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Letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences on the Rite of Institution of Catechists

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments

LETTER

TO THE PRESIDENTS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES

ON THE RITE OF INSTITUTION OF CATECHISTS

Your Eminence / Your Excellency,

Recently, Pope Francis intervened with two Apostolic Letters in the form of “Motu Proprio” on the subject of instituted ministries. The first, *Spiritus Domini*, dated 10 January 2021, amended canon 230 §1 of the Code of Canon Law regarding the access of women to the instituted ministry of Lector and Acolyte. The second, *Antiquum ministerium*, dated 10 May 2021, instituted the ministry of Catechist.

The Holy Father’s interventions orient reflection on the ministries towards the future while at the same time deepening the reflection already begun by St Paul VI with the Apostolic Letter “Motu Proprio data” *Ministeria quaedam* of 15 August 1972, by which the discipline concerning first tonsure, the minor orders and the subdiaconate were renewed in the Latin Church.

The publication of the Rite of Institution of Catechists offers a further opportunity for reflection on the theology of ministries in order to arrive at an organic vision of the distinct ministerial realities, on the understanding that *egem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*[1].

In order to respond quickly to the need for a rite of institution, this *Editio typica*, which is part of the *Pontificale Romanum*, is published without a *Praenotanda*. The 50th anniversary of *Ministeria quaedam* (1972 / 2022) will provide the occasion for the publication of an *Editio typica altera* (*De institutione Lectorum, Acolythorum et*

Catechistarum), accompanied by *Praenotanda*.

The presented *editio typica* can be widely adapted by the Episcopal Conferences which have the responsibility of clarifying the description and the role of Catechists, of offering them adequate formation programmes, and informing communities so that they understand their service.[2] This adaptation must follow the provisions of the General Decree implementing the *Motu Proprio Magnum Principium*[3] for obtaining the *confirmatio* or *recognitio* from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

This letter, which accompanies the publication of the *Editio typica* of the Rite of Institution of Catechists, aims to offer a contribution to the reflection of the Bishops' Conferences, proposing some notes on the ministry of Catechist, on the necessary requirements, and on the celebration of the rite of institution.

I. The ministry of Catechist

1. The ministry of Catechist is 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".[4] It is a broad and varied ministry.

2. First of all, it should be emphasised that this is a **lay ministry** based on the common baptismal state and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism and is essentially distinct from the ordained ministry received in the Sacrament of Orders.[5]

3. The "**stability**" of the ministry of Catechist is analogous to that of the other instituted ministries. This definition of stability, as well as expressing the fact that it is a "stable" ministry in the Church, also affirms that lay people who have the age and qualifications determined by decree of the Episcopal Conference, can be admitted in a stable manner (like Lectors and Acolytes)[6] into the ministry of Catechist. This takes place through the rite of institution which is therefore not to be repeated. The exercise of the ministry, however, can and must be regulated by the individual Episcopal Conferences in terms of duration, content and modalities, in accordance with pastoral needs.[7]

4. Catechists, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to be **co-responsible** in the local Church for the **proclamation and transmission of the faith**, carrying out this role **in collaboration with the ordained ministers and under their guidance**. "Catechizing is, in a way, to lead a person to study this mystery [of Christ] in all its dimensions. [...] It is therefore to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person. It is to seek to understand the meaning of Christ's actions and words and of the signs worked by Him, for they simultaneously hide and reveal His mystery. Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity".[8]

5. Such a goal includes **various aspects** and its attainment is expressed in **multiple forms**, depending on the needs of the communities and the discernment of the Bishops. For this reason, and in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to bear in mind that the term 'catechist' indicates different realities in relation to the ecclesial context in which it is used. Catechists in mission territories differ from those working in churches of long-standing tradition. Moreover, individual ecclesial experiences also produce very different characteristics and patterns of action, so much so that it is difficult to give it a unitary and synthetic description. [9]

6. Among the great variety of forms, one can distinguish - though not rigidly - **two main types** of Catechists. Some have the **specific task of catechesis**, others the broader task of **participating in different forms of apostolate**, in collaboration with the ordained ministers and obedient to their guidance. The context of the ecclesial reality (Churches of long standing tradition; young Churches; the size of the territory; the number of ordained ministers; pastoral organisation, etc) determines one or the other type.[10]

7. It is important to note that, since this ministry has "a definite vocational aspect [...]" and consequently calls for

due discernment on the part of the Bishop,"[11]and since its content is defined by the individual Bishops' Conferences (obviously in conformity with what is stated in*Antiquum ministerium*), not everyone who carries out a service of catechesis or pastoral assistance and who are called 'catechists' have to be instituted.

