

A Theology of Authorization for Lay Ecclesial Ministry

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Lay ecclesial ministry is characterized by (1) a personal call, (2) ecclesial discernment and recognition of a genuine charism, (3) formation appropriate to the demands of the ministry, which may require significant education, (4) ecclesial authorization, and (5) some liturgical ritualization of assuming this ministry. The lay ecclesial minister exercises leadership responsibility for some area of ministry, usually within a relationship of coordination and direction of others in the community. This essay explores the relationship between authorization and the other components of lay ecclesial ministry and places authorization within the theological context of the communion of the church.

1. What is authorization to lay ecclesial ministry?

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord defines authorization as “the process by which properly prepared lay men and women are given responsibilities for ecclesial ministry by competent church authority.”¹ Authorization may take various forms depending on the stability and ecclesial validation that accompanies the ministry, the person who authorizes, and whether the authorization is accompanied by a prayer or ritual within a prayer service or liturgy or is itself an official liturgy of the church.²

The kind of authorization given does not necessarily lie in the function or activity of the ministry. For example Paul VI’s apostolic letter, *Ministeria quaedam* (15 August 1972), which eliminated the minor orders preceding ordination, provided for the installation of lay men to the ministries of acolyte and lector, requiring these installed ministries for men ordained to the diaconate. The bishop presides over the rite of installation, which is a liturgical service. However, in the United States most lectors and acolytes are lay men and women who are not installed in these ministries and who may or may not even be formally commissioned for them by the pastor.

Authorization may take various forms, ranging from a pastor commissioning or appointing an individual for a specific ministerial role such as youth minister, catechist, or director of faith formation, to a bishop entrusting participation in the pastoral care of a parish without a resident pastor to a layperson according to canon 517 §2, to a bishop installing a layman to the ministry of acolyte or lector. In every case, the person who authorizes is a competent church authority, usually the diocesan bishop or pastor. The following are terms associated with various types of authorization:

1. **Appointment** Appointment is a juridical term and does not include a liturgical action. A minister is designated by the person appointing. The appointment of a person to a specific position should be in writing with an indication of the rights and obligations attached to the position or office, any limits on the exercise of

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), 54.

² The liturgy is the official public prayer of the church. Liturgical rites are promulgated by the Vatican for the universal church. Commissioning rituals may be composed locally for specific occasions.

authority, relevant employment and personnel policies, limitations on the term of appointment, and special delegations to perform functions proper to the ordained.

1 Delegation The minister is empowered to act on behalf of the person who delegates. Someone who has ordinary executive power by virtue of an office permits someone else to exercise that power in general or in specific situations. Examples would be the special delegation to perform functions proper to the ordained such as baptizing outside of emergencies (canon 862 §2) and witnessing the exchange of matrimonial consent (canon 1112 §1).³

2 Installation There are two installed ministries: acolyte and lector. Installation is both a juridical act and a liturgical act by the bishop or his representative.

3 Conferral A ministry is given to a minister by another. An ecclesiastical office, defined in law as a function constituted in a stable manner for a spiritual purpose (canon 145), is conferred by a proper authority (canon 147). The rights and obligations inherent to a specific office come with the conferral of the office itself and cease with the loss of office.

4 Mandate This term is used “when someone is appointed for a specific instance: for example, to act as an advocate for a part in a judicial matter (canon 1484) or given some responsibility that properly belongs to an office he or she does not hold.”⁴ This is not the same thing as a *mandatum*, which is what Catholic teachers in Catholic colleges receive to indicate that they are in communion with their bishop.

5 Entrusting This is the term generally used “for those who hold an office in which there is great discretion concerning specific programs and methods.”⁵ A diocese is entrusted to a bishop. Pastoral care in a parish may be entrusted to a single pastor, to several priests, or to a religious institute.

6 Commission Commissioning is ecclesial recognition of a ministry, but in a less formal manner than installation. These ministries may be less permanent. Possibly someone other than a bishop could do the commissioning. Commissioning can occur in the context of a liturgy, but is not itself a liturgical act. Generally, ministers such as directors of religious education and youth ministers are commissioned.

