

## TONSURE AND MINOR ORDERS

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THE sacred ministry comprises many and various functions and the right and power to perform all these functions are not conferred upon anyone at one time. The candidate for the priesthood rises gradually to this exalted office by those steps which are known as first tonsure, porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte, subdeacon, and deacon. The first of these, tonsure, is but a preparation for the rest, which, together with the priesthood itself, constitute the Sacrament of Orders.

Since the priesthood is of divine institution, of pre-eminent dignity, and transcendent powers, it is quite fitting that it should be surrounded by the lower orders of ministers, and that the Church should have decreed that the approach to it should be only by degrees. Hence there are in the Church seven orders, each specifically distinct, but generically constituting one sacrament. With each successive order are conferred the right and power to perform certain functions, gradually preparing the candidate for the priesthood.

The first four orders received are called Minor Orders. These are porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte. The duties of the exorcist and lector are performed today only by those who have the full powers of the priesthood, and those of porter and acolyte are often fulfilled by the laity. Only a few churches, and these in Rome, are always served by clerics as inferior ministers. These are the churches of St. John Lateran, St. Peter's, and the Chapel of the Holy Father. Nevertheless only the ordained have the right, in virtue of their ordination, to perform these duties, and the lay person acts only by a favor accorded him by the Church. The ordained, especially priests, sometimes have occasion even now to perform the duties peculiar to Minor Orders and always watch over them when exercised by the laity.

In the early days of the Church there were some who aspired to no order higher than the Minor Orders. These men passed their lives somewhat after the manner of lay brothers in a religious community. Out of humility, and a great love for these more lowly duties, they were unwilling to be carried any further towards the priesthood. By the will of God manifested in these humble souls we

see that although the Minor Orders are but steps to the priesthood the duties attached to them have a perfection which can absorb the heart. Even as late as the seventeenth century there were men of illustrious birth and great learning who received only these orders and exercised them faithfully.

It is not known definitely at what time the tonsure and four Minor Orders were instituted. The Catechism of the Council of Trent says that from venerable Fathers of the Church we may learn that the tonsure was introduced by the Prince of the Apostles, St. Peter. It is toward the middle of the third century that specific mention is made of the Minor Orders, in a letter from Pope Cornelius to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch.

Although the tonsure is not an order, but a preparation for orders, it is not without its own special significance. It is a preparation for the sacrament of Orders like espousals are a preparation for the sacrament of Matrimony. It makes the candidate a cleric and it implies a complete break with the world and its allurements, since by it the one tonsured takes the Lord for his portion. He becomes a member of the Church's court and receives the privileges of the clergy.

That he takes the Lord for his inheritance is evident from the words spoken by the bishop in the ceremony of tonsure, and repeated after him by the candidate, "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup: it is thou that wilt restore my inheritance to me." While these words are being pronounced the bishop cuts the hair of the candidate in five places and in the form of a cross. In the Old Law those who were consecrated to the services of God were forbidden to receive any part of the land in the Land of Promise because the Lord was their portion and inheritance. The word *cleric* itself is expressive of the separation of the tonsured from the world, since it means portion, heritage, or part.

In the United States it is not customary to wear the tonsure, but in Catholic countries it is an obligation upon all clerics. Even in our country some communities of religious wear it at all times.

For a long time there was no difference between the form of tonsure worn by the secular clergy and that worn by religious priests and monks. The prevailing form was that which, according to some of the Fathers of the Church, was introduced by St. Peter, and is known as the Roman tonsure. This consists in shaving all the hair save a circle around the head. Among the secular clerics who wear it at the present time the tonsure consists of a smoothly shaven cir-

cular spot, perhaps three inches in diameter, on the top of the head towards the rear. Two other forms have also been in use; the Eastern, or St. Paul's, the whole head being denuded of hair, and the Celtic, or St. John's, in which a crescent is shaved from the front of the head.

Various explanations are offered concerning the signification of the tonsure itself. The first is that it is imposed in honor of the crown of thorns pressed on the head of Our Saviour, that the instrument devised by the Jews for the suffering and ignominy of Christ should be the ornament and glory of His followers. Again it may be understood to indicate the perfection of the ecclesiastical state. A statement by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, that "the circle is said to be a perfect figure since its beginning and end coincide,"<sup>1</sup> is the source of this interpretation. A third explanation, and the one which is applicable to the ceremony itself and to all forms of tonsure, is that it expresses detachment from the concerns of the world, as superfluous to the ecclesiastical state, just as the hair is in a certain sense superfluous to the body.

The effect of the ceremony is the same in all forms, namely, the candidate is separated from the world and begins his gradual progress towards the eternal priesthood.

To the porter, especially in the early days of the Church, several important offices were entrusted. He was treasurer of the church to which he was assigned and guardian of the sacristy. The keys of the church were in his hands and he was to guard the doors so that no prohibited person would enter. We can readily understand what great need there was for vigilance in these matters during the early persecutions. Not infrequently the porter was called upon to risk his life to preserve the holy things in the church from profanation. Many of them received the crown of martyrdom.

Infidels, heretics, and all other unworthy persons were expelled by the porter. The catechumens, those who were not fully instructed in all the mysteries of the faith, were not allowed to remain during the whole Mass, but were required to leave before the Offertory. These too the porter dismissed. Another duty for the porter was to carry the books to the pulpit in a day when these were old manuscripts and large folio volumes and were not handled as easily as the liturgical books of our day.

