

‘Stewards of the Mysteries’

Mystery of Holy Priesthood and Church Hierarchy

“As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.”

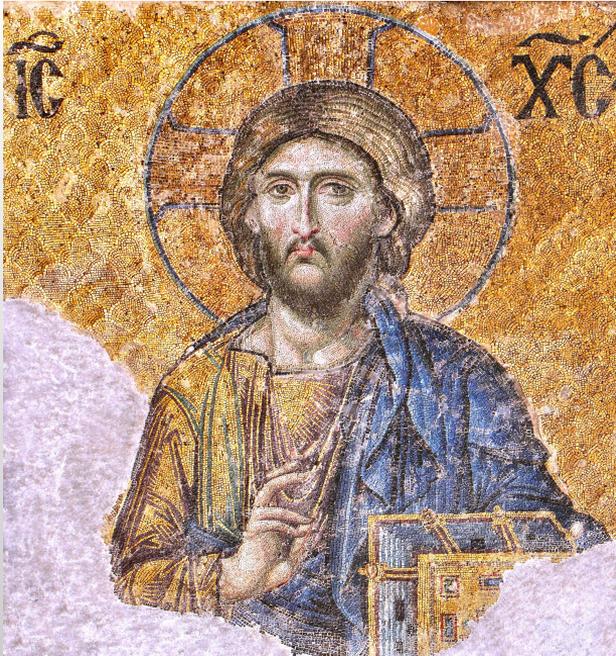
- John 20:21

Christ is the Image of the Father as one of the Holy Trinity.

Before His ascension into heaven, Christ bestowed His Holy Spirit upon His Apostles and consecrated them to represent Him upon the Earth, with the Lord Himself acting through them. The Apostles ordained bishops after them as their successors.

Just as Christ was surrounded by the Apostles on this earth, whom He also sent out as His hands and feet, so also the Apostles and bishops after them ordain presbyters (priests) who surround them in the Liturgy and are sent to perform the Holy Mysteries (except ordination and consecrating Holy Chrism oil).

The deacons are ordained for angelic service in the Holy Altar, and in the Church generally.





“As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.”

- **John 20:21**

“Let nothing be done apart from the bishop.

Without these three orders [deacons, priests, bishops] you cannot begin to speak of a church.”

- **St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108 A.D.)**

Bishops: Successors to the Apostles, as icons of Christ.

Priests (Presbyters): Surround the bishop as the Apostles surrounded Christ, and in like manner are sent out by the bishop to serve the Holy Mysteries and preach the Gospel as icons of Christ under the bishop’s leadership.

Deacons (literally ‘servants’): Represent the Holy Angels serving at the Altar of God.



The bishop stands before the Holy Altar, and the priests surround the bishop around the Altar as the Apostles surrounded Christ.

In the physical absence of the bishop, one priest (traditionally the senior priest, or whoever is selected) steps to the front of the Holy Altar as *protos* ('first').



“Whose sins you remit are remitted unto them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

- **John 20:23**

“No one takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God.”

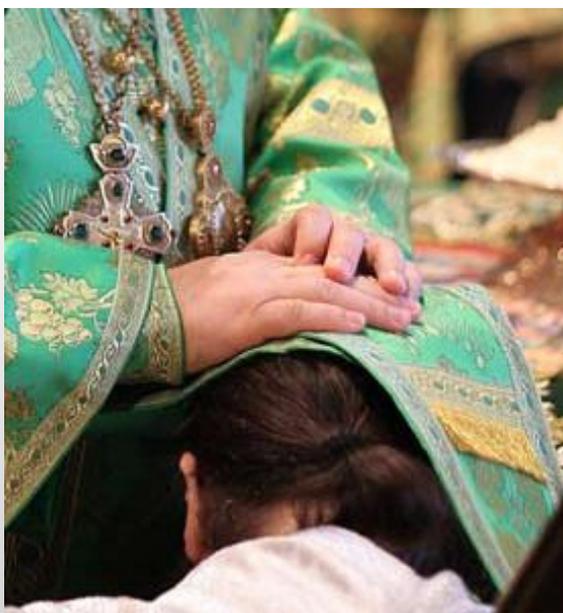
- **Hebrews 5:4**



The Holy Priesthood originates not in human election, but the Lord’s consecration of His Apostles who ordained their successors. Priesthood is a participation by Divine Grace in the ministry of the priesthood of Christ the one Great High Priest.

