

13. Christian Ministry and Service

“By sacred ordination and by the mission they receive from their bishops, priests are promoted to the service of Christ, the Teacher, the Priest, and the King. They share in his ministry of unceasingly building up the Church on earth into the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit”.
(Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Preface).

Christ's work of calling and training and sending of **The Twelve** into the world was a very important aspect of the establishing of his Church. With Peter as their leader, he made them the nucleus around which the Christian community would grow. During his years of public teaching, and again after his resurrection he gave them some very special powers to act on his behalf, and to do things which no one could do without a special commission and authorization from Christ himself.

Chief among the special duties given to **The Twelve** were those of doing what he himself had done in the celebration of the Eucharist, forgiving the sins of others on his behalf, and the preaching of his message of salvation. He thus conferred a very special kind of Christian ministry on these chosen men.

By telling them to continue to carry out these divine functions **until the end of time** his commission implied that they in their turn should select and appoint others to share that special Christian ministry with them as the numbers in the believing Christian community increased and as they themselves grew old and died. The twelve Apostles did that. The imposing of hands and prayer by which they passed on this divine power to others is what we call today the sacrament of Ordination, or Holy Orders.

Holy Orders is a sacrament by which Jesus Christ gives to chosen men the power and grace to be the spiritual leaders of his Church and to perform its sacred duties. Through it he gives them a special share in his priesthood. The Apostles were the first to be given these powers by Jesus; they were the first bishops of his Church. Before they died they passed the fullness of their priestly powers on to others to succeed them as bishops and so keep the gospel whole and for ever alive within the Church.

Down through the centuries bishops have handed on a limited part of their duties and power to those whom they have ordained deacons and a further and greater part to those whom they have ordained as priests. Priests share with their bishops in a very special way in continuing the work of the Apostles, because through their ordination they receive the power to offer the sacrifice of the Mass,

to administer the sacraments of Christ, to preach the Christian message of salvation, and to be a spiritual guide and leader to the Christian community.

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The Ordination of a Priest

The candidates for ordination lie prostrate before the altar as a litany is sung asking the Saints in heaven to pray for those to be ordained. The bishop stands alone and prays that God would pour out the blessing of the Holy Spirit and the strength given to the priesthood upon those to be ordained. One by one the candidate go to the bishop and kneel before him. He lays his hands on the head of each. The bishop then intones the prayer of consecration. After this prayer, the assisting priests arrange the vestments on the newly ordained priest. The bishop then anoints with holy oil the palms of each new priest who kneels before him. He says, "The Father anointed Jesus Christ as Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit. May Jesus keep you worthy of offering Sacrifice to God and sanctifying the Christian Assembly." Meanwhile the deacon prepares the unleavened bread on the plate; he also prepares the chalice containing wine and a few drops of water. He brings the chalice and the plate to the bishop who presents them to each of the new priests as he kneels before the bishop. The bishop says an appropriate prayer.

Then they offer the sacrifice of the Mass with the bishop reciting the prayers which include the words of consecration "This is my body", and "This is the chalice of my blood".

A different man

Each goes out from the church a different kind of man, no longer a layman or merely a cleric, but a priest. He will remain a priest forever, even if he should resign from active priestly ministry. The Holy Spirit has stamped him with the mark which will never be effaced. It sets him apart from other men and is a guarantee that he will always have the power to perform the office of a priest.

Christ the Priest

Before the coming of Jesus Christ, many priests offered many kinds of sacrifices to God in the name of the people. But now there is only one great High Priest, who offered once and for all the sacrifice of himself. He offered it under the appearance of bread and wine at the Last Supper and with the shedding of his blood on the Cross. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there continues to offer his sacrifice to the Father. But before he died he gave to his Church a way of joining in the sacrifice. He gave to the Apostles, and the men whom they ordained, the power to offer it with him to the Father on behalf of the

people. The whole Church offers this sacrifice along with Christ, but he calls special men to share in his priesthood in a fuller way than the ordinary Christian.

