Questions on Priesthood

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Dear All,

Our brother George has sent several questions that are of the utmost importance on our understanding of Orthodoxy and what the Church has received from our Lord. I will present each question followed by a brief explanation:

*Why should only a priest have the authority to baptize, serve communion, or perform a marriage?*

Priesthood is an office designed by God to lead His people to Himself. He gave this office a special authority that is not given to the rest for the purpose of guiding, disciplining, consecrating, ...etc the people and bringing them to the Lord.

In the book of Acts, we learn that is was only the apostles who could bestow the gifts of the Holy Spirit through laying of hands. No one else could give it. Even, Simon the magician wanted this gift and was rebuked by St Peter (Acts 8).

This shows that the authority given to the apostles was not for everyone as St Paul explain in his epistle to the Hebrews "And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was" (5:4)

*There is no Biblical basis for this only being priest, and it is anti-Biblical to say that a priest has greater access to God or more power from God than other people. The Bible says that every believer is a priest and that every Christian has equal access to God. Why, then, does the Orthodox church believe that the priest has special power/authority?*

With God there is no change, He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow; there a lot of verses that prove this doctrine. In fact, it would be blasphemy if anyone says that he believes in God and His word and would deny God's unchangeable aspect, as we pray in the Gregorian liturgy.

So, if God is unchangeable, then His laws are unchangeable as well. He in fact said in the NT:

"Do not think that I came to **destroy** the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to **destroy** but to **fulfill**." Matthew 5:17 The keyword in this verse is "fulfill" meaning perfected. The Old Testament is perfected in the NT. Sacrifices were offered in the OT pointing to the perfect sacrifice of our Lord. The Aaronic priesthood was perfected in the NT through the priesthood of Mechizedek as St Paul explains: "Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the **order** of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the **order** of Aaron?" (Hebrews 7:11)

The Lord gave special authority to the apostles to bind and loose sins on the earth (John 20), he commissioned them to baptize (Matthew 28). There were special characteristics for choosing a replacement to Mathias (even the Virgin could not have filled that office). The laying of hands on the selected people, for the office of priesthood, was essential as in Acts 1 and 6.

We are all priest in the spiritual sense. God called Israel in Exodus (19:6) to be a kingdom of priests, yet He chose the priests only from the tribe of Levi. Likewise, we, in the NT, are priests to offer ourselves a sacrifice "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living **sacrifice**, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1) However, this does not mean that we are all equal and have a sharing in the office of the priesthood as explained.

Why should a person have to confess his sins to a priest? 1 John 1:9 says 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' Forgiveness comes from God, the priest is just another man and it should not be necessary for him to ask God to forgive us for our sins to be forgiven.

Before answering this question, we need to understand the role of the Church in salvation. The doctrine is that there is no salvation outside the Church as there was no salvation outside the Ark of Noah. Christ established His Church through the shedding of His blood and through the Church we receive the faith, baptism and the rest of the mysteries. No one, even Paul himself to whom Christ appeared, could  become Christian without going first to the Church and becoming a member in the body of Christ. With this understanding, let's explore confession.

Confession is a three step process:

1- Reconciling with the person being wronged "First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:24)

2- Reconciling with God (Matthew 5:23,24)

3- Confessing the sin to the Church.

Since Christ is the head and the Church is the body and since sin separates us from God, then sin separates us both from the head (Christ) and the body (the Church). We need to be in full communion with the body so that we can be in full communion with Christ. As the Church had an essential role in bringing us to Christ when we first received the faith, and because of our own will we separated ourselves from the Church, she also has an essential role in reuniting us to the Head through confession and communion.

*The passage in John 20 ("If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained" John 20:23) where Jesus sent his disciples out and told them whatever sins they bound/loosed would be bound/loosed in heaven was just for that one mission, he didn't mean for that to be a permanent establishment and certainly didn't mean for it to be passed through the centuries by some handing down of 'apostolic authority'.*

As we explained the book of Acts has so many verses proving that the priesthood is an office given to the priests and their successors. Look up (Acts 6:6, 14:23, 15:2,4,6,22,23, 16:4, 20:17, 21:18, 22:5)

The history of the Church does not show that the office of priesthood stopped with the apostles. One only need to read the history to discover the truth.

In Christ,

Ihab