SILENT HOMILIES

The Hands That Stay

The sacrament of Holy Orders



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

The Hands That Stay

The sacrament of Holy Orders

Before You Begin

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This is not a long book, and it is not meant to be. The best Catholic treasures are often small enough to carry and large enough to change the way we notice a man we already knew.

What follows is the sacrament that gives the Church her bishops, priests and deacons. From a pew it can look like a costume change: new vestments, a photograph on the cathedral steps, a first blessing in a crowded hall. The Church has never thought that. She believes a man's hands can be claimed for work that is not finally his own.

Read it if you have a son who is asking the question. Read it if you have only ever known a priest as the man who arrives and leaves. Read it if Holy Orders has become, in your mind, an argument. These pages are not an argument. They are a walk through a room the apostles left open.

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Chapter 1

Not a Career with Better Clothes

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A young man can want the altar for reasons that will not last. He can want the respect, the quiet house, the feeling of being needed. He can want to leave a smaller life. None of that is rare, and none of it is enough. The Church has spent a long time learning to test a vocation, because a sacrament that marks a man for life cannot be treated as a promising job with better clothes.

Holy Orders is one of the seven sacraments. It is not a certificate of holiness. It does not make a man automatically kind, or wise, or safe. The old word is exact: it configures him to Christ the Head and Shepherd, so that the Church may have, in every generation, men who can act in Christ's name. He is set apart to preach, to forgive, and to offer the Sacrifice, not because he has become a better sort of Christian, but because Christ has chosen to use him. The man remains himself. The work is not finally his.

That is why the training is long, and why a bishop may still say no after years of study. Peter is the clearest picture of what this means. He denied Christ. After the Resurrection Jesus did not pretend the failure had not happened. He asked him three times, "Do you love me?" and then entrusted the flock to him: "Feed my sheep." Holy Orders has never been a declaration that a man is flawless. It is a trust given to a man who still needs conversion.

If you have ever watched an ordination and felt only the pageantry, look again at the moment the bishop is silent with his hands on the man's head. Everything else in the rite is explaining that silence. A career does not need that gesture. A sacrament does.

Reflection

It can be unsettling to realise that Christ entrusted His flock to Peter after the denial. We would often prefer a cleaner story. A man fails, and the work is taken away from him. Sometimes that is exactly what justice requires. But the Gospel also shows Christ asking a failed man whether he loves Him, and then giving him sheep to feed. Priesthood begins in that kind of mercy, and it never outgrows the need for it.

This is why ordination is not a certificate that the man is now holy. Holiness is the work of a life. The sacrament gives a share in Christ's ministry. It does not do the man's praying for him, and it does not make his temper disappear. A parish that expects the sacrament to replace the man will be disappointed. A parish that prays for the man, and tells him the truth, is closer to what Christ did with Peter.

The long training is part of the same care. The Church is slow because the mark is not slow. A bishop who says no is not insulting a generous young man. He is refusing to treat a lifelong sacrament as a hope that might work out. Parents who are waiting with a son can hold both things at once: gratitude that he is asking, and patience with a Church that is allowed to take time.

If the only thing you remember from an ordination is the photograph, go back to the silence. The bishop's hands are doing what the speeches cannot do. They are placing a man inside a line that did not begin with him. That is the difference between a career and a sacrament. A career can be left. These hands are being asked to stay.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, who called fishermen and not professionals, keep us from treating Your priesthood as a profession. Amen.

Chapter 2

Three Rooms in One House

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Holy Orders is one sacrament in three degrees. The Church did not invent that shape for the sake of a chart. She received it. From the earliest communities there were overseers, elders and servants: episcopoi, presbyteroi, diakonoi, words that became bishop, priest and deacon. One sacrament. Three ways of standing inside it. They are not three rival careers, and they are not three separate sacraments.

The bishop has the fullness of the sacrament. He is a successor of the apostles for a particular church. He ordains. In the Latin rite he is the ordinary minister of Confirmation. He shepherds a diocese that is not a branch office of Rome so much as a real church in communion with Peter. When he is ordained, other bishops lay hands on him, because apostolic succession is not only an idea. It is a continuity of ministry, handed on by the laying on of hands.

