

LEADER



BRIDGE TO ETERNITY

A Retreat Guide on the Sacrament of Holy Orders

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FIRST MEDITATION

BRIDGING THE GAP

INTRODUCTION


What is a deacon, a priest, a bishop? What role does God call these sacred ministers to have in the life of the Church and the world? Furthermore, knowing the weakness of human beings—so evident in the sins and scandals linked to many ordained ministers throughout the centuries—why in the world did God invent this sacrament in the first place?

We can only begin to answer these questions in a short meditation like this, but a good beginning is a worthy endeavor. Let's start by reflecting briefly on the priesthood in general, in its broad human context. Then we will better be able to appreciate how, in Christ, God elevated and brought to fulfillment the basic human need for priests.

NATURAL RELIGION

Every human society that we know of has had religious practices. Signs of mankind's attempt to communicate with the divine accompany even the earliest archeological evidence of a human presence on earth. For example, the earliest humans buried their dead out of a sense of respect for the afterlife, for unseen spiritual realities.

Some modern thinkers chalk this up to ignorance and superstition in primitive peoples. But the Catechism goes deeper when it tells us:

 *The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God.*

—CCC 27

Human beings are made by God and for God; we are naturally religious.

CHRIST THE PRIEST: A REAL BRIDGE FROM GOD TO MAN AND FROM MAN TO GOD

Yet, natural religion differs from Christianity because it is one-directional; it is mankind's natural effort to enter into relationship with God. Natural religion uses prayers, sacrifices, and other rituals to try and bridge the gulf between the fallen, sinful human family and God. But just as a drowning man cannot save himself, neither can we return to full communion with God merely by our own efforts. Only God can bridge the gulf between earth and heaven, between eternal happiness and temporal suffering. And that's exactly what he did when he sent Jesus Christ to be our Savior. As true God and true man, Christ himself is the bridge to eternity that reconnects the human and divine.

This unique role in salvation history makes Christ a unique priest. In natural religion (and even in ancient Israel), priests were members of a society set aside to take special care of the community's relationship with God. The ancient Roman term for priest expresses this well. It is "pontifex," and it comes from two Latin words, pons & facere meaning to make a bridge. But they could only make half of the bridge, the half that touches the human side of the relationship.

Jesus, on the other hand, is the true, eternal priest. As man, he is able to make the human side of the bridge, and as God, he is able to connect that human side to the divine side. This is why Jesus' priesthood, unlike that of the Old Covenant or of merely natural religions, is definitive and everlasting. He alone has truly reopened the flow of grace between God and mankind "once for all," and so he alone is "a priest forever," as the Letter to the Hebrews makes clear. (Hebrews 9:26, 5:6)



THE COMMON PRIESTHOOD OF ALL THE FAITHFUL

When Christ claims us for his own through baptism, we become sharers in that unique and everlasting priesthood; we participate in what is called “the common priesthood of all believers.” Thus, in Christ, our worship, prayers, and sacrifices are truly pleasing to God and have a real effect on the history of salvation—they move back and forth across the priestly bridge of Christ, spreading real communion between God and the human family. For this reason, the Catholic Church of the New Covenant takes on Israel’s title of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9).

CONCLUSION: “I HAVE CHOSEN YOU”

Nevertheless, Christ himself also established another type of priesthood, a sacramental and ministerial priesthood. He called twelve of his disciples and set them aside to be full-time ministers of his New Covenant. The Gospels clearly mark out the main characteristics that Jesus gave to these first recipients of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

In the first place, he graced them with a special kind of intimate friendship. He called them intentionally and kept them close to him. As St. Mark puts it:

“He went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted and they came to him. He appointed twelve [whom he also named apostles] that they might be with him ...

—Mark 3:13–14

Secondly, he entrusted them with special responsibility and authority to teach in his name, to govern the Church, and to spread the message that he had come to reveal to the world, and to authorize others to spread that message too. Here is how St. Matthew expresses it at the end of his Gospel, when Jesus addresses his chosen Apostles for the last time before his ascension into heaven:

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...

