

The larger dimension of the pope's new document on women and ministry"

Spiritus Domini" is the latest moment in a long-term process to de-clericalize the Catholic Church

By Thomas O'Loughlin

Pope Francis's little document *Spiritus Domini* on allowing women to be officially invested with the lay ministries of lector and acolyte is a most welcome development.

It is a very interesting small brick in his larger pastoral edifice dedicated to implementing the reforms mandated over half a century ago by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Some have presented the pope's "motu proprio" as no more than giving formality to what has been common practice in some places since the 1970s. Others have seen it as something that's "too little, too late" in the movement towards the ordination of women within the Catholic Church.

But perhaps the key thing is to step back and look at what *Spiritus Domini* signifies within a stream of Roman documents that have guided the renewal of the liturgy since the mid-1950s.

Since the 1955 decree on the reform of Holy Week (*Liturgicus Hebdomadae Sanctae Ordo instauratur*), down to our own, there has been one constant theme: to enable the whole People of God to have ownership of the liturgy, to take part in the liturgy as their vocation and to see themselves as ministers within the Church.

Spiritus Domini is but the latest moment in a long-term process.

A nail in the coffin of clericalism

Let's start with a simple question. Walk into any Roman Catholic building while a ceremony – for example, the Eucharist – is taking place and ask yourself: whose liturgy is this?

Most people would say that it is this parish's or this group's liturgy led by their priest.

If one asked that in the 1950s the answer would have been that it was the priest's liturgy done on behalf of the parish.

The shift in understanding it as a clerical affair to it being the business of the priestly people, an activity of all the baptized, has been a slow one.

While the rituals changed quickly, especially over a period of just a few years around 1970, this shift in consciousness has been slow and very patchy. It has also faced a great deal of resistance.

Moreover, the shift in appreciation by most Catholics has been even slower. Many people still think that they are just "going" to something that the priest does.

The clericalist Church is based around the notion that the clergy are "the real Church" or, at least, its core. They are happy to be "churchmen".

But this term should surely apply to all the baptized. And since they are made up of both males and females it would be better to speak of "churchpeople".

But the very notion of that would shock most churchmen. They don't celebrate the liturgy with their sisters and brothers in baptism, but for them.

In their mentality, the real work of the liturgy is what the clergy do. The rest of the people merely attend or, at most, just help out in the way that altar servers have done for centuries.

This is the way the clericalist Church has treated the reading of scriptures at the Eucharist since 1970. Rather than seeing Mass as the liturgy of the whole assembly, the priest asked and delegated someone else to read.

It is as if the most authentic reader is the priest (as was always the case before 1969). But he let someone else do a reading just "to get people involved". Having "a lay reader" – still far from being what one expects in many countries – was seen as no more than an application of the teacher's trick of giving everyone in the class a job to make them feel involved.

Likewise, when it came to helping the assembly to share the broken loaf and shared cup (that is, "give out communion"), this involvement was not seen as needed by nature of the activity, but simply an "extraordinary" measure to help speed things up!

This was not a real ministry, but just clergy being "user friendly".

One sees the old clerical mindset time and again. The presider steps in and does all the readings. Unless someone makes a fuss, he does not call forth "extraordinary ministers" or even think about sharing the cup. Rather, he presents himself as the only real minister in the assembly.

This mindset has not been formally challenged up till now because that cleric could point to the law.

And filled with legal righteousness he perpetuated the notion that the baptised are only present at his liturgy. Instead of the unified vision of a people with the Christ worshipping the Father, this older idea was of a priestly tribe inside the sanctuary with the laity located outside.

This community meal is our meal

Now it is formally the case that it is our common memory as an entire people that we celebrate in the Liturgy of the Word.

The scriptures are the books of our common memory, and so any one of the baptised who is skilled in their performance (a task far more demanding than just literacy) has the right -- not only theologically, but also canonically -- to take on this ministry and have it formally conferred by the community of faith.

It may have taken canon law centuries to catch up to the theology, but on January 15, 2021 with the publication of *Spiritus Domini* it finally did! Better late than never!

Likewise, eating and drinking at Eucharistic celebrations is not a matter of acquiring some sacred object consecrated by a presbyter, but the celebration of the Supper of the Lord as the community of faith whereby in our eating and drinking together we, with the Christ, offer the sacrifice of praise to the Father.

This community meal is our meal. It is not simply the presbyter's meal. And so there should be within each community those who help in serving the meal and bringing that meal's food to those community members who cannot be there.

