Admission to Candidacy: A Defining Moment?
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From First Tonsure to Admission to Candidacy

The Memory of Clerical Tonsure
In 1969, at the end of my first year of theological studies, having been in formation for five years, my classmates and I received clerical tonsure. The Bishop came early one morning to celebrate Mass and administer Clerical Tonsure. After the Gospel and homily of the Mass, the men completing their first year of theology knelt before the Bishop. The Bishop clipped five pieces of each man’s hair in the form of the cross. As he did this, we prayed a verse from a priestly psalms of the Old Testament: Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance (Psalm 16:5-6).

In preparation for the ceremony we had received a catechesis on the meaning of the rite. Slaves in the Roman Empire, we were told, wore a distinctive tonsure (and at times were branded) so that they might be readily identified as members of the slave class. In the ancient Church, the symbolism of tonsure indicated that the priest was set apart in the Church to be a slave of Christ and his people. We learned that the image of the Apostles as slave is firmly rooted in Scripture. The Apostles often referred to themselves as slaves of Christ (Romans 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1 James 1:1).¹

We knelt before the Bishop a second time. He invested us with the surplice, a sign of the clerical state. Until 1973, seminarians became clerics when they were tonsured. What it meant to be a cleric was not clear since once tonsured the seminarian received no new

¹During the Year for Priests, Pope Benedict XVI explained precisely how the priest is a slave of Jesus Christ: Alter Christus, the priest is profoundly united to the Word of the Father; who in incarnating himself, has taken the form of a slave, has made himself a slave (cf. Philippians 2:5-11). The priest is a slave of Christ in the sense that his existence, ontologically configured to Christ, takes on an essentially relational character: He is in Christ, through Christ, and with Christ at the service of man. Precisely because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: He is the minister of their salvation, of their happiness, of their authentic liberation -- maturing, in this progressive taking up of the will of Christ, in prayer, in this "remaining heart to heart" with him. This is therefore the essential condition of all proclamation, which implies participation in the sacramental offering of the Eucharist and docile obedience to the Church.
http://www.zenit.org/article-26274?-english
duties, rights, or responsibilities. If a seminarian who had been tonsured decided to leave the seminary or was dismissed, he ceased being a cleric.

The rite, however, did point out to the seminarian that he, at that stage of his formation, was accepted by the local Church as a candidate for Holy Orders and was, in fact, en route to priestly ordination. The prayer of the bishop for the candidate indicated that the seminarian was being set apart for priestly service. The sign of the tonsure that had been an anachronism for centuries had the positive effect of reminding the candidate that priesthood is all about humble service of God’s people in imitation of Christ. The rite signified, especially through the use of Psalm 16 that the seminarian was entering the priestly caste of the New Testament, a caste, though, made up entirely of slaves.

Enter Vatican II and Admission to Candidacy

As part of the liturgical renewal initiated by the Fathers of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI decreed in the Motu Proprio, Ministeria Quaedam (8/15/72) that clerical tonsure along with the minor orders of porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte, and the subdiaconate would be suppressed. A seminarian would no longer become a cleric when he received tonsure but rather through ordination to the diaconate. The decision to suppress clerical tonsure was made for two reasons: First, the tonsure had not been worn by the secular clergy and the vast majority of the religious clergy for centuries and, second, there was no satisfying explanation of what it meant to be a cleric without ordination especially since no dispensation was needed to withdraw from the clerical state.

In another Motu Proprio on the Order of Deacons, Ad Pascendum, issued on the same day as Ministeria Quaedam, Pope Paul VI explained again that a man would henceforth become a cleric through the reception of the diaconate. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had wanted to identify the clerical state and ordination to the major orders of diaconate, priesthood, and episcopacy. In the Ad Pascendum, the Holy Father explained the significance of the new ceremony of Admission to Candidacy that replaced

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2 Ministeria Quaedam: First tonsure is no longer conferred; entrance into the clerical state is joined to the diaconate. http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/p6minors.htm.
tonsure:

Since entrance into the clerical state is deferred until diaconate, there no longer exists the rite of first tonsure, by which a layman used to become a cleric. But a new rite is introduced, by which one who aspires to ordination as deacon or presbyter publicly manifests his will to offer himself to God and the Church, so that he may exercise a sacred order. The Church, accepting this offering, selects and calls him to prepare himself to receive a sacred order, and in this way he is properly numbered among candidates for the diaconate and presbyterate.³

The new ceremony of Admission of Candidacy began to be used in the Roman Church on January 1, 1973. In the simple ceremony, the man aspiring to the priesthood or permanent diaconate, states his intention to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders and thereby embrace the clerical state. The bishop, in turn, formally accepts the aspirant as an official candidate for Holy Orders. The rite signifies that the local Church in the person of the diocesan bishop welcomes a man as a candidate for Orders and is open to the eventual incorporation of the candidate into the priesthood of the universal Church through ordination in the local Church.⁴

Admission to Candidacy for Ordination as Deacons and Priests is the precise moment when the candidate says in the presence of the Church, I am morally certain that God is calling me to be his priest. I wish to give myself unreservedly to this mission. The bishop speaking in persona ecclesiae responds: I recognize signs of God’s call in your life. The charisms of Jesus, the Good Shepherd and of celibacy have manifested themselves clearly in your personality and behavior. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I and those who are in charge of your formation will further test the call of God. May the Lord who has begun this good work in you bring it to perfection on the day of the Lord Jesus.


