

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)" (St. 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" (St. 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, we participate in Christ's "total sharing of self out of love." This participation should lead to a new awareness of Christ's presence in the assembly. Pope Francis asks:

But the Eucharist which I celebrate, does it lead me to truly feel they are all like brothers and sisters? Does it increase my capacity to rejoice with those who are rejoicing and cry with those who are crying? Does it urge me to go out to the

poor, the sick, the marginalized?
Does it help me to recognize in theirs
the face of Jesus? (General audience,
Feb. 12, 2014)

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

St. 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). “Ordained ministers and other
pastoral workers,” Pope Francis writes,
must “make present the fragrance of
Christ’s closeness” through the “art of
accompaniment” (*Evangelii Gaudium*
[*Joy of the Gospel*], no. 169). 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?

Learn about the other sacraments! Visit “Resources and Tools” at www.usccb.org/jphd.