

ORDINATION

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Another Voice 19 March 2024

Our understanding of priests, bishops, and deacons has changed dramatically in the church's long history.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples of Jesus (c. 4 BCE – 30 or 33 CE) understood their role as one of ministry and service to others. Sent out to spread the Good News of the Way of Jesus, they were called "apostles" from the Greek word *apóstolos*, meaning "one who is sent out."

In the earliest Christian communities, men and women were apostles. There was a variety of ministries; but ordained priesthood was not one of them. Contrary to what one occasionally hears, the historical Jesus did not ordain anyone at the Last Supper. In the medieval period, many thought he did. But ordination did not exist in his lifetime.

The letters of Paul, written between 48 and 62 CE, mention a variety of charismatic gifts which can be thought of as ministries benefiting the local Christian community, even though the ministers were not ordained in our sense of the word. For example, members, who could teach, taught. Those who were good organizers administered community affairs. Those who had the gift of prophecy could speak out and tell the community what they needed to hear, as faithful followers in the way of Jesus.

We know as well that men and women who were heads of households presided at the Lord's Supper (Eucharist); and hosted the gatherings in their homes. In Romans 16, Paul greets women leaders such as the deacon Phoebe, the apostle Junia, and the married apostles Priscilla and her husband Aquila. Clear evidence that women were respected leaders in the emerging Jesus movement.

As Christian communities developed, ministries and the ways of training and appointing ministers evolved to meet changing cultural conditions and changing social needs. Presbyters, from the Greek *presbyteroi*, were community elders. Supervisor overseers (later called bishops) from the Greek *epískopoi* had oversight and offered guidance in community affairs, and deacons, from the Greek *diaconoi*, were helpers, entrusted with assisting people in the community by caring for widows, doing charitable work, catechizing, and assisting in baptisms.

The approval and blessing of the community for diverse ministries was indicated by the laying on of hands. These ministries included preaching, prophecy, healing, working miracles, speaking in tongues, and interpreting what was said in tongues (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, Ephesians 4:11-12, Romans 12:4-8; and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). None of the men and women exercising these ministries were ordained. Acts of Apostles, written between c. 90 and 110 CE, mentions the laying on of hands for elders or presbyters, but here it was a form of blessing for those in ministry. In the Hebrew tradition, the laying on of hands was practiced when a

father would impart a blessing to his children (see Genesis 48:14-15). We also see Jesus do this: He lays hands on children and blesses them.

In the first three centuries of Christianity, therefore, we have no direct evidence of what would later be called an ordination ceremony. By the end of the third century, however, Christianity had a clear organizational structure headed by presbyters, supervisor-overseers (bishops), and deacons. Initiation into these orders was accomplished through a rite of ordination that inducted a person into a local office in a particular community.

It is important to clarify that ordination at this time was NOT about passing on some kind of sacramental power. As my former professor the “Dutch theologian” Edward Schillebeeckx once said about liturgical leadership in the past: “You led the liturgy because you were the leader of the people. You didn’t lead the liturgy because you were ordained to have the power of consecration.” Ordination was a blessing on the minister and an assurance to the community that the ordained man or woman was competent, a genuine believer, and trustworthy. There is ample evidence that in the West women were ordained as deacons and abbesses well into the Middle Ages. Women continued to be ordained deacons in the East and were ordained to a variety of ministries. Many contemporary scholars agree with Gary Macy, professor of religious studies at the University of San Diego, who argues that, during the first twelve hundred years of Christianity, women were also ordained as presbyters and bishops. I find the arguments in Macy’s book *The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination* well-documented and convincing.

It is very important to note, however, that in the 12th century ordination changed from its earlier understanding as a blessing for different ministries in service for a specific community to a bestowal of sacramental power “to consecrate” (make it happen) the sacrament of the Lord’s body and blood. The ordained now belonged as well to a higher social class. The classless and egalitarian church of early Christianity had disappeared. History is important.

The Council of Trent, held in three separate sittings between 1545 and 1563 in Trento in northern Italy, issued several doctrinal pronouncements about ordination, reacting of course to the Protestant Reformation. The Tridentine bishops declared as required Catholic belief that ordination was a sacrament personally instituted by the historic Jesus. The Council of Trent stressed that the sacramental power of ordination was passed on through the tactile laying on of hands, understood as “apostolic succession” going back to Jesus’ “ordination of the apostles as the very first bishops” at the Last Supper. Today we would say that apostolic succession is not about a tactile laying on of hands but about passing on faith, witness, and ministerial leadership from generation to generation.

The Council of Trent stressed as well that ordination brought about an ontological change in the ordained person – a change in the very nature of the person -- which elevated the ordained to a level above the laity, leaving an indelible mark on the person forever. The Tridentine bishops emphasized that bishops have the fullest and highest degree of “sacramental power.” They forgot or were ignorant about the fact that the historical Jesus did not exercise power over people but empowered them to care for others.

Thinking about Trent, one should not forget of course the influence that medieval feudalism still had on the church at that time. There were three estates: the nobility, the clergy, and the peasantry. Bishops, in strongly patriarchal feudalism, held positions of power as feudal lords and as advisers to kings and nobles. Bishops generally lived with the same hierarchical powers, ornate dress, and luxuries as the nobles.

Ordination is a ceremony that celebrates the beginning of a professional life of ministry. It could be much more flexible than it is today and open of course to men and women, married and unmarried, and of whatever sexual orientation. It could be for a specific number of years or lifelong.

What is celebrated in an ordination ceremony is not getting power over other people or one's being elevated above the non-ordained. It is about making a commitment and responding to a call to preach the Gospel and care for others. It is about being of service to others, as genuine and credible ministers: helping others grow in and with the Spirit of Christ.

Thinking about ordination and pastoral ministry today, I would like to see some creative changes.

- I would like to see ministerial appointments – ordinations -- extended to religious educators, youth ministers, pastoral counsellors, social workers, and others, whose faith and competence are well recognized. Perhaps some would only be ordained ministers for just a few years, and then others would carry on their ministry.
- Youth ministers for example could be ministers of confirmation.
- Pastoral counsellors could be ministers of reconciliation.
- Religious educators and youth ministers could preside at small group eucharists.
- Social workers could be ministers of the anointing of the sick during house calls and hospital visits as well as presiders at small group eucharists in residences for the elderly.
- I am sure there are many other creative ministry possibilities.

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