

Holy Orders

By Fr. Lawrence Farley in **Sacraments and Rituals**

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As you have probably noticed, the Church has clergy—that is, men set apart for certain functions and who are held accountable for the exercise of those functions. Some (such as readers and subdeacons) are set apart for the exercise of their function through a blessing and the laying on of hands before the Liturgy begins; others (such as deacons, presbyters, and bishops) are set aside through solemn prayer and the laying on of hands during the Liturgy.

Technical Greek terms are now used to express the difference between these two kinds of setting apart. Readers and subdeacons are set apart through *cheirothesia*, rendered in English often as “a blessing.” Deacons, presbyters, and bishops are set apart through *cheirotomia*, rendered in English as “ordination.” The distinction made between the two words is a little arbitrary, in that both involve prayer and the laying on of hands—in fact, the word *cheirothesia* literally means “placing of hands,” whereas the word *cheirotomia* means “stretching out of hands,” so that it is hard to detect much difference in meaning. The difference, therefore, between the two ways of setting apart lies more in the function of the office than in the ceremony used for it.

One question that may be asked is, “Why does the Church have clergy at all?” Muslims do not have clergy in the same way that Christians do—and neither, if it comes to that, do Quakers. The answer is that the Church is more than a mere collection of assembled Christians. The Church is a body.

St. Paul describes the Church as a body at great length in chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians. There he writes that just as the different members of a human body have different functions, so the members of the Church as the Body of Christ also have different functions. In the human body, the ear has the function of hearing, the eye of seeing, the legs and feet of walking. All these differing functions are necessary for the body to carry out all the different things that it must do. It is the same with the Church—the Church has many functions and tasks it must fulfill in order to bring all of its members to spiritual maturity.

Because of this, Christ bestows gifts on His Church to help it do the things it must do, giving to some the gift of apostleship, to others the gift of prophecy, to others the gift of evangelism, and to still others the gift of shepherding and teaching (Ephesians 4:11). These ministries are not ends in themselves, still less were they instituted for the personal benefit of the ministers. Rather, they all serve the common goal of “equipping the saints [i.e., us] for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13). That is, all the ministries of the Church, from the highest to the lowest, from that of apostle all the way on down, exist for no other purpose than to help all the laity grow up and mature in Christ. The clergy exist for the laity. That is why clericalism is not only pathological, but also self-contradictory.

Certain of these ministries are obvious in their function—readers are set apart to read liturgically, and subdeacons set apart to help the deacons in the service at the altar. Their function is more specific and limited than that of deacon, presbyter, and bishop, and is confined to the liturgical services themselves. It is otherwise with deacons, presbyters, and bishops, for they continue to exercise their ministry even after the liturgical services, and have a pastoral element in that they work intimately with the people—and with the people’s money. For this reason, they are called to greater accountability, and are set apart with more solemn prayer—as noted, in the course of the Eucharistic Liturgy, and not before it begins. They have more accountability because they have more pastoral

responsibility. Put bluntly, if they mess up, they can do more harm. That is why the Church exercises more care in choosing deacons than in choosing subdeacons. In the present rites of ordination, deacons, presbyters, and bishops are hailed with the cry of *Axios! Worthy!* because their suitability for their ministry is of the utmost importance to the health of the Church. (The congregation's approval is now solicited liturgically only after the ordination, which does seem a bit odd; if the candidate were not *axios*, it is a bit late.) Readers and subdeacons are not hailed with the cry of *Axios!* because the pastoral responsibility is absent from their function.

What are the functions of those ministries ordained by solemn *cheirotonia*? Let us look at them one by one.

Deacons are the institutional servants of the Church, responsible for the exercise of the congregation's *diakonia*. Indeed, the word "deacon" means "servant," and *diakonia* means "service." But not just any service—service to the poor. Thus in Acts 6:1 Luke states that the Hellenistic widows of Jerusalem were overlooked in the "daily serving of food"—in Greek, the daily *diakonia*. In Acts 11:29, when the faithful in Antioch collected money to send to the Christian poor in Judea, this relief money is described again by Luke as *diakonia*. In Romans 15:31, Paul also describes the money he had collected for the poor in the mother church as "my *diakonia* for Jerusalem."

Thus the word *diakonia* often meant "money"; the *diakonos* or "deacon" was the one locally responsible for it. In the early church, he was charged with oversight for the church's charitable work, and for such pastoral tasks as taking Holy Communion to those who were absent from the Liturgy (thus St. Justin Martyr, in his *Apology*). The deacon acts as a liturgical assistant to the presiding clergy (either bishop or presbyter) in the Liturgy, offering the laity's prayers in the litanies because of his pastoral ministry to the laity throughout the week.