There are three major orders of Holy Priesthood: Deacon, Priest (Presbyter), and Bishop.

There are two minor orders: Reader and Subdeacon.



“Let the presbyters that rule well be counted worthy of double honor.”

- I Timothy 5:17

Within the primary orders, there are ranks of dignity that may be bestowed, such as Archpriest, Archdeacon, etc. This ensures administrative order, and honors longevity and distinction of service.

While all clergy of a specific order (bishop, priest, etc.) are equal sacramentally, they may vary in administrative authority and in *presvia* (seniority), that is, date of ordination and rank of dignity.





“Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.”

- I Timothy 3:8-9

“No one takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God.”

- Hebrews 5:4

The traditional canonical requirements for clergy (at least from the time of joining the Church in the waters of Holy Baptism and Chrismation) include:

If married, must have married only once (and one’s wife also). One may not marry after ordination.

Bishops are drawn only from the unmarried clergy.

20 years of age for subdeacon, 25 for deacon, 30 for priest.

A life above reproach.



“The Divine Rank of the Hierarchs, then, is the first of the God-contemplative Ranks . . . every Order of our Hierarchy is summed up and fulfilled in it.

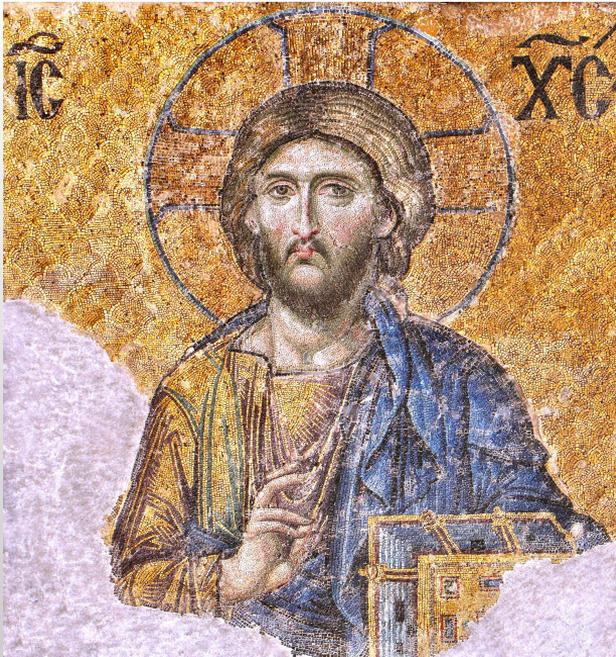
We have shewn, then, that the Rank of the **Hierarchs** is **consecrating** and **perfecting**, that of the **Priests**, **illuminating** and **conducting to the light**; and that of the **Leitourgoi** [deacons / servants] **purifying** and **discriminating**.”

- *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*

Bishops *consecrate* and *perfect* through ordinations, consecrations of Holy Chrism, and through their leadership as primary celebrants of the Mysteries at the head of the ranks of priesthood.

Priests (Presbyters) *illuminate* and *conduct to the Light* by serving the Holy Mysteries and leading people to the Truth.

Diaconal ranks *purify* and *discriminate* through reading the Holy Gospel and (traditionally) guarding the doors of the temple.





“The universal garment worn by all classes of ordained persons is the Stikharion . . . a long garment with sleeves, reaching to the ground . . . the Reader's basic ecclesiastical garment is the Stikharion. This garment . . . is called the robe of salvation and the garment of joy, symbolizing a pure and peaceful conscience, a spotless life, and the spiritual joy in the Lord which flows in him who wears it.”

