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The Priesthood Series
Article 5 – The priesthood in the scriptures (Part 2)

There are several examples in the New Testament of priests in the early Church. In Greek, the word “*presbyter*” (literally “elder”) is usually used to designate a priest. And as the Apostles establish new Christian communities, they appoint “elders” to lead them.

Acts 14:23 describes how Paul and Barnabas “*appointed elders for [the believers] in every church*”.

St. Paul writes to Timothy: “*If you put these instructions before the brethren, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus....Command and teach these things. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Till I come, attend to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you*” (1 Timothy 4:6-14). And St. Paul adds in his Second Letter to Timothy: “*I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands*” (2 Timothy 1:6).

In this, St. Paul, an Apostle (and thus a bishop), is writing to the Timothy, and instructing him to preach and teach with authority, because he has been ordained by God through the laying on of hands of other elders. This laying on of hands is exactly how Catholic priests are still ordained today.

St. Paul also instructs new elders not only to teach and govern, but also to continue the apostolic succession by appointing additional elders. St. Paul writes to Titus: “*This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you*” (Titus 1:5).

Note how the new “elders” do not appoint themselves, nor does the local community appoint or “hire” them, rather, elders are always appointed by current apostles or elders. This has been the practice of the Catholic Church since the beginning, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, “*no one takes this honor upon himself, but only he who is called by God*” (Hebrews 5:4).

And in the Acts of the Apostles, we again hear St. Paul remind the elders that they were appointed by the Holy Spirit: St. Paul “*called to him the elders of the Church. And when they came to him, he said to them....Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord*” (Acts 17-28).

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is described as being administered only by priests: “*Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders [priests] of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven*” (James 5:14-15).

And one final example is St. Paul speaking about his authority to speak and act in the name of Christ: “*People must think of us as Christ’s servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God*” (1 Corinthians 4:1). A steward is one who acts in another’s name. Thus, claiming to act as a “steward of the mysteries of God”, means one has the power to reveal or make present the mysteries of God. This is amazing. This is the task of the priest, to reveal or make present the mysteries of God; to represent God to his people.

Next up, I will begin addressing current “hot topics”. The first will be the question of priestly celibacy. Stay tuned!