

Here is a very small sampling of the earliest rules laid down by the 4th Century “Church,” all with the forceful backing of the Roman Empire. This was the norm for “Christians” during the next 1,000 years, with only a few changes made by the ecclesiastical authorities..

Apostolic Constitutions, Book 2, Section VII.—On Assembling in the Church¹

An Exact Description of a Church and the Clergy, and What Things in Particular Every One is to Do in the Solemn Assemblies of the Clergy and Laity For, Religious Worship.

LVII. But be thou, O bishop, holy, unblameable, no striker, not soon angry, not cruel; but a builder up, a converter, apt to teach, forbearing of evil, of a gentle mind, meek, long-suffering, ready to exhort, ready to comfort, as a man of God.

When thou callest an assembly of the Church as one that is the commander of a great ship, appoint the assemblies to be made with all possible skill, charging the deacons as mariners to prepare places for the brethren as for passengers, with all due care and decency.

And first, let the building be long, with its head to the east, with its vestries² on both sides at the east end, and so it will be like a ship. In the middle let the bishop’s throne³ be placed, and on each side of him let the presbytery sit down; and let the deacons stand near at hand, in close and small girt garments, for they are like the mariners and managers of the ship: with regard to these, let the laity sit on the other side, with all quietness and good order. And let the women sit by themselves, they also keeping silence.

In the middle, let the reader stand upon some high place: let him read the books of Moses, of Joshua the son of Nun, of the Judges, and of the Kings and of the Chronicles, and those written after the return from the captivity; and besides these, the books of Job and of Solomon, and of the sixteen prophets. But when there have been two lessons severally read, let some other person sing the hymns of David, and let the people join at the conclusions of the verses. Afterwards let our Acts be read, and the Epistles of Paul our fellow-worker, which he sent to the churches under the conduct of the Holy Spirit; and afterwards let a deacon or a presbyter read the Gospels, both those which I Matthew and John have delivered to you, and those which the fellow-workers of Paul received and left to you, Luke and Mark. And while the Gospel is read, let all the presbyters and deacons, and all the people, stand up in great silence; for it is written: “Be silent, and hear, O Israel.” And again: “But do thou stand there, and hear.”

In the next place, let the presbyters one by one, not all together, exhort the people, and the bishop in the last place, as being the commander.

¹ The Apostolic Constitutions were probably composed in Syria during the later 300s, although they were written in such a way as to lay claim to apostolic authority.

² Rooms where the official garments were kept. They doubled as official meeting rooms.

³ In Latin this chair was called the “cathedra,” the presence of which made the building into a “cathedral.”

Let the porters stand at the entries of the men, and observe them. Let the deaconesses also stand at those of the women, like shipmen. For the same description and pattern was both in the tabernacle of the testimony and in the temple of God.

But if any one be found sitting out of his place, let him be rebuked by the deacon, as a manager of the foreship, and be removed into the place proper for him; for the Church is not only like a ship, but also like a sheepfold. For as the shepherds place all the brute creatures distinctly, I mean goats and sheep, according to their kind and age, and still every one runs together, like to his like; so is it to be in the Church.

Let the young persons sit by themselves, if there be a place for them; if not, let them stand upright. But let those that are already stricken in years sit in order. For the children which stand, let their fathers and mothers take them to them. Let the younger women also sit by themselves, if there be a place for them; but if there be not, let them stand behind the women. Let those women which are married, and have children, be placed by themselves; but let the virgins, and the widows, and the elder women, stand or sit before all the rest; and let the deacon be the disposer of the places, that every one of those that comes in may go to his proper place, and may not sit at the entrance.

In like manner, let the deacon oversee the people, that nobody may whisper, nor slumber, nor laugh, nor nod; for all ought in the church to stand wisely, and soberly, and attentively, having their attention fixed upon the word of the Lord.

After this, let all rise up with one consent, and looking towards the east, after the catechumens and penitents are gone out, pray to God eastward, who ascended up to the heaven of heavens to the east; remembering also the ancient situation of paradise in the east, from whence the first man, when he had yielded to the persuasion of the serpent, and disobeyed the command of God, was expelled.

As to the deacons, after the prayer is over, let some of them attend upon the oblation of the Eucharist, ministering to the Lord's body with fear.

Let others of them watch the multitude, and keep them silent.

But let that deacon who is at the high priest's hand say to the people, Let no one have any quarrel against another; let no one come in hypocrisy.

Then let the men give the men, and the women give the women, the Lord's kiss. But let no one do it with deceit, as Judas betrayed the Lord with a kiss.

After this let the deacon pray for the whole Church, for the whole world, and the several parts of it, and the fruits of it; for the priests and the rulers, for the high priest and the king, and the peace of the universe.

After this let the high priest pray for peace upon the people, and bless them, as Moses commanded the priests to bless the people, in these words: "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and give thee peace."

Let the bishop pray for the people, and say: "Save Thy people, O Lord, and bless Thine inheritance, which Thou hast obtained with the precious blood of Thy Christ, and hast called a royal priesthood, and an holy nation."

