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The Identity and Ministry of the Catechist in the Light of Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter *Antiquum ministerium*

The purpose of the analyses carried out in this article is to present the new ministry of the catechist, which was established by Pope Francis on May 10, 2021 in the *Motu proprio Antiquum ministerium*. He referred to a practice that had been going on since apostolic times, when such a ministry was entrusted to laymen. Their establishment on the basis of a special rite should be motivated by the current needs of the parish community. Pope Francis locates their activity within the liturgy celebrated and in the other pastoral spaces of the Church. The task of the diocesan bishops, on the other hand, is to take care of the proper formation of the candidates, who should be characterised by their human and religious maturity and receive an adequate theological, biblical, pastoral and pedagogical preparation. To this end, schools of catechists must be established in dioceses. The main method of approaching this issue is through an analysis of the papal document establishing the ministry of catechist and the post-conciliar Church's teaching on the subject. This has made it possible to distinguish the essential elements of the new ministry and to indicate the possibilities of its adaptation to Polish conditions, where a lively discussion is currently taking place concerning the tasks of the catechist. The idea is to plan them in such a way as not to duplicate the activities of catechists with the canonical mission. Therefore, the problematic under analysis is original and expected in the catechetical environment. Addressing this problematic is intended more to start a substantive discussion than to show definitive solutions. The areas of practical activity of the catechist proposed in the article may become an inspiration for the implementation of the papal initiative in Polish conditions.

Key words: Pope Francis, catechist, ministry, *Antiquum ministerium*.

Introduction

By means of an apostolic letter in the form of the *motu proprio Antiquum ministerium*, Pope Francis has established the ministry of a catechist throughout the Church¹. He strongly suggested that it should be exercised only by lay people of deep faith and human maturity, according to the pastoral needs discerned by the bishop of the place. The Pope also recalled that the ministry of the catechist goes back to the beginnings of the Church, and that the example of the life of the first Christian communities, which were committed to the proclamation and development of the Gospel, “also today urges the Church to discern what new expressions of continuity with the Word of the Lord can be, in order to enable His Gospel to reach every creature”². He also affirmed that the history of the work of evangelisation over two millennia shows the great effectiveness of the mission of lay catechists, through whom the faith has become an essential support for Christians. Pope Francis’ decision is part of a theological narrative clearly evident since the Second Vatican Council, according to which there has been a systematically growing awareness of the significant role played by the catechist in the development of the Christian faith. This explains the fact why, even today, many apostolically committed lay people are undertaking this important mission. This article will take a closer look at the new ministry of the catechist based on the indications of Pope Francis in the document *Antiquum ministerium*. The analysis undertaken will concern the conditions for the establishment of the ministry of the catechist, the leading reasons, motives and criteria for undertaking it, as opposed to the tasks of the official catechist, and will conclude with an indication of possible areas of practical activity of the catechist in Polish conditions.

Historical background to the establishment of the catechist’s ministry

On January 10, 2021, Pope Francis promulgated the *Motu proprio Spiritus Domini*, in which he amended the provision of canon 230 §1 of the Code of Canon Law regarding the ministries of a lector and

¹ Apostolic letter in the form of Pope Francis’ *Motu proprio* “*Antiquum Ministerium*” in which he establishes the ministry of the catechist (10.05.2021), in: *Akta Konferencji Episkopatu Polski* 33 (2021), Warsaw 2022, pp. 20-23, https://episkopat.pl/files/24.bkt/04/04/242515_ut5m_33_Akta_KEP_2021.pdf (date of access: 15.12.2024).

² *Ibidem*, p. 20.

an acolyte³. In another *Motu proprio* *Antiquum ministerium*, promulgated on 10 May 2021, the Pope established the ministry of a catechist⁴. In introducing it, he referred to the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and stated: “The Spirit of the Lord Jesus, the eternal source of the life and mission of the Church, gives the members of the People of God gifts that allow each of them, in a different way, to contribute to the building up of the Church and the proclamation of the Gospel”⁵. At the same time, he stressed that awakening the personal enthusiasm of each baptised person and revitalising the awareness of being called to fulfill one’s mission in the community “requires listening to the voice of the Spirit, Who does not leave us without his fruitful presence”⁶. He is also currently calling men and women to set out to meet those who are waiting to know the beauty, the goodness and the truth of the Christian faith.

