

MAJOR ORDERS

BRO. DENIS GILLIGAN, O. P.



MAJOR Orders are also called *Sacred Orders*. According to St. Thomas, an order is said to be sacred in two ways. "First, in itself, and thus every Order is sacred, since it is a sacrament. Secondly, by reason of the matter about which it exercises an act, and thus an Order is called sacred, if it exercises an act about some consecrated thing. In this sense there are only three sacred Orders, namely the priesthood and diaconate, which exercise an act about the consecrated body and blood of Christ, and the subdiaconate, which exercises an act about the consecrated vessels."¹ Thus major or sacred orders refer directly to the functions of divine worship and especially to the Eucharist. They bind the subject to continence and to the daily recitation of the divine office.

Subdiaconate is the first or lowest degree of major orders in the Latin Church. As the name itself indicates, the subdeacon's duty is to serve the deacon. It is he who prepares the wine and water, the sacred vessels and altar linens necessary for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. He also presents water to the bishop or priest when the latter washes his fingers. He reads the Epistle, assists as a witness at the Holy Sacrifice and, at the same time, guards the celebrant from being disturbed during the sacred ceremonies.

The ceremonies used in the administration of Holy Orders are full of beauty and meaning and express well the dignity and duties of the orders conferred through them. Subdeaconship, like the other orders, is conferred at Mass, usually at a Low Mass. One year after the reception of the last minor order, namely, acolyte, the candidate is notified by his bishop, or, if he be a religious, by his superiors, that he is to be raised to the subdiaconate. This decision is arrived at after the character, intellectual acumen and spirituality of the candidate have been scrupulously examined and approved. Over and above these

¹ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., q. 37, a. 3.

qualifications he must be twenty-one years of age complete² and finishing his third year of theology.³ Since September 1, 1910, all candidates for major orders must take an oath against Modernism. Pope Pius X, in the *Motu Proprio Sacrorum Antisitum*, prescribed the form to be used in taking this oath.

The decision on the part of the candidate is very important, for upon this decision rests his entire future. It is no wonder that such a candidate should stop and reflect before taking this step. Now he is free, and it is lawful for him to pass over to worldly pursuits, but once he has received the order of subdiaconate he is no longer at liberty to recede from his resolution. He is bound by the obligation of absolute and perpetual chastity and strict obedience. His entire life in the future is to be offered as a complete oblation before the throne of God.

The Candidates, standing before the altar, clothed in alb, cincture and amice, are thus admonished by the bishop: "Dearly beloved children, who are about to be promoted to the Holy Order of Subdiaconship, you ought to consider attentively, again and again, to what a burden you, of your own accord, this day aspire. For thus far you are free, and you are allowed, if you wish, to pass to earthly vows: but if you receive this order it will not be lawful for you any longer to turn aside from what you have proposed to do: but you will be obliged perpetually to serve God, to serve Whom is to reign: you will be bound to preserve chastity with His aid, and to be joined forever to the ministry of His Church. Therefore, while there is time, reflect: and if it please you to persevere in your holy resolution, in the name of God come hither!"⁴

The candidate then takes one step toward the bishop. By that step he has separated himself from the world forever leaving behind him its pleasures and ambitions. It is because of this step that the order of subdiaconate is commonly known as *Taking the Step*.

The Litany of the Saints is recited or sung while the candidates remain prostrate on the floor. If there are any to be ordained deacons and priests, they too prostrate themselves on the floor. Here they lie like sacrificed victims. The various duties of the subdeacon are made known to them in the instruc-

² *Codex Juris Canonici*, Can. 975.

³ *Ibid.*, Can. 976 §2.

⁴ Right Rev. J. S. M. Lynch, LL. D., D. D., *Rite of Ordination*, p. 28.

tion of the bishop. These duties have already been enumerated above. An empty chalice and the paten are then handed to each candidate while the bishop says: "See Whose ministry is given to you; I admonish you, therefore, so to comport yourselves as to please God." The archpriest having given to the candidates cruets of wine and water and a basin and a finger towel, the bishop stands and calls down upon the candidates the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost.

The ceremonies are brought to a close when the bishop, having clothed the candidates in the amice, maniple and tunic or dalmatic, gives each of the newly ordained the Book of Epistles.