The Inner Calling

No one can become a priest unless he has received a call or vocation from God. First there comes a call in the secrecy of the heart. Many a boy or youth, as he serves Mass morning after morning, feels a growing yearning to hold the body and blood of Christ in his hands and offer him to God. Many, as they listen to sermons or study the Faith at school, long to share in the work of spreading the truth. Many feel a desire to bring life and comfort to others through the sacraments of the Church, good works and words of counsel. Many develop a taste for prayer and desire to join in the official prayer of the Church and preside at public worship.

These are the four great works of the priest --- **to offer the sacrifice of the Mass,, to preach the word of God, to forgive sins and administer the sacraments, and to preside in official worship.** One of these in particular, and all in general, appeal to the young men who feel the inner call to the priesthood. But there must also be a desire to serve rather than to enter upon a useful and agreeable career. To feel an attraction to these four works of the priest is not a guarantee that one has a true vocation to the priesthood. "One does not take the honour upon himself but he is called by God" (Hebr. 5, 4). God gives the true call through the official voice of his Church in the person of the bishop. The bishop gives that call only to those who have been tested in a long course of training and have shown that they have the necessary qualities of mind and body.

Normally they remain at ordinary schools until they complete their secondary education. Then they enter a special training college called a seminary for about seven years before being ordained priests. All must study Sacred Scripture, Theology, Philosophy, the Law of the Church, Church History and other subjects. But above all they must be trained in the art of prayer and self-discipline.

Some decide it is their vocation to serve God as laymen, and leave the training college of their own accord. Others are invited by their superiors to leave, because it is judged that they have not the necessary qualities. None is forced to remain. Canon 971 of the Church's Code of Canon Law says: "It is a crime to force anyone, in any way, for any reason, into the clerical state."

The Bishop

A bishop is a chief priest. Each priest must be called by a bishop and each priest exercises his ministry of preaching, saying Mass and administering the sacraments as the assistant of the bishop and under his authority. The Bishop is the centre of unity of the Church in his area, or diocese and all members of the

Church must reverence and obey him. He must watch over the teachings of Christ and guard the morals of his people. An individual bishop may err in his teaching, but the whole body of the bishops, with the Pope at their head, are so guided by the Holy Spirit that they teach Christ's Word without error.

The chief difference between a bishop and an ordinary priest is that the former conveys the priesthood to others while the latter does not. Also the bishop is the normal minister of the sacrament of Confirmation and as a successor of the Apostles has authority to govern the Church in his diocese.

Deacons

The sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles tells us how the Apostles chose seven deacons to assist them in preaching the Gospel and administering the temporal affairs of the early Christian community. Some of them became great saints of the Church. St. Stephen, the first martyr in the Church was a deacon. St. Philip was also one of the original seven chosen by the Apostles. St. Francis of Assisi, one of the best known and most loved saints in the whole Christian world, was a deacon.

Nowadays all candidates for the priesthood spend some time as deacons before they become priests. Some remain deacons all their lives, as did St. Francis and the others we have mentioned. The main duties of deacons are to administer the sacrament of Baptism, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to have charge of the consecrated Host reserved in the tabernacle and distribute Holy Communion. They also read the Scriptures at Mass and preach to the people; they officiate at funerals and burial services, and share in the administration of the material affairs of the Church.

They do not celebrate Mass or hear confessions.

The Priesthood of the Laity

All members of the Church share in Christ's priesthood by virtue of their Baptism, through which they received the Spirit of Christ and became members of his Body. Only bishops and priests have power to consecrate the bread and wine at Mass, but all members of the Christ's Body join in the offering of the Mass. They share also in the general work of the Church. In their daily lives and, above all, in organized Christian action, they are God's instruments in bringing his life and truth to men. Some may receive a special ministry, e.g. Acolyte or Lector.

The Celibacy of Priests

In most parts of the world, including Australia, priests do not marry. This custom has been followed for many centuries. In eastern Europe and some of the eastern Mediterranean countries, married men are ordained to the priesthood. Christ did not make any law as to whether his priests should be married or unmarried, but

since the fourth century it has been the custom in most parts of the world to accept candidates for the priesthood only if they choose voluntarily to remain unmarried.