The priest is the bishop's co-worker. He is ordained to preach, to celebrate the Eucharist, to forgive sins, to anoint the sick and to bless. He does not become a little bishop. He shares in the bishop's priesthood so that a parish can have Mass on Sunday without the bishop being in every pulpit at once. The deacon is ordained for service. He may preach, baptise, witness marriages, bury the dead and carry the Gospel in the liturgy. He does not consecrate the Eucharist or give sacramental absolution.

In the West the permanent diaconate almost vanished for centuries and was restored after the Second Vatican Council. Many permanent deacons are married men. That still surprises people who thought Orders only meant a man living alone. The key is one sacrament.

Reflection

A parish usually meets only one of the three rooms. The priest is at the altar on Sunday. The deacon may be at the ambo. The bishop appears at Confirmation, or in a letter, or when something has gone wrong. It is easy to think that Holy Orders means "the man in the collar." The sacrament is larger than that meeting. Bishop, priest and deacon are degrees of one gift, not three inventions placed side by side.

The bishop's fullness means, quite practically, that he can hand the sacrament on. A priest cannot ordain. A deacon cannot ordain. The Church has kept that limit so that the ministry remains something received, not something a parish can create for itself when it is short of clergy. That limit is inconvenient. It is still how the sacrament is handed on.

The priest's share is just as real. He is not a substitute who fills in until the bishop arrives. When he says Mass, the Sacrifice is truly offered. When he absolves, the sins are truly forgiven. He does these things in communion with the bishop, not as a private chaplain. That is why a priest is sent, and why a parish does not advertise for one.

And the deacon keeps the sacrament from being only the altar. Service of the Word, of the liturgy and of charity belongs inside Holy Orders, not beside it. A Church that flattens the three degrees into one office loses something Christ gave her. A Church that turns them into a ladder loses it in another way. The house has three rooms. The key is one.

A Short Prayer

Christ, High Priest, keep Your Church from flattening into one office, or swelling into a career ladder. Amen.

Chapter 3

The Hands Laid On

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In the Acts of the Apostles the community chooses seven men for service, and the apostles pray and lay hands on them. Paul writes to Timothy of a gift given through the laying on of hands, and tells him to fan that gift into flame. Later he tells Titus to appoint elders in every town. The Church has never found a better picture of what she is doing at an ordination. Hands. Prayer. A gift that must be used. The texts are not a modern rite written in advance. They are the apostolic habit the rite still follows.

In 1947 Pope Pius XII settled a long technical debate. For centuries some theologians had argued that the handing over of the chalice and paten, the traditio instrumentorum, was the essential gesture of priestly ordination. In Sacramentum Ordinis he said no. The matter of the sacrament is the laying on of hands. The form is the consecratory prayer that accompanies it. The chalice may still be given. It is a sign. It is not what makes the ordination.

Watch an ordination with that in mind and the rite becomes clearer. The man lies prostrate while the Litany of the Saints is sung, because the whole Church in heaven is being asked to help. Then he kneels. The bishop lays hands on him in silence. Then every priest present does the same. It can take a long time. That is the point. A college of priests is being shown, with their own hands, that this man now belongs with them.

If you have never seen that silence, you have missed the centre of the day. The photographs afterwards are of vestments and smiles. The sacrament happened in the silence, while a bishop's hands were laid on him.

Reflection

Most Catholics will never need the Latin name for the old debate. What they need is the conclusion. For centuries good theologians disagreed about which gesture was essential. In 1947 the Pope did not invent a new sacrament. He told the Church which gesture she must not lose. The hands matter more than the objects placed in them afterwards. That is a very old instinct, and it is now a clear one.

The silence is worth staying with. A sermon can explain ordination. Only the laying on of hands, with the prayer the Church has given, does it. The photographs are not nothing. A family is allowed to be glad. But if the day is remembered only as a celebration, the centre has been missed. The centre was a bishop's hands and a prayer.

Paul's words to Timothy still belong here. The gift can be neglected. "Fan into flame the gift of God." Ordination is not a moment that then runs by itself. A priest, a deacon, a bishop, has to return to what was given. The laying on of hands is the beginning of a ministry, not a certificate filed in a drawer.

If you are at an ordination and the line of priests takes a long time, do not wish it shorter. You are watching the college receive a brother. The Church is slow at that moment on purpose. She is letting the hands say what a announcement cannot say.

A Short Prayer

Holy Spirit, who was given through the apostles' hands, do not let us prefer the speeches to the silence. Amen.

