

The Major Significance of the Minor Orders

By Fr. Lawrence Farley

Many denominations have no real “minor orders”—i.e. clergy set apart to perform tasks other than ruling the flock and presiding at the celebration of the sacraments. In these communities, ecclesiastical status is starkly binary—one is either a layman or “the Minister.” If you are the latter, your function is to perform the entirety of the service yourself. You preside at all the sacraments, preach, and read the lessons. Sometimes a member of the laity might help, but when this occurs the task bestows upon the helper no change of ecclesiastical status: the person doing the reading that day does not thereby cease being a layman or become a clergyman. He or she is just helping out for that day. Their lay status remains unaltered by the task they perform.

Thus, when I was (briefly) in the United Church of Canada, the Sunday service was performed by The Minister (spelled with a capital “T” and a capital “M”). When I visited my (then) girl-friend’s Baptist church, the whole service was done by The Pastor. Of course people in the choir would sing and lead the congregational singing, and someone might do a solo, but they did so as individuals, not as members of a group to which some special ritual like ordination admitted them. Even in the Anglican Church where I served and which had special readers, the readers were still not considered as true “minor orders.” A Reader might indeed be admitted to that role by a special ceremony and with a special badge, but his status was not permanent, and it had to be renewed every time a new Rector or Minister came into the parish. Even their title betrayed their status: they were called “Lay Readers”—by definition not clergy in minor orders, but laity. The Anglican churches also had people to help out at the altar, called “servers” or “altar boys,” but no ceremony admitted them to the role. They simply showed up on Sunday morning and changed into their altar boy vestments with the priest’s permission.

This was very different from the practice of the early Church. In those days there existed a number of minor orders, each of which had a different task and role. The people in them were considered to be clergy of sorts, since they were admitted to their roles with a form of ceremony and prayer, and these ceremonies conferred upon them permanent status and rank. This practice has continued within the Orthodox Church to this day and so, for example, a person in the Orthodox Church who reads liturgically was (ideally) once tonsured a Reader by the bishop. That person was thereafter no longer called just “Michael” (for example), but “the Reader Michael,” and was communed and confessed under that time ever after. A person, having become a Reader, might then also later be ordained a Subdeacon with prayer and the laying on of the bishop’s hands, and would then no longer be “the Reader Michael”, but rather “Subdeacon Michael.” After their ordination they would be communed and confessed under that name and with that rank. Such ranks were not bestowed casually: the person being tonsured Reader or ordained Subdeacon was expected to take his task and his new rank seriously. He had other responsibilities also that went along with his liturgical duties.

Thus, for example, after praying for the newly tonsured Reader, the bishop would address him saying, “My son...it behoves you to peruse the divine Scriptures daily, so that the hearers watching you may receive edification, that you may in nowise shame your election...for by a chaste, holy, and upright life you will gain the favour of the God of loving kindness.” This showed that the ceremony of tonsuring a Reader or ordaining a Subdeacon truly bestowed upon the candidate an order and ministry of the Church, which in turn obliged him to pursue a life worthy of that calling.

This distinction between the binary roles of Minister and layman within Protestantism and the presence of the minor orders within Orthodoxy is of more than merely academic significance. It hearkens back to the apostolic Church, in which the liturgical assembly worked as a single body with many bodily functions: “even as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ” [1 Corinthians 12:12]. At that time there were many functions and roles in the assembled *ekklesia*, even as there were many functions in a living body. And all were crucially necessary to the total health and functioning of the body. “There are many members, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, it is much truer to say that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary” [1 Corinthians 12:20-22]. Thus everyone’s gift, calling, and liturgical contribution are necessary to the full and healthy liturgical functioning of the body on Sunday morning. The Priest cannot say to the Reader, “I have no need of you.” The Priest’s role may be the more prominent, but the Reader’s role also is necessary. Just imagine if the summoning call of “Wisdom!” prior to the Epistle reading were met with silence because there was no Reader that Sunday. People would soon discover that the head cannot say to the feet, “I have no need of you,” nor could the Priest say that to the Reader. Both were needed, head and feet, Priest and Reader.

The presence of so-called “Minor Clergy” (in itself an odd term; if both are equally necessary, why is one more “minor” than the other?) witnesses to the essentially corporate nature of authentic liturgical worship. The laity are not the liturgically disenfranchised or the great unwashed. In Holy Baptism they were washed, and became part of the holy *laos*, the holy people of God. As Saint Clement said in the earliest days of the Church, “Let each of you, brethren, make eucharist to God according to his own order [Greek *tagmati*], keeping a good conscience, not transgressing the appointed rule of his liturgy Greek *leitourgias*” [1 Clement, 41.1]. “Liturgy”/ *leitourgia* in this context meant one’s personal contribution to the common good. Each person present on Sunday had his own task: the Priest offered the prayers as his *leitourgia*; the Reader read the Scripture lessons; the Subdeacon assisted the Deacon. Neither was really interchangeable; all were required. Everyone’s different *leitourgia* was needed.

One is sometimes tempted to slack off, and assume that their particular *leitourgia* is not really necessary. Who will really notice if I am absent and do not commune, pray, or sing? Surely only the Priest and perhaps the cantor or choir are really necessary? Who needs the Minor Orders? Who needs me and my little contribution? Well actually, God and His Church do. He notices when your voice is missing and your *leitourgia* absent. If you were initiated into one of the “Minor Orders” then you are AWOL if you skip out on a Sunday morning. And if you were initiated into the holy *laos* through Holy Baptism, you are similarly AWOL if you skip. The Church is more than The Minister and a cantor or choir. It includes all of its baptized members, as a body includes all of its limbs. This includes you. You are more important than you may think.