

The Establishment Hypothesis: Toward a More Integrated Theology of Holy Orders

DOMINIC CERRATO

Diocese of Joliet

Joliet, IL

Preliminary Considerations

Understanding the Problem

Though the Sacrament of Holy Orders is a single sacrament consisting of three degrees, throughout its theological development, much of the focus has been on that of the priesthood. By priesthood I mean the two degrees that are sacerdotal in nature, the episcopate and the presbyterate. Given the growing understanding of the Eucharist in the Tradition, and its intrinsic connection to the priesthood as its exclusive agent, this sacerdotal emphasis was a natural and organic development.¹ Nonetheless, while revealing much, this sacerdotalism, along with the adoption of the *cursus honorum*,² had the unintended effect of obscuring the third level of the hierarchy, the diaconate.³ While the diaconate as an ancient order (Acts 6:1–6) would eventually be numbered among the major orders, being ordained *non ad sacerdotium sed ad ministerium episcopi*⁴ meant that deacons were not, in the same sense, related to the Eucharist as were priests. Consequently, much of

¹ This emphasis on orders and the priesthood can be seen in *Summa theologiae* [ST] suppl., q. 37, a. 2.

² The *cursus honorum* (course of honors) was the sequential order of public offices held by aspiring politicians in the Roman Republic. It was adopted by the Church in the fourth century such that, to obtain a higher office, one ascended from a lower office.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [LG] §29.

⁴ Hippolytus of Rome, *Apostolic Tradition* 8; LG §29.

what passed for diaconal theology is its liturgical role and charitable work among the poor. As observed by the Benedictine theologian Dom Augustinus Kerkvoorde just prior to the restoration of the diaconate, “there is, as far as we know, no independent theology of the diaconate. The number of authors and works should not delude us. None of them deals with the diaconate exclusively, say, to help deacons correctly understand and exercise their function in the Church.”⁵ He goes on to characterize diaconal theology as fragments strewn throughout the various writings on orders in general, the priesthood, and the sacraments.⁶

As later noted by the 2002 International Theological Commission on the Diaconate, this lack can be clearly observed in both the conciliar and post-conciliar documents on the diaconate. Of these, the commission wrote, “with reference to the pastoral priorities and in what concerns objective doctrinal difficulties, the Council texts show diversity of theological nuances which it is quite hard to harmonize.”⁷ In a similar manner, with regard to the 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law, the American canonist James Provost commented that there is:

still no coherent treatment of the permanent deacons as a “proper and permanent rank in the hierarchy” comparable to the treatment given presbyters and bishops in the code; rather they are treated as exceptions to the norms for presbyters.⁸

As a result, both before and after the Second Vatican Council, theological consideration of Holy Orders focused almost exclusively on the episcopate and presbyterate.⁹

The recognition of a deficient theological development in the diaconate does not mean that there has been no progress over the centuries. There are, as Kerkvoorde observes, fragments throughout the Tradition up to and beyond the Vatican II. Moreover, there are some who have proposed new

⁵ Dom Augustinus Kerkvoorde, OSB, “The Theology of the Diaconate,” trans. David Bourke, Karl H. Kruger, and William F. Schmitz, in *Foundations for the Renewal of the Diaconate* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1993), 91–92.

⁶ Kerkvoorde, “Theology of the Diaconate,” 91–92.

⁷ International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, ch. VII (“Theological Approach to the Diaconate in the Wake of Vatican II”), section I (“Texts of Vatican II and the Post-Conciliar Magisterium”).

⁸ James H. Provost, “Permanent Deacons in the 1983 Code,” *Canon Law Society of America Proceedings* 46 (1984): 175.

⁹ William T. Ditewig, *The Emerging Diaconate* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 13.

ways of envisioning the diaconate grounded in these very same fragments.¹⁰ While these have advanced our understanding of the diaconate as an order, missing is precisely how the three degrees relate to one another and how this unity is grounded.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) points out, Holy Orders is a single sacrament consisting of three degrees. If one degree, say the diaconate, is theologically impoverished, then the unity of Holy Orders suffers from this same deficiency. Put another way, the triune nature of this sacrament means that its unity is dependent upon the three degrees and their relationship to one another. Commenting on this dependency, the English Dominican scholar Aidan Nichols observes: “The priesthood cannot be approached in isolation from the episcopate and the diaconate.”¹¹ To better illustrate the relationship of the three degrees to the intelligibility of Holy Orders, he goes on to observe:

To the ordinary Catholic Christian, the priesthood is the order with which he or she is most familiar, and understandably so. . . . In this sense, it is the central image of the triptych: yet the central panel cannot be appreciated without those which flank it. We need the whole picture.¹²

The image of the triptych to describe the unity and diversity of Holy Orders is quite useful. As a work of art consisting of three hinged panels, the three panels together, when opened, unfold the whole story. Extending this image: if one of the panels, say that of the diaconate, were only partially open, then the triptych would only disclose part of its truth, concealing something of the artist’s intention. Moreover, this concealment not only obscures the one partially closed panel, but insofar as that panel hides part of the adjacent panel, it obscures that as well. As a result, something of the entire message, something of the artist’s intent is lost.

For the entire truth to be realized, for the triptych to reveal the whole

¹⁰ Examples can be found in Ditlewicz, *Emerging Diaconate*; Kenan B. Osborne, *The Permanent Diaconate* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007); Dominic Cerrato, *In the Person of Christ the Servant* (Bloomington, OH: St. Ephraem Press, 2014); James Keating, *The Heart of the Diaconate* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015); *The Character of the Deacon*, ed. James Keating (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017); W. Sean McKnight, *Understanding the Diaconate* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018).

¹¹ Aidan Nichols, *Holy Order: Apostolic Priesthood from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1990), 3.

¹² Nichols, *Holy Order*, 3.

story, the side panels need to be extended fully. Without this full extension, we are left with an incomplete and partially disintegrated story. The same can be said of Holy Orders. Without the diaconal panel extended, we are left with an incomplete and partially dis-integrated sacrament. In this case, something of the episcopate and presbyterate remains hidden, and beyond these, something of Christ himself. This is because each degree ontologically configures the ordinand to Christ in a way proper to the order received. In this respect, they incarnate him in a preeminent way such that all three degrees, like the open triptych, reveal Christ in a way no single degree does.

Observe also that the three panels only tell the whole story when they are hinged together and opened wide. The hinges are a figurative way of describing how the three panels relate to each other and how, together, they reveal the larger picture. Applying this analogy to Holy Orders, we would do well to focus primarily on the hinges that unite the three degrees as a means to discover a more integrated and complete theology. In this respect, while we have recognized the deficiency of the diaconate panel being partially closed, our main concern lies in the whole of Holy Orders from which, like that of the priesthood, a diaconal theology can be more effectively addressed at a later time.

Much of the early Tradition sees the unity of Holy Orders in the Eucharist, as exemplified by the work of Thomas Aquinas: "The sacrament of Order is directed to the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of sacraments."¹³ Today, the Church uses broader language, teaching that Holy Orders, as a sacrament of service is, "directed towards the salvation of others" (CCC §1534). This by no means diminishes the Eucharistic focus, but rather presupposes it and further specifies its ultimate goal, eternal life with Christ. Accordingly, the *Catechism*, citing Pope Paul VI's *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, teaches:

The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." "The other sacraments, and indeed *all ecclesiastical ministries* [emphasis mine] and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch." (CCC §1324, citing *Presbyterorum Ordinis* §5; emphasis mine)

The above analysis makes clear the need to arrive at a more organic and unified understanding of Holy Orders, one which maintains the Eucharistic

¹³ *ST* suppl., q. 37, a. 2.

focus of the Tradition while at the same time advancing the relationship between all three degrees. In this paper, I will attempt to do just that in what I call the “Establishment Hypothesis.”¹⁴

The Establishment Hypothesis is a proposed theological explanation of the origins of Holy Orders grounded in the Paschal mystery. It hopes to demonstrate, using personalist language, how all three degrees came to be in Christ’s self-giving love and how it is transmitted to and through the Church as an essential component in the mystery of salvation. In this respect, the hypothesis has the potential to provide a more integrated and unified understanding of Holy Orders.