- ***These Truths We Hold***



“My son, the first degree of the priesthood is that of reader . . .”

- **Service of the Tonsuring of a Reader**

A reader is set apart by *Cheirothesia* (a type of minor ordination or setting apart) at which his hair is cut, symbolizing his entry into the obedience of service in the clergy (in the minor orders). A reader is given a cassock to wear when serving the church, and may wear the *stikharion* (robe of baptism - basic garment of the clergy) when performing liturgical duties.



“In addition to the Stikharion, a Sub-Deacon wears, crossed upon the breast and back, a long, wide band of material, called an Orarion . . . typifying the wings of angels who serve at the Throne of God, just as do the Sub-Deacons, Deacons, Priests and Bishops. Sometimes the words, Holy, Holy, Holy are embroidered upon the Orarion.”

- ***These Truths We Hold***

A reader is elevated to subdeacon also by ***Cheirothesia*** (minor ordination or setting apart).

The ordination prayer for a subdeacon speaks of lighting the lamps in the church temple, and guarding the doors of the church.

In contemporary practice, subdeacons assist in the Holy Altar, and often vest the bishop, hold the ***trikirion*** and ***dikirion*** (bishop’s candles), and wash the bishop’s hands during the hierarchical Liturgy.





“Whereas the Sub-Deacon always wears his Orarion crossed, the Deacon, for the most part, wears his on his left shoulder, only crossing them at the time of the Communion of the clergy and the faithful. The Orarion is the Deacon's principal vestment, without which he cannot serve at any service whatever. In ancient times Deacons used to wipe the lips of communicants after they had partaken of the Holy Gifts.

In addition to the Orarion, the Deacon also wears the Cuffs (as do the Priests and Bishops) for convenience during services and also to remind him that he must not put his trust in his own strength alone, but in the right hand of the Almighty God.”

- *These Truths We Hold*

Deacons are ordained by *Cheirotonia* (full ordination by laying on of hands). Deacons proclaim the Holy Gospel (as the Angels proclaimed the Resurrection at the tomb of Christ), lead the prayers of the people, assist the bishop and priests, offer the incense that has been blessed, and assist in the distribution of Holy Communion.



Priests (presbyters) are likewise ordained by *cheirotonia* (full ordination by laying on of hands) by the bishop. The priest wears:

Stikharion (baptismal robe of salvation and gladness)

Epitrachelion (stole), symbolizing the Divine Grace of priesthood

Zone (belt), symbolizing the strength of God girding the priest

Epimanikia (cuffs), symbolizing the strength of God and the bonds worn by Christ prior to His crucifixion (ref. St. Germanos)

Phelonion (chasuble), symbolizing being invested with truth, and the purple robe worn by Christ prior to His crucifixion (ref. St. Germanos)

He may also wear:

Epigonation (triangular vestment, symbolizing the Sword of the Spirit)

Cross (symbolizing taking up the cross of Christ and being a witness of Him before men)

In some cases, he may also wear the *nabedrennik* (thigh shield), *kalimafi/kalimavkion* (varieties of headgear), or *mitre* (crown)





“Let a bishop be ordained by two or three bishops.”

- Canon 1 of the Holy Apostles

Bishops are consecrated by two or three other bishops, who were themselves consecrated in the same way, going back in a line to the Apostles upon whom Christ breathed and bestowed the Holy Spirit, enabling them to serve in Apostolic priestly ministry. This is essential.



The bishop vests similarly to the priest, except the *sakkos* (imperial-style robe) is usually worn in place of the *phelonion*, and he also wears the *omophorion* (bishop’s stole, symbolizing the lost sheep upon the shoulders of Christ). He also wears the *engolpion* (a medallion usually with an icon of the Theotokos, and sometimes an icon of Christ), and carries the staff (symbolizing the ministry of the Good Shepherd).



