



The Role of the Ministry of Lector and Acolyte in the Context of the Instruction for Parishes in the Service of Evangelisation (June 29, 2020) and the Letter *Spiritus Domini* (January 10, 2021)

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Abstract: The principal weight of the Church's responsibility for evangelization rests on the parish. However, the pastoral practice shows that there is no sufficient principle to organize the missionary life of the parish as a community of communities. This frequently leads to confusion in a multitude of activities, which contributes to the failure of the parish to fulfill its principal evangelizing mission. Firstly, the article shows how the introduction of ministries of lector and acolyte into the life of the parish may help revitalize the basic functions of the parish, which are: *martyrdom*, *liturgy*, and *diakonia*. Men and women who discovered their specific vocation to the ministry of lector and acolyte may become pillars of concrete parish groups and apostolic work realized in the parish. It is closely related to a proper understanding of the ecclesial dimension of each of these ministries. In view of the above, the article presents pastoral inspirations of the Instruction of the Congregation for the Clergy *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church*, and the indications of Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini*. Secondly, the text presents the liturgical ministries in the light of the hierarchical, charismatic, and spousal dimension of the mystery of the Church. The final part of the article describes the pastoral dimension of these ministries in realizing the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Keywords: parish community of communities, lector and acolyte ministries, evangelization, liturgy

Instruction of the Congregation for the Clergy *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church* (June 29, 2020) calls on parishes to implement more of the community dimension through “a harmonious synthesis of charisms and vocations at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel, which better corresponds to the demands of evangelisation today.” (Congregation for the Clergy 2020, para. 1). The Apostolic Letter in the form of “*motu proprio*” *Spiritus Domini* on the amendment of canon 230 § 1 of the Code of Canon Law regarding access of women to the ministries of lector and acolyte, dated January 10, 2021, is part of this call (Francis 2021).¹ In his letter, Pope Francis explains

¹ Pope Francis has determined that the ministries of lector and acolyte will henceforth be open to women as well in an established and institutionalized form with a special mandate. The fact that women read the word of God during liturgical celebrations and minister at the altar as altar servers or extraordinary

in detail that he wanted to adopt the recommendations that came out of the various synodal assemblies and says that “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 baptized and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism.” Therefore, the Pope invites everyone to recognize that these are ministries intended for the laity, as “they are essentially distinct from the ordained ministry received in the Sacrament of Orders.” For the purpose of this article, it is important to note Francis’ statement that the revision of the regulations regarding the reception of “lay ministries” emphasizes “the need to deepen the subject doctrinally, so that it may respond to the nature of the aforementioned charisms and the needs of the times, offering appropriate support to the role of evangelization that is incumbent upon the ecclesial community” (Francis 2021). Since the author wishes to respond to some extent to the Pope’s postulate, the article will first present the pastoral inspiration of the instruction *Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church*. Then, within the context of the aforementioned document, the role of the liturgical ministries will be shown in light of the mystery of the Church and their importance in carrying out the parish’s evangelizing mission.

1. Pastoral Inspiration for the Instruction

The instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church* was published by the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome on July 20, 2020. The document responds to requests from bishops from all over the world who addressed the Congregation on the issue of parish community reform projects already being implemented or planned and on the restructuring of dioceses (see: Wielebski 2021, 223). Andrea Ripa, undersecretary of the Congregation for the Clergy, presenting the document on July 21, 2020, stressed that the instruction seeks to propose some ways to help the “outreach” dynamic, which, according to the Pope’s wish, should characterize all parishes. Thus, a pastoral conversion is necessary, which should encompass all the baptized because each of them should participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church. This is why,

ministers of Holy Communion is nothing particularly new – it has become a practice authorized by bishops in many communities around the world. So far, however, everything has been done without a concrete and proper institutional mandate, in derogation of what was established by Paul VI, who in 1972, in a letter *Ministeria Quaedam*, decided that access to these ministries would be reserved for men only. Based on the letter *Spiritus Domini* issued “motu proprio,” which amends the first paragraph of canon 230 of the *Code of Canon Law*, the Pope decides that women have access to these ministries and that they are administered in a liturgical act.

in order to respond to the significant social and cultural changes that are taking place in the world, it is necessary to move from a conservative and closed pastoral approach to a missionary and outgoing one (Ripa 2020, 35). Thus, the intended purpose of the instruction is to stimulate all members of the parish (pastors, consecrated persons, and laity) to reflect on their understanding of the parish, the relation of their own parishes to the conciliar ideal of the parish, their potential and future perspectives, potential and necessary changes that should take place, indispensable changes, and directions of parish ministries. The reflection is supposed to take place from the perspective and experience of communities from other particular Churches gained in the ever-evolving context of socio-religious life (see: Żądło 2022, 232).