There is a hierarchical relationship among various types of authorization. For example, in the sequence “commissioning, installation, ordination,” commissioning, often ritualized, is usually done by someone other than a bishop, does not confer a permanent status, and is repeatable. Installation is usually done by a bishop, is a liturgical

³ *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 57. See USCCB Complementary Legislation, <http://www.usccb.org/norms/1112.htm>.

⁴ *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 58.

⁵ *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 57.

act, and is permanent. Ordination must be conferred by a bishop, is a sacrament of the church, cannot be repeated, and confers a sacramental character.

2. How is authorization related to the discernment of a vocation to lay ecclesial ministry?

Authorization represents an official ratification of the results of personal discernment of a vocation to lay ecclesial ministry. A vocation to lay ecclesial ministry is not simply between an

individual and God, but must be tested by the community. Ministry is something other than Christian discipleship or ministry done as an act of an individual Christian. It is both intentional and ecclesial: ministry is public voice and action directly for the kingdom in the name of the church. Thus discernment for this ministry requires the participation of the ecclesial community since it is in their name that ministry is given. Components necessary for vocational discernment include personal qualities such as human development and maturity, professional and academic preparation, ministerial skills, and ecclesial identity demonstrated by participation in the communal and sacramental life of the church. Assessment of competencies is part of vocational discernment. It is also necessary to discern the various and often mixed motivations that lead a person to ministry and to identify the end or purpose to which the vocation is directed. The questions to be answered are: Who am I called to be? What am I called to do? The community tests the personal discernment of the individual to ascertain that the personal desire for ministry on the part of an individual is accompanied by the appropriate human and spiritual characteristics essential for this public service and that the individual has acquired the necessary formation and education to be an effective lay ecclesial minister.

Thus vocation to lay ecclesial ministry has both a personal and an ecclesial dimension. A person must be called by both God and the ecclesial community. However, these are not two separate calls unrelated to each other, for God's call works through the discernment of the community. It may be that a person falsely mistakes a personal call to a more intense Christian discipleship and service for a vocation to lay ecclesial ministry. Communal participation in vocational discernment helps to sort out these various calls. The authorization by the bishop or the commissioning pastor or minister represents the ratification that this communal discernment has occurred.

3. Why is authorization necessary?

Since ministry requires that the minister be authorized to minister in the church's name, this requires structures and a process of accountability to the church. The bishops and their assistants, the priests, are to order and coordinate the various ministries and apostolates of the laity.⁶ To them belong the tasks of discerning, judging, and ordering the charisms given by the Spirit.⁷ Lay ecclesial ministry involves such a substantial collaboration with the ordained in their pastoral ministry that it requires authorization by the bishop or his delegate. However, there are two perspectives from which to understand this. From the perspective of the ministry, the new set of roles and responsibilities of lay ecclesial ministry need to be identified and ordered, requiring ecclesial authorization and coordination. From the perspective of the minister, the lay ecclesial minister needs to be

⁶ *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 23-24; *Lumen gentium*, 32. ⁷ *Lumen gentium*, 12, 23-24; *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 3.

acknowledged, affirmed, and supported through public recognition and clarity about their rights and responsibilities.

Even though lay ecclesial ministers are accountable to the person who authorizes, he or she is also accountable to those who receive ministry. Thus authorization is not simply a way to ensure accountability to one's employer or superiors or church authority. Assurance through authorization that the lay ecclesial minister possesses the necessary competence is one form of accountability to those who receive ministry.

The question of ecclesial authorization is larger than simply issues of authority and

governance, but is at root a question of identity. Identity answers the question: Whose work is this? Who is present in this ministry? Ultimately, the Church is present in lay ecclesial ministry because this ministry is public ministry in the name of the church. Thus lay ecclesial ministry must in some fashion witness to work on behalf of the Church through a relationship of communion with its ordained representative, the bishop. This is accomplished through juridical acts of authorization and liturgical ritualizations of ecclesial recognition.

5. How does authorization connect the lay ecclesial minister to the communion of the church?

Since 1985 when the Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops identified communion as the dominant image of the church in the documents of Vatican II, communion has been a major category for thinking about the relationship between various levels of the church such as the parish, the diocese, and the universal church. Dimensions of communion include communion with the apostolic past, the essence of the apostolicity of the church, communion within the parish, diocese, or universal church, and communion among these levels of the church. Each level is served by an ordained minister responsible for communion within that level—the pastor for the parish, the bishop for the diocese, and the bishop of Rome for the universal church. Communion among these levels is represented and facilitated by communion among the ministers serving them.

