

Community Through Co-Ordination: The Worlds of Divine Grace and Hierarchal Authority

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The sacrament of ordination, and its control of and impact on clergy and laity, have been on the radar of the Church and on my mind of late, especially with the elections of a number of bishops worldwide and the surrounding debates about hierarchy, jurisdiction, and authority. However, the theology of ordination has frequently become so convoluted and clouded—by mysticism, misinterpretation, and even sometimes malevolence—that it invariably distorts any meaningful conversation about priesthood, power, and primacy in the Church.

When Orthodox theologians discuss ways of expanding or enriching communion through conciliarity or authority through collegiality, they rarely approach the sacrament of ordination from the standpoint of the universal priesthood. By the same token, they seldom contemplate the institution of the council from the standpoint of integral conciliarity. For the most part, they speak of incorporating more rather than fewer hierarchs, and they strain to appreciate hierarchal collegiality from the standpoint of the all-embracing communion of the people of God as including and incorporating both clergy and laity.

There are many shades of meaning behind established technical terms such

as “hierarchy” and “authority,” ranging from the episcopal to the ecclesial, from the canonical to the juridical, as well as from the mystical to the sacramental. Nonetheless, the concepts of “conciliarity” and “communion” imply a communion of saints, a community of people—a common submission to and commission by the Son of God, to whom alone belongs and who alone constitutes the entire body or plenitude of the Church. In this regard, all members of the body of Christ are equally servants in an organic whole, and those elected to serve as representatives of Christ are simultaneously to function as representatives of the entire community.

Interpreting hierarchy and authority in a modern context is therefore quite challenging. After all, the world that originally shaped the concepts of ordination and priesthood has undergone monumental cultural transformations, and the present embrace of clericalism in many ways conflicts with earlier worldviews and perspectives.

My purpose here is not to denigrate the ordained structure of the Church. “All things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). The established hierarchy of orders is to be accepted and respected without reservation as the source of the Church’s identity and

the basis of its authority. Yet clergy must become less imperious and paternalistic with respect to church administration and parish ministry, and more compassionate and sensitive with regard to evangelical service and spiritual growth. Moreover, in order for the ordained ministry to prove meaningful, it must achieve harmony with the other pastoral and prophetic ministries in the Church. In the end, authority and hierarchy must increasingly be perceived in terms of dialogue and not dominion, of communion and not control, of service and not sovereignty. This is what I would call the principle of *sacramental co-ordination* (rather than simply sacred ordination), which demands a fresh look at our theology of priesthood, power, and primacy.

Priesthood, Power, and Primacy A Theology of Priesthood

Early patristic literature emphasizes the role and responsibility of the bishop (and, by extension, the priest) as an icon (εἰκὼν or τύπος) of Christ, as somehow embodying or exemplifying the Word of God, who is fully and uniquely both human and divine. This embodiment is, by anyone's standards, a tall order for any "earthly vessel." The notion of the bishop or priest standing for or standing in the place of (εἰς τόπον) Christ—without of course ever displacing the presence of God—undoubtedly approaches the hallmark of arrogance and hubris.

Among some contemporary theologians, including the late Father Thomas Hopko, the bishop or priest is projected as incorporating the sum of Christ's virtues, as becoming "all things to all people, in order by all means to save at least some" (1 Cor. 9:22). The claim of integrating all of Christ's virtues surely resonates as implausible, if not impossible. It is important to note that no-



Ordination of a priest.

where does this scriptural passage actually claim to present any prescriptive or determinative measure of the priesthood, such as the ones we encounter in 1 Timothy and Titus.

Other present-day theologians and bishops, such as Ierotheos of Nafpaktos, unabashedly perceive ordination as reflecting a journey through the three stages of spiritual development, relating the diaconate to the step of purification, the priesthood to illumination, and the episcopate to deification. Hilarion of Volokolamsk brazenly promotes ordination as not just a powerful transformation of the layman's status, but a transition to another, entirely different level of existence. Surely these images of the sacrament of ordination border on the sacrilegious, more suggestive of the language at the Council of Trent than the sacramental language of the patristic tradition.