As we begin our consideration, it is important to recognize that what is being advanced in this paper, as the title denotes, is a hypothesis. In this respect, it is simply a proposed theological explanation presented in such a way so as to undergo the scrutiny of the theological community. The aim here is to begin a new theological conversation, one in which the origins of Holy Orders leads to a better understanding of the sacrament and its place within the mission of the Church.¹⁵

Toward a Solution

Having laid out the problem, it is now possible to propose a particular remedy. In doing so, it will prove most effective to start from the very beginning, that is, at the origins of Holy Orders. Beginning here will allow us to develop a more fundamental line of inquiry, enabling us to examine the theological implications as we progress. With this in mind, our approach will take up the personalist thought of Pope St. John Paul II along with aspects of his “theology of the body.” Because personalism will enable us to turn to the subject without simultaneously turning away from the object, another level of meaning can be achieved without in any way diminishing what we already know. This will allow us to advance our understanding of Holy Orders in continuity with the tradition that preceded it. With this hermeneutical approach established and given what was said earlier regarding the sacraments being bound up and oriented to the Eucharist, we will apply this personalist approach to the Paschal mystery. This is because, while each

¹⁴ The phrase “Establishment Hypothesis” is a novel designation exclusively used by me as a title to describe this more integrated approach to Holy Orders.

¹⁵ I have published earlier versions of this hypothesis in popular publications, but this essay represents the most advanced version of the hypothesis to date. Those prior expositions are: *In the Person of Christ the Servant*, 190–208; “The Indispensability of the Diaconate,” *Josephinum Diaconal Review*, Spring 2017, 36–49; *Encountering Christ the Servant* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2020), 105–11.

of the sacraments mediate the grace of this mystery, the Eucharist represents the most perfect participation in that grace. It therefore deserves a primacy in any consideration of Holy Orders.

A Hermeneutic of Personalism

Throughout his life, Pope St. John Paul II repeatedly demonstrated the value of personalism as a means to deepen and enrich the faith. In much the same way Aquinas used Aristotelian thought as his philosophical foundation, personalism opened up for John Paul new horizons across a wide theological expanse. While continually reaffirming the traditional teachings of the Church, he nonetheless reinterprets them through a personalist lens, contributing to their objectivity a new subjectivity. In this turn to the subject, which we will later explore, John Paul advances our understanding from objective categories to lived experience without in any way compromising the objective realities already established. In examining John Paul's thought, and seeking to discover its definitive characteristic, Avery Dulles argues:

What lies at the very heart of his message? . . . the mystery of the human person. As pope he is of course bound to the whole dogmatic heritage of the church, but he presents it in a distinctive way, with his own emphases, which are in line with his philosophical personalism.¹⁶

Although during his pontificate John Paul never applied philosophical personalism to the origins and nature of Holy Orders, nonetheless, his legacy makes possible its application to our investigation. Indeed, as we will demonstrate, just as his use of the mystery of the human person reveals profound insights across a wide range of issues,¹⁷ it promises much the same in the way of advancing Holy Orders. Thus, an essential contention of this study is that the mystery of the human person, as employed in John Paul's philosophical

¹⁶ Avery Dulles, "John Paul and the Mystery of the Human Person," in *Avery Dulles, Essential Writings from America*, ed. James T. Keane (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2019), 245.

¹⁷ Papal biographer George Weigel describes the theology of the body as "one of the boldest reconfigurations of Catholic theology in centuries" (*Witness to Hope* [New York: HarperCollins, 1999], 336). It is, he explains, "a kind of theological time bomb set to go off with dramatic consequences, sometime in the third millennium of the Church" (343). Weigel maintains that the theology of the body has barely begun to "shape the Church's theology, preaching, and religious education," but when it does, "it will compel a dramatic development of thinking about virtually every major theme in the Creed" (853).

personalism, will provide new insights into the origins and nature of Holy Orders. These insights arise largely out of personalism's claim that to be (*esse*) is to be with and for another. It is this social dimension, flowing from our very nature, that views the person as a human being, not a human doing. We are, at our core, social beings and, because of this, relationships are essential to revealing the mystery of the human person as it relates to every aspect of our lives, including Holy Orders.

In its most basic sense, personalism is a philosophical movement that centers on the person as the ontological and epistemological start of any rational reflection. Here, personhood is understood as that which gives meaning to all of reality and, by that fact, constitutes its supreme value. In this regard, personalism is merely descriptive of a diverse school of thought rather than a practical philosophical approach.¹⁸ However, from this school, several philosophies have emerged, among which is Lublin Thomism. It is from this school that John Paul derives his approach as both the earlier philosopher Karol Wojtyła and the later Pope. In applying his thought to Holy Orders, and to achieve our end, we need only draw from two key personalist themes: the irreducible, and love as self-donation.

Before proceeding, however, one final note is in order. While aspects of personalism are used as the hermeneutic for our investigation, one need not adopt a personalist philosophy to appreciate both the irreducible and love as a gift-of-self. This is particularly true as these apply to the origins of Holy Orders. They bespeak first principles in the sense that they represent foundational propositions that cannot be deduced from any other propositions.¹⁹ Nonetheless, they are self-evident in human experience and witnessed in Sacred Scripture particularly as they reveal Christ. In this sense, as we advance, these principles will prove both helpful and relatable.

The Irreducible

In contrast to Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, where the person sits atop the continuum of being, Lublin Thomism does not view the person as simply an object among other objects in the natural world differentiated only by intellectual faculties. Indeed, just as Wojtyła maintained that, by phenomenologically reflecting on human experience, certain truths emerge that give rise to a more complete understanding of the human person, the same can

¹⁸ In 1947, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain quipped that there are at minimum of a dozen personalist doctrines, which at times have nothing more in common than the word "person" (*The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John F. Fitzgerald [New York: Scribner's Sons], introduction).

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Physica* 1.5.188a.

be said for its application to Holy Orders. Where the classical approach tends to reduce the person to the otherwise helpful Aristotelian-Thomistic categories, the initial datum of human experience reveals the entire concrete person as a whole. This fundamental revelation means that the person cannot be boiled down or reduced to objective classifications or functions, no matter how insightful these might be. To do so would be to examine the parts at the expense of the whole. Thus, applied to Holy Orders, any consideration of Jesus, to whom the ordinand is ontologically configured, that reduces him to general categories of being or functionality passes over that which is most human, “since the *humanum* expresses and realizes itself as the *personale*.”²⁰

To better appreciate the irreducible as it relates to Holy Orders, we need to consider how, in describing his mission, Jesus defines himself as one who serves and gives himself up for others (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). In this one phrase, we have both *diakonos* and *sacerdos*. Indeed, these descriptors ground his mission in two distinct but interrelated activities and, based on the Latin maxim “agere sequitur esse,” say something essential about him. He is both *diakonos* (one who serves) and *sacerdos* (one who sacrifices and is sacrificed). Applied to the Paschal mystery, in Jesus’s Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, he gives himself irreducibly as both deacon and priest.²¹ He can himself give no other way because both find their definitive meaning in him. Put another way, when Jesus gives himself for the salvation of the world, which is perpetuated in Holy Orders through the mission of the Church (CCC §1536), he does so whole and entire. This is not to suggest that each grade of Holy Orders receives both *diakonos* and *sacerdos* in the same measure,²² but that the whole of Holy Orders receives these gifts. The concept of irreducibility, particularly as it relates to the Paschal mystery, will be an essential element in our later consideration of the origins and nature of Holy Orders.