The conditions for the establishment of the ministry required not only a prayerful environment, but also that members of the original community undertake the practice of fasting. Once these requirements were met, the action of the Holy Spirit began, Who called people to this ministry in a unique way as He personally spoke to those gathered (Acts 13.2.4). The Pope affirmed that this process is still ongoing because the Holy Spirit is constantly enriching the Church with various charismatic gifts, and His unique gift for our time is also the ministries of catechist, lector and acolyte. These will be available for the lay faithful to undertake, after their vocation has been discerned by the Church’s shepherds. Bishops, including those in Poland, are to define the rules regarding the age and qualities of candidates for the ministries of catechist and lector and acolyte, as recommended by the Pope.

Today’s societies with their complex structures, which allow different groups of people to function within them and which have different systems of beliefs and values, justify the decision to establish a new

³ *Apostolic letter in the form of Motu proprio Spiritus Domini of the Holy Father Francis on the amendment of canon 230 § 1 of the Code of Canon Law on the admission of persons of the female sex to the official ministry of lectorate and acolyte* (10.01.2021), in: *Akta Konferencji Episkopatu Polski* 33(2021), Warsaw 2022, pp. 19-20, https://episkopat.pl/files/24.bkt/04/04/242515_ut5m_33_Akta_KEP_2021.pdf (date of access: 15.12.2024).

⁴ The term ‘catechist’ will be used in Poland to describe the new ministry introduced by Francis, as this was decided by the Polish Bishops’ Conference at its plenary meeting in Warsaw on 14-15 March 2022.

⁵ *Apostolic letter in the form of the Motu proprio of Pope Francis Antiquum ministerium*, no. 2.

⁶ *Ibidem*, no. 2.

group of evangelisers for them. For there must be persons who will watch over the spiritual condition of believers in Christ. There is no longer any doubt that the Catholic Church must currently preach the same evangelical truth as it has done in past eras. This is needed because, after times of ideological polemics, the balance between temporal and spiritual matters has been upset among Christians⁷. Many believers have lost a secure point of reference for the faith they have hitherto professed, and they do not find the support they need in the catechesis currently being carried out. In order to counteract this, the Catholic Church initiated a strategy of spiritual renewal several years ago, starting with evangelising itself in order to become capable of witnessing to Jesus in the new areopaghi of the secularised world⁸.

The matter of establishing the ministry of a catechist is the culmination of a process that has been ongoing for several decades⁹. Already in the decree *Ad gentes* of the Second Vatican Council, it was recorded that a group of great merit in the missionary work of the Church are “catechists, both men and women, who, filled with an apostolic spirit, amidst great hardships give special and necessary help in spreading the faith and the Church”¹⁰. In 1983, catechists were noted in a canon of the Code of Canon Law, where attention was drawn to their activity in mission countries¹¹. In contrast to the official catechist, the plenary assembly of the Vatican missionary dicastery stated that a catechist is a lay person, obliged by the Church “to teach to know, love and follow Christ through all those who do not yet know Him and through believers”¹². An important distinction between the terms catechist and catechist was made by John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation

⁷ See Francis, *The oxygen of the Gospel is needed. Audience for the participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation*, “L'Osservatore Romano” Polish edition 12 (2013), p. 18.

⁸ Cf. P. Mąkosa, “Courtyard of the Gentiles” as a space of encounter and dialogue between believers and non-believers, “Homiletic Review” 16 (2012), pp. 81-88.

⁹ Cf. S. Araszczyk, *The ministry of the catechist in the documents and practice of the church. Perspektywa polska*, “Legnickie Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne” XXIII (2024, 1), p. 7.

¹⁰ Decree on the missionary activity of the Church *Ad gentes divinitus* (7 December 1965), in *Vatican Council II. Constitutions. Decrees. Declarations*. Poznań 2002, 17.

¹¹ *Code of Canon Law*, Poznań 1984, can. 785 § 1.

¹² A. Seumois, *Missionary catechist*, in *Dictionary of Catechesis*, Polish edition, ed. J. Gevert, K. Misiaszek, Warsaw 2007, p. 463.

Catechesi tradendae and he stated: “The catechists working in mission territories bear the quite distinct name of ‘catechists’”¹³.

Catechetics

Up to now, the practice had become established that the term catechist was assigned to persons who were substantively prepared and who catechised on behalf of the Church on the basis of a canonical mission¹⁴. Catechists, on the other hand, having a comparable or specialised preparation, fulfilled their tasks in the mission territories¹⁵. A comprehensive explanation of the term “catechist” is provided by the Catholic Encyclopedia, where it is recorded that it is “a lay collaborator of missionaries, doing evangelising work, usually male, married, father of a family, coming from among the native population”¹⁶. In the past, the catechist fulfilled an important role in the initial preparation for the reception of the Gospel. Post-conciliar teaching defines the catechist “as a person with a specific vocation, chosen and authorised by the Church to carry out in missionary work a complementary function according to the needs of the local community”¹⁷. From these findings, it can be seen that a new ministry will be given in the territory to persons who will have to undertake other tasks. The local episcopate will assign new catechetical tasks to them after recognising previously non-existent catechetical needs. This will require a careful analysis of the socio-religious situation of believers and finding an adequate methodological instrumentarium for the catechist.

