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### A Short History of Ordination (Part II)

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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April 19, 2013

## A Short History of Ordination (Part II)

By Darius Jankiewicz

Ordination



In the [Part I](#), I explored the origin of the word “ordination” and how its pagan undertones began to influence Christian thinking on ministry during the second century of the Christian era. Most importantly, I noted that already by the second part of the second century it is possible to detect growing clericalization of the Church (i.e., separation between clergy and laity), something not present among the early New Testament Christians.<sup>[1]</sup> At the same time, the Christian minister became a priest.<sup>[2]</sup> Ironically, this understanding of Christian ministry arose from a sincere desire to protect the church from heresies and guard its unity. In the end, notes historian Pierre Gy, Christian pastors assumed the role of the ancient Roman *ordo senatorum*.<sup>[3]</sup> Other developments followed during the third century.

### **Hippolytus (ca. 170–ca. 235 AD) and Apostolic Tradition**

While no Christian thinker from the first or second century mentions the ministerial laying-on-of-hands ceremony, it is reasonable to assume that

Christians practiced the rite during the second century.<sup>[4]</sup> The first complete description of the Christian ceremony of ordination appears at the beginning of the third century and is found in the *Apostolic Tradition*, a work attributed to Hippolytus of Rome.<sup>[5]</sup> In this work, we find a detailed description of early Christian ordinations, complete with a detailed theology of ministry and the liturgy to be followed in the ordination service.<sup>[6]</sup>

All three orders of ministry—bishop, elder, and deacon—had their own ordination services through the laying-on-of-hands and a separate set of prayers; each order of ministry now required a higher order to place hands upon the lower order.<sup>[7]</sup> This is probably the root of the common Christian practice, both Catholic and Protestant, of only ordained clergy ordaining candidates for ministry

### **Cyprian (d. ca. 258 AD)**

No other writer of the early Christian centuries contributed more to elevating the authority of the pastoral office than did Cyprian of Carthage. Like his predecessors, Cyprian’s main concern was the unity and protection of the Church. He believed that the Church was, above all, a concrete, visible community, a corporate body, with a clearly established structure and constitution comprised of two classes of members: the ordained clergy and non-ordained laity. Submission of laity to the leadership of the Church was of utmost importance and any form of insubordination was simply wrong.<sup>[8]</sup>

While Tertullian appears to be the first to use the term “priest” (Latin: *sacerdos*), it was Cyprian who developed the theology of priesthood by a large-scale application of the Old Testament priestly language to the ministry of a Christian pastor.<sup>[9]</sup> The spiritual life of believers now depended completely on the ministry of the church.<sup>[10]</sup> All this, of course, depended on the rite of ordination that the bishops and priests received from the hands of other ordained bishops.

For Cyprian, thus, obedience to the ordained clergy became necessary for the unity of the Church and the salvation of believers.

## Other Developments

Two more developments relating to ordination into Christian ministry must be mentioned. First, from the time of Augustine on, Christian writers began to write of ordination as the moment when the Catholic minister receives a special, permanent mark upon his soul.[11] This indelible mark assured that the actions of the priest, such as baptism and administration of the Lord's Supper, were valid in a sacramental sense, i.e., they conveyed God's salvific grace. According to this view, ordination became one of the most important Christian rites since it allowed the pastor to function as a channel of God's grace. In this system, thus, salvation, in a significant way, depends on ministerial ordination.[12]

Finally, we must mention the origin of the practice of absolute *ordinatio*, i.e., ordination in which hands are laid upon a minister without his being asked to fulfill a particular task or minister to a particular community. It appears that, until the fifth century, only those who had been called by a particular community to be its pastor and leader, or to a particular missionary endeavor, were actually ordained. Only around the time of the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) did it become widely accepted to practice absolute *ordinatio*. Ordination thus became attached to a person rather than a task.[13]

Considering all these developments, it is not surprising that in 379 AD Jerome stated: "There can be no Christian community without its ministers." [14] By Jerome's time, however, the Christian Church had moved far from the descriptions of the early Christian community found in the pages of the New Testament. It was well developed organizationally; it promoted both theological and ontological distinctions between laity and clergy; and it accepted a sacramental understanding of ministry and ordination, making the presence of the ministry essential for the salvation of believers.

Thus, for many Christian authors writing from the second century onward, the Church could not exist without a separate class of individuals distinguished from other believers by the rite of ordination.

## Final Considerations

The death of the last apostle and that of Cyprian in 258 AD are separated by approximately 160 years. It took, thus, only about 160 years for the church to depart from its New Testament roots and thoroughly embrace sacramental ecclesiology, where the sacraments of the Church officiated by the ordained ministry (a sacrament itself), rather than individual faith, became accepted as the means of salvation.

