



LESSON TWENTY-TWO

The Sacrament of Holy Orders: Christ Acts Through the Clergy

Opening Prayer

The *Suscipe* of St. Ignatius of Loyola

*“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
all I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.”*

Amen.



Lesson Objectives:

- ❖ Understand Holy Orders as a Sacrament of Service through which men are ordained as bishops, priests, or deacons, configured to Christ to teach, sanctify, and govern his Church.
- ❖ Recognize apostolic succession as the unbroken line connecting today's bishops to the apostles, and understand why the priest acts *in persona Christi capitis*—in the person of Christ the Head.
- ❖ Appreciate the Church's teaching that Holy Orders is reserved for men as a faithful response to Christ's own example, while affirming the equal dignity and essential gifts of women in the life and mission of the Church.

BURNING QUESTIONS

❖ Why do we need priests?

In a time when many people seek a personal relationship with God on their own terms, the need for priests might seem unclear. But what if the priesthood is not about status or hierarchy, but about making Christ's love visible in a way only he can?

❖ Why can't women be priests?

This question invites us to look closely at what Jesus did, not just what he could have done, and to discover the beauty and meaning behind the Church's faithful response to his example.

St. John Vianney

Feast Day: August 4

Lived: May 8, 1786–August 4, 1859 · Dardilly, France · Patron of Parish priests

Struggling academically and doubted by many, John Vianney was nearly refused ordination, but what he lacked in scholarship he made up for in humility and love for God. Assigned to the obscure and neglected village of Ars, he prayed, fasted, and dedicated up to sixteen hours a day in the confessional, gradually drawing thousands of pilgrims back to the sacraments through gentleness and conviction. Word of his holiness spread; thousands of pilgrims flocked to Ars each year. He became a living icon of Christ the Good Shepherd, showing that the priesthood is not a career path but a vocation of radical love.



“The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.”

St. John Vianney

Holy Orders and Vocation

A Sacrament of Service

The Church calls Holy Orders a Sacrament of Service (see CCC 1534). Whether bishop, priest, or deacon, every ordained man imitates Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, “to call”—at its heart, it is about relationship, God calling each of us by name.

Three Vocations, One Mission

The Church recognizes three states of life with a permanent, public commitment: Holy Orders, Matrimony, and consecrated life. None are mere lifestyle choices; each is ordered toward building up the Body of Christ. “Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord” (Colossians 3:23) applies in every state of life, including those discerning or living the single life.



“The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 20:28

Apostolic Succession and the Three Degrees

An Unbroken Line

Jesus entrusted his authority to the apostles, who in turn laid hands on others, passing on the same mission (see Acts 6:6; 1 Timothy 4:14). This apostolic succession safeguards the truth of the Gospel and connects the Church today, sacramentally, to the time of Christ. When a man is ordained, he receives an ontological change—a permanent spiritual character configuring him to Christ (see CCC 1581).

Bishops, Priests, and Deacons

Bishops receive the fullness of Holy Orders and alone can ordain others. Priests collaborate with their bishop, shepherding parishes and celebrating the sacraments in *persona Christi capitis*—in the person of Christ the Head (see CCC 1548). Deacons, from the Greek *diakonia* (service), assist in the Liturgy and works of charity; some are permanent, others transitional toward priesthood.



“Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you.”

1 Timothy 4:14

Why Men, and the Gift of Women

A Received Teaching, Not a Cultural Practice

The Church reserves priestly ordination for men. This is not as a denial of women's dignity; it's fidelity to Christ's own choice and action: he included women actively in his ministry yet chose only men as apostles. St. John Paul II affirmed: "The Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women."¹ This is a mystery the Church receives, not a policy it can change.

The Indispensable Gifts of Women

The Church is immeasurably enriched by women's leadership and holiness—from Mary to countless saints, mystics, theologians, and missionaries. St. John Paul II wrote that the Church *"gives thanks for each and every woman ... for all the manifestations of the feminine 'genius.'"*² Men and women hold equal dignity before God (see CCC 2335); their callings within the Church differ but are equally essential.

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship "

Romans 12:1

1. John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, apostolic letter (May 22, 1994), 4, vatican.va.
2. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, apostolic exhortation (August 15, 1988), 31, vatican.va.



Discussion Questions

- ❖ The priest is a spiritual father as well as someone who performs sacramental functions. What does this reveal about the Catholic understanding of sacramental ministry?
- ❖ Fr. Mike talks about the connection between Old and New Covenant priesthood. How does this connection deepen your appreciation of the Eucharist and Reconciliation?
- ❖ Given that all Christians are called to holiness and to imitate Christ, what makes the priest's call to live *in persona Christi* unique? How does it affect the way Catholics view the relationship between priests and the lay faithful?

Faith and Fun

Which Church Father, considered one of the earliest witnesses to apostolic succession, wrote that the bishops are successors to the apostles?

a. St. Augustine

b. St. Polycarp

c. St. Ignatius of Antioch

d. St. Jerome

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St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing around AD 107, was a bishop who personally knew the apostle John and was a direct link to the early Church. In his letters, he speaks with clarity and passion about the role of the bishop as a successor to the apostles and a center of unity in the Church.

Priestly Vestments

Putting on Christ

At every Mass, the priest wears sacred vestments that set him apart and signify the dignity of the mysteries he celebrates. Each vestment is donned in a particular order, often with a short traditional prayer—the amice, alb, cincture, stole, and chasuble each carry a prayer recalling purity, chastity, or priestly authority. These prayers help the priest spiritually prepare to offer the Liturgy.

Diminishing Self, Revealing Christ

The more the priest “puts on Christ,” the more Christ becomes visible and the less the individual priest's personality is the focus (see John 3:30: “He must increase, but I must decrease”). As he vests, the priest enters a spiritual disposition, preparing to offer not just bread and wine but himself in service to the Body of Christ.



Living It Out:

Choose a priest, deacon, bishop, or seminarian you know, and pray for them by name every day this week.

Closing Prayer

*O God, Father of all mercies,
provider of a bountiful harvest,
send your graces upon those you have called
to gather the fruits of your labor;
preserve and strengthen them
in their lifelong service of you.
Open the hearts of your children
that they may discern your holy will;
inspire in them a love and desire*

*to surrender themselves
to serving others in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ.
Teach all your faithful to follow
their respective paths in life
guided by your Divine Word and Truth.
Through the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary
and all the angels and saints, humbly hear our prayers
and grant your Church's needs, through Christ, our Lord.
Amen.*¹

1. (see Closing Prayer slide for Lesson 18 for style reference): USCCB, *Prayers for Vocations*, Prayer #2, usccb.org, lightly edited for style.

Announcements / Reminders — add notes here