There is considerable controversy within the Church in modern times, as to whether this custom should be continued or not. A few exceptions have been made in recent years in the case of married men who were ministers of religion in other churches before they became Catholics. It is a matter for the Church authorities to decide how they will ultimately resolve this controversy because there is question only of a law made by the Church, not a law of God.

Those who feel we should have married priests put forward the view that it would be possible to recruit many more suitable candidates for the priesthood from those who do not feel called to live the Christian life as celibates. The Church needs more priests in many parts of the world today.

On the other hand celibacy freely chosen in order to give oneself completely to God, is a very special form of dedication to Christ. In a document dealing with the priesthood the recent II Vatican Council says of celibate priests:

“Through virginity, or celibacy observed for the kingdom of heaven, priests are consecrated to Christ in a new and distinguished way. They more easily hold fast to him with an undivided heart. They more freely devote themselves in him and through him to the service of God and men. They more readily minister to his kingdom and to the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus become more apt to exercise paternity in Christ, and do so to a greater extent”.

Those who take this vow of celibacy do so for several motives. First, they wish to give all their love to God and make themselves holy. They seek to imitate Christ, who did not marry himself and was the son of a virgin mother. He approved of those who remained celibate “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” When asked if it were better for men not to marry, he replied: “there are eunuchs (that is, celibates) who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Matt. 19, 12).

St. Paul, in the seventh chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, praises Christian marriage, but says that celibacy for the love of God is a higher state. The married man must put first the needs of his wife and family, whereas the man who does not marry is freer to dedicate himself to the service of God. “The unmarried man,” He says, “is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his

wife, and his interests are divided" (1 Cor. 7, 32-34). The question of women being ordained to the Priesthood has been discussed but it would seem that there is no possibility of this in the foreseeable future.

Valid orders

Only those who have been properly ordained by a properly consecrated bishop have valid orders, that is, are true priests. The bishop who confers the Holy Order must be in line with the bishops going back in unbroken succession to the Apostles. He must intend to give the men he ordains power to offer the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ, preach the Word, forgive sins and administer the other sacraments. He must confer the sacrament correctly, using words and actions which clearly indicate the Church's intentions.

Among the Christians separated from the Catholic Church are some who call themselves priests, but are not priests in the Catholic sense. Pope Leo XIII had the whole matter of Orders in the Anglican Church carefully examined, and it was with great regret that, in 1896, he had to declare that those Orders do not confer the Catholic priesthood. The main reason for this decision was that those who devised the Anglican ordination service, in use since the sixteenth century, made it quite clear that they did not intend to ordain men with power to offer the sacrifice of the Mass. Ministers of other denominations are in a similar position. Such ministers do great good for their people, in administering valid baptism, preaching Christ's teaching and conducting dignified and devout public worship. But they are not and do not claim to be priests in the Catholic sense of the word.

The Priest a Father

Although priests do not marry, they are rightly called "Father" because they are the means by which Christ brings life to men. The priest lends Christ his lips, his hands and his heart in offering the sacrifice of the Mass, administering the sacraments and blessing the people. As the natural father is God's instrument in bringing supernatural life. St. Paul expressed this thought when he wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 4, 15, "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel." In 1 Tim. 1, 2, he calls Timothy "my true child in the faith." Moreover, as the natural father guides and comforts his children, so the priest advises his people and teaches them the Word of God.

Priests remain men and, as such, sinners. Most of them are a credit to the Church. Catholics do not reverence them merely because of their personal goodness, but because they are instruments in the hands of the all-holy Christ. Christ can use unworthy instruments to bring his life to men.

The Work of a Priest

The work of the Church in the modern world is so extensive that her priests are to be found working in many fields.

Some priests are missionaries, carrying the gospel to other peoples and other lands, or doing missionary work in their own country.

Some are teachers in Catholic schools, some are chaplains of Catholic students in universities, some are engaged in administrative and specialized work.

Some are in religious orders and societies, living the life and doing the work which is special to the order or society to which they belong.

Some are working in parishes, tending to the spiritual needs of the people entrusted to their care.

