

The Early Church Fathers on Holy Orders

Just like the Catholic Church of today the early church had a three-tiered system of clergy; bishop, presbyter (priest), and deacon. We see this arrangement portrayed in the Scriptures. The writings of the Early Church Fathers give us a bit more detail. Deacons were subject to the priests and the bishop. Priests were subject to the bishop. Furthermore, only bishops were allowed to ordain priests and deacons. And only priests and bishops were allowed to preside at Mass. outline

Clement of Rome

Laodicea, Peter ordered the people to meet on the following day; and having ordained one of those who followed him as bishop over them, and others as presbyters, and having baptized multitudes, and restored to health all who were troubled with sicknesses or demons (*Recognitions of Clement* 10:68 [A.D. 221]).

Ignatius of Antioch

Now, therefore, it has been my privilege to see you in the person of your God-inspired bishop, Damas; and in the persons of your worthy presbyters, Bassus and Apollonius; and my fellow-servant, the deacon, Zotion. What a delight is his company! For he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ (*Letter to the Magnesians* 2 [A.D. 110]).

I cried out while I was in your midst, I spoke with a loud voice, the voice of God: 'Give heed to the bishop and the presbytery and the deacons.' Some suspect me of saying this because I had previous knowledge of the division certain persons had caused; but he for whom I am in chains is my witness that I had no knowledge of this from any man. It was the Spirit who kept preaching these words, "Do nothing without the bishop, keep your body as the temple of God, love unity, flee from divisions, be imitators of Jesus Christ, as he was imitator of the Father" (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 7:1–2 [A.D. 110]).

Clement of Alexandria

A multitude of other pieces of advice to particular persons is written in the holy books: some for presbyters, some for bishops and deacons; and others for widows, of whom we shall have opportunity to speak elsewhere (*The Instructor of Children* 3:12:97:2 [A.D. 191]).

Hippolytus

When a deacon is to be ordained, he is chosen after the fashion of those things said above, the bishop alone in like manner imposing his hands upon him as we have prescribed. In the ordaining of a deacon, this is the reason why the bishop alone is to impose his hands upon him: he is not ordained to the priesthood, but to serve the bishop and to fulfill the bishop's command. He has no part in the council of the clergy but is to attend to his own duties and is to acquaint the bishop with such matters as are needful. . . . On a presbyter, however, let the presbyters impose their hands because of the common and like Spirit of the clergy. Even so, the presbyter has only the power to receive [the Spirit], and not the power to give [the Spirit]. That is why a presbyter does not ordain the clergy; for at the ordaining of a presbyter, he but seals while the bishop ordains (*The Apostolic Tradition* 9 [A.D. 215]).

Origen

Not fornication only, but even marriages make us unfit for ecclesiastical honors; for neither a bishop, nor a presbyter, nor a deacon, nor a widow is able to be twice married (*Homilies on Luke* 17 [A.D. 234]).

Cyprian of Carthage

Christ, who says to the apostles, and thereby to all chief rulers, who by vicarious ordination succeed to the apostles: "He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that heareth me, heareth Him that sent me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me, and Him that sent me" (Luke 10:16, Letter 68:4 [circa A.D. 250]).

Council of Elvira

Bishops, presbyters, and deacons may not leave their own places for the sake of commerce, nor are they to be traveling about the provinces, frequenting the markets for their own profit. Certainly, for the procuring of their own necessities they can send a boy or a freedman or a hireling or a friend or whomever, but, if they wish to engage in business, let them do so within the province (Canon 18 [A.D. 300]).

Council of Nicaea I

It has come to the knowledge of the holy and great synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters [i.e., priests], whereas neither canon nor custom permits that they who have no right to offer [the Eucharistic sacrifice] should give the Body of Christ to them that do offer [it]. And this also has been made known, that certain deacons now touch the Eucharist even before the bishops. Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the deacons remain within their own bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and the inferiors of the presbyters. Let them receive the Eucharist according to their order, after the presbyters, and let either the bishop or the presbyter administer to them (Canon 18 [A.D. 325]).

Eusebius

Greece on account of a pressing necessity in connection with ecclesiastical affairs, and went through Palestine, and was ordained as presbyter in Caesarea by the bishops of that country (*Church History* 6:23 [A.D. 325]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

Consider, I pray, of each nation, Bishops, Presbyters, Deacons, Solitaries, Virgins, and laity besides; and then behold their great Protector, and the Dispenser of their gifts; how throughout the world He gives to one chastity, to another perpetual virginity, to another almsgiving, to another voluntary poverty, to another power of repelling hostile spirits (*Catechetical Lecture* 16:22 [A.D. 350]).

Athanasius

For if all were of the same mind as your present advisers, how would you have become a Christian, since there would be no bishops? Or if our successors are to inherit this state of mind, how will the Churches be able to hold together? (Letter 49:4 [A.D. 354]).

Hilary of Poitiers

The Blessed Apostle Paul in laying down the form for appointing a bishop and creating by his instructions an entirely new type of member of the Church, has taught us in the following words the sum total of all the virtues perfected in him: Holding fast the word according to the doctrine of faith that he may be able to exhort to sound doctrine and to convict gainsayers. For there are many unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers. For in this way he points out that the essentials of orderliness and morals are only profitable for good service in the priesthood if at the same time the qualities needful for knowing how to teach and preserve the faith are not lacking, for a man is not straightway made a good and useful priest by a merely innocent life or by a mere knowledge of preaching (*On the Trinity* 8:1 [A.D. 356-360]).

Theodoret

For a dying bishop is not permitted to ordain another to take his place, and all the bishops of a province are ordered to be convened; again, no ordination of a bishop is permitted to take place without three bishops (*Ecclesiastical History* 5:23 [A.D. 449-450]).