

THE ORDER OF DEACONS: A THEOLOGICAL PRIMER ON THE DIACONATE

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This is the first in a series of three articles about the diaconate, looking ahead to the ordination of a class of permanent deacons for the Diocese of Richmond on September 15.

According to St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, the Church is "founded upon the Apostles" (2:20). The Book of Revelation makes this same point symbolically (21:14).

Jesus chose the Twelve Apostles as his closest collaborators during his public ministry; he commanded them to celebrate the Eucharist and other sacraments; he authorized them to teach in his name; and he appointed them as shepherds over the community of believers. The Church, under the leadership of the Apostles and their successors, has continued the saving mission of Christ down to today.

The New Testament and other sources indicate that the Apostles, vested with Jesus' power and authority, and guided by the Holy Spirit, themselves commissioned assistants and successors. In this way, the Apostles handed on what they themselves had received: a share in Jesus' ministry as leaders of the Church. In this process of transmission, the sacrament of Holy Orders unfolded through the centuries.

The term "orders" (derived from the Latin *ordines*) means "ranks," and has the connotation of providing order and structure. In the Latin version of the Old Testament (Vulgate), the word designates, among other things, the various functions and divisions of Jewish priests, who were responsible for offering sacrifices on behalf of the people. Although the term "orders" does not appear in the New Testament, it aptly describes the structure of the Church that is evident there. Thus, the sacrament of Holy Orders has governed the Church from the beginning.

Historically, early Christian communities had various "orders" of members, spiritual gifts (charisms), and ministry. And while the terminology is variable in the New Testament, three types of leaders appear there: (1) bishops, meaning "overseers"; (2) presbyters, meaning "elders"; and (3) deacons, meaning "servants" or "ministers." Around the year 100 A.D., with the apostolic era coming to an end, these groups crystalized into three ranks of leadership in the Church.

Theologically speaking, Holy Orders is a single sacrament with three grades: (1) the order of bishops (episcopate), (2) the order of presbyters (presbyterate), and (3) the order of deacons (diaconate). Bishops and presbyters are both ministerial priests, meaning that they have the power to act in the person of Christ as the Head of the Church. They do so in celebrating the sacraments, in teaching, and in governing. (According to customary usage, presbyters are called "priests," although technically that term includes bishops also.)

Unlike bishops and presbyters, deacons do not participate in the ministerial priesthood of Christ. Rather, the term “deacon” (derived from the Greek *diakonos*) expresses a distinct role: “minister” or “servant” to the ordained priesthood.

In a general sense, all baptized Christians are ministers, as are bishops and presbyters in their priestly roles. For their part, deacons carry out the ministry of Christ by assisting ordained priests in three areas: (1) service to the Word of God, (2) service at the liturgy (worship), and (3) the service of charity. Whereas bishops and presbyters exclusively act in the person of Christ as Head of the Church, deacons act, in a vivid way, in the person of Christ the Servant: “For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Those in Holy Orders—bishops, presbyters, and deacons—constitute the hierarchy of the Church. This leadership is one of service, following Christ’s example and teaching. In the Church’s understanding, no one has a right to be ordained. Rather, one receives a vocation or calling from God, which the Church then verifies and accepts. In accordance with the practice of Christ and the Apostles, only men can receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. (A subsequent article will probe the question of women deacons.)

The ordained are members of the clergy. As such, they are consecrated for roles within the Church in order to serve the laity, who themselves work for the sanctification of the world. Finally, by virtue of ordination, bishops, presbyters, and deacons receive a sacramental “character” (spiritual seal) that cannot be repeated or erased. This mark enables them to represent Christ in a special way, so that the Church can continue his mission.

The next article in this series will trace the historical development of the order of deacons, from the New Testament to Vatican Council II.