¹³ John Paul II, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation on catechization in our times Catechesi tradendae* (16 X 1979), in: *Adhortacje Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, Kraków 1996, vol. 1, no. 66.

¹⁴ The need for a canonical mission imposes three obligations on church entities. Catechetical departments must search for qualified candidates to take on the job of religious teachers. The director of the institution then hires him or her, but only after receiving a referral from the ecclesiastical authority. Cf. Conference of the Polish Bishops, *Dyktorium katechetyczne Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce* (*Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*) (20 June 2001), Kraków 2001, pp. 83-85.

¹⁵ Cf. W. Kluj, *Development of Polish missionary terminology on the example of the words “katecheci/catechists”*, “*Collectanea Theologica*” 75 (2005, 4), p. 208.

¹⁶ R. Dziura, *Catechist*, in: *Encyklopedia Katolicka*, ed. A. Szostek, B. Migut (and others), vol. VIII, Lublin 2000, k. 1034-1035.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 1035.

Rationale, motives, criteria for establishing a new ministry

From the beginning of Her existence, the Church undertook the mission received from Christ to proclaim the Gospel to all mankind, resulting from the so-called Great Missionary Commandment (Mt 28,20). After the era of the early Church, the activity of evangelisation underwent numerous transformations and was carried out by different people, but it was always carried out in close dependence on the external and internal factors present in the development of Christianity¹⁸. It also depended on a variety of political, social and cultural situations, as well as on the formation of new missionary strategies emerging from theological centres around the world¹⁹. In spite of great substantive and organisational efforts, the process of evangelisation and catechisation has weakened its dynamism, which has led to a noticeable crisis in the catechetical activity of the Church in the present time. This is undoubtedly related to the process of digitalisation of contemporary culture and the search for a new model of communicating Gospel content²⁰.

However, in every era of the Church there have been men and women who have borne witness to their faith by engaging in the catechetical mission. Even today, there are many forms of lay faithful participation in the proclamation of the Gospel, with catechists occupying a special place among them²¹. The possibility of appointing lay men to the ministries of lector and acolyte was introduced after the Second Vatican Council by Pope Paul VI in the Motu proprio *Ministeria quaedam*, promulgated on 15 August 1972. Pope Francis, in the above-cited Motu proprio *Antiquum ministerium*, opened the possibility for women to receive these ministries as well. This is because there is a great wealth of talents and charisms in the Church with which the faithful undertake a variety of tasks. These will be fulfilled both in the liturgy

Catechetics

¹⁸ Cf. P. Mąkosa, *Między katechetyczny rzeczywistość a ewangelizacyjny oczekiwaniem*, in: *XXV lat nauczania religii w polskiej szkole. Between Hope and Reality*, ed. M. Zajac. Lublin 2015, p. 120.

¹⁹ Cf. S. Kasprzak, *Missionality of the Universal Church in Historical and Legal Aspects – a Definition of the Mission “ad gentes”*, “Roczniki Nauk Prawnych” 2 (2000, 10), pp. 181-187.

²⁰ Cf. J. Kloch, *The process of creating the Vatican’s digital communication model*, in *Not serving the lost cause*, ed. P. Mąkosa, H. Słotwińska, Tarnów 2024, p. 362.

²¹ After the Second Vatican Council, documents were published on the mission of catechists and the fulfilment of their ministry. The most recent is the *Directory for Catechesis*, promulgated by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation on 23 March 2020.

and in other places to which catechists will be sent. In introducing the new ministries, Pope Francis explained that the diversification of the forms of non-ordained ministries is not a simple consequence of the desire to adapt on a sociological level to the sensibilities or culture of the epochs and places, but is conditioned by the need to enable each local Church “to live the liturgical actions, the service of the poor and the proclamation of the Gospel in fidelity to the command of the Lord Jesus Christ”²². This is a clear indication of the space of activity for new catechists.

