

# Chapter IX

## Priesthood and Ordination in the Early Church

The ministry of the Orthodox Church depends much on the bishops and priests. It draws much from the practice of the New Testament period and that of the Early Church. Both in Latin West and Greek East the priest is considered as “*alter Christus*, the image, sign or representative of Christ” (Hopko, *Women and the Priesthood*, p. 47). He is understood as acting for Christ (*in persona Christi*). For example, when he recites the Eucharistic prayer “This is my Body...This is my Blood”, “he speaks these words as if he were himself Christ; or rather, at this moment Christ himself is understood to be speaking these words through the priest” (Hopko, *Women*, 47).

### The Episcopal Structure and Apostolic Succession

Our bishops and priests are not just like presidents or secretaries of a social organization. The Church finds them as successors of the apostles and their disciples. St. Paul teaches us that the Church is like a building. It has been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone” (Eph 2,20). Peter was the first among the Apostles, whom Jesus called “rock” on which the Church is built (Mtt 16,13-19). Resurrected Christ had been given “all authority ...in heaven and on earth” (Mtt 28,18) and He sent his disciples to the world as the heavenly Father had sent him (Jn 20,21-23). He gave them whatever He had including the “power to forgive sins”. He breathed on them and said “receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained” (Jn 20,23).

Bible says to us that the worship of the Church is built upon the worship of the Fathers. In the fourth and fifth chapters of the Book of Revelation we see God sitting on His throne surrounded by the twenty four elders, who represent the twelve Patriarchs of the Book of Genesis and the twelve Apostles of Christ. Today’s Church should be the continuation of this. It can not be a private organization like many of the modern sectarian churches.

The Church is rather an *organism*, the Body of Christ. Orthodox theology maintains two things about the existence of the Church. One is the statement that “where there is the Eucharist, there is the Church”. The Eucharistic community has got the characteristic features of the *universal Church*. The local churches become parts of this. The second statement is that of St. Irenaeus: “the Church is in the bishop and the bishop is in the Church”. These two ideas of the early Church point to the fact that the Eucharist and the office of the bishop are two constitutive factors of Orthodox ecclesiology.

The office bearers of the Church do what Christ had asked his apostles to do. Ignatius of Antioch, a stalwart of faith in the Early Church wrote the following: “I

exhort you, be eager to do everything in God's harmony, with the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbytery in the place of the council of the apostles and deacons, most sweet to me, entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ" (Epistle to the Magnesians 6,1). Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, another Father of the Early Church said; "We are in a position to reckon up those who were by the Apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and to (demonstrate) the succession of these men to our own times" (*Against Heresies* III,3).

Our Church maintains this Apostolic succession. St. Thomas, a beloved Apostle of Christ is the founder of the Church. Today's priests are the successors of the priests ordained by St. Thomas. Our bishops inherit the chain of the upholders of faith in the Church. However, the succession of the Apostles doesn't mean just a physical continuation of individuals. The actual "succession" is that of the faith and teachings of the Apostles and the Early Church.

## Ordination in the Apostolic Period

There are many passages in the New Testament which describes the act of ordination. The Greek word used for this is *epitithemi cheira* in the verbal form and *epititheis ton cheiron* in the nominal form. It means *laying on of hands* (Acts 8,18; 1Tim 4,14; 2Tim 1,6; Heb 6,2). Actually there were different occasions on which a person laid his hands on the head of another; for the act of healing (Mtt 9,18), for giving a blessing (Mk 10,16), for baptizing (Act 19,6), for authorizing somebody ((Act 6,6) and for ordination (1Tim 4,14). However, *laying on of hands* became a technical term for ordination gradually.

The phrase *epitithemi cheira* and related terms occur about 270 times in the Old Testament also. This was used to translate three Hebrew words, namely *Nathan*, *samak* and *shim*. Among these *samak* was the word, which meant transferring one's power and authority to another. David Daube sees this word as the mother of the idea of ordination in the New Testament.

During the inter-testamental period *laying on of hands* was practised in the rabbinic schools. The students of a rabbi were given the ordination (*semikah*) at the end of his studies. By *laying on of hands* the student received the authority to teach from his Rabbi. More over, people thought that he would get the *charisma* of his teacher by this act.

