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Edmond Cullinan

## Questioning Covid Ministry for Women: New Possibilities

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# Ministry for Women: New Possibilities

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In January this year Pope Francis wrote an Apostolic Letter entitled *Spiritus Domini* issued as a “Motu Proprio.” This document provides for women to be admitted to the ministries of lector and acolyte. At first sight this might not look like a very significant move, since women have been performing these roles for many years. However, it is quite significant, because the principle established by this Motu Proprio has great potential. It establishes the principle that all lay ministries officially instituted by the Church are open to women as well as men.

A previous Motu Proprio *Ministeria quaedam* issued by Saint Paul VI in 1972 replaced what had been called “minor orders” with “ministries.” It established that there would be two such ministries in the Latin Church, namely those of lector and acolyte. Whereas the minor orders had traditionally been given to candidates for the priesthood, these reformed ministries could be given to lay people not destined for ordination. *Ministeria quaedam*, however, limited these official ministries to men.<sup>1</sup> In practice this meant that they were mainly given to candidates for the priesthood, while the actual liturgical functions envisaged for these ministries were carried out by lay people, both male and female, without being formally “instituted.”

These two documents taken together establish, firstly, that lay people can be official ministers of the Church and, secondly, that this applies equally to women as well as men. *Spiritus Domini* points out that

a doctrinal development has taken place in recent years which has highlighted how certain ministries instituted by the Church are based on the common condition of being baptised and the

1 Pope Paul VI, *Ministeria quaedam*, (1972). Flannery (Ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 1 (Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1975), p. 431.

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Edmond Cullinan is the Administrator of the Cathedral in Waterford.

## THE FURROW

royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism; they are essentially distinct from the ordained ministry received in the Sacrament of Orders.<sup>2</sup>

Through Baptism and Confirmation all Christians are called to take part in the mission of the Church, to be apostles. The apostolate of the laity takes various forms. It does not replace the apostolate of those in Holy Orders, but complements it. The Church has the authority to give particular form to the ministry that is received through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. The officially instituted ministries are examples of this.

### THE MINISTRIES OF LECTOR AND ACOLYTE

As the name suggests, the lector is commissioned to proclaim the Scripture readings (apart from the Gospel) during the liturgy. The lector also helps to prepare those who do the reading on an occasional basis. The lector is encouraged to meditate on the Word of God and develop a love for Sacred Scripture in order to become a more perfect disciple.<sup>3</sup>

The acolyte is appointed to assist the deacon and the priest at the altar and also to train and direct altar servers. The acolyte is also an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion. In practice this is the main function of the acolyte and of those special ministers who are commissioned on a temporary basis. The acolyte is encouraged to develop a sincere love for the Eucharist and of the members of Christ's Body the Church, especially the sick and suffering.<sup>4</sup> This ensures that ministry is not seen simply as performing a liturgical function.

Both these ministries are permanent. They do not carry with them any right to remuneration.<sup>5</sup> If these ministries are to be carried out by volunteers in a parish, it makes sense that they would not be paid. The functions involved do not make up a full-time job. In the context of a parish, however, the idea of permanence does not seem like such a good idea. It is better to have readers and ministers of Holy Communion appointed for a set period, so that more people can be involved over time. On the other hand, if a person is to be employed by the diocese or parish in a full-time ministry such as I will discuss below, it makes sense that it should be permanent until they retire.

2 Pope Francis, *Spiritus Domini*, (2021).

3 *Ministeria quaedam*, Flannery, Vol. 1, p. 430.

4 Ibid, pp 430-431.

5 Ibid p.432.

## MINISTRY FOR WOMEN: NEW POSSIBILITIES

Lectors and acolytes are commissioned in a liturgical rite called “The Institution of Lectors and Acolytes.”<sup>6</sup> There is a separate ceremony for each of the two ministries, but they follow the same pattern. The institution takes place during Mass. After the Gospel the candidates for the ministry are called forward and the bishop gives a short address outlining the duties of the lector or acolyte. He then invites the people to pray. After a short silence the bishop says a short prayer of blessing for those being instituted. This is the prayer for lectors.

