

# A LITURGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF CALL AND ORDINATION IN THE LIFE OF THIS CHURCH

**Thomas H. Schattauer**  
Wartburg Theological Seminary

What is at stake in the way that the church selects and designates persons to fill the office of ministry? The aim of this paper is to reflect upon our practice of call and ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament from a liturgical perspective, with a view toward the practice of authorizing laypersons for this same ministry. The “our practice “ here refers first of all to the practice in the ELCA, but also to the practice of this church in its relation to the wider circles of Lutheran, ecumenical, and historic Christian practice. These reflections will focus on one question. What do we enact theologically in the practice of call and ordination? A ritual perspective will help us to see that ordination is part of a larger ritual process, including all that is encompassed by the term “call.” From this perspective, we will ask about the theological significance of this process, including the ritual moment of ordination.

An important assumption will guide the reflection upon this question. Ritual is fundamentally about relationships.<sup>1</sup> The Christian assembly in its worship symbolically enacts a set of relationships: to God, to one another, to the world. The ritual and symbolic enacting of relationship by the church in its assembly for worship both shows and gives us these relationships; it not only communicates about them, but also mediates them to us. So, the question about call and ordination becomes what relationships—to God, to one another, and to the world—are enacted here. The word “ordain” derives from the Latin word for “order” (*ordo*; *ordinare*, to ordain), and consequently, its root meaning is “to set in order.” It is about an ordering of relationships within the community of the church. Through call and ordination, a person is constituted in a set of relations to the community (church), to the things that bear Christ to us (word and sacrament), and to God’s purpose for the world (mission). As Gordon Lathrop writes:

The leadership of the liturgy is part of the liturgy. Ordination is intended to include persons in the schedule and pattern whereby the Christian assembly enacts the meaning of the Christian faith. Indeed, the order to which one is ordained is, finally, simply a list of persons who take their place and turn in the leadership of the structure of the *ordo*.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, ordination is less about the institutional conveyance of power and authority to an individual and more about the ritual and symbolic ordering of relationships within a community whose life is authorized by God’s mercy in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Spirit of God.

Let me caution at the outset that this way of proceeding will not lead to a simple resolution of the issue regarding the authorization of lay ministers of word and sacrament. Nor is it meant to suggest what this church can or cannot do. It is a thought project that intends to clarify what is at

stake from a liturgical perspective and also to stimulate our collective reflection about how we structure the ministry of word and sacrament and enact it ritually in a way that is coherent with our theological commitments and responsive to the missional context of the church in North America.

### **What do we enact theologically in the practice of call and ordination?**

From a ritual perspective, ordination exhibits the features of a rite of passage.<sup>3</sup> Before the rite of ordination, a person is not a minister of word and sacrament in the church; afterwards, one is. The rite marks a passage, for the individual and the community, from one set of structured relationships to another. In addition, the rite is part of a larger process characterized by stages of separation, transition, and reincorporation. Ordination is a ritual moment integrally related to a ritual process. The process includes all the activities of candidacy, theological education, assignment and first call leading up to ordination as well as what follows: installation in a local congregation and the exercise of ministry in that place. This entire process, with the rite of ordination at the culminating point of transition, “makes” a person a minister of word and sacrament in a local congregation.

What we mean by call encompasses all the processes by which the church discerns and confirms God’s calling of a person to the ministry of word and sacrament—in the ELCA that means candidacy, theological education, assignment, and first call—up to and including its ritual enactment at ordination.<sup>4</sup> What is most striking about the call is the way the church is engaged at every level. A local congregation recommends the candidate at the point of entrance and another extends the first call. A synod administers the candidacy process, and the same synod or another selects the candidate in the assignment process, oversees the first call, and authorizes the ordination. The churchwide organization oversees the candidacy and assignment processes, maintains a system of theological education, and keeps a roster of those under call. And all of this churchly activity is understood as the work of the church catholic, manifest in local assembly as well as in the structures for the communion of local assemblies. The call is a thoroughly communal process through which God calls a person into this ministry. The call of God through the church is what the call process enacts theologically.

