

9. PRIESTS, RABBIS AND ... KOHANIM PRIESTS

The Jewish priests (*kohanim*)

In Exodus 29:7-9 the Lord says to Moses: “You shall take the anointing oil and pour it upon his head and anoint him. And you shall bring his sons and put tunics upon them. And you shall gird them with girdles, Aaron and his sons, and bind headbands on them; and they shall have the priesthood by a perpetual statute; and you shall consecrate Aaron and his sons.”

The blessing of Levi in Deut 33:8-11 entrusts the Levites, descendants of Aaron, with the instruction of the people: “They shall teach Your judgments to Jacob, and to Israel Your law” and rituals: “They shall put incense before you, and a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar.”

During the monarchic period, the priests of Jerusalem were reorganised and all the Levitical priests were joined by the descendants of Zadok. The priestly function was not limited to the practice of worship in the Temple. Indeed, they were also responsible for studying and teaching Torah. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies on the holiest day of the year, *Yom Kippur*, and utter the Ineffable Name of God.

In the days of Jesus, the Sadducee priests were closely associated with the power of the Romans who occupied the land, while the task of teaching was gradually handed over to the Pharisees.

Even after the destruction of the Temple (70 AD) and up to the present day, the *Kohanim* have retained some of their prerogatives: the first call during the synagogal reading of the Torah is reserved for them, and it is they who, according to the daily rituals or on feast days, give the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”

The Rabbis (*rabbanim*)

The term “*Rabbi*” comes from the Hebrew word “*rav*” meaning “teacher” (plural *rabbanim*; my teacher: *rabbi*). In order to carry out his duties, a rabbi must have received rabbinic ordination, *semikhah*. The term ‘*rabbi*’ does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, but it appears for the first time in the New Testament and in the *Mishnah* (2nd century CE). Jesus himself is often referred to in the Gospels with the title rabbi “my teacher” or, in most cases, with its Greek equivalent *didáskalos*.

Ordination requires the successful completion of a rigorous programme of study of the written and oral Torah, followed by the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, their commentaries

and *halakhic* decisions. This training is often done in a *yeshivah*, an academy dedicated to studying Hebrew, Aramaic, liturgy, law and philosophy, especially ethics. Some institutions, such as Yeshivah University in New York, also require a university degree for access to higher education.

In Italy, cities with a Jewish community have a chief rabbi. It is up to the community to choose its own rabbi. Italian rabbis are members of the Italian Rabbinical Assembly (*Assemblea Rabbinica Italiana*).

What is the role of the rabbi today?

A rabbi's duties vary according to the type of Community and Country where he serves. His role is primarily one of teaching; he also issues decisions on halakhic matters, especially marriage, divorce and conversion.

Rabbis may lead congregational prayers (although any other adult Jew may do so), and on the Sabbath and holidays they give a sermon (*derashah* – “interpretation”) on the portion of Scripture read during the service. In some congregations they also act as spiritual leaders. In Italy, in certain circumstances, rabbis can perform civil duties (e.g. legally marry couples).

Together with the presidents of the Communities, they have a representative role vis-à-vis public institutions and civil society.

Rabbis and priests (or presbyters) share some common characteristics in terms of teaching and community leadership, but there are also some significant differences. In fact, in the Catholic Church, priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, are endowed with a special characteristic which closely links them to the mission of the bishops and identifies them with the priesthood of Christ, so that they may act in His name and cooperate with the bishops in the mission received from Jesus to develop, sanctify and govern His Body, which is the Church. This is done above all through the proclamation of the Gospel, the celebration of the Eucharist and the sacraments. Indeed, “by Baptism men are truly brought into the People of God; by the sacrament of Penance sinners are reconciled to God and his Church; by the Anointing of the Sick, the ill are given solace; and especially by the celebration of Mass they offer sacramentally the Sacrifice of Christ.”⁸³

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⁸³ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n.5.