Chapter 4

A Character That Does Not Come Off

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Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders each leave what the Church calls a character: a spiritual mark that cannot be repeated and cannot be washed off. A priest who is laicised is released from the obligations of ministry. He is not un-ordained. He may not celebrate the sacraments lawfully. If the dispensation from celibacy has not been given, he is not free to marry. But if, in danger of death, a laicised priest hears the confession of a dying person, the Church treats that absolution as valid. The character remains.

This is a hard teaching for an age that likes reversible decisions. It is also a mercy for the people of God. The Mass you attended last Sunday did not depend on whether Father was in a good mood, or even in a state of grace. The old phrase is ex opere operato: the sacrament works by the work Christ does through it, not by the personal holiness of the minister. A bad priest can still give you a true Eucharist. That is not an excuse for him. It is protection for you.

The sacraments belong to Christ before they belong to the minister. That is why a sinful priest can still validly baptise, absolve and consecrate, so long as he does what the Church intends. It is also why his sin remains his. Validity is not a pardon. It does not remove moral accountability, canonical penalties, the duty to protect the vulnerable, or the claims of justice. A priest's ordination is not a shield from any of those things. St Thomas Aquinas treated the character as a sharing in Christ's priesthood. The man is marked for worship. He can still be lost. He can still wound the flock. The mark does not save him automatically. It names the trust he will answer for.

If you have been hurt by a priest, this chapter is not asking you to pretend. The wound was real. The man's failure was real. The sacrament, where it was truly celebrated, was also real. Catholic teaching does not ask you to erase one of those truths in order to protect the other. The Church has had to learn, slowly and at great cost, that the mark is not a reason to look away.

Reflection

The priest's sin was real. The wound was real. The sacrament was also real. Catholic theology does not require us to make one of those truths disappear in order to protect the other. That is a hard sentence to hear if the wound is yours. It is still the distinction the faith makes, and it is made for the sake of the people, not for the sake of the man's reputation.

Ex opere operato can sound like an excuse until you see who it protects. It protects the dying person whose priest is unworthy. It protects the child baptised by a man who later falls. It protects a Sunday congregation from having to investigate the celebrant's soul before they can trust the Host. It does not protect the celebrant from God, from the bishop, from the law, or from the people he has harmed.

Peter is useful here again, and he should not be used cheaply. Christ knew the denial and still gave him the flock. Christ also met him with a question, not with a silence that pretended nothing had happened. A Church that cites the character in order to avoid a hard conversation has not understood the Gospel she is quoting.

If you are the person who was harmed, nobody in this booklet is asking you to call the harm holy, or to return to a man who is unsafe. The sacrament's reality and the man's answerability are both Catholic. One is about Christ. The other is about justice. They are allowed to stand in the same paragraph.

A Short Prayer

Lord, You marked us first in Baptism. Teach us to honour the later marks without making idols of the men who bear them. Amen.

Chapter 5

In the Person of Christ

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When a priest says, "This is my Body," the Church does not think he has become confused about whose body he means. She believes he is speaking in persona Christi Capitis, in the person of Christ the Head. The same is true when he says, "I absolve you." He is not reporting that Christ once said these things. At those moments he is authorised to say them as Christ's minister. The "I" is not the man's private self. It is Christ acting through a man who remains himself.

This is easily misunderstood. The priest does not become Christ, and he does not stop being the man his family knows. He is not an actor, and he is not a channel that works by his own power. He has been configured to Christ the Head so that, in certain sacramental acts, his words are Christ's gift to the Church. That is why he does not say, "Christ absolves you," as if he were only passing on a message. He says, "I absolve you." The Church has always heard Christ in that sentence.

The phrase can be turned into a pedestal. It was never meant as one. It is a description of a task so large that no man could do it as himself. That is also why the Church is careful about who may say those words, and why she will not treat the Eucharist as a gathering over which anyone kind may preside. Kindness is a Christian duty. It is not the sacrament. The authority given by Christ, through the apostles and their successors, is.

If this makes a priest sound remote, look at him on a weekday in a hospital car park, carrying a pyx. The same doctrine that sets him apart is the doctrine that sends him out. In the person of Christ means, among other things, that Christ still wants to go down corridors. He has chosen to do it with tired hands.

Reflection

The words at the altar are worth hearing slowly. "This is my Body." A man is speaking. The Church believes that Christ is giving Himself through that man's ordained ministry. Both halves matter. If you keep only the man, the Mass becomes his performance. If you erase the man, you have forgotten that Christ chose to use human hands. The doctrine holds the two together.

