



## Conferenza Stampa - Intervento di Mons. Rino Fisichella



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"The ministry of Catechist in the Church is an ancient one." With this simple and immediate observation, Pope Francis establishes for the Church of the Third Millennium the ministry of Catechist which, while new, has however, in a certain sense, accompanied the Church in her evangelizing mission in every time and place. Coming as it does in the wake of the publication of the *Directory for Catechesis* on March 23, 2021, the institution of this specific lay ministry – to which men and women throughout the Church are called who, by their dedication, render evident the beauty of the transmission of the faith – constitutes a further step forward in the renewal of catechesis and its role in the service of the New Evangelization.

It is significant that Pope Francis makes this *Motu proprio* public on the day of the liturgical memorial of Saint Juan de Ávila (1499-1569). This Doctor of the Church was capable of offering to the believers of his time the beauty of the Word of God and the living teaching of the Church in a language that was not only accessible to all, but also shaped by an intense spirituality. He was a subtle theologian and for this reason a great catechist. In 1554 he wrote *Christian Doctrine*, a catechism divided into four parts, in a language so simple and accessible to all that it could be sung like a jingle and committed to memory like a nursery rhyme for every circumstance of life. The choice of this date is not accidental, because it encourages catechists to seek inspiration in the testimony of a saint who made his catechetical apostolate fruitful through prayer, the study of theology and the simple communication of the faith.

It is undeniable that the Apostolic Letter *Antiquum ministerium* signals an important innovation and, at the same time, fulfils a desire of Paul VI. In 1975 this holy Pope wrote in the in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (par. 73):

The laity can also feel themselves called, or be called, to work with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community for its growth and life, by exercising a great variety of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord is pleased to give them [...] A glance at the origins of the Church is very illuminating and gives the benefit of an early experience in the matter of ministries. It was an experience which was all the more valuable in that it enabled the Church to consolidate herself and to grow and spread. Attention to the sources however has to be complemented by attention to the present needs of humankind and of the Church. To drink at these ever-inspiring sources without sacrificing anything of their values, and at the same time to know how to adapt oneself to the demands and needs of today, these are the criteria which will make it possible to seek wisely and to discover the ministries that the Church needs [...] These ministries, apparently new but closely tied up with the Church's living experience down the centuries – such as catechists ... – ... are valuable for the establishment, life, and growth of the Church, and for her capacity to influence her surroundings and to reach those who are remote from her [...]

The quotation retains its strong relevance and allows us to ascertain directly the ecclesial context within which this new ministry is to be inserted, while at the same time considering the dynamic with which it develops. Only in the unity between a careful attention to our roots and a realistic look at the present is it possible to understand the Church's decision to institute a new ecclesial ministry. It has taken almost 50 years for the Church to come to recognize that the service rendered by so many men and women through their catechetical commitment truly constitutes a distinctive ministry for the growth of the Christian community.

The institution of a ministry by the Church is confirmation that the person invested with that charism is performing an authentic ecclesial service to the community. Ministry is strongly associated with the earliest communities, which from their very beginning have included the presence of men and women dedicated to carrying out certain specific services. This was true of the ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons, but it was also true of those who were recognized as evangelists, prophets and teachers. It can be said, therefore, that catechesis has always accompanied the Church's evangelizing efforts and was rendered even more necessary when it was intended for those preparing to receive baptism, the catechumens. This work was considered of such primary importance that it led the Christian community to prescribe the sharing of goods in support of its catechists.

With the institution of this ministry of Catechist, Pope Francis further promotes the formation and engagement of the laity. This is an aspect that deserves to be taken into consideration because it adds an even more concrete dimension to the great impetus brought about by the Second Vatican Council which, in recent decades, has been considerably enriched not only by a distinct magisterium in this regard, but above all by a real commitment in the Church and in the world. The observation offered by the Pope should not be overlooked: "The lay apostolate is unquestionably "secular"... In their daily life, interwoven with family and social relationships, the laity come to realize that they "are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth" (*Lumen gentium*, 33)" (par. 6).

