

BISHOPS, PRIESTS, AND DEACONS



Bishops, Deacons, and Priests: these three orders of clergy exist from an early age in the Orthodox Christian Church; they are rejected by some as unbiblical, and their functions misunderstood by many others. The purpose of this article is not to argue any point, but to explain the character of these three orders in simple and general terms. Of these three orders, the most ancient is that of Bishop.

In the years following Christ's Ascension into Heaven, the Apostles were left with the governance and care of the Church. As the Church grew, individuals had to be chosen to help oversee the communities of faith that began to grow throughout the Middle East and beyond. Still being human, the Apostles could not be everywhere that they might be needed at any time. As well, the Apostles soon enough began to leave this world for the Kingdom, and leaders of the Church had to be appointed to guide and support the flock in their absence. An overseer was chosen for each community, and this was the basis for the Episcopate we have today. In Greek, the word for overseer is Episkopos, from which we derive the English word Bishop.

These Bishops then inherited the Apostolic care of the Church, the Faith, and the Faithful. In the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, we ask that the Bishops, in particular the «head» Bishops of a diocese, be granted health and length of days, and the wisdom to «rightly define the word of God's Truth». This certainly was the role that the Holy Apostles fulfilled, and it fell upon those whom they appointed, and those who were in turn appointed by their successors. This is where we derive the Apostolic succession of Bishops. These «overseers», the Bishops, appointed by the Apostles, had to appoint their own successors; so that a stable and reliable witness of the Gospels could be maintained once another generation took its leave of this world.

As the Church grew however, the work of Bishops became busier and more complicated. They needed help. Men of pious character had to be chosen for such work. It is at this point in time that the order of Deacon came into being.

We have this account in the Book of Acts, Chapter 6, beginning at the 1st verse: «In those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, a murmuring arose among the Greeks against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples to them and said, It is not reasonable that we should leave the word of God and

serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look out among you for seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith».

Without going into greater detail, the Deacon's role was to help the Bishop serve the faithful in their needs. As the Liturgy of the Church developed, so did the liturgical roles of both the Bishop and the Deacon. Soon enough, because of God's Grace, the Church would grow so much that an even further division of responsibilities became necessary. This was the birth of the Priesthood.

In the simplest terms, the Priest is the Bishop's representative in places where the Bishop Himself cannot be present regularly, just as the early Episcopate «filled in» for the Apostles. The Priest



then could be described as a kind of Bishop's proxy. This is why when the Bishop is not present, the Priest is the celebrant of the Holy Mysteries, but must stand aside in the presence of the Episcopate. The role of the Deacon does not change, however, as his order was established first as help for the Episcopate and not for the Priesthood (Presbyterate).

Historically speaking then, the order that is the most widespread, so to speak, in the «modern» clergy is the order with the «shortest pedigree». Bishoprics, Eparchies or Dioceses all are larger territories over which a Bishop presides. The most familiar division of the Bishopric is the Parish, to which one or more Priests can be assigned. It is an odd historical twist that makes the Deacon the least numerous of the clergy.

The Holy Mysteries can be celebrated without a Deacon, but never without a Priest or Bishop. However, as has been pointed out by venerable persons in the Church, the role of the Deacon in the worship of the Church is such an old one, that his presence is presumed in the rubrics. This is so much the case that rubrics always include a mention of the Deacon's role, and indicate what would be served were he present to fulfill his ancient service.

When speaking of the clergy's role in the Church, we can say that all orders are meant mystically to be the presence of Christ in the world. In the vesting prayers, the prayers for the putting on of the epimaniki, poruchi, or cuffs, are the same for Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.

For the right hand:

«O Lord, Thy right hand has been glorified in power. Thy right hand, O Lord, has shattered the enemies. In the greatness of Thy majesty Thou hast overthrown Thy adversaries».

For the left hand:

«Thy hands have made and fashioned me. Give me understanding that I may learn Thy commandments».

The cuffs signify that a cleric's hands are not his own, but belong to Christ, and do His work. They signify also that he relies not upon his own strength but upon God's. As well, the cuffs represent the bonds with which Christ's hands were bound at the time of His condemnation to be crucified.

It is customary to name the three orders in sequence of rank: Bishop, Priest, and Deacon. However, to begin this article they were named in the historical order of their appearance. It has been said that only a Bishop is a priest in the fullest sense of the word, because only a Bishop has the charism to ordain others to the priesthood. Neither can we forget that it is only the Bishop who can ordain someone to the Diaconate.

In parallel to Trinitarian theology, we might say that the Bishop is the fountain of priesthood from which all others derive their priesthood. Bishops represent the presence of Christ in the Church, and are called High Priest. However, it is Christ alone who is the Great High Priest, from whom all Grace and Love flows.

This discussion has focused on the three main orders of clergy in the Orthodox Christian Church, but there is much more to the subject than can be discussed in this small space. No mention has been made of Readers or Sub-deacons who also bare the mark of God's special grace, and who represent the «lesser ranks» of the Priesthood. It is important to say that one thing in all of this is of the essence: Christ founded His Church and chose certain men to serve Him and build it up. The clergy who serve in the Church today are those who have followed in succession to the Apostles, and minister the Holy Mysteries to the people of God. May God have mercy on them, and guide them in the way that they should walk.

Fr. Nicholas Young