—Matthew 28:19–20

Another characteristic of the priesthood as Christ envisions it has to do with his delegation of the authority to forgive sins, to administer the sacrament of reconciliation. Here is how St. John describes it:

“And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’”

—John 20:22–23

Finally, the most critical role of ordained ministers in the life of Christ’s Church is to perpetuate throughout all time the Lord’s own, unique sacrifice that atoned for the sin of mankind and reestablished communion between God and the human family. This was the sacrifice of his own body and blood on the cross at Calvary, made present in the day-to-day reality of every one of his faithful followers through the celebration of the Eucharist, through the Mass.

St. Paul calls this to mind when he explains the meaning behind the Mass and reminds the Christians in Corinth that the Mass is not just a symbol of the Lord’s sacrifice of his body and blood, but a true making present of that sacrifice, so that each of us can benefit from it and unite our lives to it. He writes:

“Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord.

—1 Corinthians 11:27

These, then, are the key characteristics of Holy Orders, and they clearly flow from the Lord’s own plan for his Church. Jesus himself is the eternal high priest of the whole human race—he is the bridge between time and eternity. But he extends that bridge into our lives through the authority, the teaching, and the sacraments of the Church, which come to us through the service of ordained ministers. The sacrament of Holy Orders, then, is God’s way of guaranteeing that all of us have everything we need to reach the fulfillment that comes from living in communion with God.

Take some time now to savor and appreciate this part of God’s plan. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.



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SECOND MEDITATION

SHEPHERDS LIKE THE GOOD SHEPHERD

INTRODUCTION

One of the amazing things about the Catholic Church, the Church that Jesus founded, is its consistency. The same sacraments and the same hierarchical structure that we experience in the Church today were already in place at the time of St. Paul in the first century. The priestly duties conferred by Christ on his first Apostles were passed on by them to a second generation of ordained ministers, and that chain has been unbroken ever since. Here is how Pope St. Clement described this process in chapter 42 of his Letter to the Corinthians written around the year 96 AD:

“The Apostles were made preachers of the gospel to us by the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent by God ... Accordingly, when they had proclaimed the word through country districts and cities and had tested the first converts of these by the spirit, they appointed bishops and deacons of those who were to believe.

SACRED HANDS

The way that “appointment” of Holy Orders happened has an important meaning for all of us. Even in the New Testament, the essential elements are already described. Ordaining a deacon, priest, or bishop consisted of “the laying on of hands” and a prayer of consecration (e.g., Acts 6:6 and I Timothy 1:6). And it is still the same today in administering Holy Orders. This laying on of hands was present even in the Old Testament. For example, the Book of Deuteronomy tells us:

“Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him, and him the Israelites obeyed, carrying out the order which the Lord had given to Moses.

—Deuteronomy 34:9

The hands are a symbol of strength and action, of work and good deeds. By choosing to administer the sacrament of Holy Orders in this way, the Holy Spirit shows that ordained ministry is primarily a sacrament

of service for others. The priest is not ordained for his own benefit or honor, but for the benefit of the people of God, of the Kingdom of Christ. Here’s how the Catechism puts it:

“That office which the Lord committed to the pastors of his people, is in the strict sense of the term a service ... It depends entirely on Christ and on his unique priesthood; it has been instituted for the good of men and the communion of the Church. The sacrament of Holy Orders communicates a “sacred power” which is none other than that of Christ. The exercise of this authority must therefore be measured against the model of Christ, who by love made himself the least and the servant of all. The Lord said clearly that concern for his flock was proof of love for him.

—CCC 1551

In other words, the model for every priest is Christ himself. Although the sacred power to celebrate the sacraments comes to an ordained minister automatically, so to speak, every recipient of Holy Orders is also called by God to cultivate a lifestyle and a manner of celebrating those sacraments that reflects Christ’s own goodness, humility, and wisdom in every way. Deacons, priests, and bishops are called to act, work, and serve the people of God just as Christ did. They are called to become true pastors, shepherds of God’s people, after the example of the chief shepherd, Christ himself. All this is symbolized by the sacramental act of ordination through the laying on of hands.

