Introduction to the NALM Statement on Antiquum Ministerium

In May 2021, Pope Francis introduced a new “installed ministry” for the Roman Catholic Church – Catechist. He followed this up with the first installations of a catechist and the installation of the first female lectors this past January.

Pursuant to these actions, the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM) established a task force to explore the impact of the installed catechist, the opening of the installed ministries of acolyte and lector. The group began meeting last spring and will continue its efforts into the near future.

Meanwhile, the attached “white paper” document was developed by the task force in order to offer the Church in the United States some reasoned guidance on how the installed catechist may be utilized by bishops who want to enhance the ministry of the laity. This document is approved by the NALM Board of Directors for dissemination.
Executive Summary

1. Pope Francis’ decision to establish the ministry of catechist as an instituted lay ministry is a welcome development in the Church’s long history of ordering ministries to serve the mission of Christ.

2. The ministerial reality described by the Pope in Antiquum Ministerium has taken various forms in different parts of the world. In the United States, this reality has taken shape most clearly in those lay ecclesial ministers who serve as parish catechetical leaders, directors of evangelization, pastoral associates, and in similar roles that have become an essential feature of parish life. Serving on virtually every parish staff or pastoral team, these lay ecclesial ministers are indispensable co-workers with the ordained in the overall catechetical and evangelizing mission of the Church.

3. In response to Pope Francis’ invitation to Episcopal Conferences “to render effective the ministry of Catechist, determining the necessary process of formation and the normative criteria for admission to this ministry and devising the most appropriate forms for the service which these men and women will be called to exercise” (AM 9), Church leaders in the U.S. can draw fruitfully on the substantive resources already developed and approved by the USCCB, including especially Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry (2005) and the National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers (2018-2025).

4. These resources reflect the reality of lay ministry in the Church in the United States. Read along with documents of the universal Church, they suggest that the appropriate candidate for the instituted ministry of catechist is the lay ecclesial minister whose ministry is marked by a broad role of catechetical leadership within the parish or diocese, a deep vocational commitment rooted in baptism, and close mutual collaboration with the ordained.

5. Such a ministry requires specific qualities and competencies on the part of the minister and demands the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation necessary to serve effectively.

6. Singling out some ministers for formal institution need not narrow the scope of lay ministry, but ought to enhance the diversity of ministries alive in the Church. As Pope Francis notes, “the
reception of a lay ministry such as that of Catechist will emphasize even more the missionary commitment proper to every baptized person” (AM 7).

BRIEF BACKGROUND

7. In the context of the liturgical reforms following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI issued the moto proprio Ministeria Quaedam in 1972, addressing the “minor orders” of porter, exorcist, lector, and acolyte, as well as the order of subdeacon—early ministries that had evolved over time into mere stepping stones on the way to priestly ordination. Paul VI suppressed those orders no longer exercised (porter, exorcist, and subdeacon) and revised the roles of lector and acolyte by opening them to lay men, separating these roles from the clerical state. Lector and acolyte were no longer “orders,” but “ministries.” They begin not with an “ordination,” but an “institution.”

8. Theologically speaking, Ministeria Quaedam marked a significant re-ordering of the Church’s ministerial structure. Pastorally, however, the document had little effect on the Church’s ministerial life. Because the ministries of lector and acolyte were reserved to lay men, they were not widely adopted outside of seminaries, where these ministries remained transitional steps leading to priestly ordination. At the same time, the liturgical roles associated with these ministries quickly became so common (and more or less occasional) in U.S. parishes that no special institution seemed necessary.

9. Ministeria Quaedam invited other instituted ministries at the local level: “Besides the offices common to the Latin Church, there is nothing to prevent conferences of bishops from requesting others of the Apostolic See, if they judge the establishment of such offices in their region to be necessary or very useful because of special reasons.” The U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy studied the issue, publishing a commentary on Ministeria Quaedam and Ad Pascendum (on deacons) the following year: Study Text III: Ministries in the Church. At their 1973 annual meeting, the U.S. bishops agreed to seek permission for two new instituted lay ministries: Catechist/Teacher of Religion and Minister of Music. They never received a response from the Vatican to this request. In his 1988 post-synodal exhortation, Christifideles Laici, Pope John Paul II cited the desire of participants at the Synod on the Laity to revisit Ministeria Quaedam and promised to establish a commission to respond to this desire.

