

Of the Catholic Priesthood Called Holy Orders – By Martin Luther



Martin Luther

Of this sacrament the Church of Christ knows nothing; it was invented by the church of the Pope. It not only has no promise of grace, anywhere declared, but not a word is said about it in the whole of the New Testament. Now it is ridiculous to set up as a sacrament of God that which can nowhere be proved to have been instituted by God. Not that I consider that a rite practised for so many ages is to be condemned; but I would not have human inventions established in sacred things, nor should it be allowed to bring in anything as divinely ordained, which has not been divinely ordained; lest we should be objects of ridicule to our adversaries. We must endeavour that whatever we put forward as an article of the faith should be certain and uncorrupt and established by clear proofs from Scripture; and this we cannot show even in the slightest degree in the case of the present sacrament.

The Church has no power to establish new divine promises of grace, as some senselessly assert, who say that, since the Church is governed by the Holy Spirit, whatever she ordains has no less authority than that which is ordained of God. The Church is born of the word of promise through faith, and is nourished and preserved by the same word; that is, she herself is established by the promises of God, not the promise of God by her. The word of God is incomparably above the Church, and her part is not to establish, ordain, or make anything in it, but only to be established, ordained, and made, as a creature. What man begets his own parent? Who establishes the authority by which he himself exists?

This power the Church certainly has—that she can distinguish the word of God from the words of men. So Augustine confesses that his motive for believing the gospel was the authority of the Church, which declared it to be the gospel. Not that the Church is therefore above the gospel; for, if so, she would also be above God, in whom we believe, since she declares Him to be

God; but, as Augustine says elsewhere, the soul is so taken possession of by the truth, that thereby it can judge of all things with the utmost certainty, and yet cannot judge the truth itself, but is compelled by an infallible certainty to say that this is the truth. For example, the mind pronounces with infallible certainty that three and seven are ten, and yet can give no reason why this is true, while it cannot deny that it is true. In fact the mind itself is taken possession of, and, having truth as its judge, is judged rather than judges. Even such a perception is there in the Church, by the illumination of the Spirit, in judging and approving of doctrines; a perception which she cannot demonstrate, but which she holds as most sure. Just as among philosophers no one judges of those conceptions which are common to all, but everyone is judged by them, so is it among us with regard to that spiritual perception which judgeth all things, yet is judged of no man, as the Apostle says.

Let us take it then for certain that the Church cannot promise grace, to do which is the part of God alone, and therefore cannot institute a sacrament. And even, if she had the most complete power to do so, it would not forthwith follow, that orders are a sacrament. For who knows what is that Church which has the Spirit, when only a few bishops and learned men are usually concerned in setting up these laws and institutions? It is possible that these men may not be of the Church, and may all be in error; as councils have very often been in error, especially that of Constance, which has erred the most impiously of all. That only is a proved article of the faith which has been approved by the universal Church, and not by that of Rome alone. I grant therefore that orders may be a sort of church rite, like many others which have been introduced by the Fathers of the Church, such as the consecration of vessels, buildings, vestments, water, salt, candles, herbs, wine, and the like. In all these no one asserts that there is any sacrament, nor is there any promise in them. Thus the anointing of a man's hands, the shaving of his head, and other ceremonies of the kind, do not constitute a sacrament, since nothing is promised by these things, but they are merely employed to prepare men for certain offices, as in the case of vessels or instruments.

But it will be asked: What do you say to Dionysius, who reckons up six sacraments, among which he places Orders, in his Hierarchy of the Church? My answer is: I know that he is the only one of the ancient authorities who is considered as holding seven sacraments, although, by the omission of matrimony, he has only given six. We read nothing at all in the rest of the Fathers about these sacraments, nor did they reckon them under the title of sacrament, when they spoke of these things, for the invention of such sacraments is a modern one. Then too—if I may be rash enough to say so—it is altogether unsatisfactory that so much importance should be attributed to this Dionysius, whoever he was, for there is almost nothing of solid learning in him. By what authority or reason, I ask, does he prove his inventions concerning angels in his Celestial Hierarchy, a book on the study of which curious and superstitious minds have spent so much labour? Are they not all fancies of his own, and very much like dreams, if we read them and judge them freely? In his mystic theology indeed, which is so much cried up by certain very ignorant theologians, he is even very mischievous, and follows Plato rather than Christ, so that I would not have any believing mind bestow even

the slightest labour on the study of these books. You will be so far from learning Christ in them that, even if you know Him, you may lose Him. I speak from experience. Let us rather hear Paul, and learn Jesus Christ and Him crucified. For this is the way, the truth, and the life; this is the ladder by which we come to the Father, as it is written: "No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me."

