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## CHURCH AND MINISTRY FROM HIPPOLYTUS TO THE CONCILIARISTS

### The Ordained Christian Ministry from the Patristic Era to the Late Middle Ages

From the age of the church fathers through the late middle ages represents nearly three quarters of Christian history, with all that this involves. Nonetheless, I have been asked to survey what I know about the ordained leadership of the Christian church during this long period. Obviously, much must be omitted. I will endeavor at least to touch on matters which interest me and which I hope will interest you.

#### I. Summary of Patristic System

Let us first summarize and recall the system which had been in effect in all catholic or orthodox Christian communities, so far as we know, at least since the beginning of the third century. This system is described in the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* and other church orders, and is alluded to in the writings of St. Cyprian and many other church fathers.<sup>1</sup>

In each city where there was a Christian community, it was presided over by a bishop. In all the larger places this was a full time occupation and the bishop was supported by the church, unless he was a landowner or man of means, as a few were. He might be celibate, or a widower, or the husband of one wife, as in I Timothy 3:2.

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The bishop supervised and directed the church in conjunction with a council or assembly of presbyters or elders. We believe these were usually mature men of trusted Christian character, often perhaps fathers or grandfathers of leading Christian families. In some larger centers, some of them, like Origen, may have been professional Christian teachers. A few others were engaged in full-time ministerial work.

Besides the presbyters there would have been several deacons. These were the bishop's assistants, secretaries, messengers, and liturgical servers. This was certainly a full-time job in larger communities. Before being ordained as deacons these men had usually served, perhaps for some years, as subdeacons --in accord with I Timothy 3:10. Leading deacons often became bishops in later life.

Notice that presbyters were board members, colleagues and associates of the bishop. Deacons, on the other hand, were staff members, subordinates and assistants of the bishop. It is a different concept of work.

Notice too that bishops, presbyters, and deacons were all solemnly ordained by bishops with the laying on of hands, having first been elected --in most cases by the people. Everyone in the early church was not a bishop, presbyter, or deacon --but everyone might have a voice in choosing who these men were.

There were a variety of lesser ranks besides those three universal ordained orders. Subdeacons assisted the deacons. Readers were persons skilled in voice projection and public reading. There were cantors, sextons and others, with varying titles in different localities. Some of these would have been unpaid positions exercised only on Sunday morning or other church occasions. Others, such as sextons, may have been full-time church employees, especially in the larger centers.

What about women? Widowed older women, emancipated by the death of their husbands, served in pastoral work and as leaders in the female community, perhaps as analogous to the male presbyters. Virgins had

a more reclusive life devoted to prayer and a more private piety. In places where mixed bathing was not common, women liturgical functionaries were essential for the baptism of women. This, and the carrying of the Eucharist to sick women, seems to have encouraged and furthered the formalization of the female diaconate in many, but not all, localities.<sup>2</sup>

From the third century on, very definite church offices existed. Yet the prevailing outlook differed from that of modern times. We note that the clergy, or the ministry, or the pastorate, whatever we call it, is today mostly one thing --a body of professional men of more or less equivalent rank. In the ancient church and right on into the middle ages, there was no such homogeneity. From the bishop in his high position of authority down to the lowly doorkeepers of a church was the widest spectrum of rank, including persons of quite different talents, backgrounds, and levels of authority. The formal ministry was in no sense one small group of similar people. How different, however, were these different ranks of ministers from everyone else?

Any group identifies itself in terms of those who are counted in and those who are counted out. In the ancient church the great distinction was not between clergy and laity, but between baptized Christians on the inside and the surrounding multitude of Gentile pagans on the outside. Professor Talley<sup>3</sup> and others have alluded to the irony that in the early church one studied for perhaps three years and then, after formal testing and approval, was baptized in a complicated and traumatic ceremony. Later in life a man might be elected a presbyter and be ordained within minutes. Today one can be baptized in a few minutes after a few questions are asked. Later in life one might study three years and, after testing and approval, might undergo a complicated ceremony and be ordained. It is a complete reversal.

