

François-Xavier Amherdt

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5488-8584>

The University of Fribourg, Switzerland

The Instituted Ministries of Readers and Acolytes: A Kairos for the Synodality of the Liturgy

Abstract

Among the proposals for the implementation of the *motu proprio Spiritus Domini* and *Antiquum Ministerium* of Pope Francis (2021), opening the instituted ministries also to women and to lay people not on the way to ordination, the *Note* of the Italian Bishops' Conference of June 2022, is certainly one of the most relevant with respect to the discernment, formation and conditions of access of candidates. By receiving a sacramental from the bishop in a community liturgy, for a perennial ministry at the service of the Word of God, the care of the body of Christ in the Eucharist and in the sick, as well as for Christian initiation and small base communities, the instituted ministers can contribute to the synodal revitalization of the ecclesial communion. Decreed *ad experimentum* for three years, the Italian document can inspire other Bishops' Conferences around the world.

Keywords

ministries, institutions, readers, acolytes, catechists, men and women, synodality, Word of God, Body of Christ.

How to implement Pope Francis' *motu proprio Spiritus Domini*,¹ of which the liturgy is the primary framework of realisation, as well as the second *Antiquum Ministerium*, dedicated to the ministry of catechist?² In this regard, it is worth examining the *Note* on the "Instituted Ministries of Reader, Acolyte and Catechist" of June 2022 of the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI).³ It is presented by the CEI as a favourable opportunity for the renewal of the *forma Ecclesiae* in more communion-oriented terms, in the context of the synodal process underway until October 2024.

Although the document of the pastors of the peninsula also deals with catechists, we follow its structure by first situating the place of the instituted ministries, male and female, in the Church (1); then by outlining the future configuration of the lectorate and acolytate (2); by discussing the discernment and training of potential candidates (3); and by examining the rite of institution and mandate (4) and discussing the challenges of implementation (5).

1. Place of established ministries

The opening up of the instituted ministries also to women – which St Paul VI had proposed to recast with his *motu proprio Ministeria Quaedam* of 1972⁴ – makes it even more evident that the Church's concern for her daughters and sons

¹ Francis, *Spiritus Domini*, Apostolic Letter in the Form of a *Motu Proprio* on the Modification of Canon 230 § 1 of the *Code of Canon Law Concerning the Access of Women to the Instituted Ministry of the Lectorate and Acolyte*, Rom 10 January 2021 (cited as *SD*), together with a *Letter to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Access of Women to the Ministries of the Lectorate and Acolyte* (Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria), dated the same day (cited as *Letter Ladaria*).

² Francis, *Antiquum Ministerium*, Apostolic Letter in the Form of a *Motu Proprio* establishing the Ministry of Catechist, Rom 2021.

³ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore, dell'accolito e del catechista*, <http://www.settimananews.it/ministeri-carismi/ministeri-istituiti-lettore-accolito-catechista/> (16.07.2022).

⁴ Paul VI, *Ministeria Quaedam*, Apostolic Letter in the Form of a *Motu Proprio* reforming the Discipline of Tonsure, Minor Orders and the Subdiaconate in the Latin Church, "La Documentation catholique" 69 (1972), pp. 852–854.

in difficulty, is a task shared by the whole of the faithful,⁵ with a more incisive feminine presence in positions of responsibility.⁶

The Italian text insists upon the vocational dimension of these institutions, which are founded on the sacraments of initiation, with which the candidates have been marked, and on the call of the Church and the bishop who make it concrete. By no longer being “reserved” for future ordained ministers, the institutions of lectors, acolytes (and catechists) are situated as services of the community which evangelises, shares the Word and the bread, and reaches out to all human suffering, like the Good Samaritan. The stability and permanence attached to them, recognised by the blessing of the institution as a model of the sacramentals,⁷ confer on the lay men and women who assume them, a qualified “office” within the Church, with an episcopal “mandate” for their realisation,⁸ and express the spiritual transformation of the person who benefits from them.

2. Profile of the two ‘liturgical’ ministries

How does the CEI specify these instituted ministries in relation to each other? It is clear that they seal an important and lasting responsibility, which in principle were assigned for a long time or for life,⁹ and which goes far beyond the usual activities that have already been carried out for a long time in the liturgy, i.e. the “simple” reading of the pericopes of the *Lectionary* at celebrations and the service of the altar practised by servers and communion auxiliaries.

For the first, in addition to proclaiming the texts, the reader is invited to prepare the assembly (through biblical meetings, for example) for liturgical listening, and the readers of his or her pastoral unit in order to ensure the quality

⁵ Cf. Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 1.

⁶ See Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, Rom 2013, n. 103; Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Rom 2020, n. 103.

