

From today’s Gospel Lesson:

*“Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.”*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

On this octave of the Feast of the Resurrection, the Gospel centers our attention on the great mystery of Holy Orders. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is one of the 7 Mysteries of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. This Sacrament, or Mystery, is directly connected to the Resurrection of our Lord, for, as Saint Paul declares to the Corinthians, “if Christ be not risen, then [the preaching of the clergy is in] vain, and [the faith of the laity] is also vain.”

In today’s Gospel, several mysterious things take place, but by far, the most mysterious of all is the giving of the Holy Ghost to the Apostles for the binding and loosing of sins. Jesus says unto the Apostles: “Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. Receive ye the Holy Ghost...”

When Jesus sent His Apostles out, He sent them out to participate in the saving work of God. He sent them to continue His ministry of reconciliation. Jesus was sent by the Father to reconcile all men unto Himself and as a result of this, the Resurrected Jesus breathes upon His Apostles, giving them the Holy Ghost, and sending them out to bind and loose the sins of their fellow men. These words that Jesus spoke unto His Apostles are the very words that He speaks through the bishops of His Church, when they, as the successors of the Apostles, ordain men to the Sacred Order of Priests.

Bound together with our Prayer Book is the Ordinal of the English Church. It begins on page 527 and contains the Forms for ordering deacons, ordering priests, and consecrating bishops. In these forms, we see an unbroken line of continuity with the work that our Lord put into motion in today’s Gospel lesson. We see how God has willed to use men to draw all men unto Himself. Listen closely to the following and consider the direct connection it has to today’s Gospel. The Prayer Book states: “...the Bishop with the Priests present, shall lay their Hands severally upon the Head of every one that receiveth the Order of Priesthood; the Receivers humbly kneeling, and the Bishop saying,

*Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”*

It is with these words, and the imposition of his hands, that a bishop in apostolic succession ordains a man to become a priest. Just like the Apostles in today’s Gospel, all priests receive the Holy Ghost for the purpose of binding and loosing sins...for the purpose of serving Christ and His Church as a minister of reconciliation.

Bishops are the successors of the Apostles. They are those men who have been called by God and His Church to receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders and thus, to be consecrated and equipped by the power of the Holy Ghost, the authority of the Son, and all of this according to the will of the Father.

Priests are men who have been ordered by the Bishop to receive the Holy Ghost in the Sacrament of Holy Orders so that they may assist the Bishop in his ministry. Priests are, in fact, living extensions of the ministry of the Bishop. They minister, on his behalf, in Word and Sacrament. Likewise, Deacons are men who have been ordered by the Bishop to receive the Holy Ghost in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, only to a lesser degree. They assist him in general Christian service. Deacons support and assist the Bishop and his priests, so that they may have both the time and energy to carry out the ministry faithfully and fruitfully.

Once a man is ordained to any of the offices of the three-fold ministry, he remains in that office forever. Thus, a bishop is not only a bishop, but a priest and a deacon as well. And likewise, a priest is not only a priest, but a deacon as well.

This three-fold ministry has been a part of the Church since her earliest days. Hear these words spoken by Saint Ignatius, the successor of the Apostle Peter, in the year 107 A.D., roughly 74 years after the Death and Resurrection of our Lord: *"See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the [priests] as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God."*

The three-fold order of bishops, priests, and deacons is not an invention of man or a corrupt hierarchy for conspiracy and power, as some like to believe. It is the very order of the Church. It is the will of God...the means by which the Father desires to reconcile sinners unto Himself, by the power of the Holy Ghost, and through the merits and ministry of His Son.

The will of God is mysterious, and perhaps, the most mysterious of all of the things presented to us today is His desire to use the hands of sinful men to draw all men into His blessed kingdom. We would do well today to remember the words that our Lord spoke to Saint Peter when He was first called to enter into the sacred ministry of reconciliation. As the Scriptures reveal to us, Saint Peter was a fisherman by trade. He spent countless hours at sea, being beaten by the waves of the

sea and oppressed by the rays of the sun. He knew what labor was. He knew both (1) the joy of a full draught of fishes and (2) the despair of empty nets.

We are familiar with the story. Jesus comes to Simon Peter, asks him to set his boat out a little from the shore so He may preach, and then miraculously causes such a multitude of fish to find their way into Peter's net that his net brakes and his ship almost sinks.

At this, Simon Peter is struck by the authority of Jesus over the fish of the sea, and knowing himself to be a sinner, says to the Lord: "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Looking into the eyes of the fisherman, Jesus responds to Peter by calling him to the sacred ministry. He does so tenderly with words that would both communicate to Peter personally and also summarize the joys and sorrows of the sacred ministry to which He was called. He says, "Fear not [Peter]; from henceforth thou shalt catch men."

To be clergy in this life is not be sinless. To be clergy in this life is to be a sinner whom God has called to draw other sinners unto Himself. Saint Peter's prayer is the prayer of a laborer in the vineyard, it is the prayer of a fisherman at sea, it is the prayer of a physician seeking to provide healing to those around him while himself being counted among the sick: "Depart from me; for I

am a sinful man, O Lord.”

Four times a year, we pray during special seasonal days known as Ember Days. Upon these days, we pray that the Lord will send more laborers into His vineyard, more men into the ministry of reconciliation. The Collect for Ember Days reads:

*O Almighty God, who hast committed to the hands of men the ministry of reconciliation; We humbly beseech thee, by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, to put it into the hearts of many to offer themselves for this ministry; that thereby mankind may be drawn to thy blessed kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

On Ember Days, we ought to pray that the Lord of the Harvest would send more laborers into the vineyard. But even more so than this, even more pressing than this, is our responsibility as Christians to daily pray for the clergy who are already in the vineyard. As you go to the Lord each day in prayer, forsake not to pray for the clergy, for the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking to devour them...and just as he desired to sift Saint Peter like wheat, so also Satan desires the destruction of every sinner who has received the Sacrament of Holy Orders for the ministry of man's reconciliation with God.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*