

THE HOLY PRIESTHOOD

This Mysterion (Sacrament) is also sent from God. It was established by Christ with the calling of His disciples giving them the authority to loose and bind the sins of the people, and sending the Holy Spirit upon them on the day of Pentecost. The holy Apostles were the **only ones to receive the priesthood**. The Holy Spirit which descended "as tongues of fire", did so **Only upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost**.

Ordination is another specific mystery that consecrates certain men for specific service in the Church of God. Priesthood in the Christian Church is different from all other understandings of priesthood within history. It is not that of the Old Covenant (Testament), where certain families were set apart from birth as ancestral priests and Levites (the kohanim). The Lord Himself was not a priest in the Levitical or Aaronic line: for He did not inherit this gift from an earthly father. **He was a priest in a different order of religion**. The Holy Scriptures describe Him as **a priest in the order of Melchizedek. He was the king of Salem (his name means 'king of righteousness' and his title was 'king of peace') who brought gifts of bread and wine, and blessed Abraham in the name of 'God the most high', and to whom Abraham gave a tithe of his goods**. The Apostolic writer of Hebrews uses this symbol of Levi (still unborn) giving homage to Melchizedek as a sign of the old priesthood acknowledging the **superiority of the new priesthood that Jesus, a descendant of Judah, brought along with the New Covenant he instituted**. For the author of Hebrews, the High Priest, Jesus, enters a **sanctuary not made by human hands, and His own blood is a sacrifice of atonement which needs not repetition, but cleanses the church definitively, for all time**. Symbolically (that is, typologically), Jesus is a priest of the order of Melchizedek, appointed to this salvific ministry of **reconciliation of mankind with the most high God, by His Father alone, not from any human law of descent**.

The unique high priesthood of Jesus is only figured by Melchizedek, but does not find its origin there. So, **in the church of Christ there remains the one priesthood of the Lord: This is the source of all the power of reconciliation which Christ Himself continually and unfailingly presides over in His ever-active ministry of reconciliation and the bestowal of grace. All grace and life flow from the Father, through the priesthood of Christ, to the Church in the energy and grace of the Holy Spirit. The only power of priesthood in the church of Christ, therefore, remains that of the Lord**. For such reasons, understanding this aspect of the Holy Scriptures correctly, some Christian movements within Protestantism have gone on to conclude (most erroneously in the judgment of Orthodoxy) that there can be no such thing as a specific Office of Christian priesthood represented by any human disciples. It is instructive, both historically and theologically, that the wide scale rejection of the concept of Christian priesthood in the time of the Reformation also **led to an extensive collapse of the sacramental system in those same movements**.

Christian priesthood is not a sacral phenomenon, distinct from Christ's Priesthood, and not a mere 'office' to which certain Christian individuals can be elected, or from

which they can be deselected, as a matter of administrative convenience. **In the Orthodox understanding, Christian Priesthood is a sacred sharing in the charisma of the Lord's own high Priesthood which He gives to certain elected members of His own flock, so that they can lead it and teach it, and act as His own ministers of sanctification within it. Their powers of teaching and sanctifying are His power. They offer themselves as ministers of His single grace. Their sanctification and blessing is His holiness and benediction: The reconciliation they mediate is the sole reconciliation which He alone has mediated for the world. The Christian Priest, consecrated as a minister of the Lord in His Church, is an icon of the Lord's single high priesthood, never separated from it, never understandable in any sense apart from it. It is a most honored and sacred mystery of grace to be elected into such an exaltation of office, but it is charisma that is always empowered by the priestly grace of Christ Himself.**

In the Orthodox Church it is the tradition for the faithful to greet a bishop or a priest by kissing his hand. This the believers do because they show their profound respect **for the hand that has touched the Mysteries of the Lord Himself, in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, and the hand that has been given by Christ the power to bless and heal and sanctify.** Some of the younger clergy, aware that all that they have in the ministry of priesthood is the grace of the Lord's own Holiness, sometimes try to withhold their hand, as if they were saying 'I am not worthy.' **This is a mistake.** No one believed they were worthy in the first place! The faith of the people that expresses itself in the kissing of their hand is not offered to them: **It is offered through them, as living icons, to the hand of the High Priest, the Lord Himself. Just as it is a mistake to think that veneration offered to an Icon of the Lord is a false worship offered merely to wood and to paint (which would be idolatry of the dimmest type), so it is a mistake to think that Christian Priesthood, as found among Christ's bishops and priests and deacons through this sacred mystery of ordination, is a division or a diminution of Christ's sole High Priesthood.** It is merely one of the ways in which it is flashed out on the world and among the believers. It is a great gift and deeply loved by the faithful. It is perplexing to the Orthodox why the beauty of the sharing of Christ's priestly ministry among His Church has been so decisively rejected among so many part of Western Christianity which only recognizes the common 'priesthood of all believers'; and from this there follows a large alienation from the Orthodox ethos.

