



FACT OF
FAITH

Minor Orders

BY FR. LARRY RICE

If you ask most Catholics about ordained ministries and who does them, most would probably be able to name bishops, priests, and deacons. And today those are the ordained orders in the Roman Catholic Church.

But before 1972, there were additional “minor” order. As a seminarian progressed through his studies and formation, he would have been inducted in the clerical state by a tonsure, a shaving of a portion of his head. Then, he could have been received into the orders of Porter, Lector, Exorcist, Acolyte, and Subdeacon. Until this last, a could still leave formation and get married. But the subdiaconate included a vow of celibacy with precluded later marriage.

None of these minor orders were considered sacraments, since they were not instituted by Christ himself.

“Today, the minor orders and tonsure ritual are fading memories.”

In 1972, Pope Paul VI suppressed the minor orders, largely because they had become pro forma rituals disconnected from the Church’s life and sacraments. Today, seminarians are “installed” as lectors authorized to proclaim the scriptures, and as acolytes who assist the priest at the altar. It’s worth noting that both of these ministries can be performed by lay people without any such “installation,” so some pro forma rituals remain.

Today the minor orders and tonsure ritual are fading memories. The ordained ministers in the church are bishops, priests,

and deacons. While the minor orders are gone, seminarians intending on priesthood are still ordained deacons-- transitional deacons-- often for their last year of theological studies or for a pastoral internship.

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