How to Be a Good Bishop? Answers and Examples from the Patristic Age

Claudia Rapp

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1. The historical development of the role of the episkopos; 2. Work vs. honor: the early Church Fathers on the episcopate; 3. Ordination as affirmation of spiritual status; 4. Ordination as affirmation of social status; 5. Being a good bishop; 6. The role of asceticism; 7. Three kinds of authority: spiritual, ascetic, pragmatic

How is it possible to mention 'holy' and 'bishop' in the same breath?* After all, through the centuries many bishops have held great power over people, administered massive wealth and played influential roles in politics. How, then, can the expectations of a spiritual, holy life, on the one hand, and of the administrative, worldly responsibilities of episcopal office, on the other, be reconciled? The answer, as I hope to show, lies in asceticism.

Indeed, the episcopate is fraught with the inherent tension between spiritual demands and administrative function, between the dichotomy—to cite the title of the famous book by Hans von

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Campenhausen—of *Kirchliches Amt und geistliche Vollmacht* or, as the English title has it, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*.[1]

1. *The historical development of the role of the episkopos*

This tension is the result of the historical development of the role of the *episkopos* over time. In the apostolic age, the tasks of an *episkopos* were encompassed by the literal Greek meaning of the word, namely 'overseer'. His function was largely administrative—especially important were the monitoring of incoming funds and the allocation of expenditures to charitable causes—while the teaching and preaching were undertaken by those who had the 'gifts of the Spirit'. It is these itinerant prophets and teachers who provided a direct link to the divine, as they went from community to community to preach the "Good News" (the εὐαγγέλιον). This early stage was also marked by the appointment of several *episkopoi* within urban settings. The only lengthy passage in the New Testament that deals with *episkopoi* is Paul's 1Tim 3:1-7 (REB):

> To aspire to leadership (ἐπισκοπῆς) is an honourable ambition. A bishop, therefore, must be above reproach, husband of one wife, sober, temperate, courteous, hospitable, and a good teacher. He must not be given to drink or brawling, but be of a forbearing disposition, avoiding quarrels, and not avaricious. He must be one who manages his own household well and controls his children without losing his dignity, for if a man does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take charge of a congregation of God's people? He must moreover have a good reputation with the outside world, so that he may not be exposed to scandal and be caught in the devil's snare.

1 Hans von Campenhausen, *Kirchliches Amt und geistliche Vollmacht in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Mohr, Tübingen 1953, translation into English: *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 1969.

The demands that were made at this time on the morality and personal conduct of the *episkopoi* were minimal and were similar to those made of deacons. In fact, the patristic authors who comment on this passage assume that this catalogue of virtues applies to *all* good Christians.

It is only in the early decades of the second century that we encounter the first firm evidence for the 'monepiscopate' or 'monarchic episcopate'.[2] In the letters that bishop Ignatius wrote to his community at Antioch while he was on his way to be martyred in Rome, the monarchic episcopate is interpreted as a reflection of the One God and as a guarantor for the doctrinal unity of the Church. According to Ignatius, it is the bishop's exemplary conduct that makes him the spiritual model for his flock, and it is his liturgical functions that make him the sacral center of his congregation.

Ignatius was the first to give voice to what would become the prevalent view in the late second and third centuries: 1. The bishop's tasks are not only administrative, but also pastoral and liturgical, looking after the spiritual well-being of his flock and celebrating the Eucharist;[3] 2. To ensure the respect and cooperation of his flock, the bishop must be an exemplar of Christian conduct. Indeed, in describing this model function of the bishop, Ignatius of Antioch even creates a neologism in Greek, based on Latin: ἐξεμπλάριον.[4] 3. Ordination is a confirmation of personal virtues.[5]

2 For a recent (and not uncontroversial) re-evaluation of the evidence, see Alistair Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2014. For a detailed discussion of the relevant sources, see Jochen Wagner, *Die Anfänge des Amtes in der Kirche: Presbyter und Episkopen in der frühchristlichen Literatur*, Francke, Tübingen 2011.

3 Ignatius, *Epistula ad Smyrnaeos*, 8,1-2; *Epistula ad Philadelphios* 4; *Epistula ad Polycarpum* 2,1-2; 3,1. On the role of the bishop celebrating the Eucharist in Ignatius' thought, see now Predrag Bukovec, *Die frühchristliche Eucharistie*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 499, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2023, 212-217 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-157730-7].

4 Ignatius, *Epistula ad Trallianos* 3,2; *Epistula ad Smyrnaeos* 12,1.

5 Ignatius, *Epistula ad Magnesios* 2,1-3,1.

This increase in the pastoral and spiritual function of the *episkopos* at this time went hand in hand with the demise of the wandering preachers, who had claimed to share their teaching as a result of direct divine inspiration. The activities of these itinerant preachers lead to much more variety of teachings than the church could afford. In order to maintain doctrinal unity and cohesion, the role of preaching the divine Logos was added to the original administrative responsibilities of the *episkopos*.