Love as Self-Donation

To better grasp Wojtyła’s personalist understanding of love and how it relates to Holy Orders, we need to turn to his papal work, more specifically his “theology of the body.”²³ These teachings, which make up a systematic

²⁰ Karol Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 215.

²¹ *Diakonos and Sacerdos* by no means exhaust Jesus’s humanity and divinity. They do however describe how he gives those two natures in the Paschal mystery.

²² Though the episcopacy does receive the fullness of Holy Orders (LG §21).

²³ John Paul II’s theology of the body is encapsulated in *Theology of the Body: Human*

catechesis, are distinct from his earlier pre-papal work in that they represent a theological development and application of his personalist thought as expressed in his ordinary magisterium. Reflecting on his theological contribution as it relates to understanding the person, John Paul would later write in his 2001 *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: “The mystery of the Incarnation lays the foundations for an anthropology which, reaching beyond its own limitations and contradictions, moves towards God Himself, indeed towards the goal of ‘divinization’” (§23). Consequently, the theology of the body builds upon personalism in much the same way that Aquinas builds on Aristotle. Moreover, while John Paul focuses on marriage and sexuality, the implications of his approach are not limited to spousal love. Indeed, he maintains that the theology of the body will immerse us into “the perspective of the whole Gospel, of the whole teaching, in fact of the whole mission of Christ.”²⁴ As a result, it represents an entirely new theological approach whose full potential remains untapped.²⁵

John Paul’s theology of the body is grounded in a key passage found in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*. It is a theme to which, throughout his many talks, he returns time and time again. It reads:

Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, “that all may be one . . . as we are one” (John 17:21–22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself. (*Gaudium et Spes* §24)

John Paul’s theology of the body is shaped by what his personalism calls “a hermeneutic of the gift.” It is essentially a broad and sweeping interpretation of reality in terms of self-donation. He describes this self-donation and its primary effect by saying that “the love in which the man-person becomes a gift and—by means of this gift—fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence.”²⁶ Like all gifts, it presupposes a willing giver and a receiver receptive to the gift. When the receiver freely accepts the gift from the giver

Love in the Divine Plan (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), which comprises 129 talks given by the Pope during his Wednesday audiences between September 1979 and November 1984.

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 175.

²⁵ See Weigel’s comments in note 17 above.

²⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 63.

an intimate union is formed; the “I–Thou” becomes a “We.” Understood this way, gift and reception enjoy a mutual, complementary, and reciprocal dynamic. Of this John Paul says: “The giving and the accepting of the gift interpenetrate, so that the giving of oneself becomes accepting, and the acceptance is transformed into giving.”²⁷ He elsewhere says: “The affirmation of the person is nothing but acceptance of the gift, which, by means of reciprocity, creates a *communio personarum*.”²⁸

Love, then, for John Paul, consists of a mutual gift-of-self that wills the good of another for the sake of the other. It is initiated by God’s creative and redemptive love through the gift of his Son Jesus Christ and is reflective of the ultimate self-giving love found within the heart of the Trinity. It is reciprocated when the believer believes or, more specifically, when his or her belief is expressed in free, concrete acts of reciprocating love. This mutual self-donation establishes what John Paul calls, “the nuptial relationship.” Deeply rooted in the Scriptures, he points out that, among all of the biblical images used to describe the relationship between God and humanity, marriage enjoys a preeminence. From the creation of man and woman in Genesis, through the sensual language found in the Song of Songs, to the wedding feast of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation, marriage is used repeatedly to describe God’s intimate relationship with humanity.

Although the nuptial relationship is typically used in a narrow sense to describe marital love, it also has for John Paul a broader meaning. He sees nuptiality as so inscribed in the mystery of creation and redemption that, in a very real way, it possesses a universal significance. This is precisely St. Paul’s point in his letter to the Ephesians. After explaining the relationship between the spouses, he goes on to say: “This is a great mystery [mystērion], but I speak in reference to Christ and his Church” (Eph 5:32). Paul, building upon the biblical tradition of the Old Testament, sees marriage as taking on a new symbolic meaning in light of the Paschal mystery, one which reveals the intimate love between Christ and his Church in a profound way. Later John Paul would write in his 1994 *Gratissimam Sane* (*Letter to Families*): “The ‘great mystery’ which is the Church and humanity in Christ, does not exist apart from the ‘great mystery’ expressed in the ‘one flesh’” (§19). Indeed, because divine love constitutes the original and fundamental gift from God, reflecting his own inner life, all of creation possesses a nuptial character.²⁹ If this is true of creation then, flowing from the same God, it is equally true,

²⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 71.

²⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 65.

²⁹ While the nuptial meaning is most fully expressed in the total gift-of-self found exclusively in spousal love, all love participates in God’s love to a greater or lesser degree.

or perhaps even more true, of redemption. Consequently, this divine nuptial gift-of-self, begun at creation, finds its fullest expression in redemption and its ultimate promise, eternal life.

The Establishment Hypothesis

As Holy Orders finds its contextual framework within the mystery of salvation and the mission of the Church, the same contextual framework must, by necessity, be applied to any new theory on Holy Orders. As noted earlier, the “Establishment Hypothesis” is a proposed theological explanation of the origins of Holy Orders grounded in the Paschal mystery and expressed in personalist language. This, as we shall see, has the potential to reveal a greater integrity within orders itself, along with a deeper sense of how these orders participate in the mystery of salvation and the mission of the Church.

As we proceed, it is important to establish at the outset that God’s plan of salvation is more profoundly revealed when it is interpreted as a divine gift-of-self. Christ does not offer salvation in a cold and depersonalized manner, but instead by giving himself (John 3:16) in a deeply personal way. This self-revelation, replete throughout his life, is intimately and inextricably tied to the Good News as revealed in his Passion, death and Resurrection. This is a God who, by his gift-of-self wants to be known by us and, in doing so, invites us to know him through a reciprocal gift-of-self. Accordingly, the *Catechism* teaches: “By revealing himself God wishes to make them [humanity] capable of responding to him, and of knowing him and of loving him far beyond their own natural capacity” (CCC §52). The dynamic by which this flows from God to humanity has been described by Victor Salas as an “analogical community.” Of this he writes:

If the analogical community between God and creatures establishes the possibility for a fuller disclosure of the meaning of self-giving, its only on account of the exemplar relation upon which it is founded. Following the general metaphysical axiom of causality, namely, that *omne agens agit sibi simili* (every agent causes something similar to itself), one can, from consideration of an image or effect (i.e., creation) find contained therein traces of its exemplar cause.³⁰

³⁰ Victor Salas, “The Analogical Structure of Self-Giving and Receiving According to John Paul II,” *Gregorianum* 90, no. 3 (2009): 474.

Consequently, our ability to give ourselves, to love others, begins with God's love (1 John 4:19) precisely because contained in us are traces of our Exemplar Cause. As a result, we are called to love one another with a divine love, albeit in a human way (1 John 4:7). All of this reveals that love, properly understood, is not to remain the sole possession of the beloved. We cannot bury the love we receive like the servant who buried his talents (Matt 25:15–30), but must instead invest it in others. In this sense, the gift-of-self we received is to be re-gifted. This means it is to be passed on to others in and through us, perpetuating the mission of the Church by incarnating Christ's own universal gift-of-self in our own particular gifts of self. This "passing-on" does not diminish the gift received from Christ, but paradoxically, enhances it.

Figure 1 provides a basic illustration of this "passing-on" through a series of successive gifts.³¹ It is used to describe, in rather broad terms, a soteriological unfolding, not an ecclesial process. It is primarily concerned with the way in which salvation is revealed, not with the manner in which Holy Orders was historically developed, though the two share certain commonalities.

