

Trends in the Theology of Ministry in the Ev. Luth. Church of Finland

An Input at the Consultation of CPCE on *Ministry, Ordination and Episkope*

By Dr. Matti Repo, Bishop of Tampere

The ELCF is likely the most staff-intensive among Lutheran churches. Our 3,4 million parishioners are served by approximately 2,000 pastors, 1,300 deacons, 1,000 youth ministers, 800 cantors, 1,700 instructors for children, and other professionals.

Among these, priests, deacons, and bishops are ordained through the episcopal laying on of hands. In the Finnish language, there is only one word for ordaining a person, for solemnizing a marriage or consecrating a church building – *vihkiminen*, as in Swedish or other Scandinavian languages, *vigning*, or in German *Weihe*. This creates another ecumenical problem, as does also the distinction made in some languages between priest and pastor, the former used for catholic and the latter for protestant ministers. Please bear with me for choosing to use the word priest for Lutheran ministers, because that, again, is equivalent to the Swedish *präst*. In Finnish we say *pappi*, which has come from Russian, meaning father.

The office of deacon in our church originated in the mid-19th century, initially modelled after the German *Mutterhaus* system, but it was soon integrated into parish work. During the war, in 1943, the General Synod decided that every parish must employ at least one deacon. In the beginning, the deacons were commissioned by the rector of the institute, but for about a hundred years now, they have been ordained by the bishop of the diocese.

The post-war period saw a rapid expansion of activities in parish life, giving rise to a variety of educated and full paid ministries. Toward the end of the last century, questions began to arise as to whether these many ministries of spiritual service could be brought together under a broader diaconate. This was partly inspired by the BEM, which states: “As the churches move closer together, ministries now existing in a variety of forms and under a variety of names may be united in this office.” (M 31, Commentary) Theologically, the most consistent approach would be to follow the BEM's vision of a threefold ministry, to which the Porvoo Declaration also refers, comprising the triad of bishop, priest, and deacon (BEM, M 22; Porvoo § 32j).

Despite numerous working groups and committees, however, no solution has been reached that would satisfy all parties. When we begin to reconcile different ministries with their liturgical, catechetical, and caritative functions respectively into the diaconate, the specific interests of each existing professional group come to the fore. Fears arise that areas of work, job descriptions, and professional expertise will become mixed, not to mention how education will be organized. I consider this, however, an unnecessary concern, although I understand the sensitivity of the issue for those it affects.

Interestingly, the reform of the diaconate raises questions not only about the ministry of deacons but also about the episcopate. As a Lutheran church, to regard conferring the office of deacon as a genuine ordination, we need to ask how it relates to the office of word and sacraments that God has established in the church. At one point in the discussion, it was suggested that since service belongs to the comprehensive responsibility of a pastor, the tasks of a deacon are inherent in their office. It was recalled that in the Bible, the apostles delegated their own responsibilities for service to those to be ordained separately so that they themselves could focus on other matters (Acts 6). Diaconal functions were thought to be part of the priestly office established by God, and deacons would be ordained for that specific ministry, separated from inside the priesthood. Support for this view was sought in the idea that the office of bishop could also be regarded as a function of broader oversight included within the divinely established priesthood, and one of the priests would be appointed to that.

However, this logic was unsatisfactory, as it seemed to reduce everything to the priesthood and turn other ordinations installations. The three ministries had to be kept distinct from one another, since the church manual already contained three separate ordination rites. Thus, the debate over whether the office of bishop is a separate ministry or merely a form of the priesthood had to be set aside; it is sufficient that the church has a tradition of ordaining to it through the laying on of hands and prayer. The same had to be said of the office of deacon; whether it is established by human right or is based on the will of God had to be set aside and only recognize that one is ordained to the office by imposition of hands and prayer to the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we would end up in an endless debate over whether the diaconate is an office established by God or whether it is part of the common priesthood of the faithful, that is, the laity. We only need to clearly state that we have a threefold ordained ministry, though not in the form of cumulative ordinations, as in the Anglican or Catholic Church.

The discussion on reforming the diaconate continues, as today both youth ministers and deacons receive their training side by side at the same institutions, yet only the latter can be ordained upon graduation and entering the church's service. In my opinion, youth ministers should also be ordained to the diaconate, as they carry out the classic catechetical tasks of deacons. This would be possible if we did not bind the concept of diaconal ordination exclusively with diakonia as caritative service. We need to understand that the office of the diaconate as an ordained ministry is distinct from the office of the diaconate as an employment relationship. But I admit this is a difficult conceptual exercise.

As for the ministry of bishop, it can also be seen to have developed more clearly into a distinct order rather than a different function of the priesthood. This is evident in the fact that as late as in the manual of 1963, the heading for the ordination rite in the manual was "installation into the office of bishop," but by 1984 it had become "ordination to the office of bishop." I do not know if the next step will be "ordination as a bishop," which could be interpreted as an even more ontological conception.

The Swedish Church Law of 1686, which was once in force in Finland, specifically referred to the “ordination of a bishop,” but the first Finnish Church Law of 1869, drafted maybe in the spirit of Pietism and Enlightenment, used more low-church terminology and spoke of the “installation of a bishop.”

The understanding of ordination as an office in an ontological sense has nevertheless always been present in our church; once ordained, one is always ordained, and a person may wear the vestments appropriate to their office even if they have resigned from service or retired. A bishop remains in office until retirement; there is no specific tenure for the office. However, a retired bishop no longer has jurisdiction after leaving office, meaning he cannot perform episcopal duties, although he may still perform priestly duties.

After the Porvoo Declaration was signed in 1996, a discussion began within the Church about how to ensure that, in future, all priests and deacons would be ordained by episcopal laying on of hands. At that time, according to the Church Order, it was still possible for a dean to perform the ordination if the bishop was unable to do so. It was considered that, since according to the Lutheran Book of Concord there is no doctrinal difference between a priest and a bishop, a priest could also validly perform the ordination. However, this possibility was removed from the Church Order so that we could fulfil our ecumenical agreement. It is, of course, still part of our confession, but as an ecumenical gesture, we wanted to ensure that the other churches in the agreement fully recognize our bishops, priests, and deacons.

We are currently in the process of revising the handbook. I am leading a working group tasked with revising the ordination rites. My own observation is that, through ecumenical dialogue, we are on a move from Lutheran Protestantism toward Lutheran Catholicism. By this I mean that our ordination rite has traditionally followed a model inherited from Luther and transmitted to us through the Swedish Church Order of 1571, according to which the congregation’s selection and call had already made the person a minister; the ordination ceremony served merely to make this public and to offer intercessory prayer. Therefore, according to the current manual, the bishop pronounces the words of ordination, after which the ordinand is clothed in the insignia of the office, and only then does the laying on of hands follow.

According to Luther’s model, during the laying on of hands, the officiant recited the Lord’s Prayer, followed by a separate epiclesis—a prayer asking for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the 1980s, the Lord’s Prayer was replaced with a blessing in the name of the Triune God. We are now moving toward having the epiclesis take place specifically during the laying on of hands rather than separately from it. The insignia of the office would also be given to the person being ordained only after the laying on of hands, not before. Then the core of the ordination would lie more clearly in the laying on of hands and the prayer for the Holy Spirit, rather than in the bishop’s declaration of conferring the office. The bishop is clothed in a mitre and a cope, and he is given a pectoral cross and a staff. The priest is clothed in a stole and a chasuble over the alb, and the deacon in a stole over the alb only after the laying on of hands and the prayer.