8. It is preferable that the following should not be instituted as Catechists:

those who have already begun their journey towards Holy Orders and in particular have been admitted among the candidates for the Diaconate and the Priesthood. As already mentioned, the ministry of Catechist is a lay ministry and is essentially distinct from the ordained ministry which is received with the Sacrament of Orders;[12]

men and women religious (irrespective of whether they belong to Institutes whose charism is catechesis), unless they act as leaders of a parish community or coordinators of catechetical activity. It should be remembered that, in the absence of instituted ministers, they can - like all the baptised - exercise ministries "de facto," precisely because of their Baptism, which is also the basis of their religious profession;

those who carry out a role exclusively for the members of an ecclesial movement: this function, which is equally valuable, is in fact assigned by the leaders of the individual ecclesial movements and not, as in the case of the ministry of Catechist, by the diocesan Bishop following his discernment in relation to pastoral needs;

those who teach Catholic religion in schools, unless they also carry out other ecclesiastical tasks in the service of the parish or diocese.

9. Careful reflection - which can truly be deepened by a comprehensive and balanced reconsideration of the instituted ministries as a whole - is required in the case of those who accompany the initiation of children, young people and adults. It does not seem appropriate for everyone to be instituted as a catechist. As already mentioned, this ministry has "a definite vocational aspect [...] and consequently calls for due discernment on the part of the Bishop".[13] Instead, it is absolutely appropriate that at the beginning of each catechetical year they all should receive a public ecclesial mandate entrusting them with this important function.[14]

It is not ruled out, however, that after suitable discernment, some who are involved in initiation programmes may be instituted as ministers. However, it would be wise to ask the question which ministry is the most suitable, that of Lector or of Catechist, in view of the specific content of each.

In fact, the rite of institution of Lectors states that it is their task to educate children and adults in the faith and to guide them to receive the sacraments in a worthy manner.[15] Considering that it is an ancient tradition that every ministry is directly linked to a particular office in the liturgical celebration, it is certainly evident that proclaiming the Word in the assembly clearly expresses the service of those who accompany candidates on the path of initiation. Those who receive catechetical instruction should see the liturgical expression of the service being rendered to them in the Lector who becomes the voice of the Word.

If, however, those who are involved in initiation are entrusted - under the moderation of ordained ministers - with a task of formation or the responsibility for coordinating all catechetical activity, then it would seem more appropriate for them to be instituted as Catechists.

In conclusion: not everyone who prepares children, young people and adults for initiation need to be instituted as Catechists. The Bishop's discernment may call some of them to the ministry of either Lector or Catechist, according to their abilities and to pastoral needs.

10. Because of what has now been established, candidates for the instituted ministry of Catechist—having some prior experience of catechesis[16]— can, therefore, be chosen from among those who carry out the service of proclamation in a more specific manner: they are called to find effective and coherent means for this first evangelization, and then to accompany those who have received it into the initiatory stage.

They play an active part in the rites of the Christian initiation of adults which expresses the importance of their ministry.[17] In the period of the pre-catechumenate, Catechists collaborate with Pastors, Sponsors and Deacons to find the most suitable forms for the first proclamation of the Gospel, awakening the candidates to faith and to conversion; they help to discern the external signs of the dispositions of those who intend to be admitted to the catechumenate.[18] During this period they carry out an appropriate catechesis suited to the liturgical year and supported by celebrations of the Word of God, from which they are able to bring the catechumens “not only to a suitable knowledge of dogmas and precepts, but also to an intimate knowledge of the mystery of salvation”. [19] The Bishop delegates “truly worthy and suitably prepared” Catechists to celebrate the Minor Exorcisms.[20]

Once the catechumens have been initiated, Catechists remain with the community as witnesses to the faith, teachers and mystagogues, companions and pedagogues who, in every way, are willing to encourage the faithful to conform their lives to the baptism they have received.[21] They are also called upon to find new and bold ways of proclaiming the Gospel that will enable them to stir up and reawaken the faith in the hearts of those who no longer feel the need for it.[22]

11. However, the area of proclamation and teaching describes only a part of the activity of instituted Catechists. In fact, they are called to **collaborate with ordained ministers in the various forms of the apostolate**, carrying out many functions under the guidance of the pastors. In attempting to offer a by no means exhaustive list of these functions, the following can be indicated: guiding community prayer, especially the Sunday liturgy in the absence of a Priest or Deacon; assisting the sick; leading funeral celebrations; training and guiding other Catechists; coordinating pastoral initiatives; human promotion according to the Church’s social doctrine; helping the poor; fostering the relationship between the community and the ordained ministers.

12. This breadth and variety of functions should not come as a surprise: the exercise of this lay ministry fully expresses the consequences of being baptised and, in the particular situation of the lack of a stable presence of ordained ministers, it is a participation in their pastoral action. This is what the Code of Canon Law [23] affirms when it provides for the possibility of entrusting to a non-ordained person a share in the exercise of pastoral care in a parish, always under the moderation of a priest. It is necessary, therefore, to form the community so that it does not see the Catechist as a substitute for the Priest or Deacon, but as a member of the lay faithful who lives their baptism in fruitful collaboration and shared responsibility with the ordained ministers, so that their pastoral care may reach everyone.[24]

13. It is the task of the **Episcopal Conferences**, therefore, to clarify the **description**, the **role** and the most appropriate **forms** for the exercise of the ministry of Catechists in line with what is indicated in *Motu Proprio Antiquum ministerium*. Adequate **formation programmes** for candidates must also be defined.[25] Finally, care must also be taken to prepare communities so that they may understand the meaning of this ministry.

