

Laymen and Laywomen in the Celebration, Consecration, and Distribution of Holy Communion

A document of the CTRE (Committee of Theology and Church Relations) of the Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil (IELB)

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1. *The Universal Priesthood of Believers*

Luther affirms that “Christ is priest, therefore all believers are priests” (St.L. vol. X: 1571). In the letter to the Christian nobility, Luther emphasizes: “All Christians are really priests and there is no difference among them, with the single exception of the office . . . he who has been born again through baptism can boast of having already been consecrated as priest, bishop, and pope” (St.L. vol. X: 272). Writing “On the Babylonian Captivity,” he affirms on the basis of 1 Pet 2:9: “Thus we all, when we become Christians, become priests” (St.L. vol. XIX: 113). By being born again we are all born priests. This gift also implies a responsibility: “Since they have a word of God and have been anointed by it, it is certain that they also have a duty to confess, teach, and proclaim it” (St.L. vol. X: 1543). Luther does not say that Christians, as individuals, exercise their priesthood in isolation. “No one should appropriate to himself what belongs to all together, not without the will and mandate of the congregation” (St.L.X: 272). There is no doubt about the universal priesthood of all believers. On the basis of the Scriptures, we together with Luther and the Confessions reaffirm this unique standing which God grants to his people. With particular reference to Luther, H. J. A. Bouman notes that the public ministry differs from the universal priesthood not on account of competence but simply on account of the call (cf., *A Doutrina do Ministério Segundo Lutero e as Confissões Luteranas*).

2. *The Public Ministry*

In article V of the Augsburg Confession we confess that God instituted the holy ministry: “*The Church has the command to appoint ministers; to this we must subscribe wholeheartedly, for we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it*” (Apol. XIII,12).

We teach in article XIV of the Augsburg Confession that “without a regular call no one ought to publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments of the Church.” In the Tractate of the Power and the Primacy of the Pope, the Confessions affirm: “For the Gospel attributes to those who preside in the churches the commission to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, administer the sacraments . . . It is clear that this authority is of divine right and is shared by all who preside in the churches, be they called pastors, elders, or bishops” (60).

The CTCR of the LC-MS explicates some important aspects regarding the proper understanding of the ministry:

- God bestows the Word and sacraments on those people who come to faith;

- God instituted the Word to be taught and the sacraments to be administered;
- Since the ministry has been instituted by God, individual persons are called by the Church to be ministers;
- Those called to be ministers hold and occupy the office of ministry;
- The power of the keys, given by Christ to the Church, is exercised publicly in the name of the Church through her called ministers;
- The authority of the ministers is the authority to preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments, and forgive and retain sins;
- Ministers ought not appropriate this right to themselves but ought to receive it through the call of the Church (The Ministry Offices, Procedures and Nomenclature, CTCR-LCMS)

At this point we make reference to the study “O Culto Luterano,” which was published in the 56th national convention of the IELB. Among others, the following points were made with respect to the public ministry:

- The office of the ministry is the office of Christ in the Church of Christ.
- Individuals are permitted and even ordained to exercise this office, but they are not masters of the office.
- An ordained minister can only act as a representative of Christ.
- Ordained ministers do not represent themselves but the person of Christ (Luke 10:16).
- Christ is actually present in the congregation through the office which he himself ordained.
- Congregations, therefore, are obliged to provide for this presence by calling and ordaining ministers.
- God himself deals with us in the Church through the ministry (Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacraments*, p. 29).
- The temptation to think that he who is administering Holy Communion is nothing more than a mere priest is, for Luther, an un-Christian thought (Luther, 1540, sermon on Job 4).
- On account of the call of the Church, the ministers do not represent themselves but Christ himself. When they present the Word of Christ or administer the Sacraments they do this in the stead and in the name of Christ.

3. The Distinction between the Universal Priesthood and the Public Ministry

We now cite the same study made for the 56th National Convention, which clearly establishes the following positions:

- The difference between pastors and laypeople (laypeople understood as those with the universal priesthood) is not a matter of inferiority or superiority, either personal or spiritual.
- Christ came and continues to come in the office—not as a tyrant but as a servant (Luke 22:27).
- Laymen and laywomen are the object of the ongoing ministry of Christ through the public ministry.

- The office, however, does not exist apart from the Church. Laypeople just need to provide the elements for the presence of Christ in their midst—providing for the ministry, calling pastors.
- The distinction between laypeople and ministers, then, is simply a matter of instrumentality—a layperson acts as a single person, a minister acts in accordance with his office as an instrument of the presence of Christ.
- A layperson may perform ecclesiastical acts, but in such cases he acts by himself; when a minister performs the same acts in his office, Christ himself is the actor.
- This distinction is nowhere so clearly manifest as in absolution. Christ is there personally dealing with the penitent through the minister as his instrument. If a layperson were to do this, even in first person (“I”), the absolution would come from the individual and not from the only begotten Son of the Father.
- The difference is the office (C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 193)
- The words of institution of the Lord’s Supper are spoken as effective words because they are the words of Christ, who is powerful and present. They are words spoken by Christ through the mouth of his servant (Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 2, pp. 228-229).
- According to the biblical doctrine and theology of the call, a layperson cannot use the first person singular in absolution and/or consecration, for the “I absolve” and the “this is my body” are spoken in his own person and of his own body and not in the person and of the body of Christ. (Note: The layperson has not been authorized for such speaking.)
- Only a minister, by virtue of the office, may speak the words of institution in accordance with the mandate of Christ and, consequently, only he can genuinely consecrate the Lord’s Supper in the first person.
- The office makes the difference.

