

THE FUTURE OF TONSURE AND MINOR ORDERS

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1. THE PROBLEM

The liturgy consists of sacred signs. One of the most important principles of the reform of the liturgy is that of the "truth of the signs". The truthfulness of these signs had to be restored because "with the passage of time there have crept into the rites of the sacraments and sacramentals certain features which have rendered their nature and purpose less clear to the people today; and hence to that extent the need arises to adjust certain aspects of these rites to the requirements of our times" (Const. on the Lit., art. 62).

Classical examples of those rites whose nature and purpose had become "less clear" in the course of time, are the first tonsure and the minor orders. How many of those who have been ordained porters ever acted afterwards as, let us say, ushers in the church? For centuries the porter's tasks have been taken over by sacristans. But these were not members of the clergy, nor did they receive a special ordination. How many of those who were ordained exorcists were ever allowed to exorcize someone possessed by a demon?

In view of these facts and moved by the growing awareness of the missing "truth of signs" ever more young men studying for the priesthood became reluctant to be ordained porter, lector, exorcist or acolyte. Could not any young boy of the age of ten or twelve do everything — without receiving an ordination — what an ordained acolyte was allowed to do. With other words; these rites had lost their original meaning. Today they have meaning only as a kind of stepping stones to the priestly ordination. But this was not their intended significance when they were introduced into the Church.

2. A PROPOSED SOLUTION

Moved by the growing uneasiness of their students in major seminaries some bishops' conferences asked Rome to create new rites and to give new meaning to the former rites of first tonsure and minor orders. Rome in turn asked these bishops' conferences to come up with practical proposals of their own. These new rites obtained the provisional approval of the Congregation of Divine Worship. Finally, inspired by these first drafts, Rome prepared rites of its own and made them public in early 1971, thereby asking the bishops of the whole world for their comments and further suggestions. The period of four months, however, envisioned by the guidelines, was too short, because during this short time not all the bishops had the opportunity to ordain clerics according to these experimental rites.

Together with other bishops' conferences also our bishops asked Rome for the permission to use this new ritual and thus gather further experience. On August 7, 1971 the Congregation of Divine Worship granted this petition.

3. FROM THE FIRST TONSURE TO THE RECEPTION INTO THE CLERICAL STATE

A. A CHANGED SITUATION

During the Middle Ages it was the privilege of the free man to wear his hair long. Short hair was a sign of being a slave. In order to signify that they considered themselves servants of God for the sake of his people, monks and clerics started to wear their hair short.

Today the outward signs of class distinctions have largely disappeared. Everyone is free to wear his hair as he likes. In a sense also clerics and religious had acknowledged this fact, because their tonsure had become smaller and smaller; in the end it was only a small round spot on the crown of their heads. In this way it did no longer signify what it was intended to in the beginning.

It was equally characteristic for the Europe of the Middle Ages that each social class, and even each individual profession had its particular custom to dress; they had a kind of uniform. The clerical state as a special group in this social structure had also its particular vestments. Consequently, when a young man was received into the clerical state

he was also given the vestments of a cleric. But from the twelfth century on they did not give him his proper clerical vestment but only the surplice (*super-pelliceum*), a kind of shortened alb which was wide enough to be worn also in winter over the furs or "pelles".

Today everyone dresses as he likes and as he can afford to. Among the last ones to follow this usage of our times, were the clerics.

These historical reflections show that both tonsure and the clerical investiture have lost their original meaning. Now the Church acknowledges this fact by changing the former rite of first tonsure into a ceremonial reception into the clerical state.

This reception is not a private affair, affecting only the seminarian and his bishop; it has consequences for the whole People of God in a diocese. It is, therefore, fitting, that it be held in a public ceremony. From the moment of this celebration on the seminarian is an official candidate for holy orders; he acquires a special relationship to the local Church; he is incardinated into the diocese.

B. THE EXPERIMENTAL RITE

This rite may be held during Mass or in the course of a Bible Service. The readings of this service are to be taken either from the liturgy of the day or from the special lectionary of the experimental rite. After the gospel, the bishop (or in religious orders and congregations the abbot or provincial) explains the rite to the assembly:

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

the resolution of these our brothers, who present themselves today before the Church, concerns us all. Because they want to declare publicly that they intend to become deacons and (and/or) priests. This concerns us, the bishop and the priests, because they want to become, with the grace of God, our co-workers in the ministry of the Church. It concerns you, my brothers and sisters, because they will eventually be sent to you, later on.

When they came to this place they were convinced that they were answering a special call of God. Now they ask me to confirm this call.