II. Requirements

14. It is the task of the diocesan Bishop to discern the call to the ministry of Catechist by assessing the needs of the community and the abilities of the candidates.[26] Men and women who have received the sacraments of Christian initiation and have presented a freely written and signed petition to the diocesan Bishop may be admitted as candidates.

15. The *Motu Proprio* describes the requirements as follows: “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. It is essential that they be faithful co-workers with priests and deacons, prepared to exercise their ministry wherever it may prove necessary, and motivated by true apostolic enthusiasm”. [27]

II. Celebration

16. The ministry of Catechist is conferred by the diocesan Bishop, or by a priest delegated by him, by means of the liturgical rite *De Institutione Catechistarum* promulgated by the Apostolic See.

17. The ministry can be conferred during Mass or during a celebration of the Word of God.

18. After the liturgy of the Word the structure of the rite envisages an exhortation (this given text lends itself well to adaptation by the Bishops' Conferences in relation to how they wish to specify the role of the Catechists); an invitation to prayer; a blessing; the handing over of a crucifix.

* * *

In conclusion I would like us to return to the ever prophetic words of Saint Paul VI in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

“We cannot but experience a great inner joy when we see so many pastors, religious and lay people, fired with their mission to evangelize, seeking ever more suitable ways of proclaiming the Gospel effectively. We encourage the openness which the Church is showing today in this direction and with this solicitude. It is an openness to meditation first of all, and then to ecclesial ministries capable of renewing and strengthening the evangelizing vigour of the Church. It is certain that, side by side with the ordained ministries, whereby certain people are appointed pastors and consecrate themselves in a special way to the service of the community, the Church recognizes the place of non-ordained ministries which are able to offer a particular service to the Church”. [28]

To Mary, Mother of the Church, we entrust our service for the building up of the Kingdom.

From the Offices of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 3 December 2021, the Memorial of Saint Francis Xavier, Priest.

✠Arthur Roche

Prefect

[1] Cf. *Indiculus*, cap. 8: *Denz* n. 246 [ex n. 139]. Cf. also Prosper of Aquitaine, *De vocatione omnium gentium*, 1, 12: CSEL 97, 104.

[2] Cf. Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, n. 9.

[3] Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Postquam Sumus Pontifex. Decree giving effect to the dispositions of can. 838 of the Code of Canon Law* (22 October 2021).

[4] Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, n. 8.

[5] Cf. FRANCIS, *Spiritus Domini*, s.n.

[6] Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 230 §1: “Lay persons who possess the age and qualifications established by decree of the Conference of Bishops can be admitted on a stable basis through the prescribed liturgical rite to the ministries of lector and acolyte. Nevertheless, the conferral of these ministries does not grant them the right to obtain support or remuneration from the Church”.

[7] Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, n. 9.

[8] Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* (16 October 1979), n. 5, in: AAS 71 (1979) 1281.

[9] Cf. Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists* (3 December 1993), n. 4.

[10] Cf. *ibid.*

[11] Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, n. 8.

[12] Cf. Francis, *Spiritus Domini*, s.n.

[13] Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, n. 8.

[14] Cf. Rituale Romanum, *De Benedictionibus*, editio typica 1984, nn. 361-377.

[15] Cf. Pontificale Romanum, *De institutione Lectorum et Acholytorum*, n. 4: "Lectores seu verbi Dei relatores effecti, adiutorium huic muneri praestabitis, et proinde peculiare officium in populo Dei suscipietis, et servitio fidei, quae in verbo Dei radicatur, deputabimini. Verbum enim Dei in coetu liturgico proferetis, pueros et adultos in fide et ad Sacramenta digne recipienda instituetis, nuntiumquesalutis hominibus, qui adhuc illud ignorant, annuntiabitis. Hac via et vestro auxilio, homines ad cognitionem Dei Patris Filiique eius, Iesu Christi, quem ipse misit, pervenire poterunt et vitam assequi aeternam".

[16] Cf. Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, n. 8.

[17] Cf. Rituale Romanum, *Ordo initiationis christianæ adultorum. Prænotanda*, editio typica 1972, n. 48.

[18] Cf. *i bid*, nn. 11.16.

[19] Cf. *ibid*, n.19 §1.

[20] Cf. *ibid*, n. 44.

[21] Cf. Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, *Directory for Catechesis*, n. 113.

[22] Cf. *ibid*, n. 41.

[23] *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 517 §2: "If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care."

[24] Cf. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christi fideles laici* (30 December 1988), n. 15; Benedict XVI, *Address opening the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome on the theme: "Church Membership and Pastoral Co-responsibility"* (26 May 2009); Francis, *Address to Italian Catholic Action* (3 May 2014).

[25] Francis, *Antiquum ministerium*, n. 9.

[26] *Ibid*, n. 8.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), n. 73, in: AAS 68 (1976) 72-73.
