

The Institution of Ministers

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Introduction

Thank you all for the honor of addressing the 2021 Annual General Meeting of the Society of St. Gregory, and the even greater honor of delivering the twentieth annual Crichton Lecture. Msgr. J. D. Crichton strove to educate and inspire people about the liturgy, widely through a series of useful books. He set the bar high for anyone delivering a lecture that recalls his name and legacy. I am grateful that he laid a firm foundation upon which other workers have been able to build through books, education and pastoral ministry.

I'm speaking to you from Kansas City, Missouri, where I serve as the pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. I'm also the director of the diocesan Office of Divine Worship. Among my upcoming tasks is to help plan the ordination of eighteen deacons, the largest ordination of any kind we can recall in the history of our diocese. Every one of these eighteen candidates has already become a lector and an acolyte. For many centuries, there was nothing too special about that. However, this year Pope Francis has crystallized the meaning of those two ministries in a new way. We can see them through a new lens.

Here is my description of this talk from your web site: "Pope Francis has opened the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte to women, and he has created a new instituted ministry, catechist. The significance of these initiatives has not been readily grasped by many in the Church. The Crichton Lecture this year will trace the history of these ministries and envision a future Church that harvests their fruits."

Much of what I will share with you today distills research I made for a forthcoming book with Liturgy Training Publications in Chicago, tentatively entitled, *I Am Present: Participating in the Rites of Institution and Ordination*. I say "tentatively entitled" because on the day I am giving this lecture, October 16, we in the United States are just a few weeks away from the anticipated publication date of the revised English translation of the ritual book *Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons*. I am a collaborator with the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, so I have watched up close as this revised translation has come to fruition. I'm not expecting big surprises, but I can't be sure of the new words in the translation until I see it all in print.

I began working on the book in 2020 during lockdown in the worst of the covid-19 pandemic. Then, just before I submitted the manuscript to LTP, Pope Francis changed the law governing the institution of ministers. And after I

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submitted the completed manuscript, he changed it again. To understand what happened, what it means, and what horizons it opened, please step back with me in time.

Minor and Major Orders

In the past the Catholic Church made a distinction between minor and major orders. We had four minor orders: porter, exorcist, lector and acolyte. The three major orders were subdiaconate, diaconate and priesthood. Today we no longer divide these the same way. Instead of having seven ranks within two types of orders, we have only three ranks of a single type: bishops, priests and deacons. These are called “orders”—not “major orders,” nor do we have anything called “minor orders.” Bishops, priests and deacons are ordained. No one else. Others may be instituted into ministries.

The minor orders had served the church for many centuries, and they formalized a situation that had grown organically. Some individuals with useful skills and a caring heart had offered their services to the worshipping community. As is true today, every priest relies on the assistance of others for the prayerful celebration of the Mass and adjunct services. Although women have always served in auxiliary liturgical roles and in pastoral care, these particular functions seem to have grown from the services offered by men.

Gradually these assistants grouped themselves into the four categories that became known as minor orders. They each had value in and of themselves; they were not initially regarded as stepping stones to priesthood. Gradually, however, those individuals desiring to fulfill one of these four ministries presented themselves to the bishop, who ordained them. Ultimately, anyone who aspired to serve the church in major orders had first to pass through the minor orders. Therefore, their original functions became more symbolic of preparatory phases. The ceremonies of minor orders assigned certain duties to the men, but in time the rituals simply became markers through which seminarians passed on their way to priesthood.

Originally, then, a porter kept the keys of the church and accepted responsibility for opening and closing the doors and the sacristy. He also kept watch over those who entered the building, thus serving as a kind of greeter, bouncer and guard.

An exorcist had the responsibilities you would expect, assisting in the expulsion of evil spirits. The rite of exorcism traditionally took place within a liturgy of prayer and ritual actions, though not during a Mass.

A lector proclaimed readings for the liturgy, in keeping with the synagogue tradition in which Jesus himself participated. Luke says that Jesus read aloud in Nazareth at the synagogue where he went according to his custom (4:16-17). Justin Martyr tells of readers at the liturgy in the mid-second century. By the fourth century, to begin the Liturgy of the Word, a presiding bishop personally

took up a book and placed it into the hands of a lector, who only then proclaimed the reading.¹ Lectors have a long, practical history.

