

Holy Orders

In the Sacrament of Holy Orders, there are three degrees or “orders”: bishop, priest, and deacon. The rite of ordination is the sacramental act that makes this possible. Ordination “confers a gift of the Holy Spirit that permits the exercise of a ‘sacred power’ . . . which can come only from Christ himself through the Church” (CCC, no. 1538).

Bishops: By ordination to the episcopacy, bishops receive the fullness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders and become successors of the Apostles. Through this Sacrament, a bishop belongs to the college of bishops and serves as the visible head or pastor of the local church entrusted to his care. As a college, the bishops have care and concern for the apostolic mission of all the churches in union with and under the authority of the Pope—the head of the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome, and the successor of St. Peter.

Priests: By ordination, “priests are united with the bishops in [priestly] dignity and at the same time depend on them in the exercise of their pastoral functions; they are called to be the bishops’ prudent co-workers” (CCC, no. 1595). With the bishop, priests form a *presbyteral* (priestly) community and assume with him the pastoral mission for a particular parish.

The bishop appoints priests to the pastoral care of parishes and to other diocesan ministries. The priest promises obedience to the bishop in service to God’s people.

Deacons: The title *deacon* comes from the Greek word *diakonia* meaning “servant.” A deacon has a special attachment to the bishop in the tasks of service and is configured to Christ, the Deacon—or Servant—of all (cf. CCC, nos. 1569-1570). Deacons receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders from a bishop and are ordained not to the ministerial priesthood but to the ministry of service. Through ordination the deacon is conformed to Christ, who came to serve, not to be served. In the Latin Church, deacons may baptize, proclaim the Gospel, preach the homily, assist the bishop or priest in the celebration of the Eucharist, assist at and bless marriages, and preside at funerals.