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- **Canon 1 of the Holy Apostles**

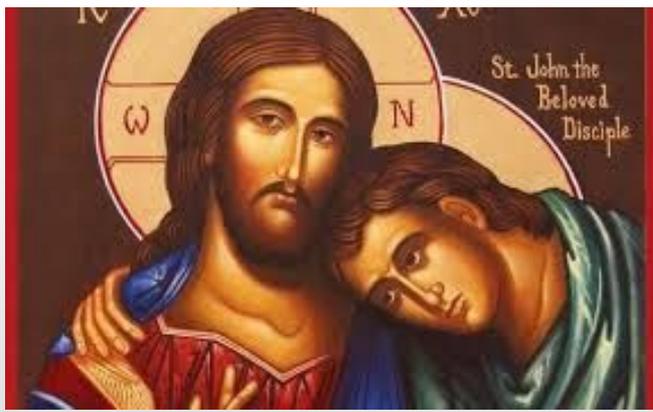
“Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic Church. It is not lawful to baptize or give communion without the consent of the bishop. On the other hand, whatever has his approval is pleasing to God. Thus, whatever is done will be safe and valid.”

- **St. Ignatius of Antioch**

All Christians owe spiritual obedience to the bishop. The bishop’s signature is upon the *antimins* on the Holy Altar, authorizing the priest to serve the Liturgy.







God is not worshipped in heaven by only a single angel, single archangel, etc. (this is inconsistent with God's revelation, and accordingly seems quite absurd).

Likewise, Eastern Orthodox worship does not limit the Liturgy to a single priest, single deacon, etc. - rather, we concelebrate with multiple clergy, as God has revealed that He wills to be worshipped in heaven.

“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands . . . ”

- Revelation 5:11

Orthodox worship is based upon the way that God has revealed that He wills to be worshipped. In the Apocalypse, Christ is worshipped by a great multiple of angels (and a large group of presbyters).

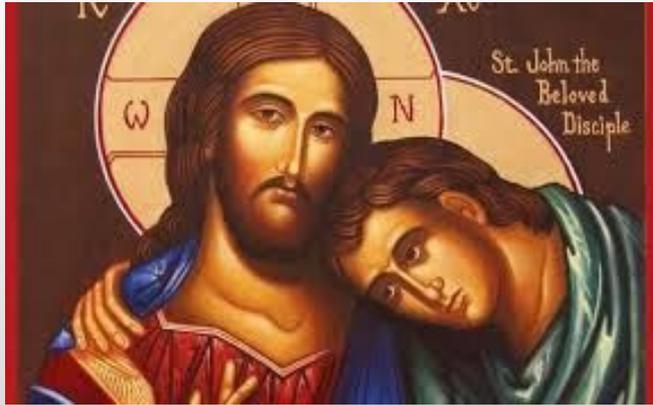
Heavenly worship - as revealed to us - is not based on any idea of ‘reductionistic efficiency’. Rather, it is incomprehensible grandeur.

Likewise, Orthodox Liturgy is ‘maximalist’ in orientation (incense, beauty, dignity), and normally practices the concelebration of many clergy together, following the heavenly model. However, one bishop/priest is *protos*.



ХРИСТУ

ГОСПОДЕ!



“**Around the throne were twenty-four thrones**, and on the thrones I saw **twenty-four presbyters** sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. **Seven lamps** of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four presbyters fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of **incense**, which are the prayers of the saints.”

- **Revelation 4:4-5; 5:8**

The liturgical worship of the Orthodox Church, led by the apostolicly-ordained priesthood, mirrors and participates in the heavenly worship of God.



The seven-branched candle-stand is upon the Holy Altar.

