

Years ago I was speaking with a friend of mine who was trying to defend his decision to leave the Catholic Church and practice another religion. As he kept getting his objections logically answered he finally asked; "How can you have apostolic succession? Not all of those Popes, Bishops and Priests have Italian last names! Where I replied, "Neither did Peter, he was a Jew."

So then, how can we have legitimate succession without the bond of blood or legal adoption? Where do the signs and symbols we use gain their legitimacy? And keep in mind as we discuss this that contracts and legal documents are the modern signs and symbols we have developed to replace the signs and symbols of antiquity that in many ways were and still are more elegant and binding than the legal forms we use today.

On this night, through the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus at the Last Supper the Catholic Priesthood was born. Why the qualifier 'Catholic'? Because the Jews also have a priesthood, the Levitical Priesthood passed down by blood and adoption from when Moses, at God's command, anointed Aaron and his sons to be priests to offer sacrifice for the people of Israel. Saul, David and all of the other the Kings of Israel were also anointed to show that the legitimate exercise of their power and authority came from God.

The laying of hands as a symbol of blessing, the calling down of the Holy Spirit can be found in the Bible before the time of Moses when Israel laid hands on Ephraim and Manasseh, to bless them and welcome them into his family as his sons. In the New Testament the first time we read of someone other than Jesus laying hands on someone to invoke the blessing of the Holy Spirit is the institution of the Diaconate in the Acts of the Apostles.

If we accept the cultural symbols used during the time of Our Lord, and we should, then anointing and imposition of hands are symbols that are used for the legitimate transmission of authority and grace.

In the Sacrament of Holy Orders, Ordination confers a gift of the Holy Spirit that permits the exercise of sacred power, which can only come from Christ himself through his Church. The laying of hands by the Bishop with the prayer of consecration are the visible signs of ordination. In this three-fold sacrament, the Diaconate was instituted by the Apostles and the

Episcopacy and Priesthood was instituted directly by Jesus Christ. When priests and bishops are ordained, they are also anointed with Sacred Chrism.

When an ordination takes place, the Bishop who has received his legitimate authority from Jesus Christ through his Church in an unbroken line of succession from the Apostles, uses the very same signs and symbols that were used when he and his predecessors were ordained, all the way back to the time of Apostles when he prays to God for the appropriate grace and sacred power to be granted to the man he is ordaining.

We know that Ordination within the Catholic Church is legitimate and carries sacred power because of the unbroken succession of bishops from the Apostles, and Popes from St. Peter. In other words, our church's family tree is well documented and solid.

There is only one Priest, Jesus Christ and one sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Cross. The Priest in the parish, in our case Fr. Gaul, due to his formation in the person of Christ and the grace of his ordination as a Priest shares in the Priesthood of Christ.

So why does Jesus listen and respond to the priest when says the prayers of consecration during the Mass? Why does the priest say, "this is my body" instead of 'this is the body of Christ' during the Eucharistic Prayer? Because in that action, the Priest, in our case Fr. Gaul and Jesus Christ are one and Jesus must listen to and be true to himself.

Why can you receive absolution from your sins during Reconciliation? Because during that Sacrament, as with all the other Sacraments administered by the priest, the Priest and Christ are one. You can confess to anyone, if you don't believe it, log on to social media and read for about 5 minutes. But if you want absolution for your sins, you must confess them to a Priest, receive absolution from him and complete your penance.

Why then is the Priesthood so important to us as Catholics? The Sacraments are central to our faith. They are our heritage, gifts from God designed by our maker, the one who knows us better than we know ourselves specifically to help us grow closer to Jesus Christ so we can spend eternity with him in heaven.

Without Priests and Bishops, all we have is Baptism. Every other Sacrament is dependent in some form or fashion on the Priest or Bishop. Our Catholic identity is dependent upon the Priests and Bishops. The existence of the Church is dependent upon the Priest and Bishops. Anyone who claims that there aren't any miracles in today's world has never been at the celebration of a Sacrament, particularly the celebration of the Mass and the Eucharist. Our Priests and bishops are purveyors of miracles.

When we are asked to pray for vocations to the Priesthood and consecrated life, we are being asked to pray for the continuing health and growth of the Church.

When a person feels the call of Jesus to enter into the Priesthood or consecrated life it is a frightening experience. It is so counter-cultural that we tend to do our best to ignore the call and look anywhere but to God who is calling us out of his love for us and asking us to respond to his love with love of our own.

Anyone who is married knows that love requires courage; love requires action; love demands a response. Let us pray on this night and every night for our Priests and Bishops and for Mary to open our hearts to recognize and appreciate the miracles we are privileged to participate in throughout our lives. Let us also pray for generous hearts to respond to the love of God and to be willing to devote their lives to his service by serving us as Priests and consecrated religious.