

Journey of Faith



In Short:



- Holy orders has three distinct levels.
- Holy orders is rooted in Scripture and the early Church.
- Holy orders is the first step of the ordained priesthood.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders

As the early Church began to grow, the apostles were in need of assistants, so they chose men “filled with the Spirit and wisdom” to help them minister to the people. Among these first deacons was a man named Stephen. Many people “came forward and debated with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke.” So these men began to plot against him, and Deacon Stephen was stoned to death for refusing to stop preaching the word of God (Acts 6:1–15).

A prisoner had escaped from a World War II concentration camp in Auschwitz. In retaliation, the Nazi commandant chose ten other prisoners to be starved to death. One of the chosen young men sobbed, “My wife, my children!” Fr. Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward. “I want to die in place of this prisoner,” he said. The commandant snapped, “Request granted.”

Tens of thousands of people journeyed to Philadelphia in September 2015 to see Pope Francis. Some waited outside in lines for hours just

to catch a glimpse of the pontiff. Why? Some were looking for a special blessing, others wanted to be part of the historic event, and some needed inspiration to stay hopeful in a troubled world.

- *What about these three examples stands out to you?*
- *How do you witness to your faith?*



All three of the men above are powerful examples of living a vocation to the ordained priesthood. By becoming an ordained priest, these men became servants for Christ and the Church. But being a priest doesn’t always mean making a radical, public show of faith. In fact, the most powerful thing a priest can do is live a life of humble service and sacrifice.

Did Christ Ordain Priests?

“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.”

CCC 1536

The foundation of the priesthood goes back to the Old Covenant. Among his Chosen People, God designated the tribe of Levi for liturgical services. The role of the Old Covenant priest was to “act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (CCC 1539). This priesthood became perfected in Christ, who only needed to sacrifice himself once for all time (CCC 1545).

Jesus then sent his disciples out to preach and baptize (see Matthew 10). They were given the power to heal (see Mark 6:1–3) and to forgive sins (see John 20:23). At the Last Supper, when our Lord instructed his friends to “do this in memory of me,” he was giving them the power to celebrate the Eucharist.

While the expression of the sacrament of holy orders was not exactly the same as it is today, the essential elements of the sacramental reality remain consistent. The apostles did serve the Church as the first priests and bishops “in the name and in the person of Christ the Head in the midst of the community” (CCC 1591) and through the unbroken line of apostolic succession, the bishops and priests of today do the same. The Gospel also shows the laying on of hands as a key symbol in this ordination.

“The holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, completing their fasting and prayer, they laid hands on them and sent them off.”

Acts 13:2–3

“I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands.”

2 Timothy 1:6

- Why do you think Jesus gave specific instructions to those who would lead his Church?



Who Were the Priests of the Early Church?

Like the Church today, the early Church believed that all the baptized shared in the priesthood of Christ, also called the universal priesthood. As promised by Christ, the Holy Spirit filled the faithful with different gifts. The early Christians recognized and used these special gifts and abilities for building up the people of God, the priestly community. Saint Paul tells us that some believers could heal, work miracles, or prophesy. Others could speak in tongues or understand and interpret the Spirit. Some could preach or teach (see 1 Corinthians 12).

Those blessed with the ability to effectively preach and teach eventually became Church leaders. As leaders called by God, their position was set apart by the laying on of hands and the calling down of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Timothy 1:6–7). This marked the beginning of formal ordination, or the making of an official minister. While everyone could proclaim the word and witness to the faith, only the ordained leader had the power to preach in the assembly, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to guide the faith community.

We see this tradition continue today in the sacrament of holy orders. The bishops, standing as the apostles, confer, or hand on, this sacrament. Through the laying on of hands, the bishop passes down this role as servant to God’s people. Additionally, the bishop asks the Holy Spirit to give the priest the grace he needs to lead and serve.

The Priest’s Role

“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.’”

CCC 1547

The priest’s chief responsibilities are to bring about the presence of Christ in the Church and to share in Christ’s role as teacher, leader, and sanctifier. A priest is chosen to act in the person of Christ. The sacrament of holy orders gives the priest the power to preach the Gospel, give service to his faith community, and celebrate Mass and the sacraments, just like the apostles.

