

Understanding the priesthood ordination Mass

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Have you ever been a part of a priesthood ordination Mass?

With the advent of social media and livestream options, these days it can be easier than ever to experience special Masses of many kinds, even when our physical ability to attend may be limited. It isn't always quite as easy to make sense of the rituals and traditions that we witness during those Masses, however, with one example being all of the unique parts that are included in the celebration of a priesthood ordination Mass. To help you better understand what you are witnessing, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) offers the following answers to some of the more common questions regarding the who, what, and why of what takes place during a priesthood ordination Mass.

What is ordination? Ordination is the sacramental ceremony in which a man becomes a deacon, priest, or bishop and is enabled to minister in Christ's name and that of the Church. There are three ordinations in the sacrament of holy orders: diaconate; priesthood; and episcopal. The ordination ceremony includes various rituals, rich in meaning

and history, e.g., prostration, laying on of hands, anointing of hands, giving of the chalice and paten, sign of peace.

When does the ordination actually take place?

The essential rite of the sacrament, i.e., when it takes place, is the laying on of hands and prayer of consecration. This is an ancient tradition in the Church, mentioned in the Bible.

Who can ordain a priest?

Only a bishop can ordain a priest because he shares in the ministry of Jesus passed down through the apostles.

What is the meaning of the laying on of hands?

By this ritual the ordaining bishop and the other priests invoke the Holy Spirit to come down upon the one to be ordained, giving him a sacred character and setting him apart for the designated ministry.

Why does the ordinand lie prostrate during the ordination?

It symbolizes his unworthiness for the office to be assumed and his dependence upon God and the prayers of the Christian community.



Q What is the meaning of the newly ordained priest receiving the stole and the chasuble?

These are vestments which pertain to his office and have symbolic meaning. The stole symbolizes the authority and responsibility to serve in imitation of Christ. It reflects the line from Scripture: *“For my yoke is easy and my burden light.”* (Mt 11:30) The chasuble is the principle garment of the priest celebrating the Eucharist and is the outermost vestment.

Q What does the anointing of the hands signify?

Anointing with oil stems from the Old Testament and indicates that someone or something is being set apart for a sacred task or duty. The anointing of the hands signifies that the hands of the newly ordained priest are being prepared for the sacred duties and vessels which will be part of the priestly ministry, for example, offering the bread and the wine, anointing the sick and blessing people. The bishop says as he anoints the hands: *“The Father anointed our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. May Jesus preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and to offer sacrifice to God.”*

Q Why does the ordaining bishop hand the ordinand a chalice and paten?

The Eucharist is at the heart of the priesthood and this ritual highlights the importance of celebrating the Eucharist in the life of the priest and its meaning, as seen in the words which are spoken by the bishop: *“Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to*



be offered to him. Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate; model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s cross.”

Q How does one prepare for ordination to the priesthood?

A man has to engage in a challenging program of priestly formation which lasts from five to thirteen years, depending upon his background and the seminary he attends. There are three levels of seminary: high school; college/pre-theology; and theology. In 1999-2000, over 700 students attended high school seminaries, 1,576 attended college seminaries, and 3,474 were enrolled in theology schools.

Seminaries address four types of formation: human, spiritual, academic (intellectual), and pastoral. In addition to the academic course work, seminarians participate in a full schedule of spiritual activities, e.g., daily Mass, Liturgy of the Hours (Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer), and spiritual direction and retreats. At each level of seminary training, the

seminarian prepares for future pastoral ministry in various settings, such as schools, religious education programs, hospitals, prisons, and parishes. All of the formation takes into consideration the human person; human growth and development is fostered by community living, workshops, and other programs. The formation of future priests includes practical learning, too—for example, preaching, presiding at Mass, and pastoral counseling.

Q Do priests take vows?
Priests who belong to a religious order (e.g., Domin-

icans, Benedictine, Franciscans, etc.) take the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Diocesan priests make two promises—celibacy and obedience; these promises are part of the ordination ceremony. It is also expected that diocesan priests will lead a life of simplicity consonant with the people they serve.

Q Bible quotes about the priesthood

“Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.” (Heb 5:1-4)

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” (Jn 20:21-23) †

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