A Series of Successive Gifts

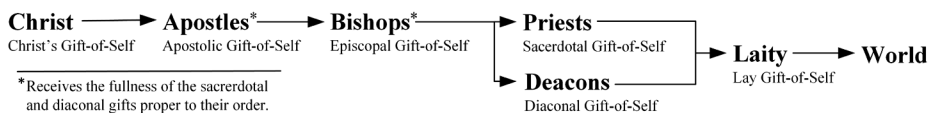


Figure 1

Keeping the above in mind, we now turn to the Establishment Hypothesis proper by considering the Paschal mystery and its relationship to the Last Supper. In many respects, the Last Supper is not only part of the Paschal mystery; it encapsulates it. This is to say, what Jesus said on Holy Thursday, he actually did on Good Friday, "Take, . . . this is my body which will be given for you." (Luke 22:19). Indeed, by giving the command "Do this in memory of me" (1Cor 11:24), he enables us to participate in the Last Supper anew, and by extension in the Paschal mystery, each time Mass is celebrated. Accordingly, the *Catechism* teaches: "In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present" (CCC §1085). In terms of the priesthood, the Church has long looked to the Last Supper as its institution. If there is a cohesive unity to be found in the

³¹ Though Figure 1 starts with Christ, it assumes that the ultimate source of this self-giving is the inner life of the Blessed Trinity.

origins of Holy Orders, then it would make sense to find it in the Paschal mystery, and because this mystery is encapsulated in the Last Supper, this event should be our starting point.

Two Sets of Dominical Commands

On the night before he died, Jesus shared the Passover meal with the Twelve. There, he issued two distinct sets of commands. The first, as we have already seen, is found in the Synoptic Gospels and consists of: "Take and eat; . . . Take and drink; . . . Do this in memory of me . . ." (1Cor 11:23–26; Matt 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–39). These commands make up what is traditionally known as the institutional narratives because they simultaneously institute the Eucharist and the priesthood.³²

However, during that same meal,³³ there was another set of commands, not found in the Synoptics but instead in John's Gospel. There Jesus, after washing the feet of his disciples says, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do (John 13:15)." Later, at that same meal, Jesus would become more explicit and emphatic when he says: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35). Also known as the *mandatum*, this set of dominical commands does not supplant the commands of the Eucharist in the Last Supper, but rather complements and supplements them, with several scholars seeing a symbolic connection between the two.³⁴ Of this, John Christopher Thomas writes:

Since Jesus' actions in John take the place of the institution of the Eucharist as recorded in the Synoptics, it is often assumed that the author of the Fourth Gospel is drawing a connection between the two

³² This includes what would later be called bishops in the sense that they were also called *sacerdos* with the presbyters called *sacerdos secundi ordinis*.

³³ While the Catholic tradition has long recognized the Last Supper and the *mandatum* as part of the same event, this is not without some debate among scholars. Nonetheless, regarding the Establishment Hypothesis, it is sufficient for our purposes to contextualize the Last Supper and the *mandatum* within the broader Paschal mystery. What is maintained here is not so much a chronological connection, but a theological connection. For a more thorough analysis of the relationship between the Last Supper and the *mandatum* see: Barry D. Smith, "The Chronology of the Last Supper," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53, no. 1 (1991): 29–45; Herold Weiss, "Footwashing in the Johannine Community," *Novum Testamentum* 21, no. 4 (1979): 310.

³⁴ John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Cleveland, OH: CPT, 2014), 3n5.

stories. It is further asserted that since John alludes to the Eucharist through specific events in Jesus' life . . . it is natural to assume that the footwashing is also an allusion to the Eucharist.³⁵

In light of the above, it is of interest to note that, in Luke's Last Supper narrative, there exists something of a parallel of John's foot washing. In Luke, Jesus asks: "For who is greater: the one seated at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one seated at table? I am among you as the one who serves" (22:27). Despite the fact that Luke does not relate the foot washing in his Gospel, one could arguably discover an allusion to it in this post-meal dialogue between Jesus and his Apostles. Within the context of the meal, Jesus identifies himself as *diakonos*. The reference to the table also suggests a link between the Eucharist and service, between priesthood and the diaconate.

This link is symbolically expressed in the Church's liturgy. On Holy Thursday, at the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the *Ceremonial of Bishops* calls for the bishop to begin the foot washing by removing his chasuble, under which is his dalmatic, the vestment of the deacon. These vestments symbolically represent the layering of Holy Orders, as the bishop's ordination to the priesthood and his subsequent ordination to the episcopacy do not supplant his earlier ordination to the diaconate.³⁶ While he is bishop, he is still ontologically a deacon, and the rite he is about to enact is one of service, diaconal. Pope Francis, during this ritual, does not wear the dalmatic. Instead, after removing the chasuble, he modifies his priestly stole into a diaconal stole before washing the feet of the people. This is to say, he takes the stole from around his neck and refashions it to hang over his left shoulder and across his chest, thus denoting the rank of a deacon. Pope Francis and the bishops do this because, while they are bishops, they still possess the diaconate, and there is something intuitively diaconal about this act.

While this truth is expressed "lex orandi, lex credendi" in the liturgy of Holy Thursday, it is also expressed at each Mass when a deacon serves at the altar, particularly during the doxology at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. Whether the celebrant is a bishop or presbyter, the deacon stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the celebrant in elevating the Sacred Species. In this moment, the Timeless Eternal Sacrifice is being offered back to the Father, the celebrant raising the Sacred Host and the deacon raising the

³⁵ Thomas, *Footwashing*, 3.

³⁶ This assumes each order, independent of the others, "imprints" an indelible character that is ineffaceable. See CCC §1582. Thus, a subsequent order does not efface a lower order.

Precious Blood. Both stand together in unity, the priest in a priestly way and the deacon in a diaconal way, offering back Christ who is the *Sacerdos* and *Diakonos*. This unity is further reinforced by the doxology itself when the celebrant says: "Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever."³⁷ In the "Amen" that follows the doxology, all affirm this unity. In this way, along with the people in a manner proper to their vocation, the priest and deacon offer themselves in union with the Unbloody Sacrifice of Christ. This liturgical rite also signifies, in a starkly visible way, the unity of Holy Orders grounded in the Paschal mystery, whose purpose it is to serve the People of God by the example of sacrifice and service, thus fulfilling, in a sacramental way, the mission of the Church.

In our consideration of these two sets of dominical commands, one sacerdotal in nature and the other diaconal, it is both important and relevant to contextualize them within the New Covenant established by Christ in the Paschal mystery. Just as the Old Covenant was expressed in the Decalogue, Jesus takes this up and elevates these commandments when he is asked by a scholar of the law which is the greatest commandment and replies:

You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. (Matt 22: 37–49)

In Jesus's response, one can detect a kind of New Covenant symmetry between the Eucharist and the *mandatum*, paralleling respectively love of God (Eucharist/priesthood) and love of neighbor (*mandatum*/diaconate). Where the Eucharist makes Christ present—Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—in a unique way so as to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, the *mandatum* requires that love to be passed on by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Indeed, to use a cruciform image, where the Eucharist directs our gaze upward, the *mandatum* simultaneously directs our gaze outward. In this respect, the two gazes interpenetrate one another, and while they can be distinguished, properly understood, they cannot be separated. They are, in many ways, part and parcel of the same reality: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt 25:40).

This interpenetration means that each grade of Holy Orders, while

³⁷ *General Instruction to the Roman Missal*, 3rd ed., 151.

perhaps emphasizing one of the two commandments of the New Covenant proper to their order, must not neglect the other. Indeed, just as the beams of the Cross connect and upon that connection is found Christ, so too Christ is found in the connection between love of God and love of neighbor. In many respects, this complementarity is symbolically paralleled in the priestly and diaconal orders.