After this let the sacrifice follow, the people standing, and praying silently; and when the oblation has been made, let every rank by itself partake of the Lord's body and precious blood in order, and approach with reverence and holy fear, as to the body of their king. Let the women approach with their heads covered, as is becoming the order of women; but let the door be watched, lest any unbeliever, or one not yet initiated, come in.

The Ecclesiastical Canons of the Same Holy Apostles⁴

1. Let a bishop be ordained by two or three bishops.
2. A presbyter by one bishop, as also a deacon, and the rest of the clergy.
3. If any bishop or presbyter, otherwise than our Lord has ordained concerning the sacrifice, offer other things at the altar *of God*, as honey, milk, or strong beer instead of wine, any necessaries, or birds, or animals, or pulse, otherwise than is ordained, let him be deprived; excepting grains of new corn, or ears of wheat, or bunches of grapes in their season.
4. For it is not lawful to offer anything besides these at the altar, and oil for the holy lamp, and incense in the time of the divine oblation.
5. But let all other fruits be sent to the house of the bishop, as first-fruits to him and to the presbyters, but not to the altar. Now it is plain that the bishop and presbyters are to divide them to the deacons and to the rest of the clergy.
6. Let not a bishop, a priest, or a deacon cast off his own wife under pretence of piety;⁵ but if he does cast her off, let him be suspended. If he go on in it, let him be deprived.
7. Let not a bishop, a priest, or deacon undertake the cares of this world; but if he do, let him be deprived.
8. If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon shall celebrate the holiday of the passover before the vernal equinox with the Jews, let him be deprived.
9. If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or any one of the catalogue of the priesthood, when the oblation is over, does not communicate, let him give his reason; and if it be just, let him be forgiven; but if he does not do it, let him be suspended, as becoming the cause of damage to the people, and occasioning a suspicion against him that offered, as of one that did not rightly offer.
10. All those of the faithful that enter *into the holy church of God*, and hear the sacred Scriptures, but do not stay during prayer and the holy communion, must be suspended, as causing disorder in the church.
11. If any one, even in the house, prays with a person excommunicate, let him also be suspended.
12. If any clergyman prays with one deprived as with a clergyman, let himself also be deprived.
13. If any clergyman or layman who is suspended, or ought not to be received, goes away, and is received in another city without commendatory letters, let both those who received him and he that was received be suspended. But if he be already suspended, let his suspension be lengthened, as lying to and deceiving the Church of God.
14. A bishop ought not to leave his own parish and leap to another, although the multitude should compel him, unless there be some good reason forcing him to do this, as that he can contribute much greater profit to the people of the new parish by the word of piety; but this is not to be settled by himself, but by the judgment of many bishops, and very great supplication.

⁴ Part of the 4th Century Apostolic Constitutions. The Eastern Church accepted a total of 85 canons, while the Western Church only recognized these first 50.

⁵ There is indication from other canon lists that married men who became priests were expected to refrain from any further sexual contact with their wives; however, they were still expected to financially support them (and any children) and could not divorce or abandon them.

15. If any presbyter or deacon, or any one of the catalogue of the clergy, leaves his own parish and goes to another, and, entirely removing himself, continues in that other parish without the consent of his own bishop, him we command no longer to go on in his ministry, especially in case his bishop calls upon him to return, and he does not obey, but continues in his disorder. However, let him communicate there as a layman.

16. But if the bishop with whom they are undervalues the deprivation decreed against them, and receives them as clergymen, let him be suspended as a teacher of disorder.

17. He who has been twice married after his baptism, or has had a concubine, cannot be made a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or indeed any one of the sacerdotal catalogue.

18. He who has taken a widow, or a divorced woman, or an harlot, or a servant, or one belonging to the theatre, cannot be either a bishop, priest, or deacon, or indeed any one of the sacerdotal catalogue.

19. He who has married two sisters, or his brother's or sister's daughter, cannot be a clergyman.

20. Let a clergyman who becomes a surety be deprived.

21. Let an eunuch, if he be such by the injury of men, or his *virilia* were taken away in the persecution, or he was born such, and yet is worthy of episcopacy, be made a bishop.

22. Let not him who has disabled himself be made a clergyman; for he is a self-murderer, and an enemy to the creation of God.

23. If any one who is of the clergy disables himself, let him be deprived, for he is a murderer of himself.

24. Let a layman who disables himself be separated for three years, for he lays a snare for his own life.

25. Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who is taken in fornication, or perjury, or stealing, be deprived, *but not suspended; for the Scripture says: "Thou shall not avenge twice far the same crime by affliction."*

26. In like manner also as to the rest of the clergy.

27. Of those who come into the clergy unmarried, we permit only the readers and singers, if they have a mind, to marry afterward.⁶

28. We command that a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who strikes the faithful that offend, or the unbelievers who do wickedly, and thinks to terrify them by such means, be deprived, for our Lord has nowhere taught us such things. On the contrary, "when Himself was stricken, He did not strike again; when He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not."

29. If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who is deprived justly for manifest crimes, does venture to meddle with that ministration which was once entrusted to him, let the same person be entirely cut off from the Church.

