

What is the “priesthood of the baptized”?

We read in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, now more than 40 years young, that the liturgy is “an action of Christ the priest” (n.7) and, with him, his Body, the Church (nos. 7, 26, 83). As priest, Christ offers a perfect sacrifice and worship to God the Father on our behalf, and, still as priest, he offers to us the grace of God, a share in God’s own life. We also read that all of the faithful, in virtue of their baptism, share in this one priesthood of Christ (*CSL*, n.14). Quoting St. Peter’s first letter, the *Constitution* recalls that we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5). But even though all of the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ, and Christ acts through the baptized and his priests in the Church, he does not act in the same way in each. So, what’s the difference?

As St. Peter said above, all believers share in the priesthood of Christ. After the baptism of a child, the minister anoints (or christens) the child with sacred chrism after he explains that with the anointing the child will “remain for ever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King.” This anointing gives the new Christian (note the similarities between Christian, Christ, chrism, and christen) the power to fulfill his duty to be like Christ: preaching the gospel to the world as a prophet, serving the needy in the world as king, and offering prayer and sacrifice for the world as priest. This priesthood is called the “common priesthood of the baptized.”

Members of the clergy—that is, bishops, priests, and deacons—, however, are called to serve Christ the priest in a way that is essentially different from that of the baptized. In virtue of the sacrament of baptism, the faithful are called upon to work in the apostolate (n.9; *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, n.2); in virtue of the sacrament of orders, the clergy are called to take up the ministry of Christ. By the sacrament of baptism, the faithful receive the duty and power to act like Christ, that is, to be Christians; by the sacrament of orders, the clergy receive the duty and power to act in the person of Christ the Head. The sacrament of baptism calls the faithful to work in the world for its salvation (the apostolate); the sacrament of orders calls the clergy to work in the spiritual and sacramental realm, serving (ministering to) the work of the baptized. This latter priesthood is called the “ministerial priesthood of the ordained,” and no eucharistic celebration is possible without it. What’s more, the bishop, priest, and deacon, by their respective ordinations, are conformed to Christ and his priesthood in a different way.

Together, the baptized and the ordained form an “organically structured priestly community” (*Constitution on the Church*, n.11). This description of the Church is, in fact, one of the meanings of the word “hierarchy.” Composed of two Greek words—*hieretas*, meaning priest (as in hieroglyphics, “priestly” or sacred writing); and *arche*, meaning order or rule—“hierarchy” can be said of the ordained who *rule* the Church in Christ’s name, as well as the entire Church that is a priestly *order*, or, in the words of the Council, an “organically structured priestly community.”

So, since all of the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ, “liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church” (n.26); but since the ordained participate in Christ’s priesthood in a way essentially different from that of the baptized, “they concern the individual members of the Church in different ways, according to their differing rank, office, and actual participation” (*ibid.*). Therefore, “in liturgical celebrations each person, minister or layman, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy” (n.28). May we all come to appreciate the priesthood of Christ in the liturgy, both in the baptized and, in a special way, in the ordained.

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