

## LITURGICAL MINISTRIES OF MEN AND WOMEN: LECTORATE AND ACOLYTATE THEN AND NOW

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### ABSTRACT

The article reflects on a recent change in the Catholic Church that women have been admitted to the liturgical ministry of lectors and acolytes by Pope Francis' Motu proprio 'Spiritus Domini'. The main research question of the article is: to what extent is this a complete innovation, a return to tradition, or an organic development of the liturgy? The research method rests on two pillars: first, the detailed study of the historical roots of these ministries in Christian antiquity; second, the study of the gradual adaptation of the lectorate and the acolyte in the second half of the 20th century. The conclusion of the article states that this is a logical consequence of the change that occurred in 1972 with Pope Paul VI's Motu proprio 'Ministeria quaedam' and that we cannot speak of a historical breakthrough, given that women exercised these services before. In the appendix, the article offers a brief discussion of the female diaconate in relation to other liturgical ministries.

### Keywords

Liturgy; Catholic church; Women's liturgical ministry; Lectorate; Acolytate; History of liturgy

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In his motu proprio from the 11th of January 2021 entitled *Spiritus Domini*, Pope Francis amended Canon 230 of canonical law so as to open the ministry of lectors and acolytes to women.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Apostolic Letter issued Motu proprio *Spiritus Domini* Modifying Canon 230 § 1 of the Code of Canon Law Regarding Access of Women to the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte, January 20, 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110\\_spiritus-domini.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html).

purpose of this article is to answer the question as to what this change means. What are the historical origins and developments of these ministries? How have men and women participated in these ministries since antiquity, and what effects is the change going to have on the further development of the liturgical ministry? It should be noted that in Christian antiquity, the ecclesial and liturgical ministries, other than those of the deacon, priest, or bishop, differed from region to region. Such ministries tended to include porters, gravediggers, exorcists, interpreters, lectors, singers/choristers, psalmists, acolytes, and subdeacons. This article will look at the ministries of lectors and acolytes only.

## 1. The Ministry of Lector in Christian Antiquity

### 1.1 Ancient Rome

In ancient Rome, the ability to read aloud correctly, with distinct enunciation and phrasing, was considered a laborious task, and as such, it was usually assigned to slaves or freed slaves, except for situations where the authors were reading out from their own works. Women readers or lectors were known to read aloud to wealthy ladies.<sup>2</sup> Readings were held in reading rooms, theatres, spas, or private houses, during public or private recitals and often also at dinners.<sup>3</sup> The reader would sit on a stool holding the scroll to be read out in his hand or having it propped on a stand. The texts were written in the form of *scriptio continua*, i.e. there were no spaces between words, no commas or full stops. Consequently, the reader must have been well educated and had to prepare his reading beforehand.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.2 Judaism

Apart from several mentions in the Scriptures (Lk 4; Acts 13), we have no information about the way in which gatherings in the Synagogue were held. It seems that in the first century, it was only the reading and interpretation of the Torah that took place in the Synagogue,

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<sup>2</sup> See Christian Laes, 'Lectors in the Latin West. The Epigraphical Evidence (c. 300-800),' *Arctos* 53 (2019): 53.

<sup>3</sup> See Raymond J. Starr, 'Reading Aloud: Lectores and Roman Reading,' *The Classical Journal* 86, no. 4 (1991): 340-342.

<sup>4</sup> See Pliny the Younger, *Letter* 9. 6 (Oxford World's Classics 227).

while other texts biblical texts, such as the prophetic books and prayer, were introduced much later.<sup>5</sup>

Le septième jour est réputé saint. Ce jour-là ils s'absteint des autres ouvrages et se rendent dans les lieux sacrés qu'on appelle synagogues ; ils s'assoient selon l'âge a des places déterminées, les jeunes gens au-dessous de vieillards se tenant prêts a écouter avec la bonne tenue convenable. Puis l'un d'eux prend les livres et lit ; et un autre parmi ceux, qui possèdent les plus d'expérience, s'avance et explique ce qui n'est pas facile à comprendre. (Philo of Alexandria, 1st century)<sup>6</sup>

And anyone who [speaks weakly or with a faltering sound, without] separating his words to make [his voice] heard [should not read in the book of the Torah], so that he will not lead to error in a capital matter. (Rules of the Dead Sea Scrolls community, the 1st century.)<sup>7</sup>

These two extracts come from two special movements of Judaism, from the Therapeutae community, which lived near Egyptian Alexandria, and from the Qumran community by the Dead Sea. It seems that in the case of the Therapeutae community, there was one person reading out from the Scriptures and another interpreting the text. The Dead Sea Scrolls, on the other hand, illustrate that not everyone was allowed to read out the Torah. One should, however, refrain from using these particular customs to draw general conclusions about Judaism as such.

### 1.3 The First Centuries of Christianity

Opinions differ as to whether the liturgy of the Word followed by Christians developed from the synagogal gathering and the reading of the Torah, or whether they were built on a general Mediterranean habit of reading aloud during a feast. One can assume that those who read at the Christian gatherings were readers who had converted to Christianity, educated members of a higher class, or slaves belonging

<sup>5</sup> Valery A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering. Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 152.

<sup>6</sup> Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit* 81–82 (OPD 28: 203).

