

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HOLY ORDERS

(Catechism nn. 1533-1600)

Deacons & Bishops

The five sacraments that we have reflected on to this point are for every member of the Church. The Catechism (n. 1536-1600) now looks at the Sacrament of Holy Orders. In n. 1554 it quotes from the Constitution on the Church from the Second Vatican Council (LG 28):

‘Christ, through his apostles, made their successors, the bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission; and these in their turn entrusted members of the Church in varying degrees with the office of ministry. Thus the divinely instituted office of ministry is exercised in different degrees by those who, from ancient times, have been called bishops, priests and deacons.’

Deacons

The Catechism focuses first on bishops (n. 1555-1561), then on priests (presbyters, 1562-1568), and then on deacons (n. 1569-1571). We begin with a brief reflection on the ministry of deacons. The Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (LG 29) has this to say:

‘Strengthened by the sacramental grace [received by the laying on of hands], deacons are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity. It pertains to the office of a deacon ... to administer Baptism solemnly, to be custodian and distributor of the Eucharist, in the name of the Church, to assist at and to bless marriages, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the sacred scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful ... and to officiate at funeral and burial services.’

The Catechism repeats this teaching, noting that deacons exercise their ministry in ‘the liturgical and pastoral life of the Church’, and ‘in its social and charitable works’ (Catechism n. 1571). Deacons receive the ministry of service, not the ministry of ordained priesthood. Their service is a consecrated way of living their baptismal priesthood. They are consecrated in a permanent sacramental communion with Jesus in carrying on their ministry, which flows out of this special sacramental consecration. Celibacy is not required of men ordained as deacons.

Bishops

Bishops and priests have the ministry of ordained priesthood. Special to the bishop is the level of his teaching authority and organisational leadership. The Vatican Council Decree, *Christus Dominus*, on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, states that bishops are

‘united in one college or body for the instruction and direction of the universal Church (n.3).

Priests and deacons are dependent on bishops in the exercise of their ministry (CD n.15). Perhaps we need reminding that ‘the bishops should not be thought of as vicars of the Pope’ (Catechism n. 895), as though the Pope was a kind of general manager and the bishops regional managers. The Catechism states:

‘The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular churches’ (n. 886, quoting LG 23).

‘As Christ’s vicar, each bishop has the pastoral care of the particular church entrusted to him, but at the same time he bears collegially with all his brothers in the episcopacy the solicitude for all the churches’ (Catechism n. 1560).

The Ministry and Life of Ordained Priests

In the Jewish cult, priests exercised their ministry from within the sanctuary. From God’s presence they mediated to the people God’s Law (the Torah), God’s will, God’s blessing, and God’s forgiveness. They mediated back to God the people’s response of sacrifice (‘self-offering’) and prayer. Priesthood is essentially about mediation.

The Letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that the ministry of priests is brought to its perfect fulfilment in Jesus, and that now there is only one priest, Jesus himself. Paul writes to Timothy (1Timothy 2:5; see Catechism n. 1544):

‘There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and mankind, Christ Jesus, himself a man.’

Jesus’ priesthood is not the priesthood exercised by the Levitical priests of the Older Testament. That priesthood was not carried over into Christianity. His is the priesthood exercised by the king, the priesthood referred to in Psalm 110 where the king is proclaimed ‘a priest according to the order of Melchizedek’ (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5:6). As a priest the king was commissioned to make the whole world holy by making it possible for everyone to live in communion with the Holy One. This Jesus did through the offering of himself.

When reflecting on Baptism, we noted that each of the baptised shares in Jesus’ life and mission and so in his priesthood. In his First Letter (see Catechism n. 1546), Peter writes:

‘Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1Peter 2:5).

He then quotes Exodus 19:6:

‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1Peter 2:9).

The Church exercises the priestly mediation of Christ by being a sanctuary of God’s presence in the world; by faithfully carrying out Christ’s mission of revealing God to the world; and by compassionately drawing the world into communion with God, sanctifying/consecrating the world. Christians participate in the priestly mediation of Christ in various ways, as Saint Paul makes clear in his First Letter to the Corinthians (12:4-7):

‘There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord;
there are varieties of ways of exercising power, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ (1Corinthians 12:4-7).

Organisational leadership

Each member of the Church has a special gift from the Spirit of love that unites Jesus with God. This gift enables each one to carry out his/her part in the priestly mission of Christ (the ‘Lord’), and the mission is guaranteed (provided we are faithful), because it is empowered by God.

