

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

The Sacrament of Holy Orders

by Fr. Antony

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the sacrament by which grace and spiritual power for the discharge of ecclesiastical offices are conferred. 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 (**Mt 16: 18 -19, Jn 20: 21**). Those who receive the sacrament of Holy Orders are consecrated in Christ's name "to feed the Church by the word and grace of God" (Vat II- LG).

God constituted Israel, the chosen people as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (**Ex 19:6, Is. 61:6**), but within the people of Israel, God chose one of the twelve tribes, that of Levi, and set it apart for liturgical service (**Num 1:48-53**). A special rite consecrated the beginnings of the priesthood of the Old Covenant. The priests are "appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (**Ex 29:1-30; Lev 8- Ordination of Aaron and his sons**). This was instituted to proclaim the Word of God and to restore communion with God by sacrifices and prayer (**Mal 2:7-9**).

This priesthood nevertheless remains powerless to bring about salvation, needing to repeat its sacrifices ceaselessly and being unable to achieve a definitive sanctification, which only the sacrifice of Christ would accomplish (**Heb 5:3; 7:27; 10:1-4**). The New Testament priesthood is the continuation of the Old Testament.

Christ as the Priest

In the New Covenant, the community came to see Christ as the priest. Through baptism, every baptized Christian shares in the priestly ministry of Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that the "whole community of believers is, as such, priestly" (1546). We call this priesthood which is shared by all the baptized "the common priesthood of all the faithful" (Catechism, 1547).

The liturgy of the Church, however, sees in the priesthood of Aaron and the service of the Levites, a prefiguring of the ordained ministry of the New Covenant. Everything that the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured finds its fulfillment in Christ Jesus, the "one mediator between God and men." The Christian tradition considers Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High," as a prefiguration of the priesthood of Christ, the unique "high priest after the order of Melchizedek" (**Heb 10:14**): "holy, blameless, unstained", "by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified," that is, by the unique sacrifice of the cross (Catechism, 1544).

In the New Testament, the church is participating in the priesthood of Christ in two ways: "the common priesthood of all the faithful" and "the ministerial priesthood" by holy orders. "Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers".

Common Priesthood

Christ, high priest and unique mediator, has made of the Church "a kingdom, priests for his God and Father". The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, the faithful are "consecrated to be. . . a holy priesthood" The common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace --a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit (Catechism, 1546-47).

Ministerial Priesthood

The ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests is at the service of the common priesthood (**Jn 13: 1-15**). It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders (Catechism, 1547).

The priesthood resulting from the Sacrament of Holy Orders is called the “ministerial priesthood”. This priesthood is ministerial. “That office. . . , which the Lord committed to the pastors of his people, is in the strict sense of the term a service”. The ministerial priesthood has the task not only of representing Christ - Head of the Church - before the assembly of the faithful, but also of acting in the name of the whole Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, and above all when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice (Catechism, 1551-52).