So in his Hierarchy of the Church, what does he do but describe certain ecclesiastical rites, amusing himself with his own allegories, which he does not prove, just as has been done in our time by the writer of the book called the Rationale of Divine things? This pursuit of allegories is only fit for men of idle minds. Could I have any difficulty in amusing myself with allegories about any created thing whatever? Did not Bonaventura apply the liberal arts allegorically to theology? It would give me no trouble to write a better Hierarchy than that of Dionysius, as he knew nothing of popes, cardinals, and archbishops, and made the bishops the highest order. Who, indeed, is there of such slender wits that he cannot venture upon allegory? I would not have a theologian bestow any attention upon allegories, until he is perfectly acquainted with the legitimate and simple meaning of Scripture; otherwise, as it happened to Origen, his theological speculations will not be without danger.

We must not then immediately make a sacrament of anything which Dionysius describes; otherwise why not make a sacrament of the procession which he describes in the same passage, and which continues in use even to the present day? Nay, there will be as many sacraments as there are rites and ceremonies which have grown up in the Church. Resting, however, on this very weak foundation, they have invented and attributed to this sacrament of theirs certain indelible characters, supposed to be impressed on those who receive orders. Whence, I ask, such fancies? By what authority, by what reasoning are they established? Not that we object to their being free to invent, learn, or assert whatever they please; but we also assert our own liberty, and say that they must not arrogate to themselves the right of making articles of the faith out of their own fancies, as they have hitherto had the presumption to do. It is enough that, for the sake of concord, we submit to their rights and inventions, but we will not be compelled to receive them as necessary to salvation, when they are not necessary. Let them lay aside their tyrannical requirements, and we will show a ready compliance with their likings, that so we may live together in mutual peace. For it is a disgraceful, unjust, and slavish thing for a Christian man, who is free, to be subjected to any but heavenly and divine traditions.

After this they bring in their very strongest argument, namely, that Christ said at the last supper: "Do this in remembrance of me." "Behold!" they say, "Christ ordained them as priests." Hence, among other things, they have also asserted that it is to priests alone that both kinds should be administered. In fact they have extracted out of this text whatever they would; like men who claim the right to assert at their own free choice whatsoever they please out of any words of Christ, wherever spoken. But is this to interpret the words of God? Let us reply to them that in these words Christ gives no promise, but only a command that this should be done in remembrance of Him.

Why do they not conclude that priests were ordained in that passage also where Christ, in laying upon them the ministry of the word and of baptism, said: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"? It is the peculiar office of priests to preach and to baptize. Again, since at the present day it is the very first business of a priest, and, as they say, an indispensable one, to read the canonical Hours; why have they not taken their idea of the sacrament of orders from those words in which Christ commanded His disciples—as he did in many other places, but especially in the garden of Gethsemane—to pray that they might not enter into temptation? Unless indeed they evade the difficulty by saying that it is not commanded to pray, for it suffices to read the canonical Hours; so that this cannot be proved to be a priestly work from any part of Scripture, and that consequently this praying priesthood is not of God; as indeed it is not.

Which of the ancient Fathers has asserted that by these words priests were ordained? Whence then this new interpretation? It is because it has been sought by this device to set up a source of implacable discord, by which clergy and laity might be placed farther asunder than heaven and earth, to the incredible injury of baptismal grace and confusion of evangelical communion. Hence has originated that detestable tyranny of the clergy over the laity, in which, trusting to the corporal unction by which their hands are consecrated, to their tonsure, and to their vestments, they not only set themselves above the body of lay Christians, who have been anointed with the Holy Spirit, but almost look upon them as dogs, unworthy to be numbered in the Church along with themselves. Hence it is that they dare to command, exact, threaten, drive, and oppress, at their will. In fine, the sacrament of orders has been and is a most admirable engine for the establishment of all those monstrous evils which have hitherto been wrought, and are yet being wrought, in the Church. In this way Christian brotherhood has perished; in this way shepherds have been turned into wolves, servants into tyrants, and ecclesiastics into more than earthly beings.