On the other hand the early church was not without its elite. The martyrs who shed their blood for the Lord Jesus and the confessors who had risked doing so were the beloved and admired figures in the

church. After the peace of the church, from the mid-fourth century on, it was the monks and nuns who were the elite of the church --the true followers of Christ. With few exceptions the men were lay, as is still true in the monasticism of the Eastern church.

## II. Gradual Early Medieval Changes

We see certain changes as we move from patristic to early medieval times. In most cases these are not easily dated, as they occurred gradually and often are not adequately documented.

### Multiplication of parishes

A major change which took place was the shift from one church in a city under one bishop to a plurality of churches ("parishes") in a diocese. On Sundays and feasts the bishop celebrated a magnificent liturgy in his cathedral surrounded by a group of presbyters, several deacons, and an assemblage of servers, singers, and lay worshippers, in what Vatican II has not improperly described as the preeminent manifestation of the church.<sup>4</sup> An ever growing percentage of Christians, however, were worshipping in outlying suburbs, surrounding towns, or even rural villages where there were now churches. These were presided over by presbyters assisted perhaps by a deacon or subdeacon, by a reader or two, and by cantors. In the larger congregations the presbyter would have to be a full-time church worker, as would one or more of his subordinate helpers. In the village church the presbyter would probably be a devout local man ordained to lead the liturgy on Sundays; his reader and cantor would also be amateurs --as still today in the Eastern churches.

This multiplication of congregations led to a vast extension of the presbyterate. First, many more of them were ordained; second, certain pastoral and liturgical functions formerly reserved to the bishop were now delegated to presbyters, as with baptism, confirmation, and penance; and third, more presbyters were serving full time. In short,

more presbyters did more things with more time to do them. The presbyterate had begun its inexorable march to conquer the entire field of ministry. (Yet that conquest was far from complete. Even in the late middle ages the clergy were still widely diversified in rank and function.) The nature of the presbyterate was also shifting. The typical presbyter was no longer seen as a board member on the bishop's council, but rather as an individual local religious practitioner and pastor --in short, as a priest.

On the other hand, they all still met with the bishop occasionally in diocesan synods or councils. In Mediterranean countries, where many people lived within sight of a cathedral, candidates still usually went to the *duomo* for the elaborate prebaptismal rites in Lent and the administration of baptism at the great Vigil of Easter.<sup>5</sup>

#### Stratification of Ecclesiastical Orders

Another change extending over the centuries was the stratifying of the different types of jobs to which different sorts of people were assigned according to their ability. These jobs now became a series of steps, a sort of ladder on which the cleric ascended over the years from the lower to the higher offices.

Interestingly enough, in the Christian East, where Byzantine life had been so highly bureaucratized, the orders of the church did not become so multiplied. In most of the ancient Eastern churches there are but two minor orders.<sup>6</sup> The first is that of reader or cantor. Many boys and pious men who are active in their parish have been and are admitted as readers by the bishop. The order of subdeacon is a more serious grade, required of all those who are to become deacons. In most places this is little more than a formality nowadays, although in some cathedrals or monasteries there is a permanent subdeacon who assists the deacon in the Divine Liturgy. One must be a deacon in order to become a priest, and one must be both a priest and a monk in order to become a bishop. This is generally the same in the different Oriental or non-Chalcedonian

churches, although the Armenians, from their medieval contacts with Western crusaders, took up the four minor orders of the Roman church of which we will speak shortly. Some of the non-Chalcedonian churches seem to have more subdeacons, so that persons in the diaconate can assist at a solemn liturgy.