They heard the Lord's call in the way God guided them in the various events and circumstances of their lives. The concern for those of their fellow men who are hard pressed by the difficulties of life has moved them. They were urged by the good example of the communities where they grew up. Christ called them to continue the work of salvation which he has performed in his earthly life. Strengthened by the powerful grace of the Holy Spirit, they came to the conclusion, that they had to give themselves to the service of God and their fellow men. This decision they want to proclaim in public.

In order that they may become in the future our faithful helpers in the apostolic ministry, they began a spiritual, apostolic and intellectual training. They trusted in the help of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they placed the firm hope that he will enable them to remain faithful to their vocation.

Now they will be called to come forward and to declare their intention in public and to ask me to accept their promise.

The the candidates are called by name to come forward. Before he asks for the candidates' readiness to become ministers in his diocese the bishop declares publicly that he is ready to accept them because of the favorable testimony of others, mainly of the staff of the seminary. Only then he addresses the candidates, asking them for their readiness to continue and complete their seminary training, and to accept, after their ordination to the priesthood, a ministry in his diocese. After their favorable reply the bishop accepts their promise in the name of the diocese, the local Church.

B. My dear sons.

your pastors and teachers, your educators in the seminary and others who know you well assured me of your good conduct of life. Gladly accept their testimony.

Therefore, I ask you now:

Are you ready and willing, in answer to the Lord's call, to continue and complete your training, and to get ready to accept in due time a ministry in the Church?

A. I am ready.

B. Are you ready to serve Christ the Lord, and his Body, the Church faithfully?

A. I am ready.

B. Gladly the Church accepts your promise.

May God who began the good work in you see to its completion.

To this all present answer "Amen."

Now there remains nothing to do but to pray and to ask God for his assistance that the new clerics fulfill what they promised. They have to become close followers of Christ; they are to "follow in his steps" (1 Pt 2:21). In the following of Jesus, the "faithful witness" (Apoc 1:5) they have to become Christ's witnesses before the world. Christ "took our illnesses and carried away our diseases" (Mt 8:17; cf. Jos 53:4). The Christian community prays, therefore, that the new clerics be ready to carry one another's burden and so fulfil the law of Christ (cf. Gal 6:2).

Since they have to strengthen the faith of their brothers — like Peter — they must “walk by faith, following the example of Abraham” (Vatican II, Decree on Priestly Ministry and Life, art. 22). They have to develop a deep devotion to the eucharist, because they have to gather the Christian people for its celebration later on, knowing that this is the central mystery of their lives, “the source and apex of the whole work of preaching the gospel” (*Ibid.*, art. 5). For all this the community prays when the bishop rises and invites the faithful to pray:

**My dear friends,
let us earnestly pray to the Lord, our God,
that he may pour out the abundance of his blessings
on these his servants,
who want to dedicate themselves
to the service of the Church.**

Some or all of the following petitions are then pronounced by the deacon or some other minister:

**For our brothers
that they more closely adhere to Christ, our Lord,
and become his faithful witnesses before the world,
let us pray to the Lord.**

**That they get ready
to carry the burdens of their fellow men
and be willing to listen always
to the voice of the Spirit,
let us pray to the Lord.**

**That he make them ministers of the Church
who strengthen the faith of their brothers
and gather them together
for the celebration of the eucharist,
let us pray to the Lord.**

The bishop continues, concluding this prayer of intercession:

**Lord,
help us and listen to our prayers.
Kindly bless + these your sons
who want to dedicate themselves to your service,
and to the pastoral care of your people.
May they grow in holiness to the joy of your Church
and become worthy to receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders.
This we ask you through Christ our Lord.**

Another, optional formula is found in the new ritual with which the bishop may conclude the intercessions of the people. It asks for a deep love of God in the new clerics. Out of this love of God the love

for those for whom they are to be ordained later on is to grow. The Spirit of love is to inspire them to serve God willingly in their brothers and sisters in all conditions of life.

Lord.

**grant to these your servants
to obtain an ever deeper knowledge
of the mystery of your love for them.
Give them the grace
to get involved in the affairs of your people
with open heart and willing mind.
May the Spirit of charity be active in them
that they serve willingly their brothers and sisters
in all conditions of life.
This we ask you through Christ our Lord. — R. Amen.**

If this rite of admission to the clerical state takes place during Mass the celebration continues in the normal way. If it is held during a celebration of the Word of God, the bishop now blesses the congregation and dismisses them.