<sup>7</sup> *Q Damascus Document 4Q266*, frag. 6, col. 11 (*The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*: 52).

to a member of the community.<sup>8</sup> The following quotations from St Irenaeus may prove that some Christian communities struggled due to a lack of qualified readers:

Si donc on ne fait pas attention à la manière dont on lit et si l'on néglige d'indiquer par des pauses de quelle personne de quel Paul veut parler, on énoncera non seulement ici une incohérence, mais un blasphème. (Irenaeus of Lyon, 2nd century)<sup>9</sup>

The oldest writings – the New Testament included (see, e.g. Rev 1:3) – refer to the reader using a participle form, i.e. not as lector but ‘the one who reads’ (ὁ ἀναγινώσκων). This is important proof that readers, rather than being officially appointed in the sense of later church ministry, were persons deemed appropriate *ad hoc*. An example illustrating this can be found in the works of St. Justin of the mid-2nd century:

On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as there is time. Then, when the reader [τοῦ ἀναγινώσκοντος] has finished the president of the assembly verbally admonishes and invites all to imitate such examples of virtue. (Justin, 2nd century)<sup>10</sup>

#### 1.4 The Origin of the Church Ministry of Lector in 2nd and 3rd Centuries

In the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the situation changed, and instead of ‘the one who reads’ ancient texts started using a noun: lector (ἀναγνώστης). The ministry of lector becomes a permanent office as documented by Tertullian in his critique of various services among heretics. The ministry gained in reputation and authority, as one can read in the Didascalia:

Nowhere is the promotion easier than in the camp of rebels, where the mere fact of being there is a foremost service. And so it comes to pass that to-day one man is their bishop, to-morrow another; to-day he is a deacon

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Dan Nässelquist, *Public Reading in Early Christianity: Lectors, Manuscripts, and Sound in the Oral Delivery of John 1–4*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 96.

<sup>9</sup> Irenée de Lyon, *Against Heresies* 3. 7. 2 (Rousseau 2011: 294).

<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* 67 (Falls 1965: 106).

who to-morrow is a reader; to-day he is a presbyter who tomorrow is a layman. (Tertullian, 2nd / 3rd century)<sup>11</sup>

And if there be also a Reader [ἀναγνώστης], let him also receive along with the Elders (Didascalia apostolorum, 3rd century)<sup>12</sup>

### 1.5 The Origin of the Minor Order of Lector in 3rd Century

The importance of lectors in church communities grew, and they started to arbitrarily borrow the customs of ordained ministers as canons of Councils in Carthage and Laodicea testify:

Plaucuit etiam [...] ut lectores populum non salutent [by a liturgical greeting]. (3rd Council of Carthage, 4th century)<sup>13</sup>

Non oportet lectores aut psalmistas orario uti et sic legere aut psallere. (Council of Laodicea, 4th century)<sup>14</sup>

The bishop and martyr Cyprian teaches us that, in his days in North Africa, even those who were not appointed as readers or lectors were allowed to read during worship and that lectors were considered as ordained clergy:

But know that I have made Saturus a reader [...]. We gave the reading to Saturus on Easter once and again or recently when we tested the readers diligently with the priest teachers. (Cyprian, 3rd century)<sup>15</sup>

The oldest records about the liturgical appointment or ordination of lectors resemble what we read in the New Testament: the lector received the book from which he was to read during the celebration. This gesture was later accompanied by the introduction of the lector to the congregation and a brief word of encouragement:

Lector cum ordinatur, faciat de illo verbum episcopus ad plebem, indicans eius fidem ac vitam atque ingenium. Post haec spectante plebe, tradat ei

<sup>11</sup> Tertullianus, *The Prescription against Heretics* 41 (Holmes 2010: 45-46).

<sup>12</sup> *The Didascalia apostolorum* 9 (1903: 49).

<sup>13</sup> *Breviarium Hipponense* 1 (CCSL 149: 33).

<sup>14</sup> *Concilium Laodicenum* 29 (La Collección Canonica Hispana 3: 163).

<sup>15</sup> Cyprian, *Letter* 29 (FoC 51: 71).

codicem de quo lecturus est dicens ad eum: Accipe et esto relator verbi dei, habiturus si fideliter et utiliter impleveris officium, partem cum eis qui verbum dei ministraverint. (Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua, 5th century).<sup>16</sup>

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. (Lk 4)

A lot of emphasis is placed on the fact that hands are not laid on the lector<sup>17</sup> and that it means that even if the word ‘ordination’ is being used with respect to lectors, it is not the same as the ordination of a deacon, priest, or bishop:

Ethiopian version: As for a reader who is to be ordained, the bishop is to hand the book to him and he is not to place a hand on him.

Arabic version: When a reader is established, the bishop presents him with the book and does not put a hand on him.

Sahidic version: When the reader shall be appointed, the bishop shall give the book of the apostle to him and pray over him, but shall not lay hand on him. (Apostolic Tradition, 3rd? century)<sup>18</sup>

When one chooses a reader, he us to have the virtues of the deacon. One is not to lay the hand on him before, but the bishop is to give him the Gospel. (Canons of Hippolitus, 4<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>19</sup>

Roman liturgy, which is rather conservative, maintained this ancient custom of simple conferral of a lector over a very long time; in the 7th and 8th centuries, the rite of lector ordination was not yet known.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua* 8 (CCSL 149: 344).

<sup>17</sup> The only exemption to this is in the Apostolic Constitutions: ‘Pour instituer le lecteur, impose-lui la main en priant Dieu ainsi [...]’ *Apostolic Constitutions* 8. 22 (SC 36: 225).

<sup>18</sup> Paul F Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition* 11 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 74.

<sup>19</sup> *Canons of Hippolitus* 7 (Bradshaw, Johnson, Phillips 2002: 75).

<sup>20</sup> In the *Ordo Romanus* 34 there is only reference to the ordination of the acolyte and subdeacon (Andrieu 3: 603-604).