So we come to the early medieval West where the proliferation of minor orders led to a much more complicated situation. In surviving documents the lower orders are not always clearly divided from the three sacramentally ordained orders. Liturgical texts of the ancient Mozarabic rite of Spain provide for the ordaining and tonsuring of a cleric (still a child) and the ordination of a sacristan or doorkeeper (alternate terms provided within the rite), of a librarian or chief scribe, of a deacon, of an archdeacon, of a chief clerk, of a presbyter, of an archpresbyter, of an abbot, and of an abbess, as well as blessings of monks, virgins and nuns.<sup>8</sup> (The rite for ordaining bishops has been lost.)

The Roman system, which ultimately prevailed, provided for tonsuring a cleric, then for doorkeeper, reader, exorcist, acolyte (i.e., attendant), subdeacon, deacon, priest and bishop. We assume these were originally all functional positions, and that exorcists were healers or persons good at exorcising, readers were good at reading, acolytes and subdeacons good at helping deacons, and so forth. Gradually, however, they became a series of steps whereby one began as a boy in the choir school, learned to read, and gradually progressed up to higher ranks. Being a reader no longer necessarily meant one was good at reading --it was simply a step on the way to subdeacon.

In the *Liber Pontificalis* and elsewhere we find lists of "interstices" giving the minimum ages for certain orders and the minimum time to be spent in one order before one was eligible to move into the next higher rank.<sup>9</sup> In the *Ordines Romani* Michael Andrieu has shown, however, that these interstices were very loosely observed.<sup>10</sup> Some steps were often skipped, and some orders went out of existence for long periods. From the first listing of the Roman orders by Bishop Cornelius in the third century to the final medieval formulation of the whole system by Bishop Durandus is one thousand years! The entire process was extremely

gradual. Yet loose stratification was certainly widely observed everywhere from the early middle ages on. Before becoming a subdeacon or deacon one first had to be a reader or some other lower cleric. Before becoming a priest one had to have served either as a deacon or as a subdeacon. Before becoming a bishop one had to have been either a deacon or a priest. Later, when all the steps were required, some were reduced to mere ceremonies. Thus two or three of the minor orders might be conferred at once. The distinctive liturgical duties of the lower orders at Rome had long since become blurred and many of these duties, such as singing or carrying candles, could legitimately be performed by laymen anyhow.

At Rome, and perhaps in many other cities, the Book of Acts was followed in having seven deacons. As the church grew large and powerful, with many orphanages and institutions which the deacons directed, they became a powerful body. We see here an example of the reversal of role. Originally presbyters were a board and deacons were individual church employees. Now it was reversed. Presbyters were individual employees, and the seven cardinal deacons constituted a powerful collegiate board from which the new pope was often chosen. The seven apparently also resisted the transitional diaconate as an apprenticeship for men who were to become priests. How then could the latter advance? The solution seems to have been for many of them to pass their diaconate as subdeacons and then be ordained as priests. Thus there were many who spent a period as subdeacon.<sup>11</sup> At the same time it should be recalled that in some cases minor ranks were functional and were related to life-long vocations. Some doorkeepers really were and remained church janitors. Some choristers, perhaps within the order of readers, remained in the choir all their life,<sup>12</sup> just as in modern England some graduates of the cathedral choir schools remain in a career of church music. In villages in the West, as still in the East, pious local parishoners may have been appointed as lectors or even as subdeacons. Yet with the collapse of literacy in the West, the ability to read and to do liturgical chanting tended to become the prerogative of those who were raised from boyhood in monastic or ecclesiastical schools and who were headed toward a clerical life. This seems to have been an important factor in the

specialized and highly clericalized development of the West. For the West the early middle ages were the dark ages. For the East the early modern period of total Turkish dominance was the dark age.

This whole question of the stratification of orders has many dimensions to it. The required progression through several ranks obviously offered a prudent safeguard against giving men responsibilities for which they were not yet ready. It also provided apprenticeships which trained men for higher positions. There is also a certain attraction in having orderly and successive grades within an institution. This is what we enjoy seeing in a military parade or in the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. Likewise in the classic Roman liturgy, as in *Ordo Romanus Primus*, much of the beauty is achieved by different orders of ministers performing different duties within one harmonious whole. Successive ranks of clergy became part of the mystique of the church. This nuance is expressed in the very adjective, "hierarchical."