The same thing happens in the confessional, and it is often clearer there. The priest says, "I absolve you." He is not announcing that God is generally merciful. He is exercising the authority Christ gave when He breathed on the apostles and said, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven." The man remains a sinner who needs mercy himself. The absolution is still Christ's.

This is why the hospital car park belongs in the chapter. In persona Christi Capitis can sound like a phrase for a textbook. In the car park it looks like a tired man carrying the Blessed Sacrament to someone who cannot come to church. The doctrine is not only about the words. It is about Christ still wanting to be present to His people through a particular minister.

A priest who starts to believe the voice is his own has misunderstood the sentence he says every day. The "I" of the consecration and the "I" of the absolution are a trust. They are not a possession. The parish can help him remember that, by praying for him, and by not treating him as the source of what he only hands on.

A Short Prayer

Christ our Head, speak through the men You have chosen, and keep them from believing the voice is theirs. Amen.

Chapter 6

Why a Bishop Comes

†

A priest cannot make a priest. Only a bishop can. That rule is one of the ways the Church has kept the apostolic ministry visible. When a man is ordained, the bishop who lays hands on him was himself ordained by bishops, in communion with the Pope, inside a line of teaching, sacraments and ministry that the Church receives from the apostles. Historians cannot always name every consecrator in the second century without a gap. The Church does not treat those gaps as a reason to stop laying on hands. Succession here means continuity of episcopal ministry, not a complete private diary of names.

To ordain a bishop, the Latin Church requires a mandate from the Pope. Three bishops ordinarily take part. The new bishop receives the Book of the Gospels, a ring, a mitre and a crozier: signs of preaching, fidelity and shepherding. He is told to receive the Gospel and to preach it. He is not being handed a hat and then left to enjoy it. He is being given a church.

Ignatius of Antioch, writing on the road to martyrdom around the year 110, already speaks of the bishop as the visible centre of a local church, with presbyters and deacons around him. He tells the Smyrnaeans to do nothing pertaining to the Church without the bishop, and says that without bishop, presbyters and deacons there is no church that can be called a church. That is not a medieval arrangement. It is a voice from the generation after the apostles.

If your diocese has felt like an office, this chapter is a reminder of what the office is for. He is easy to treat as a manager in purple. He is the man through whom that particular church is meant to remain apostolic. Pray for him as if the succession still needed living men. It does.

Reflection

The date is the part many Catholics have never been told. Ignatius was not writing in the age of cathedrals. He was writing at the beginning of the second century, while the Church was still close enough to the apostles to remember them. Already he could not imagine a local church without a bishop, presbyters and deacons. This is not a later costume placed over a simpler Gospel. The ministry was already part of the Church Ignatius knew.

The gaps in the early lists matter, and they should be admitted. We cannot always produce a named chain, man by man, back to one apostle, as if the second century had kept a modern register. What the Church claims is more serious than that kind of list. She claims a continuity of ordination, doctrine and communion. The laying on of hands is the sacramental form of that claim.

A priest who wishes he could ordain, when the diocese is short of clergy, has felt a real need. The limit remains. The sacrament is received from a bishop, and a bishop is ordained in communion with the successor of Peter. That is how a parish stays part of the apostolic Church rather than becoming a local arrangement.

If the bishop seems distant, the doctrine is still close. Every valid ordination in your diocese passed through his ministry or his predecessors'. The Mass you attend on Sunday depends on that chain, even when the bishop is not in the room. Pray for him. The succession is not a theory. It is a man who still has to be faithful.

A Short Prayer

St Ignatius of Antioch, who would not let the Church lose her bishop, pray for the men who sit in that chair now. Amen.

Chapter 7

Deacons, and the Ones Who Almost Disappeared

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In Acts 6 the apostles ask the community to choose seven men, so that the widows will be served and the apostles will not leave prayer and the ministry of the word. The apostles pray and lay hands on them. The Church has long seen the beginning of diaconal ministry here. The text itself does not use the later technical title. Stephen and Philip soon preach and baptise as well as serve. The table and the Word have been tangled together in this ministry from the start. A deacon is not a failed priest, and he is not a parish helper who has merely been given a stole. He is ordained.