4. FROM THE LECTORATE TO THE COMMISSIONING TO PROCLAIM THE WORD OF GOD.

A. HISTORY

The lectorate is the oldest of the minor orders in the Church, both in the East and the West. Not all could read in Christian antiquity. Therefore, those who could were asked to do so for the benefit of the assembly. Soon this service became an ecclesiastical office conferred in a special ordination.

But relatively soon a part of the readings — especially the gospel — was reserved to the presbyters and deacons, particularly during the celebration of the eucharist. In the Roman High Mass even the epistle was withdrawn from the lector and reserved for the subdeacon so that in the end, simple lectors were only allowed to read the lessons from the Old Testament in Mass and the readings from Sacred Scripture at Matins in the Divine Office. No wonder that in the end the office of lectors became obsolete in the Roman rite and disappeared.

When it was re-introduced in the tenth century — together with the other minor orders — it remained simply a stepping stone to the presbyterate. When the Council of Trent tried to restore the minor orders it did not succeed because it failed to give them a new meaning and

real tasks, even though it stated in a special canon: "If anyone shall say that besides the priesthood there are not in the Church other orders, both major and minor, by which, as by certain steps, advance is made to the priesthood, let him be anathema" (Denz. 895/1772).

When the bishops were asked about liturgical matters to be reformed before Vatican II, a number of them brought up also the question of the minor orders.

In the future, porters and exorcists are no longer needed in the liturgy. With high probability the order of the subdiaconate will also be suppressed. Its *tasks* will be taken over by the acolytate, its *obligations* by the diaconate. Two additional questions will be inserted into the ordination rite of deacons: one concerning celibacy, the other concerning the willingness to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours. There are to remain, consequently, two minor orders: the lectorate and the acolytate.

B. PROBLEMS

One of the guidelines of the ongoing reform of priestly education states that in the years of their formation the seminarians be gradually introduced into the duties of their future pastoral life. Relatively soon in the course of their training they should be made familiar with their principal task: the proclamation of the Word of God.

But, as a matter of fact, every Christian has the right and the duty to proclaim the good news in virtue of the Sacraments of Christian initiation (Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, art. 3). Consequently, it has been rightly observed that the minor orders are not ramifications of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, but concretisations of the Christian obligation to proclaim the Word of God which has its basis in the Sacraments of initiation, particularly in the Sacrament of Baptism. The Church acknowledges this fact, especially today, by commissioning lay people, both men and women, to proclaim the Word of God, granting them the so-called "*missio canonica*", and ordering others to act as lectors in liturgical assemblies, even in the celebration of the eucharist. This task is, as the guidelines of the new Missal say "a ministerial, not a presidential function" (n. 34).

These deliberations could induce us to suspect that the lectorate also be suppressed. But this is not the case. For the time being, at least, Rome is not willing to drop the lectorate nor the acolytate. Actually, by publishing experimental rites for these two minor orders, Rome is trying to revive them and to give them a new meaning.

These two minor orders are now to be conferred by the local ordinary or, in the case of religious, by the major superiors (abbot, provincial or their equivalents). These ministers may also delegate other priests who have some higher ecclesiastical office.

It is obvious, then, that before seminarians be sent out to teach religion in schools, they should be ordained lector, that is to say, they should be commissioned to proclaim the Word of God. There should be, however, an appropriate space of time between the admission to the clerical state and the lectorate on the one side, and the lectorate and the acolytate on the other. The judge in this matter is the bishop or the religious ordinary.

C. THE EXPERIMENTAL RITE

The ordination of lectors takes place either during Mass or in a celebration of the Word of God. Lectors are ordained before the first reading of the Mass or after the gospel. Here appears a kind of hesitation in the new ritual. Practically all reformed rites of Sacraments and sacramentals to be held during the eucharistic celebration, have now been inserted between the celebration of the Word and before the preparation of the gifts. If lectors are ordained before the first reading of Mass, it gives to *one*, or at highest *two* of the newly ordained the possibility to exercise this ministry during the eucharistic celebration.

After the candidates have been called nominally by the deacon or a priest, the bishop addresses them with the following words:

My dear sons,

God the Father fulfilled the mystery of our salvation and revealed it to us through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is God and man. After he had told us everything the Father had ordered him to reveal to us, he entrusted the Church with the task to preach this Good News to the whole world.

As lectors, as readers of the Word of God, you are to help in its proclamation. When you will be ordained lectors in the Church, you become co-responsible for the faith of your fellow men, since faith has its very foundation in the Word of God. You have to read the Word of God in the liturgical assemblies; you have to give religious instruction to children and adults, to baptized people and to catechumens; you have even to proclaim the Gospel, that is to say, the Good News, to people who have never heard of it. In this way, through your help, all men are to come to the knowledge of God the Father, and of Jesus Christ, whom the Father sent into the world, so that they may obtain eternal life.