Just as Jesus welcomed repentant sinners, the priest through the sacrament of confession does the same. Just as Jesus fed the hungry crowds with miraculously multiplied bread, so the priest administers Holy Communion to people hungering after holiness. Just as Jesus healed and comforted the sick and suffering, so the priest administers the sacrament of anointing to all who are in need. Just as Jesus taught true doctrine even in the face of violent opposition, so the priest proclaims the teaching of Christ and the Church persistently, “whether it is convenient or inconvenient” (2 Timothy 4:2). And just as Jesus laid down his own life on the altar of the cross to pay the price for sin



and reveal the limitlessness of God’s merciful love, so the priest pours out his own life for the sake of those entrusted to his spiritual care, drawing all his strength from the altar of the Mass.

GIFT AND MYSTERY

This vision of Holy Orders makes it clear why no one has a right to become an ordained minister. From the very first the initiative was with God:

It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain ...

—John 15:16

When God calls a man to be a priest, he is calling him to enter into the mystery of spiritual fatherhood, to die to himself in order to become a channel of grace for others. Once again, we see God’s humility at work: he chooses to take care of his beloved flock through the free collaboration of ordinary men, “chosen” for an extraordinary mission.

And the history of the Church is bursting with ordained ministers who have lived their extraordinary vocation to imitate Christ the Good Shepherd with dynamism, heroic devotion, and dramatic ingenuity. Deacons like St. Francis of Assisi, priests like St. John Vianney, and bishops like St. John Paul II show the face of the Good Shepherd to the world in every generation.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Unfortunately, though, not every priest is faithful, nor is every bishop and deacon—but Christ is. And he will continue to send his grace into his Church, even if some of his shepherds fail him. Indeed, for the faith-filled Catholic the mere fact of the continued existence of the sacrament of Holy Orders is a constant reminder of Christ’s own unfailing love and providence, as well as an undeniable proof of the eternal vitality of his Church.

St. Matthew gives us a privileged glimpse into our Lord’s faithful priestly heart at the end of the ninth Chapter of his Gospel.

He writes:

At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.

—Matthew 9:36

And in the same passage, Jesus admonished his followers that

The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few, so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for the harvest.

—Matthew 9:37–38

Let’s take some time now to do that, to ask God to keep sending good shepherds to his Church, and to give us all the generosity and courage we need to say yes to God’s calling in our own lives, and to help others do the same.

In the conference, we will look at some of the reasons behind priestly celibacy, but for now, let’s speak with our Lord in the quiet of our hearts about this beautiful, powerful sacrament that he has given us as a bridge from time into eternity. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. It is easy for us to see that no ordained minister is a perfect shepherd of his flock—only Christ himself is perfect. How does God want us to deal with the flaws of our shepherds?
2. When was the last time I prayed for my parish priest? For my bishop? How firmly do I believe that they truly need the support of our prayers?
3. When was the last time I asked a young man if he had ever felt a call to the priesthood? Would I feel comfortable doing that if I met a young man who seemed like he would be a good priest? Why or why not? How regularly do I pray for “the lord of the harvest to send out laborers for the harvest”?



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CONFERENCE

PRIESTLY CELIBACY FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM

INTRODUCTION

Celibacy, the priest's free commitment to a life of chastity while remaining unmarried, has long been a distinctive trait of the Catholic priesthood, so much so that it's almost always one of the first things non-Catholics associate with the Catholic Church. But the celibate priesthood has its critics. Taking a brief look at some of their main arguments against celibacy will help generate a fuller understanding and appreciation of the Church's wise and convincing reasons for it.

CELIBACY AND SEXUALITY

Perhaps the most common argument against celibacy is *"Married priests would have fewer difficulties living out their sexuality."*

In the first place, this argument posits a superficial conception of marriage and sexuality—as if marriage were merely a vehicle for letting off sexual steam. Marriage and marital intimacy are a lot more than that. In fact, marriage too is a sacrament, an efficacious sign of God's grace. It shouldn't be demeaned.

But this objection makes two other ungrounded assumptions. First, it assumes that most priests have noteworthy difficulty living out their vow of celibacy. Now, it's clear that some priests do, and they make the news because of it, but it's not clear that most, or even a slight majority, or even many priests do. Not at all.