In this new formulation, then, the role of the *episkopos* was significantly expanded. When initially he had been an administrator, by the end of the second century he had also become a mediator with God, operating through divine inspiration. These two aspects, the institutional and the inspirational, resonate with the work of Max Weber, the German sociologist of the early twentieth century. He established an influential theory of the relation between charisma and institution building.[6] Charismatic leadership was provided by a religious founder who gathered many followers around him. A good example would be Jesus of Nazareth. After the death of the charismatic leader, several successors take the helm of the nascent movement. In order to keep the founder's teaching alive, it becomes codified into one single and unchangeable message—a process that Weber calls "the routinization of charisma". The only legitimate keepers of this message are the disciples of the founder. They decide to whom they wish to entrust the original founder's teaching in the subsequent generation. To continue the process of succession on a stable basis, it is necessary to create an institution, in this case the Church. Weber's binary opposition of charisma and institution would become very influential as part of his pioneering work on *Religionssoziologie*/sociology of religion. It corresponds to other oppositional pairs: religious – secular, church – state, or (a point to which I'll return later) desert – city.

6 See for example Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1968.

But a closer study of bishops in late antiquity ends up eroding these binary pairs. In fact, the development of the episcopal office is the exact opposite of Weber's model that sees a development from charisma to institution. This is because the episcopate, as we have seen, begins as an entirely administrative function, and only later takes on spiritual significance.

2. *Work vs. honor: the early Church Fathers on the episcopate*

Let us now move on to the fourth century during which Christianity developed from persecuted minority to the imperially endorsed official religion of the Later Roman Empire. How did the Christians in the fourth century think about the episcopate? First of all, it is paramount to bear in mind that throughout the period that concerns us here, the distinction between the priesthood and the episcopate remains blurry.[7] In the textual and epigraphic sources, the Greek ἱερωσύνη or the Latin *sacerdotium* simply refer to higher ecclesiastical office, no matter whether it was held by a priest or by a bishop. This poses some problems in the interpretation of sources. Even after the monepiscopate is firmly established, the haze of indistinction between the episcopate and the presbyterate will remain well into the fourth century. Every *episkopos* is also a presbyter, but not every presbyter is an *episkopos*. Both, however, are usually called *sacerdos*.

The passage with which we began that describes the ideal character of the bishop in Paul's Letter to Timothy begins: εἴ τις ἐπισκοπῆς ὀρέγεται, καλοῦ ἔργου ἐπιθυμεῖ. The literal translation would be: "If someone desires the function of overseer, he wishes for a noble task." The Greek word for this is ἔργον, the Latin *opus*, both of which have their most literal equivalent in the English 'work'. Both Greek and Latin commentators on this passage observed that the episcopate is a task—we might say a ministry—and not an honorific distinction.

7 The evidence on this up to the third century is gathered in A. Stewart, *The Original Bishops*.

The first Latin author to express the idea that the episcopate should not be regarded as an honorific distinction seems to have been Jerome who comments on this passage in 386: "He [Paul] says «work», not «honor», nor «glory»."[8] At around the same time, John Chrysostom admitted that to strive for the episcopate in the true sense of a task was a good thing, but insisted that one ought to avoid yearning for it as an magistracy (ἀρχή) or a source of authority (αὐθεντία).[9] A few decades later, Augustine picked up this point in his *City of God*: "He [Paul] wanted to explain what the episcopate is, for it designates a work, not an honor."[10] Theodore of Mopsuestia reiterated this argument in his *Commentary on the Epistle to Timothy* in 428.[11] At the close of the patristic age, in the early seventh century, Isidore of Seville resumed the words of Jerome and Augustine in his *De ecclesiasticis officiis*.[12] By that time, they had acquired an almost formulaic character. Such emphasis on the priesthood or episcopate as an *opus* or "task" reminds us of the original functions of the *episkopoi* as overseers in the first two centuries.

Why should it be necessary for the authors of the fourth century and beyond to insist on this point? By the late fourth century, when Jerome uttered his words of caution, the situation of the Church within the Roman Empire had changed dramatically. These changes had taken their beginning with Emperor Constantine the Great. After the Christian God had granted him a decisive victory over his adversary Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, he ended the

8 Jerome, *Commentarii in Epistulam ad Titum* 1: "Opus inquit, non honorem, non gloriam." Jerome here refers to 1Tim 3:1.

9 John Chrysostom, *Homilia X in Epistulam 1 ad Tim*otheum 3. The same idea is also expressed in his *De sacerdotio* III,11.

10 Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 19,19: "Exponere uoluit quid sit episcopatus, quia nomen est operis, non honoris."

11 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *In Epistulam 1 ad Timotheum* III,1: "bene *opus* dixit et non 'dignitatem', nec enim dignitates sunt ecclesiasticae functiones, sed opus".