An isolated reference to the ordination of a woman lector can be found in the Arabic version of the Apostolic Canons dating approximately to the 6th century. Controversy remains as to whether this may have been caused by an error of the scribe:

Quant aux diaconesses, aux sous-diaconesses et aux lectrices, nous nous sommes déjà exprimés à leur sujet. (Apostolic Canons, 6th century)<sup>21</sup>

## 1.6 Lector and Cursus Honorum

It was thanks to Emperor Constantine that the church was made free, and consequently, even those who had pursued a secular career became interested in ecclesial offices. This was probably the reason why candidates for ordination as deacons, priests, or bishops were required to gain experience as lectors or by performing other low-ranking functions in the church:

Bishop Ossius said: And I think it necessary that you treat this most carefully: if it happens that either a rich man or a jurist from the forum, or an administrator, shall have been asked for as bishop, he shall not be ordained before he has discharged the function of lector and the office of deacon and the ministry of presbyter, that he may ascend [by these] grades one by one (if he is suitable) to the summit of the episcopate. For by these promotions, which in any case have extended time, his faith, his modesty, his dignity, and reverence can be proved. (Council of Serdica, 4th century)<sup>22</sup>

Although this requirement was not met immediately or everywhere, it gave rise to the development promoting lectorate as an integral part of gradual preparation for the priesthood.

At the end of antiquity, there were lectors who had been serving as such for dozens of years and, therefore, could be considered as permanent lectors without further promotion.<sup>23</sup> We also encounter cases in which the office of the lector was conferred to children. Tombstones of

<sup>21</sup> *Canons of the Apostles* 53 (PO 8: 638).

<sup>22</sup> Text and Translations of the Serdican Canons, can. 13, in Hamilton Hess, *The Early Development of the Canon Law and the Council of Serdica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), 221.

<sup>23</sup> Ewa Wipszycka, 'Les ordres mineurs dans l'Église d'Égypte du IV<sup>e</sup> au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,' *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 23 (1993), 197–204.

lectors who died at the age of five years (!) were preserved.<sup>24</sup> This very development was a sign of the gradual emptying of the lector's ministry. His task to read from the Scriptures during Eucharist in Roman liturgy was later taken over by the subdeacon, and the position of lector then remained nothing more than a step on the progressive way to the priesthood.

## 2. The Ministry of Acolyte in Early Christianity

### 2.1 Deacon as Servant of the Bishop

The Greek word *diaconos* (deacon) means 'servant', 'ambassador', or 'representative'.<sup>25</sup> As diaconship developed into an ordained ministry, its role was to represent and stand in for the bishop as well as assist him:

In the ordination of a deacon, let the bishop alone lay on hands, because he is not ordained to the priesthood but to the service of the bishop, that he may do those things that are ordered by him. (The Apostolic Tradition, 3rd century)<sup>26</sup>

As aides and representatives of the bishops, deacons were often sent as envoys or legates. As messengers, they were entrusted with the task of bringing the Eucharist – the sacrament of the unity of the church – to absent brothers and sisters or to neighbouring Christian communities.<sup>27</sup>

And when he who presides has celebrated the Eucharist, they whom we call deacons permit each one present to partake of the Eucharistic bread, and wine and water; and they carry it also to the absentees. [...] To those who are absent they are sent through the deacons. (Justin, 2nd century)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> DACL 8.2: 2246-2266

<sup>25</sup> In the New Testament it is most often to refer to a serving a Christian community. International Theological Commission, *The Diaconate: Evolution and Perspectives*, 2,1,2. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_05072004\\_diaconate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_en.html)

<sup>26</sup> *The Apostolic Tradition* 8 (Bradshaw, Johnson, Phillips 2002: 60).

<sup>27</sup> On possible link between the following quotations see: Enrico Cattaneo, *I Ministeri nella Chiesa antica* (Milano: Paoline, 1997), 319.

<sup>28</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* 65 and 67 (Fathers of the Church 6: 105-107).



The presbyters before you who did not observe it [the Quatordeciman practice of celebrating Easter] sent the Eucharist to those from other the dioceses who did [observe the Quatordeciman practice]. (Irenaeus of Lyons, 2nd century)<sup>29</sup>

As helpers of the bishop, deacons became soon available during the celebration of the Eucharist in the preparation of the gifts as well as during Holy Communion:

And then let the oblation be presented by the deacons to the bishop [...] And if the presbyters are not sufficient, let the deacons also hold the cup [...]. The deacons break the bread. (The Apostolic Tradition, 3rd century).<sup>30</sup>

## 2.2 Ecclesiastical Promotion of Deacons

The position of deacon gained significant prestige in the second and third centuries. As the closest collaborators of the bishop, they carried out the practical administration of the local church and its assets, managed alms for the poor, and enjoyed higher status than the presbyters did. Various aspects of inappropriate behaviour on the part of the deacons were criticised by church writers and councils in the 4th century:<sup>31</sup>

The deacons who do not handle the tables of the money of the church honestly but are always stealing from them and do not dispense justly the funds they dispense, so they became rich from the things of the poor. (Origen, 3rd century)<sup>32</sup>

Someone has been mad enough to put deacons before presbyters [...] must not a mere server of tables and of widows Acts 6:1-2 be insane to set himself up arrogantly over men through whose prayers the body and blood of Christ are produced [...] I have seen a deacon, in the absence of the bishop, seat himself among the presbyters and at social gatherings give his blessing to them. [...] Although he [presbyter] may be less highly paid

<sup>29</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5. 24. 17 (K. Lake 1926: 511).

