

THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION *SACRAMENTUM ORDINIS*

INTRODUCTION

The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, issued November 30, 1947, is justly regarded as a most important pronouncement in that it definitely settles problems regarding the validity of Holy Orders which have been discussed for centuries.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: (1) *Liturgical*. For the first nine centuries the entire sacramental rite in the conferring of the higher orders was the imposition of hands with an appropriate accompanying prayer. In the Western Church, beginning with the tenth century, this ceremony was augmented by the giving of instruments. In the Oriental churches the imposition of hands has ever remained the entire matter of this sacrament.

(2) *Theological*: Since the thirteenth century there has been much controversy as to the essential requirements for the valid conferring of the various orders. This was particularly true of priestly ordination, regarding which many views have been proposed in connection with the problems: (a) Which ceremonies give the power to consecrate? (b) Is the power to absolve given with the power to consecrate or separately toward the end of the ordination rite? These controversies are linked up with the more general discussion as to whether the specific matter and form of all the sacraments were determined by Christ or (in case of some sacraments) left to the determination of the Church, with only a generic determination by Our Lord.

II. CONTENT OF THE CONSTITUTION. Six paragraphs: (1) General principles of sacramental theology; (2) Historical background of rite of Holy Orders; (3) General principles regarding Holy Orders; (4) Authoritative papal pronouncement as to requirements, at least in future, for valid conferring of diaconate, presbyterate and episcopate; (5) More detailed exposition of these requirements; (6) Prescription that all ceremonies be carefully performed; declaration that physical contact of hand or hands not necessary for validity.

III. PRACTICAL POINTS CONNECTED WITH THE DECREE: (1) We know now with certainty that Holy Orders are validly conferred if in the priestly ordination there is no wine in the chalice, if the final imposition is omitted, if in the ordination to the diaconate the book of Gospels is not given, etc. Whether the Church would require these ceremonies to be supplied subsequently for the sake of liturgical integrity can be found out only from future decisions. (2) The juridical and disciplinary prescriptions of this Apostolic Constitution became effective on April 28, 1948.

IV. SPECULATIVE POINTS: (1) The controversy as to how Our Lord determined the matter and form of the sacrament of Holy Orders is still unsettled. The Pope uses terms in this Constitution which clearly show that he visualizes both views as probable. (2) Whether a future Pope could decree that the giving of the instruments also in the future will be necessary—or even that it will constitute the entire essence—is a question that could be controverted. (3) Whether the episcopate is a distinct sacramental order, giving a new character is a question that is not settled by the constitution; (4) Whether the minor orders and the subdiaconate are to be regarded as participations of the sacrament of Holy Orders, or merely ecclesiastical ceremonies remains a matter of controversy. Similarly, the Constitution does not settle disputed points regarding the essential factors of the ordinations to these orders.

CONCLUSION

The Apostolic Constitution we are discussing makes it easier for the theologian to settle practical problems about the rite of Holy Orders. But there still remain many speculative problems in sacramental theology which theologians can profitably discuss.

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Digest of Discussion

In the discussion following the reading of this paper, three questions were brought up:

(1). Is this decree doctrinal or disciplinary? In other words, does it represent an act of teaching or of ruling?

It was agreed that, while the decree is certainly doctrinal, in the sense that it declares authoritatively what will constitute the essential elements of the sacrament of Holy Orders in future, it is uncertain whether or not it is also an exercise of the power of ruling, determining the specific factors of a sacramental rite, which Christ determined only generically. As is evident, this question depends on the mooted point about the manner in which Our Lord determined the matter and form of Holy Orders, whether generically or specifically. The Pope left this question undecided by using the expression: "Declaramus, et quatenus opus sit, decernimus et disponimus."

(2). Is this an infallible pronouncement? It was the opinion of those present that in promulgating this important constitution, Pope Pius XII made use of his infallible teaching authority. In the first place, this is indicated by the words: "divino lumine invocato, suprema Nostra Apostolica Auctoritate et certa scientia declaramus" Secondly, this constitution lays down a ruling of vital importance for the universal Church, since the validity of priestly ordinations could be impaired if it contained error. Now, it is a certain theological doctrine that the teaching authority of the Church is infallible in matters of general discipline in the sense that the Holy Spirit will preserve the magisterium from any legislation that would be harmful to the faith or to the spiritual welfare of the universal Church.

(3). What is the significance of the "moral contact" which the Pope declares to be sufficient in the matter of the imposition of hands? Some believed that this indicates a laying of hands on an individual, but in such wise that contact between the head and the hands is not quite established. Others inclined to the opinion that even a superimposing of hands over a group, such as takes place in Confirmation while the bishop recites the prayer *Omnipotens sempiternae Deus* would suffice for the validity (though not for the lawfulness) of ordination.