One way of exercising baptismal priesthood is through the ministerial priesthood into which bishops and priests are ordained. Quoting from the Vatican Council (LG 10), the Catechism (n. 1547) states:

‘Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless ordered one to another. Each in its own way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.’

In view of the variety of charisms and priestly ministries in the community, I am not sure how helpful it is to lump all non-ordained priestly ministries into one category called ‘common’. However, the key point for our present reflection is that the priesthood of the ordained (priests and bishops) is related to baptismal priesthood.

Having set the context, let us look more closely at the ministerial, ordained priesthood. The leadership exercised by the ordained priest is a leadership of order: organisational leadership, carrying with it the responsibility for unifying and coordinating the various gifts, ministries and power of the members of the community for the better functioning of the Body, and ensuring that the various ministries are exercised in such a way as to be faithful to Christ’s will as expressed through the apostles and the prophets, for the continuing of Christ’s mission to the world.

The organisational leadership of the priest (‘presbyter’) derived from Jewish synagogue practice in which the local community was under the leadership of a group of older men, the presbyters. Though the English word ‘priest’ derives from the word ‘presbyter’, the Jewish presbyter (Hebrew: *zâkên*; Greek: *presbyteros*; Latin *presbyter*) was not a priest (Hebrew: *kohên*; Greek: *hiereus*; Latin: *sacerdos*). By the third century, however, Christian presbyters, as well as the overseers (Greek: *episkopoi*, ‘bishops’) of the community, were being referred to as priests. The community recognized that they had a special role in carrying out the mediatory (‘priestly’) ministry of Christ the King (‘Leader’, ‘Head’).

The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests writes (PO 3):

‘The priests of the New Testament are, by their vocation to ordination, set apart in some way in the midst of the People of God. But this is not so that they should be separated from the people or from anyone, but that they should be completely consecrated for the task for which God chooses them. They could not be the servants of Christ unless they were witnesses and dispensers of a life other than that of this earth. Yet they would be powerless to serve others if they were to remain aloof from their life and circumstances.

Their ministry makes a special claim on them not to conform themselves to this world. At the same time it requires of them that they should live among people in this world and that as good shepherds they should know their sheep, and should also seek to lead back those who do not belong to this fold so that they, too, may hear the voice of Christ and there may be one fold and one shepherd.’

The Letter to the Hebrews (2:17-18) says that Jesus

‘had to become in all things like his brothers and sisters so that he might be a compassionate and faithful/trustworthy high priest for the things of God.’

‘Compassionate’ so that people would find him approachable, knowing that he felt for them in their need. ‘Faithful’ so that people would know that his ministry brought them into contact with God.

Ordained Priests are ‘set aside’ only in the sense that they are to live a life of special holiness (the priest ministers from the sanctuary), for a special mission within the Church and world. They are ‘set apart and invested by Christ himself for his Church’ (Catechism n. 1538).

Ordained Priests are Consecrated to Christ

By virtue of his ordination, the priest is in a special sacramental consecration to Christ:

‘Through the sacrament presbyters, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head’ (PO 2; Catechism n. 1548).

Pope John-Paul II expresses this intimate connection between the ordained priest and Christ, the Head of the Church, when, in his encyclical *That they may be One*, he writes (n. 15):

‘Priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd.’

For the community, the ordained priest is a sacramental representation (a ‘symbol’, an ‘icon’) of Jesus. The ordained priest is called to live a holy life in God’s presence (in the ‘sanctuary’). Only from within the sanctuary, from within this sacred communion, can a priest mediate. He is to be faithful/trustworthy, witnessing that it is indeed God’s word that he is mediating to the community. He is to be compassionate, witnessing that he is indeed in communion with the people whose self-offering he is mediating to God.

The consecration is such that it cannot be taken away, and it cannot be repeated (see Catechism n. 1582), though, for a variety of reasons, a priest may not be able to exercise the ministry for which he was ordained.

Women priests

Also, following Jewish practice, Christian priestly leadership was restricted to males. The place of women in the public life of the community has changed dramatically in recent centuries, and there are those today who would like to see ordained priesthood open to women. As is clear from a reading of the Catechism n. 1577, the teaching of Pope John-Paul II and of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is that only males can be ordained priests.

