

Catholics are familiar with various helpers at Mass. In several of our Appalachian parishes, the priest scrambles to find readers, servers, and sometimes even musicians to help with the Sunday liturgy. But have we ever asked ourselves why we have these ministries? The obvious answer is that they help the priest and provide services that enrich our worship. It would be hard to think of Sunday Mass without singing, for example. It is true that these ministries help with the Mass, but it is also true that involving people in the Mass makes things complicated and it is not always clear how it helps. So why do we still insist on lay people sharing in the work of the Liturgy?

The real reason comes from Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: "Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14). The Church asks the laity to be involved in the liturgy because she desires this active participation of the people. Active participation means more than merely giving everyone a job at Mass. It means that everyone recognizes and fulfills their part in worship- from the priest at the altar to the smallest child in the congregation. As Vatican II teaches: "in liturgical celebrations each one, minister or layperson, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to that office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 28). If this is true, then it means that the people have their own role and their own part in the offering. This is why the priest says "Pray, brothers and sisters; that my sacrifice and yours will be acceptable to God, the almighty Father". (*Roman Missal*) In other words, the sacrifice of the Mass is not something the priest does alone. The people have their own unique and important gift to offer to God as well. In fact, the Church itself shines forth more fully when we all offer God worship in accord with our vocation.

However, this unique and important role of the laity is not only spiritual. The Church has created several ministries for the laity to show how they can practically exercise their role. Currently, these ministries are the ministry of lector and the ministry of acolyte. They are not just volunteers, but stable and officially instituted roles. The ministries of lector and acolyte exist not only to help the clergy, but also to show that the work of the Church is bigger than just the work of the clergy. These ministries exist to show that "the very arrangement of the celebration itself makes the Church stand out as being formed in a structure of different orders and ministries" (*General Instruction on the Roman Missal* 58). When Paul VI formally reformed the ministries of lector and acolyte, they were only open to men. Over time, the people began to get the idea that the ministries of lector and acolyte were almost steppingstones to the priesthood. However, Pope Francis opened them to all the baptized, male and female, in his *motu proprio Spiritus Domini* in 2021. The Holy Father points out that "a doctrinal development has taken place in recent years which has highlighted how certain ministries instituted by the Church are based on the common condition of being baptized". As a result, he teaches that "these lay ministries, since they are based on the Sacrament of Baptism, may be entrusted to all suitable faithful, whether male or female."

With that, we can now look specifically at the ministry of acolyte. What does an acolyte do? To answer this question, we must remember that all ministries, ordained and lay, have two components: things that are done in the Mass and things done outside of the Mass. At Mass, the acolyte performs the work of the altar server. They help to serve at the altar by holding the Missal, setting the altar at the offertory, and helping carry candles and incense in processions. Unlike an altar server, an instituted acolyte can also help with the distribution of Holy Communion, and they can also purify the vessels after Communion. Outside of Mass, the acolyte should be involved in coordinating and training altar servers. They should help take care of the altar cloths, vestments, and vessels used in worship. An acolyte should serve in an altar guild or a parish liturgical committee if these things exist in their parish. Instituted acolytes can bring Holy Communion to nursing homes and to the home bound. Finally, when a priest or deacon is not available, the acolyte can expose the Eucharist for public adoration.

Since the ministry of acolyte plays an important role in our Church, we should pray the God would call good and holy men and women to serve at his altar and to further the great work of Christ and his Church.