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“You are members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the Apostles ...” (Eph 2:19).

The idea of apostolic succession is central to the Roman Catholic church’s belief that bishops are successors to the Apostles, even as the pope is successor to St. Peter, head of the Apostles. The priesthood is an extension of the power of the bishop, who ordains by imposing hands on each candidate, delegating his own teaching, preaching and sacramental authority to that individual.

This hierarchical structure was recognized in the Gospels, written toward the end of the first century, also establishing the Apostles as successors to the 12 tribes of Israel going back to Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah. As traditions go, this one is deep and therefore difficult to question or alter. Luke tells us that Jesus spent the night in prayer before choosing, ensuring divine approval on the selection.

Yet, the basic model has also been adapted and added to historically to include celibacy, limiting ministry to males, the creation of episcopal ranks, cardinals and elaborate ecclesial protocols, costumes and customs to define and protect the clerical order that runs the church.

It is a selective interpretation of Jesus’ practice of including women within his inner circle, St. Paul’s partnering with married couples and women as leaders in his missionary work and communities. It also brackets apart the role that Mary of Magdala played in Gospels and the church’s official recognition that she was an “Apostle to the Apostles” as key witness to both the death and resurrection of Jesus sent to announce this to the others.

With this as background, we can understand the bump going through the church after a majority of the bishops at the Synod on the Amazon recommended that married men be ordained as priests and women be considered for ordination as deacons and given greater official roles in ministry. This adaptation was about ensuring that the Eucharist, other sacraments and full pastoral care will be available to the people in the region.

On this feast of St. Jude and St. Simon, Apostles, we ponder the tradition and its long history of adaptations to meet the needs of the church. We don't know what Jesus prayed for all night on the mountain, but he must have had God's people in mind first and foremost.

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