

Pope Francis creates new "ministry" for Catholic lay people



By formally instituting the "lay ministry of Catechist", the pope tries to redefine the place of the laity in a Church he sees as being too clerical

"I establish the lay ministry of catechist." With these few words, Pope Francis hopes to fundamentally change the Catholic Church from within. The words appear at the very end of a six-page "motu proprio" he published on Tuesday. *Antiquum ministerium* (ancient ministry), as the text is titled, effectively opens another new ministry to the laity.

The move comes after Francis' decision last January to officially extend the functions of acolyte and lector to women. With this new document he wishes to recognize the place of the hundreds of thousands of "competent" lay catechists who already "carry out a mission invaluable for the transmission and growth of the faith". The institutionalization of this role, which Paul VI had already envisioned in 1972, has not been widely followed in the Church up to till now. Often associated with the Churches of the South, this ministry never really developed in Europe and North America. Half a century later, the current pope now wants to expressly and more firmly "invite" the bishops to make this instituted ministry "effective". He asks them to call "men and women of deep faith and human maturity" to this stable ministry. He says pastors should look for people who are "active participants in the life of the Christian community and are capable of welcoming others, being generous and living a life of fraternal communion". These future catechists should then be given a "suitable biblical, theological, pastoral and pedagogical formation", he pope says.

Fundamental cultural change

Some see this as fundamental cultural change in a Church that, since the Middle Ages, has been marked by the presence of many priests." We are heirs to a time when priests were plentiful and the laity were always put aside. It's a complete and very profound change of mentality," claims Jesuit priest and theologian Cesare Giraudo. A retired professor of Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, the 80-year-old Italian is convinced that Francis is inviting Catholics to invent new roles for the laity in order to "shake up a Church that is too clericalized"."In the last few centuries, many different missions have found their way into the hands of priests, thanks to their numbers," acknowledges Archbishop Vincent Dollmann of Cambrai in northern France, a former official at the Congregation for Catholic Education (2009-2012). Archbishop Hervé Giraud, a former seminary rector and expert in priestly formation, agrees. "Bishops and priests have too many powers that are far from their primary function," says the 64-year-old head of the Archdiocese of Sens in central France. Archbishop Dollmann, 56, also spent many years working in seminaries in France and Rome. He believes this exclusively lay ministry should make it possible, as a mirror image, for the ordained priesthood to "rediscover its specificity"." The pope is making us aware that not everything revolves around the ordained ministry," another French bishop told La Croix. By promoting these lay ministries, the pope is also helping to redefine the role of the priest.

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