The implication of the category of communion to describe the church is that the church is fundamentally relational. A parish cannot exist apart from the diocese, and the diocese must be in communion with the universal church through hierarchical communion with the bishop of Rome. No local church exists in isolation, but only in communion with other churches. There is absolute interdependence among all the churches as there is among the members of the churches.

A church identified by communion is characterized by reconciled diversity rather than uniformity as each local church inculturates the one church within its local particularities. It is broadly participative inviting the contributions of the various charisms which build up the church of God. It is oriented to mission rather than self-maintenance as it seeks to further the reign of God. It is served by a shared and diverse ministry of both lay and ordained faithful.

Within the church diversity is coordinated within unity through a ministry of unity exercising authority as a part of the community, not standing above the community as a self-contained authority. Authority in the church is personal, communal, and collegial. The church is not governed by an anonymous committee, but by a person selected through ecclesial discernment and authorized through prayer to the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands. Individuals exercising authority in the church do so in a relational manner. This collegiality is embodied in the college of presbyters and the college of bishops. Lay ministers participate in this relational ministry by being in communion with the ordained ministers responsible for communion and by cultivating collegial relationships with their co-workers.

A ministerial principle corresponds to the relational character of the church. Ministry serves the communion of the church and contributes towards building it up. No minister functions in isolation, but only in communion with other ministers. Thus lay ecclesial ministers must be in communion with their pastor, their bishop, and with the bishop of Rome. Obstacles to this ministerial principle include the phenomenon of fiefdoms and lone rangers where ministers define their turf rather than collaborating with other ministers and work in isolation, disengagement from official church teaching or from presence to a faith community, and compartmentalization where a minister's personal life is in dissonance with that person's public ministerial identity. All these violate the ministerial principle of communion.

Authorization creates a bond of communion between the authorizer and the minister, and empowers the minister to actually engage in ministry over which the authorizer exercises oversight. This is why the local church, not the formation program or school which educates the lay ecclesial minister, is the proper agent of authorization. Authorization is an ecclesial act distinct from preparation and certification. Preparation may be the work of a theological school and certification a function of a professional society, but authorization must always be an ecclesial act.

6. What is the relationship between authorization and certification?

Structures of certification are just now emerging, so it is possible that some dioceses are certifying lay ecclesial ministers in addition to authorizing them. Nevertheless, these are still two distinct actions which accomplish two very different things. Certification indicates that an individual is competent in a particular ministry and has completed the necessary education and formation programs for a particular ministry. Certification indicates that the individual meets the standards that have been established by an accrediting agency, if there is one, for a particular ministry. Agents of certification may be a school, a professional organization, an office of the USCCB, or even a diocese if it operates its own ministerial preparation programs. Certification is a seal of competency according to established guidelines or standards that measure ministerial preparedness.

Once certified, a lay ecclesial minister must then be authorized to exercise ministry in the local church. As stated above, authorization indicates that competent church authority gives the lay ecclesial minister responsibility for a particular ministry in the church. Authorization indicates that this minister is exercising public ministry in the name of the church. Certification is an indication of ministerial readiness and preparedness. Authorization is an indication of an ecclesial responsibility and bond of communion in the church.

While certification and authorization are distinct concepts, in the current practice in the church the distinction may not appear to be so clear cut. Certification processes and the organizations or groups responsible for them are still being developed, so formal certification may not be possible in all lay ecclesial ministries. From another perspective, the fact of hiring a lay ecclesial minister for a “job” is sometimes not adequately related to the richer ecclesial concept of “authorization” in the theological meaning of the term. Even though someone hired may receive a letter of appointment, a form of authorization, both the person hiring and the person being hired may not see this as creating an ecclesial relationship.

7. What is the value of authorization being ritualized in a context of prayer?

Lay ecclesial ministry is not just a job like any other job. It is a ministry, even though it should be subject to just and sound personnel policies. Authorization in the context of prayer emphasizes the spiritual dimension of ministry at the same time it underscores the relationship between the lay ecclesial minister, the community gathered in prayer, and the authorizing minister.