How if they were compelled to admit that we all, so many as have been baptized, are equally priests? We are so in fact, and it is only a ministry which has been entrusted to them, and that with our consent. They would then know that they have no right to exercise command over us, except so far as we voluntarily allow of it. Thus it is said: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." (1 Pet. ii. 9.) Thus all we who are Christians are priests; those whom we call priests are ministers chosen from among us to do all things in our name; and the priesthood is nothing else than a ministry. Thus Paul says: "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." (1 Cor. iv. 1.)

From this it follows that he who does not preach the word, being called to this very office by the Church, is in no way a priest, and that the sacrament of orders can be nothing else than a ceremony for choosing preachers in the Church. This is the description given of a priest: "The priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." (Malachi ii. 7.) Be sure then that he who is not a messenger of the Lord of hosts, or who is called to anything else than

a messengership—if I may so speak—is certainly not a priest; as it is written: “Because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me.” (Hosea iv. 6.) They are called pastors because it is their duty to give the people pasture, that is, to teach them. Therefore those who are ordained only for the purpose of reading the canonical Hours and offering up masses are popish priests indeed, but not Christian priests, since they not only do not preach but are not even called to be preachers; nay, it is the very thing intended, that a priesthood of this kind shall stand on a different footing from the office of preacher. Thus they are priests of Hours and missals, that is, a kind of living images, having the name of priests, but very far from being really so; such priests as those whom Jeroboam ordained in Beth-aven, taken from the lowest dregs of the people, and not from the family of Levi.

See then how far the glory of the Church has departed. The whole world is full of priests, bishops, cardinals, and clergy; of whom however, (so far as concerns their official duty) not one preaches—unless he be called afresh to this by another calling besides his sacramental orders—but thinks that he amply fulfils the purposes of that sacrament if he murmurs over, in a vain repetition, the prayers which he has to read, and celebrates masses. Even then, he never prays these very Hours, or, if he does pray, he prays for himself; while, as the very height of perversity, he offers up his masses as a sacrifice, though the mass is really the use of the sacrament. Thus it is clear that those orders by which, as a sacrament, men of this kind are ordained to be clergy, are in truth a mere and entire figment, invented by men who understand nothing of church affairs, of the priesthood, of the ministry of the word, or of the sacraments. Such as is the sacrament, such are the priests it makes. To these errors and blindnesses has been added a greater degree of bondage, in that, in order to separate themselves the more widely from all other Christians, as if these were profane, they have burdened themselves with a most hypocritical celibacy.

It was not enough for their hypocrisy and for the working of this error to prohibit bigamy, that is, the having two wives at the same time, as was done under the law—for we know that that is the meaning of bigamy—but they have interpreted it to be bigamy, if a man marries two virgins in succession, or a widow once. Nay, the most sanctified sanctity of this most sacrosanct sacrament goes so far, that a man cannot even become a priest if he have married a virgin, as long as she is alive as his wife. And, in order to reach the very highest summit of sanctity, a man is kept out of the priesthood, if he have married one who was not a pure virgin, though it were in ignorance and merely by an unfortunate chance. But he may have polluted six hundred harlots, or corrupted any number of matrons or virgins, or even kept many Ganymedes, and it will be no impediment to his becoming a bishop or cardinal, or even Pope. Then the saying of the Apostle: “the husband of one wife,” must be interpreted to mean: “the head of one church;” unless that magnificent dispenser the Pope, bribed with money or led by favour—that is to say, moved by pious charity, and urged by anxiety for the welfare of the churches—chooses to unite to one man three, twenty, or a hundred wives, that is, churches.