The instruction *Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church* consists of eleven chapters divided into paragraphs, of which there are 124 in total. The introduction to the instruction reads that it represents “a valuable opportunity for pastoral conversion that is essentially missionary. Parish communities will find herein a call to go out of themselves, offering instruments for reform, even structural, in a spirit of communion and collaboration, of encounter and closeness, of mercy and solicitude for the proclamation of the Gospel” (2020, para. 2). Point 3 once again quotes Pope Francis’ words: “If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning, and a goal in life” (see Francis 2013, no. 49). Following the pope’s desires, the instruction encourages Christian communities, in a spirit of pastoral conversion, to make a decisive missionary choice (Congregation for the Clergy 2020, para. 5) to be open to “creativity,” to “seek new ways” (2020, para. 1) to cultivate the “culture of encounter” (2020, para. 25). In this way, Christian communities can be ever more conducive to an encounter with Christ (2020, para. 3). To achieve this goal, a renewed dynamism is needed to rediscover the vocation of every baptized person as a disciple of Jesus and a missionary of the Gospel. It is necessary to identify perspectives that allow for the renewal of “traditional” parish structures in terms of mission (2020, para. 20) because today, the parish territory is no longer just a geographical space but also the context in which people express their lives in terms of relationships, reciprocal service, and ancient traditions (2020, para. 16). The parish must teach how to read and meditate on the Word of God using a variety of ways to proclaim it (2020, para. 22), adopting clear and comprehensible means of communication that announce the Lord Jesus according to the ever-new witness of the kerygma (2020, para. 21), and allowing the parish to rediscover Christian initiation, which gives birth to new life. For this reason, it would be useful to establish a mystagogical itinerary that genuinely affects existence (2020, para. 23). It is important to re-think not only a new experience of the parish but also the ministry and mission of priests, who, together with the lay faithful, have the task of being “salt and light of

the world” (cf. Matt 5:13–14), and a “lamp on a lamp-stand” (cf. Mark 4:21), representing an evangelizing community capable of reading the signs of the times and of giving witness to coherent evangelical living (2020, para. 13).

All these elements of the pastoral conversion are presented in the first four chapters (26 paragraphs in total): “Pastoral Conversion,” “The Parish in a Contemporary Context,” “The Value of the Parish Today,” and “Mission: the Guiding Principle for Renewal.” The fifth chapter devoted to the parish as “a community of communities” consists of seven paragraphs (Congregation for the Clergy 2020, paras. 27–33). The chapter emphasizes the fact that the parish is a specific community of the faithful realized in communion and unity by various members of the Body of Christ (2020, para. 27). It includes a reminder that, according to the *Code of Canon Law*, a parish is a defined community of the faithful (1983, can. 515, 518, 519). Moreover, the words of Francis from the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* are quoted emphasizing that the parish is a community of communities (Congregation for the Clergy 2020, para. 28). The sixth chapter, “From the conversion of people to that of structures,” points to the fact that the transformation of the structures that a parish sets for itself requires a prior change of mentality and internal renewal, especially of those who are responsible for pastoral care. They are the ones who should see the need for reforming pastoral care of a missionary nature in the first place (2020, para. 35). In view of the above, the need to overcome a self-referential conception of the Parish or the ‘clericalization of pastoral activity’ becomes apparent. This calls for the promotion of practices and models through which baptized persons, thanks to the charisms they have received, “become active participants of evangelisation, in the style and modality of an organic community, together with other Parish communities or at the diocesan level.” (2020, para. 38). The pastoral conversion of the Parish community, in terms of mission, takes shape and finds expression in a gradual process of a renewal of structures (2020, para. 42). Therefore, the next six chapters of the instruction – a total of 91 paragraphs – deal with the transformation of structures, the reorganization of parishes, the role of pastors and laity in shaping parishes, etc. In the ninth chapter, “Appointments and Pastoral Ministry,” one of the paragraphs (2020, para. 97) has it that “Lay men, by the norms of law, may be instituted Lectors or Acolytes on a stable basis, by means of the relevant rite, according to canon 230.” In this context, it is all the more worthwhile and necessary to bring out the importance of liturgical ministries in order to, as Francis urges in *Spiritus Domini*, “offering appropriate support to the role of evangelization that is incumbent upon the ecclesial community” (Francis 2021; cf. John Paul II 1988a, no. 23).