12 Isidore of Seville, *De ecclesiasticis officiis* II,5,8: "Episcopatus autem, ut quidam prudentium ait, nomen est operis et non honoris."

last Great Persecution of Christians and accepted Christianity as a legitimate religion. In the following decades, the adoption of this new religion by most of his successors resulted in an ever-increasing number of conversions of adult men and women to Christianity. The Christian converts originally came from the middling and lower classes, but by the end of the fourth century, Christianity had reached not only the wealthy class of the *curiales* in the many urban centers of the Empire, but even the senatorial aristocracy. The first bishop from the senatorial elite was Ambrose of Milan, who will concern us again later.

In the course of the fourth century, Christianity had thus become a visible force in society, and its highest representative in each city, the bishop, held a position of great influence and responsibility. He was in charge of hundreds, if not thousands, of people across all levels of society, and he had access to great wealth as a result of the donations that augmented the regular income of the church from the tithes of the faithful. By the middle of the fifth century begins the great building boom for lavishly built churches that claim a prominent space at the center of the cities. It is not surprising that ambitious men would be interested in the singular position of being a bishop.

It was precisely the urban middle class of the *curiales*, i.e. the men who had the necessary wealth and pedigree to sit on the city council, who constituted the largest recruiting ground for the episcopate in the fourth century, even more so than the monasteries. For these upwardly mobile people, honor and distinction[13] were attained through the holding of public office (which often required dishing out large sums of money), whether at the municipal level or, even better, at the imperial court. For such status-conscious men, the highest and most exclusive ecclesiastical office, that of the bishop, appeared as an additional source of honor and

13 For these concepts, see also "The Latin and Greek Lexicon of Honour" at the end of J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World*, Clarendon, Oxford 1977, 272-279 [doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198150794.001.0001].

distinction among their peers.[14] Indeed, a law of Justinian demands that the bishop, along with three reliable men, exercise oversight over the donations of money that were earmarked to finance public works that benefit the entire city: the purchase of grain, the heating of the public bathhouses, building of aqueducts and walls, the paving of roads and the repair of bridges.[15] These are very pragmatic tasks, and the bishop is charged with them alongside three leading citizens.

A simultaneous development—and one that will concern us in a moment—is the rise of the monastic movement. The movement began in Egypt in the late third century, but was soon also present in Palestine and Syria, Asia Minor (think of the siblings Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea), and also in Italy and Southern Gaul. Men and women turned their back on the obligations of the world, abandoned family, wealth and profession, and adopted a lifestyle of asceticism and poverty that consisted of fasting, vigils, psalmody, and sexual abstinence. They lived as μοναχοί (the Greek word μοναχός means: singular, alone), alone with God, whether individually as hermits, as Anthony of Egypt had done near Mount Pispir, or with a few others in a spiritual family gathered around an *abba* (spiritual father), or in large, organized communities, such as those founded by Pachomius around Tabennisi. Some of them developed extraordinary spiritual abilities—the power to work miracles, but also the gift to foretell the future, or the ability to reconcile enemies—, which singled them out as holy men in the eyes of their contemporaries. After their death, further miracles confirmed their status as saints, as particularly efficacious intercessors with God.

The warning against seeking ordination as an *honor* instead of an *opus*, is aimed at those who wish to instrumentalize ecclesiastical office as an affirmation of their worldly status. And in the situation of the Church in the late fourth century, that status can be spiritual (as in the

14 Cf. J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, esp. 90-95.
15 *Codex Justinianus* 1,4,26.

case of holy men) or social (as in the case of the upwardly mobile urban middle class). These two elements, the spiritual and the social, stand in a complex relation. Historians of late antiquity or, if we use different terminology, of the age of the Church Fathers, have long struggled to understand how the relation between the religious and the secular, between church and empire, was shaped and continually re-defined by the people involved. Let's look at these two elements in turn.

3. Ordination as affirmation of spiritual status

"Monks should flee bishops"—these words of John Cassian, who had lived for many years with the monks in Egypt before returning to the West, are often quoted to illustrate what is perceived in traditional scholarship as the fundamental incompatibility of the monastic life with the episcopate, or indeed any clerical office.[16] But this neat dichotomy dissolves into a more complicated picture when we consider the context of this remark. Cassian places it at the end of his treatment of vainglory which is one of the spiritual challenges to the monk. Even in the solitude of the desert, he says, the hermit can become puffed up with pride over the magnitude of his sacrifice in renouncing family, career and riches or he can become overly proud in his ascetic habits and emaciated appearance. It is this over-confidence of the monk in his attainment of virtue, Cassian continues, that can also lead to

> a desire for the priesthood or deaconate. And it suggests that if a man has even against his will received this office, he will fulfil it with such sanctity and strictness that he will be able to set an example of saintliness even to other priests; and that he will win over many people, not only by his manner of life, but also by his teaching and preaching.[17]

16 Cassian, *Collationes* XI,18.

17 Cassian, *Collationes* XI,14. Elsewhere, Cassian observes that the monk who suffers from accidie or boredom may be attracted by the prospect of taking up "some dutiful and religious offices": Cassian, *Institutes*, X,2.