The ritual moment of ordination stands at the center of the whole ritual process between the call to the ministry of word and sacrament and its exercise in a local congregation. Ordination takes place in a local assembly of the church;<sup>5</sup> a bishop normally presides and other ministers of word and sacrament may be present. The historic pattern at the core of the ordination rite consists of election and prayer (to which the laying on of hand is connected).<sup>6</sup> According to Paul Bradshaw, the earliest sources show “two distinct but related actions: firstly, the election of the candidate; and secondly, prayer for the bestowal of the gifts needed to fulfill the particular ministry.”<sup>7</sup> And these things—election and prayer—are set within the pattern of the assembly itself—word and meal. In this way, the appointment to ministry is enacted precisely in relation to the things of Christ that this ministry will serve. The minister is ordered in a relation to word and sacrament within the Christian assembly.<sup>8</sup> The rite of ordination symbolically (and effectually) enacts a set of relationships that involves the person ordained, the church in its assembly, and God.

At this point, it is important to recall briefly the early history of Lutheran practice regarding ordination. Luther's polemic against and rejection of the consecration of a sacrificial priesthood did not prevent him from establishing a practice of ordination for evangelical ministers of the gospel.<sup>9</sup> The medieval understanding and practice of ordination had shifted the focus from the laying on of hands with prayer to the consecration of the hands by anointing and actions that bestowed the powers of priesthood: to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins.<sup>10</sup> Luther and Lutheran practice reclaimed certain features of earlier Christian practice that had been seriously obscured in the medieval rites. Luther gave renewed prominence to the essential participatory role of the congregation gathered for ordination,<sup>11</sup> and he prepared a rite ritually focused on the laying on of hands and prayer (the Lord's Prayer and a prayer for the Holy Spirit).<sup>12</sup>

As we consider the principal relationships symbolically enacted at ordination—the person ordained, the church in its assembly, and God—we note again the thoroughly communal nature of what is taking place. The presence and participation of a local assembly is essential to the rite of ordination. Apart from a gathering of the people of God, there can be no ordination. In the rite currently used in the ELCA, there is, strictly speaking, no election of the ordinand by those gathered. The response, “Thanks be to God,” to the presentation of one “who has been prepared, examined, and certified . . . and . . . called by the Church” (rubric 4), however, clearly implies the congregation's assent to the ordination, and the reception and acclamation of the newly ordained after the prayer with laying on of hands further enacts the consent of those “assembled as the people of God and speaking for the whole Church” (rubric 15).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the prayer of the rite is an action of the assembly. It should not be overlooked that the principal prayer of the ordination rite (rubrics 10-11) is, like all liturgical prayer, a prayer of the entire assembly. The thanksgiving to God and prayer for the Spirit (*epiclesis*), offered by the presiding minister, belong to everyone. Not even the laying on of hands in its restriction to bishop and pastors need be understood as an exclusively clerical action; it bears and designates the prayer of the assembly. The rite enacts this relation: a person becomes a minister of word and sacrament through the assent and prayer of a local assembly.

The rite is also clear that a person is made a minister of word and sacrament by the action of God. The prayer of thanksgiving at the center of the rite (rubrics 10-11) turns at its own center to invoke the Holy Spirit:

Eternal God, through your Son, Jesus Christ, pour out your Holy Spirit upon \_\_\_\_\_ name \_\_\_\_\_ and fill *him/her* with the gifts of grace [for the ministry of Word and Sacrament]. Bless . . . Make . . . Grant . . .