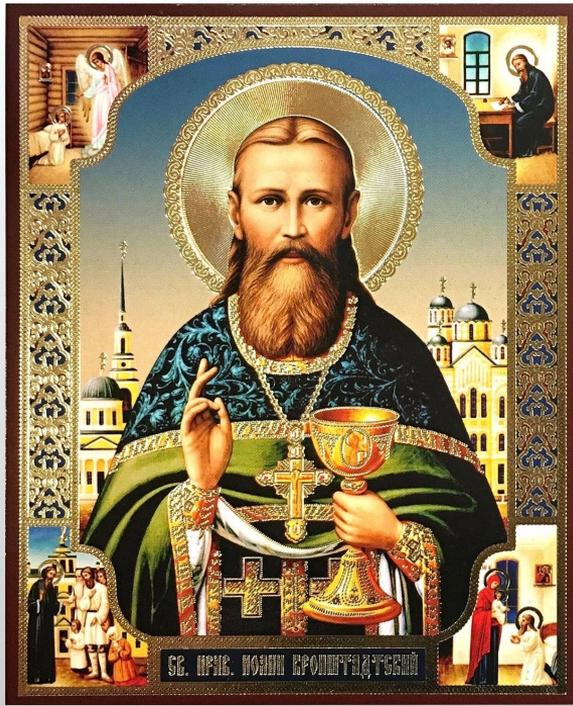
“Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four presbyters sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.”

- **Revelation 4:4-5; 5:8**

“When the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

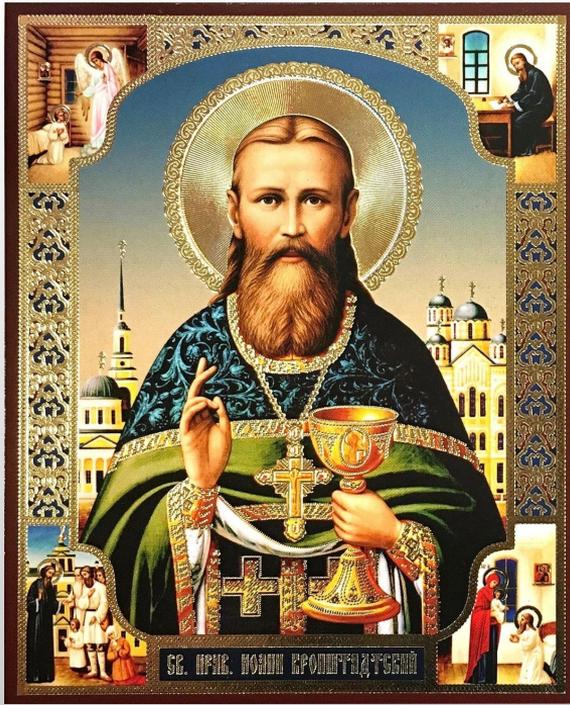
- **Matthew 19:28**

The architectural layout of the Orthodox temple also mirrors the heavenly worship - the bishop, representing Christ, has his throne at the center, and the presbyters (priests - representing the Apostles) have their seats (*synthronos*) on the sides of the bishop.



“Dear brethren, priests and co-pastors of Christ’s flock! The greatest of callings has been entrusted to us from God. We are clothed with the grace of priesthood, we are empowered by the grace of God’s ever-acting and all-sanctifying Spirit to perform God’s greatest Mysteries in the Church - the rebirth and sanctification of sinful humanity, the renewing reconciliation of ourselves and humanity with God, we stand before the Throne of the Almighty face to Face, we converse with Him, we beseech and thank Him, we constantly refer to Him as His closest *Ministers and Stewards of His mysteries (I Corinthians 4:1)*. What faith is required of us - what reverence, what never-ending attention to ourselves, what purity of heart, what passionlessness, what trust in God, what love toward God and neighbor, what audacity, what wisdom and simplicity, what revocation from every evil, what mercy and compassion toward people . . . ”

- **St. John of Kronstadt**



“What a great personage a priest is! He is in constant converse with God, and God constantly replies to his speech, as whatever the ceremonies of the Church may be, whatever his prayers, he is speaking to God, and whatever the ceremonies of the Church may be and whatever his prayers, the Lord answers him . . .

O Lord, let Thy priests be clothed with righteousness;
Let them always remember the greatness of their calling;
Let them not be entangled in the snares of the world and the devil; let them be saved from the cares of the world, the delight in riches, and the desire for other things entering into their hearts.”

- **St. John of Kronstadt**

Remember those serving in the Holy Priesthood in your prayers.



Questions / Discussion