In an article entitled ‘*Bringing life to Faith and faith to life: for a shared Christian praxis approach and against a detractor*’ (see *Compass* volume 40 2006), Thomas Groome, after defending himself on a number of issues writes the following:

‘The only accurate charge that Mr Keane makes against me is that I have long favoured the ordination of women in the Catholic Church. Mr Keane claims that the prohibition against ordaining women is an infallible aspect of Catholic faith, whereas I claim that this has not been taught infallibly. Here I’m in company with many respected theologians, of left, right and centre; I’m also confident that it never will be so taught. It is true that the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) stated in its Responsum ad Dubium of October 28, 1995, signed by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women” and that this is “to be held definitively” and “as belonging to the deposit of faith”. But the CDF cannot teach infallibly on its own authority and its claim that Pope John Paul II in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* merely confirmed teaching already taught infallibly by the bishops of the world has been challenged by many respected and faithful theologians. In this light, Canon 749§3 makes a very important statement: “no doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such.” The Church’s teaching that women should not be ordained does not meet this criterion for infallibility. This heartens me to continue to respectfully call for reconsideration of the Church’s present position ... Should the Church ever explicitly state its opposition to women’s ordination as infallible, and the conditions for infallibility are fulfilled, then I will submit to its teaching, precisely because I accept and respect the Church’s teaching magisterium.’

The Ministry of the Ordained Priest

Let us pause here to reflect upon what some modern writers say about the ordained priesthood. We begin with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who speaks of priests as ‘bearers of the mystery’ and ‘doctors of the soul’:

‘We are not dispensable “functionaries” in the church; we are bridges to the very mystery of God and healers of the soul. When we claim this identity unapologetically, we not only find ourselves; we also provide the church and our culture with the sustenance they require. This is the vocation, the reality, to which we are called. It is not dependent on numbers, or structures, or chancery offices, or any of the things we thought so essential, so important, but are now completely changed or are no more. Rather, it is dependent on the Lord Jesus, who never changes, and to whom we are irrevocably united through ordination – the Lord Jesus (who is the mystery of God and the healer of the soul) whom we make present in a tangible and inviting way each day to the countless people whom we serve. To him be honour and glory, now and always.’

John Thornhill, an Australian Marist theologian, writes:

‘The church’s institutional structures exist to promote what is paramount in the church’s life: helping people find a life-giving relationship with God. Pastors who make this their overriding priority, consciously directing the pastoral guidance they exercise within their communities to this end, and sharing the truth of their own faith journey with their people, will find that their people respond positively.’

Pastors, on the other hand, whose vision is little more than administering a well-disciplined system, will find that their well-intentioned efforts often meet with dissatisfaction – as their people instinctively recognise that, before all else, membership of the church should develop their life-giving relationship with God.’

John O’Donohue, an Irish theologian, states that

‘One of the great joys of priesthood is to be a spiritual midwife, that is, to help a person give birth to the divine that stirs within.’

Karl Rahner, the great German Jesuit theologian, writes:

‘The priest can bring life to the preaching of the Gospel only if (as well as and as far as it is granted to him) he is a mystagogue of that ultimate, internal, religious experience of God and his grace, without which no one can in the long run resist the pressure of his secularised environment and remain a Christian. Without this the pastor will be little more than a cultic and ecclesiastical official celebrating no longer credible ceremonies. The ability to pray ought not to be seen as a sectoral occupation in his life but as a basic structure of his existence, since he is the very one who ought always to accept, as dependent on it, the presence of the absolute mystery facing everyone, and truly to live it in freedom. The priest today is primarily the servant of the faith of others.’

Once again, John Thornhill:

‘Our ministry will be fruitful, if we sincerely offer the service of which we are capable. As we have already remarked, those pastors who effectively foster the faith, hope and love which constitutes the essential covenant-relationship between God and the church, and who help their people find God in the reality of their lives, are accepted by their people as effective spiritual leaders, whatever limitations they may have in their own talents.’

The Catechism (n. 1589) quotes Saint Gregory Nazianzus (died 389):

‘We must begin by purifying ourselves before purifying others. We must be instructed to be able to instruct, become light to illuminate, draw close to God to bring Him close to others, be sanctified to sanctify, lead by the hand and counsel prudently.’

