

Holy Orders evolved in response to each era

By Rob Cullivan
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The church often refers to Jesus Christ as the "High Priest," pointing to his life of service, sacrifice, teaching and healing as a model for ordained ministry.

The boundaries of priesthood in the church have widened and constricted time and time again. To this day, the territory of ordained ministry contains unmapped realms.

Over the centuries, priests have lived as pastors and monks, husbands and celibates, bishops and politicians, judges and popes.

In a number of centuries — including our own — the sacrament of Holy Orders has encompassed a separate group of ordained men known as deacons. In other eras, scholars observe, the diaconate simply served as a stepping stone on the way to priestly ordination.

Ordained ministry long has been a feature of many religions. Joseph Martos noted in his book *Doors to the Sacred — A Historical Introduction to the Sacraments in the Catholic Church*. Following their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites boasted a hereditary priesthood drawn mainly from the clan of Aaron and the tribe of Levi.

"Priests were expected to lead exemplary lives and be respected by the people since they were engaged in the service of God," Martos wrote, "but in some ways, too, the whole nation was considered a 'kingdom of priests' since they were a chosen people who were called to holiness."

St. Peter emphasized this point in his first epistle. He exhorted his readers to be like "living stones," allowing God to build them into "a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Despite the church's continuing emphasis on the universal "priesthood" shared by all its members, in practical terms, some form of designated leadership seems to have been a part of Christianity since its origin. Initially, Christ's apostles and disciples were seen as ambassadors of his message, expressly chosen by the Lord to convey his teaching to the world.

In *Special Signs of Grace — The Sacraments and Sacramentals*, Father Joseph M. Champlin of Syracuse explained that about a century after Christ's birth, St. Ignatius of Antioch described a rather clearly defined hierarchy of ordained ministers known as deacons, presbyters and bishops.

Much about these classes of ministers can be learned by exploring the roots of each word.

"Deacon" derives from the Greek term for "servant," as in servant of the church. Deacons, therefore, were known for tending to the needs of widows and the poor, for example.

"Presbyters," on the other hand, were respected elders or leaders of the local church. The word "priest" is itself rooted in the word presbyter. And "bishop" is an English word derived from the Greek word *episkopos* meaning "overseer."

Martos' book explains that the early bishops often were presiding elders or chief presbyters of their Christian communities.

The importance and relative power in the church exercised by each of these ministerial groups waxed and waned through the church's history.

Although St. Ignatius spoke of a hierarchy early in the Christian era, historians have noted some Christian communities operated without such power structures, according to Father Joseph Hart, director of the diocesan Office of the Synod and associate professor of theology at St. Bernard's Institute.

"The evidence is so slim, we don't really know who the first single bishop was," Father Hart told the *Catholic Courier*. He added that some communities apparently had no single leaders but instead boards of



This image from the Middle Ages depicts the ordination of a bishop. The sacrament of Holy Orders has undergone many transformations as the times and culture around the church changed.

elders or presbyters.

As the early church developed the theology of Eucharist as a sacrifice, scholars report, presbyters and bishops began to take on a "priestly" role similar to that exercised by the ancient priests of Israel who made sacrifices to Yahweh on behalf of their people.

As time went on, the structure of the ordained ministry of the church became more organized and regulated. Burgeoning numbers of the faithful led to increased demand for presbyters and deacons. As a result, their duties became full-time professions.

Climbing conversions following the Roman Empire's legalization of Christianity in the early fourth century made it impossible for bishops to preside at all of the eucharistic celebrations needed by their communities. As a result, presbyters took on more and more important roles in the church, presiding at eucharistic and baptismal liturgies, for example.

By the fifth century, Martos explained, presbyters were commonly referred to as priests, though still seen as an order second to the priesthood of bishops.

Priests also began to assume many of the ministries exercised by permanent deacons, causing the diaconate to lose importance in the church. This shift contributed to the diaconate's virtual disappearance. By the sixth century, the church viewed the diaconate merely as a waystation on the road to priesthood, rather than as a lifelong ministry.

Starting with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, meanwhile, the church's bishops took on more and more temporal power, serving as judges and rulers in many areas where inhabitants considered the church as the only legitimate authority.

History reveals, however, that worldly authority eventually corrupted many clerics, leading to schisms, power struggles and, in later centuries, some of the abuses that sparked the Protestant Reformation.

Like the members of the flocks they shepherded, many bishops and priests of the early church were married and had children. Yet as early as the third century, Father Hart explained, some Christians

were demanding that their priests become celibate so as to better serve the faithful.

Many of the early Christian leaders were influenced by such thinkers as St. Augustine, who saw sexual relations — even between married people — as tainted by lust and sin unless undertaken solely for procreation.

Father Hart noted that the view of celibacy as a holier way of life was rooted, in part, in a belief that Christian priests should abstain from sexual relations before celebrating the Eucharist, just as the ancient Jewish priests had done before making sacrifices to Yahweh.

As daily Mass became more popular, however, it became virtually impossible for married priests to frequently celebrate the Eucharist in such a "pure" manner. Father Hart remarked, whereas celibate monks who were priests could do so.

In addition, other scholars have observed that the influence of monasticism, and con-

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cern over the inheritance of church property added further impetus for the growing practice of celibacy. Nonetheless, the discipline was not made mandatory until the 11th century.

The Council of Trent, called in the 16th century in response to questions and problems posed by the Protestant Reformation, also reformed the priesthood. Among other changes instituted by the council, the declarations of Trent directed priests to pray and preach more, and established seminary training in theology and canon law.

Nationalism and the rise of Europe's civil governments in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries led to a decline in the clergy's temporal power. As a result, scholars noted, priestly life took on a monastic character. Although priests in such orders as the Jesuits remained active in the outer world, parish priests tended to remove themselves more and more from public

life.

"(T)he ideal priestly ministry was portrayed as one that revolved around the Mass and the sacraments," Martos wrote of the 18th-century priesthood.

One legacy of the Council of Trent was a period of relative stability in the clerical roles that lasted through the mid-20th century.

But as it did in in almost every area of church life, the Second Vatican Council — convened in 1962 — brought about a dramatic re-examination of priestly ministry. Its effects are still being felt, as evidenced by Pope Paul VI's reinstatement 10 years later of the permanent diaconate for married and unmarried men.

The council called priests to see themselves not only as possessors of certain spiritual powers, but also as servants of the community. Emphasizing the "lay apostolate," the council helped to create a veritable explosion of lay ministries. That explosion was a timely development, Father Champlin explained, as it coincided with a decline in priestly vocations.

Scholars have observed that the questioning atmosphere created in the council's wake led some priests to leave the priesthood, and lay men to hesitate in committing to it.

On the other hand, Father Thomas Mull, priest consultant to the Diocesan Office of Liturgy, remarked that Vatican II charged priests with seeing themselves in a new light — that of developer of the gifts of the lay Catholic.

Father Champlin echoed this point when he wrote in *Signs of Grace*: "Still ministers of the Word and the sacraments, (priests) must also serve as enablers and coordinators of the gifts which the baptized possess and share."

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