Second, the argument assumes that most married men don't have difficulty living out their sexuality, as if as soon as a man gets married, all temptations and difficulties just disappear. This is clearly false. Pornography is equally rife among bachelors and husbands, and marital infidelity remains one of the leading causes of divorce. Furthermore, the most reliable statistics indicate that married men are also just as likely as single men to be involved in sexual abuse crimes, and even more likely than celibate priests.^[1]

So letting priests marry would not magically remove temptations and difficulties. Whether celibate, married, or single, all Catholic men are called to live the virtue of chastity, and that always takes a healthy combination of self-discipline, maturity, and God's grace—no matter what.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Another common argument goes like this: *"Priestly celibacy was invented later in history and is an expression of a male-chauvinistic culture; in the early, pre-male-dominated Church priests were married. Therefore, priests today should also be allowed to marry."*


This objection depends on inaccurate history and flawed theology. Priestly celibacy didn't begin "later in history"; it began with Jesus Christ—who was celibate—continued in New Testament times (with St. John the Evangelist and St. Paul, for instance) and has been present in the Church ever since.

It is true that some of the first Apostles and many of the priests and bishops in the early Church were married. But that doesn't imply that celibacy was a later invention. Rather, married priests and celibate priests coexisted in the first centuries of the Church's history, even though celibacy was preferred—so preferred, in fact, that in the early Middle Ages it was made a required discipline for all priests of the Latin Rite. (Married priests exist in the Oriental Catholic Churches, though usually bishops are required to be celibate. But even in those traditions, once a man is ordained to the priesthood, he cannot marry.) So, historically speaking, priestly celibacy has been around as long as the Church has been around.

[1] See the studies quoted in "9 Myths about Priestly Pedophilia" at catholiceducation.org: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/9-myths-about-priestly-pedophilia.html>




Theologically, celibacy undertaken for the Kingdom of Christ is rooted in the gospel itself, not in a medieval program of male domination. Jesus praises celibacy “for the sake of the Kingdom.”:

 *Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.*

—Matthew 19:11–12

St. Paul also praises the celibate state in his first letter to the Corinthians:

 *Now to the unmarried and to widows, I say: it is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do ... those who marry will experience affliction in their earthly life, and I would like to spare you that ... I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided ...*

—I Corinthians 7:8, 28, 32–33

St. Paul concludes by pointing out that both marriage and celibacy are good, saying that whoever marries does well, and whoever refrains from marriage for the sake of the Kingdom, does better (cf. I Corinthians 7:38). Historically, therefore, celibacy was not an invention of the Middle Ages. And theologically it has nothing to do with unjust male domination—we’ll go further into what it does have to do with later on.

CELIBACY AND VOCATIONS

Another objection claims that “*Allowing priests to marry would end the shortage of priestly vocations.*”

This objection is naïve and superficial. In the first place, the “shortage” of priests is not universal. Some parts of the world are experiencing it, while seminaries in other parts of the world are showing an abundance of vocations. If the problem were celibacy, why would there be such a discrepancy?

Second, the countries that are suffering a lack of vocations to the priesthood now did not suffer such a lack in years past. Again, if the problem were celibacy, why the discrepancy?

Third, plenty of mainstream Protestant Churches allow their clergy to marry, but this hasn’t flooded their seminaries.

Clearly, the so-called “vocations crisis” needs to look elsewhere for a solution.

CELIBACY AND COUNSELING

Another objection claims that “*Married priests would be better equipped to counsel married couples.*”

This objection is also based on two faulty assumptions. The first is that Catholic couples are only supposed to receive counsel from priests. That’s not true. A healthy diocese or parish offers engaged and married couples the services of well-formed Catholic physicians and psychiatrists on matters where medical expertise is required. They also offer mini-courses and retreats that include sessions with experienced couples who can help younger couples overcome difficulties and make the most of opportunities. The priest who cuts himself off from this kind of help is simply not being faithful to the mind of the Church.

The second faulty assumption is that you have to actually experience all the problems that marriages can undergo in order to be able to help solve them. That’s like saying that a doctor has to suffer from a disease himself in order to be able to identify and cure it. If this were the case, no one would be qualified to give marriage counsel, because no one person has experienced all the problems that can crop up in a marriage.