In the New Testament the Acts of the Apostles uses the phrase *epitithemi cheira* at three different places:

a) In Acts 6,1-6 we see the ordination of the seven deacons. They were selected on the basis of their reputation in their home place, wisdom and the gift of the Holy Spirit. At first they were *selected* on the basis of these three credentials, then they were *presented* before the Apostles and then only they were *ordained* as deacons. We see a parallel for this in the book of Numbers (27,15-23) only, where Joshua was selected through a similar process. The act of ordination was performed in the Acts by the *laying on of hands* in a community which

prayed for the candidates (Act 6,6). The ordination gave them the authority to spread the Gospel by serving at the table and preaching.

b) In Acts 13,1-3 five men were gathered together and from among them Barnabas and Saul were set apart for the work of the Lord. The *laying on of hands* happened here in the presence of a gathering of prophets and teachers, who were the authorities of the Early Church along with the Apostles. This gathering had *fasted* and *prayed* for the candidates before they were ordained and before they received the Holy Spirit. Some scholars interpret this as the ordination of Saul and Barnabas in to the office of the *Episkopos*.

c) In Acts 14,23 we see the appointment of *presbyters or elders*. The Greek word *cheirotonia* carries the meaning of the act of ordination. Here also we see a community which *prays and fasts* when their local pastors were ordained.

The *Pastoral Epistles* give us more information about the act of ordination. Six passages are important in this regard:

a) 1Tim 4,14 is a clear text about the ordination, which reads: “*Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery*”. The ceremony of ordination was having a spiritual exhortation, which was called *prophecy* (Greek *parangelia*). This was like the *amalogia* of our present day ordinations. It was accompanied by the *laying on of hands*. Those who administered the function were the *presbyters* or elders.

b) In Tim 1,18 Timothy was reminded of “the prophecies previously made” concerning him and was asked to fight with faith and good conscience. After examining the whole context scholars opine that the word *prophecy* (Greek *parangelia*) is a hint towards the exhortation, which Timothy received during his ordination.

c) 1Tim 6,11-16 is the content of the above said *prophecy*. The candidate was exhorted to fight a good fight to maintain the *undefiled faith* in an age of heretical teaching and he was pointed towards Jesus Christ. The candidate had to confess his faith “just as Jesus did it before Pilate”.

d) In 2 Tim 1,6 the ordained was asked to *kindle afresh the gift of God* which he received on the day of ordination. The ordination of the Pastoral Epistles contained the bestowal of the *Gift of the Holy Spirit*. They received a *charisma* from God, whereas the ordination of the rabbinic schools spoke of the *transfer of the charisma of the Rabbi*. Christian ordination didn't think of the transfer of the personal *charisma* of the one who administered the ceremony. The latter was more an instrument who presided over the ordination, in which the *charisma of the Holy Spirit* was bestowed upon the ordained.

e) The ordained were asked to do it further so that the faith of the Church will be continued for ever. In 2 Tim 2,2 Timothy was asked by his teacher “to entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” what he had received “in the presence of many witnesses”.

e) However, Timothy, the disciple of Paul was warned not to *lay hands on* any body hastily in 1Tim 5,22. As we have seen earlier in the Acts of the Apostles the selection of the candidates was very important in the Early Church. Otherwise the one who ordained would share the *responsibility for the sins of others*.

From the above texts we get a bird’s eye view about the practice of ordination happened in the Early Church. The candidates were selected on the basis of their reputation, wisdom and the spiritual gifts. It was the congregation, which selected them and the *laying on of hands* was performed by the *presbyters*, which was a term used interchangeably for bishops and priests. The ordination ceremony was done in the presence of the congregation, which fasted and prayed for those who were ordained. The one who administered the ordination gave an exhortation, in which the candidate was reminded of the office to which he was called and his functions were declared. The latter had to take an oath of confession in the presence of the audience. The whole ceremony was thought of as an occasion when one who was chosen for God’s service received the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

## Ordination of Women

Among many aspects of ordination the issue of the ordination of women is very alive today. Paulose Mar Gregorios writes about the Faith and Consultation on the topic held in 1968; “Although many object to the ordination of women, the majority of members of the consultation felt that there is no conclusive theological basis for refusing them ordination; they felt that on the contrary, there are fundamental reasons which would justify the Church in such ordination” (*Glory and Burden*, 18). However, he did not propose personally the ordination of women in to the ministry of priesthood. Rather he supports the teaching ministry of women in the Church (*Glory and Burden*, 149).