Returning to the Last Supper, we have two sets of dominical commands: one unmistakably priestly in nature, and the other unmistakably diaconal. In this respect, the Establishment Hypothesis is not really new in grounding the diaconate in the Paschal mystery. James Keating writes, “The footwashing scene at the Last Supper is an expression of the institution of the diaconate by Christ, since it reflects the doctrinal truth of the unity of Holy Orders. There is symmetry between the ‘Do this in memory of Me’ (Lk 22:19) charge to the Apostles, and his other Apostolic charge ‘so that as I have done for you, you should also do’ (Jn 13:14–15).”³⁸ In making this observation, Keating cites Walter Kasper, who asserts:

We have seen that without *diaconia* there cannot be a Church, because Christ himself is one who serves (Lk 22:27). Therefore, at the Last Supper . . . he not only established the idea of priesthood, but, in principle, also laid the foundation of the diaconal ministry. By the washing of feet, he gave us an example, so that we also do, as he did to us (Jn 13:15). In these words, one can see the foundation of the diaconate.³⁹

Similarly, in 2021, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also acknowledged the origins of the diaconate in the *mandatum*:

The Apostles’ decision to appoint ministers (Acts 6:1–7) . . . has long been interpreted as a *normative step* in the evolution of ministry. It is seen as a practical response to Jesus’ command during the Last Supper of mutual service among the followers. In washing his disciples feet, Jesus as Head and Shepherd of the community modeled the service that he desired to be the hallmark of their faithfulness.⁴⁰

³⁸ Keating, *Heart of the Diaconate*, 64.

³⁹ Cardinal Walter Kasper, “The Deacon Offers an Ecclesiological View of the Present-Day Challenges in the Church and Society,” presented at the International Diaconate Centre Study-Conference, Brixen, Italy, October 1997.

⁴⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States of America*, 2nd ed.

The association of the mandatum and the diaconate is by no means new. It is first mentioned in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a third-century Syrian document on various aspects of early Christian life, worship, and organization. The document underscores the symbolic significance of footwashing for deacons. In this respect, it is not just a practical act of hygiene but a spiritual and symbolic act that represents humility, love, and service. Referencing the mandatum, the author writes:

If then the Lord of heaven and earth performed a service for us, and bore and endured everything for us, how much more ought we to do the like for our brethren, that we may imitate Him. For we are imitators of Him, and hold the place of Christ. And again in the Gospel you find it written how our Lord girded a linen cloth about his loins and cast water into a wash-basin, while we reclined (at supper), and drew nigh and washed the feet of us all and wiped them with the cloth [Jn 13.4–5]. Now this He did that He might show us (an example of) charity and brotherly love, that we also should do in like manner one to another [cf. Jn 13.14–15]. If then our Lord did thus, will you, O deacons, hesitate to do the like for them that are sick and infirm, you who are workmen of the truth, and bear the likeness of Christ?⁴¹

Where the Establishment Hypothesis breaks new ground, and where it builds upon Keating's and Kasper's intuitive observations, is that it describes precisely how this happens through a series of successive gifts of self (acts of love—Figure 1). Critical to this is the fundamental assumption that we simply cannot give what we do not first possess. In other words, if the Apostles had not received the fullness of what we now call Holy Orders from Christ, they could not have passed it on to the bishops. Likewise, if the bishops had not received Holy Orders from the Apostles, they could not have passed it on to priests and deacons. Similarly, if priests and deacons had not received their orders from the bishops, they could not have passed them on to the laity in the form of priestly and diaconal ministry. This progression is grounded in the Latin maxim “*nemo dat quod non habet*,” literally meaning, “no one gives what they do not have.” Another important insight from this is that the diaconate has its origins not from the choosing of the seven in Acts 6:1–6, but like the priesthood, from the Last Supper.

(Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2021), 29 (emphasis mine).

⁴¹ *Didascalia Apostolorum: That Is Teaching of the Twelve Holy Apostles and Disciples of Our Savior*, trans. R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 62.

This would mean that, through the *mandatum*, the diaconate was directly instituted by Christ at the same pivotal event in salvation history.⁴² Such a connection now inextricably links the origins of the priesthood with the origins of the diaconate.

In Search of a Typology

The possibility of a direct institution by Christ raises a fascinating question. If the *mandatum* marks the origins of the diaconate, then was it, like the Eucharist and the institution of the priesthood, prefigured in the Old Testament?⁴³ Put another way, is there a typological basis for the *mandatum*? Finding a type in the Old Testament, grounding it in the Semitic tradition,⁴⁴ would go a long way in substantiating the claim of a direct institution of the diaconate.

While it is certainly true that God has placed anticipations of Christ in the events and people of the Old Testament, it does not follow that every event and person in the New Testament is prefigured in the Old. Nonetheless, the point is well taken with regard to the *mandatum*, and given the centrality of the Paschal mystery to Holy Orders, it is reasonable to expect some prefigurement. Of this, however, the Tradition is silent. This silence may be because such a typological connection does not exist, or perhaps it is because it has yet to be found.

To identify whether there may be an undiscovered typology of the *mandatum*, we need to identify first what the *mandatum* signifies and whether it was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. In his consideration of the foot washing, Jan Gabriël Van der Watt observes:

What was important was not necessarily the action in itself, but rather the character of the action; in other words, the intent and attitude the action illustrates. This might be the reason why there is no known evidence that the practice of foot-washing was continued in the early Church in the sense of the Johannine example. However the

⁴² The apparent discrepancy between the call of the seven and Last Supper will be addressed later. A fuller explanation can be found in Cerrato, *In the Person of Christ the Servant*, 162–77.

⁴³ See Lawrence Feingold, “Typology of Exodus and Passover,” Spring 2013, <https://www.hebrewcatholic.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/11.09TypologyofExodusandPassover.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Foot washing in the Old Testament was practiced for three reasons: cultic ritual of purification, hospitality, and hygiene.

requirement of intense love, serving one another, even in humbling tasks, remained part and parcel of Christianity.⁴⁵

If Van der Watt is correct that the intent and attitude of the *mandatum* is intense love, and if we wish to discover a possible typological connection in the Old Testament, we will need to return to the narrative to appreciate the context of that love. This will enable us to fine-tune our search and subsequent examination of any possible type.

The narrative begins by placing the foot washing within the Last Supper. John says: “Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end” (13:1). This reference to loving his disciples “to the end” contextualizes what follows, providing insight into Jesus’s motivation, the very reason for this act.⁴⁶

The hour (*hōra*) refers to the climactic event of Jesus’s Passion, death, and Resurrection, this is to say the manner in which he will express this love. This direct connection to the Paschal mystery means that the intense love expressed in the *mandatum* is of the deepest kind. Of this Jesus says: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Anticipating his Passion through a symbolic expression, Jesus dons the garb of a servant and performs a servant’s task—an act unrivalled in antiquity.⁴⁷ Here, his intense love is expressed in service, in a redemptive gift-of-self that wills the good of another for the sake of the other, prefiguring and finding its fulfillment in the Cross and Resurrection.⁴⁸ This is precisely what Jesus meant when he said: “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28). If the intent and attitude of the *mandatum* is, as Van der Watt observes, intense love, and if that love is expressed in the sacrifice of a servant, then it follows that a possible Old Testament typology will be found in a suffering servant.

In Isaiah 52 and 53, the author describes an enigmatic figure that the Church Fathers would later called the “Suffering Servant.” The parallels between this servant who suffers and Jesus are quite striking. Because of this, the early Church wasted little time in making a typological connection between the two. It was not so much that the typology rested on two servants who suffered, but that the suffering they endured was redemptive for

⁴⁵ Jan Gabriël Van der Watt, “The Meaning of Jesus Washing the Feet of His Disciples (John 13),” *Neotestamentica* 51, no. 1 (2017): 19.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *Footwashing*, 53.