⁷ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1672.

⁸ Cf. Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 2.

⁹ Cf. *CIC* 1983, can. 230 § 1.

and competence of this service of the Word (as leader of the group of readers, as formator and organiser).

In addition, the conduct of liturgies of the Word (in the absence of a priest), of funerals, of celebrations of the hours of the *Prayer of the Present Time* can be given priority. All forms of biblical animation of the entire pastoral ministry, according to the expression taken up by the International Catholic Biblical Federation¹⁰ by Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*,¹¹ from circles of *lectio divina*, meditation and prayer, sharing of the Gospel at home,¹² in a spirit of ecumenical dialogue, to initiatives of first proclamation, can be taken into consideration in this ministry: “In general, he or she is called to accompany the faithful and so many people in search of a living encounter with the Word, providing them with keys and methods of reading for its correct interpretation and its spiritual and pastoral fruitfulness.”¹³ In this way, the biblical pastoral ministry and the radiance of the Word sung in Psalm 148(147),¹⁵ can be promoted: “The Lord sends his Word to the earth: quickly his Word goes through it”!

It is around the Body of Christ that the second ministry is organised, either in the form of the Eucharistic species in the liturgy, or in the form of the poor and sick with whom Jesus identifies.¹⁴ The mission of the instituted acolyte is to coordinate and form altar servers, children, youth (and adults), as well as the extraordinary ministries of communion during Mass or outside of it, in homes, hospitals and care institutions (meetings for formation and deepening, for spiritual and pastoral motivation).

Similarly, the instituted minister is invited to encourage a taste for Eucharistic adoration, to animate and organise the times offered in parishes, including for children and adolescents (children adorers). It would also be possible, to go beyond the Italian *Note*, for chaplains of hospitals or institutions for the elderly, to be given the ministry of acolyte, also as leaders of chaplaincy teams.

¹⁰ Cf. our book: *L'animation biblique de la pastorale. 120 propositions pratiques*, coll. “Pédagogie pastorale”, n. 12, Namur, Lumen Vitae 2017.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, Rom 2010, n. 73.

¹² <https://www.cath-fr.ch/region-diocesaine/formation/levangile-a-la-maison/> (16.07.2022).

¹³ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 3a.

¹⁴ Cf. Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 3b.

As for catechists, the Italian episcopates attribute to them, among other tasks, the coordination of catechists for the Christian initiation of children and the catechumenate of adults,¹⁵ as well as the conduct of liturgies in *Small Christian Communities* (SCC), including Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest.¹⁶ In fact, as the *Letter* of the Congregation for Divine Worship to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences on the Rite of Institution of Catechists invites them to do, accompanying AM,¹⁷ the instituted catechists are entrusted by the CEI not only with the function of coordinating the catechetical itineraries and training the volunteer catechists, but also, if necessary, with guiding the SCC (ministry of government *ad intra*) and founding new communities (ministry of evangelisation *ad extra*).¹⁸

In so doing, the Italian *Note* takes up the intuitions already expressed in the years following *Ministeria Quaedam* (1972), by prelates such as the Cardinal of Kinshasa Joseph Malula (the *mokambi*). Moreover, we could envisage, in addition to what the CEI provides, that other instituted ministries accessible to lay women and men, in addition to the three retained up to now be defined, for example in the field of *diakonia*, service to the world, social, economic and political, youth ministry, various chaplaincies, etc. In fact, MQ already outlined that the list of instituted ministries was not closed: "In addition to the functions common to the whole Latin Church, there is nothing to prevent the Episcopal Conferences from also asking the Apostolic See for those whose institution they have judged, for particular reasons, to be necessary or very useful, [such as those] entrusted to those who are devoted to charitable works."¹⁹ In this way, that "ecclesial culture of its own, clearly lay," could spread, through which the

¹⁵ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 3c.

¹⁶ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 3c.

¹⁷ *Letter from the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Archbishop Arthur Roche, to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences*, on the occasion of the publication of the *Editio typica* of the Rite of Institution of Catechists, Rom 3 December 2021.

¹⁸ Cf. *Roche Letter*, n. 10.

¹⁹ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 1. This is a latitude which almost no Bishops' Conference has wished to take advantage of since 1972.