2. Liturgical Ministries in the Light of the Mystery of the Church

The vision of the parish community outlined in the instruction *Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church* (Congregation for the Clergy 2020, paras. 27–29) is merely a point of reference and indicates a very general direction of pastoral action. These activities are taking place with varying intensity as part of various parish renewal projects (see: Żądło 1999, 93–99; Biela 2014, 119–53; Biela and Celary 2019, 57–94). Therefore, various initiatives and institutional forms are undertaken that are a response to the needs and signs of the times (see: Polak 2007, 59–84; Wolański 2011, 245–67; Póltorak 2011, 181–218). However, one can see that there is no sufficient organizing principle for the life of the Church, especially at the parish level. Sometimes, this leads to a sort of confusion in the multiplicity of courses of action up to the point of various dangers (cf. John Paul II 1988a, no. 30). As for the organizing principle of pastoral care in the parish is concerned, it is critically important that as the “community of communities,” the parish is a community of non-accidental ministries and associations (cf. John Paul II 1988a, no. 29). So, on the one hand, it is a matter of ensuring that the various “needs” of parishioners are met, and on the other, that the parish corresponds to the demands arising from the teachings of Vatican II, that is, the ecclesiology of communion (see: Extraordinary Synod 1985, II.C.1–8). Therefore, theological criteria derived from the mystery of the Church are of particular importance in providing a more accurate definition of particular communities and ministries. The source of these criteria can be found in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, the council says that the Holy Spirit

guides in way of all truth and which He unified in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits. By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse. The Spirit and the Bride both say to Jesus, the Lord, “Come!” (Second Vatican Council 1964, no. 4).

What is at stake here are hierarchic and charismatic gifts, with which the Church is endowed and that show the proper purpose both types of gifts serve. They lead to “perfect union with the Bridegroom.” The image used by the Council depicts the Church as a charismatic, hierarchical, and bridal community. This image of the Church should therefore shape specific ministries in the liturgy and in parish life revealing the Church in her charisms, hierarchical structure, and spousal union with Christ.

The community of God’s people receives from Him an extraordinary multitude of charisms. Each of her members receives his or her own gift appropriate for building the *communio*. Among the said gifts are the ones distinguished by the Church,

those that by their very nature reveal some essential truth about the Church. Certainly, among such gifts is the ministry of “ordination” defined by the *Code of Canon Law* as “sacred ministry” (1983, can. 233 § 1) exercised by bishops and presbyters by virtue of their mission and authority to act *in* the person of Christ the Head, that is, *in Persona Christi Capitis*, or by deacons who “serve the people of God through the diakonia of liturgy, word and charity” (Benedict XVI 2009). Nor are the lay faithful (*christifideles laici*) – men and women – who have become “in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (Second Vatican Council 1964, no. 31) deprived of such ministries. In particular, the ministry of lector and acolyte has been highlighted in the Church’s teaching. In 1972, Pope Paul VI issued the “*motu proprio*” *Ministeria Quaedam*, in which he indicated what is a function and what is a ministry in the liturgical celebration. The previous minor orders were called “ministries.” Henceforth, ministries can be conferred on the lay faithful so that they are not reserved only for candidates for the sacrament of Holy Orders. There are two such ministries: lector and acolyte. The Pope also pointed to the relationship of ministry to function (*ministerium* to *munus*). The document has it that the ministry (*ministerium*) is conferred to perform specific functions (*munus*), some of which are defined as functions proper for specific ministries (*munus, quo est ei proprium*) (see: Paul VI 1972). Such a distinction is found in the *Code of Canon Law* 1983, can. 230 reads:

§ 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 (*ad ministeria lectoris et acolythi*). Nevertheless, the conferral of these ministries does not grant them the right to obtain support or remuneration from the Church.

§2. Lay persons can fulfill the function of lector in liturgical actions (*liturgicis munus lectoris*) by temporary designation. All lay persons can also perform the functions of commentator or cantor, or other functions, according to the norm of law.

§3. When the need of the Church warrants it and ministers are lacking, lay persons, even if they are not lectors or acolytes, can also supply certain of their duties, namely, to exercise the ministry of the word, to preside over liturgical prayers, to confer baptism, and to distribute Holy Communion, according to the prescripts of the law.

A similar distinction is drawn by *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, which often uses the term *munus* in addition to the term *ministerium*, together with its modifying and more precise term *munus liturgicum*.² Summing up, it can be

² One can read about the ministry of appointed acolytes and lectors in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal from the third edition of the Roman Missal* (2003, nos. 98–99). The functions to which the acolyte

concluded that the term ministry (*ministerium*) – in its most proper sense pertains to “participation in the one priesthood of Christ,” and therefore “only by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the term acquires its full and only meaning ascribed to it by the tradition.” (Giovanni Paolo II 1994, 187). It is then understood as an “ordained ministry” and refers to the clergy. “If in some cases the meaning of the term ‘ministry’ (*ministerium*) has been extended to *munera* that is specific to the lay faithful, it is because it shares, in its own way, in the one priesthood of Christ” (Giovanni Paolo II 1994, 187). In such a case, “by virtue of the priesthood of all the baptized,” the laity can also take up the “ministry,” which then takes on a strictly defined meaning: it is conferred to the lay faithful (these are not Holy Orders), by a special rite of institution (*institutio*), approved by the Holy See and celebrated by a bishop; it has the character of a permanent assignment to perform the tasks associated with it; in principle, the tasks in question are related to the liturgy, but they go beyond the liturgy and have the character of participation in the pastoral ministry of the ordained.