10. Meanwhile, the U.S. bishops issued three significant documents that charted the story of laity and lay ministry since the council: Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity (1980); Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium (1995); and Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry (2005). The story told in these documents is one of expanding roles for lay people in ecclesial ministries. While not officially instituted, thousands of lay men and women began to serve as lectors, extraordinary ministers of communion, and in other liturgical ministries, as well as volunteers in parish religious education programs and outreach ministries. Within this larger group of more occasional ministerial volunteers, a smaller group of laypersons sought out education and took on new ministerial positions on parish staffs and in diocesan offices. Today, close to 40,000 lay ecclesial
ministers work at least half-time in paid positions of ministerial leadership in U.S. parishes. The overwhelming majority coordinate catechetical, educational, or evangelizing ministries.

Reflecting on this story, the U.S. Bishops offered a ringing affirmation: “Lay ecclesial ministry has emerged and taken shape in our country through the working of the Holy Spirit” (Co-Workers 14).

INITIAL REFLECTIONS ON ANTIQUUM MINISTERIUM AND ARCHBISHOP ROCHE’S LETTER

11. At the beginning, it is important to note a problem with language. In the U.S. context, a “catechist” commonly and customarily refers to someone engaged in the specific task of handing on the faith, usually to children, and almost always on a volunteer, occasional basis. However, this more intermittent role does not seem to be what Antiquum Ministerium envisions for the instituted ministry of catechist. Instead, as Archbishop Roche helps to clarify, the instituted catechist is one who serves the Church’s catechetical and evangelizing mission through (a) a broader role of ministerial leadership (b) in response to a deeper vocational commitment (c) in closer mutual collaboration with the ordained.

(a) Broader Ministerial Role

12. In a letter meant to help guide implementation of Antiquum Ministerium, Archbishop Roche acknowledges that different local contexts will foster different characteristics and patterns of action regarding the ministry of catechist. Nevertheless, he notes two main types of catechists:

(1) Those engaged in the specific task of catechesis; and
(2) Those participating more broadly in different forms of the apostolate.

Although not a strict distinction, Type 1 corresponds most closely to the volunteer “catechist” familiar in U.S. parishes. Type 2 corresponds more closely to the role of “catechist” as it developed in missionary territories—a lay leader who oversees not only catechetical instruction, but also the broader pastoral care of a local community in the absence of a resident priest pastor. As the rest of the letter demonstrates, it is Type 2 that serves as the primary referent—and thus the most appropriate candidate—for institution to the lay ministry of catechist. However, the characteristics of Type 2 catechists (e.g., broader responsibility for ministerial leadership in the community, an ongoing commitment and sense of call, close collaboration with the ordained) are not limited to the missions. In the United States, they are often found in those more-or-less full-time, more-or-less long-term lay ministerial leaders that the U.S. Bishops have come to call lay ecclesial ministers.

13. It is easy to understand why the role of missionary catechist provides the basic lens for reading not only Roche’s letter, but also Antiquum Ministerium. Roche draws the distinction between the “specific task of catechesis” and “different forms of the apostolate” directly from the Guide for Catechists (n. 4), issued by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in 1993. His parenthetical mention of “Churches of long standing tradition” and “young Churches”
reinforces this interpretation. Similarly, Pope Francis mentions the “many competent and dedicated catechists” currently serving as “community leaders in various parts of the world” (AM 3). He goes on to cite Vatican II’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity to praise “that army of catechists, both men and women, to whom missionary work among the nations is so indebted” (AM 4; citing AG 17). Indeed, the role of “catechist” appears explicitly not only in Ad Gentes, but also in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (cc. 776, 780, 785, 861.2), which accords catechists a broad ministry: “[C]atechists are those lay members of the Christian faithful who have been duly instructed, who stand out by reason of their Christian manner of life, and who devote themselves to expounding the gospel teaching and organizing liturgical functions and works of charity under the supervision of a missionary” (c. 785.1).

