

RCIA CLASS 16 - HOLY ORDERS

I. Jesus Himself is the leader of the Church, but He also wanted there to be a visible ministry to continue guiding His Church, able to assure people of what is the true Church, what is the true faith, and what are the true sacraments.

A. The clergy (i.e., bishops, priests and deacons) draw their sacramental authority from Jesus Himself. “Christ is Himself the source of ministry in the Church. He instituted the Church. He gave her authority and mission, orientation and goal. In order to shepherd the People of God and to increase its numbers without cease, Christ the Lord set up in His Church a variety of offices which aim at the good of the whole body. The holders of office, who are invested with a sacred power, are, in fact dedicated to promoting the interests of the brethren, so that all who belong to the People of God may attain salvation.” Catechism 874.

1. During His earthly life, Jesus specifically appointed twelve men, who were called Apostles, to show forth His truth and glory before Him. During His public ministry, He called the Apostles, commissioned them and gave them authority to proclaim the faith, to administer the sacraments, and to defeat the forces of evil. See, e.g., Matt. 10:1-5; 18:18-2, 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-18; Acts 1:1-8. He also seventy-two other disciples to assist Him in other ways. See, e.g., Luke 9:1-6, 10:1-12. “Jesus is the Father’s Emissary. From the beginning of His ministry, He called to Himself those whom He desired. . . . And He appointed twelve, who He also named apostles, to be with Him, and to be sent out to preach. From then on, they would also be His emissaries (Greek “apostoloi”.) In them, Christ continues His own mission: ‘As the Father sent Me, even so I send you.’” Catechism 858.

2. “Accordingly, just as Christ was sent by the Father so also He sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. This He did so that they might preach the Gospel to every creature and proclaim that the Son of God by His death and resurrection had freed us from the power of Satan and from death and brought us into the Kingdom of His Father. . . . By the power of the same Holy Spirit they entrusted this power to their successors. This apostolic succession structures the whole liturgical life of the Church and is itself sacramental, handed on by the sacrament of Holy Orders.” Catechism 1086-1087.

3. Scripture and Tradition confirm this notion of having offices to succeed the Apostles, and other offices to assist these successors.

- Acts of the Apostles describes the Apostles as laying hands on others (particularly Saints Paul and Barnabas and early assistants who were apparently what we now call deacons) and thus conferring a portion of their authority upon them. See Acts 6:1-6, 13:1-3. They also appointed Saint Matthias to succeed Judas Iscariot. Acts 1:21-26. Saints Paul and Barnabas also appointed *presbytoi*, now called priests, in cities they evangelized. See Acts 14:23.

- Especially in two of the pastoral letters, 1 Timothy and Titus, the Bible describes these different levels of Church office. See, e.g., 1 Tim. 3:1-13,

5:17-22; Titus 1:5-16. St. Paul had laid hands upon and thus ordained Saints Timothy and Titus to lead the church in Ephesus and Crete respectively as what we would now call in English bishops. They in turn had the authority to ordain others.

- Early Church documents plainly refer to the offices of episcopos (bishop), presbyter (priest), and diaconos (deacon.) See, e.g., Didache ch. 15; Letter of St. Polycarp to the Philadelphians ch. 5-6; Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Trallians ch.3 and to the Magnesians ch. 3-4, 13, and to the Philadelphians ch. 7-8.

B. “The whole Church is apostolic, in that she remains through the successors of St. Peter and the other apostles, in communion of faith and life with her origin: and that she is sent out into the whole world. All members of the Church share in this mission, though in various ways. The Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well.” Catechism 863.

1. There is a priesthood of all believers because all Christians have a role in sanctifying, not only their own lives, but all of the world and increasing the kingdom of God on earth. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of His own, so that you may announce the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.” 1 Peter 2:9.

2. But there is also a special office of those who are set aside to sanctify, teach and guide the Church and thus continue the role of the Apostles in making Christ present throughout the ages. “The divine mission, which was committed by Christ to the Apostles, is destined to last until the end of the world (see Matt. 28:20), since the Gospel which they were obligated to hand on is the principle of all the church’s life for all time. . . . The bishops, therefore, with priests and deacons as helpers, took on themselves roles of service to the community, presiding in God’s place over the flock of which they are the pastors, as teachers of doctrine, priests for sacred worship and ministers of government.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 20.

C. Bishops, priests and deacons then carry out a specific role as ordained ministers to represent Christ in specific ways, for governance, prayer, teaching, and above all the sacraments. “In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ Himself who is present to His Church as Head of His Body, Shepherd or His flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth.” Catechism 1548.

