

The Sacrament of Holy Orders and the Priesthood



Catechism 1565 Through the sacrament of Holy Orders priests share in the universal dimensions of the mission that Christ entrusted to the apostles. The spiritual gift they have received in ordination prepares them, not for a limited and restricted mission, "but for the fullest, in fact the universal mission of salvation 'to the end of the earth,'" prepared in spirit to preach the Gospel everywhere.

Protestant Reformation



Martin Luther rejected the teaching of the Catholic Church that the priesthood was established by Christ. Luther wrote on Holy Orders:

“Of this sacrament the Church of Christ knows nothing; it was invented by the church of the Pope. It not only has no promise of grace, anywhere declared, but not a word is said about it in the whole of the New Testament. Now it is ridiculous to set up as a sacrament of God that which can nowhere be proved to have been instituted by God..... After this they bring in their very strongest argument, namely, that Christ said at the last supper: “Do this in remembrance of me.” “Behold!” they say, “Christ ordained them as priests..... In fact they have extracted out of this text whatever they would; like men who claim the right to assert at their own free choice whatsoever they please out of any words of Christ, wherever spoken. But is this to interpret the words of God? Let us reply to them that in these words Christ gives no promise, but only a command that this should be done in remembrance of Him.” *First Principles of the Reformation on Orders*

The Council of Trent

In response to the Protestants, the Church convoked the Council of Trent. Here are three infallible Canons against their teachings on the priesthood:

Session XXII Canon II: If anyone says that by those words, “Do this for a commemoration of me” Christ did not institute the Apostles priests or did not ordain that they and other priests should offer His own body and blood, let him be anathema.

Session XXIII Canon I: If anyone says that there is not in the New Testament a visible and external priesthood or that there is no power of consecrating and offering the true body and blood of the Lord and of forgiving and retaining sins but only the office and bare ministry of preaching the Gospel; or that those who do not preach are not priests at all, let him be anathema

Canon III: If anyone says that order or sacred ordination is not truly and properly a sacrament instituted by Christ the Lord, or that it is some human contrivance devised by men unskilled in ecclesiastical matters, or that it is only a certain rite for choosing ministers of the word of God and of the sacraments, let him be anathema.

Protestant Objections: There is no evidence in scripture of the priesthood. It speaks only of elders not priests.

Catholic Answer: The New Testament was originally written in Greek and Greek is the inspired text.

Whenever you read the word “elder” in scripture it is *presbyteros* in Greek and in Latin it is translated *presbyter*. Go to any dictionary and you will find that it is then translated in Old English as *prēost* and in Middle English as *prest* and in modern English it is *priest*.

Protestant Objection: I don’t go by what the dictionary says. I go by the bible alone!

Catholic Answer: We can prove from the bible alone that an “elder” (*presbyteros* in Greek) is a priest.

In the Book of Revelation the apostle John saw presbyters (elders in English) offering incense we read:

“The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb each holding a harp and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, they sang a new song.” Revelation 5:8

We know from scripture that only priests, not lay people, were allowed to offer incense. We see that referenced in the epistle of Jude 1:11 “Woe to them! For they walk in the way of Cain and abandon themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error and perish in **Korah’s** rebellion.”

The Punishment of Korah





Korah's rebellion is recounted in Numbers 16.

Korah and over 14,000 members of the congregation rebelled against Moses. Korah was a Levite but he wasn't a priest. He was a Kohathite and their duty was to carry the holy objects of the sanctuary. (See Numbers 4:15)

Korah and 250 men were chosen to speak out against Moses and Aaron. Korah and his followers stood with 250 censers full of fire and incense at the entrance to the tabernacle. The earth opened up and swallowed all 250 men.

God then inflicted a plague on the other 14,700 members of Korah's rebellion and they all died for trying to usurp the authority of Moses and elevate themselves to ministerial priests.