⁴⁷ Thomas, *Footwashing*, 114.

⁴⁸ Thomas, *Footwashing*, 53–54.

others. As Isaiah points out, “he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; . . . by his stripes we were healed.” (Isa 53:5). It is noteworthy that the first recorded biblical figure to recognize Jesus as the Suffering Servant was Philip, one of the first deacons, in his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:29–35). This connection is also found in Peter’s first epistle (1Pet 2:22–25). Likewise, the Church Fathers were quick to pick up on this typology. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr refers to this text thirty-one times.⁴⁹ Indeed, even a superficial survey of patristic literature demonstrates a strong typological connection between the Suffering Servant and Christ.⁵⁰ Today, the Church summarizes this identification when she teaches:

By his loving obedience to the Father, “unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8), Jesus fulfills the atoning mission (cf. Is 53:10) of the suffering Servant, who will “make many righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities” (Is 53:11; cf. Rom 5:19). (CCC §623)

The typological connection between the Suffering Servant and Jesus, already well established in the Tradition, may seem distinct from a possible typological connection between the Suffering Servant and the *mandatum*. This typology, at first glance, may seem tenuous until we consider the irreducible, that is, until we shift our focus from the act to the agent, from the foot washing to the Foot Washer, Jesus Christ. This irreducibility, grounded in personalist thought, is key to unlocking this mystery further. In both examples, we have not two typologies, but one single typology revealed at two different levels. This is to say that the *mandatum*, precisely because it is inextricably linked to the Paschal mystery, reveals more fully who the Suffering Servant is and why he suffers. It extends an already existing typology rather than revealing a second typology. Here, the same Suffering Servant referred to prophetically in Isaiah, is the one who washed his Apostles’ feet. Commenting on foot washing in the Semitic imagination, John Christopher Thomas observes:

Footwashing is generally the responsibility of servants. While a host/hostess offers hospitable acts, it is [*sic*] ordinarily carried out by his/her slaves, even though the guests may sometimes wash his/her own

⁴⁹ St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ed M. Slusser (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 227.

⁵⁰ For a survey of the Fathers, see *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 228–29.

feet. There is so much identification with servants footwashing that the footbasin comes to function figuratively as a sign of servitude. Those who receive footwashing are always the social superiors of those who render the service.⁵¹

In many respects, a typology of Isaiah's Suffering Servant and the *mandatum* is not new, but coexists with the typology of the Suffering Servant and Jesus as part of the same reality. This is precisely because Jesus's Passion, death, and Resurrection are inextricably tied to the Last Supper and the Last Supper is inextricably tied to the *mandatum*. To deny this is to deny the typological relationship between the Eucharist and the Suffering Servant, as both this and the relationship between the *mandatum* and the Suffering Servant are grounded in the same event, both of which share a similar reference to being a servant.⁵² Understood this way, the *mandatum* has always had a typological connection; it just had not been fully explored. As a result of this further exploration, the claim of the diaconate being directly instituted by Christ through the *mandatum* gains credibility. It does so by virtue of its prefigurement in the Old Testament, sharing the ancient typological connection between the Suffering Servant and Jesus.

Seven Steps

Returning to the Establishment Hypothesis, to better appreciate the progression of self-donation described above, it will be broken down into seven distinct but related steps (Figure 2). In considering these steps, it is important to note the irreducible in terms of how Christ gives himself totally as *Sacerdos* and *Diakonos*, and how each step is differentiated from the others by distinct and successive gifts of self. Taken together, these form an organic unity within the sacrament, a kind of integral continuity that moves humanity from the Paschal mystery to its final end.

Recall earlier how John Paul taught that "the giving and the accepting of the gift interpenetrate, so that the giving of oneself becomes accepting, and the acceptance is transformed into giving."⁵³ Applied to the successive gifts of self, Christ's self-donation in the Paschal mystery interpenetrates the Apostles so that the giving of himself becomes the acceptance of the Father's will, and this acceptance is subsequently transformed into giving. Observe that it is the forward giving of the gift that constitutes a fuller acceptance of

⁵¹ Thomas, *Footwashing*, 34.

⁵² Cf. Luke 22:27 and John 13:15.

⁵³ Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 71.

the gift already received. In this respect, the Apostles more fully accept the gift from Christ when they give it to the bishops. This is equally true of the other orders and the laity. In each case, the giving and the receiving, which give rise to an interpenetration, move the participants from an I–Thou relationship to a We, thereby constituting a *communio personarum* throughout the continuum. Critical to a correct understanding of this progression is that what is given is not something, but rather someone. This is a key insight of personalism, moving ministry from a functional approach to an interpersonal and incarnational reality.

Within the progressive gift-of-self, it is important to observe that God is the Efficient Cause. The subsequent gifts of selves represent *material* causes. This is to say that the apostolic gift-of-self to the bishops is not so much the Apostles gift, as if it is sourced in them alone. Rather, this gift originates with Christ and, through the grace of participation, flows through the hands of the Apostles to the bishops. In a similar fashion, the subsequent gifts represent a passing-on of a gift ultimately sourced in the divine and received in a manner proper to the receiver. So, for example, the laity do not receive this gift so much from priests and deacons, as if they are the source, but from Christ through the hands of the priest and deacon. In this respect, Christ's gift is not diminished at each level, but distributed in a manner proper to the receiver, enabling the receiver to receive the fullness of that gift and, as a result, become an agent of that gift to others. In what follows, each step of the hypothesis will be discussed in relation to Figure 2.

- **Step 1:** Through his gift-of-self on the Cross, Jesus reconciles humanity to the Father. This reconciliation, expressed in the Paschal mystery, is encapsulated in the Last Supper, which is also a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to come.
- **Step 2:** In the Last Supper, Jesus issues two sets of commands to his Apostles, one at the Eucharist, and the other at the *mandatum*.
- **Step 3:** These commands, in light of the Paschal mystery, institute both the priesthood through the Eucharist and the diaconate through the *mandatum*. This constitutes Christ's gift-of-self to the Apostles.
- **Step 4:** The Apostles, having received this gift-of-self from Christ in both the priesthood and diaconate, now gift themselves to their successors, the bishops. This constitutes the apostolic gift-of-self to the episcopacy.