<sup>30</sup> Paul F Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition* 21-22, 120–136.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Jerome or the Council of Nicaea, quoted in the International Theological Commission, *The Diaconate: Evolution and Perspectives*.

<sup>32</sup> Origen, *The commentary on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 16. 22 (R. Heine 2018: 497).

than a deacon, he is superior to him in virtue of his priesthood. (Jerome, 4th century)<sup>33</sup>

These developments inevitably resulted in the need to confer the service to someone else, and this is where the origin of subdeaconship and acolytate comes into play.

### 2.3 Acolyte – Servant of the Deacon

The activities performed on behalf of the deacon or for the deacon became known as ‘subdeaconate’.

Sahidic version: Hand shall not be laid on a subdeacon, but he shall be named to follow the deacons.

Arabic version: Hands are not laid on the subdeacon; rather they are given the name of followers of the deacons.

Ethiopian version: Concerning a subdeacon, he is not to place a hand on a subdeacon but they are to employ the name over them so they may serve the deacons. (The Apostolic Tradition, 3rd century)<sup>34</sup>

The job description of the subdeacon was to accompany, serve, or in other words, perform the *acolytate*. In Greek *acolyte* means ‘one who guides, one who serves’. The position of subdeacon and acolytate probably used to be synonymous – both referred to the practical service of the auxiliaries taking on various tasks for which the deacons were responsible. In the West, this double terminology gave rise to two distinct ministries, while in the East, the service referred to as the acolyte never existed. It seems that at the time, the church organisation in Rome was divided into seven districts governed by seven deacons, each of them having seven collaborators: 6 acolytes and one subdeacon as ‘team leader’.<sup>35</sup> Roman liturgy preserved the similarity of the acolytate and subdeaconate for a long time: in preparation to be ordained

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<sup>33</sup> Jerome, *Letter* 146. 1–2 (Select library of Nicene and post-Nicene fathers 6: 288).

<sup>34</sup> Paul F Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition* 13, 78.

<sup>35</sup> Interpretation by Michel Andrieu, *Ordines Romani du Haut Moyen Age*, Vol. III (Louvain: Spicilegium Lovaniense, 2006), 544–545.

a deacon, it was sufficient to go through either of these roles<sup>36</sup>, and there was a liturgical rite conferring just the aforementioned services and not others, such as lectorate and exorcistate.<sup>37</sup>

The subdeacons and acolytes have taken over the service which used to be performed by the deacon: that is, to represent the bishop as his envoy, including by bringing the Eucharist to those who were not present at the Papal mass<sup>38</sup>:

The presbyters of these [titular] churches– who cannot assemble with us on this day because their people need them – receive from the acolytes the fermentum that we consecrated, so that they do not find themselves separated from our communion on that great day. (Innocent I, 5th century)<sup>39</sup>

There were other tasks of the deacons that were taken over by subdeacons: such as looking after the sacred vessels,<sup>40</sup> bringing water for the washing of hands, preparing the church for the service, kindling the lamps, or guarding women's entrances to the church so that those who were not baptised could not be let in and so that congregants do not leave the church early,<sup>41</sup> caring for the poor and the persecuted,<sup>42</sup> and, if they were not allowed to read from the Gospels, they took over at least the reading of the other non-gospel readings from the Scriptures.

According to the *Ordo romanus I*, seventh-century subdeacons were given the following tasks to fulfill: helping the Pope dress, carrying the incense during the entry procession and the Gospel procession, reading the first reading, holding the Gospel Book during Gospel reading and the kiss, taking the bread intended for the Eucharist from the

<sup>36</sup> See Andrieu, *Ordines*, Vol. III, 549, footnote. 3. See also Michel Andrieu, 'Les Ordres mineurs dans l'ancien rit romain,' *Revue des sciences religieuses* 5, no. 2 (1925): 252–274.

<sup>37</sup> See *Ordo Romanus* 34 (Andrieu 3: 603–604).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. John Baldovin, 'The Fermentum at Rome in the Fifth Century: A Reconsideration,' *Worship* 79 (2005): 38–53; Cf. Antoine Chavasse, 'A Rome, l'envoi de l'eucharistie rite unificateur de l'Eglise locale,' *Revue Bénédictine* 97 (1987): 7–12.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Connell, ed. *Church and Worship in Fifth-Century Rome: The Letter of Innocent I to Decentius of Gubbio* (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>40</sup> '[Dieu], jette jette maintenant les yeux sur ton seigneur, que voici, proposé comme sous-diacre, et donne-lui l'Esprit Saint, pour qu'il s'occupe dignement de tes objets liturgiques.' (*Les Constitutions apostoliques*, 8, 21, 3 (SC 336: 223)).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Wipszycka, 'Les ordres mineurs,' 191–192.

<sup>42</sup> E. Cattaneo, *I Ministeri*, 179.

Pope and putting it into linen pouches during the preparation of the gifts, ordering them on the altar, bringing water for mixing, holding the paten during the second part of the Canon, instructing the Pope that the Eucharist of the people has finished. The following tasks were conferred to the acolytes: expecting the Pope before his entrance to the church, bringing him the Eucharist from earlier mass to check, bringing the Gospel Book to the altar before the beginning of the Mass, carrying the candles in the procession before the Gospels and taking the Gospel Book to safe-keeping, assisting the deacon during the preparation of the altar and during collection of the gifts from the congregation for the Eucharist, holding the linen pouches for bread and ministerial chalices for the wine, holding the paten during the first part of the Canon, bringing the transubstantiated bread to the bishops and priests for the fraction, guard the grids after the end of the service.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.4 The Origin of the Minor Order of the Acolyte

The oldest sources put an emphasis on the fact that the subdeacon is appointed through a liturgical rite which makes his role clearly distinct from the ordination of a deacon, priest, or bishop. In the course of history, the perception of subdeacon as well as the acolyte in the West has prevailed that they constitute ‘minor order’ for those who are part of the clergy.<sup>44</sup>

The following texts refer to the rite performed during the ordination of the acolyte:

Acolythus cum ordinatur, ab episcopo quidem doceatur qualiter se in officio suo agere debeat, se ab archidiacono accipiat cereoferrarium cum

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<sup>45</sup> *Ordo Romanus I* (Andrieu 2: 74–108).