14. Roche notes that “not everyone who carries out a service of catechesis or pastoral assistance and who are called ‘catechists’ have to be instituted” (n. 7). Conversely, the ministry of the instituted catechist is not limited to teaching. Roche offers a partial list of those apostolates appropriate to the instituted catechist: “guiding community prayer, especially the Sunday liturgy in the absence of a Priest or Deacon; assisting the sick; leading funeral celebrations; training and guiding other Catechists; coordinating pastoral initiatives; human promotion according to the Church’s social doctrine; helping the poor; fostering the relationship between the community and the ordained ministers.” These are the kinds of varied ministerial roles exercised by lay ecclesial ministers in the United States. What seems to lie behind Archbishop Roche’s interpretation is not a functionalistic understanding of the instituted catechist, which limits the ministry to performing a specific catechetical task. Rather, what is proposed is a broader ministerial role of leadership, rooted in baptism, whose various tasks flow out of the Church’s comprehensive mission of evangelization.

(b) Deeper Vocational Commitment

15. Antiquum Ministerium states that the ministry of catechist “has a definite vocational aspect, as evidenced by the Rite of Institution.” It is described as “a stable form of service rendered to the local Church,” that calls for “suitable biblical, theological, pastoral and pedagogical formation” (AM 8).

16. Archbishop Roche cites this “definite vocational aspect” as the reason why not every baptized member of the Christian faithful who does catechesis or is called a “catechist” has to be instituted—suggesting that the candidate for official institution has made some larger, life-orienting commitment to ministry, in response to God’s call.

17. Pope Francis speaks of vocation in the strict sense as “a call to missionary service to others” (Christus Vivit 253). This vocation “is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an ‘extra’ or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in the world” (CV 254; citing Evangelii Gaudium 273). This deeper notion of a calling to mission
can help inform the “vocational aspect” of the instituted catechist, a ministerial form that implies a certain stability in the life of the individual and in the life of the Church.

18. The instituted ministry of catechist is stable in two senses: (1) the stability of the ministry ensures that this role—regardless of who fills it—is available to the local Church in order to respond to pastoral need; (2) the stability of the ministry also means that the individual minister will always be a catechist, even if that individual will not always exercise that ministry.

19. Here, Archbishop Roche makes explicit an important distinction: The institution to the ministry of catechist is permanent, thus the rite of institution is not to be repeated. However, the exercise of the ministry “can and must be regulated by the individual Episcopal Conferences in terms of duration, content and modalities, in accordance with pastoral needs.” Thus, institution to lay ministry involves a permanent re-positioning of the individual minister in the Church, reflecting their life-orienting response to God’s call to serve. However, it does not guarantee that this individual will always be allowed to exercise this ministry on behalf of the Church. The unrepeatability of official institution does not preclude the bishop, for example, from establishing terms of service that would be renewed or not renewed based on pastoral need or ministerial effectiveness.

20. It is helpful to compare the “definite vocational aspect” of the instituted catechist to what Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord says about lay ecclesial ministers: “These lay ecclesial ministers often express a sense of being called. This sense motivates what they are doing, guiding and shaping a major life choice and commitment to Church ministry. At the same time, they know that a self-discerned call by the individual is not sufficient. Their call must also become one that is discerned within the Church and authenticated by the bishop, or his delegate, who alone is able to authorize someone to serve in ecclesial ministry” (12).

(c) Closer Collaboration with the Ordained

21. Acknowledging the special, secular vocation of the laity in the world, Antiquum Ministerium cites Lumen Gentium: “We do well to remember, however, that in addition to this apostolate, ‘the laity can be called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy, like those men and women who helped the apostle Paul in the Gospel, working hard in the Lord’” (AM 6, citing LG 33).

22. This “more immediate cooperation” with the ordained is underscored by Archbishop Roche and may explain his reasons for including some catechetical ministers and excluding others as candidates for official institution. Those moving toward Holy Orders should not be instituted, because lay ministry is essentially distinct from ordained ministry. What about those who are not preparing for ordination? Men and women religious should not be instituted, Archbishop Roche recommends, unless “they act as leaders of a parish community or coordinators of catechetical activity.” The distinction he makes here seems to depend on whether or not the individual religious is collaborating directly with ordained ministers in a pastoral setting within the parochial/diocesan structure. Similarly, those serving in ecclesial movements are not to be
instituted as catechists, because they are not assigned “by the diocesan Bishop following his
discernment in relation to pastoral needs.” Those who teach Catholic religion in schools are not
to be instituted, presumably because they are not necessarily working in close collaboration
with the ordained. The exception, “unless they also carry out other ecclesiastical tasks in the
service of the parish or diocese,” confirms that a key factor in determining the suitability of a
minister for official institution as a catechist is whether or not they serve under the oversight of
the bishop in collaboration with priests and deacons in the context of diocesan and parish
structures.