One of the most significant developments in contemporary ordination rites has been the broad ecumenical recognition that prayer of thanksgiving encompassing a prayer for the Spirit (*epiclesis*) most appropriately enacts the relation to God in the making of a minister.<sup>14</sup> The office of ministry is God's gift to the church; God chooses persons to fill it and pours out the Spirit to empower the exercise of that ministry. With the confidence of a people itself empowered by the Spirit, the assembly begs God's action. Instead of an authoritative bestowal of Spirit and office by the ordaining minister, the assembly as a whole prays for God to act.<sup>15</sup> The rite enacts a

second relation: a person becomes a minister of word and sacrament by God's act of pouring out the Holy Spirit to empower this ministry.

The ministry of the bishop and other participating pastors adds another dimension to the relationships enacted in the rite. The significance of the bishop's ministry and the participation of other pastors at ordination lies in this: the local assembly, however constituted, does not act on its own but rather in communion with other local assemblies. The ministry of the bishop in particular represents this supra-local dimension at ordination. The bishop presides as a sign of the unity of local assemblies within a region as well as the wider, universal communion of churches.<sup>16</sup> This is one of the ways that the practice of ordination bears the sign of the communion of the church, a sign that the one ordained then bears in the exercise of ministry in a local place. Ultimately the communion of the church signified in the ministry bishops and a pastor is its unity in Jesus Christ, marked by the principal signs of that communion: word and sacrament (the external Word), to which these ministries are ordered. This dimension of what is enacted at ordination is connected to the laying on of hands by those who are themselves ordained.<sup>17</sup> The rite enacts an additional relation: a person becomes a minister of word and sacrament in the working of supra-local signs of communion, including the ministry of bishop and pastors.<sup>18</sup>

It should be evident from all of this that ordination, through ritual and symbol, establishes a rich and complex set of relationships among the church in its assembly, those who hold office, and God. Ordination enacts a three-fold relation: 1) a person is given to exercise the ministry of word and sacrament by God's empowering act, 2) through the assent and prayer of God's people in local assembly, 3) in conjunction with the supra-local sign of communion exercised in the ministry bishop and pastors. The exercise of the ministry of word and sacrament in a local congregation is constituted precisely in these relationships.

### **Summary Comment and a Look Ahead**

There are further questions that need to be addressed from a liturgical perspective. One very important question has to do with the connection between ordination and eucharistic presidency. There is indeed much more to be said about the meaning of ordination in relation to the things of Christ and to God's mission toward the world. These are matters for conversation and perhaps the second round of papers.

The specific aim of these reflections has been to offer an analysis of the meaning of call and ordination from a liturgical perspective. From this vantage point, the ministry of word and sacrament exercised in a local Christian assembly is itself a part of the symbolic "language" of the worshipping community. "The leadership of the liturgy is part of the liturgy,"<sup>19</sup> is the way that Lathrop puts it. And further he writes, "the clergy . . . are a living part of the assembly's collection of symbols, subject to the same interactions and the same breaking that turns all symbols to the purpose of the assembly."<sup>20</sup> The symbolic interactions of Christian worship, including those surrounding ordained ministry, are connected to the symbolic purpose of the church: to be a sign of the reign of God, to enact in its life and its worship God's eschatological purpose for the world.<sup>21</sup>

The symbolic interactions at work in the process of call and the rite of ordination have been interpreted here in terms of the relationships enacted. The ritual process of call and the ritual moment of ordination aimed at the exercise of the ministry of word and sacrament establishes a set of relationships. When synodical authorization replaces the regular process of call and ordination in the appointment of a minister of word and sacrament, these relationships are not ritually and symbolically (and thus effectively) enacted. Certain things are missing:

- the full engagement of the church as a community in discerning and confirming the call of God for this ministry;
- the assent and prayer of the people of God gathered in a local assembly;
- the sign of the supra-local communion of the church in the liturgical ministry of the bishop and other participating pastors;
- the prayer of thanksgiving with its *epiclesis* of the Spirit, and with that the acknowledgment that the ministry of word and sacrament is God's gift and empowered by God's action.