By contrast, the term function (*munus*) – is a specific activity or set of activities understood as a task. It applies to both liturgy and daily life. Depending on the way of participation in this mission (through baptism or through the sacrament of Holy Orders), it takes on a different scope and dimension. Functions resulting from ordination are performed by bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Assigned functions, resulting from institution, are performed by lectors and acolytes, while functions performed under authorization (designation) may be entrusted to other lay faithful who are able to take them up after a suitable preparation. They may then serve as lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, commentators, cantors, schola members, organists, sacristans, altar servers, commentators, ceremonialists, persons responsible for order during processions, or persons designated *ad hoc* to distribute Holy Communion (cf. Second Vatican Council 1963, no. 29). However, these tasks are temporal and carried out during the liturgy (cf. Górzynski 2009, 83–84; Araszczuk 2010, 229–30)³. Thus, the term “ministry,” in its most proper and general

is entitled are listed in numbers 187–193, while those to which the lector is entitled are listed in numbers 194–198. The same *Introduction* was issued in 2006 and supplemented with the Indications of the Episcopate of Poland adopted at the 331st National Plenary Meeting of the Polish Bishops’ Conference (KEP), March 9, 2005. In pt. 125–126 it was noted that functions that are direct service to the priest at the altar and at the place of presiding are reserved for the male liturgical service (altar servers). Girls (altar girls) may be admitted by the diocesan bishop after consultation with the KEP.

³ In Poland, the ministry of permanent acolyte and lector was introduced by the Second Plenary Synod, held from 1991 to 1999 (Skworc 2016, 84). October 2, 2007, the Polish Episcopate adopted the *Instruction on Granting of the Ministry of Lectors and Acolytes to Lay Men*, which is executive in nature to the provisions of the Second Plenary Synod. *The Instruction* has it that a detailed program for the formation of the lector and acolyte *Ratio fundamentalis* will be developed by the Episcopal Commission for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (KEP 2008a, no. 44). A separate *Ratio* has not been developed, while guidelines for the formation of lectors and acolytes were included in the document (cf. KEP 2008b, nos. 35–44). On December 12, 2021, the general decree of the Polish Bishops’ Conference on the age and qualities of male and female candidates for the permanent lectorate and acolyte came into effect. According to

sense, refers to the tasks (*munera*) resulting from Holy Orders (*ministerium ordinatum*). As such, they are non-transitory and permanent in nature. In a narrower sense, and more specifically, the term “ministry” applies to the tasks of the laity, lector, and acolyte, conferred by a special rite of institution (*ministerium institutum*), which thus took on permanent features, too. Therefore, these ministries belong to the ecclesiastical office, because according to the legislator’s statement, “An ecclesiastical office is any function constituted in a stable manner by divine or ecclesiastical ordinance to be exercised for a spiritual purpose” (*Code of Canon Law* 1983, can. 145 §1).

The ministries of lector and acolyte date back to ancient times (Righetti 1959, 382; Nadolski 2006, 63). This is a consequence of understanding the Eucharist as a mystery of two tables: the table of the Word and the table of the Bread. God feeds man with His Word and His Body. The Church provides us with the Gospel and Eucharist. The visible signs of this mystery are the pulpit and the altar. The mystery is referred to by the Book and the Cross too. In a special way, the “embodiment” of such an understanding of the Eucharist and the Church are the distinguished persons of lector and acolyte.⁴ The former ministers at the table of the Word, the latter at the table of the Bread. As far as the ministry of lector is concerned, the charisms associated with teaching are highlighted, while in the ministry of acolyte, all the charisms associated with the work of the hands are expressed.

The aforementioned ministries highlight an important dimension of the Church, which is hierarchy. It is based on participation in the mystery of the priesthood of Christ, in which all the baptized participate. Therefore, ministries conferred to the laity should also be thought of in terms of the hierarchical structure of the Church. The question arises: Do all the laity participate equally in the mystery of Christ’s priesthood, or do some of them participate in this mystery in a “special” way, namely, at the level of ministries? Certainly, a positive answer to these questions would change the picture of parish communities, as today’s situation can be better described by the sentence “there is a hierarchy in the Church” rather than “the Church is hierarchical.” This is because hierarchy only applies to a very small percentage of Church members. On the other hand, among the vast majority of her members, there is no