II. “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, presbyterate, and diaconate.” Catechism 1536.

A. The bishops are the successors of the Apostles and receive the authority to sanctify, lead and teach the Church that Christ gave to them. “Jesus Christ, the eternal pastor, established the holy Church by sending the apostles as He Himself had been sent by the Father. (See John 20:21). He willed that their successors, the bishops, should be

shepherds of his Church until the end of the world.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 18. Jesus proclaimed some things to the public at large, but at other times, such as at the Last Supper and in the Upper Room after the Resurrection, He spoke specifically to the Apostles. For example, He explained the parables especially to the Apostles; and, in the Upper Room, He specifically gave the Apostles the authority to forgive sins. See, e.g., Mark 4:10-12; John 20:22-23. And at the Ascension, He said to the Apostles, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8.

1. In the early Church, the Apostles plainly led the Church, exercising their authority from Pentecost onward. See, e.g., Acts 2:14-41, 5:1-17, 10:34-48, 15:1-34, 16:4. Sensing the need for assistants, they appointed others to assist them, the beginning of the offices of diaconate and priesthood. See Acts 6. The Apostles would also appoint others, such as Saints Paul, Barnabas, Timothy and Titus to lead specific churches. Thus, “the divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in different degrees by those who even from ancient times have been called bishops, priests, and deacons.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 28.

2. From the beginning of the Church, “to fulfill their exalted mission, the apostles were endowed with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit coming upon them, and by the imposition of hands they passed on to their auxiliaries the gift of the Spirit, which is transmitted down to our day through episcopal consecration. . . . Episcopal consecration confers, together with the office of sanctifying, also the offices of teaching and ruling. In fact by the imposition of hands and through the words of consecration, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given, and a sacred character is impressed in such wise that the bishops, in an eminent and visible manner, take the place of Christ Himself, teacher, shepherd, and priest, and act as His representative.” Catechism 1556, 1558.

B. The Pope is the Bishop of Rome and the successor of Peter, the leader of the apostles. He is needed to preserve the unity and independence of the Church with his teaching and guidance. “In order that the episcopate itself, however, might, be one and undivided he placed blessed Peter over the others, and in him set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of unity both of the faith and communion.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 18. Jesus said to the apostle Simon, “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it.” Matt. 16:18. (In Aramaic, the word cephias means both Peter and rock.) At the Last Supper, He also spoke of Peter’s role in bringing his brother Apostles back. And then, after the Resurrection, He specifically commissioned Peter as shepherd. See Luke 22:31-32; John 21:1-19.

- As an historical matter, when Saint Peter died, the following Bishops of Rome, starting with Linus, Cletus and Clement, were respected as leading the whole Church. Thus, for example, when there was a dispute about a bishop in Corinth near the end of the first century, St. Clement, the Bishop of Rome, sent a letter clarifying the matter and giving general instructions for the life of faith and governance of the Church. And when the heresy of Gnosticism arose in the second century, St. Ireneus referred to the Church in Rome as always maintaining the true faith under her bishop. See Against Heresies, Book III, chapter 3 (2).

C. Priests are the assistants to the bishops and share in part of their authority to help bring the sanctifying, teaching, and guidance roles of the Apostles to a more local level.

1. “Because it is joined with the episcopal order the office of priests shares in the authority by which Christ Himself builds up, sanctifies and rules His Body.” Vatican II Council, Presbyterum Ordinis 2; Catechism of the Catholic Church 1563. “The function of the bishops’ ministry was handed over in a subordinate degree to priests so that they might be appointed in the order of the priesthood and be co-workers of the episcopal order for the proper fulfillment of the apostolic mission that had been entrusted to it by Christ.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1562.

2. At the high point of this authority is the ability to celebrate sacraments, beginning with the Mass. Through the other sacraments, priests also forgive sins, anoint the sick, baptize, witness marriages, teach and guide the people of God. In the eastern traditions of the Catholic Church, priests also confer the sacrament of Confirmation along with baptism; in the Latin tradition, priests have this authority to confer Confirmation in certain circumstances. By the nature of the sacrament itself, they cannot ordain other clerics; however, at ordination rites they still have an important symbolic and ceremonial role in welcoming the new cleric to their ranks.