Nowadays, it is customary to regard the deacon merely as a liturgical ornament to the bishop—nice to have, but distinctly superfluous. Indeed, many Orthodox congregations do not have deacons. This would have been unthinkable in the early church. Deacons were essential to each congregation because deacons were the embodiment and institutionalization of their local ministry to the poor. How, they would have asked, could the local church fulfill its *diakonia* to the poor without its *diakonos*? Because of their liturgical role as assistant in the Liturgy, deacons are ordained at the place in the service which best reveals their role as assistant—that is, they are ordained after consecration of the Eucharistic Gifts, but before their distribution, so that they can help to help distribute Holy Communion. Even now at every Liturgy, the deacon is the one bringing out the Chalice and inviting the faithful to come forward.

Presbyters are the Church's rulers and counsellors. The term "presbyter" comes from the Greek *presbyteros*, meaning "elder," or "old man," and in Israel, it was the elders who ruled the local communities. The term presbyter now is often abbreviated as "priest," even though the Greek word for "priest" (*iereus*) is an entirely different word. Strictly speaking, such clergy should be referred to as presbyters, for that is how the ordination prayer reads. Indeed, that prayer contains a play on words, which vanishes in English translation. If *presbyteros* is rendered as "elder," the play on words is apparent: it begins "O God, who have no beginning and no ending, who are older than every created thing, who crown with the name of elder those whom You deem worthy to serve the word of Your truth..." The "elders" are thus given the Holy Spirit by God, who is elder or older than all creation.

In the early church, each congregation had several presbyters who formed a council around the leading presbyter, the bishop. The bishop was the main liturgist who presided at the services, surrounded by his fellow elders. They were the ones who made the pastoral decisions and ruled the local church under the guidance and vision of the bishop. According to the (sometimes controverted) early third-century document known as *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, the presbyters joined their bishop when he ordained others to the presbyterate, laying their hands on the new candidate while the bishop prayed the prayer. When the local congregation became too large for all the people to meet in

one place, the bishop would delegate one of the presbyters to preside over the overflow congregation meeting elsewhere. In current practice, of course, the bishop's diocesan charge is now spread over a wide area, so that presbyters are now the main celebrants in most local congregations. Because of this function of presiding over the Eucharist, presbyters are ordained after the Cherubic Hymn prior to the Anaphora, so that the newly-ordained presbyter can take part in the Eucharistic consecration.

Bishops are the Church's main teachers. In the early church, a bishop served as the main pastor and liturgist of every local congregation. He was the one who offered the prayers at the weekly Eucharist, and baptized the new converts, and anointed the sick, and restored the excommunicated penitent back to the Church. He was the one who gave the sermon each Sunday, and it was his orthodoxy (or lack of it) which determined whether his congregation was recognized as orthodox by the rest of the church. His most important task, therefore, was to preach the Gospel, to "rightly define the word of truth."

This concern for the orthodoxy of each bishop is the reason why he is more or less grilled prior to his ordination as bishop in our modern rites. Before the ordination takes place, the episcopal candidate stands before the other bishops as they ask him three times about his faith. They first ask him, "How you do believe?", and he must respond with the Nicene Creed. Then they say to him, "Reveal to us more particularly how you believe concerning the properties of the three Persons of the ineffable Godhead, and concerning the Incarnation of the Person of the Son and Word of God," and he must respond with a long Trinitarian and Christology dissertation. Then, for the third time, they ask him, "Declare to us also what you think concerning the canons of the holy apostles and the holy Fathers, and the traditions and regulations of the Church," and he must respond with another long answer. Talk about literally being called on the carpet! (the carpet in this case being the little eagle rug on which he is standing throughout this long interrogation). By all this, the Church takes good care to insure that the new bishop will be impeccably orthodox in his faith. Not surprisingly perhaps, the new bishop is ordained in the Liturgy right after the Trisagion hymn, in time to perform his main episcopal function of defining the faith—i.e., preaching the sermon.

Holy Orders are therefore Christ's gifts to the Church, as each of these functions is a *charisma* or spiritual gift. But as important as they are, they are not the totality of the Church, and they exist only to serve the laity. Indeed, in one sense, the clergy are a part of the laity, in that they all form part of the holy *laos*, the people of God. One can tell this by looking at all of them as they stand in church: all of them, clergy and laity alike, face the same way when they pray. All face east. All face the same Lord, receive the same salvation, and are called into the same Kingdom.