

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS



The teaching of the Armenian Orthodox Church proclaims that Christ is the eternal priest, the chief shepherd and the only teacher of the Church. He alone forgives sins and restores the broken relationship between man and God. The Armenian Church also proclaims that through the Holy Spirit Christ is eternally present in his Church as its head. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the assurance of Christ's everlasting presence among his people. The three ranks of bishop, priest and deacon have only one function: to make the presence of Christ manifest to the faithful. The clergy—bishops, priests and deacons—receive the grace of their ministries through the “laying on of hands.” But the reality and effectiveness of the sacraments of the Church administered by the clergy do not depend on the virtues of the person, but on the presence of Christ in His Church by the Holy Spirit. There are three ranks of clergy in the Church: bishops, priests, and deacons.

Bishops have the charge to maintain the unity of faith within the Church. They have the responsibility to oversee (the Greek word for bishop—*episkopos*—means **overseer**) the spiritual and administrative needs of the churches in his jurisdiction. The geographic area over which a bishop presides is called a **diocese**. The Apostles are the first bishops of the Church who passed their authority to their successors, and they in turn to their own successors, and thus the authority of the office of bishop has been maintained in the Orthodox Church from the Apostles until today. This is in part what is called the Apostolic Succession.

Priests are assigned by the bishop of a diocese to administer the needs of a local church or parish. They are also called **presbyters** (Arm. երեց=yerets.) The ministry of priests is to lead the people of God in worship, to teach and to proclaim the Gospel, to counsel those who are in need. In the practice of the Armenian Church there are two disciplines of priesthood: married and celibate.

Deacons presently function as assistants in the celebrations of the liturgy. Originally the diaconate was instituted by the Apostles to assist them in the ministry of social services. Traditionally the diaconate is open to both men and women. As late as the second half of the 20th century there were deaconesses in the Armenian Church in Iran, Tiflis and Istanbul. Even to this day there are deaconesses

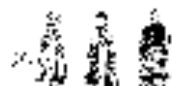
serving in the Kalfayan Orphanage in Istanbul. The dwindling number of female deacons threatened the continuation of this vital ministry, new recruits in Lebanon and Armenia are raising hopes that it will be revived and restored as an important ministry of the church.

In addition to the three ranks of clergy the tradition of the Armenian Church includes the special functions of sub-deacons or **Lesser Deacons** and **Acolytes**. The office of sub-deacon is the first step to the full diaconate, the service branch of the Church's ministry. Their function is the same as deacons, i.e. assisting the priest in the celebration of the liturgy. They are granted the permission to incense the altar, to read the Gospel, and to prepare the chalice for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. They perform essentially all the functions of the deacon except carry the chalice to the Holy Altar with the elements of bread and wine for the offering of the Holy Sacrifice. In the middle of the 19th century a new function was created called **stole-bearer** (Arm. Ռարաղիր=ooraragir.) Their role is identical to that of a sub-deacon. The original intent of this office was to help small local churches who had no deacons or sub-deacons. Stole-bearers were allowed to function only in the local churches. Their privilege of assisting the priest in the liturgy did not extend beyond the local church where they were permitted to function. Today, the original purpose has been forgotten and the office of stole-bearer has become essentially synonymous with the sub-deaconate.

The beginning of the ordained ministries of the Church are the **Minor Orders** or the Order of Clerics. The Book of Ordinations identifies **psalmists** and **sweepers** as the beginning of Holy Orders. The first order in the Minor Orders is the **doorkeeper**, one who is given the privilege to open and close the church doors. The second order is that of **reader**, one who is called to “proclaim the Word of God and to study it.” The third order is the **exorcist**. The bishop gives the person “the authority to lay hands on the sick, and to renounce Satan with those who come to receive the sacrament of Holy Baptism.” The fourth and last of the Minor Orders is the **acolyte**, “the authority to light the candles and lanterns” in the church.

Fr. Arshen Aivazian

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