Sacrament of Holy Orders

- Holy Orders is the sacrament by which a man is permanently made a deacon, a priest, or a bishop.
- The primary sign is the Bishop laying hands upon the head of the person who is being ordained.
- Only bishops can ordain.
- Ordination is understood as a sacrament, a visible sign that includes a hidden reality. For example, in the Eucharist, bread is the visible sign and the hidden reality is that it is also Christ’s body.
- The visible sign in the sacrament of Holy Orders is the laying on of hands on the head of the candidate. The hidden reality is that through the sign the deacon, priest or bishop is made an effective representative of Jesus.
- The ministry of the priest can also be described by the Latin term, in persona Christi. He functions “in the person of Christ.” In other words, he is Christ’s representative on earth. When he is acting in persona Christi, that is, in the person of Jesus, it is Christ himself who is acting and who is present. Christ is present in his work, his ministry, and in his actions.
- Our liturgy documents tell us that Christ is present to us in four ways when we celebrate the Mass.
  1. Christ is present in the gathered community. Thus, we are to be open to his presence when the community gathers for Mass.
  2. Christ is present when the Scriptures are proclaimed; it is as though Christ himself were speaking to us.
  3. Christ is also preeminently present in the elements of bread and wine.
  4. Christ is present in the person of the priest.
- The priest is a visible sign of Christ’s presence to us; the hidden reality is Christ’s effective action and presence in his ministry.
- A priest who is committed to his vocation lives a righteous, faithful life and is committed to serving God’s people. His ministry is the greatest gift he could give to the people of God.

Why Is this Sacrament Called “Orders”?

- The word “order” in ancient times referred to a civil group, a governing body.
- There is an order of priests, an order of deacons, an order of catechumens, an order of virgins, an order of spouses, and an order of widows, among others (CCC, #1537).
- Entrance into one of these groups or orders is accomplished with a special rite.
- Those who are preparing for baptism as adults celebrate a rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens. As such they are blessed and enter into the order of catechumens—it is part of the sacrament of baptism they will receive.
- The sacrament of holy orders and the sacrament of marriage are called sacraments of service because those who celebrate them place themselves at the service of communion (CCC, #1533).
- They are directed toward the salvation of others. They contribute to the salvation of the individual in so far as the individuals reach out to others and build up the body of Christ.

What does “orders” mean?

- Ordination is the sacramental rite in which a man is incorporated into the order of bishops, or the order of presbyters (priests), or the order of deacons.
A community does not elect or delegate a person to become a priest but it does play a role in helping call forth the candidates.

The Holy Spirit gifts them with a sacred power that only comes from Christ.

Through ordination Jesus himself sets apart and consecrates a man for ministry in the Church. The priesthood continues the priesthood of Jesus. Jesus builds up the Church through the ministerial priesthood.

Ordination is conferred by the bishop who lays hands on the candidate and prays the prayer of consecration.

Just as water is the sign of baptism, the laying on of hands is the sign of ordination. The visible sign is the laying on of hands; the hidden reality is the Holy Spirit who permanently consecrates the man with a special, sacred power (character) for service to the Church.

Degrees of priesthood

The catechism says that there are “two participations in the one priesthood of Christ” (#1546). These are the baptismal priesthood that all the faithful exercise (#1546), and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests (#1547); there are two degrees of “ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ”: episcopacy and presbyterate (#1554). Both these forms of priesthood—baptismal and ministerial—participate in the one priesthood of Christ.

There are three degrees of holy orders: bishops, priests, and deacons.

- Bishop:
  - The highest office is bishop.
  - The office of bishop can be traced back to the apostles in an unbroken line of succession.
  - It is entrusted to the bishops to hand down the teaching of Jesus’ Apostles.

- Priests
  - Priests are coworkers of the bishop.
  - Priests and bishops are conferred with a special character that joins them to the priesthood of Christ.
  - Priests are ordained to:
    - preach the gospel;
    - celebrate the sacraments;
    - shepherd the flock;
    - lead a community of believers.
  - Priests most fully act in the person of Christ when they preside at the Eucharist.
  - Priests are to obey the bishop and serve under his authority.

The college of bishops (all the bishops speaking together) makes the mission of the twelve Apostles present to us today.

- Priests and bishops are ordained to a celibate life.
  - They are consecrated to God alone.
  - In the Eastern Church, married men can be ordained. However, if they become single they cannot marry again.
• Deacons
  o The sacred character (sacred gift) given to deacons empowers them to serve the Church, the people of God.
  o “Strengthened by sacramental grace [deacons] are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service (diakonia) of the liturgy, of the Gospel, and of works of charity” (CCC, #1588).
  o Transitional Deacons are unmarried men who are preparing for priestly ordination. Permanent Deacons can be married men. If a married deacon wife dies, he may not remarry; an unmarried permanent deacon may not marry after he is ordained.

Some things to consider about priesthood
• If the priest acts in persona Christi, does that mean the priest is perfect and cannot sin? If he acts in the person of Christ doesn’t that mean he is perfect since Christ was perfect?
  o No. Priests are sinners just like the rest of us. Sacraments make us holy. However, the sacrament of holy orders does not keep a deacon, priest or bishop from committing sins any more than our participation in the sacraments prevents us from sinning.
  o It is important to remember that sacraments are not magic. We are given God’s grace and God’s strength in the sacraments.
  o Sacraments should help us avoid sin, but we must be open to that help. We must prayerfully seek it; we must be conscious of it.
  o Thus, priests should be able to draw from the strength of the sacrament they received just as married couples should be able to draw strength from the grace of the sacrament of marriage to help them stay faithful to their marriage covenant.
  o Because we are sinners, however, we are not always open to receiving and cooperating with that grace. As with all sacraments, it requires a willingness on our part to cooperate with the grace of the sacrament.
  o When a priest truly acts in the manner of Christ, when he is engaged in his mission and promoting the kingdom, when the priest celebrates the sacraments, regardless of whether he has committed serious sin or not, the sacrament is valid. Why? Because what takes place in the sacraments is the action of Christ. It is not dependent on the holiness of the priest. It is Jesus’ work through the work of the priest.
  o It is important to say that Christ is the principal actor of the sacraments. Thus sacraments are effective even when performed by an unworthy minister. St. Thomas Aquinas reminded us that Christ might act even through a minister who is spiritually dead.