The Catechism (n. 1589) also quotes Saint John Vianney, the Curé (parish priest) of Ars:

‘The priest continues the work of redemption on earth ... If we really understood the priest on earth we would die not of fright but of love ... The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.’

The Priest and Celibate Love

We should pause here to look at the kind of loving asked of those ordained to the priesthood in the Catholic Church. The priest is a sacrament of Christ the head. From the beginning there have been those ordained into leadership in the community who have aspired to love in the way Jesus loved: as celibates. For many centuries bishops have been instructed to select priests only from among those who have given evidence that they can love in a mature way as celibates.

Priestly Celibacy

This has not always been a requirement, and many would like to see it as optional, arguing that it is dangerous to make a Spirit-given charism into a legal requirement. The local Church needs good leaders, and these may or may not have the charism of celibacy. At the same time, though some priests have failed to live celibacy well, there is plenty of experience to support the fact that celibate loving is fitting for ordained priests.

An important caution is offered here by the science of psychology. Mature persons are generative. That is, they are able to spend their life in creative communion that is life-giving both to themselves and to those to whom they relate. To be generative, a person must have experienced intimacy: the kind of loving and being loved which is experienced as being the fruit of being deeply known and accepted by another whom we intimately know and accept. To be truly intimate one must have a sense of one's personal identity: a sense of self that is experienced as being affirmed by another who is significant to us. A so-called celibacy that avoids these stages of maturing will never become generative, and so will never become a way of loving.

We need to heed also the following warning from Henri Nouwen (*In the Name of Jesus*, page 60):

‘The temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead.’

Earlier in the same book (page 32) he writes:

‘When we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative.’

In view of the present discipline on the Church, which requires celibacy of priests, we should pause here to reflect upon the nature of celibate love, particularly as it applies to the life and ministry of priests. The central love of Jesus' life was his loving communion with God. His choice not to marry and have a family led his opponents to make fun of him, accusing him of being a 'eunuch'. His response was that he made this choice 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:12). And he invited those who had enough space in their hearts to take up the same challenge. His celibate love cast into sharp relief the mystery of his communion with God. It also gave a special power to his witness of God's special, personal and unconditional commitment to each person.

As disciples of Jesus each of us is invited to let Jesus love through us. From the beginning, Jesus invited some to love, like him, in a celibate way. They gave up the intimacy of having a sexual partner and a family of their own, not, in the words of the English priest, Tony Philpot, to live 'a grim resentful bachelorhood with lots of built-in compensations', but to be in the community a sacrament of the total and undivided dedication of Christ in love to the Christian community and to each member of the community without distinction.

In 1999 the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy issued a document entitled *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium*. On page 54 we read:

‘The call to become, like Jesus, a ‘Hostia’ [someone offered in sacrifice to God] underlies the compatibility of the commitment to celibacy with the priestly ministry in the Church. It implies the incorporation of the priest in the sacrifice with which “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her so as to make her holy”(Ephesians 5:25-26). The priest is called to be “a living image of Jesus Christ, Spouse of the Church”(John-Paul II *I will give you shepherds* n.22) and to make his entire life an offering for her. “Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self in and with Christ to his Church and expresses the priest’s service in and with the Lord”(ib. n.29).

The basic reason for aspiring to a love that is celibate, then, is that Jesus loved in a celibate way. The decree on the priesthood from the Second Vatican Council (PO 16) declares:

‘Priests have freely accepted consecrated celibacy after the example of Christ.’

Pope Paul VI, in his *Priestly Celibacy* (n.23) wrote:

‘Priests want to share with Jesus his manner of living.’

When a celibate is truly a sacrament to others of Christ’s love, this highlights for them how special they are, for they experience being loved for themselves, free of any desire to possess. In a speech to seminarians (1959), Pope John XXIII said:

‘Purity of heart is an atmosphere of serenity ... an indispensable condition for disinterested service of one’s neighbour in the sacerdotal ministry. It is purity of heart that prepares one for the incomparable joys of long colloquies at the foot of the altar, which feeds fervent thoughts of apostolic charity, which breathes unbroken serenity ... It attracts souls by the very charm of Jesus Christ.’

The Jesuit archeologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in a paper entitled *The Evolution of Chastity* (1934) wrote:

‘Chastity is often presented to us as a fragile crystal, which will shatter unless it is protected from every shock and from the light. Rather, it is more like a flame that devours everything as it burns.’