the decree, in Poland, bishops will be able to grant the ministries of permanent lectorate and acolyte to candidates who have reached the age of 25. Male and female candidates are required to lead exemplary moral life, be characterised by apostolic devotion, selflessness, sincere piety and zealous sacramental life, special love of the Holy Scriptures and the Eucharist, and a spirit of obedience to the Church. Moreover, they must have adequate intellectual qualities, sufficient knowledge of this ministry in the Church, stand out for their reliability in work and ability to cooperate with others. They should enjoy a good reputation and be accepted by the faithful of the community to which they belong and in which they will carry out the tasks entrusted to them. They should be prepared for their tasks by proper formation. See: <https://episkopat.pl/wchodzi-w-zycie-dekret-ogolny-konferencji-episkopatu-polski-dotyczacy-stalego-lektoratu-i-akoliatu-udzielanego-takze-kobietom/> [Accessed October 13, 2023].

⁴ *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2003, no. 98) lists the acolyte in the first place. Moreover, the importance of this ministry has been outlined in the Roman Pontifical *Rites of Institution for the Ministry of Acolyte*.

structure at all that might be characterized by the phrase: hierarchical participation in the priesthood of Christ.

Much light is shed on this issue by the history of the formation of ministries and the formation of communities in the Church. When a man received the mission of the Church, he would always gather a community around him, and if the community was born inside the people of God, it needed someone appointed by the ecclesiastical authority. Over the centuries, communities of the Church have been born and continue to be born in this way. The foundation and head of each community is the bishop. He is the first priest of the Church gathered in a specific place and time. His Church – a specific diocese – is a community of communities. These smaller communities are parishes. Each of them is headed by a priest whom the bishop has ordained and sent to preside over it on his behalf. This is the way the Church has grown and should grow. Today, in the era of promoting the participation of lay persons in the life of the Church, this path cannot and should not be reversed. Since offices and ministries of various kinds are ways of participating in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, they can take shape in only one way: by “emerging” from within the mystery of the Church. It seems that this issue is critical to the realization of the parish as a community of communities, for authentic ecclesial communities will not be formed in the parish if there is no one to lead them. Moreover, it is impossible to shape ministries that have a fully ecclesiastical character if there is no responsibility for a particular community attached to this ministry. Therefore, it is impossible to imagine a community parish without the participation of the laity, whose ministry should have, on the one hand, the character of direct work with a small group with a specific profile of involvement, and on the other hand, the ministry should have the character of coordinating and unifying the ministry of animators. In this hierarchical structure of the parish, it is only its first shepherd – the parish priest – who is able to become its true father. It is due to direct contact and flow of life to the “group of the Twelve,” which he, in turn, can have for mothers in the parish communities.

Such a vision for building a parish community is found in the *Directory for the Pastoral Care of the Liturgical Service*, prepared by the Subcommittee on Liturgical Service under the Commission for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments of the Episcopate of Poland published on November 27, 2008 (KEP 2008a).⁵ The *Directory* is based on an integral and dynamic vision of the realization of the Church in the parish and assumes that a variety of evangelization, formation, prayer, charity, missionary, and other types of works are undertaken in the community of believers. Each of the said works, however, should be based on individuals

⁵ The *Directory* offers, inter alia, detailed indications for the preparation for the ministry of the permanent acolyte and lector, as well as the distinguished function of the cantor related to music and singing in the parish, specific tasks of the acolyte, lector and cantor during the celebration of the liturgy, and the tasks of the acolyte, lector and cantor in supporting presbyters and deacons in building up the Church in the daily life of the parish community (KEP 2008a, nos. 35–51).

whom God has chosen and empowered with special grace to perform their tasks well on His behalf and on behalf of the Church. To establish someone for service in the community is to make him a pillar on which a concrete apostolic work carried out in the parish can be built upon. A specific apostolic work reaches its peak and expresses itself most fully in the liturgy, and from there it expands to all areas of life of the parish community (cf. KEP 2008a, no. 50; Brzeziński 2010, 51–59).

Among the ministers appointed to celebrate the Eucharist, the Church singles out the ministries of the lector and acolyte and invites them not only to perform *functions*, but confers them to *minister* to the community of believers. The Church gives them a gift from God and entrusts them with tasks that they are to fulfill “permanently.” This “permanence” should be understood as a response to the calling that God gives to man. No other rationale and invitation is sufficient enough to justify a lifetime ministry. The aforementioned ministries (ministeria) are missions that the bishop entrusts to lay men in the community of the Church. It begins in the liturgy and finds its culmination in it, but it also encompasses the tasks of the acolyte and lector in the daily life of the community (KEP 2008a, no. 32).⁶