At the same time bureaucratization seems adverse to the elective principle. We expect promotions to be based on seniority in the post office, but we would not wish the candidates for mayor of a city to be limited to senior members of the city council nor the candidacy for president of the United States to be limited to Senators, although such experience may be helpful to candidates.

In church we would not want seniority in directing the choir or Sunday school to be the main criterion for the ordination of pastors. On the other hand, it might be at least one of several criteria. This at least would make as much sense as the twentieth century system of taking young men from seminaries and ordaining them as presbyters.

In any case the early church generally stood for election. The education and the previous experience of a candidate were considered, but it was the assembly of baptized people, the Spirit-filled body, which was normally expected to elect those who served and represented them at the altar. This concept gradually faded away in the medieval period as clergy, after varying apprenticeships, were appointed by kings or nobles, or by bishops or popes, or by elections held within the clerical body itself.

### Clerical Women

What about women in the early medieval church? Not surprisingly, the monastic life swallowed up the order of virgins and many of the widows. As long as there was adult baptism deaconesses had a significant role. Infant baptism finally prevailed and the order of deaconess diminished. Yet Rome apparently still had deaconesses in the eleventh century.<sup>13</sup> For various reasons convents rather than the diaconate attracted medieval woman. Those with executive ability could become abbesses, in some cases wielding great power. At the same time there are instances of abbesses being ordained as deaconesses. Deaconesses survived longer in Constantinople where some great ladies were so ordained.

In the absence of extensive evidence, historians in the past have assumed that the remaining deaconesses were of no importance. In the same absence of evidence modern feminist advocates may assume they were very important. Perhaps new and helpful evidence can be found in the future.

In some places a chief woman minister may have been called a *presbytera*, which could be translated as lady priest. Few would claim however that they exercised the sacerdotal powers of the male presbyterate.

Meanwhile there were the wives of the clergy. In a society with a close sense of family solidarity it was inconceivable that a wife would not support her husband's vocation and that she would not share his title, just as today in France a colonel's wife is *Madame La Colonel* and a president's wife is *Madame La Presidente*. In the East, as the priest is "father", so his wife is "mother" to parishioners; or more formally, a *presbyterissa*. The deacon's wife is similarly a *diakonissa* --not the ordained deaconess of olden times, but still a clerical woman of conservative behavior who visits the sick and so forth.

In late patristic and early medieval times it is inferred that when a man was ordained his wife received a formal blessing conferring her title, and she may in some areas have subsequently worn distinctive clothing. Detailed evidence is lacking.<sup>14</sup> Since the activities and

social role of deacons' and priests' wives were in fact so similar to those of deaconesses, there was a tendency to assimilate all clergy wives into the order of deaconesses. Some priests' wives were called deaconesses. Bishops' wives, then as now, tended to be *grandes dames* in the church, yet they too might be assimilated into the female diaconate. One early medieval Western bishop is known to have ordained his wife a deaconess. In the East, before the election of bishops was confined to monks, the bishop's wife was to become a nun or deaconess.

How, the modern student asks, did they ensure that clergy wives would be willing to conform as deaconesses? The answer is simple. Men were not usually ordained as deacons or priests until middle life. If they did not have the right sort of wife or family, they would not be elected for ordination. This would literally still be the case in rural Greece.

### Celibacy

In the East the parish clergy are married men, but bishops are chosen from the small number of monastic clergy, a few of whom are more educated and prepared for advancement. In the West celibacy was adopted unevenly over the centuries. It prevailed early in Rome. In Gaul and Spain it came to be expected that when elected deacon, priest, or bishop the individual would remain married but no longer cohabit with his wife<sup>16</sup> --a system that obviously did not often work well. In some cases the active practice of matrimony for deacons and priests was restored and accepted, as in Anglo-Saxon England. Ultimately the Rome rule of celibacy was adopted in principle, if not always in fact. And it was required of subdeacons as well as of the three ancient ordained orders.