Cassian here as elsewhere shows the influence of his teacher Evagrius Ponticus, whose *Praktikos* discusses the eight evil thoughts that can obstruct one's spiritual progress. Vainglory is one of them, here defined as the monk's desire to receive public recognition for his efforts. It is a demon that can lead to fantasies of performing miracles in front of admiring crowds or of being selected for ecclesiastical office, even if the monk makes a show of resisting this honor. "This demon predicts ... that they will attain to the priesthood. It has men knocking at the door, seeking audience with them. If the monk does not willingly yield to their request, he is bound and led away [in order to be forcibly ordained]."[18]

These warnings are well taken. It was not unheard of that one or the other solitary in the desert got carried away by boastfulness to the point where he either claimed to be a priest or rejected the liturgical community of the church and the Eucharist. One monk in Scetis was overheard in his cell as he delivered a rousing sermon to an imaginary congregation.[19] Another monk was so deluded by his visions of Christ and the angels that he came to church and announced to his fellow monks: "I have no need for the Eucharist. For I have seen Christ today." It took one year of confinement, prayer and a more relaxed lifestyle to cure him from these delusions of grandeur.[20]

These passages point to the common assumption that ordination to the priesthood is a great honor for the monk and does, in fact, serve as a confirmation of his personal virtues. The papyrological evidence from late antique Egypt examined by Ewa Wipszycka shows a remarkable number of monks who had received ordination to the priesthood. A sizeable proportion of them did not celebrate the Eucharist or exercised any other priestly function, so that it must be assumed that ordination had been conferred on them in recognition of their asceticism and

18 Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 13.
19 Cassian, *Collationes* XI,16.
20 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 25,4-5.

spiritual abilities.[21] Similarly, the church historian Sozomen mentions three Syrians, Barses, Eulogius, and Lazarus, who in the second half of the fourth century were "ordained bishops, but not of any city, for the title was merely an honorary one, conferred on them as a compensation for their excellent conduct".[22] Theodoret of Cyrrhus reports that the practice of honorary ordination of particularly accomplished ascetics continued in Syria into the fifth century.[23]

However, attempts were eventually made to eliminate the conferral of this type of *honorary* priesthood without concrete duties. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, it was decreed that any such existing ordinations carried no weight, and that henceforth all clergy should be ordained to serve at a specific location, whether church, chapel or monastery.[24]

At the same time, the recruitment of monks into *active* duty in the clergy became a noticeable trend, which began in Egypt in the 340s and occurred in Palestine and Syria about six decades later—clear evidence that spiritual qualifications were highly sought after for service in the institutional Church. Their preparation through ascetic living became a further asset when lifelong celibacy became a requirement for the episcopate. It was a requirement for the higher clergy in the West since the fifth century, and for the episcopate in the East since 692. The emphasis on episcopal (or clerical) celibacy further sealed the close link between ecclesiastical appointment and personal virtue.

21 Ewa Wipszycka, "Les clercs dans les communautés monastiques d'Égypte", in *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 26 (1996), 135-166 and Eadem, *The Second Gift of the Nile: Monks and Monasteries in Late Antique Egypt*, The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement 33, University of Warsaw, Warsaw 2018, 441-455.

22 Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* VI,34,1.

23 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* 13,4-5; 15,4; 19,2. Philip Rousseau, "Eccentrics and Coenobites in the Late Roman East", in *Byzantinische Forschungen* 24 (1997), 35-50 discusses this process of what he calls "enfolding" of holy men and ascetics into the institutional church, especially in Syria.

24 Chalcedon (451), Canon 6 (Periklēs Petros Ioannou [ed.], *Discipline générale antique*, vol. 1,1, *Les canons des concils oecumeniques*, Tipografia Italo-Orientale 'S. Nilo', Grottaferrata [Roma] 1962, 74-75).

4. Ordination as affirmation of social status

The conflation between "work" and "honor" with regard to the episcopate was a very real concern. Beginning with Constantine, we observe a surprising degree of permeability between service to the *civitas* and service in the *ecclesia*. Transitions from a secular to an ecclesiastical career were not uncommon. We know of several instances of men who had worked as tax collectors or in the imperial service prior to becoming bishops.[25] A particularly egregious case of ordination for reasons of social distinction is reported from Seleucia in the mid-fourth century. Apparently, these men "had no inkling of either the Scriptures or the canons of the Church. After their ordination [at the hands of bishop Neon, who was condemned for this deed in 360] they preferred the possession of their goods to the episcopate and declared in writing that they would rather hold liturgies (i.e. finance public benefactions) with their possessions than the episcopate without them."[26] It seems that these *curiales* had entered the episcopate without a clear knowledge about the consequences of this appointment for their personal lives.