23. The liturgical rite, in which “the ministry of Catechist is conferred by the diocesan Bishop, or
by a priest delegated by him,” symbolizes the importance of the “more immediate
collaboration” that ought to characterize this instituted ministry. The “commissioning” of
volunteer catechists that occurs in many parishes, often on Catechetical Sunday, remains. It is a
ritual blessing appropriate to the volunteers’ level of commitment and place within the
ministerial life of the local community. The Rite of Institution is something different. It
celebrates a greater ministerial responsibility, a more lasting ministerial commitment, and a
closer ministerial partnership with ordained leaders.

MOVING FORWARD

24. Toward the end of Antiquum Ministerium, Pope Francis invites Episcopal Conferences “to
render effective the ministry of Catechist, determining the necessary process of formation and
the normative criteria for admission to this ministry and devising the most appropriate forms
for the service which these men and women will be called to exercise” (AM 9; emphasis added).
In considering each of these three tasks (determining forms, admission criteria, and formation
processes) within the context of the Church in the United States, we offer the following
observations:

(a) Appropriate Forms of Service

25. Sharing the Gospel and teaching the faith occur at all levels within the Church—from the
parent to the pope. Moreover, many of the baptized volunteer their time to teach in formal
ways through occasional, part-time ministries in their parish. Often called “catechists,” these lay
ministers are essential to the Church’s mission of evangelization. In no way detracting from or
minimizing these volunteer catechists, the officially instituted lay ministry of catechist involves
a broader role of leadership, a deeper vocational commitment, and closer collaboration with the
ordained.

26. Archbishop Roche reveals that Antiquum Ministerium intends the instituted ministry of
catechist more for those exercising lay leadership within the broader evangelizing mission of
the Church than for those exercising the specific task of catechesis. In the U.S. context, the
parish catechetical leader, director of evangelization, or pastoral associate is the more
appropriate candidate for official institution, not the volunteer catechist.
27. The USCCB’s Subcommittee on Lay Ministry spent over ten years reflecting on lay ministry, singling out for special attention *lay ecclesial ministers*, namely, those lay women and men whose ecclesial service is characterized by:

- **Authorization** of the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local church
- **Leadership** in a particular area of ministry
- **Close mutual collaboration** with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons
- **Preparation and formation** appropriate to the level of responsibilities that are assigned to them (*Co-Workers* 10).

28. There is notable overlap between these characteristics and those articulated by Archbishop Roche. The defining characteristics of a lay ecclesial minister identified by *Co-Workers* could easily be adopted to name the appropriate form of service for those to be officially instituted as catechists, perhaps in a way that specifies the second characteristic as “leadership in *catechetical* ministry.”

29. Aligning the instituted catechist with those lay ecclesial ministers who lead catechetical and evangelizing ministries in U.S. parishes and dioceses would provide a well-defined, but flexible, category to determine who is eligible for official institution. It would respond to the reality of lay ministry as it has evolved in this country, allowing bishops to draw on those competencies, criteria, and qualities already used in many dioceses to assess lay ecclesial ministers.

30. For an example of an attempt to identify appropriate forms of service in a different context, see the Archdiocese of Brisbane’s Commission on the Liturgy’s proposed “Guidelines for the Institution of Lectors, Acolytes and Catechists in the Archdiocese of Brisbane” (included as an appendix). Brisbane’s suggestion to distinguish between “instituted ministry” and “lay ministry,” and thus between the role of “lay catechist” and “instituted catechist” reflects their own particular history. However, the proposal’s recognition of distinct, complementary ministries may be instructive for dioceses in the United States.

