

13 Obstacles of Becoming an Orthodox Priest

Ecclesiastical hierarchy plays an important role in the life of the Church. The Church cannot exist or perform her salvific ministry in the world without the hierarchy that traces its origins to the holy apostles and was laid out by Jesus Christ himself. This is why it is vital that future priests meet the high moral and spiritual requirements of the holy Gospel.

Physical Obstacles

1. Age

One has to be mature, strong in his convictions, and have a solid experience in life to be a member of the clergy or even help the priest or the bishop as an altar server. Consequently, the person has to reach a certain age. The canonical required age for a presbyter (priest) is 30

That a presbyter be not ordained before he is thirty years of age, even if he be a very worthy man, but let him be kept back. For our Lord Jesus Christ was baptized and began to teach when he was thirty (Canon 14 of the Quinisext Council).

Canon 15 of the same Council orders those who were ordained contrary to the prescribed time to be deposed. Practically speaking, this requirement can sometimes be waived (under Oikonomia) both nowadays and in the ancient times. Additionally, according to the current Code of the Russian Orthodox Church, a person can be ordained into priesthood at the age of 18 and into bishopric at the age of 30.

2. Physical Defects and Illnesses

Though they generally don't preclude one from becoming a priest, there are several defects that render priestly ministry hardly possible. Apostolic Canon 77 states:

If any one be deprived of an eye or lame of a leg, but in other respects be worthy of a bishopric, he may be ordained, for the defect of the body does not defile a man, but the pollution of the soul.

However, Apostolic Canon 78 adds:

If a man be deaf or blind, he may not be made a bishop, not indeed as if he were thus defiled, but that the affairs of the Church may not be hindered.

As far as eunuchs (castrates) are concerned, Canon 1 of the First Ecumenical Council

states:

If any one in sickness has been subjected by physicians to a surgical operation, or if he has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy; but, if any one in sound health has castrated himself, it behooves that such a one, if already enrolled among the clergy, should cease from his ministry, and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted.

Zonaras explains that the person who voluntarily lets someone else castrate him also counts as a person who castrates himself. If a man suffers from mental disorder, he cannot be among the clergy, either (See Apostolic Canon 79). However, if that person recovers and is worthy of ordination, he may be ordained.

Spiritual Obstacles

3. Apostasy

The faith of a candidate for priesthood must be tried and tested, because if that person apostatizes in the time of persecution, he cannot be restored in the priestly rank even if he repents.

If any who have lapsed have been ordained through the ignorance or even with the previous knowledge of the ordainers, this shall not prejudice the Canon of the Church, for when they are discovered they shall be deposed.

4. Baptism For Fear of Death

Canon 12 of the Council of Neocæsarea states:

If any one be baptized when he is ill, forasmuch as his profession of faith was not voluntary but of necessity, i.e. through fear of death, he cannot be promoted to the presbyterate, unless on account of his subsequent display of zeal and faith...

5. Recent Conversion

Recent converts are typically characterized by a lack of faith, hence they are not ordained, per church Canons. This is what Apostle Paul writes to Timothy with regard to ordination of bishops:

Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil (1 Timothy 3:6).

Canon 3 of the Council of Laodicea sums up Apostolic Canon 80 and Canon 2 of the First Ecumenical Council thus:

He who has been recently baptized ought not to be promoted to the sacerdotal order.

6. Non-Christian Relatives

The apostle Paul writes that a candidate may be ordained into bishopric only if he has *faithful children* (Titus 1:6). Hence, Canon 36 of the Council of Carthage prescribes the following:

None shall be ordained bishop, presbyter or deacon before all the inhabitants of their houses shall have become Orthodox Christians.

7. Mortal Sins

Those were the sins that required public confession in the ancient Church. They include murder, theft, grave robbery, sacrilege, fornication, adultery, sodomy (See Canon 6 of St. Gregory of Nyssa and Apostolic Canon 61). Canons of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa also prohibited even those who had committed manslaughter to become members of clergy. Usurers may be ordained only if they donate the ill-gotten money to the poor and go out of business.

Social Obstacles

8. Second Marriage

Apostolic Canon 17 reads:

He who has been twice married after baptism, or who has had a concubine, cannot become a bishop, presbyter, deacon or any other of the sacerdotal list.*

**Orthodox marriage* (The Orthodox Church does not recognize heterodox marriages)

9. Passive Polygamy

Apostolic Canon 18 states:

He who married a widow or a divorced woman or a harlot or a servant-maid or an actress, cannot be a bishop, presbyter, deacon or any other of the sacerdotal list.

10. Wife's Adultery

Canon 8 of the Council of Neocæsarea:

If the wife of a layman has committed adultery and has been clearly convicted, such a husband cannot enter the ministry; and if she commit adultery after his ordination, he must put her away; but if he retain her, he can have no part in the ministry committed to him.

11. Marrying A Close Relative Or A Non-Christian

These facts also make it impossible for a man to become a priest, based on Apostolic Canon 19 and Canon 36 (45) of the Council of Carthage, respectively.

12. Liabilities To The State, Which Make It Impossible For A Priest To Perform His Duties

Apostolic Canon 83 reads:

If a bishop, presbyter or deacon shall serve in the army and wishes to retain both the Roman magistracy and the priestly office, let him be deposed; for “the things of Cæsar belong to Cæsar and those of God to God.”*

Aside from soldiers and officers, people who are sentenced to jail time, cannot be ordained, either.

* i.e. *public office*

13. Ill Reputation

Apostle Paul writes:

Moreover, he [i.e., a bishop] must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:7).

Therefore, people of certain occupations cannot be candidates for ordination (e.g., loan sharks, actors, casino owners, etc.).

Oikonomia

The aforementioned obstacles, no matter how serious they are, especially concerning moral purity, are not absolute. In cases of dire necessity or owing to the candidate's exceptional qualities, the legitimate church authorities may forgo the general rules out of mercy and in view of the well-being of the Church. This often occurs with regard to canonical age of the candidate. There are just two absolute and peremptory obstacles for ordination in the Orthodox Church: (1) sex (only men can be priests) and (2) not having been baptized (for in this case, the man does not belong to the Church).

(This article was originally written by John Nichiporuk and reformatted here with slight corrections in grammar and punctuation)