

What is the specific role of the priest in the liturgy?

By Doug Culp

YEAR FOR
PRIESTS



photo courtesy of JoAnn Fox

Q: How is priesthood understood within the context of the celebration of liturgy?

A: Well, first of all, what is liturgy? According to the catechism, liturgy is an “action” of the “whole Christ.” This means that the celebration of the liturgy goes beyond the visible celebration here on earth and includes all those who now participate in the heavenly liturgy – Mary, the apostles, the saints, and all those who have already entered the kingdom. In other words, it is the “whole community” of believers – on earth and in heaven – the entire body of Christ.

In terms of the priesthood, Christ alone is priest. At the same time, the entire celebrating assembly of the baptized participates in Christ’s priesthood through the power of the Holy Spirit, in order that they may actively offer the spiritual sacrifices of the liturgy. This is referred to as the “common priesthood” of believers.

Within this shared priesthood of the one Christ, members have different functions. The ordained priest then is understood as one who has been “called by God, in and through the church, to a special service of the community.” Put simply, the ordained minister is charged with assisting the work of the common priesthood of the faithful, of Christ, in a very specific way – he is the means by which Christ continuously builds up and leads his church.

Q: What is the specific role of the priest in the liturgy?

A: The priest presides over the liturgy. Essentially, this means the priest fulfills two vital and interrelated functions during the liturgy: He represents Christ to the church and he presents the church’s prayer to God.

By the sacrament of holy orders, the priest is anointed by the Holy Spirit, who enables the priest to “act in the person of Christ the head,” or in persona *Christi capitis*. This means

that, within the context of the priest's service to the church, it is Christ himself who is present as the church's head through the action of the priest. In this way, the priest becomes an "icon" of Christ.

The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults explains that an icon is "a religious painting that is considered to make present the mystery of salvation or the saint it depicts." Therefore, when the priest is called an "icon" of Christ, it means that the priest is not simply a reminder or image of Christ, but also a real means by which Christ can touch a person.

At the same time, because the ordained minister represents Christ, he also acts in the name of the whole church when presenting to God the prayer of the church. This is because the church is inseparable from Christ, who worships in and through his church. The whole church, the body of Christ and the common priesthood, prays and offers herself through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ – the one priest. The ordained priest's role here is especially evident in the offering of the eucharistic sacrifice. It is the priest, standing in the person of Christ, who alone can consecrate the bread and wine that will become the very body and blood of Christ, offered as the spiritual sacrifice of Christ on behalf of his body, the church.

Three degrees of Holy Orders

1 Bishop In unbroken succession from the apostles, a bishop exercises a ministry of preaching and teaching, sanctifying, governing (CCC 1558). As Christ's vicar, each bishop has the pastoral care of a particular church entrusted to him, but he also serves with all bishops in the Episcopal College of which the pope is head. The "fullness of the sacrament" of Holy Orders resides in the episcopacy.

2 Priest A minister of God's word, a minister of the sacraments and a pastoral guide of the community. He exercises his role in communion with the bishop and in union with the presbyterate of the diocese.

3 Deacon is a minister of the liturgy, of the word and of charity (diakonia). He serves in conjunction with the bishop and priests. There are two types of deacons:

- **1 transitional deacon** will serve until he is ordained a priest
- **2 permanent deacon** is a married or unmarried man who will remain a deacon. They may baptize, witness a marriage, preach and assist at liturgies, and preside at funerals.



clerical suit:

Ordained clergy members often wear black suits with a white collar known as the roman collar. The collar originated in the 15th century, when it was a popular secular practice to turn one's linen collar up and over the outer garment. By the 19th century, it became customary to insert a starched linen *collaro* onto the rabat, the high-collared, backless vest worn under a cassock.

How has Hollywood depicted Catholic priests?

» We often hear complaints about how priests and the church are portrayed in the movies. Have things really changed? Take a look back at some priestly depictions from the 1930s and '40s – an era some call the 'golden age' of filmed priest-heroes.



I Confess

In 1953's *I Confess*, Alfred Hitchcock presented a compelling story of crime and punishment – and the heroic virtue of a Catholic priest. Set in Quebec City, the movie focuses on Father Michael Logan, who hears the confession of a murderer – a man who works in his parish rectory. Circumstantial evidence suggests Father Logan may have been the killer – and, due to the seal of confession, he cannot say anything to exonerate himself.

The movie includes a dramatic trial, an angry mob and a chase scene through one of Quebec's oldest buildings, the Chateau Frontenac Hotel. And most of all, it includes an amazing act of forgiveness.

Montgomery Clift stars as Father Logan, Karl Malden as the police detective. Anne Baxter also has a starring role as a woman from Father Logan's past who comes to recognize the great love he has for his faith and his church.