

Christian Levites — Eucharistic Ministers

“Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated. Each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ” (Constitution on the Church #10 in Vatican II Documents).

Moving inside the sanctuary, one observes those who function during ritual events. Ministers who play an essential part in the Eucharistic Liturgy. They own a definite identity which contributes to the overall effect. They assist the priest in closest proximity, share an altar ministry. They witness to a visible expression of Baptismal priesthood. They prepare for holy actions and handle holy things. They carry bread and wine to the altar — gifts to be consecrated. They return leftover bread, now transformed, to the Tabernacle. Tabernacle and altar center their ministry. Responsibilities once reserved to priests and deacons alone, now they carry out.

Such shared ministry raises the need for role distinctions during Liturgy. What priests do and how their part differs from Eucharistic Ministers? The more technical terms that have grown to separate the two are: the celebrating priest as “Presiders,” while others in the sanctuary are “Ministers”. Upon arrival in the sanctuary, Presiders are responsible for the penance rite, opening prayer, Eucharistic Prayer, and closing prayer. Gift preparation they share with Ministers. Both share again the Communion rite. Ministering to the presiding celebrant characterizes the relationship between Temple Levites and priests who performed sacrificial actions. In both contexts, someone assists a priest in an expression of sacrificial prayer.

Although Lectors and Eucharistic Ministers enter the sanctuary together in procession, they occupy separate moments in the overall spiritual drama. Lectors answer another call to another stage in the Liturgy. They occupy an important function, solely during the Liturgy of the Word. After Penance Rite and Opening Prayer, the Liturgy of the Word begins. Lectors proclaim the Word of God. That completed, their function comes to an end. Eucharistic Ministers now begin their service. Unlike Lectors, they will complete an initial task of preparation but then return later. Both ministries comprise one overall worship system.

Three different but related roles are at work when the Liturgy begins. Sacristans perform tasks before celebrations and at their completion. They rarely appear during times of prayer. Lectors and Eucharistic Ministers both play a significant role but neither occupies total time, whether in pulpit or sanctuary. Both come and go. They have their time to assist but it is a walk-on, walk-off dynamic.

Separate models of communication characterize these two ministries, each significant for its own purpose. Lectors communicate Scriptural texts from the pulpit to a congregation

at large. They engage in a brief but public relationship. They proclaim the Word of God to all gathered in faith to enliven that faith. Energy flows into a wide opening, originating from a lone individual but directed toward a large audience. In turn, congregations focus their attention on one person standing alone in a pulpit. Nothing else is happening. Lectors speak. They announce a variety of texts, chosen for the day. They proclaim non-Gospel readings from Scripture, some Old Testament and others New. Doing so, they also create Biblical preparations for priests who will replace them in the pulpit and proclaim Gospel readings. Gospel readings represent the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. Lectors leave the sanctuary when their reading is concluded. They may return, if a Prayer of the Faithful follows a Homily or the Creed. When readings and prayers are proclaimed, Lectors are no longer seen.

Eucharistic Ministers approach the altar when the Liturgy of the Word concludes. The Liturgy of the Eucharist has begun. The first stage entails preparation of gifts. These may be brought forward by members of the congregation. Receiving these gifts will offer a brief moment of contact with worshippers. Nothing is said. Gifts are carried to the altar. The Minister also adds a chalice and whatever is needed from a table on which they sit. Presider and Minister relate non-verbally during this preparation time. Worshippers observe what takes place.. No words pass between the two but a stage has been set for secular gifts to become holy on their way to become the Holy of Holies. The Presider offers prayers of preparation over the chalice and hosts. The Minister washes the Presider's hands. The Minister's tasks end with this phase of the ritual. He/she withdraws from the altar, replacing the wine and water containers. Role and responsibility at this point have all been non-verbal. Yet, a moment of faith has been shown, demonstrated by both Presider and Minister. Both have celebrated this portion of the Liturgy together. The Presider now moves to the next stage alone, exchanging responses with the congregation. Approaching is the sacrificial climax in the Eucharistic Prayer, which he alone announces. He stands alone in the sanctuary and at the altar at this most solemn moment.

Upon completing the Eucharistic Prayer and its Great Amen, the Presider introduces the Communion Rite with the recital of the Our Father. Presider and Minister again work together. This preparation concerns the distribution of the Eucharist. The Minister must bring to the altar whatever consecrated hosts have been reserved in the Tabernacle. This to feed a congregation made spiritually hungry by the Liturgy of the Word. When ready and the Lamb of God has been proclaimed or sung, the Presider raises the consecrated host and identifies it as the Lamb of God just announced. All admit unworthiness but profess the healing power of God's Word. All are invited to come forward to be fed. Attention of Presider and Minister now turns to the congregation. If more than one Minister, they stand at designated stations to meet the faithful in this intense moment of faith.

Eucharistic distribution seems a simple gesture. It requires merely placing a wafer of bread in a person's hand or on their tongue. First of all, Ministers now speak. They direct the same formula toward each person receiving. Simple words join a simple gesture. Behind both word and gesture, an encounter occurs. A Presence is shared

with members of the congregation. And shared one by one. Unlike the Lector, whose relationship remained public, this meeting is deeply personal. Ministers feed the faith community face-to-face. Ministers strive to convey to each person a private word in the midst of a public celebration. This feeding experience contains elements of instant intimacy. There is a gift being given, moving slowly from one to another. In that movement, seeds of a spiritual encounter awaken and stir. People come to their God seen in a host to be received. Before that reception, Minister and communicant share a dialogue of faith. Not simply facing each other but speaking with consecrated bread between them.

Now reverence should take hold. A lone formula the Minister speaks. It is repetitious. Whispered are the same words upon the arrival of each person. It resembles litany responses. Danger here lies in repetitions that kill freshness of experiences. The Minister's faith must push beyond human tendencies. He elevates the host and whispers to this person alone: "The body of Christ." He speaks words that interpret the event. The recipient responds, "Amen," which is to say, "Yes, it is." The meaning spoken and implied moves beyond formula and response. Words here stress a private message underlining spiritual significance. Minister comes forward as God-bearers to feed souls. They come forward to receive what they believe to be the Dwelling. They meet where congregations end and sanctuaries begin. And both places come a little closer.

Levites most resemble Eucharistic Ministers in care relegated to them as Temple servants of the showbread (the bread of the Presence). They prepared it and placed it in the Holy Place near the Holy of Holies. Not holy itself, its importance arose from nearness to what was most holy. Christian ministers care for another kind of bread which goes beyond measures of closeness. This bread contains Divinity within itself. Divine Dwelling moves beyond a special room to the bread itself as a vehicle for Divinity. Liturgical Ministers carry this bread to those who believe. Doing so fulfills what the Eucharistic Prayers proclaim: the bread is to be eaten. The sacrificial prayer exhorts, "Take and eat," thus fleshing out at Communion time this strong invitation. Words that give explicit direction of how this bread is to be revered. Eat first, then "Do this in memory of me." The ritual works its way from sacrifice to communion meal. Presider, Minister, and faith community all share this common meal. They share a transformational process, one that changes bread and wine but also challenges to change all who have come forward in faith.