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Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, blesses three women acolytes during Mass Nov. 24 at the Cathedral of Christ the King in Lexington. (Courtesy of Maureen C Guarnieri Yeager)



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Nearly four years since Pope Francis changed canon law to allow women to be installed as lectors and acolytes, some dioceses are now moving ahead with ceremonies to formally recognize women in those instituted lay ministries.

"I waited long enough to get any direction from the USCCB," Bishop [John Stowe](#) said, referring to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which has yet to promulgate new guidelines and norms on the expanded lay ministries.

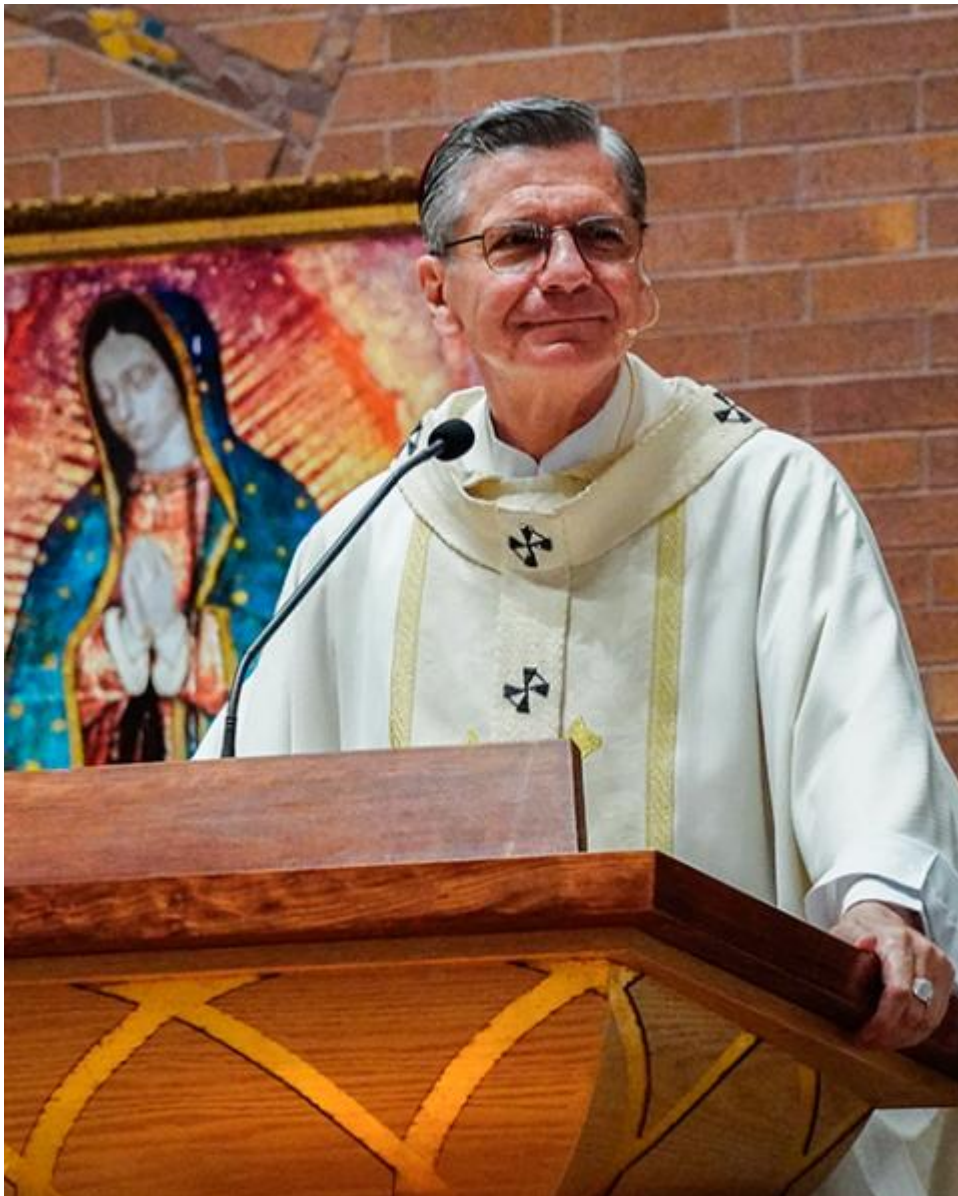
Stowe installed three women as acolytes during Mass on Nov. 24 at the Cathedral of Christ the King in his Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky. Following his homily, Stowe imparted a blessing onto the acolytes, who typically assist priests in distributing Communion and preparing the altar during Mass.