This is a ministry arising from the nature of the Eucharist, not simply a job that needs to be done to hasten a ceremony or "help out" a tired or busy priest.

It's a sad reflection of how little we value the Ministry of the Word that since 1970 we have treated readers as just "doing a job" rather than giving them, in each community, a formal standing.

Likewise, it shows, alas, how we have seen the Ministry of the Eucharist as only the work of a presbyter ("deep down it's really the priest that counts") because we saw those who "helped" as really not being needed if we had "enough priests".

Sadly, members of the clerical establishment do not like any suggestion that the Liturgy of the Eucharist is common property of all the baptised.

They like to think of it as their special property. Hence their reluctance to changes such as moving from pre-cut hosts to a single broken loaf or their resistance to sharing the cup or their objections to any but clerics helping at the meal.

But Spiritus Domini is one more reminder to them that their vision of Church is not that of Vatican II's constitution on the liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium.

Those who continue to hanker for "the good old days" or see themselves among that well-organized phalanx of resistance to Pope Francis, those who want to continue in a clericalist Church, must see January 15, 2021 a black day for the clerical army.

It is a day when an explicit legal act took place that removed two potent weapons have been used to try to frustrate the reform of the liturgy.

A new reading of the status quo

Most liturgical change takes place in such a way that those who want to subvert them can find little "workarounds".

Indeed, the hallmark of those who have tried to slow down change in the Roman Church has not been so much as to oppose developments, but to get them to run into the sand.

Already, I have heard one cleric bemoan Spiritus Domini precisely because he sees just what a well-aimed dart it is at the notion of "the Church = the clergy".

His sigh was all the deeper when he added: "Pope Benedict would not have let this happen!"

I fear I was less than sympathetic and replied: "I fear it's worse than that, Pope Francis has not simply 'let it happen', but has mandated it in canon Law."

My friend, shocked, said goodbye and put the phone down.

Canon 230§1 now reads: 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. Nevertheless, the conferral of these ministries does not grant them the right to obtain support or remuneration from the Church.

Instead of lay persons, that canon to read lay men (*viri laici*). And, so, an important threshold has been passed. The law now reflects the faith of the Church that the liturgy is the work of all of us, sisters and brothers of Jesus in baptism.

Will bishops now take the corresponding step forward?

In the Roman Pontifical – the book with those liturgies performed only by bishops – there is a formal ritual for instituting lectors and another one for instituting acolytes. How many have ever seen these being used?

In the period of over forty years since they were promulgated, I have never seen them used outside a seminary! They have been used there as just steps toward the diaconate and as progress markers that a seminarian is doing all that's expected and is on track for "greater things".

Meanwhile, readers have often been just those willing to help out and unafraid of meeting "awkward words" such as Nebuchadnezzar. And too often readers have been given little preparation because they are "just helping because the priest wants it"!

Likewise, extraordinary ministers have been given the occasional retreat day. But, again, this has been seen as a mere convenience, an intrusion or somehow less than ideal.

Will the bishops now see these as ministries that they actually institute? This is the acid test for the importance of Spiritus Domini.

Means to train for ministries

There are now five challenges.

1. Will communities shift their perception of those who perform the readings from being simply those helping out the priest to those who are taking up part of the baptismal call to witness in word, before the assembly, to the Good News preached by the Christ?

Will these women and men see this as a ministry and part of their conforming their lives to the work of Jesus?

2. Will presbyters take this vision to heart when they seek out readers and encourage them to see this as a real ministry? Will they take to heart that this changes their own relationship with the assembly and that this shift is part of the death of clericalism?

3. Will those who help in the ministry of the Table see this as part of their baptismal calling and not just a job to "help out Father"? Acolytes are not just glorified altar boys, but part of the community's celebration of its identity.

4. Will presbyters see that this shift in the law is a reminder of a deeper shift in the Church's understanding that has been going on since the 1950s, but which has often barely affected the Church's practice?

5. Will bishops and episcopal conferences take Pope Francis's letter to heart and actually institute these ministries of lector and acolyte?

They can hardly say that it will need a lot of time to think about.

The actual structures of these ministries were established thirty-nine years ago by *Ministeria quaedam* (1972), as Pope Francis reminds us.

Every bishop has the necessary liturgical texts for conferring these ministries on the baptised faithful in the book of ceremonials he carries around from parish to parish.

So many have already dismissed Spiritus Domini as being of no importance in the actual life of the Church.

But the new "motu proprio" can be dismissed only when every bishop has formally instituted lectors and acolytes – and has provided the means to train them for their ministries – in every community in their care.

Taken from *La Croix International*