This is also the position of the CTCR of the LC-MS:

“The office of the public ministry in the Church is distinct from the universal priesthood of believers and has its origin in the divine institution of the office.

By reason of their baptism, all Christians receive the Holy Spirit and are constituted priests before God (Cf. 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; Rom. 12:1). They are not priests in the sense of making atoning sacrifices. God's people are His priests by His mandate and appointment as they present their bodies a living sacrifice for the extension of His kingdom. As priests they exercise the privilege of prayer not only for themselves but also for others.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is precious. . . . Not all Christians are eligible to hold the office of the public ministry nor should they be called to do so.

The term ‘the office of the public ministry’ is used to differentiate the¹ divinely established office of Word and sacrament from the service of all God's people in the priesthood of all believers.

The characteristics of the sublime² public ministry are the following: (1) it is an office, conferred by God through the call³ of the whole Church⁴, which places a man under a

¹ English adds “unique”

² The original English has: “office of the” in place of “sublime” [The mistranslation in Portuguese is likely due to a scanning error on the CTCR website]

³ English: “a call”

special obligation for which he is accountable to God and to those who have called him; (2) it requires the performance of specific functions that carry out the mission of God and His Church in the world. That is, it is a Gospel ministry, a ministry of Word and sacrament⁵ (3) it is a public ministry, that is, it is carried out on behalf of the Church, and those who occupy it are accountable to the Church.

The public ministry of the Church is distinct from the universal priesthood of all believers and is not derived from it. It follows from God's mandate. Believers exercise their priesthood⁶ in many ways. One way to do this is to join fellow Christians in calling a man to occupy the office of the public ministry in their midst. God created the office of the public ministry, and He fills that office through the call of a qualified man by the Church. Other offices that assist in essential functions of the office of the public ministry are created by the Church as the need arises. The functions of such offices, if they are truly auxiliary to the office of the public ministry, are mandated by God. Those who hold them by virtue of a call are doing services that are required by God in the extension of His kingdom. No one may arrogate to himself any of the public offices of the Church (AC XIV).

Baptism makes all Christians members of the priesthood of believers. It does not make them public ministers of the Church. The call of God, issued through the Church, makes some of the royal priests⁷ holders of the office of the public ministry and thus responsible for all of its functions. The holder of such an office represents the Church, but he does so as a representative of God. He is bound to the Word of God, and his responsibility⁸ to the call of the Church is to be bound to proclaim God's Word. That responsibility⁹ completes his entry into the office.

To be eligible to be called to the sublime public ministry¹⁰ a man must be adjudged to have met God's requirements as listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

The Church, availing itself of mature advice and guidance as it certifies men for the public ministry, performs the evaluation necessary to determine whether a man is in all respects suitable for the ministry of Word and sacraments.”

(Source: The Ministry Office, Procedures and Nomenclature of the CTCR—LCMS)

4. The Celebration of the Lord's Supper

We base our position on that already set forth by the CTCR of the LCMS:

Regularly called and ordained pastors should officiate at the celebration of the Holy Supper. The Word of God speaks of both the universal priesthood and the office of the public ministry as divine institutions (1 Pet. 2:9-10; Tit. 1:5-9)

“The Confessions do not allow us to refer to the universal priesthood as an institution of God in contrast with the public ministry as a human institution. The idea of the transference of the rights of the universal priesthood of the individual to the pastor is foreign to the Confessions. The Church does not transfer her office of preaching the Gospel and

⁴ English: “of the Church”

⁵ English text adds: “although it includes concerns for the earthly welfare and needs of suffering humanity”

⁶ English adds: “privately”

⁷ English does not have “royal”

⁸ English has “response”

⁹ English has “response”

¹⁰ English has “the office of the public ministry”

administering the Sacraments to individuals within her communion, but to fulfill this office granted her by God she calls from within this office instituted by God. In this office, consequently, the pastor acts in the name of and according to the direction of God and in the place of Jesus Christ. He acts with an authority based not in the disposition of believers but in the divine institution.” (Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*.)

The Augsburg Confession demonstrates the importance of a regularly called pastor in the administration of the Holy Supper: “It is taught that without a regular call no one ought to teach publicly or preach or administer the Sacraments in the Church” (CA XIV); “It is taught among us that, in accordance with the Gospel, the power of the keys or of the bishops is the power and command of God to preach the Gospel, loose and retain sins and administer and distribute the sacraments” (CA XXVIII, 5).