The gift of ordained priesthood is a specific focusing of the gift of priestly grace given to all the baptized in their Chrismation at baptism. It is, nevertheless, not reducible to this 'priesthood of all believers.' The Sacred Chrismation **elevates in all the baptized the priestly charisma of the disciple: to share in Christ's work of reconciliation, and to take their own part (in living the Gospel) in the sacred cosmic task of the consecration of matter, and the rendering of history subservient to the claims of the kingdom. Ordination confers another set of charismata, based upon this overarching gift of baptismal consecration, but which are more specific and more elevated. They are related first and foremost to the offices of sanctifying, leading and teaching the flock of Christ.**

In Orthodoxy there are **three degrees of priesthood: that of deacon (diakonos, a word which means the servant or the minister). the priest (presbyteros, which means the elder), and the bishop (episkopos, which means the overseer or superintendent).**

The word 'priesthood' is itself an Old English corruption of the Greek word **presbyter**. Eventually the Church adopted the Greek word **hiereus** (ἱερεύς).

The Christian priest does not manifest a share in the charisma of Christ's Priesthood as if this could be cut up and divided out. Just as it is with the Holy Eucharist itself, the one bread is 'broken, but never divided, eaten but never consumed', and so **too the one High Priesthood of Christ empowers the sacred priestly ministry of all those He has called to this intimate and awesome form of obedience and discipleship. The priest exercising the sacred charisma of his ordained office is a medium of the priestly power of Christ, a channel of the Lord's own sanctifying grace. Just as there is only one Holy Eucharist in the world despite the great number of Eucharistic celebrations experienced daily, so too there is only ultimately the one Priesthood of the Lord manifested in the Church through the number of disciples called to share in His pastoral work, and given specific charismata to apply for the benefit of the chosen people. The priest, like the Lord Himself, is one who is at the service of the people of God. If he is a leader of the people, with a status that is remarkable, it is because he has learned from the Master the charisma of being the minister (diakonos), that is, the servant of all.**

Orthodoxy speaks of ordination in two forms. Only the first is specifically and particularly relevant to the Mystery of Ordination. The key word describing this Mystery is **Cheirotonia**. **This is 'the laying on of hands,' which is witnessed in the Holy Scriptures as an apostolic charisma of conferring the Grace of the Holy Spirit for special diakonia (ministry), and which harks back to the Lord's own method of conferring grace by the powerful laying on of hands.** This laying on of hands, as performed in the Apostolic ministry and by the council of the presbyters, is continued now by the 'laying on of hands' bestowing the sacred charisma in baptism, through the absolution prayer when the penitent receives the laying on of hands for the forgiveness of sins, through the laying on of hands for healing in the Mystery of the Holy Unction, and lastly in the Mystery of Ordination when the bishop lays hands upon the head of the person to be consecrated for priestly service as bishop, priest, or deacon. All of these laying on of hands are integral to the greater mysteries. There is also a second term in use: **Cheirothesia**. This word also designates the laying on of the hands, but for a **lesser blessing. It bestows what are known as the 'minor orders' as distinct from the three 'major orders.'** **Today the minor orders have been restricted to those of subdeacon and lector (reader).** In the ancient Church there were several others, such as exorcist, fossor (gravedigger), acolyte, porter, and several 'orders' specific to Christian women such as widows and virgins. All of these have now lapsed and been 'restricted' because of changed circumstances. These blessings of **Cheirothesia are not ordinations as such, not part of the Great Mysteries, and are conducted at the offices of the Church (vespers or matins) not during the course of the Eucharistic Liturgy.** [source: "The Orthodox Church" by John Anthony McGuckin]