It is also worth pointing out that ‘ministry’, given to selected individuals, is more than a ‘function’ that all the baptised can perform. As a person matures, he can fulfil these functions more consciously and with fuller commitment. He can also receive the blessing of the Church strengthening him in this service. Certain men and women, actively involved in the life of the community and possessing the qualities defined by the relevant ecclesiastical authority, may be called to accept and fulfil the ministry of catechist. It is first and foremost a gift offered to a person in the rite of institution. In it, the bishop asks God for the graces needed by the lay faithful to fulfil the mission entrusted to them, and then sends them out to fulfil it. The gift confers on the person receiving it the dignity of a servant of God and of the Church, born of a vocation, an establishment for ministry and a sending to carry out a mission. Those who receive ministries become close collaborators of pastoral ministers²³.

Ministries will be given to selected men and women on a permanent basis²⁴. Pope Francis explains that such decisions characterise the nature of the Church, which responds adequately to the challenges of each era. The exercise of ministry also has the character of a spiritual journey. One direction of the journey leads from the sources of life, present in the liturgy, to all areas of human existence. The other direction is the opposite, since it has its origin in the encounter with the

²² *Apostolic letter in the form of Motu proprio Spiritus Domini*, p. 19.

²³ The ministry of catechist should be conferred “by the diocesan bishop – or by a priest delegated by him – by means of the liturgical rite *De Institutione Catechistarum*, promulgated by the Holy See”. *Letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences on the rite for the institution of catechists* (3.12.2021), in *Acts of the Polish Bishops’ Conference 33* (2021), Warsaw 2022, p. 56, https://episkopat.pl/files/24.bkt/04/04/242515_ut5m_33_Akta_KEP_2021.pdf (date of access: 15.12.2024).

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

human being living away from God, and moves towards community and the encounter with Christ in the liturgical celebration.

Directions for the catechist's practical activity

Catechetics

All ministry in the Church is a participation in the salvific mission of Christ, Who has filled the men sent by Himself with the Holy Spirit “so that they may proclaim this work of salvation, also to celebrate it through the Sacrifice and the sacraments, around which the whole liturgical life centres”²⁵. The catechist should combine being a witness to the faith, a teacher and a companion on the journey towards God. He or she is called to put himself or herself at the service of the Gospel message, from the first proclamation, through preparation for the sacraments of Christian initiation, to ongoing formation. This is done through prayer, study and direct participation in the life of the community. Lay catechetical ministry is a particular expression of the missionary commitment proper to every baptised person and should be carried out in a completely lay form, without falling into any temptation of clericalisation²⁶.

The lay ministry of the catechist, as the fulfillment of a vocation in the Church, requires proper discernment on the part of the bishop and a special rite of institution, which the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has confirmed by issuing a relevant document²⁷. Pope Francis points out that catechists should be men and women of deep faith and human maturity. It is necessary for them to participate actively in the life of the Christian community and to be people capable of hospitality, generosity and living in fraternal communion. Care should therefore be taken to form them biblically, theologically, pastorally and pedagogically²⁸. They

²⁵ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963), in *Vatican Council II. Constitutions. Decrees. Declarations*. Poznań 2002, no. 50.

²⁶ Cf. H. Slawinski, *Promotion of the Lay Faithful to the Ministry of the Word in the Church*, “Polonia Sacra” 26 (2022, 3), p. 64.

²⁷ Cf. Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, *Pontificale romanum ex decreto sacrosancti œcumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli Pp. VI promulgatum Francisci pp. Cura recognitum. De institutione catechistarum*, Citta del Vaticano 2021, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20211203_decreto-rito-istituzione-catechisti_la.html (date of access: 14.12.2024).

²⁸ Such formation is already taking place at the School for Catechists of the Archdiocese of Poznań. Cf. H. Pilarczyk, *Catechist – Witness, Evangelizer, Formator. Catechesis of Adults in the Context of Pastoral Care of Families in the Face of*

should systematically develop and enrich their previous catechetical experience. They should be expected to enter into collaboration with priests and deacons and be filled with genuine apostolic dynamism and enthusiasm.

The methodological instrumentarium, adequate to the current catechetical needs, should be similar to the repertoire of action developed and successfully used by the institution of the *New Evangelisation*. The use of modern multimedia seems to be necessary²⁹. The directions of the catechist's practical activity may at first determine the tasks within the framework in the liturgy. Although the tasks from this ecclesial space are not explicitly mentioned in any of the documents of the Church cited earlier, it can be indirectly inferred that the catechist is called to be a minister of the word also in the liturgy³⁰. He or she can therefore fulfil, as far as necessary and possible, those tasks which are entrusted to the lector. Among these tasks, we can single out the function of commentator. The catechist, as an expounder of the truths of the faith and the meaning of the liturgy in the life of believers, can prepare explanations of the rites of the Sacred Paschal Triduum, Christmas and other solemn liturgical celebrations in the parish.

