

HOLY ORDERS

Holy Orders is the Sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to His Apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time; thus it is the Sacrament of Apostolic Ministry. It includes three degrees: episcopate (bishopric), presbyterate (priesthood), and diaconate.¹

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred on the designated candidate by the laying of hands followed by a solemn prayer of consecration asking God to grant to the ordainand (the person being ordained) the graces of the Holy Spirit required for his ministry. Ordination imprints an indelible sacramental character.²

1. The Sacrament of Holy Orders, as in the Sacrament of Matrimony, belongs to the title of “The Sacraments of Service,” primarily directed to the work of salvation of others. The recipients of Holy Orders and the partners in the Sacrament of Matrimony grow in holiness through their service to others in Holy Orders or to each other in Matrimony.
2. We read in the Old Testament of the priesthood of the Old Covenant when God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai saying, “*Tell the Israelites: you have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.*”³ With the people of Israel, God set apart the tribe of Levi from which priests were “*appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifice for sins.*”⁴
This priesthood, however, could not bring about salvation or achieve a definitive sanctification for its people. Rather, the Levitic Priesthood of the Old Covenant, through the offering of animal sacrifice and prayers, were acts of worship recognizing the supremacy of God, submission to His will, and admission of one’s unworthiness to the great works God performed on their behalf.
3. The Church sees in the priesthood of the Old Covenant a prefiguring of the ordained ministry of the New Covenant of the Christian faith, as evidenced in the very ritual words of ordination to the New Priesthood, “From the beginning, you chose the descendants of Abraham to be your holy nation . . . you appointed high priests to rule your people . . . you chose the sons of Levi and gave them your blessing as their everlasting inheritance.”⁵
4. Everything that the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured, finds its fulfillment in Christ Jesus, the “one mediator between God and man,”⁶ the High Priest, who “by a

¹ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 427, para. 1536) Print.

² Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 445, para. 1597) Print.

³ Ex. 19:4-6

⁴ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 428, para. 1539) Print.

⁵ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (pp. 429-429, para. 1541-1543, citing Roman Pontifical for Ordination) Print.

⁶ 1 Tim. 2: 5

single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified⁷ by the unique sacrifice of the Cross.”⁸

5. The ministerial priesthood of the New Covenant of Bishops and Priests participate in the one priesthood of Christ and is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads His Church. For this reason the priesthood is transmitted by its own sacrament, the Sacrament of Holy Orders.⁹
6. In the Sacrament of Holy orders, there are three degrees; Bishop, Priest and Deacon. Through the act of ordination, by the laying of hands and a solemn prayer of consecration, the Holy Spirit is called upon to confer His gifts upon the candidate so to exercise the sacred powers proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.
7. 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, the Eucharist.¹⁰
8. By ordination to the episcopacy, Bishops receive the fullness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders and they become the singular unbroken line of succession of the Apostles. He becomes a visible head of the Church in a particular territorial area, referred to as diocese. He also becomes a member of a “College of Bishops” which has care and concern for the Apostolic mission of the Church in union with and under the direct authority of the Pope.
9. Priests, by their ordination, “are united with the bishop in priestly dignity and at the same time depend on them in the exercise of their pastoral functions.”¹¹
Together with the bishop, the priests form a presbyterium (priestly) community and assume with the bishop the pastoral mission for a particular parish. The priest is subordinate to his bishop by an oath of obedience.
10. The third order of Holy Orders is the degree of Diaconate. By ordination by a Bishop, the Deacon shares in Christ’s mission and grace in ministering in a different manner than that of a Bishop or Priest. The Deacon’s task is to assist the Bishop and Priest in the celebration of the divine mysteries, especially the Eucharist, in assisting at and blessing of marriages, in the proclamation and preaching of the Gospel, and fulfilling obligations of service in various ministries of charity.¹² The order of Deacon dates back to the time

⁷ Heb. 7: 26

⁸ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 429, para. 1544) Print.

⁹ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 430, para. 1547) Print.

¹⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2006). *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (First ed., p. 265). Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing.

¹¹ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 445, para. 1595) Print.

¹² Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 437, para. 1570) Print.

of the Apostles who chose men to assist in the performance of charity.¹³

The order of Diaconate can be identified as “transitional” or as “permanent.” A “transitional” Deacon is one who is in preparation for the reception of the order of priesthood.

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Church has restored the order of Diaconate as a “permanent” rank of the hierarchy in contrast to the diaconate order which led to the priesthood. The permanent diaconate can be conferred on married and unmarried men.

11. The only valid minister of the Sacrament of Holy Orders is a Bishop. It is Christ who continues to guide the Church through the Bishops who confer this Sacrament of Apostolic succession of ministry and hand on the gift of the Holy Spirit.
12. Only a baptized man may be ordained to the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Jesus Christ chose only men to become part of His twelve Apostles. Certainly, this intent on the part of Jesus was not reflective of the culture of the time when women were considered as second class to men. Even though the custom of the forbidding men speaking to women, Jesus did not hesitate to speak to the Samaritan woman at the well. Also, Jesus chose a woman, Mary Magdalene, to be the first to witness His Resurrection and to direct her to announce it to the Apostles. The Apostles continued Christ’s practice to choose men only; the Church has followed this practice through the centuries as part of Tradition of the Church.

Key Points

The Sacrament of Holy Orders, like that of Baptism and Confirmation, confers an indelible or permanent character on the recipient and is never repeated.

By ordination to the episcopacy, a Bishop is given the grace to teach in the name of Christ, sanctify the Church through the celebration of the Sacraments, to guide and defend the Church and to be a sign of the unity of the Church.¹⁴

The spiritual gifts conferred at the priestly ordination is to proclaim the Gospel, celebrate the Sacraments (except Holy Orders) and to shepherd the people.¹⁵

With regard to Deacons, “strengthened by sacramental grace, they are dedicated to the people of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity.”¹⁶

¹³ Acts 6:1-6

¹⁴ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 442, para. 1586) Print.

¹⁵ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 442, para. 1587) Print.

¹⁶ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (p. 443, para. 1588) Print.