

Explaining Holy Orders

By Deacon Tim Sullivan

The Bible makes clear that Jesus gave the twelve apostles a special authority to carry on his mission as priest and teacher. They in turn passed this authority on to bishops who could be trusted to be faithful to Jesus' mission.

There are three degrees of the apostolic ministry known as Holy Orders: bishops, priests and deacons. All are ordained, or consecrated, for their service, receiving a sacred power from the Holy Spirit.

Bishops have the role of sanctifying, teaching and ruling. Each bishop is appointed by the pope and has the care of a particular geographical area, called a diocese, entrusted to him. He governs the priests and deacons in his diocese, as well as the lay people.

Priests share in the bishop's apostolic mission. They are trained for several years in seminaries then ordained by their bishop. They promise to obey this bishop and his successors. Bishops and priests all act in the person of Christ himself when they administer the sacraments.

Deacons are at a lower level of authority and are consecrated by their bishop for the ministry of service. They are conformed to Christ in His role as servant. Deacons perform various tasks which enable the priests to focus primarily on their spiritual duties.

Because Jesus was a man and chose only men as his apostles, only men can receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Bishops and priests cannot marry, giving themselves entirely to their ministry. Deacons are permitted to marry before their ordination.

“Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins...No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God...” Hebrews 5:1,4