In adherence to the mind of the church fathers, other theologians speak of the priesthood in terms of fulfilling the Lord's commission or doing the

Lord's work, feeding the Lord's sheep or washing the Lord's feet, becoming the Lord's fishermen or serving rather than being served. But are not all these spiritual insights and noble intentions also the fundamental vocation of all Christians, who comprise the "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9 and Rev. 5:10)? Is it not fair to say that they are by no means exclusively or even exceptionally the responsibilities of the ordained hierarchy or clergy alone?

Ordination at all times remains an essential and vital aspect of church life and ecclesial hierarchy. Otherwise the role of the Holy Spirit and the divine grace conferred sacramentally could be dismissed as purely symbolic of the distortion of ministry or else as symptomatic of the abuse of authority. It is always and only the Spirit of God that, in the sacrament of ordination, "wholly renders the ordinand a servant, well-pleasing in all things" to the entire communion of saints in the body of Christ.

When our attention is invariably misplaced on authority or apostolicity, rather than on authenticity or accountability, then our focus is inevitably misdirected to the precise canonical and ecclesiological differences between those who have and do not have legitimate or lawful ordination. It behooves us, then, always to remember that the laying-on of hands in the sacrament of ordination constitutes a reminder (and not a dismissal) of the importance of community and the power of grace—ultimately, of the openness and transparency of the Holy Spirit. It is never simply an imposition of authority by one individual in isolation from or over and above the rest of the community.

Apostolicity implies that it is the Church in its entirety that consecrates and commissions its leaders, pastors,

and ministers. The exclamation of "Axios!" (worthy) among the bishop and the congregation during the ordination ceremony symbolizes the paramount importance of this communal relationship. By the same token, ministers—whether bishops, priests, or deacons—are always called to enhance and empower the Church in its entirety. Anything less than or different from this inclusive sense of community is tantamount to clericalism.

In this sense, the Church's wisdom has always recognized that individuals innately depend on the grace of God in order to carry on Christ's work. The sacrament of ordination reflects the definitive and formative role of the Holy Spirit in the election of pastors and the exercise of pastoral leadership. Through ordination, it is ultimately "the divine grace, which always heals what is infirm and completes what is lacking."

The Temptation of Power

There has, of course, been an organic and charismatic progression of sacramental orders through the centuries, originating in the priesthood of Christ and elaborated in the Letter to the Hebrews, through apostolic succession and, eventually, in the establishment of an institutional hierarchy in the sacrament of ordination: "He had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God" (Heb. 2:17). When apostolic succession is deplorably confounded with the advancement of power, however, the grace of sacramental priesthood is obscured, yielding instead to the primal seduction of secular authority. The process of election devolves into a demoralizing maze of Byzantine machination and behind-the-scenes manipulation,

reducing the disgrace of simony to a token medieval misdemeanor.

Perhaps the source of such a fallacy lies in our conventional image of the Church. More often than not, we consider the episcopate and the priesthood as a pyramid, a “top-down” structure or system, where authority somehow emanates or radiates from above. Yet this is hardly the message that reverberates throughout scripture, where Christ definitively declares: “It shall not be so among you!” (Matt. 20:26, Mark 10:43, and Luke 22:26).

Thinking outside of the box, this has always been my vision of clergy remuneration. If the Church is not a secular corporation, but instead a spiritual community that reflects the *corpus Christi*, then I wonder if bishops should be paid little or nothing (since they are invariably celibate, and their overall needs are charitably and graciously accommodated), even as the “lower” clergy should be sustained more generously (inasmuch as they are often married and provide for families). I wonder where the opposition would arise were such an inverse system ever introduced into the conventional stewardship models of our parishes and dioceses.

My point is that, in the Church, hierarchy and authority are always born out of community and relationship. It is neither power nor position but always love and service that define the disciple of Christ and determine the spirit of leadership. Whenever, then, we are reminded that the laity can do little or nothing without the bishop, we should equally remember that the bishop is literally nothing without the faithful. The first instance is diabolical, in the sense of proving divisive, according to Ignatius of Antioch, but

the second situation is also clearly anomalous, in the sense of proving abusive for the life of the community.

In order that we should never confuse authority with narcissism or obedience with flattery, the Church, in its wisdom, has always emphasized that the Liturgy cannot be celebrated by a clergyman, whether a bishop or priest, without at least one layperson in attendance—a graphic reminder of the delimited and relational role of the clergy as well as the unique importance of every layperson.