In accordance with this, the Apology explains: “But we should discuss the term ‘liturgy.’ This word properly does not indicate a sacrifice but rather a public ministry, and fits well with our assertion, namely, that only a consecrated minister should offer the Body and Blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as only a teaching minister offers the Gospel to the people, as Paul says: *So let men consider us to be ministers of Christ, and stewards of the sacraments of God*, that is, of the Gospel and the Sacraments. In 2 Cor. 5: *Consequently, we are ambassadors in the name of Christ, as if God were exhorting through us. In the name of Christ, then, we bid you to be reconciled with God*” (Apol. XXIV, 80).¹¹

In this way, our Confessions maintain the celebration (consecration and distribution) of the Holy Supper as a function of the called ministry.

5. *Confession and Absolution*

The Augsburg Confession emphasizes the value of confession and absolution in the preparation for the reception of the sacrament: “Confession has not been abolished in our churches. For it is our custom not to give the Body of the Lord unless they have been previously examined and absolved. And the people are most diligently instructed about faith in absolution . . . The people are taught to hold absolution in the highest regard, for it is a voice of God and it is pronounced by the command of God. The power of the keys are praised and remembered for the great comfort it brings to terrorized consciences, and that God requires faith that we believe in this absolution as his voice sounding from heaven, and that this faith truly grasps and receives the remission of sins” (CA XXV,1-4).

With Luther we say in the Small Catechism: “I believe that when the truly called ministers of Christ deal with us by his divine command it is as valid and certain in heaven itself as if Christ, our Lord, himself dealt with us personally. . .” (Office of the Keys).¹²

Serving a beneficial purpose in the life of the believer, the examination and absolution are fundamental for the worthiness of the communicant. “To loose and to retain sins publicly,” according to the Confessions, is a function of the called ministry.

6. *Practical Implications for the Life of the Church*

¹¹ The original Portuguese text has a typo, “XIV.”

¹² Note that this section of the Small Catechism did not appear in Luther’s first editions of the Small Catechism and was likely not written by Luther himself, though it was published in later editions during his lifetime.

The history of the Church testifies that already in the early Church officiating bishops (pastors) were very often assisted by deacons in the distribution of the chalice. The same practice was found in the Lutheran Church after the Reformation, in that laypeople (elders and others) came to assist pastors with the distribution of the chalice, just as they would help with the responsibility of teaching (Christian education) and preaching. The proper understanding was that lay assistance was not contrary to article XIV of the Augsburg Confession because a duly called minister continued to be the minister responsible for the administration of the Sacraments just as he was responsible for teaching and preaching.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, since her organization, it has been correctly understood that the practice of employing laypeople as assistants to the pastor in the duties of preaching and teaching would not undermine the doctrine of the ecclesiastical ministry. But recently many congregations expanded this practice to include the administration of the Holy Supper. Although this practice is new among us, it is not new in the history of the Christian Church and, as we have seen above, it does not undermine the doctrine of the ministry because, in both cases, the pastor remains the responsible minister in accordance with the principle of article XIV of the Augsburg Confession. It is understood that assistance with the distribution of the Holy Supper is on the same level as the duties of teaching (Bible studies, confirmation, Sunday school) and of preaching (reading service,¹³ devotions), which are accepted in the Church without any trouble (CTCR, Statement of January, 1999).

7. *Laymen and laywomen in the Celebration (consecration and distribution) of the Holy Supper.*
 - I. This statement speaks with respect to the question of whether a layperson should conduct the full celebration of the Holy Supper, including consecration and distribution.
 - II. We understand that consecration is a necessary element in the celebration of the Holy Supper.
 - III. In accordance with CA XIV and the historic understanding of the Church implied therein, we understand that the consecration of the Holy Supper ought to be performed exclusively by a called minister.
 - IV. The Apostle Paul affirms that “He who eats this bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27). The communicant has a personal responsibility: “A man ought to examine himself” (1 Cor. 11:28); but there is also the pastoral care of the called minister: “for they keep watch over your souls. . .” (Heb. 13:17) in order to prevent human abuse and divine judgment. This is the pastor’s responsibility, which also necessitates the pastor’s presence and active involvement in the distribution of the Holy Supper, even if he should have assistants participating.
 - V. It is important to remember that the authority and responsibility of the called ministry are not dependent on the approval of the believers (as if by a democratic decision of the congregation). Rather, they depend on the divine institution of the ministry, which in this way is not simply a transference of responsibilities from the universal priesthood.

¹³ In the Lutheran “reading service,” a layman reads a sermon written by a pastor.

- VI. We do not commend the celebration of the Holy Supper by laypeople without the presence of a pastor. It is necessary to remember that such was not the intention of the Reformer in his letter to the Bohemians (“How to establish ministers in the Church,” *Obras Selectionadas* VII, p. 81ff.).
- VII. However, in case of a pastoral vacancy or absence, we propose that congregations look to the district counselor who is immediately responsible for the congregation for help with the celebration of the Holy Supper.

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