

Holy Orders

Ordained to Serve, Gather, Transform, and Send



By virtue of our Baptism, all Christians are part of a *common priesthood* of believers. We are all called to participate in Christ's mission. Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, bishops and priests are given a special role in carrying out this mission. They exercise a *ministerial priesthood*. Deacons also receive a special grace through ordination and are called to assist the ministry of bishops and priests (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], nos. 1547, 1554).

Pope Benedict XVI writes, "The priest is above all a servant of others" (*Sacramentum Caritatis* [*Sacrament of Charity*], no. 23). In gathering the community, modeling Christ's love for the poor, presiding at Eucharist, and evangelizing social realities, ordained ministers help Christians imitate Christ's mission of love and justice.

Representatives of Christ

Through ordination, priests become representatives of Christ to the Church—as witnesses of holiness and love, preachers of the Gospel, shepherds of the faithful, conveners of divine worship, and builders of the Church. Through their ministry, priests are called, in imitation of Christ, to "preach good news to the poor . . . proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4:18-19)" (Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* [*I Will Give You Shepherds*], no. 11). Deacons, too, are ordained to imitate Christ in his ministry of service and charity to the poor and needy in the community.

Proclaimers of the Word

As co-workers with their bishops in teaching and carrying out Christ's mission, priests and deacons proclaim the Word of God to his people. This includes education about the social teaching of the Church, which is based in both Scripture and Tradition, and helping community members become aware of their "right and duty to be active subjects of this doctrine" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [*Compendium*], no. 539).

Pastors

Each bishop is entrusted with the care of a particular church, and priests and deacons assist in pastoring the people of God locally. Pastoral ministry requires that ordained ministers develop competency in "social analysis and community organization" and cross-cultural ministry (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*, 29). Priests should "animate pastoral action in the social field," especially assisting lay Christians who are involved in political and social life (*Compendium*, no. 539). Pastoral concern extends beyond the local Church; bishops and priests must also attend to problems facing the people of the world, "sharing their experiences and growing, above all, in solidarity towards the poor" (Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* [*The Church in America*], no. 39)

Presiders of Eucharist

Bishops and priests preside over the Eucharist, offering the sacrifice in the name of the whole Church, the Body of Christ (CCC, no. 1553). In celebrating the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit transforms the people of God for mission. In the words of Bishop William S. Skylstad:

Especially at the celebration of Eucharist we help our people find Jesus in their lives through word, sacrament, and community. We also help them to appreciate that as they leave the church building they move into the world as eucharistic people. They too are to become "foot washers of humanity." (*Priests for a New Millennium*, 158).

In other words, through presiding over the Eucharist, priests help Christians to “live their social commitment” as a fruit of their worship (*Compendium*, no. 539).

Builders of Community

Ordained ministry is a reminder of our “communitarian” nature, because it can only be carried out in communion with others. For example, priests minister in communion with their bishop, with other priests, and with the lay faithful. An important role of the priest is to bring together the entire community both in worship and in building the Church in the world. Being “a man of communion” means that a priest must be “a man of mission and dialogue,” working for unity, justice, and peace with other faiths, people of good will, and with those who are poor and vulnerable (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, nos. 17, 18).

Missionaries

Pope John Paul II notes, “All priests must have the mind and the heart of missionaries,” whether they serve near their home or across the world (*Redemptoris Missio* [*On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate*], no. 67). Priests can have missionary hearts through their attentiveness to the struggles of their brothers and sisters across the world and by remembering “the whole Church for all of humanity” in their prayers and in the Eucharistic sacrifice (*ibid.*). This global perspective must be contagious;

priests must work to “form the community entrusted to them as a truly missionary community” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 32). Deacons, too, have been sent by Christ and play an important role in bringing him to the heart of the parish community and beyond.

Servants

St. John Vianney wrote, “The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.” Likewise, St. Augustine noted that the priesthood is the office of the good shepherd who offers his life for his sheep. In sum, “the priest is above all a servant of others” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 23). As Christ “emptied himself” (Phil 2:7) to become the suffering servant, so too, priests give themselves in service for the Church and the world. The celibate lifestyle, which encourages an undivided heart in those committed to it, fosters such self-emptying service. Deacons also exemplify service as they assist the bishop and priests in their ministries and dedicate themselves to ministries of charity (CCC, no. 1571).

Advocates for the Poor

Ordained ministers are guided by the Holy Spirit to have “a preferential love for the poor, the sick, and the needy” and to identify with Christ the priest and victim (CCC, no. 1586). This special obligation to the poor and weak is in imitation of Jesus’ own love for the poor and ministry to the sick and dying (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* [*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*], no. 6).

Counter-Witnesses

The ordained are to live in the world while also being witnesses representing virtues that lead the sheep to the one true sheepfold. These virtues include love, goodness, and “careful attention to justice” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 3).

Sharers of Catholic Social Teaching

Because the Church’s social doctrine is an “essential component” of the “new evangelization” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 54), those preparing for the ordained ministry should develop a “thorough knowledge” of Catholic social teaching and “a keen interest in the social issues of their day” (*Compendium*, no. 533).

Evangelizers of Social Realities

Bishops, assisted by priests, deacons, and religious, must “evangelize social realities” (*Compendium*, no. 539) by being “articulate spokesmen for and interpreters of Catholic social teaching in today’s circumstances” (USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation*, no. 345).

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QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

How does this reflection help you to better understand the role of the bishop, priest, or deacon?

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