<sup>44</sup> See Cyprian, *Letter* 29 (FoC 51: 71–72): ‘Know that I have made Saturus a reader and Optatus, the confessor, a subdeacon, men whom we had long ago in a common council appointed next to the clergy, either when we gave the reading to Saturus on Easter once and again or recently when we tested the readers diligently with the priest teachers we appointed Optatus among the readers of the teachers of the catechumens, examining whether all things were fitting to them which ought to be in those who were preparing for the clergy.’

See the Apostolic Constitutions which require that hands are laid on the subdeacon during his ordination: ‘Quand tu ordonnes un sous-diacre, o eveque, tu lui imposeras les mains et tu diras: „Maitre, Dieu, créateur du ciel et de la terre ... ton Christ, par qui a ta gloire, honneur et vénération dans le Saint-Esprit pour des siècles, Amen.“’ (*Les Constitutions apostoliques*, 8, 21, 3 (SC 336: 223)).

cereis, ut sciat se ad accendenda Ecclesiae luminaria mancipari; accipiat et orciolum vacuum ad suggerendum vinum in eucharistiam sanguinis Christi. (Statuta ecclesiae antiqua, 5th century)<sup>45</sup>

Dum missa celebrata fuerit, induunt clericum illum planetam et orarium. Dumque venerit episcopus aut ipse dominus apostolicus ad communicandum, faciunt eum venire ad se et porrigit in ulnas eius sacculum super planetam et prosternit se in terram cum ipso sacco et dat ei orationem sic: Intercedente beata et gloriosa semperque sola virigine Maria et beato Petro apostolo, salvet et custodiat et protegat te dominus. Resp. Amen. (Ordo romanus 34, 9th century)<sup>46</sup>

The object used for the establishment of the acolyte differed from region to region depending on the aspect of his ministry that required emphasising. It is useful to note that in Gaul (Statuta ecclesiae antiqua), the acolyte was appointed by the archdeacon rather than the bishop.

As far as subdeacons are concerned, fourth century Egypt required them to be married prior to ordination, whereas in Spain, there was the requirement for them to be celibate; the commitment of celibacy became connected with the minor order of subdeacon.<sup>47</sup> It is probably this very element that contributed to the transfer of subdeaconate from the minor orders to holy orders in the Middle Ages.<sup>48</sup>

## 2.5 Women Deaconesses – ‘Acolytes’?

In the ancient history of Eastern Christianity, we encounter a liturgical ministry of women, who were called deaconesses. The oldest text describing their service dates from 3rd century Syria, that is, the same period in which subdeacons and acolytes appeared.

[Bishop] for there are houses where thou canst not send a Deacon to the women on account of the heathen. Send a Deaconess for many things. The office of a woman Deaconess is required, first, when women go down to the water, it is necessary that they be anointed by a Deaconess, and it is not

<sup>45</sup> *Statuta Ecclesia antiqua* 6 (CCSL 149: 344).

<sup>46</sup> *Ordo Romanus* 34. 1–2, (Andrieu 3: 603).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Wipszycka, ‘Les ordres mineurs,’ 192.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Mario Righetti, *Manuale di storia liturgica*, vol. 4 (Ancora: Milano, 1959), 385–986.

fitting that the anointing oil should be given to a woman to touch; but rather the Deaconess. (*Didascalia apostolorum*, 3rd century)<sup>49</sup>

In the following centuries, women deaconesses were found only in Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Cappadocia, and Greece, while there were none in Egypt and Ethiopia or in the Christian West.<sup>50</sup> Various documents indicate that the tasks of deaconesses included assistance during the baptism of women but not the baptism itself, bringing the Eucharist to sick and imprisoned women, assisting the bishop during contact with women, caring for the sacred vessels and tidying up the church, lighting the candles and dispensing incense, overseeing women's entry to the basilica and overseeing women during Eucharist as well as conducting the singing of women's choir during liturgy or even reading from the Gospels in a purely female community in the absence of the deacon.<sup>51</sup> It is unclear to what degree the diaconate of women was similar to the same office for men or rather whether it was close to the services performed by a subdeacon (acolyte) or lector.<sup>52</sup> The list of their specific tasks, an emphasis on the fact that deaconesses only substituted for deacons in case the latter were not available, ambiguity in the arrangements of pontificals which grouped the texts concerning the ordination of deaconesses to the ones referring to those of deacons but other times to those of subdeacons and lectors, and, last but not least, the fact that the ministry had only local significance – all of the above confirms that deaconesses were closer to subdeacons than deacons. The fact that, in the course of centuries, the rite of ordination of deaconesses became similar to the rite of ordaining deacons<sup>53</sup> (hands were laid on them, they received a stole and chalice) implies that the

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<sup>49</sup> M. Dunlop Gibson, ed., *The Didascalia Apostolorum* 16 (Clay and Sons: London, 1903), 78.

<sup>50</sup> For detailed list of places and documents see Marie-Joséphine Aubert, *Des femmes diaconesses* (Beauchesne: Paris, 1987), 112–116.

