

# The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

## The Sacrament of Holy Orders – Part 2

*by Fr. Antony*

From Scripture we learn that the Apostles appointed others by an external rite (imposition of hands), conferring inward grace.

The sacrament of holy orders is conferred in three ranks: bishops, priests, and deacons. These three ranks existed from the very beginning of the church. Although the terms bishop, priest, and deacon were not very clear in the apostolic age, by the beginning of the 2nd century they had achieved the fixed form in which they are used today, whose functions are clearly distinct in the New Testament. The early Church Fathers recognized all three offices and regarded them as essential to the structure of the church. Ignatius said that without this three-fold ministry, a group cannot be called a church.

“Now, therefore, it has been my privilege to see you in the person of your God-inspired bishop, Damas; and in the persons of your worthy presbyters, Bassus and Apollonius; and my fellow-servant, the deacon, Zotion. What a delight is his company, for he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ” (Ignatius of Antioch, A.D. 110).

“Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest” (Ignatius of Antioch).

Pope: In the Church of Christ, the Roman Pontiff, as the Successor of Peter, to whom Christ entrusted the care of his sheep and his lambs, has been granted by God supreme, full, immediate and universal power in the care of souls. As pastor of all the faithful his mission is to promote the common good of the universal Church and the particular good of all the churches. He is therefore endowed with the primacy of ordinary power over all the churches (VAT II, DECREE ON THE PASTORAL OFFICE OF THE BISHOPS #2).

Bishops (episcopoi) are those who have care of multiple congregations and have the task of appointing, ordaining, and disciplining priests and deacons. We find Timothy and Titus as the first bishops (**1 Tim. 5:19-22, 2 Tim. 4:5, Titus 1:5**).

The Bishops also have been designated by the Holy Spirit to take the place of the apostles as pastors of souls; together with the Supreme Pontiff and subject to his authority, they are commissioned to perpetuate the work of Christ, the eternal Pastor. For Christ commanded the apostles and their successors, and gave them the power to teach all peoples, to sanctify men in truth and to give them spiritual nourishment (VAT II, Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishops, #2).

Priests: The word 'priest' is derived from the Greek word presbyteros, which means elder. The term "elder" designates a person holding an office distinguished by age, experience, nobility of character and life. The priest is distinguished from the rest of the people by the dignity and authority inherent in the very nature of the priesthood.

Priests represent the seventy elders of the Old Testament, who were chosen by Moses in the desert to assist him. Three special powers are vested on the priest in ordination: the power to offer up the Holy Sacrifice, the power to forgive sins, and the power to bless. The indelible character of the priesthood is impressed upon the priest's soul: and for all eternity he shall be "priest according to the order of Melchisedech" (**Ps. 109, 4**).

A priest is ordained by the imposition of hands by the bishop after proper training and scrutiny. Then he is anointed with holy oil. Anointing with oil has its origin in the Old Testament. Both, imposition and anointing, indicate that the priest is being set apart for a sacred task or duty. The anointing of the hands signifies that the hands of the newly ordained priest are being prepared for the sacred duties, and vessels which will be part of the priestly ministry.

The newly ordained priest receives the stole and the chasuble from the Bishop. These are vestments which pertain to his office. The stole symbolizes the authority and responsibility to serve in imitation of Christ. The chasuble is the principle garment of the priest celebrating the Eucharist. The ordaining bishop hands the ordinand a chalice and paten. This ritual highlights the importance of celebrating the Eucharist in the life of the priest. The Eucharist is at the heart of the priesthood.

The name Deacon (diakonos) means minister or servant. The deacon partakes of the priesthood so far as he is the assistant of the priest and bishop. The election and ordination of the first deacons is related in the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 6, 1-6**). Their duties are manifold: to assist the priest at the Holy Sacrifice, to distribute Holy Communion, to read the Gospel, to preach and to instruct the people. They now administer some of the sacraments; baptism and marriage. The Deacon is ordained by imposition of hands by the bishop and a stole and gospel is given to him, at the time of his ordination.

The matter of this sacrament is the bishop's imposition of hands on the head of the candidate to be ordained. The form of this sacrament is the bishop's prayer of consecration asking God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and for His gifts proper to the diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopate, as appropriate.

After Vatican II, more emphasis is given to Baptism and the common priesthood of all the faithful, and has caused a flowering of ministries in the Church. In parishes around the world we now see Christians serving as readers, Communion ministers, spiritual directors, catechists, liturgists, ministers to the sick, directors of religious education, and parish managers.