An acolyte assisted throughout the Mass, but with special emphasis on the second part, what used to be called the Mass of the faithful to distinguish it from the Mass of the catechumens, now called the Liturgy of the Word. Acolytes were responsible for the smooth flow of the ceremonies. In time, altar boys took up these duties, partly because ordained acolytes were relatively few, and someone had to assist in the ceremonies of the Mass at every parish. The task fell to boys perhaps to introduce potential candidates for priesthood into sanctuary responsibilities, perhaps to hand them activities that were easier to master than proclaiming scripture, and perhaps to keep them engaged in a liturgy that otherwise demanded more patience and prayer than they would otherwise be capable of giving.

Subdeacons were the first of the major orders, and they exercised several responsibilities within the liturgy. Deacons and priests performed functions similar to the ones they accept today, proclaiming the gospel and presiding over the eucharist respectively. The office of bishop was not considered an independent major order. When the pope chose a priest to serve somewhere as a bishop, the man received his new rank during an elaborate ceremony. Today it is called an ordination, but it was as common in the past to call it a consecration. Thus, the three major orders were subdeacon, deacon and priest, whereas a new bishop was consecrated.

Reforms Following the Second Vatican Council

At the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy called for the revision of the liturgy—not just the Mass, but sacraments, sacramentals, and the calendar as well. Among these were the ceremonies and texts of the ordination rites (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 76). As with all of the other revisions, a group of experts in the relevant field then convened to focus on a particular project.

For this group, the members were Bernard Botte, a Belgian Benedictine at the Liturgical Institute in Paris; Bruno Kleinheyser, a priest and liturgist from Germany; Joaquim Nabuco, a parish priest and liturgist from Brazil; Cyrille Vogel, a French priest at the University of Strasbourg; Emil Joseph Lengeling, former secretary of the liturgical apostolate in Münster and adviser of the German bishops' conference; Pierre Jounel, a French Dominican and liturgy professor at the Catholic Institute of Paris; and Joseph Lécuyer, a French Spiritan Father of the Lateran University in Rome.² The same group also worked on the revision of the sacrament of confirmation. All such groups reported to a central committee,

¹ Paul Turner, "The Meaning and History of Your Ministry," *Guide for Lectors and Readers*, Second Edition (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2021), p. 12.

² Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy: 1948-1975*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 707.

the Consilium, appointed by Pope Saint Paul VI. This ordination study group first convened in 1966, and Pope Paul authorized the finished work in 1972.

In revising the various orders, the group adhered to what it called “the principle of truth,” namely, that “the liturgical fact (the rite, the text, persons and circumstances) ought to correspond in reality to the matters toward which it is directed.”³ The group judged that by this time in the long history of the minor orders, these ordinations no longer all corresponded to the reality toward which they had been directed. Specifically, the duties of a porter were frequently being entrusted to volunteer positions such as sacristan and usher. Or the pastor himself opened and closed the church and kept an eye on the people who came and went.

Also, the duties of an exorcist had been absorbed into those performed by deacons and priests. Whether they baptized an infant or celebrated ceremonies in preparation for the initiation of an adult, they performed the exorcisms that pertained to those rites. These had less to do with demonic possession and more to do with original sin or the chaotic moral decision-making that can reign over those who do not have the assistance of the sacramental grace that baptism affords. Designated priests carried out more formal exorcisms pertaining to possession. The duties of exorcism, then, pertained to priests and deacons, not to those of lesser rank. Consequently, the revising group agreed to repress these two of the minor orders: porter and exorcist.

However, the other two still carried considerable liturgical importance because of their long history, their adoption in churches East and West, and their practical function in carrying out the liturgy today. Someone still had to proclaim the word, so the group preserved the role of lector. Someone still had to assist in the various ministries at the altar, so the group preserved the role of acolyte.