<sup>51</sup> See the following studies: Valerie A. Karras, 'Female Deacons in the Byzantine church,' *Church History* 73, no. 2 (June 2004): 278; Ameer Jajé, *Diaconesse. Les femmes dans l'Église syriaque* (Domuni Press: Toulouse, 2016), 18; Janine Hourcade, *Les diaconesses dans l'Église d'hier et de demain* (Éditions de Saint-Augustin: Saint-Marice, 2001), 119; Aubert, *Des femmes diaconesses*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> A summary of discussions between A.-G. Martimort and R. Gryson on the sacramentality diaconal ordination of women in the Apostolic Constitutions (particularly Robert Gryson, *Le ministère des femmes dans l'Église ancienne*, Gembloux: Duculot, 1972). In 70's and 80's see Hourcade, *Les diaconesses*, 53–56.

<sup>53</sup> See particularly *L'Euchologio Barberini, Gr. 336*, 163–164 (BELS 80: 338–339).

rite had followed a similar development as the ordination of lectors or subdeacons.

Local synods in the West repeatedly prohibited the service of women deaconesses. The Sacramentary of pontifical liturgy dating from the 8th century preserved the prayer for the ordination of a deaconess. The prayer, however, rather than being placed close to the ordination of a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, is located among blessings:

Exaudi Domine preces nostras, et super hanc famulam tuam *illam* spiritum tuae benedictionis emitte, ut caelesti munere ditata et tuae gratiam possit maiestatis acquirere, et bene vivendi aliis exemplum prebere. (Gregorian Sacramentary, 8th century)<sup>54</sup>

The ministry of deaconesses gradually disappeared. The reasons for this remain subject to discussion. For our purposes, it is important to summarise that one might consider deaconesses not as a parallel service to deacons but rather as a service corresponding to that of subdeacons and acolytes. The inconsistency in the appellation of the deaconess, acolyte, and subdeacon should not mislead us. Neither acolytes, subdeacons, nor deaconesses were the first rank servers of the Eucharist; that role belonged exclusively to bishops, priests, and deacons. The former were considered helpers in practical tasks during liturgy as well as the non-liturgical life of the church.

### 3. Renewal of the Ministries in the 20th Century

#### 3.1 Discussions Following the Second Vatican Council

There were various bishops demanding that the Second Vatican Council deal also with the issue of minor orders, which in those days included ostiariate, exorcistate, and acolytate. Subdeaconate was also part of the discussion although it had been ranked among holy orders since the Middle Ages.<sup>55</sup> After the Second Vatican Council, the issue of minor orders was covered in the works of *Consilium ad exequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia*. From the very beginning, it was proposed that rather than ‘ordination’, the term ‘appointment’ should be used and that other services are to be introduced:

<sup>54</sup> *Le Sacramentaire Grégorien* 994 (Deshuesses 1979: 541).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Paul VI, *Ministeria quaedam* (EDIL 2878).

Il gruppo affronto anche il delicato problema di benedizioni da impartire alle donne per l'esercizio di qualche compito che già è loro affidato, ad. es.: sagrestane, organiste, direttrici del canto. Ma anche questo tema fu solo sfiorato e non sufficientemente approfondito. (...) Non piu 'ordini' ma 'ministeri', benedizioni stabili per altri ministeri esercitati dali laici noc posibilita di conferirne alcune anche alle donne.<sup>56</sup>

At the time, women were expected to provide different types of services than those of lectors or acolytes. In addition, various proposals began to take shape in that period, e. g. proposals which aimed to introduce the rites of blessings and conferral of certain liturgical tasks outside of appointment to the instituted liturgical service, or proposals to maintain only the services of lectorate and subdiaconate, considering their ancient history as well as their counterparts in the Byzantine rite.

In further discussions, the role of the lector was expanded to include not only reading from the Scripture during the liturgy but also the catechesis to children, adults, and catechumens. It was also proposed that acolytate and subdeaconate be merged into a new ministry.<sup>57</sup> The key questions raised in the discussion concerned the essence of these ministries, that is, whether or not they are integral parts of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Another important question concerned the nature of the acolytate, as it was originally conceived as an altar function. Another distinct function was intended for the purpose of administering the Eucharist. During further discussions on established functions, the notion of acolytate as a function linked to the Eucharist prevailed so that the distinction between an acolyte and the extraordinary ministry of Holy Communion was blurred.<sup>58</sup> A decision was made to abolish the status of subdeaconship.

### 3.2 Lectorate and Acolytate are Based on the Priesthood of Baptism

In 1972 St. Pope Paul VI published his Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio* *Ministeria quaedam*, through which he abolished all minor orders. Lectorate and acolytate are defined as established ministries.

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<sup>56</sup> Annibale Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica* (BELS 30: 706).

<sup>57</sup> Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 713 and nn.

<sup>58</sup> Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 723 and 721.



Besides adapting to the times, their nature also changed: they were no longer to be considered an integral part of the sacrament of Holy Orders belonging to the clergy but, instead, as services emerging from the priesthood of baptism:

Melius etiam apparebit discrimen inter clericos et laicos; inter ea, quae clericis sunt propria et reservantur, atque ea, quae christifidelibus laicis demandari possunt; ideo apertius apparebit mutua ratio quatenus „sacerdotium ... commune fidelium et sacerdotium ministeriale seu hierarchicum.“ (Ministeria quaedam, 1972)<sup>59</sup>

The task of the appointed lector was thus established as reading from the Scriptures during the liturgy, standing in for the deacon or cantor, preparing temporary readers, and preparing for the first communion.<sup>60</sup> The role of the acolyte became helping the deacon and priest, performing service at the altar, distributing the Eucharist, expositing of the blessed sacrament and guiding the altar servers.<sup>61</sup> To appoint a person to the service of the lector, the bishop or ordinary was to pass the book Scriptures and for the service of the acolyte to pass the paten with hosts or the chalice with the wine.