Orthodox theologians like Bishop Kallistos Ware, Father Thomas Hopko and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel wrote a lot about the theme. They agree with others in saying that “the one and living God is an asexual spirit (or supra sexual supra-spirit)” who is known in three personal forms, traditionally called Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the two forms of human beings, male and female, has nothing to do with one’s basic humanity. Since Christian ministry exists for human beings, it must be performed by persons of both sexes.

Father Hopko finds the ministry of the Presbyter/ bishop as entirely masculine, because it is against the Gospel. He says: “Women serving as bishops and priests in the Christian Church would be contrary to God’s Gospel in Christ and, as such, destructive of sound doctrine and behavior” (*Women*, 139). Elisabeth Behr-Sigel distances herself from a hard line thought like the former and the following: “The

ordination of women to the priesthood is not, for us, subject to debate, since it is contrary to the Christology, ecclesiology, tradition and practice of the Early Church” (*The Ordination of Women*, 2000, P.11.). Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh wants to address the issue like this: “The question of the ordination of women to the priesthood has only just been raised. For us Orthodox, it comes to us from outside. It needs to become an internal question. It requires from us an inner liberation and a deep exposure to the vision and will of God” (*Ordination of Women*, 12).

The three objections for the ordination come from the *tradition, anthropology and liturgical symbolism* of the Church. Among them the argument of the living tradition of the Orthodox Church is much stronger, which does not recommend women either to the office of the bishop or that of a priest. Here the word “tradition” is not simply a “used practice” or “a collection of texts, documents and decisions”. Rather “there is simply the Church herself in her living sacramental and spiritual tradition, mystically actualized in her liturgy, realized in her saints, witnessed by her martyrs, defended by her confessors, articulated by her fathers and councils and always protected and preserved by the entire body of her members” (Hopko, *Women*, 235). However, Bishop Kallistos Ware agrees with Prof. Erickson; “We must admit quite simply: while the Fathers have blessed us with a multifaceted yet coherent teaching on the priesthood, they have not given us a complete and altogether satisfactory answer to the question of the ordination of women” (s. Behr-Siegel, *Ordination of Women*, 90).

There is a consensus in saying that women should not be excluded entirely from the ministry of the Church. The declaration of Orthodox theologians who met at Athens in 1978 lists four things as parts of women’s ministry:

1. ministries of the diaconal and philanthropic kind, including the pastoral care of the sick and needy along with other social responsibilities,
2. ministries of prayer and intercession and of spiritual help and guidance,
3. ministries connected with teaching and instruction, particularly in the field of mission, and
4. ministries connected with the administration of the Church.

The thought of the reinstallation of the ministry of the *Deaconess* is also alive among Orthodox circles. It was very important in the fourth and fifth centuries and was practiced as late as 11<sup>th</sup> century. An inter-Orthodox symposium in Rhodes held in 1988 said: “The apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived...Such a revival would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres”. What the supporters of the rethinking about the ordination of women inspires is an old prayer found in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (Chapter 8:3:20), a Syriac work of early third century. This was used during the occasion of the ordination of a deaconess:

*“O Eternal God, Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and woman, who did replenish with the Spirit Miriam and Deborah and Hannah and Huldah; who did not disdain that your only begotten Son should be born of woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, did ordain women to be guardians of your holy gates; look down now upon this servant, who is ordained for the diaconate and grant her your Holy Spirit, cleanse her from all that can defile flesh or spirit, so that she may worthily accomplish the work which is committed to her to your glory, and the praise of your Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to you and the Holy Spirit for ever. Amen”*

However, the Orthodox Church of India should also find some space for women in the over all life of the Church so that their calling will not be neglected and their talents will not be unused. Our spiritual organizations are run more by the leadership of women and it is the women’s group which find time to learn and hand over the rich faith traditions of the Church. Therefore more studies should be conducted on the ministry of women in the Church.