

Friday, January 22, 2010

On Scandalizing Moments, and the Abolition of the Minor Orders

One of the more inspiring (if crazier) stories I heard in college was about Pope Paul VI. I don't remember all the details, but apparently he'd called together a group of advisors in the late '60s and had them evaluate various aspects of sexual morality. The advisors unanimously reached the conclusion that contraception was totally fine. Paul VI thanked them, and then promulgated *Humanae Vitae* anyway.

I was thumbing through Anibale Bugnini's *Reform of the Roman Liturgy* the other day, and happened upon the section that dealt with the minor orders. Some background is in order: Before Vatican II, there were nine [minor orders](#), steps on the way to the priesthood - kind of like a religious taking temporary vows before taking perpetual vows (the minor orders no longer exist in the Roman Church*). In [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#), the Council Fathers called for some changes and simplifications in the liturgical and paraliturgical rites of the Church, and Bugnini's book is intended as a memoir (but sometimes feels like a tell-all) about the Consilium, the Sacred Committee of Rites, and the process of the revision of the liturgy.

So I was reading with interest about the whole process, and was surprised to hear that both the Consilium and the pope wanted to keep a few of the minor orders. They all wanted to cut out the ones (like porter) that no longer really exercised their functions, but they agreed in definitely wanting to maintain lector, acolyte, and subdeacon.** (I'm simplifying here, but not a *whole* lot.) No consensus was reached, and discussions were tabled for a while.

When discussions were picked up again six months later, the pressure was intense. Bishops, priests, and seminarians the world around wanted answers. They didn't just want answers from Rome, though; they wanted a specific set of answers. The nail in the coffin was a group of German seminarians, who quite simply *refused* to be ordained to the minor orders, "claiming that they are 'absurd and not fulfillable'" (Bugnini 741).

That is to say: Some seminarians wrote to Rome and said, "Look, you'd better ordain us some other way, 'cuz we're not doing that," *AND ROME LISTENED!* Holy Mother Church caved to the demands of a class of impatient seminarians.

I am just about scandalized! I take comfort in the fact that this was not a matter of doctrine (as in the *Humanae Vitae* story above), but still: an ancient, laudable tradition of the Church, important though non-binding (much like the celibate priesthood) was just chucked out the window because the people rebelled.

Little wonder people seem to think the Church is a democracy!

*I know, I just made a dangerous claim there. While the minor orders do seem to exist in many fantastic traditional communities, they remain a juridical reality more than anything, and unless those communities have an exemption to the current Code of Canon Law of which I'm unaware, treating their seminarians as clerics before diaconate is not technically correct (but is grandfathered in because of the wonderful tradition).

**These are pretty much what they sound like. The lector reads, the acolyte serves at the altar, and the subdeacon assists the deacon (much like an MC or a really good main server).

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Posted by Claire Christina at [9:22 PM](#) **2 comments:****AHarburg** [1:32 AM](#)

This makes me furious. Let's pray to God they reinstate them with the same ease they discarded them.

[Reply](#)**totustusmaria** [8:17 PM](#)

Claire, you are incorrect (imho) about the "minor order" thing. Your footnote * is fascinating, but it misses an important point:

being "ordained" and being in a clerical state are TWO DIFFERENT THINGS. A proof of this is that, prior to the reform of Canon Law, one not only received the clerical state before ordination, but one could be dismissed from the clerical state after receiving any of the minor orders. If, after being dismissed, one wished to be ordained, he could not be and would not be reordained.

The same holds today for priests and deacons. A priest or deacon can be dismissed from the clerical state, but he remains a priest/deacon, and, when readmitted to the clerical state, is not reordained.

POINT: The clerical state is a JURIDICAL reality, ordination is a SACRAMENTAL (or, if you reject the sacramentality of the minor orders, at least a more important ecclesial reality than a mere juridical reality). Why? Because you can be dismissed from the clerical state, but you can not be dismissed from the minor orders. Once ordained a porter, a man is a porter forever -- well, at least until death.

I think, though I am not certain, that this also applies for the current ministries of Acolyte and Lector. I think that, even if one apostatizes and rejects the ministries, if he later reverts, he is not permitted to receive it again.

So, yes. The orders still exist. But they no longer admit one to the clerical state.

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