In order to counteract this trend of immediate transition from a civic post to an ecclesiastical office, canon law, beginning with the Council of Sardica in 343, discouraged direct appointment to the episcopate and insisted that the proper ecclesiastical *cursus honorum* had to be observed, so that one had to be a deacon first, then a priest, before becoming a bishop. By the sixth century, Justinian barred former civil servants or *curiales* from access to the episcopate, *unless* they had already ruptured their ties to the world by entering the monastic order at a young age.[27] He even scornfully labeled direct appointments to the priesthood and then on to the episcopate as 'pretend' or 'fake'

25 Gregory of Nazianzus holds this against his adversaries who ousted him from the see of Constantinople in 381: Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmen* II,1,12, verses 432-433. Cf. the case of Eleusius of Cyzicus: Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* IV,2.

26 Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* IV,24,15.

27 Justinian, *Novella* 6,1,1 (535).

appointments—thus implicitly acknowledging that ordination was treated by some as a source of social distinction.[28]

Even after ordination to the clergy, civic office was not entirely out of reach.[29] It seems that active ministers of the church sometimes attempted to hold a *dual* appointment in the secular administration. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, compiled in the 380s, indicate that some bishops took up public responsibilities after their ordination. They also report that former members of the imperial service who had become bishops, priests and deacons intended to hold their new 'priestly' rank while retaining their 'Roman' one.[30] In 451, the Council of Chalcedon threatened to excommunicate such men unless they abandoned their secular engagements.[31] Justinian in the sixth century was even harsher in his condemnation of clergy who had attained secular positions. They were to lose their belt of office, their honor, and their position and were compelled to return to serve on the *curia* of their hometown.[32]

In addition to the attempts to hold dual office in the *ecclesia* and the *saeculum*, some men with worldly ambitions sought to hold such offices *sequentially* and to return to curial service after a certain number of years in the Christian clergy. They clearly regarded ecclesiastical office like a magistracy that was not a profession, but an honor, held for a limited period of time, before moving on to the next stage on the career ladder. We know of at least one prominent case, Dorotheus, a highly

28 Justinian, *Novella* 6,1,2 (535): "imaginariam... ordinationem" or "ἐσχηματισμένην...χειροτονίαν".

29 For interesting epigraphic evidence of high-ranking pagans acting as benefactors of Christian churches, see Claude Lepelley, *Évergetisme et épigraphie dans l'antiquité tardive: les provinces de langue latine,* in Michel Christol – Olivier Masson (eds.), *Actes du Xe Congrès international d'épigraphie grecque et latine (Nîmes, 4-9 octobre 1992)*, Éditions de la Sorbonne, Paris 1997, 335-352. 347-348 [doi: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.psorbonne.24052].

30 *Apostolic Constitutions*, Canons 81 and 83. On the correct interpretation of στρατεία in Canon 83 as "imperial service" (analogous to the Latin *militia*) rather than "military service", as Metzger translates it, see Pierre Batiffol, "Les prémiers chrétiens et la guerre d'après le septième canon du concile de Chalcédoine de 451", in *Bulletin de la Societé nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 1911, 226-232.

31 Chalcedon (451), Canon 7 (Ioannou, *Discipline générale*, vol. 1,2, 75).

32 Justinian, *Novella* 123,15 (546).

educated eunuch who had been a priest at Antioch and was later placed by none other than the Emperor Constantine in charge of the imperial purple dye works in Tyre.[33] By the early fifth century, this practice seems to have become so common that efforts were made to curb it. In 402, Innocent, bishop of Rome, counseled against the appointment of *curiales* to the clergy because he was worried that after serving in the clergy for a while, these men would return to the *saeculum*, thus causing distress to the church.[34] In 408, a law of Arcadius and Honorius specified that priests who had either been deposed by the bishop or left the clergy *at their own volition* immediately had to return to serve on the *curia* or in a guild, depending on their social origin, and that they would be barred from any office in the imperial service.[35] This law suggests that some Christians regarded the priesthood (or indeed the episcopate) not as a lifelong vocation, but as an intermediate stage in their professional lives, with a position in the bureaucracy of the Empire as their ultimate goal.

As we have noted in the beginning, the development of the episcopal office within the church began with administrative tasks of the *episkopoi*, as reflected in the New Testament, and in subsequent centuries acquired pastoral and liturgical functions. By the fourth and fifth centuries, bishops became singularly important figures within their cities, and it is not surprising that the episcopate would be considered a desirable position. Monks thought of it as a confirmation of virtue, and ambitious laymen regarded it as a confirmation of their social status. Against this background, the reminder of authors like Jerome that the episcopate is a 'work' not an 'honor' is well taken.

33 Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* VII,32,2-3.

34 Innocent, *Epistula* 4,3; see also *Epistula* 2,11.

35 Sirmium (408), Canon 9. The version of this law preserved in the *Codex Theodosianus* XVI,2,39 does not contain the passage referring to imperial service.

