

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Continuing this series of factual letters about the sacraments of the church, we finally come to the two sacraments of service. The first of these is Ordination.

There are three holy orders into which a man may be ordained. The first is the Order of the Diaconate. The first deacons were chosen by the apostles to assist them in practical ministry. In the Acts of the Apostles seven men were chosen to administer the charitable work of the church, releasing the apostles to preach the gospel.

A deacon is therefore ordained to service and is answerable directly to the bishop, the successor of the apostles. A deacon may be any Catholic man in good standing with the church. His function in the church is one of service, and his work of service is seen liturgically in the preparation of the altar, the reception of the gifts, and in preaching--both in reading the gospel and preaching at Mass.

Because of their work of service, the deacons show the whole church the model of servanthood. Liturgically and theologically they also stand for Christ the suffering servant, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. In addition to these duties, a deacon may also officiate at weddings, funerals and be an ordinary minister of baptism.

The priest is a Catholic man who is free to be ordained. The priest does all that a deacon may do, but in addition, he is authorized to celebrate Mass, hear confession and administer holy anointing. Because he shares in Christ's forgiving work, the priest stands in persona Christi capita -- representing Christ Himself at the altar, both priest and victim.

Because he represents Christ in the symbolism of the liturgy, the priest also represents the different roles of Christ in the story of redemption. As the deacon stands for the Suffering Servant, the priest stands as Christ the Priest and Victim. He also represents Christ the Bridegroom of His bride the Church, and if a bridegroom, then also husband and father. This is why a woman is unable to be ordained as a priest.

The sacrament of holy orders is fulfilled in the bishop who gathers up all these functions in his role as the successor of the Apostles.

Finally, the bishop, priests, and deacons remind us that, by virtue of our baptism we all share in the priestly service of Christ and His church. "The priesthood of all believers" means that while we are not all sacramentally ordained priests, all of us are called to serve and "offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God which is our reasonable service."

Your Pastor,
Fr. Longenecker