Regarding the major orders, the group absorbed the duties of the subdeacon into those of the acolyte, and they listed bishops as the third of the major orders—now simply called “orders” because they had discontinued the expression “minor orders” altogether.

All this laid the groundwork for the revisions that Pope Paul VI authorized in two significant documents issued on the same day, August 15, 1972: *Ministeria Quædam* concerning the ministries of lector and acolyte and *Ad Pascendum* concerning the orders of diaconate and priesthood. The first of these pertains to this presentation.

Ministeria Quædam

Three years before *Ministeria Quædam*, the revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* had already assigned specific duties to lectors and acolytes at Mass. These ministries especially fit the responsibilities of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist respectively. Pope Paul significantly changed these functions from orders to ministries and therefore from clergy to

³ Consilium ad Exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia, Schemata, n. 178, De Ordinibus minoribus, 2 (August 15, 1966), p. 10.

lay. In doing so, he also acted in favor of “the principle of truth,” in that these were two types of ministry still useful in the church and that did not require ordination to fulfill. In practice, both laymen and laywomen were already assisting with them. However, Pope Paul distinguished between those who commonly helped at a Mass and those whom a bishop formally instituted into these ministries in the way of the minor orders of the past. Probably for that historical reason, Pope Paul restricted participation in these instituted ministries to males, and he kept the rituals of institution outside the Roman Missal that any priest used, and inside the Roman Pontifical among the ceremonies that a bishop or his delegate used. Other men and women continued to exercise these functions in parishes, but without the formal institution by a bishop.

In his Apostolic Letter *Ministeria Quaedam*, Pope Paul VI explained the reasoning behind this development as well as his expectations for the qualifications of candidates, the celebration of the liturgies of institution, and the expectations of those to be instituted.

Regarding lectors, Pope Paul assigned them the duties of proclaiming the readings and the responsorial, that is, all the scriptures except the gospel, which was still reserved to a deacon, or in his absence, to a priest. He also asked lectors to lead the intentions of the universal prayer, though a lector would usually do so in the absence of a deacon. Pope Paul also invited lectors to assist with singing and the participation of the people. Thus, they were to help motivate the people to fulfill their role at the Mass, singing the dialogues and assuming the appropriate postures and gestures. These responsibilities had more practical force in the early years of the renewal when people were still becoming accustomed to more vibrant participation at Mass.

That was a lot for a lector to do. However, Pope Paul VI expected even more. He expected these lectors to become so familiar with the scriptures and the skills of proclamation that they would instruct others how to read effectively and prepare other members of the faithful, including women, to serve as readers. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy promoted a warm and living love of the scriptures (SC 24), and Pope Paul thought that lectors could bring this to life. They may accomplish this through their own private meditation, but also by study of the bible through any means of classes, commentary and resources.

Regarding acolytes, Pope Paul assigned them the duties of assisting at the altar and serving as extraordinary ministers of holy communion. Outside of Mass, acolytes could also expose the Blessed Sacrament for periods of adoration, but they were not to give benediction; only a priest or a deacon could lift the monstrance and bless the people with it. This meant that acolytes would be bringing communion to the sick, fostering eucharistic devotion among the people, and assisting in the duties of altar servers and communion ministers.

That was a lot for an acolyte to do. However, Paul VI expected more. He expected these acolytes to instruct others who served at Mass to learn how to carry the cross and candles, and how to hold the missal. As lectors were to develop a deep love for the Word of God, acolytes were to develop a deep love for

the eucharist. They may accomplish this through their own devotion to faithful participation at Mass and through ancillary means such as eucharistic adoration. Because the eucharist is the sacrament of love, because Jesus instituted the eucharist on the occasion when he washed the feet of his disciples, the connection between communion and service is so tight that acolytes should also be exemplars of the love of God. They not only serve the eucharistic Body of Christ; they serve the ecclesial body of Christ, the other members of the church, as a source of unity in humility.