5. Being a good bishop

But how can one be a good bishop, then? First of all, by avoiding the office. Ambrose of Milan, the first bishop who came from the senatorial elite (his father was Pretorian Prefect of the Gauls), is a fine example. When it became clear that the people of Milan wanted to make him their bishop, he tried to show them that he was completely unworthy, by doing outrageous things. First, in his function as a local judge, he ordered (against his own custom) that people be put to torture. When that did not work, he invited prostitutes very openly, so that everyone could see them on their way to his house. And when even that had no effect and the people persisted in calling for his ordination, he attempted to escape from the city secretly, by night.[36] But he did not get far and eventually had to accept that the episcopate was God's will for him. A century later, Gregory the Great would suggest that 'fear', i.e. respect for the magnitude of the office is an essential prerequisite for ordination.[37]

Second, by being a good Christian, heeding the advice in 1Tim 3:1-7, which, according to the Church Fathers, applied to all Christians.

Third, by being an ascetic. This brings us back to the idea of ordination as a confirmation of virtue. The capability to lead a life of Christian virtue and the strength to achieve strict asceticism are ultimately gifts of God, as are any miraculous abilities that may result from it. It is this closeness to God that is the most desirable in a bishop. This is an essential condition for the exercise of his duties: during the liturgy as a mediator between the people and God, and especially in his exercise of the power to bind and loose, i.e. to impose penance on those who have transgressed and to reconcile the penitent sinner again with God and the community.

36 Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 3,7.
37 Gregory the Great, *Liber regulae pastoralis* I.

The ability to weep with sinners and to carry the burden of their sins is highlighted by many Church Fathers as one of the foremost qualities of a bishop. Exclusion from the church and, eventually, reconciliation are essential instruments to keep a congregation focused and pure. The consecration prayer for a bishop recorded in the *Apostolic Tradition* 3,4-5 (a church order of unclear origin, which was for a long time attributed to Hippolytus of Rome),[38] draws attention to this:

> Bestow, knower of the heart, on this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, to feed your holy flock and to exercise the high priesthood for you without blame, ministering night and day; unceasingly to propitiate your countenance, and to offer you the holy gifts of your church; and by the spirit of high priesthood to have power to forgive sins according to your command; to assign lots according to your bidding; also to loose every bond according to the power that you gave to the apostles, and to please you in gentleness and a pure heart, offering to you a sweet-smelling savor...[39]

Living an exemplary life without causing offense to others, displaying gentleness and a pure heart: these qualities are tied up in the bishop's role to celebrate the liturgy and to exercise the power to bind and loose by imposing penance and brokering reconciliation. In other words, it is the personal conduct of the bishop that enables him to fulfill his duties.

38 The most recent monograph on the Apostolic Tradition is Nathan P. Chase – Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Apostolic Tradition: Its Origins, Development, and Liturgical Practices. With English Translations of the Version Contained in the Aksumite Collection (Ethiopic I) by A. Bausi and the Arabic Version of the Clementine Octateuch (Arabic I) by M. Lüstraeten*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MI 2025.

39 Translation of the Latin redaction, taken from Paul Bradshaw – Maxwell E. Johnson – L. Edwards Philips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Hermenia, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MI 2002, 30 [doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb93712].

6. The role of asceticism

We hear of many ascetics who became bishops, as I have noted before, but the inverse is also true: we hear of many bishops who, after ordination, made an effort to live as ascetics. Ambrose, after his ordination had become inevitable, transformed himself into a man "of much abstinence, and many vigils and toils, whose body was wasted by daily fasts".[40] Augustine, who converted to Christianity under the impact of Ambrose's preaching, surrounded himself with a quasi-monastic community which provided the training ground for future clergy. He calls it a *domus episcopi* (house of the bishop) or *monasterium clericorum* (monastery of clergymen).[41] And there are other examples of bishops, such as Eusebius of Vercelli, who lived in an urban household that observed an ascetic way of life.

The importance of asceticism in conjunction with the episcopate can be illustrated with the hagiographical narrative of Daniel the Stylite. Daniel established himself in a suburb of Constantinople in the mid-fifth century. Over the following years, he became something like a personal saint for Emperor Leo I (457-474) and for his successor Zeno (474-491), who depended upon Daniel to soothe restless crowds on the verge of rebellion, to predict the outcome of imperial initiatives, and to quell heretical stirrings. Leo rewarded Daniel's cooperation with public gestures of recognition, especially by donating a large pillar, topped by an enclosed platform, on which Daniel would live as a stylite. The holy man was, quite literally, put on a pedestal, so that his extraordinary ascetic stamina—his motionless stance on the small platform, his exposure to the elements—was visible even from afar.

