

Ten After Ten Session 77: The Sacrament of Holy Orders

1536 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.

1537 The word **order** in Roman antiquity designated an established civil body, especially a governing body. *Ordinatio* means incorporation into an ordo...And so the liturgy speaks of the *ordo episcoporum*, the *ordo presbyterorum*, the *ordo diaconorum*.

1538 Today the word “ordination” is reserved for the sacramental act which integrates a man into the order of bishops, presbyters, or deacons,...it confers a gift of the Holy Spirit that permits the exercise of a “sacred power” (*sacra potestas*) which can come only from Christ himself through his Church. Ordination is also called *consecratio*, for it is a setting apart and an investiture by Christ himself for his Church. The laying on of hands by the bishop, with the consecratory prayer, constitutes the visible sign of this ordination.

1539 The chosen people was constituted by God as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” But within the people of Israel, God chose one of the twelve tribes, that of Levi, and set it apart for liturgical service; God himself is its inheritance. 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.”

1540 Instituted to proclaim the Word of God and to restore communion with God by sacrifices and prayer, 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.

1541 The liturgy of the Church, however, sees in the priesthood of Aaron and the service of the Levites, as in the institution of the seventy elders, a prefiguring of the ordained ministry of the New Covenant.

1544 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”; “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.

1545 The redemptive sacrifice of Christ is unique, accomplished once for all; yet it is made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Church. The same is true of the one priesthood of Christ; it is made present through the ministerial priesthood without diminishing the uniqueness of Christ’s priesthood: “Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers.”

1546 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."

1547 While 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—the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. 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.

1548 In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi Capitis*.

1549 Through the ordained ministry, especially that of bishops and priests, the presence of Christ as head of the Church is made visible in the midst of the community of believers.

1550 This presence of Christ in the minister is not to be understood as if the latter were preserved from all human weaknesses, the spirit of domination, error, even sin. The power of the Holy Spirit does not guarantee all acts of ministers in the same way. While this guarantee extends to the sacraments, so that even the minister's sin cannot impede the fruit of grace, in many other acts the minister leaves human traces that are not always signs of fidelity to the Gospel and consequently can harm the apostolic fruitfulness of the Church.

1551 The sacrament of Holy Orders communicates a "sacred power" which is none other than that of Christ. The exercise of this authority must therefore be measured against the model of Christ, who by love made himself the least and the servant of all. The Lord said clearly that concern for his flock was proof of love for him.

1552 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.

1553 The whole Church, the Body of Christ, prays and offers herself "through him, with him, in him," in the unity of the Holy Spirit, to God the Father. The whole Body, *caput et membra*, prays and offers itself, and therefore those who in the Body are especially his ministers are called ministers not only of Christ, but also of the Church. It is because the ministerial priesthood represents Christ that it can represent the Church.