

HOLY ORDERS

BACKGROUND READING



Christ promised that He would never leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5), and that He would not leave us as orphans (Jn 14:18). Have you ever wondered how He fulfills these promises now that He has ascended into Heaven? One way is through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Jesus knows that we are both physical and spiritual beings, so in the Sacraments He addresses both the physical and spiritual aspects of our nature. Along those lines, in Holy Orders He approaches us in the person of the priest – a human being we can both see and hear.

The Priesthood of All Believers

The bible tells us that every baptized Christian shares in what is called the Common (or Universal) Priesthood of believers: “But you are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his [God’s] own’” (1 Peter 2:9a).

Christ has given the laity the right and duty to participate in His priesthood through our active participation in the Mass, Confession, prayer, and almsgiving. This participation also includes the witness of our life as we practice both self-denial and charity. In order to fulfill this mission we need the graces of the Sacraments and the teachings of the Church, which is where Holy Orders comes in.

Holy Orders

Christ calls some men to teach, strengthen, and guide his children (the Church) by providing the Sacraments and performing particular types of service in His place. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the Sacrament in which those men are consecrated in Christ’s name to continue the mission that was “entrusted by Christ to his apostles ... until the end of time” (CCC 1536). It is also known as: the Sacrament of the Ministerial Priesthood, the Sacrament of Ordained Priesthood, the Sacrament of Apostolic Ministry, and as a Sacrament at the Service of Communion.

While the priesthood is a great and necessary gift to the Church, it does not mean that the ordained minister is free from personal weaknesses or even from sin. But the Sacrament of Holy Orders does guarantee that the grace of the sacraments is valid and effective even when they are performed by a sinful minister. Why? Because it is truly Christ who is the minister of grace through the Sacraments.

Not only is it Christ who works through the ordained minister, but it is Christ who calls men to that ministry. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “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. ...Like every grace this sacrament can be received only as an unmerited gift” (1578). A call to the Sacrament of Holy Orders is a call to serve. The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the Common Priesthood of all believers in the Church.

The Three Degrees of the Sacrament

The three degrees of the Sacrament of Holy Orders are: bishops (the episcopate), priests (the presbyterate), and deacons (the diaconate). All three degrees are conferred by the same Sacrament of Holy Orders.

We can trace the unbroken line of apostolic succession through the bishops. The bishop, in the fullest sense possible, serves in the place of Christ as teacher, shepherd, and priest. Only the bishop can administer the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and he is normally the one who administers the Sacrament of Confirmation. The bishop has care over the particular Church given to him by the pope, and is “responsible with the other bishops for the apostolic mission of the Church” (CCC 1560). Only the pope can ordain a person to be a bishop.

In order to fulfil their mission across the many churches and institutions within a diocese, bishops ordain local priests to

assist with some of their ministerial duties. “Priests can exercise their ministry only in dependence on the bishop and in communion with him” (CCC 1567). From their bishop they receive charge over a parish community or a particular ecclesial office.

The priest is the ordinary minister of the Sacraments other than Confirmation and Holy Orders. Because of his administration of the Sacraments the priestly office is sometimes referred to as the office of “sanctification” as distinguished from the bishop’s office of teaching and governing.

At the third Degree of Holy Orders are the deacons who are ordained for a ministry of service. The deacon is ordained by his local bishop and is assigned his specific ministry of service by him. A deacon may serve at the celebration of the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He may also distribute Holy Communion, bless marriages, baptize, preside over funerals, proclaim the Gospel and preach, and dedicate himself to various charitable ministries.

A Gift from Christ

Christ’s goal is for each of us to become fully mature and complete in Him so that we can enter into his joy. For this reason He has given His Church the gift of Holy Orders through which we receive the Sacraments, learn His teachings, and are shepherded (led and governed) by Him.

LESSON 13

HOLY MATRIMONY

BACKGROUND READING



At the very beginning of creation God made it clear that marriage was a part of His original plan and that He is its author: “God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).

God, who is love, created man and woman in His image for love. Thus, the God-given vocation of every human being is to love. And in a unique way man and woman were created for each other and called to become one in a covenant of love: “The Lord God said: ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’ ... The Lord God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said: ‘This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called “woman.”’ ... That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body” (Gen 2:18-24). This oneness becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love that God has for us. After God created man and woman He said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28).

From the very first chapters of Scripture we see that God created man and woman in His image and called them to love. He created

them for each other and joined them together in a covenant of love (marriage) and oneness that cannot be broken. This covenant is to be “fruitful” and its work is to watch over creation and to partake in procreation.

Created for Joy

As the *Catechism* makes clear, God created marriage for the good of the spouses: “The acts in marriage by which the intimate ... union of the spouses takes place ... are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude. Sexuality is a source of joy and pleasure. ...The Creator himself ... established that in the [generative] function, spouses should experience pleasure and enjoyment of body and spirit” (CCC 2362).

God’s creation was perfect and the union of man and woman in marriage was complete. Then came sin. Since original sin, marriage has been “threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation” (CCC 1606). God’s beautiful plan was soiled by the stain of sin and no longer worked as He had created it. To return to God’s plan, man and woman need the help of God’s grace.

“Without his help man and woman cannot achieve the union of their lives for which God created them ‘in the beginning’” (CCC 1608).

Jesus raised marriage to a Sacrament – Matrimony. This sacrament is a source of great grace for all baptized persons who receive it and is one of the ways God provides spouses with the graces necessary to live their marriage according to His original plan.

The Consent of Marriage

Although a marriage covenant must be witnessed to by an authorized Church authority, it is the exchange of consent between the couple that makes the marriage. For a marriage to be valid it must have the following elements: the couple must be free to marry (not already married, of opposite sexes, not close relatives etc.); they must freely consent to the marriage and not be under constraint; in consenting to marry, they must have the intention to marry for life, be faithful to one another, and be open to children; and their consent must be given in the presence of two witnesses and before a properly authorized Church minister. The consent consists of the act of

the couple giving themselves to one another as expressed in the words of the marriage vows: “I take you to be my wife” and “I take you to be my husband.”

God’s Call to Marriage

Marriage is a vocation which is not simply a personal preference or a state of life to be lived, but rather a call from God. Men and women are called to the vocation of Matrimony for their joy and good and for the procreation and education of children.

The very nature of marriage where “they are no longer two, but one flesh” implies a unity and indissolubility (Mt 19:6). This mutual self-giving is strengthened by the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony and deepened by the couple’s life of common faith and the Eucharist. The Church teaches that “Children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of the parents themselves” (Documents of Vatican II, G.S. 50). We, as parents, should tremble as we pray and help our children discern the call of God in their lives. May all the graces necessary to fulfill this solemn obligation be ours in Jesus Christ.