

# Questions about the Priesthood

"The priesthood leads one to serve God in a state which, in itself, is no better or worse than any other: it is simply different. But the priestly vocation is invested with a dignity and greatness which has no equal on earth" ('In Love with the Church', 38).

06/10/2021

## Summary

1. What is the priesthood's place in the Church?

2. Who were the priests of the Old Testament?

3. What is the difference between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood?

4. What is the sacrament of Holy Orders?

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**1. What is the priesthood's place in the Church?**

The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the people of God. Therefore, since they have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office in their own manner, they are called to

exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one.

In virtue of their rebirth in Christ there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality with regard to dignity and the activity whereby all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ in accord with each one's own condition and function.

The differences which the Lord has wanted among the members of his Body serve its unity and mission. For in the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity too share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the

world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God.

No one—no individual and no community—can proclaim the Gospel to himself: "Faith comes from what is heard" (*Rom 10:17*). No one can give himself the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel. The one sent by the Lord does not speak and act on his own authority, but by virtue of Christ's authority; not as a member of the community, but speaking to it in the name of Christ. No one can bestow grace on himself; it must be given and offered. This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorized and empowered by Christ. From him, they receive the mission and faculty ("the sacred power") to act *in persona Christi Capitis*. The ministry in which Christ's emissaries do and give by God's grace what they cannot do and give by their own powers, is called a "sacrament" by the Church's

tradition. Indeed, the ministry of the Church is conferred by a special sacrament. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 871-875)

## Meditate with Saint Josemaría

- I have been thinking of all the priests throughout the world. Help me to pray for the fruitfulness of their apostolates.  
—"My brother in the priesthood, please speak always about God and, when you really do belong to him, your conversations will never be monotonous." (*The Forge*, 965)
- The priest is not a psychologist or a sociologist or an anthropologist. He is another Christ, Christ himself, who has to look after the souls of his brothers. (*Christ is passing By*, 79)
- In a word: they ask the priest to learn how not to hamper the

presence of Christ in him, especially in those moments when he is offering the Sacrifice of the Body and Blood and when, in God's name, he forgives sins in secret, private sacramental confession. The administration of these two sacraments has so important a part in the priest's mission that everything should hinge on it. (*In Love with the Church*, 43)

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## **2. Who were the priests of the Old Testament?**

The chosen people was constituted by God as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*Ex 19:6*). But within the people of Israel, God chose one of the twelve tribes, that of Levi, and set it apart for liturgical service. 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.

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.

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.

Everything that the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured finds its fulfillment in Christ Jesus, the "one mediator between God and men" (1

*Tim 2:5).* The Christian tradition considers Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High," as a prefiguring of the priesthood of Christ, the unique "high priest after the order of Melchizedek;" "holy, blameless, unstained" (*Heb 7:26*), "by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (*Heb 10:17*), that is, by the unique sacrifice of the Cross.

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." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1539-1545)

## Meditate with Saint Josemaría

- A Priest — whoever he may be — is always another Christ. (*The Way*, 66)
- Pray for the priests of today, and for those who are to come, that they may really love their fellow men, every day more and without distinction, and that they may know also how to make themselves loved by them. (*The Forge*, 964)

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### 3. What is the difference between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood?

There are two ways to participate in the one priesthood of Christ.

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.

The ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests, and the common priesthood of all the faithful participate, each in its own proper way, in the one priesthood of Christ. While being ordered one to another, they differ essentially.

In what sense? While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace (in 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 to 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.

This priesthood is ministerial. "That office [...] which the Lord committed to the pastors of his people, is in the strict sense of the term a service." It is entirely related to Christ and to men. It depends entirely on Christ and on his unique priesthood; it has been instituted for the good of men and the communion of the Church.

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." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1546-1553)

## Meditate with Saint Josemaria

- To be a Christian, and in particular to be a priest — bearing in mind, too, that all of

us who are baptized share in Christ's priesthood — is to be at all times on the Cross. (*The Forge*, 882)

- In the sacrament of holy orders our Father God has made it possible for some members of the faithful, by virtue of a further and ineffable communication of the Holy Spirit, to receive an indelible character on their soul which configures them to Christ the priest so that they can act in the name of Jesus Christ, head of his mystical body. By virtue of this ministerial priesthood—which differs essentially and not only in degree from the common priesthood of the faithful—the sacred ministers can consecrate the body and blood of Christ, offering God the holy sacrifice. They can pardon sins in sacramental confession and carry out the ministry of

teaching the peoples "about everything that refers to God"—and nothing more. A priest should be exclusively a man of God. He should reject any desire to shine in areas where other Christians do not need him. (*Christ is Passing By*, 79)

- A priest is no more a man or a Christian than any ordinary lay person. That is why it is so important for a priest to be deeply humble. He must understand that these words of Saint Paul also apply to him in a special way: What have you that you did not receive? What he has received... is God! He has received the power to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Mass (the principal purpose of priestly ordination), to forgive sins, to administer the other sacraments and to preach with authority the Word of God, governing the rest of the

faithful in those matters which refer to the Kingdom of Heaven.  
(*In Love with the Church*, 40)

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#### **4. What is the sacrament of Holy Orders?**

The essential rite of the sacrament of Holy Orders for all three degrees (bishop, priest, and deacon) consists in the bishop's imposition of hands on the head of the ordinand and in the bishop's specific consecratory prayer asking God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.