To express his gratitude for Daniel's efficacious prayers, the emperor also instigated Daniel's ordination to the priesthood at the hands of the archbishop of Constantinople, Gennadius. But when the

40 Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* 38,1.
41 Augustine, *Sermo* 355,2.

archbishop asked Daniel to descend from his pillar in order to receive his ordination, the latter refused—most likely because he did not want to be seen as coveting the priesthood. Thus, instead of consecrating the new priest through the customary imposition of hands, Gennadius decided to perform the ordination rite from the bottom of the pillar where he stood.[42]

Daniel's ordination had no effect on his way of life or daily routine, since he never exercised any priestly duties. His ordination to the priesthood served the exclusive purpose of recognizing, confirming, and enhancing his position as an extraordinary ascetic and a miracle-working a holy man, and it took place at the initiative not of the highest representative of the church, but of the emperor.

Daniel's influence in Constantinople and among his followers was considerable. An episode during the rebellion of Basiliscus, a supporter of Monophysitism, against the emperor Zeno illustrates this. While the efforts of the new archbishop Acacius to force Basiliscus to embrace orthodoxy remained fruitless and resulted only in stirring up the potential for unrest in the capital, Daniel came to the rescue. He descended from his pillar and was greeted by large crowds as he made his way to Constantinople. His triumphant presence in the city culminated in his visit to the cathedral church of Saint Sophia, where both the rebel emperor Basiliscus and the archbishop Acacius demonstrated their submission. They fell at his feet and, while laying prostrate on the ground, were formally reconciled by Daniel.[43] We have to imagine them with their heads on the ground, Daniel towering above them, and all they would see, right in front of their eyes, were his feet, crippled and worn down to the bone—a tangible token of his ascetic achievement and neglect of his body.

Shortly before describing Daniel's death, the hagiographer is at pains to reinforce the notion of Daniel's quasi-priestly position, complete

42 *Vita S. Danielis Stylitae* 43.
43 *Vita S. Danielis Stylitae* 83.

with quasi-liturgical prerogatives. In a vision, the story goes, Daniel saw the saints in heaven asking him to celebrate the eucharistic liturgy. Upon awakening, he asked to receive communion from a priest, and his disciples partook of it also. The hagiographer, who claims to have been one of the disciples present on that occasion, explains that it was "just as if he had been administering to us the holy sacrament".[44]

This extraordinary story illustrates the ambiguous and fluctuating relation between Christian priesthood and personal holiness: Daniel's ordination to the priesthood was bestowed on him as a confirmation of his sanctity, at the behest of the secular ruler, by the highest representative of the church. At a time of crisis and political instability, both the would-be emperor and the archbishop submitted to Daniel's higher authority. He was recognized by the people as their true priest and preserver of doctrinal unity, and his followers even experienced him in the role of a priest consecrating the Eucharist. Daniel's story, as it was narrated for the benefit of his admirers, exemplifies the complex relation between the possession of spiritual gifts, visible evidence of ascetic living, and concrete authority within the institution of the Christian church.

In the late antique world, it was asceticism that held the other two aspects of the episcopate, the spiritual and the administrative, in balance. This brings me to my concluding point.

7. Three kinds of authority: spiritual, ascetic, pragmatic

Earlier, I mentioned Max Weber's thesis that pitches original charisma on the one hand against institution on the other. Both are sources of authority, but of a very different, and indeed opposing nature. We have seen that in the formative centuries of the Christian church, things were more complex than that, beginning with the fact

44 *Vita S. Danielis Stylitae* 96.

that in the historical development of episcopal office, institution comes first and charisma second.

I have therefore suggested a different way of thinking about the kind of authority that is involved in the late antique episcopate, and it has been rewarding to see that other scholars have found this a useful approach.[45] Instead of Weber's binary opposites, I introduced three categories: spiritual authority, ascetic authority, and pragmatic authority.

Spiritual authority indicates that its bearer has received the Spirit from God. Spiritual authority has its source outside the individual. It is given by God, as a gift. Spiritual authority is personal. It is given directly to a specific individual, without personal participation or preparation by its recipient. Finally, spiritual authority is self-sufficient. It can exist in the individual independent of its recognition by others. In highlighting the concept of spiritual authority, I follow the lead of the Christian writers of the later Roman Empire who acknowledge God as the source of all gifts of the spirit.

The public recognition of charismatic abilities is encompassed in what I call ascetic authority. Ascetic authority derives its name from *askesis*, meaning "practice". It has its source in the personal efforts of the individual. It is achieved by subduing the body and by practicing virtuous behavior. These efforts are centered on the self, in the hope of attaining a certain ideal of personal perfection. Ascetic authority is accessible to all. Anyone who chooses to do so can engage in the requisite practices. Finally, ascetic authority is visible. It depends on recognition by others, as it is made evident in the individual's appearance, lifestyle, and conduct.