O pontiffs, worthy of this venerable sacrament of orders! O princes not of the Catholic churches, but of the synagogues of Satan, yea, of very darkness! We may well cry out with Isaiah: "Ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem" (Isaiah xxviii. 14); and with Amos: "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria, which are named chief of the nations, to whom the house of Israel came!" (Amos vi. 1.) O what disgrace to the Church of God from these monstrosities of sacerdotalism! Where are there any bishops or priests who know the gospel, not to say preach it? Why then do they boast of their priesthood? why do they wish to be thought holier and better and more powerful than other Christians, whom they call the laity? What unlearned person is not competent to read the Hours? Monks, hermits, and private persons, although laymen, may use the prayers of the Hours. The duty of a priest is to preach, and unless he does so, he is just as much a priest as the picture of a man is a man. Does the ordination of such babbling priests, the consecration of churches and bells, or the confirmation of children, constitute a bishop? Could not any deacon or layman do these things? It is the ministry of the word that makes a priest or a bishop.

Fly then, I counsel you; fly, young men, if ye wish to live in safety; and do not seek admission to these holy rites, unless ye are either willing to preach the gospel, or are able to believe that ye are not made any better than the laity by this sacrament of orders. To read the Hours is nothing. To offer the mass is to receive the sacrament. What then remains in you, which is not to be found in any layman? Your tonsure and your vestments? Wretched priesthood, which consists in tonsure and vestments! Is it the oil poured on your fingers? Every Christian is anointed and sanctified in body and soul with the oil of the Holy Spirit, and formerly was allowed to handle the sacrament no less than the priests now do; although our superstition now imputes it as a great crime to the laity, if they touch even the bare cup, or the corporal; and not even a holy nun is allowed to wash the altar cloths and sacred napkins. When I see how far the sacrosanct sanctity of these orders has already gone, I expect that the time will come when the laity will not even be allowed to touch the altar, except when they offer money. I almost burst with anger when I think of the impious tyrannies of these reckless men, who mock and ruin the liberty and glory of the religion of Christ by such frivolous and puerile triflings.

Let every man then who has learnt that he is a Christian recognise what he is, and be certain that we are all equally priests; that is, that we have the same power in the word, and in any sacrament whatever; although it is not lawful for any one to use this power, except with the consent of the community, or at the call of a superior. For that which belongs to all in common no individual can arrogate to himself, until he be called. And therefore the sacrament of orders, if it is anything, is nothing but a certain rite by which men are called to minister in the Church. Furthermore, the priesthood is properly nothing else than the ministry of the word—I mean the word of the gospel, not of the law. The diaconate is a ministry, not for reading the gospel or the epistle, as the practice is nowadays, but for distributing the wealth of the Church among the poor, that the priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal things, and may give themselves more

freely to prayer and to the word. It was for this purpose, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, that deacons were appointed. Thus he who does not know the gospel, or does not preach it, is not only to priest or bishop, but a kind of pest to the Church, who, under the false title of priest or bishop, as it were in sheep's clothing, hinders the gospel, and acts the part of the wolf in the Church.

Wherefore those priests and bishops with whom the Church is crowded at the present day, unless they work out their salvation on another plan—that is, unless they acknowledge themselves to be neither priests nor bishops, and repent of bearing the name of an office the work of which they either do not know, or cannot fulfil, and thus deplore with prayers and tears the miserable fate of their hypocrisy—are verily the people of eternal perdition, concerning whom the saying will be fulfilled: “My people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge; and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst. Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure; and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it.” (Isaiah v. 13, 14.) O word of dread for our age, in which Christians are swallowed up in such an abyss of evil!

As far then as we are taught from the Scriptures, since what we call the priesthood is a ministry, I do not see at all for what reason a man who has once been made priest cannot become a layman again, since he differs in no wise from a layman, except by his ministerial office. But it is so far from impossible for a man to be set aside from the ministry, that even now this punishment is constantly inflicted on offending priests, who are either suspended for a time, or deprived for ever of their office. For that fiction of an indelible character has long ago become an object of derision. I grant that the Pope may impress this character, though Christ knows nothing of it, and for this very reason the priest thus consecrated is the lifelong servant and bondsman, not of Christ, but of the Pope, as it is at this day. But, unless I deceive myself, if at some future time this sacrament and figment fall to the ground, the Papacy itself will scarcely hold its ground, and we shall recover that joyful liberty in which we shall understand that we are all equal in every right, and shall shake off the yoke of tyranny and know that he who is a Christian has Christ, and he who has Christ has all things that are Christ's, and can do all things—on which I will write more fully and more vigorously when I find that what I have here said displeases my friends the papists.

[Next: [On the Sacrament of Extreme Unction](#)]