Mandatory celibacy must have brought about great changes. First, it divided the lower or minor clerics who could marry from the higher ones who could not. It was the higher orders (subdeacons, deacons, priests, and bishops) who held and passed on the leadership of church affairs. Secondly, celibacy divided the higher clerics from the laity. They became a special community, a subculture of their own, living in rectories with interests and tastes of their own and entertaining

themselves by reading books. Thirdly, the celibate clerics became somewhat assimilated into monasticism and *vice versa*. Besides the traditional so-called secular clergy of each diocese there were canons regular who might be stricter than monks. Friars and members of various devout brotherhoods filled out the spectrum. As many priests now lived a semi-monastic life, so now many Western monks and friars were ordained as priests. Both secular and monastic clergy practiced similar pieties and shared a similar ecclesiastical culture. The abbots of monasteries were normally priests, but their authority and their liturgical functions were assimilated to those of bishops.

What about the minor orders? In some cases pious church sextons or choir masters were also celibate and lived very dedicated lives, not unlike those of monastic lay brothers. In other cases they married and were a full part of local community life. Readers of Chaucer will recall that the latest husband of the wife of Bath was in fact a clerk. As to more pious women, new devout societies and third orders in the late middle ages reopened active pastoral ministries to them, although the term deaconess was not revived in the West until modern times.

### III. Late Medieval Theology of Holy Orders

The theology of holy orders becomes very complicated in the late medieval West. Ever since the fifth century the presbyterate had begun to expand, and now priests proliferated. Since subdeacons, deacons, and priests were all now required to be celibate and to recite the daily office, these three were not viewed as the three major orders. These were also the three conspicuous orders at the altar in the medieval high mass. Thus one had four minor orders and three major orders, a series of seven climaxing in the priesthood, as Saint Thomas Aquinas and others maintained.<sup>17</sup>

The final formulation of the rite for conferring and ordaining clergy in the Western middle ages was provided by William Durandus, Bishop of Mende, in his renowned pontifical of 1286. It may be noted in passing that he, like Aquinas, still has trouble excluding the old non-Roman minor order of psalmists and that he still provides for ordaining deaconesses.<sup>18</sup>

Having paid the price of celibacy most of the major clerics wished to be priests. A few remained as deacons for some years, or permanently. Some of these, like Saint Francis, were motivated by humility --others by ambition; for a deacon was eligible for high office, as for arch-deacon in a diocese or even for several of the cardinals' hats at Rome. The priesthood was widely seen as the fulfilment and completion of the Christian ministry. Patristic writings by Saint Augustine and others spoke of priesthood when they meant bishops. Their ideas were now understood, or misunderstood, to apply to presbyters. A bishop was now seen as a special kind of priest who had power to ordain. The distinctness of the ancient three orders of deacon, presbyter and bishop was also complicated by the definition of the indelibility of orders. Each priest remained also a deacon (and he could and did vest as a deacon if assisting another priest at high mass). Each bishop remained a priest. These were not seen as three different sorts of ministry, but as larger portions of the same thing.

By the end of the middle ages the bishop's unique power of ordination was eroding. On the one hand the papacy claimed a unique and absolute power over everything which ordinary bishops did not share. On the other hand we will recall that abbots, although they were priests, had quasi-episcopal powers within their monasteries. This included the prerogative of ordaining readers, acolytes, and other lesser clerics, including subdeacons. Finally, the popes gave the mighty Cistercian abbots permission to ordain full deacons --a privilege they exercised until the French Revolution. Here was a drastic break with tradition --little noticed because the diaconate was no longer conspicuous. In isolated and controversial cases late medieval popes humiliated diocesan bishops by giving an abbot permission to ordain a presbyter or two.<sup>18</sup> Thus certain popes, in the aggressive pursuit of their own authority, ushered in the presbyteralism which the Reformation would later espouse.