Lord God, source of all goodness and light, you sent your only Son, the Word of life, to reveal to mankind the mystery of your love. Bless + our brothers who have been chosen for the ministry of lector. Grant that as they meditate on your word they may grow in its wisdom and faithfully proclaim it to your people. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>7</sup>

Following the prayer the bishop hands each new minister a symbol of their office. The lectors are each given a Bible. The acolytes are given a ciborium containing bread for the Eucharist.

### POSSIBLE NEW MINISTRIES

*Ministeria quaedam* makes the point that lay ministries have changed over time and that new ministries could be established in the future.

There is nothing to prevent episcopal conferences from requesting the establishment of other offices from the Holy See, over and above those which are common to the whole Church, if they decide that this is necessary or very helpful for reasons peculiar to their own territories.<sup>8</sup>

Another document of St Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), discusses the development of lay ministries in the context of evangelisation. Having pointed out that the particular sphere in which lay people give witness to their faith is in secular affairs and family life, the Pope goes on to point out that there is also a place for active ministries within the Church community.

The laity must realise that they have been called or are being called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the

6 *The Roman Pontifical*, (Vatican City, Vox Clara Committee, 2012), pp 243-248.

7 *Ibid*, p. 245. “Sisters” are not included because the Pontifical was issued before women were admitted to this ministry.

8 *Ministeria quaedam*, Flannery, Vol. 1, pp 428-429.

## THE FURROW

ecclesial community, to extend and invigorate it by the exercise of different kinds of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord has been pleased to bestow on them.<sup>9</sup>

The document goes on to give examples of the kinds of ministry that can revitalise and build up the Church: “the ministry, for example of the catechist, of directors of prayer and chant, of Christians dedicated to preaching the Word of God or to caring for their brethren in need, the ministry of directors of small communities, of the heads of apostolic movements and of others of this kind.”<sup>10</sup>

This list of possible ministries includes “preaching the Word of God” and “directors of small communities.” This suggests the possibility of having lay preachers and community leaders or pastoral workers. Let us look at these in turn.

### PREACHING

The bishop is the preacher *par excellence* in his local Church. It is his task to preach the Gospel himself and to insure that it is preached effectively by priests and deacons. Lay people are not usually permitted to give the liturgical homily. However, they do frequently address the congregation to give witness to their faith by sharing experiences. This happens regularly during missions and retreats.

#### CANON 766 OF THE *CODE OF CANON LAW* STATES:

The laity may be allowed to preach in a church or oratory if in certain circumstances it is necessary, or in particular cases it would be advantageous, according to the provisions of the Episcopal Conference and without prejudice to canon 767 §1.<sup>11</sup>

Canon 767 §1 states that the liturgical homily is reserved to the priest or deacon.<sup>12</sup> However, it would seem that there is room for development here. Allowing a lay minister to give the homily, at least occasionally, would come under the heading of “advantageous.”

In the past the main reason why lay people were not permitted to give a homily or sermon with doctrinal content was that they did not have training in Scripture or Theology. As well as this there was no mechanism for commissioning or authorising lay preachers

9 Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975). Flannery (Ed.), *Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 2 (Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1982), pp 747-748.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 748.

11 *The Code of Canon Law in English Translation* (London, Collins, 1983), p. 141.

12 *Ibid.*

## MINISTRY FOR WOMEN: NEW POSSIBILITIES

in order to insure that what they preached was orthodox. However, many lay people are now trained in Scripture and Theology. If a formal ministry were set up for this purpose by the Church's authority, then they could be permitted to exercise this ministry.

*Three* things would need to be present in order to permit someone to preach. These are

1. the discernment of the charism of preaching,
2. a properly certified course in Scripture and Theology and
3. authorisation by the bishop.

The discernment of the charism would be part of the discernment of vocation to this ministry which would be carried out by the candidate and those responsible for formation. The authorisation would be given in a liturgical rite which will be discussed below.

### COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

At a press conference in February this year Sister Nathalie Becquart, the recently appointed Undersecretary to the Synod of Bishops welcomed the opening of instituted ministries to women and said she would be in favour of the creation of a ministry of community leadership for women.<sup>13</sup> A ministry of *woman community leader* already exists in religious communities. In monastic communities of women the community leader is called the abbess. She is established in her role in an impressive liturgical ceremony called the Blessing of an Abbess.

