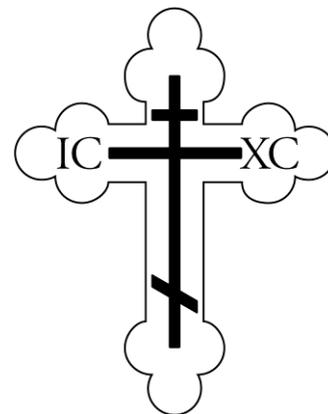


## **FOUR "ORDERS" IN CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

*An ancient visitor to modern Christendom would be shocked to find that factions have pulled away from Apostolic Christianity not just over doctrinal matters but even over the issue of how the Church is governed. Thus, in quite a recent development, some religious bodies call themselves congregational (ruled by the people), others are Presbyterian (ruled by the elders), still others are Episcopal (ruled by the bishops).*



*The New Testament teaches that all four orders which form the government of the Church-laity, deacons, presbyters, and bishops-are necessary to the proper functioning of the body of Christ. All four are clearly visible in Paul's first letter to Timothy.*

*(1) The laity are called saints (ἀγιοι; Rom. 1:7; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Tim. 5:10), the faithful (Eph. 1:1), and brethren (Col. 1:2). The laity (Gr. λαος or laos) are all the people of God, the priesthood (1 Pet. 2:4-10). Technically laity includes clergy, though in our day the word usually refers to those in the Church who are not ordained. It is from among the laity that the other three orders emerge.*

*(2) The deacons, διάκονοι, literally servants, are ordained to serve the Church and must meet high qualifications (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The Apostles were the first to take on the service tasks of deacons, and when the workload became too great they called for seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business (Acts 6:3). Besides serving the material needs of the people, deacons occupy a crucial role in the liturgical life of the Church.*

*(3) The presbyters, or elders, are visible throughout the New Testament. Their ministry from the start was to rule, labor in the word and teach true doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17) in the local congregation. Paul appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23) and later instructed his apostolic apprentice, Titus, to do the same in Crete (Titus 1:5). From the word presbyter came the shorter form prest, which was used in the early Church and finally became priest. In no way is the ordained Christian priesthood seen as a throwback to or a reenacting of the Old Testament priesthood. Rather, joined to Christ who is our High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:6, 10), the New Testament priest is likewise a minister of a New Covenant which supersedes the old.*

*(4) The bishop is the overseer of the congregation and clergy in a given area. Often the terms “bishop” and “elder” are interchangeable in the New Testament (Acts 20:17, 28), with the bishop being the leader of the elders. The qualifications for bishop listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9 underscore this role. Nonetheless, bishop is a specific office both in the New Testament and in the early Church. The Twelve were the first to hold this office (in Acts 1:20 office is literally translated bishopric) and they in turn consecrated other bishops to follow them. For example, Timothy and Titus are clearly of a separate order from that of elder (see 1 Tim. 5:17-22; Titus 1:5). Early records show James was bishop of Jerusalem by A.D. 49 and functioned accordingly at the first council there (Acts 15:13-22). Peter is on record as the first bishop of Antioch prior to A.D. 53, and later first bishop of Rome, where he was martyred about A.D. 65.*

*Perhaps the strongest early reference outside the New Testament to the presence of the four orders in Church government occurs in the writings of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch from A.D. 67-107, the very heart of the New Testament era. To the church at Philadelphia (see Rev. 3:7-13) he writes of Christians [laity] at one with the bishop and the presbyters and the deacons. . . (Ign. Phil., salutation; italics added).*

*In The Sacred Trust, authority is resident in all four orders, with the bishop providing the center of unity. His authority is not over the Church but within the Church. He is an icon of Jesus Christ, the Shepherd and Overseer [literally, Bishop] of your souls (1 Pet. 2:25). Church leadership is not one or more of the orders functioning without the others. Rather the Church, with Christ as Head, is conducted like a symphony orchestra, a family, the body of Christ, where all the members in their given offices work together as the dwelling place of the Holy Triunity—of our God.*