All of them share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. It is through them that he has willed to exercise his priesthood in the world and will continue to do so until the end of time.

Religious Societies

There are in the Church different ways of dedicating oneself to the service of God and humanity. In all ages men and women, called monks and nuns, have felt it to be their duty to join with others in living a common life so that they may serve together. These societies are called Religious Orders or Congregations.

The members of such communities are dedicated first and foremost to the praise of God in the public worship of the Church and in striving for holiness in private prayer. This is the noblest and most important duty of man. But since man is made to work as well as to pray, they also do practical works which are a great benefit to mankind. In striving to be holy, they dedicate to God three of the strongest instincts and desires of man, for sexual pleasure, for money and possessions, and for independence and the esteem of men. If these desires are not controlled they breed the vices of lust, avarice and pride. Hence the members of Religious Orders take the vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience.

They do not enter the community to escape from the troubles of the world and enjoy selfish retirement and leisure. They enter to perform the most difficult task of all, to strive to uplift their fallen nature and give all their love to God and their fellow-men. The monks of old divided their day into seven hours of prayer, seven hours of physical or mental work, seven hours of sleep and three for food and recreation.

There are hundreds of Religious Congregations or Societies in the Catholic Church, both for men and women, serving the ignorant, the poor, the aged or the sick. Four of the better known may be taken as examples.

ST. FRANCIS, born in 1181, was the son of a merchant of Assisi, Italy. He obeyed literally the command of the Gospel to sell all his goods and give to the poor and, dressing himself in a rough garment, set out to preach to the poor. A large community of men, called Franciscan Friars, grew up around him and Franciscans have been preaching and ministering to the poor ever since. There are Franciscan monasteries in all the Australian States.

ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, born about 1491, was a Spanish soldier of a lesser noble family. After being wounded in action he decided to become a soldier of Christ. He gathered about him a group of similar young men, all dedicated to the service of the poor and unfortunate, and in particular to Christian education. He founded the Society of Jesus, called the Jesuits, who now run universities, colleges and parishes throughout the world, and work in the foreign missions. The first community of Jesuits in Australia was started in Adelaide in 1848.

MARY AUGUSTINE AIKENHEAD, born in Ireland in 1787, felt an early attraction towards the service of the poor. She founded the Irish Sisters of Charity in Dublin in 1815. She modeled the Rule of the Sisters on that of the Jesuits. As well as taking the three vows of religion, the Sisters take a fourth vow to serve the poor. In 1838 they became the first women belonging to a Religious Congregation to work in Australia. Their original apostolate was to the poor and sick. Today, they have established homes for the aged, crippled, blind and widows. The Sisters also teach in primary and secondary schools and conduct orphanages, hostels and re-creational centers as well as maternity centers and the St. Vincent's hospitals for which they are widely known throughout Australia.

MARY McKILLOP, born in Melbourne in 1842, founded an Australian community of nuns, popularly known as the Josephite Sisters, in Adelaide in 1866 for the religious education of children in the outback. Before her death in Sydney in 1909 about a thousand Josephite Sisters were teaching 12,000 children in 117 schools. In 1969 there were more than two thousand members of the community in Australia and New Zealand. In addition to many schools they have maternity hospitals, foundling homes, orphanages, homes for aged women and hostels for students and business girls throughout Australia. Preliminary investigations for the canonization of Mother Mary McKillop were begun in Rome in 1954. She may become the first Australian to be declared a canonized saint.

Martyr of Oceania

St. Peter Chanel is specially honoured in the Church in Australia as the first Christian martyr of Oceania. A little north of a line drawn between Fiji and Samoa lies a group of Islands marked on the map as Horn Islands but better known by the native name FUTUNA. When Father Peter Chanel, a Marist priest, arrived there in 1837 to attempt to bring Christianity to the islanders, his first act was to kneel on the ground, consecrate the land to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and affix a medal bearing her image to a tree. For three years he spent himself amidst dreadful conditions trying to give these wretched people a knowledge of Christ. They were cannibals and warmongers. They were steeped in superstition especially about evil spirits.