The charismatic and hierarchical dimension of the mystery of the Church is completed and clearly displayed in the spousal dimension. Everything in the Church is focused on unity and serves this goal. The Church herself is “sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (Second Vatican Council 1964, no. 1). Unity is the purpose of every charism. The hierarchical structure is auxiliary when it comes to unity, and yet its inner beauty and power lie in the mystery of the bridal relationship (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004, nos. 8–12). The bridal dimension of the Church has it that the mystery experienced by the faithful is an encounter between Christ the Bridegroom and the Church the Bride, expressed figuratively by the nuptials. The bridegroom married the community. He gave his life for it. He cleansed it of its sins and adorned it with virtues. He made a perpetual and indissoluble covenant with it. He did this in the Paschal mystery by embracing the entire Church and all her members with His love. The bridal mystery is lived out in the Church in a variety of ways. One can speak of a spousal union between a priest and a community, a consecrated person and Christ, or a husband and his wife. All these ways are participation in the spousal union of Christ and the Church. Each way makes this mystery present and reveals it in a different way. Moreover, each should be visible and lived in the Eucharist. So far, only the priestly (priest community) way is emphasized in our Eucharistic celebrations. The way of marriage and the way of consecrated life

⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 1672. It should be noted that the *Directory for the Pastoral Care of the Liturgical Service* bestows a special function in the Church’s liturgy and in the life of the community to the cantor and others responsible for music and singing (KEP 2008a, nos. 33–34, 45–49).

remain underestimated. On the spiritual level, every conscious Christian experiences in some way the mystery of the spousal union of Christ and the Church. However, in the liturgical sign, only one dimension of it is manifested. The place of the priest in relation to the community is evident. What remains unclear, however, is the place of husband and wife, who, after all, have much to say about the mystery of the bridal relationship. While marriage is recognized as the basis of social life and the foundation of family life, the way the Eucharist is celebrated seems to contradict this conviction. In the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II writes: “As the Redeemer of the world, Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church. The Eucharist is the Sacrament of our Redemption. It is the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride.” (John Paul II 1988b, no. 26)

The mystery of bridal and marital unity during the Eucharist may be of a different nature. When spouses attend Mass and receive Holy Communion together, it is undoubtedly the most primordial and fundamental sign of the union of their nuptial covenant with the mystery of Christ. When spouses offer one another the sign of peace during the Eucharistic celebration, the beauty of this gesture undoubtedly expresses the truth of the unity of God and man. Masses said for spouses are also a special experience for them. Their participation in the Eucharist on this day as spouses renews their unity. They give themselves anew to Christ in His Church (cf. Szczepaniec 1992b, 347–50). Today, the truth of the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church in the liturgical sign can be expressed in a special way, by the possibility offered to men and women invited to serve together as lectors and acolytes. A fuller involvement of men and women, especially spouses, in the liturgical celebration will help them to better understand how the sacrament of marriage is a method of participation “in the mystery of Christ and the Church.” Moreover, all of the faithful gathered can rediscover that they are participating in the mystery of the “nuptials of the Lamb” (cf. Rev 19:7) and should seek to identify themselves with the role of the bride. This would be an opportunity both for married life and for the formation of the parish community in its spousal dimension.

3. The Importance of Ministries in the Formation of the Parish Community

In the ecclesiology of the community, the liturgy as “the source and the summit” remains at the center of the community. This is because it is the epiphany of the Church understood as the community, and its expressive and effective symbol (Blachnicki 2013, 390–95). In implementing the small-group strategy, Catholic parishes therefore possess a unique tool that can be used as a principle of concentration in building parishes as a community of communities. If the liturgy is to represent the principle

of concentration of the Church's activities, then first and foremost the source of the Church's ministries must be its inner mystery. Specific ministries are designed to make this mystery "visible" to the eye. They are to form a clear sign of the Church. Moreover, it can be concluded that the sign of the Church is most clearly revealed in the Eucharistic gathering, in which the mystery of the Triune God and the threefold mission of Christ appear in three forms: in the prophetic word, the priestly sacrifice, and the royal banquet. It follows naturally that from within the divine-human mystery emerges the visible form of a threefold ministry: the ministry of the word (lector), the ministry of "action" (acolyte), and the ministry of "celebration" or unification (cantor). This distribution of ministries is thus an embodiment and "revelation" of the threefold mission of the Church (KEP 2008b; Szczepaniec 1992b, 348). It is directly related to the renewal of the liturgical ministries. They are decisive, to a large extent, in creating the image of the Church manifested in the liturgy, as well as the distribution of offices, ministries, and functions in the local community of the Church.⁷

Every baptized person can be invited to perform liturgical functions, whereas ministries (*ministeria*) are offered only to chosen individuals (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 2003, paras. 65–66). This distinction touches upon the relationship between the function performed in the liturgy, and ministry understood as a person's life vocation in the community of the Church. Ministries grow out of the common baptismal vocation of all Christians and mature as a special vocation for chosen men and women in the community of the Church. The ministry (*ministerium*), however, can only be obtained in one way – through the blessing of the Church. It is not a matter of choice made by the community. The community may nominate a male or female candidate. However, an individual must be admitted to the ministries "through the prescribed liturgical rite" (*Code of Canon Law* 1983, can. 230 § 1). Such a ministry is instituted "for building up the unity of the Church," and not only "for the performance of certain acts." Therefore, acceptance of