#### IV. Conclusion

In spite of all we have said, by the beginning of the sixteenth century the entire body of clergy had not yet become priests. Nor were

they all totally segregated into a separate ecclesiastical caste. Different orders of minor and major clergy were dispersed in every level of society throughout the medieval scene.

In spite of all the negative things which may be said, we do not have grounds for believing that most medieval clergy viewed their calling simply as careers of personal advancement. There were too many cases of voluntary self denial and heroic devotion. Not did they claim to have a monopoly on grace, for many of the canonized saints of the middle ages were lay men and women.

The most common and widely known statements about clerical order in the middle ages were short and easily memorized lists of orders with a one-sentence explanation of each order relating it to Jesus Christ. A recent researcher has called these "ordinals of Christ".<sup>19</sup> They differ considerably in the number of orders they list and in their the sequence. Typical statements are as follows:

When was he a sexton? When he raised Lazarus from the tomb.

When was he a lector? When he read from Isaiah.

When was he a deacon? When he washed the disciples' feet.

When was he a priest? When he broke the bread and blessed the cup.

When was he a bishop? When he blessed the apostles at the ascension.

In the sixteenth century John Calvin held these ordinals up to derision as examples of medieval stupidity. We would see them rather as expressions of a naive but Christ-centered piety. We have, however, one serious theological criticism of them, and this is my final point. The earlier ordinals of the eighth or ninth centuries often begin with Christ's baptism --the sacrament he shares with us all, laity and clergy alike, and the sacrament on which all the others are based. That I believe, is as it should be. Unfortunately, by the high middle ages, the reference to baptism was usually omitted, and total attention was given to the successive orders of clerical rank. The laity were now no longer in any sense partners in the order and structure of

the church. Instead, they were passive recipients of the teaching, preaching, blessings and sacramental rites performed for them by the clergy. The pastoral ministry of word and sacrament was exercised by the clergy, at the laity --a view which neither the Reformation nor the Counter-reformation undertook to correct.

NOTES

- 1 For several convenient sources, H. B. Porter, *The Ordination Prayers of the Ancient Western Churches* (Alcuin Club Collections XLIX, London, 1967), pp. 3-4.
- 2 J. Danielou, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (London, 1961).
- 3 Thomas J. Talley, "Ordination in Today's Thinking", (*Studia Liturgica*, XIII (1979 no. 2,3,4), pp. 4-10.
- 4 *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, art. 41.
- 5 J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West* (Alcuin Club Collections XLVII, London, 1965), p. 109.
- 6 *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, third ed., trans. Isabel F. Hapgood (Brooklyn, 1956), pp. 306-310.
- 7 Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia* (London, 1912), pp. 168-9.
- 8 Marius Ferotin, ed., *Le Liber Ordinum* (Paris, 1904), col. 39-68 and 82-6.
- 9 Roger E. Reynold, *The Ordinals of Christ from their Origins to the Twelfth Century*, Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters, Band 7 (Berlin and New York, 1978), pp. 28-35.
- 10 Michel Andrieu, *Les Ordines Romani*, III (Louvain, 1951), pp. 560 ff.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 567 ff.
- 12 *Cf. ibid.*, IV, pp. 5-11.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 141, but clear reference p. 200.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 144-6
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 140, n. 2.
- 17 *Summa Theologica*, Q. 37, art. 2 Suppl., (U.S. translation, 1948) Vol. III, pp. 2690 ff.
- 18 Lawrence N. Crumb, "Presbyteral Ordination and the See of Rome," *Church Quarterly Review*, XLIV (January 1963).
- 19 See n. 9 above *passim*.