

CHAPTER III

THE EPISCOPATE AS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF THE SACRAMENT OF ORDERS

THE PRIESTHOOD

11. The Episcopate as a Sacrament

Jesus, Apostle and High Priest of our confession (see Hb 3:1), the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (1 Pet 2:25), so established the power of authoritatively teaching and governing in the Church that by its very nature it is closely connected with the power to sanctify that is conferred in the Sacrament of Orders.¹ There is no doubt, therefore, that the Episcopate belongs to the Sacrament of Orders; it is the priesthood at its supreme level, that which in the words of the holy Fathers and the ritual custom of the Church is called the high priesthood, the summit of the sacred ministry.² Indeed, since it is clear from Tradition, known especially from the liturgical rites³ and from the practice of both the Eastern and Western Church,⁴ that by the imposition of hands and the words of episcopal consecration, the grace of the Holy Spirit is conferred, no one should doubt that the Episcopate is truly and properly the supreme level of the Sacrament of Orders.⁵ A consecrated Bishop, moreover, is so marked by the sacramental character of orders that he can never again become a simple priest or layman nor lose the power validly to confer the sacrament of confirmation and to ordain the ministers of the Church. Therefore, the Holy Synod declares that Bishops, even solely in virtue of the sacrament received, are superior to presbyters in the hierarchy of Orders.

12. Presbyters

Presbyters, who are ordained by Bishops as a support to their order and work and upon whom, as it were, the abundance of their paternal plenitude is poured out,⁶ although they do not possess the apex of the Pontificate, nevertheless, by the sacrament they receive are true priests.⁷ In offering the sacrifice of the Mass and in administering the sacraments, they too act in the person of Christ. But they do not obtain any jurisdiction or care of souls except through direct or indirect bestowal by the Roman Pontiff or by the competent Bishop, by whom they are received as co-operators and whom they represent in shepherding the flock.

NOTES

¹ See Leo XIII, Enc. *Satis cognitum* (ASS, 28 [1895-96] 723); Pius XII, Address to the Second World Congress on the Lay Apostolate (AAS, 49 [1957], p. 924).

² Leo XIII, Epistle *Apostolicae Curae* (ASS, 29 [1896-97], p. 200).

³ In all the liturgical documents from the very first centuries of the Church, episcopal consecration is described in such a way that its sacramental character is clear since through it some grace of the Holy Spirit is conferred.

⁴ It is certain that episcopal consecration was often conferred on a man who was not a priest; see Gregory of Nyssa, *Oration* 18, 33 (PG 35, 1027-30); John Chrysostom, *De Beato Philogonio, Hom.*, 6, 2 (PG 48, 751); Augustine, *Epist.* 209 (PL 33, 953f); *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. Duchesne, I, 209; *Ordines Romani*: see M. Andrieu, *Les Ordines Romani du Haut Moyen-Age*, III (Louvain, 1951), p. 572f, p. 608 and 610.

⁵ This is also clear from the way the Roman Pontiffs speak; see Leo XIII, *Apostolicae Curae*, l.c., pp. 199-200; Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Sacramentum Ordinis* (AAS, 40 [1948], pp. 5-7); John XXIII, Address, May 8, 1960 (AAS, 52 [1960], p. 466): episcopal consecration confers both the episcopal character and grace.

⁶ *Pontificale Romanum*, On the Ordination of a Presbyter. The image, taken from Aaron and his sons, is also found in many liturgical texts and in the Fathers. The words, "as a support," are found in the *Pontificale Romanum*, On the Ordination of a Presbyter. The image is taken from the seventy men who were appointed to assist Moses, and it is found in all the liturgical documents, and already in Hyppolytus of Rome's *Traditio Apostolica*.

⁷ Innocent I, *Letter to Decentius* (PL 20, 554f; see Mansi 3, 1029; Dz 98).