

Why are we silencing women (and lay) preachers?

Christine Schenk | Aug. 28, 2014 Simply Spirit

Bishop Salvatore Matano, the new bishop of Rochester, N.Y., is in the process of [ending a 40-year custom](#) [1] of permitting lay ministers to preach at Mass. Most are women commissioned to preach by the former bishop, Matthew Clark. All have advanced degrees in theology and all have served for many years in various diocesan leadership positions. Many are or were parish administrators in a diocese where [one-third of all parishes](#) [2] are without a resident priest. (And things are going to get worse. According to the diocesan website, the number of active diocesan priests is expected [to decline from 140 to 62 by 2025](#) [3] -- a decline of almost 60 percent.)

Preaching at Mass by prepared and gifted laity, especially laywomen, flourished under Clark, who interpreted church law broadly, though the practice actually began under his predecessor, Bishop Joseph Hogan. Clark, who retired in 2012, was nationally known for supporting expanded roles for women in the church. In 1982, in "[The Fire in the Thornbush](#) [4]," his first pastoral letter as bishop, he wrote:

Many women have also demonstrated that they have the gift of inspired preaching, that they can explain the Word of God in a way so moving that it reaches the minds and hearts of their hearers and hereby strengthens their faith.

We have such women in this diocese. In our liturgical and other prayer assemblies, and in all events wherein we witness to our faith, we need to be creative in designing ways and providing opportunities for women with such gifts to share this richness with the community.

To his credit, Clark was as good as his word. For decades, Rochester parishioners were gifted with women regularly preaching the Word at Sunday Mass. Along with their pastors, the women carefully observed the letter of canon law by preaching "in dialogue with" the priest and describing their Gospel insights as "reflections" rather than homilies, since church law says only the ordained can preach a homily at Mass.

Meanwhile, a few [ultraconservative Rochester Catholics](#) [5] bitterly and continuously attacked Clark for his prophetic pastoral leadership. They found a hearing in Rome. Under Pope Francis' predecessors, the Vatican bureaucracy turned a deaf ear to progressive bishops and theologians. In September 2012, [Clark's resignation](#) [6] upon reaching retirement age was immediately accepted. Such a speedy acceptance usually signifies curial unhappiness with the outgoing prelate. In an unprecedented move that [some found insulting](#) [7], Pope Benedict XVI's Curia [named a bishop from an adjoining diocese](#) [8] as "apostolic administrator." It is highly unusual to name a bishop administrator when the retiring bishop is still healthy.

The November 2013 appointment of Matano could be viewed as yet another sign of the old regime's dissatisfaction with Clark's pastoral leadership. Matano is a classmate and friend of Cardinal Raymond Burke. Burke is well known for a [certain rigid legalism](#) [9] during his tenure in St. Louis. In 2008, he was appointed prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, the church's highest canonical body, and would eventually become a member of the Congregation for Bishops. In this capacity, Burke had a hand in appointing his former classmate to

Rochester.

It is telling that just a month after Matano's appointment, [Pope Francis removed Burke](#) [10] from the congregation. Alberto Melloni, director of the John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies, [said he believes](#) [11] Burke's removal signaled that "you don't need to be a conservative to become a bishop ... [Pope Francis] wants good bishops, regardless of how conservative or liberal they are."

Good bishops like, say, Matthew Clark?

Sadly, it all comes a day late and a dollar short for our female Rochester preachers.

Rochester isn't the only diocese to shut down long-established lay preaching customs. In 2008, outgoing St. Paul-Minneapolis Archbishop Harry Flynn instructed pastors to [discontinue a 25-year-old practice](#) [12] even though 29 parishes had active lay preaching programs in place. Observers believe Flynn stopped the practice in preparation for his more conservative successor, Archbishop John Nienstedt. Like Matano, Flynn and Nienstedt interpreted canon law narrowly. "Canon law does not support the practice of lay preaching at the homily during Mass," Flynn said. "The education, formation and ordination of priests and deacons make them uniquely suited to preach during Mass."

So, you may ask, what does canon law actually say? In the wake of the Second Vatican Council's renewed focus on the priesthood of all believers, the 1983 Code of Canon Law permitted lay preaching under certain circumstances.

[Canon 766](#) [13]: "Lay persons can be permitted to preach in a church or oratory, if necessity requires it in certain circumstances or it seems advantageous in particular cases, according to the prescripts of the conference of bishops and without prejudice to canon 767, §1."

[Canon 767, §1](#) [13]: "Among the forms of preaching, the homily, which is part of the liturgy itself and is reserved to a priest or deacon, is preeminent; in the homily the mysteries of faith and the norms of Christian life are to be explained from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year."