According to Catholic historians, the first mention of subdiaconate as an order is found in a letter of Pope Cornelius (250 A. D.) to Fabius of Antioch. The functions of the subdeacon were performed by the deacon in apostolic times and from the wording of this letter there is every reason to believe that the order of subdeaconate is older than the third century. Nevertheless, since there is no imposition of the hands and the Holy Ghost is not called down upon the candidates during the ceremony of ordination, a dispute has arisen among theologians as to whether or not subdiaconate, together with the minor and the other major orders, is a sacrament. It may seem to be a contradiction to say that during the ceremonies the Holy Ghost is not called down upon the candidates since we have already said above that the bishop calls down upon the candidates the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost. There is a difference, however, between the calling of the Holy Ghost and the calling of His gifts upon the candidates. Among those who hold that subdeaconship is a sacrament are St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure, B. Albertus Magnus. Modern theologians seem to hold that it is only a sacramental instituted by the Church. Neither opinion is certain.

This is not the case with the order of diaconate, however. The origin of diaconship is given in detail in the Acts of the Apostles (vi, 1-3): "In those days, the number of the disciples increasing there arose a murmuring of the Greeks against the Hebrews, for that their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve (Apostles) calling together the multitude of the disciples, said: It is not reason, that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of good reputation, full of

the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business." This pleased the multitude and they chose Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmeanas and Nicholas. These seven were then set before the Apostles: "And they (the Apostles) praying, imposed hands upon them." Stephen later became the first Christian martyr.

The order of deacon is the second degree of major orders in the Latin Church. The character, virtues and integrity of a deacon are set forth by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy.⁵ These qualifications are essentially the same as those required of a deacon today. Just as in the time of the Apostles the multitude presented "men of good reputation, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom," so today, at the beginning of the ceremonies for the ordination of deacon, the bishop stands and calls upon the people present to make known any reason why the subdeacons before him should not be promoted to the order of deaconship.

In the ordination of a deacon, the bishop uses more numerous and more solemn prayers than at that of a subdeacon. In the first place, the bishop makes known to the candidates, that they are about to be promoted to the Levitical Order. In the Old Law, the Jews were divided into twelve tribes. One of these tribes, that of Levi, was chosen to serve the tabernacle of God with special devotion and to continue His sacrifice by a perpetual rite. A deacon enjoys both the name and the office of this tribe and like them he must wrestle "not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirit of wickedness in the high places." St. Stephen is then placed before them as their example. Having finished the prayers, the bishop imposes his hands on the head of each candidate, saying: "Receive the Holy Ghost, that you may have strength, and be able to resist the devil and his temptations. In the name of the Lord." The Apostles did the same over the heads of St. Stephen and the other six whom the people placed before them.

The stole is placed on the left shoulder of the candidate, extending diagonally to the right side, where the ends are fastened. Then he is clothed in the dalmatic, with a prayer which expresses its symbolic meaning, namely, salvation, joy and justice. Finally the bishop gives him the Book of the Gos-

⁵ I Tim. iii, 8-10.

pels saying: "Receive the power to read the Gospel in the Church of God, both for the living and the dead, in the name of the Lord."

The duties of the deacon are very limited today in comparison with his varied duties during the early ages of the Church. His functions are now practically reduced to the ministrations at Solemn High Mass, to exposing the Most Blessed Sacrament during Benediction and to distribute Holy Communion in case of necessity. He also has the faculty to baptize solemnly but this faculty is seldom exercised at the present time, at least in this country. In former times deacons were not allowed to preach from the pulpit. He is allowed today.

In the first ages of the Church, many duties which were later assigned to those of inferior orders, were performed by the deacons. Besides serving the tables at the *Agape* or love-feast, he warned the faithful to be attentive to the Holy Mysteries and if anyone misbehaved a deacon was summoned. He was to see that the faithful occupied their proper places and he took notice of who were present at the Holy Sacrifice and sermons and who were absent. He had to give a report to the bishop of all the faithful under his charge that the bishop might admonish and advise each privately, or rebuke and correct publicly. To the deacon was entrusted the distribution of the Church's goods and it was his business to provide all that was necessary for each one's sustenance. As the Apostolic Constitutions express it, the deacon was "the ears, eyes, mouth and heart of the bishop."⁶

In our day, we are sometimes prone to be unmindful of the importance attached to these orders by the Church. It is true that the dignity of the priesthood far surpasses these lesser dignities. Nevertheless, it is only by means of these preparatory steps that the young Levite approaches gradually the exalted position to which he is called. They are like so many terraces placed at regular intervals where the chosen ones may rest and prepare themselves for the ascent towards the mountain top where with uplifted arms they will one day stand mediators between God and His creatures.

⁶ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV, p. 648.