Dimensions of Priesthood and Power

When we think about bishops and their elections, about ordination and authority, we should be humble enough to allow for the workings of grace, even when some choose to meet behind closed doors or work behind the scenes to achieve their goals. In such a paradigm of authority, bishops must take up less “oxygen” in the Church, allowing the Spirit to blow more freely. Otherwise, authority is reduced to arbitrary tyranny instead of unleashing the unrestricted potential of the whole Church.

Here is my vision: instead of beginning with the bishop as the expression of canonical authority by means of his presidency at the sacrament of the Eucharist, perhaps we should consider revising or reversing our approach, and begin with the believer as the expression of the charismatic authority that comes from baptism. After all, are the two sacraments—the Eucharist and baptism—not mutually constitutive and jointly definitive for the formation of every believer? Adopted through baptism and anointed through chrismation, the Christian becomes the focus and purpose of all spiritual authority.

If Christ clearly admonished his disciples that “it shall not be so among you” when it came to the exercise of power and primacy, then perhaps we are on the wrong track when we only consider authority in the Church in historical and canonical perspectives. Our discussions are reduced to philosophical and juridical arguments, and they remain founded on essentially Byzantine and medieval assumptions. They revolve around an image of sovereignty and a concept of jurisdiction

that are not derived primarily from the gospel or the early apostolic community. They involve an understanding of the Church that prevails only when people have not really thought very much about the Church.

Master of the Housebook, *Christ Washing the Feet of the Apostles*, c. 1480.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the proper significance of authority in the Church, primacy should therefore be turned on its head. Our focus and concern should be less centered on the concept or content of authority, and more on the purpose and objective of leadership-in-community. In this regard, two fundamental points should be remembered and highlighted in our discussion as well as in our application of models of leadership and authority:

First, there is the *evangelical or diaconal perspective of primacy*, which above all implies mercy and love for the people of God. We as Orthodox Christians should not be known for the precise and perfect degree that we have preserved the apostolic succession through the institutional hierarchy in the Church. Instead, we should be identified by our pastoral concern and compassion for every parishioner. “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The biblical image of service and sacrifice shatters practices that we have come to take for granted in the hierarchical and synodal system. It overturns and radically subverts the values we have come to expect from our leaders in the Church. Scripture and the gospel turn the institutional structure of the Church upside down. Like Christ in the New Testament, the values of charity and compassion rebuke “the scribes and Pharisees” (Matt. 23:13) in today’s Church, reminding them where their priorities and treasure should lie.



In other words, in order for a hierarch or primate to lead, he should first remember that he is primarily a disciple and follower. In order for a pastor to supervise, he must first realize that he is predominantly a sheep of the only good shepherd (John 10:11). In order for a bishop to be a father, he must first respond to his preeminent vocation as a son and servant. It is much easier to be a bishop than it is to be a Christian. It is much harder to fulfill the mandate of Christ, according to which “the last will be first, and the first last” (Matt. 20:16) and “he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11).

Second, there is *the sacramental or communal perspective of primacy*, which implies service and sacrifice as paramount in church life. In the early Church, just as in late antiquity, the bishop was never understood merely as a distant administrator, as an authoritative figure who at best attended councils and at worst imposed canons. The bishop was above all called to be a father to the faithful, an advocate for those entrusted to him, and a spokesman for justice. The protection of the poor and oppressed was his principal concern and not a peripheral charge. The Church never overlooked its social obligation, and one of its principal functions was philanthropic and charitable work within the community.

A Fresh Starting Point A Release of Spiritual Energy

Unfortunately, we have developed an extended, perhaps even exaggerated theology of the bishop as president of the Eucharist and center of unity on the basis of the early apostolic teaching and later Byzantine tradition. We have reduced the role and responsibility of the bishop to upholding canonical jurisdiction at all cost, even at the ex-

pense of other vital aspects of authority and ministry. For instance, why is it that we focus exclusively on baptism whenever we discuss the individual life of the Christian, on the Eucharist in order to discuss the communal life of the Church, and on ordination when we discuss the ministry of the priesthood? The truth is that we should not sharply separate the dimension of spirituality in baptism from the dimension of ecclesiology in the Eucharist and from the dimension of canon law in ordination. All of the sacraments have a vital and fundamental bearing on personal growth, sacramental communion, and spiritual direction.

