christ is pictured as a servant, a priest, and the bishop of our souls. The bishop guards and carries out the teachings of Christ as His representative who oversees the administration of the Church. As a servant, the deacon represents Christ. As a priest who offers the body and blood of Christ to the Church, the presbyter represents Christ. By virtue of the sacrament of holy orders administered under Apostolic Succession, the priest acts in the person of Christ, the Head of the Church. As Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law was a figure of Christ, and the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ”.¹⁸ Ordained ministers make the presence of Christ as Head of the Church visible to the community. As Pope John Paul II wrote in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*:

“In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd, authoritatively proclaiming his Word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation, particularly in Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock ... In a word, priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the Head and Shepherd.”

The principal effect of the sacrament of ordination to our three recognized Holy Orders is character, a spiritual and indelible mark impressed upon the soul, by which the recipient is distinguished from others, designated as a minister of Christ, and deputed and empowered to perform certain offices of Divine worship.¹⁹ The sacramental character of Holy Orders distinguishes the ordained from the laity. It gives the recipient in the diaconate the authority and anointing to minister officially and to assist the bishop. Through the priesthood is given the

¹⁵ Thein, J. (1900). In *Ecclesiastical Dictionary: Containing, in Concise Form, Information upon Ecclesiastical, Biblical, Archaeological, and Historical Subjects* (pp. 508–509). Benziger Brothers.

¹⁶ Whitham, A. R. (1910). *Holy Orders* (W. C. E. Newbolt & D. Stone, Eds.; pp. 43–44). Longmans, Green, and Co.

¹⁷ Argarate, P. (2013). In P. Argarate (Ed.), *Word and Icon: Exploring the New Testament with Christian Art, Iconography, Commentary and Prayer* (p. vii). The Committee for Ukrainian Education.

¹⁸ *Summa theologiae* III.22. 4c

¹⁹ *Ibid.* *Summa* III.63.2

authority and anointing to offer the Eucharist and dispense the sacraments. In the episcopate is the authority and anointing to oversee and guard the church, to ordain new priests, and to confirm the faithful.²⁰

²⁰ Ahaus, H. (1907–1913). *Holy Orders*. In C. G. Herbermann, E. A. Pace, C. B. Pallen, T. J. Shahan, & J. J. Wynne (Eds.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*: Vols. I–XV. The Encyclopedia Press; The Universal Knowledge Foundation.