

On the Hierarchical Structure of the Church and in Particular on the Episcopate

Necessarily, in order to maintain good order and discipline throughout, the Church is hierarchical. Jesus named Peter to be the first Pope in the Matthew. He is to be the head of the household, and we understand this office to be the Vicar of Christ.

With the institution of Apostolic Succession in Acts, the 11 apostles chose the replacement for Judas Iscariot. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, we know that there are three hierarchical levels:

1. **The Episcopate** – This is the order of the Bishops. They receive full sacramental authority in their ordination and are the modern-day apostles. They are the heads of their own territories called dioceses. They are ranked at the top of the Church's hierarchy, with only one bishop out ranking them by positional authority: the Pope. The Pope is the Bishop of Rome. He is the chief shepherd of the whole flock. The college of bishops, which embody the whole and supreme power within the universal Church, may only act with the consent of the Roman Pontiff, just as a body may not act without the consent of its head. This supreme power is solemnly exercised in an ecumenical council. The diocesan bishops are the shepherds of their own flocks and each will one day be held to account for all of the souls under his care. **“And finally, the bishops, in a universal fellowship of charity, should gladly extend their fraternal aid to other churches, especially to neighboring and more needy dioceses in accordance with the venerable example of antiquity.” - Lumen Gentium 23**
2. **The Presbyterate** – This is the order of the priesthood. “By the power of the sacrament of Orders, in the image of Christ the eternal high Priest, they are consecrated to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful and to celebrate divine worship, so that they are true priests of the New Testament...They exercise their sacred function especially in the eucharistic worship or the celebration of the Mass by which **acting in the person of Christ** and proclaiming His Mystery they unite the prayers of the faithful with the sacrifice of their Head... For the sick and the sinners among the faithful, they exercise the ministry of alleviation (Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick) and Reconciliation...” Priests are “prudent cooperators with the episcopal order, its aid and instrument, called to serve the people of God, constitute one priesthood with their bishop although bound by a diversity of duties.” – (Lumen Gentium 28) Priests are required to be obedient to their bishops and are bound together into an intimate brotherhood. They, too, are the shepherds of their flocks.
3. **The Diaconate** – “At a lower level, of the hierarchy are deacons, ‘upon whom hands are imposed not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.’” It is the duty of the deacon according as it shall have been assigned to him by competent authority, to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, to officiate at funeral and burial services. – (Lumen Gentium 29)