Candidates for the diaconate and the priesthood were expected to be instituted in these two ministries first. However, Paul VI did not design them as steps to the priesthood. He envisioned them as vocations discerned and executed separately. They appear in a separate part of the pontifical from the ceremony called Candidacy for orders. Only those men preparing for ordination to the diaconate or priesthood go through the ceremony of candidacy. This replaced a ceremony called tonsure, which admitted a man to the clerical state and made him eligible for the minor and major orders. Now he becomes a cleric only with ordination; candidacy is the declaration that he is making the appropriate preparations. The two ministries, then, lector and acolyte, truly belong to the laity, not just to those in formation for ordination.

Yet because the Pope Paul VI had reserved these to males, for the past several decades they have essentially remained steps to the priesthood. Some bishops instituted into these ministries some men who did not aspire to continue formation as deacons or priests, but many more bishops did not because it seemed unfair to women who performed the same duties in practice. These bishops may not have called it such, but they were in effect following the same “principle of truth” that inspired these changes after the council. Consequently, the development of these ministries in and of themselves never fully flowered.

Spiritus Domini and Antiquum ministerium

All of that changed on January 10, 2021, when Pope Francis issued *Spiritus Domini*,⁴ an Apostolic Letter given *motu proprio*. He permitted bishops to institute women into the ministries of lector and acolyte. For the first time in hundreds of years two titles formerly reserved to men whom a bishop placed in minor orders are now open to women in a ceremony over which the bishop presides. This was a logical conclusion to the actions taken by Pope Paul VI, but it marked a revolution in how the church perceived these roles. Yes, women could read at Mass, and, yes, they could assist at the altar and in the distribution of communion. However, now a pope saw these instituted ministries as products of vocational discernments that applied to women as well as men, people called into stable, lifelong leadership within a community. With Pope Paul VI, Francis envisioned some people entering into these ministries not only because of their

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html

liturgical skills, but also because of their catechetical abilities and the development of pertinent devotion in the spiritual life.

Several months after that, Francis expanded the number of instituted ministries to include catechist. He issued another Apostolic Letter *motu proprio* that carried the title *Antiquum ministerium*,⁵ a reference to the antiquity of the ministry of catechist in the church. He acknowledged the primacy of the bishop as the chief catechist, but also recognized “those lay men and women who feel called by virtue of their baptism to cooperate in the work of catechesis” (5). Pope Francis clarified, “This ministry has a definite vocational aspect, as evidenced by the Rite of Institution, and consequently calls for due discernment on the part of the Bishop. It is in fact a stable form of service rendered to the local Church in accordance with pastoral needs identified by the local Ordinary, yet one carried out as a work of the laity, as demanded by the very nature of the ministry. It is fitting that those called to the instituted ministry of Catechist be men and women of deep faith and human maturity, active participants in the life of the Christian community, capable of welcoming others, being generous and living a life of fraternal communion. They should also receive suitable biblical, theological, pastoral and pedagogical formation to be competent communicators of the truth of the faith and they should have some prior experience of catechesis” (8).

We are still awaiting the liturgical ceremony by which this institution will happen. It will have to be created from scratch, unlike those for lector and acolyte, which have precedents hundreds of years old. We’ve never had an instituted ministry of catechist in the history of the church, even though two of our most popular rituals, baptism and matrimony, have chapters that explain how a catechist is to lead them in the absence of a deacon or a priest. Whatever the final ritual turns out to be, it will surely shed more light upon the expectations of those called to this ministry.

Unlike lector and acolyte, the ministry of catechist has never been associated with minor orders, so its connection to lay ministry may be seen more clearly. Furthermore, the pope issued no expectation that those aspiring to the orders of diaconate and priesthood first require institution into the ministry of catechist. Throughout history and in pastoral practice large numbers of the laity have embraced the ministry of catechist. Nonetheless, looking to the future, because bishops are the chief catechists, perhaps it would be appropriate that everyone aspiring to be ordained a priest fulfill the requirements for institution as a catechist. Even if the priest never becomes a bishop, he will need to assist the bishop by overseeing catechetical ministry in parishes and other centers of the faith.

Although the institution of catechists is new, Pope Saint Paul VI foresaw the possibility. In *Ministeria Quaedam*, he permitted conferences of bishops to restore porter or exorcist if they saw fit, but as ministries, not orders. He also envisioned new ministries such as catechist and worker of charity. Although the

⁵ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html.

idea first came from the desk of that pope in 1972, it took nearly fifty years for another pope to designate catechist as a lay ministry.

