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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on access of women to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte

The Holy Spirit, the bond of Love between the Father and the Son, builds up and innervates the communion of the entire People of God, bringing forth in it a wealth and variety of gifts and charisms (cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 117). Through the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, the members of the Body of Christ receive from the Spirit of the Risen One, in various measures and with a diversity of expressions, those gifts that allow them to offer the necessary contribution to the edification of the Church and to the proclamation of the Gospel to every being.

In this regard, the Apostle Paul distinguishes between *gifts of grace* — charisms (“charismata”) and *services* (“*diakoniai*” — “*ministeria*” [cf. Rom 12:4ff and 1 Cor 12:12ff]). According to the tradition of the Church the diverse forms that charisms assume when they are publicly recognized and are made available to the community and to its mission in stable form are called *ministries*.

In some cases a ministry has its origin in a specific sacrament, the Sacred Order: it pertains to the “ordained” ministries, of the bishop, the priest, the deacon. In other cases the ministry is entrusted, with a liturgical act of the bishop, to a person who has received Baptism and Confirmation and in whom specific charisms are recognized, after an appropriate journey of preparation: we then speak of “instituted” ministries. Many other ecclesial services or offices are in fact exercised by many members of the community, for the good of the Church, often for a long period and with great efficacy, without the expectation of a particular rite for the bestowal of the role.

In the course of history, with the changing of ecclesial, social, cultural situations, the exercise of ministries in the Catholic Church has assumed different forms, while the distinction, not only of degree, remains intact between “instituted” (or “lay”) ministries and the “ordained” ministries. The former are particular expressions of the priestly and royal condition of every baptized person (cf. 1 Pt 2:9); the latter are proper to certain members of the People of God who as bishops and priests “receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head” or as deacons “are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity” (Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Omnium in Mentem*, 26 October 2009). To indicate this distinction expressions such as *baptismal priesthood* and *ordained priesthood* (or ministerial) are used. In any case it is good to reiterate, with the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council, that they are

“interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ” (LG, n. 10). Ecclesial life is nourished by this reciprocal reference and is fostered by the fruitful tension of these two poles of the priesthood, ministerial and baptismal, which despite the distinction are rooted in the one priesthood of Christ.

In line with the Second Vatican Council, the Supreme Pontiff Saint Paul VI wished to review the practices relative to non-ordained ministries in the Latin Church — until then called “minor orders” — adapting them to the needs of the times. This adaptation, however, must not be interpreted as surpassing prior doctrine, but as the implementation of the dynamism that characterizes the nature of the Church, always called with the aid of the Spirit of Truth to respond to the challenges of every era, in obedience to Revelation. The Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Ministeria Quaedam* (15 August 1972) configures two offices (duties), that of the Lector and that of the Acolyte, the first strictly connected to the ministry of the Word, the second to the ministry of the Altar, without excluding that other “offices” may be instituted by the Holy See upon the request of the Episcopal Conferences.

The modification of the forms of exercise of non-ordained ministries, moreover, is not the simple consequence, on the sociological level, of the desire to adapt to the sensibility or to the culture of periods and places, but is determined by the need to allow each local/particular Church, in communion with all the others and having as the centre of unity the Church which is in Rome, to live the liturgical action, service to the poor and the proclamation of the Gospel in fidelity to the mandate of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the duty of the Pastors of the Church to recognize the gifts of each baptized person, also to guide them toward specific ministries, promoting and coordinating them, in order to ensure that they contribute to the good of the communities and to the mission entrusted to all disciples.

The commitment of the lay faithful, who “are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God” (Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 102), cannot and certainly must not exhaust itself in the exercise of non-ordained ministries (cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 102), but one of their best configurations and a more precise reference to the responsibility that arises, for each Christian, from Baptism and from Confirmation, will be able to help the Church rediscover the meaning of the communion that characterizes her and to implement a renewed commitment in the catechesis and the celebration of the faith (Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 102). And it is precisely in this rediscovery that the fruitful synergy born of the reciprocal ordination of ordained priesthood and baptismal priesthood can find a better translation. This reciprocity, from service to the sacrament of the altar, is called to flow back, in the distinction of tasks, in that service to “make of Christ the heart of the world” which is the particular mission of the whole Church. Precisely this unique, although distinct, service in favour of the world, expands the horizons of the ecclesial mission, preventing her from withdrawing into sterile logic aimed above all at claiming spaces of power and helping her to experience herself as a spiritual community that “goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does” (Paul VI, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40). In this dynamic one can truly understand the significance of a “Church that goes forth”.