In sum, the rich ecclesial and theological relationships enacted in the practice of call and ordination are missing or, at the least, seriously attenuated. The administrative authorization of persons for the ministry of word and sacrament by a synod and its bishop is an institutional conveyance of authority dissociated from the church in its assembly and from God's action through the church.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the liturgical celebration of ordination in relation to the call process is primarily a symbolic ordering of relationships that enacts significant theological claims.

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## Endnotes

1. “‘Ritual communication is not about the communication of information, . . . but about the rehearsal of meaning, bonding people together in a common stance toward life.’ Ritual speech does not send new messages back and forth between believers and God, . . . ‘it enacts relationships;’” Mark Searle as quoted in *The New York Times*, December 11, 1988.
2. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 190.
3. See Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
4. In the ordination rite, see, for example, the presentation of the ordinand (rubric 4) and the first question in the examination (rubric 6), where there is explicit reference to the call of the church and God’s call; *Occasional Services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, and Philadelphia: Board of Publication, LCA, 1982).
5. The practice as to where an ordination takes place indeed varies. The local assembly may be a congregation (the congregation of first call or the home congregation of the ordinand) or a gathering of the synod (at the time of the synod assembly or on some other occasion). Whatever the circumstance, the church necessarily gathers in a particular place—in a local assembly.
6. Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 1965.
7. Paul Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West*, (New York: Pueblo, 1990), 21-22. Further, Bradshaw notes that “in both these actions, the local Christian community played a major part” (22).
8. Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 197-198; see also, 189ff.
9. Ralph F. Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination in the Early Reformation Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 48ff.
10. In the pontifical of Durandus, the anointing of the hands and its formula is followed by the handing over of chalice and paten with the words: “Receive the power to offer sacrifice to God and to celebrate mass for the living and the dead.” A second laying on of hands was accompanied by these words: “Receive the Holy Spirit, those whose sins you forgive are forgiven and those whose sins you retain are retained.” See, Smith, *Ordination*, 27-33.
11. Smith, *Ordination*, 222-223.
12. Smith, *Ordination*, 119-127.
13. On this matter, see Paul R. Nelson, *Lutheran Ordination in North America: The 1982 Rite*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1987, 76-92, 300-304. Nelson suggests that election remains an unresolved issue. Nelson’s work presents a thorough analysis of the present rite and its development.
14. Nelson, *Lutheran Ordination*, 137-193, 292-295, 306-311. See also Ralph W. Quere, “The Spirit and the Gifts are Ours: Imparting or Imploring the Spirit in Ordination Rites?” *Lutheran Quarterly* 27 (1975): 322-346; and Ralph W. Quere, “Ecclesiology and Ministry as Reflected in Contemporary Ordination Rites,” in *Church and Ministry: Chosen Race, Royal Priesthood, Holy Nations, God’s Own People*, ed. by David C. Brockopp, Brian L. Helge, and David G. Truemper (Valparaiso, IN: Institute of Liturgical Studies, 1982), 100-101.
15. Cf. the ordination rite in *The Occasional Services from the Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, and Board of Publications, LCA, 1962), where the formula that accompanies the laying on of hands reads: “The



Lord bestow upon thee the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a Minister in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the authority of the Church through the imposition of our hands: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost;" p. 98.

16. The sign of this wider communion is enacted at the ritual appointment of a bishop through the participation of other bishops in the laying on of hands. Historic succession further intensifies the sign of communion that operates in the ministry of a bishop.
17. This suggests a reason for the restriction of this gesture to ministers of word and sacrament based upon the ecclesial and theological relationships that are symbolically enacted at ordination, rather than one based upon clerical power, privilege, or status.
18. Here I have emphasized the role of bishop and other pastors as sign of the church's unity and catholicity. A full account would also explore their role as a sign of apostolicity.
19. Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 190.
20. Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 192.
21. Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. by Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 13.
22. See Wolfhart Pannenberg's critique of the "bureaucratic act of commissioning by church leaders" in place of ordination; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 404.