However, it seems that his tasks outside the liturgy may be particularly valuable. It should be emphasised that some of the tasks entrusted to established catechists may overlap in practice with those entrusted to lectors and acolytes. They can bring help to the sick and the poor, preside at funeral ceremonies, lead the formation of other catechists, coordinate pastoral initiatives, support sacramental catechesis in the parish, promote the human person according to the indications of the social teaching of the Church³¹.

At this stage of the analysis it should be noted: "The tasks of the catechist vary according to the continent, country, diocese and the degree of development of ecclesiastical structures in a particular local Church"³². Since, under the conditions of the local Church in Poland,

Postmodern Tendencies of the Modern World, in: *Pastoral Care of Families in Theory and Practice*, ed. A. Pryba. Poznań 2015, pp. 234-249.

²⁹ Cf. K. Klysiak, *Wiara w epoce cyfrowej rewolucji*, Lublin 2024, p. 17.

³⁰ Cf. Z. Głowacki, *Catechist, Catechetist or Liturgical Mystagogue? Perspektywa teologiczna listy apostołskiego Antiquum ministerium*, "Roczniki Teologiczne" LXXI (2024, 3), p. 85.

³¹ Cf. *Letter from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences on the Rite for the Institution of Catechists*, p. 53.

³² R. Hole, *Catechist*, k. 1035.

the status of the official catechist with a canonical mission is firmly established and the areas of his activity precisely delineated by the relevant national catechetical documents, other areas where the catechist can mark his activity should be indicated. Possible activities can be interpreted on the basis of current catechetical needs arising in the parish, which for various reasons cannot be met by the catechists working there. Catechists should bring a new quality to the space of catechesis in the Church. Pope Francis spoke of a new ecclesial reality in one of his homilies, assuring us that we are called “to dream of a Church that is the servant of all, the servant of the least. Of a Church that never demands to ‘do well’, but welcomes, serves, loves, forgives. Of a Church of open doors, which is a *port of mercy*”³³.

Therefore, the established catechist should firstly pay attention to those who do not believe in God or are on the periphery of faith and Christian morality. He or she can lead them to make the first contact with Jesus. It is possible for catechists to lead activities through multimedia, since in the modern world more and more people are using such means when seeking religious inspiration³⁴. Catechists can lead musical ensembles promoting evangelistic repertoire, seek contacts with young people who have dropped out of school religion lessons, contact people who have formally left the Catholic Church, make contact with those living in non-sacramental and informal relationships, attempt at the religious formation of prisoners. Each of the ministries intended for the lay faithful, if fulfilled as a vocation, requires the full commitment of those to whom it is entrusted. However, final arrangements will be possible when the reform of religious instruction in Polish schools is completed and the discussion about the tasks of catechists in the Polish catechetical reality subsides.

Conclusion

Pope Francis' initiative to find an evangelising space for the lay catechist stems from the fact that there is still interest in the search for a

³³ *Homily of Pope Francis at the Mass at the conclusion of the first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. St Peter's Basilica. 29 October 2023*, <https://synod.org.pl/homilia-papieza-franciszka-podczas-mszy-na-zakonczenia-pierwszej-sesji-xvi-zwyczajnego-zgromadzenia-ogolnego-synodu-biskupow-29-10-2023r/> (date of access: 7.12.2024).

³⁴ In the *Directory for Catechesis*, an unprecedented early statement on the use of the potential of cyberspace was written: «Digital culture appears as a set of beliefs with religious characteristics». Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation. *Directory for Catechesis*, no. 365.

personal God. Based on the carried out analyses, it can be concluded that the ministry of the catechist can be an adequate response to the religious creeds of the contemporary world. The detailed analyses provide a solid basis for several important findings. The ministry of the catechist is expected by the ecclesial community because there are many people who wish to develop their spirituality but do not find support in the available current catechetical proposal. The catechist can initiate his activity when he has a comprehensive knowledge of the problems of contemporary man, his fascinations and his spiritual needs. It follows from Pope Francis' teaching in *Antiquum ministerium* that catechisation inspired by the experience of the early Church cannot be mass, but rather individual or implemented in small groups. At the same time, the activity of the catechist should not lead only to the acceptance of a theoretical knowledge of Jesus, but to Eucharistic communion. The findings of the article justify the conclusion that catechetical activity in a secularised world is still possible and can be effective thanks to the involvement of lay women as well as men in this work. The presented assumptions regarding Pope Francis' establishment of the new ministry of the catechist, the proposed possible structures for his ongoing formation, and the proposals for locating his practical activity in the catechetical strategy of the Catholic Church, may prove to be a valuable proposal to dynamise the Church's action in a secularised environment.

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