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Eamon Duffy, the leading church historian, once explained the problem of a shortage of priests in a single sentence: “No priests, no sacraments; and no sacraments, no Church.”

Faced with a diminishing number of priests in many parts of the Church, Pope Francis has, for the time being, decided against widening access to the ordained ministry. He’s kept the ban on women priests in place and has decided not to proceed with the ordination of married men. Women deacons may be under discussion, but any shift in that direction looks unlikely in the short term. What the Pope is pursuing foremost is a renewed vision of ­ministry in the Church; seeking to build up lay roles and develop what he describes as a ­“distinctively lay” culture of ministry, rooted in the priesthood of all the baptised.

It’s an approach that frustrates some, who argue that Francis is allowing the burning questions of the shortage of priests and the issue of women’s ministry to fester. Make no mistake, the Pope is not saying a definitive “No” to ordaining married men, or to women deacons. He’s opened up discussions in these areas. But he has to factor in the fierce resistance to any change in the Church’s understanding of priesthood, particularly in Rome. To avoid polarisation, and to pursue reforms that would attract a broad consensus, he’s pushing ahead with initiatives that will create conditions for a more fruitful discussion about the nature of priesthood and who can and cannot be ordained.

On Tuesday the Pope took a step forward in implementing his vision with the creation of an official ministry of catechist, which is described as a “stable form of service”. In parts of Africa, Asia and the Amazon region, where priest shortages are acute, lay catechists are often the permanent leaders of Christian communities. Until now, catechists, many of them women, have been performing this ministry without formal recognition. Yet the Vatican wants to keep catechists away from the altar. During a press briefing, I asked Archbishop Rino Fisichella if women catechists could give the homily during Mass.“I think not,” he replied, stressing that their role is “not ­primarily liturgical”.

Francis’ reforms to lay ministry are rooted in the 2019 synod on the Amazon region, at which local bishops asked the Pope to ­“promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner”. In light of a dire shortage of priests, the leaders of the Church in the Amazon also called for the ordin­ation of married men and for more ­discussion on female deacons.

The Roman Curia strongly resisted these proposals; faced with the impossibility of creating a ­consensus, the Pope pressed pause. What he’s focused on instead is opening up spaces within church ministry in which women and men can break the link between leadership in the Church and ordination to the priesthood. The Pope seems to be following some advice attributed to his namesake, St Francis of Assisi: “Start by doing what’s necessary; then do what’s possible; and ­suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) has slammed the brakes on moves by some bishops in the United States to bar President Joe Biden from Communion on the grounds of his support for abortion policies. What is striking about the latest CDF intervention is how it contrasts with the ruling it issued against same-sex blessings. While the latter offered a one-word “negative” to the possibility of blessings, the letter to the US bishops offers a framework for discernment. It suggests that the Pope was more closely involved in its ­formulation than the same-sex blessings ­document. Senior Vatican officials, I am told, do not support moves to deny Biden and other Catholic ­politicians Communion.

Cardinal Luis Ladaria, the CDF prefect, has advised the bishops to find a “true consensus” on the topic (highly unlikely, given the depth of the divisions between them) and carry out a dialogue with pro-choice politicians before making any policy. He also points out that the decision to withhold Communion from any Catholic rests with his or her local bishop, not a bishops’ conference.

Intriguingly, the Ladaria letter was made public on the day that priests across Germany offered blessings to same-sex couples. Some in the US have accused the German Church of defying the Vatican and fostering schism. But that charge will ring hollow if US bishops defy Rome and refuse Biden Communion.

in february, I broke the news that the Pope was considering coming to Glasgow in November for the COP26 climate change summit. Sources in Rome say a trip is being prepared – pandemic permitting – with Francis keen to do all he can to encourage world leaders to act to protect the planet. Any trip, I am told, would be short (possibly a day) and be concentrated on the summit.

Speculation that the Pope may visit Scotland was fuelled again with the visit of Alok Sharma, the UK’s COP26 president, to the Vatican on Monday. Mr Sharma met Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See’s Secretary of State, and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States. If the trip does happen, remember you read it in The Tablet first ...