Discernment and Formation

All of this raises some important questions about the discernment of vocations within the church, especially with regard to deacons and priests. Imagine a church in which the fruits of this year's two apostolic letters have flowered. The diocese has added to its vocation offices for priests, religious and women, a vocation office for lectors, acolytes and catechists. Or perhaps these are initially included in the same offices. However, the discernment of applicants clearly needs careful and individual attention.

Concerning lectors, here are some questions that one could ask: What is the applicant's experience of the Word of God? What formation have they already received? Are they already proclaiming the scriptures in their parish? Have they ever participated in scripture study offerings at their parish? Have they ever led such studies? What evidence do they show for letting their own lives be formed by the Word of God? What is their personal approach to meditating on the scriptures? Are they familiar with any biblical commentaries or with the writings of the church fathers on the books of the bible? Have they engaged in ecumenical or interreligious dialogue concerning sacred scriptures? Do they know why certain books appear in the Catholic bible, but not in others? Knowledge of Hebrew and Greek would not be essential for this ministry, but it would enhance it; have they any familiarity with the scriptures in those original languages?

Concerning acolytes, what experience do they bring with serving at Mass? What formation have they received in eucharistic theology? Are they currently a communion minister at their parish? Have they taken part in retreats, eucharistic congresses, or intensive studies on the Mass? How do they understand the expression, "the sacrifice of the Mass" and what implications does that have? Have they ever taught others how to serve? Can they effectively explain Catholic teaching about the eucharist? What evidence do they show about how the eucharist has formed their lives? How are they known for their acts of love? How are they known for their service to others? Are they agents of unity in the parish? How do they develop their love for the eucharist? Do they study it from the bible or from spiritual writers? Who are their favorite writers on eucharistic themes? Have they dialogued with other Catholics and other Christians about the meaning of communion at church? Have they ever prepared children for first communion or for serving at Mass?

Concerning catechists, what experience do they bring in offering religious instruction? What instruction have they received? An advanced degree in theology may not be necessary, but it would aid this ministry; what evidence do they have of their serious intent to be a learner of the church's teachings? Are they part of a network of catechists? How do they like to sharpen their skills? Have they ever taught others how to teach? What skills do they look for in good catechists? Which books, journals, blogs or web sites do they seek to form themselves in the Christian way of life? What textbooks or tools have they found

especially helpful when they catechize others? Have they experience not only in teaching but also in organizing catechetical programs? Have they supervised other catechists? What is their vision of catechesis in their own parish?

The process of discernment can move from these questions into the area of spiritual formation. Each of the ministries deserves its own regulated track specializing in pertinent material. Perhaps each candidate needs to show evidence of pastoral ministry over the course of several years. Perhaps their particular formation needs to last from six months to a year. Perhaps diocesan leadership, not the pastor alone, determines which candidates will be instituted. In the end, each parish may still have the same number of readers, acolytes and catechists as they now have, but perhaps the bishop will institute only one or two of them, men or women, into these ministries as leaders of the others.

What then is the consequence for the formation of deacons and priests? Each of them is expected to be instituted into the ministries of lector and acolyte. However, in the past, because these were restricted to men, and because they were broadly perceived as steps to the priesthood, they probably received little pertinent formation for these particular ministries. If the formation of lectors and acolytes in a diocese requires a more studied approach to discernment and preparation, then surely this would apply the formation of deacons and priests for these ministries as well—unless the candidates come from a pool of men who were already instituted into one or both of these ministries. Either way, they should first demonstrate their response to a vocation into the ministries of lector and acolyte. If they have reached a level of spiritual discernment equivalent to that expected of other men and women of the diocese, then they have fulfilled that part of their requirements for ordination.

Even so, these ministries are no longer established as stepping stones to something further. They are discerned vocations into which some men and women in each parish may be called. They deserve our prayer, our attention, and the openness of our hearts to receive from these developments whatever the Holy Spirit has in mind for the Church.