

Church Hierarchy

For “in the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing in his name and by his power.”

(CCC 873)

Church Hierarchy

The words Church Hierarchy have been used to denote the ruling power of the Church ever since the 6th century. It connotes the totality of power established in the Church for the guiding of man to his eternal salvation, divided into various orders or grades in which the inferior are subject to and yield obedience to the higher ones.¹

1. There is a twofold hierarchy in the Church, and we distinguish them as that of “Order” and that of “Jurisdiction,” corresponding to the twofold means of sanctification; grace, which comes to us principally through the sacraments, and the organizational and teaching authority of the Church.

2. Jesus, in establishing His Church, gave power to some for the administering the sacraments, especially the power over the Real Body of Christ, in the Eucharist, through the Hierarchy of Orders, that of Bishopric (Bishop, Priest, and Deacon).

3. The Church, as a society of members comprising the Mystical Body of Christ, and sanctioned by Christ himself to teach all nations² with power of binding and loosening,³ is bestowed the power to legislate, administer, and teach for the good of the Church society; thus a hierarchy of jurisdiction.

4. This sanctification of souls coupled with the good of the society of the Church, the Hierarchy of Jurisdiction is endowed with the following rights:

- the right of legislative power to form and sanction laws considered useful or necessary,
- the right of judicial power to judge how laws are to be observed,
- the right of coercive power to enforce obedience and to punish disobedience to its laws,
- the right of administrative power to make provisions for proper celebration of worship. (Cath. Ency. Hierarchy)

5. While by divine institution the Hierarchy of Orders consists of the episcopate, priesthood, and diaconate, in the Hierarchy of Jurisdiction the episcopate and papacy alone are of divine institution. All of the other grades of orders have been instituted by the Church; the Priesthood, Diaconate, and the minor orders of tonsure, subdiaconate, lector, acolyte, and porter.

6. “The Bishop of Rome, as successor of St. Peter, has been established by Christ as the visible head of the whole Church militant, and possesses a real primacy and supreme power of jurisdiction over the universal Church in matters of morals, faith, discipline and the governing of the Church. This power is ordinary and immediate over all the churches, over all the pastors and faithful.”⁴

¹ Van Hove, A. (1910). Hierarchy (citing Const. de Eccl. Christi). In The Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved September 2, 2016 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07322c.htm>

² Mark 16:15

³ Matt 18:18

⁴ Van Hove, A. (1910). Hierarchy. In The Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved September 2, 2016 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07322c.htm>

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7. This supreme authority over the whole Church belongs exclusively to the Pope by virtue of his primacy, and at the same time holds the title of Patriarch of the West, Primate of Italy, Metropolitan of the Church Province of Rome, Bishop of Rome.

8. The Bishops are the successors of the Apostles, but do not inherit the jurisdiction over the universal Church, or infallibility. The Pope is bound to ordain bishops who will enjoy ordinary power in the Church subordinate to himself.

9. Cardinals are the pope's advisors in the important matters concerning the universal Church and they exercise their jurisdiction in various tribunals and offices instituted by the pope for the governing of the Church.

10. Next in order are the Patriarchs. From the 8th and 9th centuries, the title of Patriarch became an official title connoting a special rank in the hierarchy, that of a chief bishop who ruled over a specified territory or group of dioceses which can be entitled as "Metropolitan." Over time, the title and office of patriarch has been more commonly associated with the chief bishop of the Uniate Church of the East, those Churches that remained faithful to the Roman Pontiff after the Schism of the East.

In our Latin or Roman Rite, the title and office of archbishop is comparable to the title of patriarch.

11. After the order of archbishop comes the rank of bishop who administers an area of parishes or a diocese that is entrusted to them by the Holy See. In the government of a diocese, a bishop can be assisted by various ecclesiastics (clergymen of various subordinate rank) such as an auxiliary bishop, a vicar general, etc.

12. Finally, at the head of a parish is the pastor with rights and privileges, enforced with obligations to the appointing bishop for the fulfillment of pastoral (shepherding) duty to the people of a defined parish.

13. Although deacons are ordained ministers of Holy Orders and are included in the Hierarchy of Orders, they are not considered as part of the Hierarchy of Jurisdiction, having no judicial or governmental authority; rather, they are assigned for the administering certain Sacraments, assist the priest in the celebration of the Eucharist and fulfilling various ministries in the parish.