The common or universal priesthood, Church members who are not ordained, also has an important role in the Church. All members of the laity have the task of spreading the good news and of being Christ for one another in their everyday lives. The responsibilities of the ordained priest and the layperson (as part of the universal priesthood) have quite a bit in common!

- As a group or with a partner, create a list of characteristics in a good priest.
- Which of these traits do you think are most important? Why?



What Are Holy Orders?

The sacrament of holy orders establishes bishops, priests, and deacons as official Church leaders. The emphasis in holy orders is not on powerful leadership but on faithful, dedicated service to the people of God.

Throughout history, the principal duty of the priest has been to offer sacrifice. In the Old Testament, the priest would offer sacrifice by killing an animal or burning a harvest offering so that the people could make up for their sins and be reconciled with God.

Christ came to offer a sacrifice, too, but he offered himself on the cross so that all of God's people might be reconciled with God. Christ was both offering and priest. There could be no greater sacrifice than that of our Lord offering himself totally to God through his death on the cross.

It remains the duty of today's priest to offer sacrifice. At Mass, the priest and the people offer themselves and are joined with the bread and wine that become the Body and Blood of our Lord. We all become one with Christ, the true priest.

The priest must also lead and teach his faith community. Jesus was always willing to seek out the lost, to care for the sick and injured in his flock, even to give his life to save them. In the ceremony of ordination, the men to be ordained are reminded to be like Christ the Good Shepherd, who came to serve rather than to be served.

"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."

CCC 1548

Being like Christ is difficult work. Christ preached in words and parables that the people could apply to their daily lives. He showed mercy and forgiveness to sinners and never ran from the poor, sick, or disabled. He brought a message of physical and spiritual healing to all and stood by his people in their greatest need, even when they were weak, afraid, or unfaithful. Priests are called to do the same.

Because priests are human, they sometimes don't perform their duties perfectly. Jesus didn't expect us to be perfect, in fact, he expected weaknesses and failures to be part of his Church. Jesus knew the sufferings and trials of being human. But he also knew the joys and understanding of humanity, too. The same human nature that has at times brought great difficulties to the Church also allows priests to be more fully understanding of the struggles and temptations of this life.

- Why might weakness and imperfections be necessary for a priest?
- How do your mistakes make you more understanding?



Three Levels of Holy Orders

Most people associate holy orders with the priesthood, but priesthood is really the second of three levels of holy orders.

Deacon

A transitional deacon is a stage a seminarian goes through before becoming a priest. While not the same as a priest, a deacon can, with the permission of the bishop, preach, baptize, distribute the Eucharist, bring Communion to the sick, and officiate at marriages and funerals. He leads the people in prayer, reads Scripture, preaches, and teaches. A married man may be ordained a permanent deacon with the same duties, but if his wife dies, a permanent deacon cannot get remarried.

Priest

In the early Church, the bishops ministered to everyone. As the number of believers grew, the bishops were no longer able to care for all of them. Therefore, they ordained men to act in their place. These men were the first priests.

Priests have three important roles. First, they are called to preach by word and action. Second, they are the leaders of worship. Third, they are called to be leaders in the image of the Good Shepherd.

Bishop

The office of bishop in the Church can be traced back to Christ's commissioning (special appointment) of the apostles as the first leaders of the faithful. The bishops are the successors to the apostles.

As the principal teacher in his diocese, the bishop sees that the truths of the Catholic faith and the principles of morality are correctly taught. In his own diocese, the bishop is the head of the Church. When he visits a parish or celebrates a sacrament such as confirmation, he represents the universal Church, the people of God living throughout the world. The Catholic Church's principal bishop is the pope.

Celibacy is the voluntary state of not marrying and of abstaining from sexual intercourse. Though this may seem like a huge sacrifice, it actually frees a priest from the responsibilities of married life and allows him to devote himself to "the things of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:32).

As a group, fill out the chart below:

	How are they the same?	How are they different?
Bishops and Priests		
Priests and Deacons		
Priests and the Laity		

Catholics are called by God to a certain vocation (married life, priesthood/holy orders, and single or religious life).



Spend quiet time in prayer thinking about these choices. Is there one that seems to speak more strongly to you than the others? What about it seems appealing? Difficult?



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