The Establishment Hypothesis

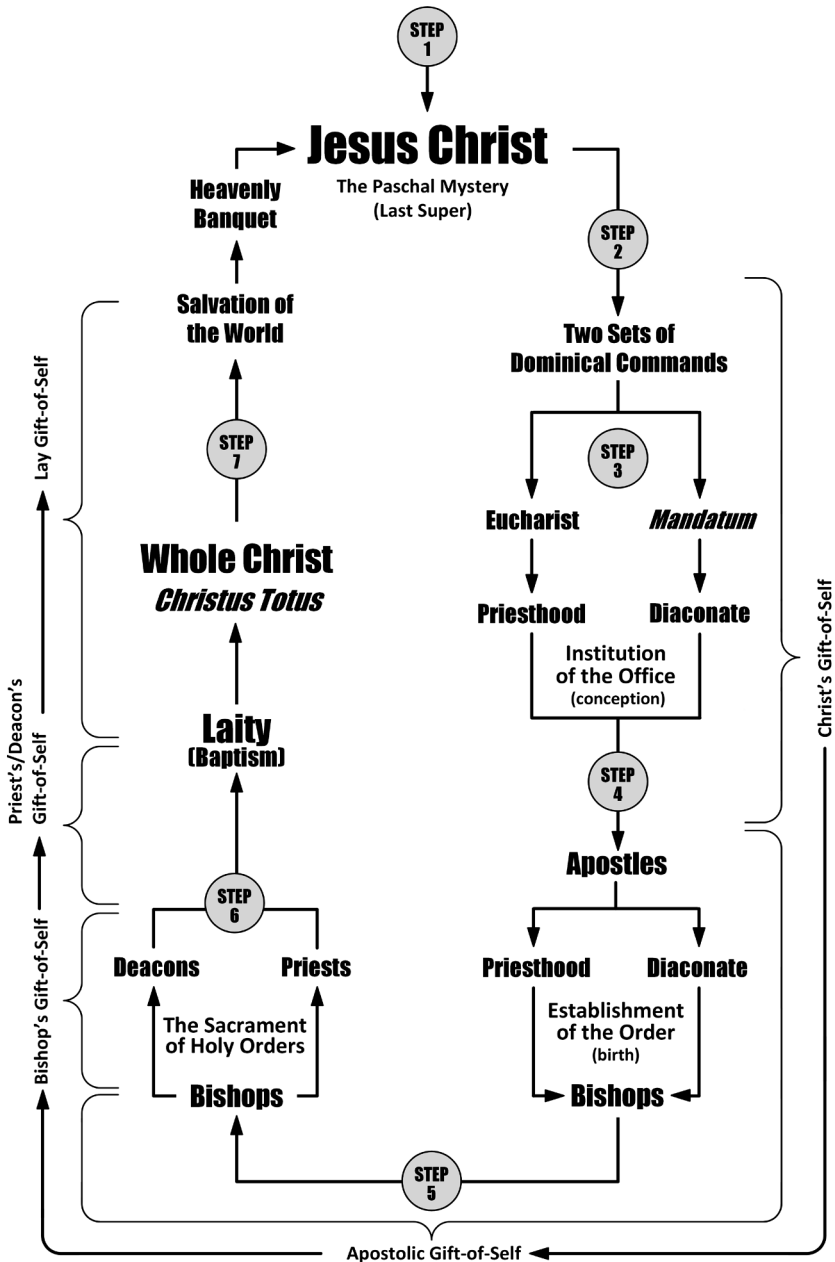


Figure 2

- **Step 5:** The bishops, having received a full share of Christ as both *sacerdos* and *diakonos* through the Apostles, now pass this gift-of-self on to priests and deacons in a way proper to their order; priests being configured to Christ the Priest, and deacons being configured to Christ the Servant.⁵⁴ This constitutes the episcopal gift-of-self to priests and deacons.
- **Step 6:** Priests and deacons, having received a specific share of *sacerdos* and *diakonos*, each in a manner proper to their order, now pass this gift-of-self on to the laity in a manner proper to the lay state through evangelization, the dispensation of the sacraments, and acts of charity. This constitutes the priests and deacon gift-of-self to the laity.
- **Step 7:** Finally, the laity, having received this gift of *sacerdos* and *diakonos* in a manner proper to their vocation through baptism,⁵⁵ now pass it on to the world. This constitutes the lay gift-of-self to society.

The combined effect of this self-giving from Christ to the world (steps 1–7) manifests the *Christus totus*. The use of this phrase may seem an overstatement. However, it is employed here in a very limited and very specific sense. First, it does not imply that the process of self-giving expressed in the Establishment Hypothesis reveals absolutely everything about Christ. This is obviously not true. Rather, it simply means that the fullness of God's revelation in Christ is made known through the Apostles and their successors under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This revelation is articulated and transmitted by the entire Church for the salvation of the world.⁵⁶ Such an articulation also comprises everything that flows from it, including the Scriptures and the Tradition, along with the Church's doctrinal, moral, sacramental and liturgical life. Taken together and interpreted by the magisterium, these sources provide the believer with all that is necessary for redemption in Christ. It is only in this limited and salvific sense that we can rightly speak of the *Christus totus* as applied to the Establishment Hypothesis.

⁵⁴ Insofar as the Church requires that every priest be first ordained a deacon, the priest possesses both ontological configurations. Consequently, he is both *diakonos* and *sacerdos*. Though his primary identity is priest, at his core, he is still deacon.

⁵⁵ CCC §1547 speaks of a lay participation in the one priesthood of Christ. In a similar way, it can be argued that there is also a lay participation in the one diaconate of Christ as all of the baptized are called to serve (Matt 20:25–28).

⁵⁶ This progression, as a soteriological unfolding, reveals the ordinary way in which salvation is offered. It does not preclude extraordinary ways expressed in the natural law (See LG §14).

Reconciling with the Tradition

Much of the Establishment Hypothesis can easily be reconciled within the broader tradition of Holy Orders with one exception, the institution of the seven found in Acts 6:1–6. Traditionally, this is held to be the origin of the diaconate, which occurs chronologically after the Paschal mystery.⁵⁷ One way to address this apparent conflict is through the distinction between *officium* and *ordo*. Where an office is a position in a larger organization that carries with it a specific function, an order is an office shared by two or more forming a recognized body. In the sequence of causality, an office always precedes an order. Before a man can enter the order of bishops, there must first be an episcopal office. Similarly, before a man can enter the order of presbyters, there must first be a presbyteral office. Likewise, before someone can enter the order of deacons, there must first be a diaconal office. While the *mandatum* established the office of deacon (step 3 in Figure 2), the selection of the seven and the laying on of hands represent the institution of the diaconal order (step 4 in Figure 2). Where the office represents a kind of conception, the order represents a kind of birth. They are not two separate things, but rather two stages of the same thing.

There is some implicit evidence for this office–order sequence in the Scriptures. We know, for example, that the office of priest was established at the Last Supper. However, the presbyteral order (what would later be called the “priesthood”)⁵⁸ was instituted sometime after, as witnessed by Luke (Acts

⁵⁷ Although there are multiple attestations of Acts 6 as the origins of the diaconate throughout the Tradition, there are Scripture scholars today that have called this connection into question. I have dealt extensively with this issue in my first book on the diaconate (*In the Person of Christ the Servant*, 177–89). There, I conclude that when working from a purely biblical perspective, using only the methods of historical criticism, these scholars are correct but incomplete. To argue theologically apart from an ecclesiological context is to omit the mind of the Church, neglecting the very ecclesiological matrix from which the Scriptures arise. It is to reduce scriptural interpretation to the literary sense, while at the same time ignoring the spiritual senses so very vital for a complete hermeneutic. Consequently, the seven in Acts are the diaconate in embryonic form. They are not two separate things, but the same thing at two different points of development. For those who accept Acts 6 as the call of those who would later be identified as deacons, what follows reconciles this passage with the hypothesis. For those who do not, this discussion is irrelevant. Regardless of where one stands on the question of Acts 6 and the origins of the diaconate, the Establishment Hypothesis does not rise or fall on this point.

⁵⁸ As in the case with the connection between Acts 6 and the origins of the diaconate, certain Scripture scholars using only higher criticism reject the biblical connection between the early presbyterate and the priesthood. Assumed here, as a result of a broader hermeneutical approach described in the previous footnote, and based on the

15:6, 23) and Peter (1 Pet 5:1). Likewise, we can say that the episcopal office (the fullness of orders) was also established at the Last Supper. However, the episcopal order was instituted sometime after, as witnessed by Timothy (1Tim 3:1–7).⁵⁹ If this is true of the presbyterate and episcopate, then it is reasonable to conclude that it is also true of the diaconate. Thus, the call of the seven in Acts 6 presents us with an instance of discernment on the part of the Church as to how a ministry already instituted by Christ at the Last Supper was to be carried out in the concrete circumstances of the nascent Christian community.