Church could “ensure a capillary presence which is possible only with a significant role for the laity.”²⁰

3. Discernment and training

If the call to such instituted ministries is to contribute to redesigning the face of the local Churches in our changing world, in an ever more participatory way, it is necessary that the discernment of candidates be carried out with diligence, especially during the early stages of the implementation of the two *motu proprio*. In order to determine which of the faithful to present to the bishop, the communities with their pastoral teams will take into account the following (classic) criteria: “They are persons of deep faith, formed in the Word of God, mature in human terms, actively participating in the Christian community, capable of establishing fraternal relationships, able to communicate the faith either by their example or by their words, and recognised as such by the community, according to the forms and modalities that the bishop considers adequate.”²¹

After the initial discernment, the formation of “at least one year, under the guidance of a diocesan team”, will allow for a deepening of the intellectual, biblical and theological, spiritual and relational, pastoral and practical aspects, with, in particular, practical training in situations. The training courses could be based on existing academic institutions and institutes of theology and religious sciences and continue after the institutions (cf. *ibidem*). In our opinion, the question may arise of setting up new *ad hoc* courses or adapting existing ones and, above all, of recognising the training of lay people who have already been appointed and who would be willing to take on such an instituted ministry.

In this regard, it will be necessary for the authorities to be very tactful, in order to establish sufficiently clear and objective criteria so that everyone can find their way, in order to prevent that jealousies do not arise among lay pastoral agents, and so that the people of God fully understand what is being done. The more transparent the information is, especially with regard to the dimension of personal vocational discernment, validated by the competent authorities, the more this enlargement and diversification of ecclesial ministry will bear

²⁰ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, n. 94.

²¹ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 4.

good fruit. The fact that the CEI promulgates its directives on a trial basis, for a period of three years, shows that it is in the course of use, that their validity will be verified or not. The *Note* of the IEC does not mention the difference between the instituted ministries and those of other lay pastoral agents, designated in various ways depending upon the country, assistants, animators or pastoral auxiliaries in Switzerland²², lay people in ecclesial mission or pastoral delegates in France, for example. It should be noted that there is no question, in the texts of Francis *SD* and *AM*, of suppressing other lay ministries for those who do not feel called to a stable institution.

It should be noted that the term “ministries” is indeed used outside of “institutions”, both by Vatican II²³ and in John Paul II’s exhortation *Christifideles Laici*.²⁴ The transition phase with the coexistence of many more current instituted ministers and lay pastoral agents in ecclesial mission, will thus be particularly delicate, especially with regard to the tasks entrusted to each other, among others, Sunday preaching.

4. Rite of the institution and mandate

At the end of the preparation and examination phase, the persons chosen will benefit from the liturgical rite provided for by the *Roman Pontifical*, which establishes them in a permanent manner and which cannot be repeated, and entrusts them to the welcome of the whole community.

The CEI sets the minimum age of admission at 25 years and provides for a mandate for a period of five years, renewable or modifiable according to personal and pastoral developments.²⁵ It is therefore the letter of episcopal appointment that determines the “offices” exercised, which can be transformed, while the ministry is maintained for life.

²² The Swiss terminology corresponds to the different levels of formation and responsibilities assigned. The German-speaking part of Switzerland (and the Jura Pastoral in the diocese of Basel) has even introduced the term “pastoral theologian” for the first category.

²³ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Rom 1964, n. 30.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World, Rom 1988, n. 23.

²⁵ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri istituiti del lettore*, n. 5, referring to the *Roche Letter*, n. 13.

5. Issues

5.1.

It might be appropriate for each Bishops' Conference to follow the lead of the CEI and agree upon common guidelines. This will not happen without difficulties, given the diversity of ministries and functions currently present in the dioceses, for example between the three linguistic parts of Switzerland.

5.2.

The challenge is to find a fruitful articulation not only between instituted and ordained ministries, but also with existing mandated ministries. Liturgical institutions can provide a "sacramental" and communal recognition to a new form of ministry coming from the people of God. The Italian bishops put it this way at the end of their document:

The lectors, acolytes and catechists instituted "will not be merely executors of the instructions of priests and deacons, but true animators of the assembly presided over by the pastor of souls, promoters of co-responsibility in the Church and of the welcome of so many people who seek to follow a path of faith, evangelisers in various situations and contexts of life, interpreters of the human condition in its many aspects (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 24).²⁶ They will make present to the community the expectations and aspirations of the men [and women] of our time, and together they will be an authentic sign of the Church's presence in families, in places of study and work, and on the roads of the world (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 13)."²⁷

5.3.

In order to avoid the haphazard development of instituted ministries, it is also useful that local episcopates respond to the invitation of Francis on 24 August 2022 for the 50ème anniversary of MQ to enter into dialogue about this matter

²⁶ Cf. Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Rom 1965.

²⁷ Consiglio permanente della Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Nota sui ministeri instituiti del lettore*, n. 5.

and to share their past and future experiences, in order that they can be coordinated at the global Catholic level.

It will therefore be very interesting to see how the various Bishops' Conferences will respond to the challenges of the successive challenges issued by the Supreme Pontiff.

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