For many centuries in the Latin West the diaconate became, in practice, a step on the way to priesthood. A man was made deacon and then, often quickly, a priest. The permanent diaconate faded from ordinary view. The Eastern Churches kept the ministry more visible, including married deacons. The Second Vatican Council asked that the permanent diaconate be restored where needed. Paul VI carried that out. Since then many men, husbands and fathers among them, have been ordained to remain deacons.

A permanent deacon may baptise, witness a marriage, bury, preach and serve at the altar. He does not consecrate or absolve. He goes home afterwards to a family who have lent him to the parish. That household is part of the sign the Latin Church has recovered. Holy Orders and celibacy are related in her life, but they are not the same thing. A deacon can be married. In the Latin Church a priest ordinarily cannot. The sacrament is larger than one way of living it.

Reflection

Acts 6 is often summarised too quickly. The Seven were chosen so that a real injustice, the neglect of the Hebrew-speaking community's widows, would not be ignored. The apostles did not think service was beneath them. They thought the word and prayer would be lost if nobody was set apart for the tables. The Church has read a lasting ministry in that decision, without pretending the chapter is a modern job description.

A permanent deacon is not a priest who stopped halfway. The transitional deacon is on the way to priesthood. The permanent deacon has been ordained for the diaconate itself. Confusing the two makes the restored ministry look like an incomplete one. It is not. It is a degree of Holy Orders with its own work.

The married deacon also clarifies something people often mix. Celibacy, in the Latin Church, is the ordinary discipline for priests. It is not what makes a man ordained. Eastern Catholic Churches have long ordained married men to the priesthood, and choose their bishops from among celibate clergy. The Catholic Church lives with that difference. A parish that meets a married deacon is not meeting an exception to the sacrament. It is meeting one of its degrees.

If the deacon in your parish is easy to overlook, that may be the oldest risk of this ministry. The widows in Acts were overlooked first. The diaconate exists, in part, so that the Church will not only look at the altar. Service belongs in Holy Orders. It is not an extra for people who are not important enough to be priests.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who chose Stephen and his six companions, keep the Church from forgetting the men ordained to serve. Amen.

Chapter 8

Oil on the Palms

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After the laying on of hands and the consecratory prayer, the new priest's palms are anointed with chrism, the fragrant oil used at Baptism and Confirmation. The bishop prays that God will consecrate those hands so that they may bless and sanctify. Then the man is given the chalice and paten with bread and wine. He will spend the rest of his life touching holy things with those hands. The oil is not what makes him a priest. Pius XII was clear about that. The oil tells the Church what the hands are now for.

This anointing is a development of the Western rite, not a gesture we can trace unchanged to the apostles. In the older Roman rite the newly anointed hands were bound for a time with a linen cloth, sometimes called a manutergium, as if the gift needed a moment to set. Some families kept that cloth. The meaning remains even where the binding does not. The Church was setting the hands apart before the work began.

The oil does not give the hands a power of their own, and it does not promise that every priest will be remarkable. St John Vianney is useful here precisely because he nearly was not ordained. His studies were so weak that he struggled through the examinations, and he was ordained because those responsible judged his goodness, not his Latin. He was then sent to Ars, a small parish, and spent years in the confessional until people came to him from far away. The oil had not made him impressive. It had set his hands to a work Christ could use.

If you next see a priest's hands at the elevation, you are allowed to remember that they were once shiny with chrism in a cathedral.

Reflection

The cathedral and the Tuesday morning are the same priesthood. At the ordination the hands are new, oily, and held out. Years later they may tremble. They may lift a Host in a cold church, sign a screaming baby, or rest on a forehead in a hospital ward. The chrism has long since been washed off. The claim has not. That is the simplest way to understand the title of this book.

Vianney's difficult studies are a kinder fact than his later fame. The Church did not ordain him because he was already the Curé people would travel to see. She ordained a man who could barely satisfy the examiners, and Christ did the rest through a confessional in a small town. Nobody at that anointing could have predicted what Ars would become. The oil had only set him apart.

The old linen cloth, where it was used, was a pause. The Church has always needed pauses around holy things: a moment after the anointing, a silence after the laying on of hands, a prayer before the Host is touched. The cloth is gone from the present rite. The instinct is still there every time a priest washes his fingers after Communion.

If you are watching an ageing priest at the altar, you are often watching the end of the promise made over young hands. Nothing in the rite guaranteed that he would be easy to love. The rite asked that his hands would still be there for the Body of Christ, for the sick, and for the child. When they are, the oil has done what it was for.

