

The Role of Lay Ministers in the Liturgical Life of the Church

"Servers, lectors, commentators, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function. They ought, therefore, to discharge their office with the sincere piety and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected of them by God's people. Consequently, they must all be deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy, each in his own measure, and they must be trained to perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 29). While all members of the faithful truly participate in the liturgy in an important variety of ways, including participation in responses, acclamations, dialogues, and litanies, by attentive listening to the Liturgy of the Word and the presidential prayers, and by joining oneself to the gathered community through song, processions, and common posture and gesture, certain lay men and women fulfill necessary roles to ensure its orderly running. Past issues of the *Newsletter* have treated the role of the deacon in the Church's liturgical life, as well as of the instituted ministers of lector and acolyte. The series concludes with a brief overview of the varied ways lay men and women participate in specific liturgical ministries.

Altar Servers and Readers

In the absence of instituted acolytes and/or lectors, lay men and women may take on their functions as altar servers and readers. Altar servers assist the priest and deacon; they "carry the cross, the candles, the thurible, the bread, the wine, and the water," and some may even be deputed as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM], no. 100). Likewise, lay readers who are "truly suited ... and carefully prepared" proclaim the word of God to the gathered assembly (GIRM, no. 101). Readers are encouraged to continually meditate on Sacred Scripture, so that their faithful proclamation of the readings at Mass will in turn inspire the faithful to turn to God through his word.

Psalmist

Within the music ministry of a parish, a psalmist is the "cantor of the psalm" that occurs after the First Reading. He or she must carefully meditate on the Psalms and be able to sing them "with clarity, conviction, and sensitivity to the text, the musical setting, and those who are listening." When necessary, the psalmist may also sing the Gospel acclamation and verse (*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* [STL], nos. 34-35; see GIRM, no. 102).

In current practice, it is usually the cantor who also assumes the duties of the psalmist. Nonetheless, it may be useful for parish choirs to have one of its members devote himself or herself to contemplating the literary, theological, and musical aspects of the Psalms, in order to truly bring out the beauty of those texts to the gathered faithful at Mass. The psalmist may also be useful at other liturgical celebrations, including the Liturgy of the Hours or other rites.

Choir, Pastoral Musicians, and Cantor

"Among the faithful, the *schola cantorum* or choir exercises its own liturgical function, its place being to take care that the parts proper to it, in keeping with the different genres of chant, are properly carried out and to foster the active participation of the faithful by means of the singing" (GIRM, no. 103). The USCCB's guidelines on liturgical music provide additional clarity on the choir's supporting role:

The choir must not minimize the musical participation of the faithful. The congregation commonly sings unison melodies, which are more suitable for generally unrehearsed community singing. This is the primary song of the Liturgy. Choirs and ensembles, on the other hand, comprise persons drawn from the community who possess the requisite musical skills and a commitment to the established schedule of rehearsals and Liturgies. Thus, they are able to enrich the celebration by adding musical elements beyond the capabilities of the congregation alone. (STL, no. 28)

Liturgical documents during and after the Second Vatican Council affirm the primacy of the gathered faithful in their singing the liturgy. Choirs support the people and give added beauty to liturgical celebrations. When choral pieces are sung, the faithful "unite themselves interiorly to what the ministers or choir sing, so that by listening to them they may raise their minds to God" (*Musicam Sacram*, no. 15). The organist and other instrumentalists likewise assist the choir and the faithful through their respective instruments, "without dominating or overpowering them" (STL, no. 41).

A key member of the choir is the cantor. He or she supports the singing done by the faithful, but does not overpower their collective voice, nor that of the choir. In the absence of a choir, the cantor directs the singing of the various hymns and chants, while allowing the people to sing their proper parts as well. He or she may also serve as the psalmist when none is available, as noted above (see GIRM, no. 104; STL, nos. 37-40). The cantor may exercise his or her ministry from a conveniently located stand, but the ambo should only be used by the cantor if leading the singing of the Responsorial Psalm (see GIRM, no. 61; STL, nos. 36 and 40).

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

In circumstances where a "truly large number of communicants" is anticipated, and where there are not enough priests or deacons on hand to assist adequately in the distribution of Holy Communion, the priest may call upon instituted acolytes or even other members of the faithful to be deputed for this service (GIRM, no. 162). Under normal circumstances, these extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are selected, trained, and commissioned in accordance with policies of individual dioceses and parishes. In cases of genuine need, however, a priest may even designate such an extraordinary minister for a single occasion. (Appendix III of the *Roman Missal, Third Edition* provides a brief blessing to be used in these circumstances.)

The need for extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion tends to be more pronounced in communities where Communion is shared under both species with the faithful. The 2002 document *Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America* adds some helpful language on this ministry: "Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should receive sufficient spiritual, theological, and practical preparation to fulfill their role with knowledge and reverence" (no. 28). Finally, "[i]n all matters such Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should follow the guidance of the Diocesan Bishop" (*ibid.*).

Sacristan

The sacristan is a lay person who "diligently arranges the liturgical books, the vestments, and other things that are necessary for the celebration of Mass" (GIRM, no. 105a). Working from the sacristy, he or she should be well-trained in the complexities of the liturgical actions, as well as those of special Masses or those of greater solemnity, so as to make appropriate provisions.

Some parishes organize the sacristans and their assistants into "altar societies." These groups are dedicated to the maintenance of the vestments, altar linens, and sacred vessels; they also occasionally help the parish in making or purchasing replacements.

Commentator

Although not in common use in most communities of the United States, another liturgical role that exists is the commentator. He or she "provides the faithful briefly with explanations and exhortations so as to direct their attention to the celebration and ensure that they are better disposed for understanding it. The commentator's remarks should be thoroughly prepared and notable for their restraint. In performing this function the commentator stands in a suitable place within sight of the faithful, but not at the ambo" (GIRM, no. 105b). In many parishes, the reader carries out the functions of the commentator, particularly with making necessary announcements before the final blessing and dismissal.

Strong liturgical catechesis over the past number of years has allowed the faithful to understand and appreciate the various parts of the ritual actions. In addition, well-prepared booklets of the Mass have become an appropriate substitute for the commentator. Nonetheless, there may be rare occasions when a commentator may be called for, such as the dedication of a church, or an ordination rite that occurs at a church or chapel other than the cathedral.

Ushers, Greeters, and Collections Staff

"A liturgical function is also exercised by ... [t]hose who take up the collections in the church; [t]hose who, in some regions, welcome the faithful at the church doors, seat them appropriately, and marshal them in processions" (GIRM, no. 105c-d). As the priest and other ministers prepare for Mass in the sacristy, lay persons have a valuable role to play in welcoming their brothers and sisters to the church and ensuring that all have a place to sit. These apostolates are related to hospitality, an important aspect of the New Evangelization.

Master of Ceremonies

Finally, in cathedrals and some larger churches, "[i]t is desirable ... to have some competent minister or master of ceremonies, to see to the appropriate arrangement of sacred actions and to their being carried out by the sacred ministers and lay faithful with decorum, order, and devotion" (GIRM, no. 106). Indeed, in any church where the solemnity of the occasion warrants it (for example, during the Sacred Paschal Triduum), a well-trained master of ceremonies can bring the benefits of expertise and preparation to any liturgy, especially one which may be more complex. The master of ceremonies should not perform the functions designated to other ministers, nor should he or she become a distracting presence in the liturgical action. An effective master of ceremonies will see to the correct and orderly flow of the liturgy by assisting the other ministers in the execution of their designated liturgical functions.