### 3.3 Lectorate, Acolytate, and the Service of Women

After the Council, the services of lectorate and acolytate remained reserved for men. This was later reflected in the Code of Canon Law (1983). Women were, however, allowed to distribute the Eucharist during Holy Mass (1969), read non-gospel readings, and carry out other liturgical services, except for altar service (1970):

Persona idonea, [...] designabitur iuxta hunc ordinem: subdaiconus, clericus in ordinibus minoribus constitutus, tonsuratus, religiosus, religiosa, catechista (nisi, prudenti Pastoris iudicio, catechista religiosae praeferendus sit) aut simplex fidelis: vir et mulier. (Fidei custos, 1969)<sup>62</sup>

Iuxta liturgicas normas in Ecclesia traditas, vetantur mulieres [...] ad altare sacerdotis inservire. Mulieribus autem licet secundum normas de

<sup>59</sup> Paul VI, *Ministeria quaedam* (EDIL 2880).

<sup>60</sup> Paul VI, *Ministeria quaedam*, 5 (EDIL 2885).

<sup>61</sup> Paul VI, *Ministeria quaedam*, 6 (EDIL 2886).

<sup>62</sup> Sacra Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, *Fidei custos*, 3 (EV 3: 1059).

his rebus latas: a) lectiones proferre, Evangelio excepto [...]; b) intentiones orationis universalis proferre; c) liturgici coetus cantum moderari et organum aut instrumenta premisa pulsare; d) monitiones (seu didascalía) legere [...]; e) munera quaedam obire in servitium congregationis fidelium, quae alicubi etiam mulieres committi solent, ex. gr. fideles ad portas ecclesiae recipere eosque in locis ipsis convenientibus disponere, atque eorum processiones ordinare, aut stipes in Ecclesia collegere. (*Liturgicae instaurationes*, 1970)<sup>63</sup>

The liturgical rite which confers temporary authorisation to administer Holy Communion contains the following prayer:

Clementissime Deus, familiae tuae institutor et rector, hunc fratrem nostrum N. benedicere + digneris, ut qui cibum vitae fratribus suis fideliter distribuit, huius sacramenti robore confortatus, caelestis convivii partem accipiat. Per Christum Dominum nostrum (*Ritus ad deputandum*, 1973)<sup>64</sup>

On publication of this ceremony, the Congregation stressed that, in the case of women, there is no equivalence between authorisation to participate in the distribution of the Eucharist in this extraordinary mode and general service at the altar.<sup>65</sup> It was only in 1992 that altar service was opened to women through a decree of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts. In response to the question of whether this includes liturgical services which are open not only to men but also to women, pursuant to article 230 Section 2, it replied in the affirmative, attaching the following commentary:

Si autem in aliqua dioecesi, prae oculis can. 230, § 2 habito, Episcopus sinet ut peculiares ob rationes ad altare munus etiam mulieribus permittatur, hoc, ad normam quam supra diximus, plane fidelibus explicari debet, et pariter ostendendum mulieres saepe munus lectoris in liturgia complere easque Sacram Communionem distribuere posse, tamquam extraordinarias Eucharistiae ministras, atque alia officia praestare, quemadmodum can. 230, § 3 prospicit: Perspicuum exinde esse debet haec liturgica munera

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<sup>63</sup> Sacra Congregatio de cultu divino, *Liturgicae instaurationes*, 7 (EDIL 2180).

<sup>64</sup> Sacra Congregatio pro cultu divino, 'Ritus ad deputandum,' *Notitiae* 83 (maio 1973) 165–167.

<sup>65</sup> 'Le rôle des femmes dans la liturgie,' *Notitiae* 83 (maio 1973) 164.

« ex temporanea deputatione » obiri, ad Episcopi iudicium, nullo existente iure ut laici, sive viri sive mulieres, ea expleant.<sup>66</sup>

Since the Second Vatican Council, the issue of the diaconate of women has been repeatedly studied.<sup>67</sup> For the first time since 1973, it was discussed under the Pope Paul VI by the Commission on Women in Society and the Church and then, from 1992, the International Theology Commission under the Pope John Paul II, at which point the work of the Commission resulted in a document entitled ‘The Diaconate: Evolution and Perspectives’.<sup>68</sup> In 2016, the Pope Francis established a commission devoted to the diaconate of women,<sup>69</sup> which later dissolved due to diverging opinions.<sup>70</sup> In 2020, the Pope appointed a new commission on the same topic.<sup>71</sup>

In 2021, when the Pope Francis modified Canon 230 of the Code of Canon Law and made it possible to welcome women among lectors and acolytes, he added an explanatory letter addressed to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. The letter reads:

Una più chiara distinzione fra le attribuzioni di quelli che oggi sono chiamati “ministeri non-ordinati (o laicali)” e “ministeri ordinati” consente di sciogliere la riserva dei primi ai soli uomini. Se rispetto ai ministeri ordinati la Chiesa «non ha in alcun modo la facoltà di conferire alle donne l’ordinazione sacerdotale», per i ministeri non ordinati è possibile, e oggi

<sup>66</sup> Pontificia Commissio Codici Iuris Canonici Authentice Interpretando, ‘Interpretatio authentica,’ *Acta apostolicae sedis*, 86 (1994), 541–542.