A Short Prayer

Father, consecrate the hands that still lift Your Son, and heal the hands that have failed. Amen.

Chapter 9

What the Church Does Not Ordain

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The Church ordains only baptised men to the priesthood and the episcopate. In 1994 Pope St John Paul II, in Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, said that the Church has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women, and that this judgement is to be held definitively by all the faithful. He did not present it as a policy a later committee might improve. He presented it as a limit the Church has received. The Catechism teaches the same. The question of the diaconate is distinct. The Church has not authorised the ordination of women to the diaconate. Ordinatio Sacerdotalis does not settle that separate question in the same definitive way, and this chapter will not pretend that it does.

The reasons are not a claim that women are less holy, less intelligent, or less able to lead. The holiest human person is a woman, and she was not a priest. Mary's dignity is not smaller than Peter's because she received no ordination. Baptism is the dignity no Order can increase. Ordination is a sacramental vocation and a service. It is not promotion to a higher class of Christian.

The Church's explanation, already set out by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Inter Insigniores, is sacramental and apostolic. Christ chose men as apostles. The priest acts in the person of Christ the Head, and the tradition of the Church has understood that ministerial priesthood as a sign of Christ who gives Himself for His Bride, the Church. A sacramental sign is not an insult to the people who are not that sign. A bride is not less than a priest because she is the sign of the Church. A baptised woman is not less than a priest because she is not ordained. The sign serves the mystery. It does not rank the people.

Celibacy is a different question. It is a discipline, not a dogma. The Latin Church ordinarily ordains to the priesthood only men who have freely promised celibacy, with limited exceptions for some married clergy received from other traditions. Eastern Catholic Churches have long ordained married men to the priesthood. They choose bishops from the celibate clergy. The family of Churches is allowed that difference. If this chapter lands on a bruise, it is still better said plainly than dressed as something it is not. Holy Orders is not the measure of a Christian life.

Reflection

This teaching is often heard as a verdict on women. It is not. It is a statement about a sacrament. The Church believes she has not been given authority to change the person who may be ordained to the priesthood. That is a limit, and limits can hurt when they cross a real desire to serve. The hurt should be told the truth, not a softer sentence than the Pope wrote.

Mary is the clearest protection against a wrong reading. She is the Mother of God. She is not a priest. No ordained man will ever have her place in the Church. If Holy Orders were a ladder of worth, that fact would be nonsense. It is not nonsense, because Orders is not a ladder. Peter was given a ministry. Mary was given a vocation that the ministry exists to serve.

The diaconate needs its own caution. The definitive judgement of 1994 concerns priestly ordination. It should not be stretched, in a short book, into a claim the Magisterium has not made in the same form about women and the diaconate. It should also not be turned into an announcement that the diaconate is open. Honesty is part of the Catholic explanation.

Celibacy, finally, should not be used as if it were the same teaching. A married Eastern Catholic priest is truly a priest. A celibate Latin priest is truly a priest. The discipline says something beautiful about leaving one's life available to the Church. It does not define the sacrament. Confusing the two makes an already difficult chapter harder than the faith requires.

A Short Prayer

Mary, Mother of the Church and not a priest, teach us the dignity that does not need an altar to be real. Amen.

Chapter 10

Living with Hands That Are Not Only Yours

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A newly ordained man is often sent to a parish that did not choose him. That is part of the doctrine. The priesthood is not a freelance gift. It is a gift to a church. He will learn, if he is willing, that his hands now belong to baptisms he has not yet been told about, to confessions that arrive at inconvenient hours, and to a hospital on the far side of town. Most of his priesthood will not look like the ordination. It will look like a Tuesday.

The Tuesday has a doorbell, a hospital car park, a baptism where the baby screams, a confession heard when he is tired, a homily that does not work, and a family sitting in a front room after a death. It has an early key in the church door, and a Mass at which only a handful of people have come. None of this is the opposite of Holy Orders. It is where the sacrament spends its life. The grandeur has to be able to arrive there, or it has not been understood.

The people have a part. They are not consumers of a religious service. They are the ones who must let a man be a priest, which means bringing him their real sins, their real sick and their real dead, and not only their compliments at the door. A parish that treats the priest as a chaplain to its plans will slowly empty the sacrament of its shape. A parish that prays for him, and tells him the truth, may keep him human enough to be useful.