Father Chanel's Apostolate was visible a failure but it was not wasted. Like St. John the Baptist he prepared the way for the coming of the Saviour; and like St. John he did not see the fruits of his labours. He was savagely murdered for his faith on April 28th, 1841. His murderers rejoiced: "The priest is dead and his religion is dead with him". Yet two years after his death the whole island was Catholic.

The Blood of Martyrs is the Seed of Christians

"The blood of Martyrs" --- that could not yet be said officially, for *martyr* in the Church means something clear and definite. But since 1954 the words can now be repeated with all their true force because in that year Pope Pius XII declared Peter Chanel a true martyr and placed him among the long line of recognized Saints of the Church.

Today the Vicariate of Wallis and Futuna Islands has a civic population of 8,574. The Catholic population is 8,574. Yes, the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians and as so often has been repeated in the history of the Church, there was a triumph of seeming failure. After all it seemed Christ had failed when he was nailed to the Cross. His Glorious Resurrection proved the triumph of his seeming failure.

Contemplation

In every age of history some Catholics feel called to become members of religious groups of either men or women who dedicate themselves completely to God in contemplation and prayer. The Poor Clare Nuns at Campbelltown, N.S.W., the Cistercian Monks at Yarra Glen, Vic., and the Carmelite Nuns in each of the Australian capital cities are typical of such contemplative Religious Orders. They consecrate themselves totally to God in silence, contemplation, prayer and penance.

Such totally dedicated lives are a powerful reminder to the world that God has made us for himself alone. All who come in contact with them are strengthened in their awareness of the primary importance of spiritual values. The total consecration of their energies to God is a direct challenge to many who deny God or ignore him.

Great emphasis on silent contemplation each day highlights the supreme value of recollection and attentiveness to God. Recollected silence provides a maximum of opportunities and a minimum of distractions in their search for complete union with their Creator. During evening recreation after each day of contemplation and prayer they share together the joy of God's love and friendship.

Though set apart from the daily lives of the majority of people the life of a contemplative monk or nun is still the most unselfish life of all. Given directly and wholly to God it is an immediate participation in the saving work of Christ who redeemed the world principally by prayer and the sacrifice of himself.

Secular Institutes

Some men and women dedicate their lives completely to God without becoming Priests or Nuns or Brothers. They offer themselves completely to God through vows or promises to practise celibacy and poverty and to obey approved rules and regulations regarding regular prayer and meditation and works of charity. They strive to make daily participation in the Eucharist the centre of their lives. Some do not wear any special religious dress; they usually continue to live in their own homes; they share in a special way in the life of the Church by their regular Christian service of others.

Voluntary Service

There are many voluntary organizations and fellowships of Catholics dedicated to a variety of works of charity and service. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a typical example. Branches of this society exist in nearly every parish in Australia. The members live ordinary family lives but give some hours of their free time each week to the work of their society. At their weekly meeting they pray together and meditate on some aspect of the Christian life. Then they work to help the poor, the needy, the sick and the lonely. They collect money, clothing, furniture and household goods and distribute them to those who need them. They build night shelters for homeless people, visit those in prison, care for the families of prisoners, visit the sick in hospitals and in their homes.

Catholics are encouraged to become members of some voluntary society of this kind. Through it they become more Christlike in their daily lives, and bring the love and compassion of Christ into the lives of others.

In the fourth and fifth chapters of the Letter to the Hebrews there is this summary of the Church's teaching on the Catholic priesthood.

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honour upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was" (Hebr. 4, 14---5, 4).

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POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What are the main functions in the Church which can be performed only by priests?**
- 2. Give some reasons for the belief that Jesus intended that the Apostles should pass on their priesthood to others.**
- 3. List some motives which might prompt a person to become a Priest or a Brother or a Nun.**
- 4. What are some of the reasons why the Church selects its candidates for the priesthood from those who promise to remain unmarried?**
- 5. Describe the work of some Religious Community of Nuns you have come in contact with.**
- 6. What in your opinion is the most necessary form of Christian service of others today?**