The conclusion reached by Pope Francis is unambiguous: "'We can indeed count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 102). It follows that the reception of a lay ministry such as that of Catechist will emphasize even more the missionary commitment proper to every baptized person, a commitment that must however be carried out in a fully "secular" manner, avoiding any form of clericalization"(par. 7). At stake here is much of what is new in this ministry: men and women are called to express their baptismal vocation in the best possible way, not as substitutes for priests or consecrated persons, but as authentic laymen

and laywomen who, in the distinctive nature of their ministry, are able to experience the full of extent of their baptismal vocation of witness and effective service in the community and the world.

There is no doubt that the institution of this ministry, together with those already existing of Acolyte and Lector, will make it possible to have a laity that is better prepared in the transmission of the faith. Catechists cannot be improvised because the task of transmitting the faith requires, in addition to a knowledge of its contents, a prior personal encounter with the Lord. Those who will be Catechists must know that they speak in the name of the Church and transmit the faith of the Church. This responsibility is something that cannot be delegated, but falls to each one personally. This service, however, must be lived in a "secular" manner without falling into forms of clericalism that blur the true identity of the ministry, which must express itself not primarily in the liturgical sphere, but in the specific sphere of the transmission of the faith through proclamation and systematic instruction.

It is obvious that not everyone who is a catechist today will have access to the ministry of Catechist. This ministry is reserved for those who meet the requirements stated in the *Motu proprio*. Of primary importance is the vocational dimension which implies a willingness to serve the Church where the bishop considers it most beneficial. Ministries are not conferred for personal gratification, but for service to be rendered to the local Church where the bishop deems the presence of the Catechist necessary. It should not be forgotten that in various regions where the presence of priests is inexistent or rare, the figure of the Catechist is that of one who presides over the community and keeps it rooted in the faith.

This is what Pope Francis means when writes: "It is in fact a stable form of service rendered to the local Church in accordance with pastoral needs identified by the local Ordinary, yet one carried out as a work of the laity, as demanded by the very nature of the ministry" (par. 8). In order to conform fully to the vocation, a corresponding formation that presents the fundamental contents of the faith becomes all the more necessary. Dioceses will have to ensure that future Catechists "should also receive suitable biblical, theological, pastoral and pedagogical formation to be competent communicators of the truth of the faith and they should have some prior experience of catechesis" (par. 8). To this end, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an ideal tool and in which every Catechist should become a true expert. Studying through the four parts into which the *Catechism* is divided allows one to enter progressively into the richness of the mystery that is professed, celebrated, lived, and prayed. This unitary dimension of the contents of the faith makes for a deeper understanding not only of the hierarchy of truths as they apply to its transmission, but also of how the ministry should be exercised. It is to be hoped, therefore, that the institution of the ministry will also lead to the formation of a community of Catechists which grows with the Christian community in its service to the local Church, without ceding to the temptation to put up walls with which to delimit one's own territory, or, indeed, to any form of self-reference.

Now that the Holy Father has instituted this lay ministry, it is up to the Episcopal Conferences to appropriate this directive by finding the most coherent forms for its implementation. While the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has been entrusted with the task of publishing in the near future a Liturgical Rite for the conferment of the Ministry of Catechist by the Bishop, the Episcopal Conferences, in accordance with their own local traditions, will have to establish the criteria as to age, academic formation, etc., necessary in order to accede to the ministry.

As I hope everyone can see, this is an invitation addressed to the local Churches so that they can make the most of the contribution of the men and women who intend to dedicate their lives to catechesis as a privileged form of evangelization. In the name of the Pope, the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization will lend all its support in order that the new ministry may expand in the Church and forms of assistance be found for the formation of Catechists. It is our hope that in this way the process of evangelization will continue its fruitful journey of inculturation in the various local realities, and that the millions of women and men Catechists who daily dedicate their

lives to this ministry, so ancient and yet always new, will rediscover their vocation for an engaging renewal of the catechetical process for the benefit of the Church and of the new generations.