After Trent, St Charles Borromeo founded seminaries in Milan and had his clergy examined and visited. St John Paul II wrote Pastores Dabo Vobis for the same reason: priests are formed in the flesh, not only on paper. Without those hands, the other sacraments wait.

Reflection

The ordination is one morning. The priesthood is a long series of ordinary days. That is not a disappointing truth. It is the shape of the Incarnation. Christ did not only do the great public acts. He walked, ate, waited, and was interrupted. A priest configured to Him should not be surprised if the life looks like interruption.

A handful of people at a weekday Mass is not a verdict on the sacrament. The same words are said. The same Lord is given. The hands lifting the Host are the hands that were anointed, whether the church is full or not. A parish can forget this and begin to measure the priesthood by the size of the congregation. The doctrine is kinder, and more demanding, than that.

Borromeo's seminaries are a useful memory because they were practical. He did not leave the formation of clergy to goodwill after Trent. He built a house where men could be taught, watched and prayed with before a bishop laid hands on them. Formation is not a modern extra. It is one of the ways the Church tries not to be careless with a lifelong mark.

If these pages have done their work, the next priest you see will not be a category. He will be a man with borrowed hands. Thank him if you can. Pray for him whether you can thank him or not. And if you are the man whose hands they are, go back to the silence in which they were given. The Tuesday will still be there in the morning, and the gift will still be there with it.

A Short Prayer

Jesus, eternal Priest, stay with the men You have marked, and with the people who must live by their hands. Amen.

A Last Word

†

The stole comes off. The chalice is locked away. The hands remain.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it to a man who is afraid of the question, or to a parish that has forgotten what it asked for when it asked for a priest.

May the bishops still lay hands. May the priests still come when they are sent for. May the deacons still serve the table and the Word. May none of us treat the sacrament as a costume.

Our Lady, Mother of priests, pray for us. St John Vianney, pray for us.

Sources and Further Reading

†

Scripture: Mark 3:13–15; Luke 6:12–16; Luke 22:19; John 13; John 20:21–23; John 21:15–17; Acts 6:1–6; Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 4–5. The Seven in Acts are the Church's traditional starting point for diaconal ministry. The chapter does not itself use the later technical title.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1536–1600, especially 1548, 1554–1571, 1577–1580 and 1581–1584. Code of Canon Law, canons 1008–1054, and 290–293 and 976 on the permanence of orders and ministry in danger of death. Lumen Gentium 20–21 and 28–29. Presbyterorum Ordinis. The Rite of Ordination in the Roman Pontifical.

Pius XII, Sacramentum Ordinis (1947): the matter of ordination is the laying on of hands, and the form is the consecratory prayer. St John Paul II, Pastores Dabo Vobis; Ordinatio Sacerdotalis (22 May 1994), on the Church's lack of authority to confer priestly ordination on women. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Inter Insigniores (1976). That definitive judgement concerns priestly ordination. It is not treated here as an equivalent judgement on the diaconate.

St Ignatius of Antioch, letters to the Smyrnaeans, Magnesians and Trallians, written around 110. St John Vianney's difficult path to ordination and his long years in the confessional at Ars are standard in the approved lives. St Charles Borromeo's seminaries and visitation of the clergy in Milan after Trent are likewise standard. The binding of the newly anointed hands belongs to the older Western rite, not to an unchanged apostolic ceremony.

Keeping the Hands at Work

†

This booklet is about hands given to a work that is not finally their own. The writing of it has been a much smaller version of the same discovery. The pages are short. The checking is not.

Behind them are hours with Scripture, the Catechism and the Code of Canon Law; with what Pius XII actually clarified in 1947; with Ignatius of Antioch, close enough to the apostles to be startling; with the restoration of the permanent diaconate; with the ordination rite; and with the slow work of saying a difficult teaching plainly without turning it into a slogan. Then the cutting of sentences that sounded neat and did not explain anything.

These books remain free to read. A gift is not payment for this one. It is already yours. What a gift on the Silent Homilies website gives me is time, and the books, to keep the next one as carefully checked as this one had to be.

If you cannot give, nothing is owed. Perhaps pray for the priest whose hands bring you the Eucharist. Or give this booklet to a young man who is quietly asking whether those hands might one day be his. Either of those would already be a good use of these pages. www.silenthomilies.com

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