

“Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders [priests] sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads” (Rev 4:4)

✠ Lecture II: The Sacrament of Priesthood ✠

The Sacrament of Priesthood is the Holy Sacrament by which the Bishop lays his hand on the elected candidate in order for the Holy Spirit to descend on this person to grant him one of the priestly ranks. As a result, the ordained person is granted the authority to perform the ministry of the Church, whether the Holy Sacraments, teaching or others. This process is called “Laying of hands” or “Ordination.”

✠ Institution of The Sacrament:

Lord Jesus Christ instituted this Sacrament when He chose the twelve of His followers and consecrated them for ministry, “He called His disciples to Him, **and from them He chose twelve** whom He also named apostles” (Lk 6:13). He gave them the authority of absolution and binding, “**He breathed on them**, and said to them, ‘**Receive the Holy Spirit**’. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:22-23). Notice that this took place before the Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit here is the gift of ordination. Only to them He said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19) and only to them He delivered the mystery of His Body and Blood (The Eucharist)

✠ Honor of Priesthood:

St. Paul said, “No man takes **this honor** to himself, but he who is called by God” (Heb 5:4) and “Let the elders [priests] who rule well be counted worthy of **double honor**” (1 Tim 5:17), for the Priesthood is:

a) A divine choice, call and appointment

- “Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons.” (Mk 3:13-15)
- “And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles.” (Lk 6:12-13)
- “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain.” (Jn 15:16)
- “After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go.” (Lk 10:1)
- “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” (Acts 13:2-3)

b) Faithfulness and Stewardship

- “Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing he comes.” (Lk 12:42-43)
- “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries [Sacraments] of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor 4:1-2)

c) Consecration or Sanctification

- Lord Jesus Christ said, “for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth” (Jn 17:19). To sanctify means to consecrate; our Lord has consecrated Himself for the ministry and redemption. Likewise, all ranks of the Priesthood are consecrated for the ministry according to the example of Lord Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest.

✠ The Order of Deacons ✠

1. Epsaltos (Hymnist, Cantor):

The work of the Epsaltos is obvious from his name that is to learn and sing Church hymns and praises. This rank is mentioned in some of the early Church canons, “Chanters also must be blessed by the Bishop”. Children are usually ordained in this rank as the Psalm says, “Out of the mouth of babes and infants You have ordained strength” (Ps 8:2), the wisdom of children’s ordination is attaching them to the Church in order to grow up being nourished by the Orthodox faith and rites, so that they become steadfast in the faith, clinging to it with a high level of spirituality and holiness, as the Psalm says, “But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God ... I will praise You forever” (Ps 52:8-9)

2. Anagnostis (Reader, Lector):

His work is the daily readings in Church especially the Holy Epistles; he must read without mistakes so that the congregation may understand what is read. After the Commemoration of the Saints, readers recite the names of the Patriarchs who passed away in the Lord as the deacon says, “Let those who read recite the names of our fathers the Patriarchs who have fallen asleep; O Lord repose their souls and forgive us our sins”. Readers also can give sermons to the congregation as mentioned in the rite of their ordination, “Lord show Your face to Your servant standing before You to know by Your Holy Words to preach Your laws to Your people, teach them Your pure words for their rescue and salvation”, this is done by the permission from the Bishop or Priest. Readers are required to receive the Church Psalmody (Praises) and receipt it with the chorus during Liturgy and other occasions.

3. Epideacon (Sub-deacon):

His work is to prevent heretics and false teachers from entering the Church, to light the Church’s lamps, to maintain the books of the Church, to prepare the censer, to organize the worshipers and to help the deacon and replace him if necessary. These responsibilities are added to the previous ones of the reader.

4. Deacon (Servant):

His work is to recite all the liturgical responses. In the past no one was allowed to enter to the Sanctuary except the Bishop, Priest and the Deacon or Archdeacon, also kings who were believers and anointed by Christ. The deacon may carry the chalice and give the congregation from the precious blood of the Lord during communion. He reads the Holy Gospel of the Liturgy and may teach or preach by the permission of the Bishop or Priest. The deacon helps the priest in the service by visiting the congregation, widows and orphans, sick, etc. If he was ordained before marriage, he does not marry. If he had a wife and was ordained then his wife died, he remains without marriage like the case of Priests. If he elects to marry, he loses his rank.

5. Archdeacon (Leader of Deacons):

The Archdeacon leads all the ranks of deacons, manages their needs, and specifies their deeds.

✠ **Qualifications of Deacons:**

→ St. Paul said, “Deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless... Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.” (1 Tim 3:8-9,12)

→ The twelve apostles set the criteria of ordination of the seven deacons as being “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Although this rank is the smallest of the priestly ranks, St. Paul praised it saying, “Those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 3:13). It is also noteworthy to mention that the first Christian martyr was St. Steven the deacon who saw heaven opened and Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56)

✠ The Order of Priests ✠

1. Priest, Elder, Presbyter:

This is the first and essential priestly rank. The priest has the right to administer all the Church Sacraments except the laying of hands and ordination, which is reserved to the Bishop or someone above him. He teaches the people the word of God, explains to them the dogmas and rites, and leads them to the way of righteousness “For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.” (Mal 2:7) He is a father who pastors his children compassionately, visits them with tenderness care and love, as he is zealous for their salvation. He humbly serves them as Lord Jesus washed the feet of His disciples.