The Priest and Ministry

Since loving is at the heart of every ministry and every sacrament in the Church, we have focused on the special kind of loving asked of ordained priests. We move now to look more closely at their ministry. Vatican II writes (PO n. 1):

‘Through the sacred ordination and mission that they receive from the bishops, priests are promoted to the service of Christ the teacher, priest and king.’

The ministry of the ordained priest is one of the ministries of leadership in the Christian community. His leadership is of the community as such, being a sacrament of Christ the Head to his Body. It is a ministry of teaching, of divine worship and of governance (see Catechism n. 1592). It is a ministry of mediating the word of Christ to the community as such. Other baptised persons mediate Christ’s word, one to another, but not as Christ the Head to the Body.

Mediating God's Word

It is a ministry of mediating Christ's governing of the community as such, with a view to the unity of its life and mission. Other baptised persons share in some form of Christ's leadership, but not as Christ the Head to the Body. It is a ministry of mediating the self-offering of the community as such to God. Other baptised persons mediate people's self-offering to God, but not that of the Body itself.

Mediating God's Word to the Community

An ordained priest, because he shares in the priesthood of Christ is called to be a sacrament of Christ's priestly mediation of God's word:

'The carrying out of the priest's ministry begins with the announcement of the gospel' (PO 2).

'Since no one can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of the priest to preach the gospel of God to all' (PO 4).

'The pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates' (Catechism n. 890).

Mediating God's will to the Community

An ordained priest because he shares in the priesthood of Christ is called to be a sacrament of Christ's priestly mediation of God's will. The priest is graced to lead, direct, govern and shepherd the people:

'The bishops have the ministry of discernment and harmony, which involves an abundance of special gifts of the Holy Spirit and the distinctive charisms of ordering the various roles in intimate docility of mind to the one and only life-giving Spirit' (*Mutual Relations between bishops and religious* 1978).

'In what is doubtful, freedom; in what is necessary, unity; in all things, charity' (John-Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance* 1984 n.9)

'The sacrament of Orders is intended to give to the Church the pastors who, besides being teachers and guides, are called to be witnesses and workers for unity, builders of the family of God, and builders and preservers of the communion of this family against the sources of division and dispersion' (John-Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance* 1984 n.27).

'Those who have charge over the Church should judge the genuineness and the proper use of the gifts through their office, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and to hold fast to what is good' (Vatican II LG 12).

'They are to be dedicated to promoting the interests of their brothers and sisters, so that all who belong to the People of God, through their free and well-ordered efforts towards a common goal, may attain to salvation' (Vatican II LG 18).

'The pastor's task extends to the formation of a genuine Christian community' (Vatican II PO 6).

‘While testing the spirits if they be of God, they must discover with faith, recognise with joy and foster with diligence the many and varied charismatic gifts of the people ... bringing about agreement among divergent outlooks in such a way that nobody feels a stranger in the Christian community’ (Vatican II PO 9).

Mediating the Community's self-offering to God

An ordained priest, because he shares in the priesthood of Christ is called to be a sacrament of Christ's priestly mediation drawing the community into communion with God. He is called, therefore, to live a life of self-offering ('sacrifice') and to encourage the same in the community.

‘Acting in the person of Christ, the priest unites himself most intimately with Christ's offering, placing on the altar his entire life, which bears the marks of a holocaust’ (Paul VI *Priestly Celibacy* 1967 n. 29).

‘The ministry of ordained priests is directed to the Eucharist and finds its consummation in it. For their ministration, which begins with the announcement of the Gospel, draws its force and power from the sacrifice of Christ and tends to this’ (Vatican II PO n. 2).

‘From this unique sacrifice the whole of the priestly ministry draws its strength’ (Catechism n. 1566).

‘Pastoral charity flows especially from the Eucharistic sacrifice. This sacrifice is therefore the centre and root of the whole life of the ordained priest, so that the priestly soul strives to make its own what is enacted on the altar of sacrifice’ (Vatican II PO n. 14).

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *I will give you shepherds* (n. 15), Pope John-Paul II writes:

‘In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ the head and shepherd: authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and offer of salvation, particularly in Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock, which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit.’

We conclude our reflections with the following words from Paul to Timothy:

‘I, Paul, remind you, Timothy, to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power, love and control of self’ (2Timothy 1:6).

‘Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of presbyters laid their hands upon you’ (1Timothy 4:14).

