

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS

Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to the Apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time. It includes three degrees: episcopate [bishop], presbyterate [priests], and diaconate [deacons]. (Catechism # 1536). This teaching from the Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us a good starting point for considering the biblical origins of this sacrament and for understanding its basic purpose and function in the Church. We find the teaching of scripture about the structure and leadership of the Church not only in the gospels but also in the Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament epistles. Let us examine some of these texts.

A pattern and office established by Jesus

Jesus established a community of believers which we call the Church by first calling individuals to become his disciples. Among the first disciples were those who would later become apostles but there were many others as well: *And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.* (Mat 4:25). But very early we also discover the first biblical root of Holy Orders: the choice of twelve men whom were called apostles: *In these days he went out to the mountain to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles;* (Lk 6:12-13). It is important to note the distinction here. Although Jesus had many disciples, only the twelve were called to be apostles. During his public ministry Jesus worked closely with the apostles, instructing them and preparing them for leadership. There are certain tasks and powers that he gave only to the twelve apostles and not to the disciples in

general.

The Role of Simon Peter

Peter is the first to be called to this leadership. Jesus declares of him *And I tell you [Simon], you are rock and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" (Mat. 16:18-19) So Peter is to be given an authority that will be recognized even in heaven. Later Peter is told that part of his role will be to unify and strengthen the



others: *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.* (Luke 21:31-32). These texts about Peter are important because they serve as the basis and biblical model of the office of the pope. What Peter was for the early Church, so also

is the pope today whom we acknowledge to be the successor to Peter and to the office of Peter established by Christ himself. The other apostles too were to share in the role of leadership and in the ability to bind and loose (cf. Mat 18:18).

The office of the Apostles

There were also other important tasks that were entrusted only to the apostles. They alone were present when Christ celebrated the first Eucharist (cf. Lk. 22:14) and it was they who received the command, "Do this in memory of me." Likewise, only the apostles were present when Christ gave them authority to forgive sins: (cf. Jn 20:19ff). Jesus did not confer these powers upon all the disciples. It was the apostles alone who received the mandate that they should exercise these ministries on behalf of the disciples. It is our Catholic tradition to respect and preserve these actions of Christ by reserving the consecration of the Holy Eucharist and the forgiveness of sins to ordained bishops and priests alone. In so doing we honor the distinctions observed and established by Jesus himself. Lastly, the apostles were entrusted especially with the task of teaching the Gospel to all nations and of baptizing them (cf. Mat 28:19). Here too it is our tradition to reserve the solemn and authoritative teaching office of the Church to bishops in union with the Pope. The celebration of baptism is also reserved to ordained clergy except when there is danger of death, in which case anyone may baptize.

Now let us recall the teaching of the catechism that was quoted above: *Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to the Apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time.* The sacrament of Holy Orders reflects and perpetuates the will of Christ who entrusted certain tasks only to the

Apostles. The Catholic faith has respected this distinction ever since through entrusting certain tasks only to the ordained clergy.

The handing down of the ministry and office

Some may wonder however how these powers granted the apostles are possessed by the ordained clergy today. What evidence is there that these tasks were ever handed on to others? Here too the scriptures are actually quite clear. The apostles shared their mission and the powers they had received with others through what the scriptures describe as “the laying on of hands.” The apostles considered what they had received from the Lord as an “office” not merely as a personal privilege they alone were to have. This is evident from a passage in the Acts of the Apostles. The apostles were gathered in Jerusalem and discussing the loss of Judas who had been one of the twelve. Peter rose to address the others and noted that Judas, *was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry* (Acts 2:17). Peter also went on to declare, *His office let another take.* (2:20). Two men were proposed as candidates for the office and the apostles drew lots after praying. Matthias was chosen to fill the office left vacant by Judas (2:26) But note what the scriptures teach, it is an office which must be filled. The privileged ministry and powers granted to the apostles by Christ do not cease with the death of the apostle. Those powers are handed on and the ministry is shared.

As the Church grew in size there was also need for the apostles to share their powers. Seven men are appointed deacons to assist the apostles in Jerusalem. They are appointed to this task by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:3) Paul and Barnabas prior to their mission to the Gentiles have hands laid upon them for their task (Acts 13:2). Paul and Barnabas also appointed presbyters (“Presbyter” is the Greek word from which we derive the word “priest.”) in each town where they had evangelized to carry on their ministry: *And when they had appointed presbyters for them in every church,*

with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. Then they passed through Pisidia, and came to Pamphylia. (Acts 14:23-24). Paul also gave extensive instructions to Timothy and Titus regarding the ordination of bishops, priests and deacons (1 Tim 3:1ff, 5:17ff; Titus 1:7ff). Titus is also instructed by Paul to address errors and restore discipline in the Church in Crete: *This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint presbyters in every town as I directed you.* (Titus 1:5). Thus we can see that the office of the apostles was shared with other men who received, by the laying on of hands, the power to exercise leadership, govern, teach and perform their ministry of reconciliation (1 Cor. 5:12) and the celebration of the Eucharist (Lk 22:19).

It has been the practice of the Catholic Church to very carefully and faithfully maintain the apostolic office and ministry down through the centuries in accord with the will of Jesus as described in the scriptures. This is done through the laying on of hands in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Additional Teachings

There are several other things to emphasize in reference to this sacrament. The title “Apostle” came to be reserved only for a few in the early Church (probably out of reverence for the Twelve). The term “bishop” became the more common and later exclusive title for the office. We already see this transition underway in the letters to Timothy and Titus.

Holy Orders is conferred in three degrees: Bishop, Priest and Deacon. Again this in accord with scriptures wherein all three offices are described. The bishop possesses the fulness of the priesthood whereas priests possess the sacrament in a subordinate degree as the bishop’s co-workers or associates. Deacons are ordained not to the priesthood but to the “ministry” and they undertake to help the bishop in works of charity, administration, preaching, teaching and assist in liturgical celebrations and certain

sacraments.

The ministerial priesthood does not exist apart from the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priesthood is a participation in the priesthood of Christ. Just as Christ willed to share his ministry with the apostles so too does he continue to do so through their successors. Nor does the ministerial priesthood contradict the “royal priesthood” of all the baptized (1 Pet 2:5,9). Rather it is at the service of the royal priesthood by leading, guiding, governing and sanctifying the people of God by God’s grace.

A final important clarification is that the priest acts “in the person of Christ.” In other words when the priest says, “I absolve you,” “I baptize you” or “This is my body” it is really Christ who speaks. Clearly the priest, as a man cannot forgive sin or change bread and wine to the Body and Blood of Christ. It is only because Christ works through him that such things are possible. It is ultimately Christ who acts and effects salvation through the ordained minister.

We can only thank God who is able to work his graces even through humble human flesh. No priest or deacon can fail to reflect on the greatness of the gift he has received and he can only pray for the grace to remain a faithful minister of the gospel and the sacred mysteries of the faith. Most are very faithful. Sadly some have fallen or display great weaknesses. But here it is essential to put faith in God who can minister to the faithful despite weak or unworthy ministers for ultimately it is always Christ who works. St. Augustine wrote long ago, *As for the proud minister, he is to be ranked with the devil. Christ’s gift is not thereby profaned: what flows through him keeps its purity and what passes through him reaches the fertile earth.* For the battle is the Lord’s. It is Jesus, our merciful and great high priest who lives forever to make intercession for us (Heb. 2:17; 7:25), who always stands behind every priest and acts through him.