

## Lay preachers in Rochester diocese want to be at the pulpit again

Peter Feuerherd | Mar. 10, 2016 NCR Today  
The Field Hospital

The sounds of lay preachers -- often women -- echoed from pulpits in the Diocese of Rochester over decades. But those sounds have been silenced for the past two years, and former lay preachers say the church is losing out.

Ever since the 1970s, the upstate New York diocese had permitted lay preachers under Bishops Joseph Lloyd Hogan and his successor, Matthew Clark. That changed two years ago, soon after Clark's retirement and the installation of Bishop Salvatore R. Matano.

Lay preaching is no longer allowed in the diocese, according to diocesan spokesman Doug Mandelaro, because church law prohibits it.

Bishop Matano, in a letter sent in 2014, soon after coming to the diocese from Burlington, Vt., wrote that preaching at Mass "is an extension of Holy Orders," and that canon law affirms that "the diocesan Bishop may never dispense from the norm which reserves the homily to the sacred minister," the ordained priest or deacon.

That argument does not sit well with many of the former lay preachers in the diocese. Around 40 of them have collected their stories on a website called [God's Word, Many Voices](#) [1].

They are among the 150 or so lay preachers who once regularly proclaimed the Word at Sunday Mass around the diocese's 125 parishes.

One of them is Gloria Ulterino, who started preaching in 1986. She told *NCR* that, at the time, the U.S. bishops had established norms for lay preachers and that Vatican II opened up the possibility.

Ulterino preached once a month and was trained, like other lay preachers, at the diocesan-run St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry, a facility that used to be a seminary.

Lay preachers are important, said Ulterino, because it is the only way available for Catholics to hear a women's perspective from the altar.

"It's important to have multiple voices," she said. "People in parishes are looking for a word of hope. There's a better chance of that with a variety of voices."

Mercy Sr. Barbara Moore, another former lay preacher in the diocese, teaches preaching at the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, an interdenominational Protestant seminary.

Moore was a preaching pioneer, getting an invitation to the pulpit back in 1972.

The ban on lay preaching, Moore told *NCR*, "is a loss to our diocese."

"We bring our life experiences, our education, our views to God's holy words. Everybody preaches through a particular lens," she said. A woman's perspective comes alive, she said, in illuminating stories from the Bible about women or exploring the stories of women who are mentioned only in passing.

For example, Moore cited the brief story of Peter the Apostle's sick mother-in-law (Luke 4:38, Matthew 8:14), who was healed by Jesus. After she is healed it is said she began waiting on the apostles. Moore connects that story to other women who, despite illness and struggles, continue to serve others.

The lack of women's voices preaching, said Moore, "is a blind spot for our church."

Fr. William Spilly, a priest of the diocese and pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Hamlin, N.Y., worked with lay preachers in the past and would like to do so in the future.

"The Spirit speaks to us in a variety of ways," he said, echoing the idea that a woman's voice in particular from the pulpit offers a different perspective. And, in a time when parishes are frequently led by a single priest, splitting homily duties "is a break not only for me but for the people" who might appreciate hearing a different take on the Sunday Mass readings.

Spilly has explained his view to the bishop, who he said listened but believes that canon law remains an obstacle. The priest said he would like to see a change back to the days when Rochester was a lay preaching pioneer.

Meanwhile, the lay preachers of Rochester will share the texts of their homilies, quietly, in written form, through their [website](#) [1]. And, according to diocesan spokesman Mandelaro, lay people will be invited to share their spiritual insights at diocesan gatherings, just not at Mass.

[Peter Feuerherd is a professor of communications and journalism at St. John's University in New York and contributor to *NCR's* Field Hospital blog.]

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**Editor's note:** "The Field Hospital" blog series covers life in U.S. and Canadian Catholic parishes. The title comes from Pope Francis' words: "I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. ?"

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[1] <http://williampickett.com/sensus/>