The third member of this triad, pragmatic authority, is based on actions (from πράττω, meaning "to do"). It arises from the actions of

45 E.g. Renate Dekker, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt: Bishops of the Theban Region at Work*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 264, Peeters, Leuven 2018.

the individual, but in distinction from ascetic authority, these actions are directed not toward the shaping of the self, but to the benefit of others. Access to pragmatic authority is restricted. Its achievement depends on the individual's ability, in terms of social position and wealth, to perform these actions. Pragmatic authority is always public. The actions are carried out in full public view. The recognition of pragmatic authority by others depends on the extent and success of the actions that are undertaken on their behalf.

These definitions are, of course, schematic and serve merely to isolate the most important distinctions between the three types of authority. The usefulness of this tripartite scheme lies in the fact that it accords a special place of relevance to ascetic authority as the vital link between the other two. The personal practice of asceticism prepares the individual for the receipt of the gifts of the spirit, and thus of spiritual authority, from God. Since ascetic authority is founded on the regulation of lifestyle and behavior, this is a path open to all. In fact, it is the only path by which an individual can hope to bring down God's grace on his or her own initiative. Yet, at the same time, asceticism is a gauge of the presence of spiritual authority. Nobody can walk the difficult and thorny road of ever more demanding ascetic practices unless he or she receives the help of God. To observers and bystanders, ascetic accomplishments are thus the outward face of spiritual authority. In other words, ascetic authority is simultaneously the humanly and freely accessible precondition for spiritual authority and its openly visible confirmation.

At the same time, ascetic authority is also the motivation and legitimation of pragmatic authority. This feature is essential to understanding the public activities of bishops in late antiquity. It allows us to perceive a crucial distinction between bishops and civic leaders. Bishops are always held to a higher code of conduct, and their ability to exercise leadership is conditional on their adherence to that code. In contrast to civic leaders, the bishops' pragmatic actions on

behalf of the community are considered to be a manifestation of their ascetic authority, so much so that the successful exercise of the former is believed to be a direct consequence of the latter.

To return to the initial question, how can one study 'holiness' and 'bishops' in together? The answer lies in asceticism. It provides the analytical tool that allows the study of bishops and holy men within the same cultural, religious, social, and political context. These ideas were first articulated by the Church Fathers in late antiquity, but they remain of acute importance. I therefore close with three quotations from the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* by Pope Paul VI, which was based on discussions at the Second Vatican Council and issued on 21 November 1964. The episcopate is called "a true service" (Jerome would have said: an *opus*, not *honor*), their duties at the altar and their power to bind and loose requires an exemplary way of life to inspire others (as the *Apostolic Tradition* noted), and they are expected to become a model (Ignatius of Antioch would have said: an ἐξεμπλάριον) to their flock through their daily life and interests.

> Bishops, as successors of the apostles, receive from the Lord, to whom was given all power in heaven and on earth, the mission to teach all nations and to preach the Gospel to every creature, so that all men may attain to salvation by faith, baptism and the fulfilment of the commandments.
> To fulfill this mission, Christ the Lord promised the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and on Pentecost day sent the Spirit from heaven, by whose power they would be witnesses to Him before the nations and peoples and kings even to the ends of the earth.
> And that duty, which the Lord committed to the shepherds of His people, is a true service, which in sacred literature is significantly called 'diakonia' or ministry (*Lumen gentium* 24).

> Bishops thus, by praying and laboring for the people, make outpourings in many ways and in great abundance from the fullness of Christ's holiness. By the ministry of the word they communicate God's power to those who believe unto salvation and through the sacraments, the regular and fruitful distribution of which they regulate by their authority, they

> sanctify the faithful. They direct the conferring of baptism, by which a sharing in the kingly priesthood of Christ is granted. They are the original ministers of confirmation, dispensers of sacred Orders and the moderators of penitential discipline, and they earnestly exhort and instruct their people to carry out with faith and reverence their part in the liturgy and especially in the holy sacrifice of the Mass. And lastly, by the example of their way of life they must be an influence for good to those over whom they preside, refraining from all evil and, as far as they are able with God's help, exchanging evil for good, so that together with the flock committed to their care they may arrive at eternal life (*Lumen gentium* 26).
>
> Let them [the priesthood, encompassing priests and bishops], as fathers in Christ, take care of the faithful whom they have begotten by baptism and their teaching. Becoming from the heart a pattern to the flock, let them so lead and serve their local community that it may worthily be called by that name, by which the one and entire people of God is signed, namely, the Church of God. Let them remember that by their daily life and interests they are showing the face of a truly sacerdotal and pastoral ministry to the faithful and the infidel, to Catholics and non-Catholics, and that to all they bear witness to the truth and life, and as good shepherds go after those also, who though baptized in the Catholic Church have fallen away from the use of the sacraments, or even from the faith (*Lumen gentium* 28).

Abstract

Is high clerical office incompatible with personal holiness? Does the episcopate constitute 'work' or 'honor'? This article examines patristic authors and contextualizes the issue in late antique society. It suggests that the ultimate source for ecclesiastical authority is asceticism.