30. If any bishop obtains that dignity by money, or even a presbyter or deacon, let him and the person that ordained him be deprived; and let him be entirely cut off from communion, as Simon Magus was by *me* Peter.

31. If any bishop makes use of the rulers of this world, and by their means obtains to be a bishop of a church, let him be deprived and suspended, and all that communicate with him.

⁶ Which means, of course, that priests were to remain unmarried.

32. If any presbyter despises his own bishop, and assembles separately, and fixes another altar, when he has nothing to condemn in his bishop either as to piety or righteousness, let him be deprived as an ambitious person; for he is a tyrant, and the rest of the clergy, whoever join themselves to him. And let the laity be suspended. But let these things be done after one and a second, or even a third admonition from the bishop.

33. If any presbyter or deacon be put under suspension by his bishop, it is not lawful for any other to receive him, but for him only who put him under suspension, unless it happens that he who put him under suspension die.

34. Do not ye receive any stranger, whether bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, without commendatory letters; and when such are offered, let them be examined. And if they be preachers of piety, let them be received; but if not, supply their wants, but do not receive them to communion: for many things are done by surprise.

35. The bishops of every country ought to know who is the chief among them, and to esteem him as their head, and not to do any great thing without his consent; but every one to manage only the affairs that belong to his own parish, and the places subject to it. But let him not do anything without the consent of all; for it is by this means there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified by Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

36. A bishop must not venture to ordain out of his own bounds for cities or countries that are not subject to him. But if he be convicted of having done so without the consent of such as governed those cities or countries, let him be deprived, both the bishop himself and those whom he has ordained.

37. If any bishop that is ordained does not undertake his office, nor take care of the people committed to him, let him be suspended until he do undertake it; and in the like manner a presbyter and a deacon. But if he goes, and is not received, not because of the want of his own consent, but because of the ill temper of the people, let him continue bishop; but let the clergy of that city be suspended, because they have not taught that disobedient people better.

38. Let a synod of bishops be held twice in the year, and let them ask one another the doctrines of piety; and let them determine the ecclesiastical disputes that happen—once in the fourth week of Pentecost, and again on the twelfth of the month Hyperberetaeus.

39. Let the bishop have the care of ecclesiastical revenues, and administer them as in the presence of God. But it is not lawful for him to appropriate any part of them to himself, or to give the things of God to his own kindred. But if they be poor, let him support them as poor; but let him not, under such pretences, alienate the revenues of the Church.

40. Let not the presbyters and deacons do anything without the consent of the bishop, for it is he who is entrusted with the people of the Lord, and will be required to give an account of their souls. Let the proper goods of the bishop, if he has any, and those belonging to the Lord, be openly distinguished, that he may have power when he dies to leave his own goods as he pleases, and to whom he pleases; that, under pretence of the ecclesiastical revenues, the bishop's own may not come short, who sometimes has a wife and children, or kinsfolk, or servants. For this is just before God and men, that neither the Church suffer any loss by the not knowing which revenues are the bishop's own, nor his kindred, under pretence of the Church, be undone, or his relations fall into lawsuits, and so his death be liable to reproach.

41. We command that the bishop have power over the goods of the Church; for if he be entrusted with the precious souls of men, much more ought he to give directions about goods, that they all be distributed to those in want, according to his authority, by the presbyters and deacons, and be used for their support with the fear of God, and with all reverence. He is also to partake of those things he wants, if he does want them, for his necessary occasions, and those of the brethren who live with him, that they may not by any means be in straits: for the law of God appointed that those who waited at the altar should be maintained by the altar; since not so much as a soldier does at any time bear arms against the enemies at his own charges.

42. Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who indulges himself in dice or drinking, either leave off those practices, or let him be deprived.

43. If a sub-deacon, a reader, or a singer does the like, either let him leave off, or let him be suspended; and so for one of the laity.

44. Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who requires usury of those he lends to, either leave off to do so, or let him be deprived.

45. Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who only prays with heretics, be suspended; but if he also permit them to perform any part of the office of a clergyman, let him be deprived.

46. We command that a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who receives the baptism, or the sacrifice of heretics, be deprived: "For what agreement is there between Christ and Belial? or what part hath a believer with an infidel? "

47. If a bishop or presbyter rebaptizes him who has had true baptism, or does not baptize him who is polluted by the ungodly, let him be deprived, as ridiculing the cross and the death of the Lord, and not distinguishing between real priests and counterfeit ones.

48. If a layman divorces his own wife, and takes another, or one divorced by another, let him be suspended.

49. If any bishop or presbyter does not baptize according to the Lord's constitution, into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, but into three beings without beginning, or into three Sons, or three Comforters, let him be deprived.

50. If any bishop or presbyter does not perform the three immersions of the one admission, but one immersion, which is given into the death of Christ, let him be deprived; for the Lord did not say, "Baptize into my death," but, "Go ye and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Do ye, therefore, O bishops, baptize thrice into one Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, according to the will of Christ, and our constitution by the Spirit.