Vatican

A young woman reads during Pope Francis' celebration of Mass on the feast of Christ the King

A young woman reads during Pope Francis' celebration of Mass on the feast of Christ the King in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Nov. 22, 2020. In a written message released Aug. 24, 2022, Pope Francis invited the world's bishops' conferences to join in a 'dialogue' reviewing diversity and growth of ministries in the church. (CNS photo/Stefano Dal Pozzolo, pool)

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Vatican City — August 24, 2022

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Fifty years have passed since St. Paul VI instituted the ministries of lector and acolyte, opening them to the laity, and Pope Francis wants a formal "dialogue" with the world's bishops' conferences to discuss their experiences with the ongoing promotion of the church's ministries so they foster unity and evangelization.

The pope made the proposal for dialogue in a message published by the Vatican Aug. 24 and dated Aug. 15 -- the 50th anniversary of his predecessor's apostolic letter, "Ministeria quaedam." That document from 1972 determined that "minor orders" be called "ministries" and that these ministries -- lector and acolyte -- be open to laymen and no longer reserved only to candidates for ordination.

Since then, Francis has instituted further changes: amending canon law so women can be formally installed as lectors and acolytes, and instituting the ministry of catechist as a formal office and vocation in the church.

In his message, the pope said these last two efforts "should not be interpreted as overriding previous doctrine, but as a further development made possible because (the change) is based on the same principles -- consistent with the Second Vatican Council's reflection -- that inspired 'Ministeria quaedam.'"

Therefore, he wrote, "The best way to celebrate today's significant anniversary is precisely to continue to deepen the reflection on ministries that St. Paul VI initiated."

"Every ministry is a call by God for the good of the community," Francis wrote.

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The Christian community is called to carefully discern what the Holy Spirit is prompting in relation to the concrete situation of each community, he added.

"Every ministerial structure that arises from this discernment is dynamic, lively and flexible, just like the action of the Spirit," and each structure must further deepen its roots in the Holy Spirit "to avoid the risk that this dynamism become confusion, liveliness be reduced to extemporaneous improvisation and flexibility turn into arbitrary and ideological adaptations."

A ministry must be based on the firm foundation that its origin is God working through the Holy Spirit and its purpose is always the common good and the building up of the community, he wrote.

"In order to be able to listen to the voice of the Spirit and not halt the process -- being careful not to want to force (the process) by imposing choices that are the fruit of ideological points of view -- I believe that it is useful to share experiences over these past years, all the more so during this season of the synodal journey," Francis wrote.

For this reason, the pope said he wanted to "initiate a dialogue on the topic (of the church's ministries) with the bishops' conferences in order to be able to share the richness of the ministerial experiences that in these 50 years the church has lived." Details would be coming later about the dialogue, which he wanted to begin "in the

coming months," he wrote.