⁷ The *Directory for the Pastoral Care of the Liturgical Service* states that the tasks of the acolyte during the liturgy include: assisting the priest and deacon during the celebration, distributing, if necessary, the Holy Communion of which he is an extraordinary minister, exposing the Blessed Sacrament for adoration, leading the vigil at the side of the deceased and leading prayers at the funeral at home of the deceased and in the cemetery. Exemplary areas of acolyte's involvement in the life of the parish community are as follows: care for Eucharistic worship in the parish, preparation of liturgical celebrations in the parish (proper preparation of liturgical service teams), ministry to the sick, helping the needy, organizing volunteer work. The lector, in turn, assists presbyters and deacons in proclaiming the word of God except for the Gospel, sings the psalm, recites the intentions of the universal prayer, leads the prayer at the deceased and leads the stations at the home of the deceased, and at the cemetery. In addition to the liturgy, a lector assists pastors in carrying out the ministry of evangelization by: preparing the faithful to receive the sacraments with dignity, assisting in preparing and conducting adult catechesis, engaging in other forms of ministry of the Word in the parish, revitalizing the missionary tasks of the parish, animating the prayer life of the parish, supporting families before and after funerals (KEP 2008a, nos. 35–44).

a specific ministry entails responsibility for a particular community of the faithful (Szczepaniec 1992a, 18–19).

Regarding the relationship between liturgical ministries and the functions performed in the community of the Church, the lector combines and coordinates the function of the *martyria* in the parish. In the liturgical ministry, he is responsible for the liturgy of the word and in the parish community for the extensive liturgical and apostolic formation of evangelization animators. The acolyte coordinates the function of *diakonia* in the parish. He would thus be responsible for the ministry in the liturgy of sacrifice and for the liturgical and diaconal formation of animators of mercy in parish communities. In turn, a person responsible for “celebration” in the liturgy is in charge of animators responsible for “celebration” in the parish, coordinating all kinds of ministries of singing, order, decoration, and others. Lectors and acolytes, performing the highest liturgical ministries in the secular hierarchy, constitute the first small community of life and ministry for the shepherd of the parish. Together with other elected representatives of the parish, they are the “Twelve” of the community that embraces all the basic dimensions of community life. Christ’s words, “I know My sheep, and My sheep know Me” (John 10:14), apply to them in the fullest sense (Szczepaniec 1990, 16–18).

By applying the liturgical principle of concentration in building the parish community, all ministries appear first in the liturgy. It is there that the proper tasks of parish members related to word, deed, and celebration are manifested. This liturgical ministry is extended to the *pia exercitia* and finds particular concretization in the community of animators who, being heads of their groups, take responsibility for a concrete dimension of parish life. These groups gradually reach out to all members of the parish, bringing them the richness of Christ’s mystery derived from the liturgy and assimilated in *pia exercitia*. Hence, through animators and their groups, the ministry of the priest, and “moderators,” the daily life of the entire parish community is distributed. Thanks to this approach, not only will the Eucharist form individual members of the parish community, strengthening them for ministry, but also organize the life of the local Church structurally.

The three major gifts of God spring from the Eucharist as if from a font: Truth (the liturgy of the word), Life (the liturgy of the sacrifice), and Unity (the liturgy of the banquet). As they enter into everyday life, they are growing gradually and reaching all areas of human life. Furthermore, it is there from where they begin their way back, which is the way to the top. The closer one gets to the summit, the more the various forms of ministry unite to take the most perfect form in the Eucharist itself: a simple and clear sign of the threefold mission representing the mystery of the Triune God. The “embodiment” of this unity between the liturgy and daily life and its ‘personal sign’ seem to be those who, within the community, take up the principal ministries intended for lay Catholics (Biela 1993, 239).

This approach, which synchronizes the ministries in the liturgy with life, calls for a revision of today's age-related associations with persons involved in liturgical ministries. They should be performed only by adult men and women. The task of children would be to assist the adults and become a sign of representation of all God's people at the altar.