The descendants of Aaron were all ministerial priests and according to Numbers 16 only ministerial priests could offer incense. When the apostle John tells us in the Book of Revelation that the 24 elders were offering incense he is telling us that they were ministerial priests because offering incense is a function of a priest.

Therefore we can conclude that whenever the word "elder" is found in the New Testament it is referring to ministerial priests.

For more on Korah's rebellion and the priesthood go [HERE](#)

Protestant Objection: The Bible clearly states that all Christians are priests in 1 Peter 2: 9. There is no longer need for a ministerial priesthood.

Catholic Answer: The Bible tells us in Exodus 19:6 that the Israelites were a kingdom of priests and yet they had Aaron as High Priest and below him ministerial priests. We see the same in the New Testament. Jesus is our High Priest and then there are ministerial priests and then the lay people who are priests because of their baptism.

Catechism 784 On entering the People of God through faith and Baptism, one receives a share in this people's unique, *priestly* vocation: "Christ the Lord, high priest taken from among men, has made this new people 'a kingdom of priests to God, his Father.' The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are *consecrated* to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood."

Protestant Objection: There isn't any scripture that speaks of a ministerial priest.

Catholic Answer: In the book of Revelation the apostle John saw presbyters (elders in English) offering incense which is only done by priests in scripture.

In the epistle of James he says if anyone is sick call the presbyters (elders in English) and they will anoint the sick man with oil, another function of a priest.

Authority to forgive or NOT forgive sin was given to men. Matt. 9:8 and John 20:23

In 2 Corinthians Paul says that he forgave sins in the "person of Christ" (Greek prosopon, Latin persona Christi). Forgiving sins is a function of a priest.

In Romans 15:16 Paul says he is in the "priestly service".

Hebrews 7:12 says there is now a change in the priesthood'

Hebrews 13:10 says "we have an altar". Altars are only used for sacrifice, a function of a priest.

Matthias was chosen by lot in Acts 1:20 to hold the office of Bishop.

Luke 1:8-9 tells us priests were chosen by lot to enter the Temple.

At the Last Supper Jesus told the Apostles "Do this in remembrance of me." Do what? Offer the Eucharist which is a priestly service for the faithful.

Paul consecrates the Eucharist in 1 Cor. 11:23 the function of a priest.

Hebrews 8:6 says we now have a better ministry. The Greek word for ministry is "leitourgia" where the word "liturgy" comes from.

Protestant objection: Christ never made the apostles priests.

Catholic Answer: Jesus made them priests when He said at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me" which may also be translated, "Offer this as my memorial sacrifice"

The Greek word poiein or "do" has sacrificial overtones. This can be seen by examining the way it is used in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. For instance, Exodus 29:38: "This is that which you shall offer (poieseis) upon the altar: two lambs." Here the verb poiein is translated as "offer"

Jesus' word anamnesis, usually translated "remembrance," also has sacrificial overtones in the Old Testament. In addition to "Do" and "Remembrance" Jesus used other words associated with sacrifice such as blood, chalice, body and shed. To offer a sacrifice you must have priests.

MATTHEW 12

Even though Jesus “ordained” the apostles as priests and gave them the authority to change bread and wine into His body and blood at the Last Supper we also see that Jesus considered His apostles to be priests in Matthew 12:1-8 where we find the story of His disciples eating grain on the Sabbath:

“At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, **something greater than the temple is here.**”

In Judaism all work is forbidden on the Sabbath. The people must rest on the Sabbath even from baking and cooking. However in Judaism there was an exception; priests could work in the Temple service on the Sabbath offering the sacrifices including the bread of the Presence. The priests would be breaking the Law but were guiltless because of an exception, they were priests.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that HE is greater than the Temple and therefore his disciples are “guiltless” because of an exception, they too are priests and working on the Sabbath for the true Temple.

To read the transcript from a debate on the priesthood go [HERE](#)

Next topic: Is celibacy of the priesthood biblical?