At his ordination the porter is admonished by the bishop to conduct himself as having to render an account to God for those things

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 7, obj. 2a.

which are kept under the keys. This guardianship of the keys to the material entrance to the house of God is in a sense a presage of the spiritual power of the keys, of binding and loosing, which he will one day exercise over souls as a priest.

He who is ordained lector has a twofold office, to read and to bless. He is to read the word of God to the people, clearly, distinctly, and without any alteration. St. Augustine is said to have demanded the same respect for one syllable of the Gospel as for a particle of the sacred Host. Hence this office of reading is a duty well worthy of the lector's most serious attention. When Pope Liberius was quite young he was placed among the lectors and acquitted himself so nobly that his voice penetrated the vast recesses of the basilicas and carried to the most distant rows of people. Even at that early period of his career he gave proof of his future greatness by the wisdom and seriousness he evidenced in his work as lector. The bishop admonishes the lector to prepare himself to instruct by example as well as by word, that the truth of the divine lessons may not be corrupted through his fault, to the detriment of those who hear him.

The lector's power to bless never extended further than the blessing of bread and first fruits. It was the rule then for the faithful to bring their bread to be blessed all through the year, and the first fruits of their orchards and farms in the summer and autumn. St. Viator is honored among the saints of this order. Ordained lector, he wished to remain in this state throughout his life.

Our divine Lord, after His resurrection, sent His disciples into the world to preach the Gospel, saying, "These signs shall follow them that believe; in My name they shall cast out devils." This power of casting out devils is conferred upon the exorcist. In the earliest days of the Church some of the simple faithful seemed to have this power and their actions were a source of argument to the primitive apologists. It is not difficult to see that this office is one which requires great wisdom and caution. The exorcist is called upon to perform no merely exterior function, as are those in the other minor orders, but is asked to establish contact with the spirit world. Consequently it has never been permitted to him, nor is it even today permitted the priest, who alone fulfils this duty, to act without the special delegation of the bishop. A very holy priest is chosen, for the struggle is against the powers of darkness, and the outcome of the combat will depend in great measure upon the ardent faith and personal sanctity of the exorcist. It is not here as in the case when he absolves in the confessional, consecrates in the Mass, or administers the sacraments.

On these occasions the effect worked by each priest is the same. For a successful exorcism, however, Our Lord Himself indicated certain necessary conditions. The Apostles asked Him why they could not cast a devil out of a certain child, and He answered, "Because of your unbelief." And He added that that kind of demon was expelled only after prayer and fasting. A holy martyr, Peter, who suffered death under the Emperor Diocletian, was an exorcist. On one occasion, when thrown into prison, this man of God delivered the daughter of his jailer from the possession of the devil and converted her and her whole family to the faith of Christ. The Church has seen fit to place his name in the Canon of the Mass.

The order of acolyte immediately precedes the first major order, subdeaconate. The number of prayers and the solemnity of the admonitions given to the candidate during this ceremony all indicate that he is approaching the transition between the Minor and Major Orders. The name acolyte itself means companion, i. e., the one accompanying the superior ministers. In the time of Pope Victor he was called *sequens*, the one following. His duties are to prepare the wine and water for the Sacrifice of the Mass, to light the church and the candles for the Mass and other ceremonies, to serve at Mass, and to prepare and offer incense to the minister. These offices bring the acolyte in closer touch with the altar and the Holy Eucharist than do the duties of any of the other Minor Orders. This is especially true when he offers the celebrant of the Mass the wine and water.

During the ceremony of his ordination the bishop offers the acolyte an empty cruet and an unlighted candle. The cruet is empty and the candle unlighted to indicate to him that he must prepare the wine and water for the Sacrifice, light the church and the altar, and show the light of a good life to the faithful.

There have always been in the Church pious laymen who have appreciated the great honor extended to them by the Church in permitting them to exercise some of the functions of the acolyte. Counts, princes, and kings have considered it a great privilege to bear a candle and serve at the altar of their God. The story is told by Montalembert of a count who became a religious in later life and insisted on performing the humble duty of carrying a candle, saying that if in the world he had willingly carried a light for a mortal king, so much the more should he be willing to perform the same service for the Immortal Emperor of the court of Heaven, as a pledge of his humble respect.

The Church is not without her martyrs among the acolytes. A



young boy, Tarcisius, suffered death in the days of persecution in an attempt to carry the Holy Eucharist to some Christians who had been thrown into prison and were about to become the prey of the beasts in the amphitheatre. This heroic soul is now the patron of acolytes.

It is interesting to note that Our Lord Himself sanctified the duties of those in minor orders by exercising them on occasions which are familiar to all. He performed the duty of porter when He drove the money-changers from the temple; of lector when He was found in the midst of the doctors and again when He appeared in the synagogue and rose to read; He often drove the demons from the possessed; and all His life He acted as acolyte, preparing the Sacrifice which He was to offer on the Cross.

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## *The Living Host*

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Within Thee throbs the Sacred Heart  
 O living Host divine!  
 Thou art in truth our very God:  
 May we be truly Thine!

And in Thee flows the Precious Blood  
 The mystic Stream of life;  
 Our hope before the Triune God,  
 Our strength in every strife.

O Bread eternal, Lamb divine,  
 Thy mercy we implore:  
 True Son of Mary, Son of God,  
 Sweet Jesus—we adore!