⁴ Just as baptism incorporates the Catholic into the universal Church through a rite always celebrated in a local, i.e. diocesan Church, so Holy Orders incorporates a man into the priesthood of the universal Church through a rite always celebrated in a local, i.e. diocesan Church.
Candidate: Step into the Drama of the Gospel!

And he appointed twelve,
to be with him,
and to be sent out to preach
and have authority to cast out demons.
(Mark 3:14).

Envisioned as the moment when the Twelve responded to Christ’s call to be with him, Admission to Candidacy for Ordination as Deacons and Priests will be a deeply defining rite of passage for the candidate for Orders. It will be an ritual memorial (anamnesis) of the moment when the disciples, hearing the call of Jesus to follow him, left everything to live in his presence, emulate his relationship with his Father and his love for his people, embrace the life of celibacy that the Son of God chose, live in simplicity unencumbered by material possessions, do the will of the Father in all things, and learn to walk in the way of the cross. Admission to Candidacy will be seen as the intentional and grace-filled beginning of a man’s final period of preparation for the priesthood.

The rite of Admission to Candidacy includes three components: The call to candidacy, the scrutiny of the candidate, and the blessing of the candidate.

The Vocation to Priesthood
First, the candidate is called by name. This is evidently an allusion to the call of God of this man to the priesthood. The call within the rite is a symbol of the vocation that the aspirant has identified and the Church is about to confirm. In presenting himself as a candidate for Holy Orders, a man is saying publicly that he believes that he is called by God to continue the ministry of Christ in the Church and with the help of grace is determined to be ordained.
The Scrutiny: Seeking for a Firm Resolution to be Ordained

This is followed by a scrutiny of the aspirant and the acceptance of the candidate. This gesture externalizes and, in a sense, symbolizes the scrutiny that is an ongoing component of priestly formation in both the seminary and apostolic assignments. The bishop asks the aspirant two questions: In response to the Lord’s call are you resolved to complete your preparation so that in due time you will be ready to be ordained for the ministry of the Church? And, Are you resolved to prepare yourselves in mind and spirit to give faithful service to Christ the Lord and his body, the Church? In this scrutiny, the bishop probes into the state of the man’s will. The verb resolved is intentionally used twice. Are you resolved to be ordained? Are you resolved to prepare yourself in mind (studies) and spirit for service of Christ and the Church.

The Acknowledgment of a Call from God

The bishop then formally accepts the man as a candidate for Holy Orders: The Church receives your declaration with joy. May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfillment. The acceptance on the part of the diocesan bishop is the first official recognition by the Church that a man is on a trajectory towards the priesthood. Admission to Candidacy is essentially, on one hand, the public declaration of the aspirant that he has discerned a divine vocation and desires ordination and, on the other hand, the recognition of the vocation by the Church in the person of the Bishop.

The rite of Admission to Candidacy concludes with prayers for the candidate and a blessing. The petitions highlight the meaning of diaconal and priestly service in the Church:

- That our brother may draw closer to Christ and be his witness in the world, let us pray to the Lord.
- That he may share the burdens of others and always listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord.
- That he may become a minister of the Church who will strengthen the faith of his brothers and sisters by word and example, and gather them together
to share in the Eucharist, let us pray to the Lord.

The Blessing: The Grace of Perseverance in the Vocation to the Priesthood

The Bishop blesses the candidate, asking God to give him the grace of perseverance in his vocation and fidelity to Christ, the Priest:

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\text{Lord, hear our prayers for your son who wishes to dedicate himself to your service and the service of your people in the sacred ministry. Bless him in your fatherly love, that he may persevere in his vocation, and through his loving fidelity to Christ the Priest be worthy to carry out the Church's apostolic mission. We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.}
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The blessing is a sacramental of the Church. Like all blessings it imparts actual graces to the recipient. The specific grace of this sacramental is perseverance in the vocation to the priesthood and a deeper fidelity to Christ in the seminarian’s preparation to share in the mission of the Apostles. God imparts grace through the Bishop’s blessing to strengthen the candidates resolve to be ordained and serve Christ and the Church. Just as the Twelve Apostles were called to be with Christ and learn from him before they were given a share in his ministry, so the candidate for Sacred Orders is called to live in quiet intimacy with Christ for a period of time in the seminary so as to be prepared to act in persona Christi capitis. The fruitfulness (effectiveness) of the grace of this sacramental depends on the disposition of the recipient (ex opere operantis) who in fact is strengthened and spiritually enriched by the blessing. The grace of Admission to Candidacy is a strengthening of the resolve to be ordained and serve Christ and the Church. It is the grace to live in hidden intimacy with the Lord and be transformed interiorly by his word and his presence for priestly service.