<sup>67</sup> A clear overview provided in Susan Rakoczy, ‘The ordination of Catholic women as deacons: The state of the question,’ *Hervormde Theologiese Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020), 5–6, doi:10.4102/hts.v76i2.5965.

<sup>68</sup> International Theological Commission, *The Diaconate: Evolution and Perspectives*, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_05072004\\_diaconate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_en.html).

<sup>69</sup> Istituzione della Commissione di Studio sul Diaconato delle donne, *Bollettino della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede*, August 2, 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/08/02/0569/01268.html>

<sup>70</sup> Viz *Conferenza stampa del Santo Padre durante il volo di ritorno da Skopje*, October 7, 2019, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190507\\_macedoniadelnord-voloritorno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190507_macedoniadelnord-voloritorno.html); see also *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants at the XXI Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG)*, May 10, 2019, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190510\\_uisg.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190510_uisg.html)

<sup>71</sup> Istituzione di una nuova Commissione di studio sul diaconato femminile, *Bollettino della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede*, April 8, 2020, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2020/04/08/0210/00474.html>.

appare opportuno, superare tale riserva. [...] La riserva ai soli uomini non appartiene alla natura propria dei ministeri del Lettore e dell'Accolito. Offrire ai laici di entrambi i sessi la possibilità di accedere al ministero dell'Accolito e del Lettorato, in virtù della loro partecipazione al sacerdozio battesimale, incrementerà il riconoscimento, anche attraverso un atto liturgico (istituzione), del contributo prezioso che da tempo moltissimi laici, anche donne, offrono alla vita e alla missione della Chiesa.<sup>72</sup>

In an official commentary on *Motu proprio Spiritus Domini* sent by the Holy See on the occasion of its publication, Angelo Lameri claims that it would be wrong to understand the change as the promotion of women, but rather:

Si tratta propriamente di un riconoscimento del laicato e del suo ruolo nella Chiesa, nella direzione della declericalizzazione di una ministerialità che, tra l'altro, non può essere intesa ed esercitata solo nell'ambito della liturgia. Il ministero del lettore infatti non si esercita solo nella proclamazione delle pericopi non evangeliche nella celebrazione, ma anche nell'annuncio della parola di Dio perché germogli e fruttifichi nel cuore degli uomini. L'accolito non è istituito solo per il servizio all'altare, ma anche per testimoniare un sincero amore per il corpo mistico di Cristo e specialmente per i deboli e i malati. Si tratta di svolgere una missione ecclesiale in quelle realtà aperte all'evangelizzazione.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

How should we interpret the opening of the ministries of lectorate and acolytate to women? First, this is a logical consequence of the change which occurred back in 1972, when the *Motu proprio* by Pope Paul VI in *Ministeria quaedam* linked the two services with the priesthood of baptism rather than the priesthood of ministry, rendering the idea of reserving them to men only obsolete. This is in fact also the

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<sup>72</sup> Lettera del Santo Padre Francesco al Prefetto della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede circa l'accesso delle donne ai ministeri del Lettorato e dell'Accolito, *Bollettino della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede*, January 11, 2021, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/01/11/0016/00033.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Angelo Lameri, Commento alla Lettera Apostolica in forma di *Motu Proprio Spiritus Domini*. Il Lettorato e l'Accolito come ministeri laicali radicati nel Battesimo, *Bollettino della Sala stampa della Santa Sede*, January 11, 2021, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/info/2021/01/11/motuproprio.html>.

official interpretation of the Holy See, as expressed in Pope Francis' letter to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith as well as by comments by Angelo Lameri.

Secondly, it is not a historical breakthrough, given that women did perform these services before. Lectors during liturgy developed from the function of readers typical in ancient society, which was performed by both men and women. Appointing women readers, therefore, represents a return to this ancient, pre-Christian reality. The office currently entrusted to the acolytes was, back in the first millennium, performed by male acolytes and subdeacons as well as deaconesses.

Thirdly, although the historical services of men and women acolytes, subdeacons, and deaconesses were derived from the ministry of the deacons, they were not understood as ordained functions. The ceremony of appointing them was originally much closer to that of the appointment of a lector based on the lay ministry of a reader rather than the Sacrament of Holy Orders. It was only later that these ceremonies gained overt similarity with ordination and that their title settled as *ordination* or their official inclusion among Holy Orders (the function of subdeacon in the West; the question of female deaconates in the East remains a matter of discussion).

Fourthly, this change might represent the end of the discussion on the deaconate of women. In his speech to the participants at the XXI Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General, Pope Francis pointed out:

La forma di ordinazione [of women deacons] non era una formula sacramentale, era per così dire – questo è quello che mi dice l'informazione, perché io non sono perito in questo – come oggi è la benedizione abbaziale di una abbadessa, una benedizione speciale per il diaconato alle diaconesse. (...) Per questo, sul caso del diaconato, dobbiamo cercare cosa c'era all'inizio della Rivelazione, e se c'era qualcosa, farla crescere e che arrivi... Se non c'era qualcosa, se il Signore non ha voluto il ministero, il ministero sacramentale per le donne non va.<sup>74</sup>

While discussion on the nature of the deaconate as performed by women throughout history and its renewal in the Roman rite continues, this historical overview has illustrated that women-deaconesses were,

<sup>74</sup> *Address of His Holiness*, May 10, 2019.

both by their tasks and, initially, even by their conferral rite, comparable to male subdeacons and acolytes. The decision to include women into established – albeit lay – services could be a strategy used by the Holy See to compensate for the fact that women will always remain outside the scope of Holy Orders, not only of priests but also of deacons.

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