While you proclaim to others the Word of God, you have to receive it yourselves willingly in your hearts. Meditate eagerly on this Word. May your whole way of life be a manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ before the world.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hb 11:6). But how are people "to believe in him of whom they never heard And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:4 f). For future priests and deacons this official sending takes place now in their ordination as lectors.

In order to be able to instruct others in the Word of God the lector has to study this Word of God and to meditate regularly on it. "Practice these duties; devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Take heed to yourself and to teaching; hold to that, for by doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim 4:15;16).

After the allocution all stand and the bishop invites the faithful to pray for the candidates:

**My dear brothers and sisters,
let us pray to God, the all-powerful Father,
that he may bless these his servants,
whom he has chosen to become lectors in the Church.
May they faithfully perform the tasks entrusted to them.
By preaching Christ, may they glorify
the Father who is in heaven.**

After a while of silent prayer the bishop sums up the prayers of the assembly, asking for God's blessing; it is to enable the seminarians to meditate constantly on the Word of God. It is to give them a deeper insight into the content of their faith, and to grant them the ability to communicate the Christian message effectively to others:

**O God,
you are the source of light and goodness.
You sent your Son, the Word of Life, to mankind,
to reveal the mystery of your love.
Bless + these our brothers
whom you have chosen
to become lectors in the Church.
Help them to meditate always on your word.
Give them a deep knowledge of the faith
so that they become ready
to proclaim the truth faithfully
to their brothers and sisters.
This we ask you through Christ our Lord. — R. Amen.**

By handing over to the candidates a volume of Sacred Scripture and ordering them to proclaim the word of God faithfully, the bishop bestows on them the office of readers, saying:

**Receive the book of Sacred Scripture.
Proclaim the word of God faithfully
to your brothers and sisters
that it may grow vigorously in their hearts. — R. Amen.**

In the meantime, especially if many are to be ordained, one may sing Psalm 18 or any other suitable chant. Then the Mass continues in the usual way. If the lectors have been ordained before the first reading, one of them reads the lesson. Another of them announces the individual petitions of the Prayer of the Faithful.

5. FROM THE ACOLYTATE TO THE COMMISSIONING OF EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

A. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The highest of the four minor orders was the acolytate. From the very beginning it had a close affinity to the Eucharist (breaking of the eucharistic bread; "fermentum"), to the altar and to all that is connected with it.

In the course of time the tasks of the acolytes were partly entrusted to lay people and partly taken over by higher orders. Often the acolyte's tasks at the altar were entrusted to small boys. Like the other minor orders, also the acolytate became one of the stepping stones to the priestly ordination.

When it was decided to retain from among the four minor orders the acolytate, it had to be given new tasks. The acolyte is now to be ordained as assistant of the priest and the deacon; he has to help them at the altar. He is to be the extra-ordinary minister of the distribution of holy Communion. He may lawfully distribute holy Communion if priests or deacons are not available. He may bring holy Communion to the sick and the aged who cannot regularly attend the Sunday services in the parish. In case the number of communicants is so great, he may help the priests in parishes in order not to delay unduly the end of holy Mass.

B. PROBLEMS

But in this case too we are faced by a certain dilemma. In virtue of their royal priesthood, the Church entrusts today again lay people with the task, not only to conduct priestless Sunday services and to preach the Word of God at these occasions. She allows them also to bring holy Communion to these celebrations from the parish church and to distribute the eucharist to the people attending these services. Many

religious sisters working as nurses bring today in a number of countries holy Communion to the sick. Obviously, these lay people are to be commissioned to this task, and there exist proper, though experimental, rites (cf. *Liturgical Information Bulletin* 5(1970) pp. JKL). This act of commissioning, however, must not be considered an ordination.

Here we are now faced with the question: What is to happen to a seminarian who had been commissioned to distribute holy Communion or to act as reader, or obtained the "missio canonica", when his classmates are to receive the minor orders of lector and acolyte? Is he to receive these orders, after he has exercised the tasks connected with them, eventually over a longer period of time? The most reasonable solution would be *not* to ordain him lector and acolyte, because the Church had commissioned him earlier to these tasks. After the reception into the clerical state this seminarian could be ordained deacon immediately. But this is a matter to be left to the decision of the hierarchy.