Conclusion

The realization of the Church in the parish resulting from the ecclesiology of communion should reveal the Church in its hierarchical structure, charisms, and in the spousal union with Christ. Hierarchicality demands, among other things, the consistent formation of authentic hierarchicality within the structure of God's people. It should include both the hierarchy and the laity, among whom there should be various degrees of offices, ministries, and functions. However, in the first instance, this is not due to some specific need, but rather the necessity to make the community of the Church present in all its complementarity of gifts. This problem becomes particularly relevant when the ministry of the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion becomes increasingly popular.⁸ One cannot escape the impression that the implementation of this ministry has been dominated by practical rationale, while its theological meaning has been diminished. This applies as well to the general attitude towards the diaconate, understood basically as a transitional phase to the priesthood. A deacon's mission is, in this perspective, limited solely to liturgical activities. Therefore, non-liturgical functions that should be the domain of deacons in a diocese and a parish are delegated to bishops and priests (cf. Nolywajka 2011, 265–91). A similar situation is encountered in the relationship between priests and laity. It might be that more than 50% of the tasks performed by priests are “substitute activities.” This is the mode of thinking that shapes the entire style of pastoral ministry in parishes. The current stage of the Church's history could be considered as “waking up a sleeping giant.” Therefore, it is all the more necessary to carry out Vatican II's postulate that everyone “should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to his office” (Second Vatican Council 1963, no. 28). Implementation of this principle, however, requires a clear-cut answer to the question of what is a “proper ministry” and what is a “substitute ministry” for bishops, presbyters, deacons, acolytes, lectors, and many others in the Church community. Or, to phrase this question another way, can a parish be a mature missionary community of communities if it does not employ different types of ministries, functions, and charisms?

⁸ See: KEP 1994; KEP 2006; KEP 2007.

In this context, it is worth asking – How many extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are there in Poland (and beyond), and how many lectors and acolytes have been instituted?⁹ And are the latter indispensable for pastoral ministry in our parishes? Much has been written about the importance of the role of the lector and acolyte in the context of the implementation of the *Pastoral Program for the Church in Poland* for 2010–2013, the motto of which was: “The Church as the home and school of communion.” It was suggested that Polish dioceses proceed with the establishment of appropriate formation centers for these two groups of ministers. One cannot overestimate, in this context, the role of various types of movements or other religious associations in building the Church as a community. However, they are unable, with few exceptions, to form a team of adults: men and women capable of liturgical-diaconal animation of parish life. The creation of various types of “educational communities” and formation schools was strongly encouraged by Pope John Paul II; so much so that he dedicated the entire fifth chapter of his exhortation *Christifideles Laici* to the issue of formation of lay Catholics. The fact that the pope called the discovery of a “personal vocation and mission” and preparation to take on tasks in accordance with one’s charism in the Church “the focal point of the whole work of formation,” is a clear sign of the pastoral activity of the Church (cf. John Paul II 1988a, nos. 58, 62, 63).¹⁰ This is why the Church faces an important task of putting the new regulations and rites concerning permanent lectors and acolytes into practice (cf. Dyduch 2016, 11). In this context, Makowski asks a provocative question: “Since for 60 years not every diocese in Poland has trained men for such a ministry, is there a need for women?” (Makowski 2021). It is worth recalling John Paul II in this context, who in the *Christifideles Laici*, stated that “above all, the acknowledgment in theory of the active and responsible presence of woman in the Church must be realized in practice” (John Paul II 1988a, no. 51; Kowalczyk 2021, 155–66).

Summing up, it can be said that the introduction of the established ministries of lector and acolyte into the life of the Church can contribute to the revitalization of various sections of parish life. The aim will be reached when the ecclesial dimension of each of these ministries is properly understood. A variety of evangelization, formation, prayer, charity, and other works is undertaken in the community of believers. Each of them should be based on individuals chosen by God, enriched with appropriate charisms, and strengthened with special grace to perform the assigned task well in His name and in the name of the Church. Establishing lay men and women for

⁹ So far, several dioceses in Poland have taken on this task. For example, on April 7, 2019, Bishop Józef Szamocki granted the ministry of permanent acolyte to 26 men from 14 parishes in the Diocese of Toruń. A year earlier, they became permanent lectors through the ministry of the Bishop of Toruń Wiesław Śmigiel. (See: Kowalczyk 2021, 16).

¹⁰ The Second Synod of the Archdiocese of Katowice points this out emphatically, recommending the establishment of an Archdiocesan Center for Pastoral Formation. (See: Skworc 2016, nos. 8, 11, 20, 45, 47, 51, 54, 276, 301, 307, 370, 393, 394, 408, 409, 410, 412, 414).

the permanent ministries of lector and acolyte should be a new step in putting this truth into practice in the life of parish communities. To establish someone for service in the community is to make him or her a pillar on which the concrete apostolic work realized in the parish rests. The apostolic work reaches its peak and expresses itself most fully in the liturgy and, from there, it expands to all areas of community life. Accordingly, the permanent establishment of lay men and women for the ministry of lector and acolyte should be based on the discernment of a God-given vocation and adequate preparation that includes not only liturgical matters but also the ability to undertake a specific mission in the parish community (KEP 2008a, nos. 50–51).

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