In 2001, to fulfill the prescriptive requirements of Canon 766, the U.S. bishops' conference issued [norms for lay preaching](#) [14], which says, in part: "The lay faithful may be permitted to exercise this [preaching] ministry in churches and oratories." The conference named three "illustrative" cases: "the absence or shortage of clergy, particular language requirements, or the demonstrated expertise or experience of the lay faithful concerned." It also carefully stipulated: "Preaching by the lay faithful may not take place within the Celebration of the Eucharist at the moment reserved for the homily."

Even though the 2004 Vatican document [Redemptionis Sacramentum](#) [15] sought to restrict lay preaching even further, [canonical experts say](#) [16] it remains a nonlegislative document "that implements but does not supersede already existing law." Thus, the more expansive U.S. bishops' norms are lawful, depending on if and how the diocesan bishop wants to implement them.

Proponents of lay preaching at Mass, such as Clark, interpreted the bishops' norms with some latitude and permitted lay reflection on the Gospel to be given after "in dialogue" with the priest presider or placed just before or after the prayers of the faithful. Bishops who do not support lay preaching, such as Matano, Flynn and Nienstedt, allow no such latitude.

So why should anyone care about all this canonical hair-splitting?

We should care because if narrow-minded interpretations prevail, our church walks with one foot and speaks

with only half a voice.

We should care because too many parishes will continue to suffer from terrible or no preaching either because the priest or deacon just doesn't have the gift or because the presider is from another culture because of the U.S. priest shortage and cannot be understood despite his best efforts.

We should care because female professors are even now teaching homiletics to Catholic seminarians, though they themselves are forbidden to preach at Mass.

Are too many of our bishops straining at gnats and swallowing camels?

I close with what turns out to have been a prophetic statement about prophecy from Clark's 1982 pastoral letter:

It is entirely possible that the Spirit of God is even now granting to the Church at large and to our local church true prophets, men and women through whom the Spirit of God will inspire and renew us. No one of us can claim on personal authority that he or she does not possess this gift of prophecy nor can any one of us claim from God's hand this extraordinary power. But all of us -- bishop and housewife, priest and lay person, monk and religious woman -- can and must be open to [its] advent among us. It remains to those who preside over the Church to decide the presence of true prophecy and even they must be extremely careful not to make premature, unprayerful judgments and so to "extinguish the Spirit."

May God (and Pope Francis) send us pastoral bishops who know how to discern and cultivate the Holy Spirit's preaching gifts poured out upon all the People of God, male and female, lay and ordained.

P.S. For readers interested in exploring this topic further, here are two helpful links:

- [Partners in Preaching](#) [17] is an organization that has trained more than 500 skilled lay preachers
- FutureChurch is working for [women deacons](#) [18] to end the silencing of Catholic women at Mass.

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years.]

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Links:

[1] <http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2014/07/19/catholic-diocese-upends-custom-homilies/12863357/http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2014/07/19/catholic-diocese-upends-custom-homilies/12863357/>

[2] <http://futurechurch.org/prieststats/>

[3] <http://www.dor.org/index.cfm/pastoral-planning/faq/#What%20is%20Pastoral%20Planning>

[4] <http://www.dor.org/index.cfm/linkservid/B64830E7-F70F-F886-583E9C925C1E80B0/showMeta/0/>

[5] <http://cleansingfiredor.com/tag/bishop-clark/>

[6] <http://roc.democratandchronicle.com/article/20120714/NEWS01/307140009/Bishop-Matthew-H-Clark-retirement>

- [7] <http://paxchristirochester.blogspot.com/2012/09/bishop-clarks-resignation-accepted.html>
- [8] <http://www.catholiccourier.com/news/local-news/pope-accepts-bishop-clarke28099s-resignation-appoints-syracuse-bishop-as-apostolic-administrator/>
- [9] <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/kerrys-communion-controversy/>
- [10] http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/pope-francis-removes-former-st-louis-archbishop-burke-from-congregation/article_d6c5783d-456a-54fb-b230-81cedbd39d2b.html
- [11] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/17/world/europe/pope-replaces-conservative-us-cardinal-on-influential-vatican-committee.html?hpw&ref=world&_r=0
- [12] <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0802616.htm>
- [13] http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/___P2J.HTM
- [14] <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/canon-law/complementary-norms/canon-766-lay-preaching.cfm>
- [15] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html
- [16] <http://www.partnersinpreaching.org/LayPreaching07.pdf>
- [17] <http://www.partnersinpreaching.org>
- [18] <http://futurechurch.org/women-in-church-leadership/women-deacons>
- [19] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>