In view of these problems theologians as well as liturgists have asked themselves whether the present-day attempts to revive at least two of the minor orders will be successful, because the sharp decrease of priestly vocations in many countries will necessarily imply that major seminarians will be relatively soon asked to teach religion in schools and to help out in parishes on Sundays. This help will certainly include the distribution of holy Communion.

C. THE EXPERIMENTAL RITE

This rite consists of a calling of the candidates, an allocution of the ordaining minister, the ordination prayer (with invitation and collect) and finally the handing over of the symbols of the office of acolyte.

The acceptance into the clerical state and the ordination of lectors may be held during a celebration of the Word of God (Bible service); the acolytate, however, because of its close connection to the eucharist, has to be conferred during the celebration of the eucharist. In the course of his homily the bishop has also to mention, toward the end, the tasks entrusted to acolytes in the Church and the qualities of his life. Acolytes as extra-ordinary ministers of holy Communion make it possible for their fellow Christians to become one with their Lord. Therefore, acolytes should be themselves united with Christ in sincere personal love. This is a new motive why, as acolytes, the candidates have to strive after a deep and intensive love of Christ and their fellow men:

**My dear sons,
you have been chosen to become acolytes. Thus you get a special part in the mystery of the Church, whose summit and well-spring**

is the eucharist. By the eucharist the people of God develops and grows.

From now on you have to perform the tasks entrusted to you in religious celebrations, by assisting priests and deacons. As extraordinary ministers of the distribution of holy Communion you have to give the body of Christ to the faithful, and bring it also to those who are sick.

When you do all this, keep in mind that you become one with your brothers when you share with them the one bread of Christ. May the word of the Lord which he spoke to his disciples during the Last Supper strengthen you in your service: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

After an invitation to pray for the future acolytes, the bishop sums up the silent prayers of all present. Jesus is the true bread of life given to us by the heavenly Father. Acolytes bring this heavenly bread to other members of the Church. They need God's special assistance for this task, to be faithful and trustworthy stewards of the table of the Lord. Exhorting the faithful to prayer the bishop says:

**My brothers and sisters,
let us ask God the all-powerful Father,
to pour on these his servants
the abundance of his blessings.
He chose them to become acolytes.
May he, therefore, give them the strength
to be his faithful servants in the Church.**

After silent prayer of all, the bishop continues:

**Father,
in your loving kindness
you gave to the Church
through your Son the Bread of Life.
Bless - these our brothers
whom we chose to the office of acolytes.
Help them to become faithful stewards
of your holy altars.
Through Christ our Lord. — R. Amen.**

In a symbolic act the bishop entrusts finally to the seminarians their new office. A vessel (paten or ciborium) filled with unconsecrated altar bread is handed over to each one. The ordaining prelate exhorts them to be worthy servants of the Lord's table, and worthy stewards of the Church which grows through the eucharist. While he gives the vessel holding hosts for holy Mass, the bishop says:

**Receive this vessel with bread
for the celebration of the eucharist.
Be a worthy servant of the Lord's table
and of the Church.**

For the preparation of the gifts some of the newly ordained acolytes bring this vessel, together with wine and water, to the altar and hand it back to the bishop, for the celebration of the eucharist. Immediately after the priests and deacons of the concelebrated Mass, the newly ordained receive holy Communion. Before the distribution of holy Communion to the people starts, the bishop may hand over the vessel a second time, this time filled with consecrated hosts. As the Bread of Life they give the Lord under the eucharistic species to their fellow Christians and act in this way for the first time as extraordinary ministers.

EPISCOPAL ORDINATION ANNIVERSARIES

Let us pray for our Bishops on the occasion of their ordination anniversaries.

Most Rev. Emilio Cinense
May 11, 1957

Most Rev. Mariano G. Gaviola
June 4, 1963

Most Rev. Jesus J. Sison
May 11, 1963

Most Rev. Cipriano V. Urgel
June 12, 1962

Most Rev. Juan N. Nilmar
May 11, 1959

Most Rev. Cornelio de Wit
June 19, 1962

Most Rev. Godofredo Padernal
May 18, 1968

Most Rev. Charles van de
Ouwelant

Most Rev. Mariano M. Madriaga
May 24, 1938

June 21, 1955

Most Rev. Felix Perez
May 27, 1969

Most Rev. Francisco Cruces
June 24, 1968

Most Rev. Amado Paulino
May 27, 1969

Most Rev. Alfredo Ma. Obviar
June 29, 1944

Most Rev. Antonio F. Frondosa
May 28, 1952

Most Rev. Gerard Mongeau
June 29, 1944