But even so, priests can become excellent guides and supports for married couples. A dedicated priest takes his spiritual fatherhood seriously and can get to know hundreds of families and married couples in the course of his ministry, maybe even thousands. He learns from this vast experience. He accompanies couples through the good times and the bad; he gets to know the symptoms, causes, and solutions of the most common and uncommon marriage and family troubles. And because of his exclusive dedication to the Church, both men and women can approach him with confidence, with openness.



Maybe they will need to talk to experts or experienced married couples about particular psychological and physiological issues, but they can open their hearts to the priest. In this way, the priest becomes a truly unique resource for married couples: an objective, but at the same time caring and experienced spiritual guide for the people entrusted to his ministry.

THE REASONS FOR CELIBACY

Those are some frequent arguments made against celibacy, and some brief answers. But the real reasons for priestly celibacy are more than just responses to objections. They show the immense advantages of a celibate priesthood, both for the priest and for the Church. There are three of them.

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL REASON

First, there's the Christological reason. What is a Catholic priest? Someone whom God has chosen to exercise Christ's own eternal priesthood in a particular place and time. Through the ordained priest, Christ himself pastures his flock, feeding them with the Eucharist, interceding for them through the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, healing them with the sacraments of anointing and confession ... In short, a Catholic priest is an extension of Christ's incarnation. His total dedication to the little part of the Church that has been entrusted to him is a visible sign of Christ's total dedication to the Church as a whole. A celibate priesthood is a clearer expression of this; it's a clearer manifestation of Christ himself, who was celibate, married to the Church, his only bride.

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL REASON

There's also the ecclesiological reason. "Ecclesial" means "having to do with the Church." This is a practical reason. A man who has no wife and family of his own can, objectively speaking, be more available to go wherever his bishop needs him. He can dedicate all his time, all his attention, and all his affection to the demands of his ministry. Certainly it's not impossible for a married priest to be faithful and dedicated to his community, but objectively speaking, celibacy provides greater internal freedom and external flexibility.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL REASON

The third reason is referred to as the eschatological reason. Eschatology has to do with the last things—death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Christ tells us in the Bible that there is no marriage in heaven (Cf. Matthew 22:30). The indescribable happiness of heaven, the fulfillment that comes from living in perfect communion with God and the saints, makes marriage as we understand it here on earth obsolete. The celibate priesthood, like the perfect chastity vowed by members of religious orders and other consecrated persons, is a constant reminder of this, a reminder that even the greatest natural pleasure and meaning that this world has to offer—that which comes from the intimacy of marriage and family life—will be superceded, a reminder that this world is not all there is, a reminder that our sexuality means much more than just having sex. The celibate priesthood, in short, is a billboard for heaven.

CONCLUSION: MORE THAN A THEORY

These reasons are not just theoretical. They are also the result of the Church's experience. During the first Christian centuries, before making celibacy a requirement for all priests in the Latin rite, Catholics gradually came to understand and appreciate the advantages of a celibate priesthood in the day-to-day life of their communities. They realized how valuable the gift, or "charism," of a celibate priesthood is, and so it became the norm.

In recent years, under pressure from non-Catholic Christians and from the challenges of post-modern society, the Church has reexamined this discipline, rediscovered its power and its beauty, and explicitly reaffirmed it. And so, as we continue to pray to the Lord for many dedicated and holy priests, we should also thank him for this great charism of celibacy, and humbly ask him to keep lavishing it on those he calls to the priesthood.

Take some time now to reflect on the ten questions in the personal questionnaire, which are designed to help you understand this teaching more deeply.



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FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *I Will Give You Shepherds*
by St. John Paul II
- *Dignities and Duties of the Priest*
by St. Alphonsus Liguori
- *Many Are Called: Rediscovering the Glory of the Priesthood*
by Scott Hahn
- *Priests for the Third Millennium*
by Timothy Dolan
- *The Priest Is Not His Own*
by Fulton Sheen
- *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy*
by Christian Cochini, SJ

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