Since the sacrament of Holy Orders is the sacrament of the apostolic ministry, it is for the bishops as the successors of the apostles to hand on the gift of the Spirit, the apostolic line. Validly ordained bishops, i.e.,

those who are in the line of apostolic succession, validly confer the three degrees of the sacrament of Holy Orders

Only a baptized man validly receives sacred ordination. The Lord Jesus chose men to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry. The college of bishops, with whom the priests are united in the priesthood, makes the college of the twelve an ever-present and ever-active reality until Christ's return. The Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible.

No one has a right to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed no one claims this office for himself; he is called to it by God. Anyone who thinks he recognizes the signs of

God's call to the ordained ministry must humbly submit his desire to the authority of the Church, who has the responsibility and right to call someone to receive orders. Like every grace this sacrament can be received only as an unmerited gift.

All the 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.

In the Eastern Churches a different discipline has been in force for many centuries: while bishops are chosen solely from among celibates, married men can be ordained as deacons and priests. This practice has long been considered legitimate; these priests exercise a fruitful ministry within their communities. Moreover, priestly celibacy is held in great honor in the Eastern Churches and many priests have freely chosen it for the sake of the Kingdom of God. In the East as in the West a man who has already received the sacrament of Holy Orders can no longer marry.

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.

As in the case of Baptism and Confirmation, this share in Christ's office is granted once for all. The sacrament of Holy Orders, like the other two, confers an indelible spiritual character and cannot be repeated or conferred temporarily.

It is true that someone validly ordained can, for a just reason, be discharged from the obligations and functions linked to ordination, or can be forbidden to exercise them; but he cannot become a layman again in the strict sense, because the character imprinted by ordination is forever. The vocation and mission received on the day of his ordination mark him permanently.

Since it is ultimately Christ who acts and carries out salvation through the ordained minister, the unworthiness of the latter does not prevent Christ from acting. (Catechism of the

Catholic Church, nos. 1573, 1576,  
1577-1580, 1581-1584)

## Meditate with Saint Josemaria

- The sacrament of Orders, in effect, equips the priest to lend Our Lord his voice, his hands, his whole being. It is Jesus Christ who, in the Holy Mass, through the words of the consecration, changes the substance of the bread and wine into his Body, Soul, Blood and Divinity.
- This is the source of the priest's incomparable dignity. It is a greatness which is on loan: it is completely compatible with my own littleness. I pray to God our Lord to give all of us priests the grace to perform holy things in a holy way, to reflect in every aspect of our lives the wonders of the greatness of God. Those of us who celebrate the

mysteries of the Passion of Our Lord must imitate what we perform. And then the host will take our place before God because we render ourselves hosts.

- If you ever come across a priest who apparently does not seem to be following the teaching of the Gospel — do not judge him, let God judge him — bear in mind that if he celebrates Mass validly, with the intention of consecrating, Our Lord will still come down into his hands, however unworthy they are. Where could you find greater self-surrender and annihilation? Here it is greater than in Bethlehem or on Calvary. Why? Because Jesus' heart, filled with a desire to redeem, does not want anyone to be able to say that he has not been called. He goes out to meet

those who do not seek Him. (*In Love with the Church*, 39)

- In the priest, they [Christians] want to find in the priest those virtues proper to every Christian and, indeed, every honourable man: understanding, justice, a life of work — priestly work, in this instance — and good manners.
- But the faithful also want to be able to recognise clearly the priestly character: they expect the priest to pray, not to refuse to administer the sacraments; they expect him to be open to everyone and not set himself up to take charge of people or become an aggressive leader of human factions, of whatever shade. They expect him to bring love and devotion to the celebration of the Holy Mass, to sit in the confessional, to console the sick and the troubled; to teach sound

doctrine to children and adults, to preach the Word of God and no mere human science which — no matter how well he may know it — is not the knowledge that saves and brings eternal life; they expect him to give counsel and be charitable to those in need. (*In Love with the Church*, 42)

- The Church needs priests, and always will. Ask the Blessed Trinity for them each day, through Holy Mary. —And pray that they may be cheerful, hard —working, effective; that they may be well trained: and that they may sacrifice themselves joyfully for their brothers, without feeling that they are victims. (*The Forge*, 910)

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