In such an all-embracing context, perhaps our starting point in appreciating hierarchy and authority should be the sacrament of baptism, which after all defines our initiation into and determines our commitment to the Church. Baptism provides a crucial charismatic dimension for a balanced appreciation of life and leadership in the Church. Through baptism, Orthodox Christians remember and renew the ministry of the Church in theory and in practice.

The Church is not a one-dimensional establishment. It is a multifaceted structure, and when it succeeds in properly remembering, recognizing, and realizing the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9 and Rev. 5:10)—as the prophetic ministry of all believers and the vocation of all the people of God in the plenitude of the Church—then new spiritual energies are released within the community. Otherwise, if the line of distinction that we draw between the “ordinary” priesthood and the “ordained” priesthood is exaggerated into a wall of demarcation between clergy and laity, then our understanding of sacramental ministry remains derived from the perspective of secular authority.

Ordination as Co-Ordination

In order for sacred ordination not to be conflated with secular domination, we must recognize how every member of the body of Christ is invaluable and irreplaceable—not simply as reflecting the image and likeness of God, but specifically as realizing the vocation to service and sacrifice addressed to the common priesthood for the sake of the common good. This is the message conveyed in the First Letter to the Corinthians:

Concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. . . . There are varieties of gifts [*charismata*], but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as the Spirit wills. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? (12:1–29)

It is a sad reality and a reduction of the Church that we are overly concerned, if not obsessed, with canonical and ju-

ridical matters pertaining to sacred ordination and apostolic succession. I am not referring here simply to high-level deliberations or contemporary disputes about hierarchy and primacy. A mere glance at Orthodox print and social media reflects the preferences and priorities of our communities, with the episcopacy assuming a disproportionate amount of authority and attention in the Church. Is it any wonder that so many—both inside and outside the Church—feel that the “synergy” of the Spirit, or indeed their own “shareholding” of the community, is stifled, suppressed, and slighted?

Instead, we must strive for an understanding of hierarchy and authority in which the contribution of all is welcomed and valued. This is how St. Paul continues in the Letter to the Corinthians:

As it is, then, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, which our more respectable members do not require (1 Cor 12:20–24).

But in order to achieve this kind of authority, we cannot focus solely on the sacrament of the Eucharist and the ordained hierarchy. We must also highlight the sacrament of baptism and the royal priesthood. At the very least, we cannot isolate or separate these two quintessential sacraments as they impact and inform the spiritual life of the baptized Christian as well as the com-

munal life of the institutional Church. In fact, even when the concept of hierarchal or priestly authority is grounded in the sacrament of the Eucharist, it must also be attended by a constructive and communal dimension. After all, as we know, the ordained ministry is never vicarious but always representative and participatory. The bishop or priest is not a vicar, but a representative commissioned by the entire community and ordained by divine grace.

This is why I believe we should be speaking of communion and cooperation whenever we are discussing hierarchy and power. We should not so much undermine the sacrament of ordination as underline the principle of co-ordination as the counterbalance of every level of authority and administration in the Church. This principle conveys the fact that ordination is the exercise of a ministry essentially shed upon and shared by all. The priestly ministry is not and cannot be practiced as the unique prerogative of a few, but should be perceived as the universal privilege of all. And the intimate, even inseparable relationship between the sacrament of baptism (as the foundational ordination of every Christian into the universal priesthood of Christ) and the sacrament of the Eucharist (as the essential participation of all Christians in the crucified and resurrected body of Christ) reflect the appointment

or anointment of every baptized person in the community.¹

In this way, all baptized members of the eucharistic assembly participate in and contribute to the governance and growth of the Church. Moreover, all baptized members stand beside one another—in service and sacrifice, in solidarity and support—through the exercise of leadership within the church community. Most importantly, all individuals baptized in the death and resurrection of Christ safeguard and ensure the Church as an institution of compassion rather than of abuse. This is why St. Paul concludes with an emphasis—beyond power and prophecy as well as before all things earthly and heavenly—on the authority of love:

Earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. . . . Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away. . . . For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end (12:31–13:10). ✱

¹ See John Zizioulas, "Some Reflections on Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist," *Sobornost* 5 (1969): 644–52.



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