In the horizon of renewal outlined by the Second Vatican Council, one feels ever greater today the urgency to rediscover the co-responsibility of all the baptized in the Church, and particularly the mission of the laity. The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region (6-27 October 2019), in the fifth chapter of the final document indicated the need to think of “new paths for Church ministries”. Not only for the Church of the Amazon, but rather for the entire Church, in the variety of situations, “it is urgent for the Church in the Amazon to promote and confer ministries for men and women.... It is the Church of baptized men and women that we must consolidate by promoting ministries and, above all, an awareness of baptismal dignity” (*Final Document*, n. 95).

In this regard, it is known that the *Motu Proprio Ministeria Quaedam* reserves the ministries of Lector and of Acolyte to men only and thus as a result establishes can. 230 § 1 of the CIC. However, in recent times and in many ecclesial contexts, it has been observed that dissolving such a reservation could help to better manifest the common baptismal dignity of the members of the People of God. Previously on the occasion of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (5-26 October 2008) the Synod Fathers hoped “that the ministry of the Lector would also be open to women (cf. *Proposizione* n. 17); and in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), Benedict XVI explained that the exercise of the *munus* of reader in liturgical celebrations, and particularly the

ministry of Lector as such, is a lay ministry in the Latin Rite (cf. n. 58).

For centuries the “venerable tradition of the Church” has considered those that were called “minor orders” — including, precisely, the Lector and the Acolyte — as steps on a path that was to lead to the “major orders” (Subdiaconate, Diaconate, Presbyterate). Being that the Sacrament of Orders is reserved to men only, this was a valid fact for the minor orders as well.

A clearer distinction between the responsibilities of those that today are called “non-ordained (or lay) ministries” and the “ordained ministries” allows a loosening of the reservation of the former to men only. While, with regard to the ordained ministries, the Church “does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination” (cf. Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Sacerdotalis Ordinatio*, 22 May 1994), for the non-ordained ministries it is possible, and today it seems opportune to surpass this reservation. This reservation had its meaning in a specific context but may be reconsidered in new contexts, however, always having as a criterion fidelity to the mandate of Christ and the will to live and proclaim the Gospel imparted by the Apostles and entrusted to the Church so that it may be religiously heeded, devoutly safeguarded, faithfully proclaimed.

Not without reason, Saint Paul VI refers to a *venerabilis* tradition, not a *veneranda* tradition, in the strict sense (namely, it “must” be observed): it can be recognized as valid, and for a long time it has been so; however it does not have a binding character, since the reservation to men only does not pertain to the nature proper to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte. To offer lay people of both genders the opportunity to enter the ministries of Acolyte and Lector, by virtue of their participation in the baptismal priesthood, will increase recognition, also through a liturgical act (institution), of the precious contribution that for a long time many, many lay people, including women, have offered to the life and mission of the Church.

For these reasons, I found it opportune to establish that not only men but also women — in whom, through the discernment of pastors and after an appropriate preparation, the Church recognizes “the steadfast will to faithfully serve God and the Christian people”, as written in the Motu Proprio *Ministeria Quaedam*, by virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism and of Confirmation — may be instituted as Lectors and Acolytes.

The choice to confer also to women these offices, which entail stability, public recognition and a mandate on the part of the Bishop, renders more effective in the Church everyone’s participation in the work of evangelization. “This would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions and the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood” (Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, n. 103). The “baptismal priesthood” and “service to the community” thus represent the two pillars on which the institution of the ministries is founded.

In this way, in addition to responding to what is required for the mission in the present time and to welcome the witness given by many, many women who have attended to and attend to service to the Word and to the Altar, it will appear more evidently — also for those who are oriented toward the ordained ministry — that the ministries of Lector and Acolyte are rooted in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. As such, on the path that leads to diaconal and priestly ordination, those who are instituted as Lectors and Acolytes will better understand they are participants in a ministry shared with other baptized, men and women. Such that the priesthood proper to every faithful (*commune sacerdotium*) and the priesthood of ordained ministers (*sacerdotium ministeriale seu hierarchicum*) may be seen even more clearly interrelated (cf. LG, n. 10), for the edification of the Church and for the witness to the Gospel.

It will be the responsibility of the Episcopal Conferences to establish appropriate criteria for the discernment and preparation of men and women candidates for the ministries of Lector or Acolyte, or for other ministries that may be deemed to be instituted, according to what has already been provided for in the Motu Proprio *Ministeria Quaedam*, subject to the approval of the Holy See and according to the necessities of evangelization in their territory.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments shall provide for the implementation of the aforementioned reform with the amendment of the *Editio typica* of the *Pontificale romanum* or of the “*De*

Institutione Lectorum et Acolythorum".

In renewing to you the assurance of my prayers, I impart my heartfelt Apostolic Blessing to Your Eminence, which I willingly extend to all the Members and Collaborators of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

From the Vatican, 10 January 2021, Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Francis