D. Deacons are ordained to assist the bishops and priests, especially in the sacramental ministries and charitable works. “Strengthened by sacramental grace, they are dedicated to the people of God, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate, in the service of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity.” Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 29. “Deacons share in Christ’s mission and grace in a special way. The sacrament of Holy Orders marks them with an imprint (‘character’) which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made Himself a deacon or servant of all. Among other tasks, it is the task of deacons to assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries, above all the Eucharist, in the distribution of Holy Communion, in the assisting at and blessing marriages, in the proclamation of the Gospel and preaching, in presiding over funerals, and in dedicating themselves to the various ministries of charity.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1570.

- A deacon can either be transitional, that is in preparation for the priesthood, or permanent, that is, intending to continue as deacons until the end of his life. There have always been permanent deacons in the Eastern rites of the Church. From about the fifth century to the Vatican II Council, permanent deacons were rare in the West, with some notable exceptions, such as St. Francis of Assisi. The Vatican II Council restored the common use of permanent deacons in the Latin Rite, and said that married men could receive this consecration.

III. “This sacrament configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ’s instrument for His Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in His triple office of priest, prophet, and king.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1581. Because the recipients of Holy Orders are acting in the

person of Christ, they must be men and are preferably celibate. The former requirement is absolute from the sacrament itself. The latter quality has always been preferred and has been universally required in the West for bishops and priests for 900 years.

A. As the St. Pope John Paul II defined in Ordinatio Sacertalis (1995), it is a matter of infallible Church dogma that the episcopacy and priesthood are reserved to men alone, for the priests must be in imitation of Christ, and Christ's masculinity (like all men's masculinity and women's femininity) is at the essence of the person.

- It will not do to argue, as many have done, that Jesus did not appoint women as Apostles because it would contradict the social norms. Jesus was quite willing to cross social boundaries (e.g., by welcoming sinners, lepers, and the like) when He wished to. And, as the Holy Father argued, if Jesus had wanted women to be priests, surely His mother would have been the first candidate.

- Although it has never been specifically defined, it would seem that the same is true of deacons.

B. In addition, celibacy, that is refraining from marriage and, by extension, from all romantic attachment and conjugal relations, has always been preferred for the clergy; it is required in the general case for priests and deacons in the Latin rite. All bishops, and (with a few narrow exceptions for minister converts) all priests in the Latin rite are unmarried. Even a permanent deacon does not remarry if his wife dies. Likewise, in the eastern traditions of the Church, a cleric does not remarry if his wife dies.

1. There are several reasons for this requirement. First, the priest acts more like Christ who took the Church as His mystical spouse. See, e.g., Eph. 5:31-32; Rev. 21:2, 9-14. Second, the priest acts more like the saints in heaven, who are not married or given in marriage. See Mark 18:25. Third, the priest has a more mystical sense of prayer in union with the Church; in a similar fashion, the priests of the old covenant were required to refrain from conjugal relations for three days before ministering in the Temple. See 1 Kings 21:4-5; cf. 1 Cor. 7:5. Fourth, the priest can be more exclusively devoted to service in the Church. See 1 Cor. 7:32-35.

2. Therefore, "ordained ministers of the Latin Church, with the exception of permanent deacons, are normally chosen from among men of faith who live a celibate life and who intend to remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to the affairs of the Lord, they give themselves entirely to God and to men. Celibacy is a sign of this new life to the service of which the Church's minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God." Catechism 1579.

3. The Eastern rites of the Catholic Church usually permit married men to become priests, but even there, celibacy is the preferred status; and bishops must be unmarried. The Latin rite does sometimes allow, with special approval from the Pope, married ministers from another denomination to become Catholic priests for the sake of assisting them and their faithful to join the Church.

However, this narrow exception does not vitiate the general rule that a priest is fully consecrated in love for Holy Mother Church and is thus in general required to be celibate for the sake of this love.

- C. All priests and deacons also take a promise of obedience, either to the local bishop or the superior in a religious order.
 - 1. All priests and deacons are either diocesan or religious order clerics (or in the personal prelate of Opus Dei.) Some diocesan priests are members of institutes such as the Youth Apostles in the Arlington Diocese. A diocesan priest could also be a member of the third order of a religious order such as Dominicans, Franciscans or Carmelites.
 - 2. Diocesan priests are ordained for a diocese, and make a promise of obedience to the local bishop. Typically, their assignments would be in the diocese, and usually in parishes.
 - 3. Religious Order priests join the order, and usually a part of the order, such as a province (as with the Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits) or even a specific house, as with the Benedictine tradition. They would make a promise to the order and to their superiors in the order, who go by such titles as provincial or abbot. Religious order priests, like religious sisters, can either be contemplative (mostly in a monastery) or more active in the world. They are united together in the order and its spirituality. Specific assignments would come from that united purpose.