

Tridentine Community News

April 24, 2022 – Low Sunday

Educational Infographics for the Traditional Mass: The Minor Orders

The below graphic provides visual imagery of the “steps” to the priesthood represented by the Minor Orders.



The 1988 establishment of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter and other subsequent traditional priestly groups prompted the Vatican to re-authorize the system of Minor Orders for seminaries primarily oriented towards the Tridentine Mass. The steps are as follows:



Tonsure: The name refers to the ceremonial clipping of hair from the head of a seminarian. It represents a formal commitment to a seminary community and the entry to the clerical state. It is after Tonsure that a seminarian begins wearing the cassock instead of civilian

clothing. Even though he has not yet been ordained as a Lector, he can read or chant the Epistle at Mass. Note that Tonsure is not a Minor Order, but a preceding step.

The orders of **Lector**, **Porter**, **Exorcist**, and **Acolyte**: These four individual orders are generally conferred together. These are what are officially referred to as the Minor Orders, though that term has come to represent the entire, more elaborate system we are currently describing. A Lector is authorized to read a broader spectrum of Lessons at Mass than one who has only received Tonsure. A Porter is the doorkeeper to the church (think Fr. Solanus Casey). An Exorcist is largely a ceremonial role, authorized to administer water to a priest during sacred functions. (Only a priest can exorcize demons.) An Acolyte is the formal name for the two principal altar servers at the Tridentine Mass. (Today's lay acolytes are merely authorized substitutes for the originally-intended ordained Acolytes.)

Subdeacon: This is the lowest of the Major Orders. In the Western tradition, it commits the recipient to celibacy. An ordained Subdeacon by definition may perform all of the functions of the Subdeacon at a Solemn High Mass, unlike so-called “straw” Subdeacons who have not been so ordained.

Deacon: Same as in the Ordinary Form system. Only a Deacon, Transitional or Permanent, or Priest may serve as Deacon in a Solemn High Mass.

The chapel at Chicago's Mundelein Seminary portrays these steps to the priesthood as inscriptions on steps in the sanctuary [photo by Fr. Bryan Jerabek]. The Minor Orders are imprinted upon the steps leading up from the nave into the sanctuary, while the Major Orders are inscribed upon the steps leading up to the High Altar (behind the freestanding altar).



Pope Paul VI's 1972 Apostolic Letter *Ministeria Quaedam* abolished the Minor Orders and eliminated the Major Order of Subdeacon, leaving only Deacon and Priest. These orders were replaced by “ministries”, of which Acolyte is one. Laymen are now “instituted” (as opposed to ordained) into these ministries by a bishop.

On June 7, 1993 the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei issued Protocol 24/92, a ruling stating the following: “In celebrating the Solemn High Mass according to the 1962 Roman Missal it is necessary to follow the rubrics of that missal. In the past the employment of a person who had received the ministry of acolyte acting as subdeacon was tolerated. In that case the acolyte acting as subdeacon did not wear the maniple. Thus usage may continue to be tolerated.”

In response to the PCED's ruling, a few dioceses began to institute laymen as Acolytes. The Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska and the U.S. [Anglican] Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter stand out: both install large numbers of men as Acolytes, the latter specifically to assist at Solemn High Masses. In metro Detroit and Windsor, James Murphy is the only layman thus far to have been instituted as an Acolyte for this purpose, by the Diocese of London, Ontario.

The Minor Orders continue to be provided to members of the religious communities which follow the Extraordinary Form ordination track, including the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter and the Institute of Christ the King.