Conclusion

This essay has been an attempt to offer a more integrated approach to Holy Orders through the “Establishment Hypothesis.” In this pursuit, we began by exploring the personalist thought of Pope St. John Paul II through an examination of the irreducible and love as a gift-of-self revealed most fully in the Paschal mystery. This provided the hermeneutic lens by which we reexamined the scriptural basis of the sacrament. We then offered a consideration of the hypothesis proper, describing in personalist terms the origins of Holy Orders as a whole, demonstrating the Christological unity of all three degrees. In what follows, we will conclude by exploring some of the key contributions of the Establishment Hypothesis as it relates to a more integrated understanding of Holy Orders.

Some Key Contributions

Through the mystery of the human person, the Establishment Hypothesis lays the foundation for a more integrated theology of orders which, reaching beyond its own limitations, moves toward a deeper appreciation of divine love as it relates to our final end. It attempts to grapple with a question not explicit in the Scriptures or Tradition and not addressed by the theological community in any depth. In this respect, it does not pretend to offer a definitive explanation, but instead a reasonable possibility of what might be. In

ecclesiological Tradition, the presbyterate is the priesthood in embryonic form. They are not two separate things, but the same thing at two different points of development. Once again, regardless of where one stands on the connection between the presbyterate and the priesthood, the Establishment Hypothesis does not rise or fall on this point.

⁵⁹ It could be argued that the episcopal order was instituted at the Great Commissioning (Matt 28: 16–20), as that event occurred within the Paschal mystery just before the ascension. This would allow for a direct dominical institution and explicitly link the episcopacy to the mission of the Church.

the absence of formal teaching by the magisterium, this exercise falls well within the scope of the theological community. That said, while not fully developed, the hypothesis does offer several key theological contributions that, taken together, constitute a more complete theology of orders. Briefly, these include:

Holy Orders as an Interpersonal Reality. By rereading the Paschal mystery in light of John Paul's philosophical personalism, we were able to advance our understanding of Holy Orders through an examination of the subjective dimension of the sacrament. This "turn to the subject," expressed in a hermeneutic of gift, allows a shift from the objective categories used in the traditional teaching on orders to the subjective category of lived experience, without in any way compromising the categories already established. Such an approach enabled us to supplement rather than supplant the tradition on orders, thereby enriching what we already know by what we just learned.

By re-envisioning Holy Orders as an act of love expressed in a gift-of-self, an objective ecclesial reality now becomes, at the very same time, a subjective interpersonal reality. Far from being separated, the objective and subjective interpenetrate and infuse one another such that they become two aspects of a single reality. Consequently, Holy Orders is not merely something done to the ordinand by the laying on of hands and the prayer of ordination, but also a deeply personal and spiritual encounter borne out of a divine love, calling him to intimate communion with a God who defeated death for him. This love, this divine gift-of-self, personified in the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ, when personally appropriated by the one ordained in an ongoing way, now becomes the source of his life and ministry. As a result, these encounters radically inspire and empower him to gift himself through those who bear God's image.

Holy Orders as Profoundly Incarnational. Where God, who is Love, is incarnate in Christ, humanity follows this example by also incarnating this redemptive love through subsequent gifts of self in Holy Orders.⁶⁰ Here, the Establishment Hypothesis emphasizes and describes how this love Incarnate is received and successively given such that each in their own way act either *in persona Christi Capitis* (priests) or *in persona Christi Servi* (deacons). Indeed, the laity play their own essential role in this incarnational dimension as, in the exercise of their vocation, they act as *alter Christus*. Understood this way, what emerges from the Paschal mystery is an incarnational progression

⁶⁰ This is true of marriage as well. Just as marriage expressed the nuptial meaning of the body in a personal way, Holy Orders does so in an ecclesial way.

in which each participant is linked together through acts of love sourced in divine love. In doing so, they participate and contribute, in unique and unrepeatable ways, to the redemption of humanity. As a result, Christ is manifested in personal and tangible ways across the entire spectrum of humanity. This incarnational dimension of Holy Orders means that it is not simply I who gift myself, but with me, the Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20).

Soteriological Emphasis of Holy Orders. Following the model of *exitus–reditus*, the hypothesis proceeds from Christ and returns to him. It takes up and reflects the broader notion of emanation and return as these are applied specifically to the order of redemption. This Neoplatonic scheme, which forms the very organizing principle of the *Summa theologiae*, considers the divine economy of salvation, from the beginning of creation to the end of the world, according to a strict logical sequence. While Aquinas treats this from creation, the Establishment Hypothesis assumes this, picking it up at the Paschal mystery. As a result, it emphasizes that Holy Orders, and the redemption it proclaims, finds its origins and end in Christ, following a soteriological path.

Situating the Origins of the Diaconate within the Paschal Mystery. As we have already seen, grounding the origins of the diaconate in the Paschal mystery is not unique to the Establishment Hypothesis. What is unique, and what the hypothesis contributes, is how this takes place through Christ's irreducible gift-of-self. Beyond this, through the distinction of *officium* and *ordo*, the hypothesis reconciles the Paschal mystery with the call of the seven to describe two stages of the same reality. All of this allows for the origins of the diaconate to be founded in the Paschal mystery without diminishing the Tradition as expressed in Act 6:1–6. Consequently, the diaconate is not simply viewed as a stop-gap measure to facilitate apostolic preaching, but as an integral part of the mystery of salvation. By incarnating Christ the Servant, the diaconate contributes something of Christ that the other two orders on their own do not, forming a complementary expression of divine love.

Holy Orders as a Participation in Divine Love: The Establishment Hypothesis contextualizes the mystery of salvation and the mission of the Church in a personal love characterized by self-donation. Here, participation in this mission requires a reception of a divine love whose ultimate acceptance is realized when it is given away (John 13:34). Essential to the hypothesis is the observation that this giving is not the giving of something, but instead the giving of someone in some act of service, whether priestly

or diaconal, whether through ordained ministry or through the laity. This dynamic process of freely receiving and freely giving results in a personal transformation, a divinization of sorts. It also illustrates how sanctifying grace is transmitted and received, revealing a distinctively personal dimension moving from the mystical to the practical without losing the mystical. This is perhaps the greatest contribution of the Establishment Hypothesis, and one that requires further investigation.

Grounding the Unity of the Sacrament in Its Origins: While we have made distinctions concerning the three grades within Holy Orders, it is nonetheless a single sacrament. This is to say that it not only enjoys a unity distinct and apart from the other six sacraments, but it is also harmonious within itself, possessing the quality of perfection. Though the Church's understanding developed over time, the Tradition has long maintained this unity as having some level of participation in Christ's own priesthood.⁶¹ The Establishment Hypothesis affirms this and demonstrates how this unity is achieved through a sacrificial and redemptive gift-of-self that is shared and perpetuated by all of the faithful, each according to its state and vocation. Indeed, because of its personalist approach, the hypothesis demonstrates that this participation is not simply a sharing in the Paschal mystery in some abstract sense, but what this mystery points to and makes present, Christ himself. Thus, the theological basis of the unity of Holy Orders is Jesus Christ, who is both Priest and Deacon *par excellence*, and to whom the ordinand is ontologically configured on the day of his ordination.

Concluding Thought

Earlier, we drew upon the image of Aidan Nichols's tryptic to illustrate Holy Orders with the three panels representing the three degrees. Our attempt in this study is to open wider the side panels by rethinking how we can speak of these three degrees with respect to their diversity within the one sacrament. Using personalist language, I believe we have begun the process, or at least begun a new conversation. If Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission of the Church is transmitted, then it follows that, as we develop a more advanced understanding of this sacrament, we will likewise develop a more profound sense of our mission, a mission that invites us to gift ourselves to others in imitation of Christ.

N.V.

⁶¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *In IV sent.*, d. 24, q. 2, a. 1, ad 2; Council of Trent, sess. 23, can. 3, CCC §§1113, 1536.