2. Hegomen, Senior Priest, Archpriest:

This is only a promotional rank from a priest and is not considered as a new ordination. If there were more than one priest serving in the same Church, the oldest in ordination or the most active and knowledgeable is promoted to the rank of hegomen. The rest of the priests submit to him and consider him the primary responsible person in the Church.

3. Khoori-Episcopos (Bishop of a village):

This rank came to existence by the end of the third century in Asia Minor when the dioceses extended and their division to smaller ones was not preferred. Members of the Nicene Council included 15 Khoori-Episcopos from Asia Minor and Syria. This rank disappeared from our Coptic Church and was revived by H.H. Pope Shenouda III when His Holiness ordained several monks as Khoori-Episcopos in order to assist some Bishops and Metropolitans in the service of their wide dioceses. His Holiness promoted most of them later on to general Bishops or Bishops of Dioceses. This rank is closer to the Bishopric rank for the candidate is a monk, holds the title of “Anba”, his turban is very similar to the Bishop’s, has the authority to ordain the various ranks of Deacons, is a member of the Holy Synod, and his name is mentioned like the Bishop in all liturgical prayers and hymns.

✠ The Order of Bishops ✠

1. Bishop, Overseer, Episcopos:

This is the highest rank of the Priesthood. Bishops are distinguished from Priests by having the perfection of the Priesthood and the authority to lay their hands and ordain all the diaconry and priestly ranks in their dioceses.

2. Metropolitan (Bishop of a large city):

This is a promotional rank from the Bishop, and the Metropolitan is mentioned before the Bishop in all the Church rites.

3. Patriarch, Pope, Archbishop:

The Patriarch is the highest rank in the Bishopric level and has the greatest ruling of Priesthood; he is the leader of the Church, Bishops and Metropolitans. The Patriarch is the successor of our fathers the Apostles and is the symbol of the unity of the Church. He has the right to ordain Bishops (at least one Bishop accompany him) and promote them to Metropolitans. He also has the right to make the Holy oil (Mayron). He heads the sessions of the Holy Synod, which is the highest authority in the Church.

✠ Qualification of Bishops:

→ St. Paul said, “A bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.” (Titus 1:7-9)

→ “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous... not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” (1 Tim 3:2-3,6-7)

Q: The Holy Bible said that the Bishop should be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2). Why then do we ordain the Bishops from the celibate monks?

A: First of all, “we” don’t ordain anybody; the Pope does, “we” merely recommend the ordination. Secondly, St. John Chrysostom said, “The apostle did not place this order as a basis that he (the Bishop) must be a husband of a wife, but he forbids from this rank the individual who married more than one wife, as he wanted to choose the most pure and modest, but since the door of celibacy and monasticism is opened so the Bishops are ordained from the celibate monks who never married at all.” Moreover, The Holy Book of Revelation (the only **Prophetic** Book of the New Testament) called the Bishops “Angels” and our Lord said that the angels “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mt 22:30). In the Nicene Council 325 AD, a decision was made that priests must be married because of the nature of their service since they enter houses and solve family problems. Nevertheless, if the priest is widowed, he does not remarry another woman since he is the father of all women and a father cannot marry one of his daughters.

✠ Lord Jesus Christ & The Ranks of Priesthood ✠

→ Our Lord Jesus Christ practiced certain services that became the essence of the Church ranks:

- a) **The Epsaltos:** The person who holds this rank is required to learn and sing the Church hymns. Lord Jesus Christ sung a hymn with His disciples before going to Gethsemane, “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mt 26:30)
- b) **The Anagnostis:** The most important work of this rank is reading the Holy Scriptures in Church during the Liturgy. Our Lord practiced the work of the reader when He went in the synagogue and stood up to read (Lk 4:16)
- c) **The Epideacon:** The most important work is keeping the Church organized. The Lord did the same when He drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple (Mt 21:12)
- d) **The Deacon:** One of the duties of the Deacon is to pour water for the priest to wash his hands upon the start of the Mass. Our Lord poured water into a basin and washed the disciples’ feet (Jn 13:5)
- e) **The Priest:** The main work of the priest is to sanctify the bread and wine during the Holy Liturgy and to give communion to the congregation. The Lord did the same on Covenant Thursday (Mk 14:22-26)
- f) **The Hegomen:** The role of the Hegomen is to provide for the Church services. It is obvious that our Lord did the same for when He said to Judas “What you do, do quickly” (Jn 13:27) the disciples thought that since Judas had the money box, the Lord had asked him to buy what they need for the feast or to give to the poor (Jn 13:29)
- g) **The Bishop:** The bishop is the shepherd of the flock. St. Peter refers to Lord Jesus as the shepherd and overseer of our souls (1 Pet 2:25) and the Lord said about Himself, “I am the good Shepherd” (Jn 10:14)
- h) **The Patriarch:** Only the Pope can ordain Bishops and our Lord breathed on His apostles and gave them the authority to bind and loose sins (Jn 20:22-23)

Therefore, we find Lord Jesus Christ practicing most of the priestly ranks despite their variation so that every person may find in Him a good example to follow and to know that however small his rank may seem it is not lowly since the Lord Himself practiced and blessed it.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*The Sacrament of Priesthood*’ by H.G. Bishop Mettaous.