

The Early Church Fathers on The Priesthood

The leaders of the local churches were referred to as either presbyters or priests. Presbyter comes from the Greek word presbyteros (πρεσβύτερος). Presbyteros means elder. Since the earliest Christians were Jewish elder was a term that they would be familiar with. They were also called priests because their main function was to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice. This was and is done in response to Jesus command at the last Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). This of course is not a new sacrifice but a participation in the once for all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Ignatius of Antioch

Good, too, are the priests; but the High Priest is better, to whom was entrusted the holy of holies; and to Him alone were entrusted the secret things of God. He is the door of the Father, through which Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets and the Apostles and the Church. All these are joined in the unity of God (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 9:1 [A.D. 110]).

Irenaeus of Lyon

And all the apostles of the Lord are priests, who do inherit here neither lands nor houses, but serve God and the altar continually (*Against Heresies* 4:8:3 [A.D. 189]).

Liturgy of the Blessed Apostles

The Priest says this secret prayer in the sanctuary: O Lord God Omnipotent, Thine is the Holy Catholic Church, inasmuch as Thou, through the great passion of Thy Christ, didst buy the sheep of Thy pasture; and from the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is indeed of one nature with Thy glorious divinity, are granted the degrees of the true priestly ordination (6 [A.D. 200]).

Teachings of the Apostles Syriac

And by ordination to the priesthood, which the apostles themselves had received from our Lord, did their Gospel wing its way rapidly into the four quarters of the world (27 [A.D. 230]).

Origen

So, too, the apostles, and those who have become like apostles, being priests according to the Great High Priest and having received knowledge of the service of God, know under the Spirit’s teaching for which sins, and when, and how they ought to offer sacrifices, and recognize for which they ought not to do so (*On Prayer* 18 [A.D. 233]).

Cyprian of Carthage

On which account it is fitting, that with full diligence and sincere investigation those should be chosen for God’s priesthood whom it is manifest God will hear (*Letter* 67:2 [A.D. 254]).

Peter of Alexandria

Since I have found out that Meletius acts in no way for the common good, – for neither is he contented with the letter of the most holy bishops and martyrs, – but, invading my parish, hath assumed so much to himself as to endeavor to separate from my authority the priests, and those who had been entrusted with visiting the needy; and, giving proof of his desire for pre-eminence, has ordained in the prison several unto himself; now, take ye heed to this, and hold no communion with him (*Fragments* 1 [A.D. 300-311]).

Eusebius

Moreover, he made the priests of God his counselors, and deemed it incumbent on him to honor the God who had appeared to him with all devotion (*Life of Constantine* 1:32 [A.D. 339]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

After this the Priest cries aloud, "Lift up your hearts." For truly ought we in that most awful hour to have our heart on high with God, and not below, thinking of earth and earthly things. In effect therefore, the Priest bids all in that hour to dismiss all cares of this life (*Catechetical Lecture 23:4 [A.D. 350]*).

Gregory of Nyssa

The man who ungrudgingly spent upon the poor his patrimony even before he was a priest, and most of all in the time of the famine, during which he was a ruler of the Church, though still a priest in the rank of presbyters (*Against Eunomius 1:10 [A.D. 382]*).

John Chrysostom

The Offering is the same, whether a common man, or Paul or Peter offer it. It is the same which Christ gave to His disciples, and which the Priests now minister. This is nowise inferior to that, because it is not men that sanctify even this, but the Same who sanctified the one sanctifies the other also. For as the words which God spake are the same which the Priest now utters, so is the Offering the same, and the Baptism, that which He gave (*Homily 2 on 2 Timothy [A.D. 393-397]*).

Jerome

You see then that the blessedness of a bishop, priest, or deacon, does not lie in the fact that they are bishops, priests, or deacons, but in their having the virtues which their names and offices imply (*Against Jovinianus 1:35 [A.D. 393]*).

Apostolic Constitutions

And I James, the son of Alphaeus, make a constitution in regard to confessors: A confessor is not ordained; for he is so by choice and patience, and is worthy of great honor, as having confessed the name of God, and of His Christ, before nations and kings. But if there be occasion, he is to be ordained either a bishop, priest, or deacon (8:23 **[A.D. 400]**).

John Cassian

But sometimes it creates a wish to take holy orders, and a desire for the priesthood or diaconate. And it represents that if a man has even against his will received this office, he will fulfil it with such sanctity and strictness that he will be able to set an example of saintliness even to other priests; and that he will win over many people, not only by his manner of life, but also by his teaching and preaching (*Institutes 11:14 [A.D. 425-430]*).

Sozomen

And the event has exceeded my prayer, in that so many priests of Christ have been conducted into the same place; now, it is my desire that you should be of one mind and be partakers of a consentient judgment, for I deem dissension in the Church of God as more dangerous than any other evil (*Church History [A.D. 440-443]*).

Theodoret

Was it that I ordained to the priesthood men of character and of honorable life? (Letter 81 **[circa A.D. 443]**).

Leo the Great

Priests and deacons may not be ordained on weekdays any more than bishops (Letter 6:6 **[A.D. 446]**).