**(b) Criteria for Admission**

31. Archbishop Roche notes that, “It is the task of the diocesan Bishop to discern the call to the ministry of Catechist by assessing the needs of the community and the abilities of the candidates” (14).

32. In *Antiquum Ministerium*, Pope Francis identifies several qualities of candidates for the ministry of catechist: “It is fitting that those called to the instituted ministry of Catechist be men and women of deep faith and human maturity, active participants in the life of the Christian community, capable of welcoming others, being generous and living a life of fraternal communion. They 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. . . . It is essential that they be faithful co-workers with priests
and deacons, prepared to exercise their ministry wherever it may prove necessary, and
motivated by true apostolic enthusiasm” (AM 8).

33. In a similar way, the USCCB identified a number of dispositions that determine the
suitability for lay ecclesial ministry. These include:

- Being in full communion with the Catholic Church
- Desire to serve the Church and its mission
- Commitment to regular prayer and participation in the sacraments
- Zeal for the Christian life
- Knowledge of and adherence to Church doctrine
- Emotional maturity, including healthy relationships, respect for others, and emotional
balance
- Intellectual gifts needed for a specific ministry and disciplined study
- Commitment to good communication and conflict resolution
- Ability to direct others in their service
- Appreciation for new ideas (Co-Workers 30-32)

34. The dispositions identified in Co-Workers inform the more extensive qualities and
competencies laid out in the National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers
(included as an appendix) which divide these standards according to the human, spiritual,
intellectual, and pastoral. These common standards, along with the specialized competencies
for Parish Catechetical Leaders and Parish Directors of Evangelization, could be mined for
specific criteria to determine admission to the instituted ministry of catechist.

(c) Processes of Formation

35. Many lay ecclesial ministers serving as Parish Catechetical Leaders, Parish Directors of
Evangelization, and Pastoral Associates are well-trained, with extensive ministerial experience.
Successful formation programs—degree and certificate, university-based and diocesan, full-
time and part-time, in-person and online—can be found in dioceses around the country
(though not always evenly distributed). These ministers and ministry programs are a
tremendous resource for the Church in the United States.

36. Still, many lay ecclesial ministers require more substantive or ongoing formation. In Living
as Missionary Disciples: A Resource for Evangelization, the Bishops’ Committee on
Evangelization and Catechesis makes clear that effective planning for ministry requires leaders,
“not just managers and administrators but spiritual leaders with requisite planning skills” (24).
The document calls for pastoral leaders who embrace pastoral, spiritual, human, and
intellectual formation, and who are interculturally competent. The future of catechesis and
evangelization will depend on forming the next generation of lay ecclesial ministers.
37. In *Antiquum Ministerium*, Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of “biblical, theological, pastoral and pedagogical formation” in order for instituted catechists “to be competent communicators of the truth of the faith.”

38. *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* offers a detailed treatment of the elements and methods of human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. These recommendations provide a helpful framework for building, strengthening, and assessing the various processes of formation for those called to the instituted ministry of catechist.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:**

39. This is an initial response of NALM’s study group to Pope Francis’ decision to open the installed ministry of catechist. It provides some theoretical and contextual background. It is our intention to continue our conversations, moving to the practice and practical implications for the church in the United States.

40. As our conversations have developed we have become increasingly aware of, and excited by, the possibilities of *Antiquum Ministerium*. We know we are being asked to stretch our ecclesial imaginations by the possibilities presented here, but in the end we believe this can be of great service to the US Church.

41. Should it be of help, we are available for further conversation. We wish you well in your deliberations.
RESOURCES

Official Documents


Pope Francis, *Antiquum Ministerium*, Moto Proprio Instituting the Ministry of Catechist, May 10, 2021,


Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God, March 25, 2019,


Pope Francis, *Spiritus Domini*, Moto Proprio Modifying Canon 230.1, January 10, 2021,


Pope Francis, “Letter to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Regarding Access of Women to the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte,” January 10, 2021,


Pope Francis, *Antiquum Ministerium*, Moto Proprio Instituting the Ministry of Catechist, May 10, 2021,


Rite for the Institution of Catechists, December 13, 2021,

https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/12/13/0845/01772.html.

Archbishop Arthur Roche, “Letter to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences on the Rite of Institution of Catechist,” December 13, 2021,


**Secondary Sources**