"It was a nice day to recognize the ministry that these women have already accomplished," Stowe told National Catholic Reporter. "I would have liked to have done it sooner."

Diane Zekind, one of the acolytes blessed by the bishop, said it was fulfilling to be recognized for a ministry that she has been performing at her parish, St. Clare Church in Berea, Kentucky, for 14 years.

"It was an awesome moment," Zekind told NCR. "I think it was a great way to set an example for others to be involved with liturgical ministries, that women can serve in a number of areas, and how others should be involved with it."

At least one other diocese has installed women as lectors and acolytes in the absence of guidance from the U.S. bishops.



San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller in June 2024 (OSV News/Courtesy of San Antonio Archdiocese/Veronica Markland)

On Aug. 27, the San Antonio Archdiocese held a special Mass at Our Lady's Chapel in Assumption Seminary to install five women in those ministries. The women had completed formation training through the archdiocese's Lay Ministry Institute.

"Your role is crucial in helping the community encounter Christ," San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller said during [his homily](#) in which he emphasized the importance of those ministerial roles in the life of the local church.

"Through your proclamation of the Scriptures and your service at the altar, you will make the presence of Christ known, inviting the faithful to a deeper communion with Him," the archbishop said.

Though the pope allowed for women to be formally installed as acolytes and lectors with his *motu proprio* letter *Spiritus Domini* [in January 2021](#), most dioceses have been waiting for the U.S. bishops' conference to update its norms to reflect the changes in canon law.

At their plenary meeting in June, the U.S. Catholic bishops voted to establish a task force that will create a new national directory of instituted ministry that would encompass norms, guidelines and best practices for the expanded ministries of lector, acolyte and catechist. Francis, in a separate document issued *motu proprio* (meaning on his own initiative) in 2021, also established catechist as a new lay ministry.

Military Services Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, said at the [June plenary](#) that the bishops' task force would consider "practical" matters, such as qualities that instituted lay ministers should possess and whether those ministries require a set minimum age or duration, as well as how those ministries would relate to the roles that pastors serve in a parish, among other considerations.

In addition, Broglio and other prelates said the national directory will need to reflect the updated or expanded theological vision of lay instituted ministry, which Francis said in his 2021 apostolic letter had undergone a "doctrinal development" in recent years.

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Opening up the ministries of lector and acolyte to women, Francis wrote in *Spiritus Domini*, reflected a reality that "certain ministries instituted by the Church are based on the common condition of being baptized and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism."

That development, the pope wrote, followed recommendations from several assemblies of the Synod of Bishops to deepen the subject of lay ministry doctrinally, "so that it may respond to the nature of the aforementioned charisms and the needs

of the times."

In a letter accompanying *Spiritu Domini* that he wrote to the then-prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Francis said it would be the role of national bishops conferences to consider criteria for who in their communities could serve as lectors and acolytes.

The U.S. bishops' task force on creating the new national directory of instituted ministries will be led by Auxiliary Bishop Michael Woost of Cleveland, Broglio announced at the bishops' November plenary meeting in Baltimore. Broglio did not articulate a timeline for when he expects the directory to be complete.

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—Bishop John Stowe

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Stowe, a former member of the bishops' conference Administrative Committee, said he asked "on multiple occasions" in recent years why the conference had not yet adopted new norms for the instituted lay ministries. Stowe told NCR he "never got an answer to that question."

"It just seemed to me that we were waiting too long, and there were people here who I felt were already qualified for this role," Stowe said. "I thought it was time to have women installed in some kind of a ministry that would be visible in the sanctuary."

The women who were installed as acolytes in the Lexington Diocese completed a new diocesan training program that Stowe said was made available to people who had already been serving their parishes in various liturgical ministries.

"This is to give some sense of permanence to the ministries that they're doing, which they do officially in the name of the church," he said.

Zekind, who has served as an acolyte in various liturgical ceremonies — including weddings, funerals, confirmation and installation Masses — said she not only enjoys serving in her ministry, but added that it has enriched her own personal faith.

"You're involved in the Mass, you're interacting with the priest, and I think it just brings a little bit more involvement with receiving the Eucharist," she said.