It was also during this period that the early Christian Church departed from a variety of biblical teachings such as the seventh-day Sabbath and the mortality of the soul. Interestingly, the same period of time witnessed the phasing out of the ministry of women in the Church. For example, Canon XI of the Council of Laodicea (364 AD) forbids ordination of women elders.[15] The same Council, in Canon XXIX, forbade observance of the seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest once and for all, designating all those who continue to observe the Sabbath as judaizers. "But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ," the council declared.[16]

Obviously, the Council's message regarding the ordination of women elders did not receive widespread acceptance, since Pope Gelasius I, in 494 AD, felt it necessary to issue a strong condemnation in his letter to the bishops in Lucania (Southern Italy): "Nevertheless we have heard to our annoyance that divine affairs have come to such a low state that women are encouraged to officiate at the sacred altars, and to take part in all matters imputed to the offices of the male sex, to which they do not belong." [17] Other teachings, such as various Marian doctrines, the cult of the saints, and veneration of relics were also introduced into Christian theology at the time.

Could it be that creating a clear separation between laity and clergy, thus separating the Church into two distinct groups of individuals and granting the ordained clergy special powers and authority, contributed in a significant way to the Church's departure from its New Testament roots?

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[1] "It is the authority of the Church that instituted the distinction between clergy and laity [Lat.: *ordinem et plebem*] and the honor shown the ranks of the clergy made holy for God." Tertullian *Exhortation to Chastity* 7.3. Translation by Robert B. Eno, in *Teaching Authority in the Early Church* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), 54-55; cf., *ANF* 4:54. The exact Latin phrase reads: *Differentiam inter ordinem et plebem constituit ecclesiae auctoritas et honor per ordinis consessum*

*sanctificatus*. John Henry Hopkins, *The Church of Rome in Her Primitive Purity, Compared with the Church of Rome at Present Day* (London: J. G. and F. Rivington, 1839), 89. Note the parallels between the order and plebs of the Roman Empire and this usage found in Tertullian.

[2]It is also Tertullian who is mostly responsible for applying priestly language to the Christian ministry and endowing the bishop with the title *summus sacerdos*, or the chief priest. Tertullian *On Baptism* 17 (ANF 3:677); cf. David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 163.

[3]P. M. Gy, "Notes on the Early Terminology of Christian Priesthood," in *The Sacrament of Holy Orders* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1957), 100.

[4]Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 220.

[5]*The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, ed., Gregory Dix (London: Alban, 1992).

[6]*Ibid.*, 2-18.

[7]For a detailed description of these three ordination services, see Osborne, 117-129.

[8]Peter Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage and the Unity of the Christian Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974), 40-41.

[9]Edward White Benson, *Cyprian, His Life, His Times, His Work* (London: MacMillan, 1897), 33.

[10]Cyprian *Epistle* 27.21 (ANF 5:383).

[11]This seal is variably referred to as *character indelebilis*, *dominicus character*, or sacramental character. For Augustine's teachings on this matter, see Emmanuel J. Cutrone, "Sacraments," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 741-747.

[12]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1558, page 389.

[13]Schillebeeckx, 38-41; the ontological distinction between *ordinem et plebem* that had already appeared in Tertullian, and was eventually accepted by Christian thinkers, made this development inevitable. Cf., Vinzenz Fuchs, *Der Ordinationstitel von seiner Entstehung bis aug Innozenz III* (Amsterdam: P. Shppers, 1963), 280; R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 151; Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

[14]Jerome *Dialogus contra Luciferanos* 21, in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 6:331.

[15]W. A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Order of St. Benedict Inc., 1970), 316. There exists overwhelming historical and inscriptional evidence that, prior to the developments of the second and third centuries, women served the church in various leadership capacities. Many were ordained. Both Catholic and Protestant studies have shown conclusively the existence of women ministers in the early church. See, for example, a recent work by a Catholic scholar, Gary Macy, who does not appear to endorse the ordination of women in the Catholic Church. Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011).

[16]Heidi Heiks, *AD 538 Source Book* (Ringgold: Teach Services, 2010), 252.

[17]Deborah Halter, *The Papal No: A Comprehensive Guide to Vatican's Rejection of Women's Ordination* (New York: Crossroads, 2004), 50. Interestingly, the Biblical Pontifical Commission established by Paul VI in 1967 declared that opposition to women's ordination cannot be sustained on biblical grounds. The Commission concluded: "It does not seem that the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle in a clear way and once and for all the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate" (Origins 6:6 [Jul 1, 1976],92-96). Even more significant is the following remark: "It must be repeated that the texts of the New Testament, even on such important points as the sacraments, do not always give all the light that one would wish to find in them." *Commentary on the Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the*

*Doctrine of the Faith on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1977], 27). Notwithstanding such findings, both Paul VI and John Paul II defended the male priesthood. In 1994, John Paul II published an apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, in which he authoritatively declared that the church had no authority to ordain women on traditional grounds. Commenting on the papal letter, Avery Dulles, a well-known Roman Catholic scholar and ecclesiologist, recalled the traditional Catholic argument against women's ordination, known as the "iconic argument," which states that "the priest at the altar acts in the person of Christ the Bridegroom. These theological reasons," Dulles concludes, "show why it was fitting for Christ to have freely decided to reserve priestly service to men. If the maleness of the priest is essential to enable him to act symbolically in persona Christi in the eucharistic sacrifice, it follows that women should not be priests." Avery Dulles, "Infallible: Rome's Word On Women's Ordination," *National Catholic Register*, January 7, 1996, 1, 10.



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