The Rite of Blessing of an Abbess<sup>14</sup> takes place during Mass. After the gospel the candidate is presented to the bishop and a member of the community asks that she be blessed. The homily follows and then the bishop questions the abbess-elect on her willingness to carry out the duties of her office. These include her willingness to teach the traditions of religious life according to the rule of the founder, to be obedient to the Church and the Pope in accordance with canon law and to be an example of the life of the Gospel. After these questions the abbess-elect kneels while the Litany of Saints is chanted. The bishop then extends his hands and says the Prayer of Blessing while the abbess-elect kneels before him. The blessing is an extended prayer which contains the following invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Give her the gifts of your Spirit.  
Set her on fire with love for your glory

13 Reported in *La Croix* by Loup Bernard de Senneville, February 10, 2021.

14 The Roman Pontifical, pp 268-275.

## THE FURROW

and for the service of your Church,  
and may she in turn inflame with zeal  
the hearts of her sisters.<sup>15</sup>

The bishop then presents the new abbess with symbols of her office: the rule of her order and a ring.

*The Roman Pontifical* does not mention the pastoral staff which is part of the paraphernalia of many abbesses and symbolises jurisdiction within their monastic communities. In the Middle Ages (12th to 15th centuries) many abbesses had a wider jurisdiction like that of their male counterparts. For instance, the Abbess of the Royal Abbey of Las Huelgas, near Burgos in Spain, exercised both civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction over a large territory comprising over fifty villages in which she appointed parish priests and granted faculties for preaching and hearing confessions.<sup>16</sup> The idea of a woman community leader is not new. It is just that up to now it has been limited to religious communities. It could also have a place in the context of a parish.

### COMBINING PREACHING WITH PASTORAL WORK

A number of dioceses already have pastoral workers who visit the sick, counsel the bereaved, give catechetical instruction, help with sacramental preparation and visit people in their homes. This role of pastoral worker could be formally recognised as an instituted ministry. If the role of pastoral worker were to be combined with that of lay preacher, this could make a very worthwhile full-time ministry. This ministry could then be called “lay pastoral minister.” These ministers could also be given some other liturgical functions, such as presiding at the Liturgy of the Hours and performing certain parts of the Funeral Rite, i.e., the Reception of the Remains and the Burial Service.

Each diocese would have a vocations director specifically for lay pastoral ministers. Candidates would be accepted for formation after a process of discernment. They would then do a course such as the B.D. or B.Th. The course would include spiritual and pastoral formation which might be done concurrently with the course in Theology. Four years would bring them to Admission to the Pastoral Ministry. There would be ongoing formation afterwards.

A rite could be devised by which the bishop would commission the lay pastoral minister. This could be similar to the Rite of Institution of a Lector or of an Acolyte. If it was felt that a more elaborate ceremony was required, it could be modelled on the Blessing of an Abbess.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 273.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. “Abbey of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas,” History, *Wikipedia*.

## MINISTRY FOR WOMEN: NEW POSSIBILITIES

### A MINISTRY FOR BOTH WOMEN AND MEN

The opening up of official ministry in the Church to women as well as men has great potential for the future. It provides a way to involve women in some way in the public, formal, visible ministry of the Church. It means that women's gifts can be recognised and shared in new ways. For instance, women's insights into the Word of God would be available to the People of God if we had lay preachers.

Lay ministry should also include men. Men, of course, can become priests and deacons. However, the priesthood is a special vocation to which only a small number feel called. The diaconate involves obligations that may not suit many people. A married deacon cannot remarry if his wife dies and a single deacon is obliged to commit to celibacy. To develop lay ministry to its full potential, rather than promoting the diaconate, would seem to be a more fruitful way for the Church to proceed at the present time.

**Insight.** In 1522, he cast off the trappings of his old life and limped around Europe as a poor beggar trying to discover what God wanted for him. Determined to learn about the 'things of God', he threw himself heart and soul into the pilgrim experience. To his own surprise, he found himself having to learn to moderate his excessive tendencies, given his impulsive nature. Ignatius underwent a painful relearning, especially in Manresa, like a child at school again, to come to the realisation that he did not need to engage in excessive penance or harsh asceticism to please God. Ignatius's great insight was to learn how to be open, to drop his own agenda and follow the path that God revealed to him.

- BRENDAN MCMANUS, SJ, *Way to Manresa* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.ix.