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# The Need for Lay Preaching

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**T**he prophet Amos, writing in the eighth century B.C., issued a poignant warning to the people of Israel.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. (Amos 8:11-12)

Twenty-eight centuries later, Catholic Christians gather for worship in villages and cities, urban parishes and rural missions scattered from north to east and south to west. As communities of the baptized, they need not experience a famine of hearing the word of the Lord. But if such a famine is to be averted, it is essential that all members of the faith community accept responsibility for the quality of our common worship and yield to the promptings of the Holy Spirit whose presence continues to make all things new.

We are in a far different place today than in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council. In the first phase of liturgical renewal, and in compliance with a directive of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the lectionary was revised so that richer fare might be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word.<sup>1</sup> The listening community

could now feast at a Liturgy of the Word in which an expanded number and variety of Scriptural passages were to be proclaimed in the language of every people and nation. Responding to the Spirit, the Church moved away from famine and towards abundance.

In today's Church, the Spirit is inviting once again. As God's people gather hungry at the table, they pray that the Bread of God's Word can be broken and shared. Their need has shifted from an expanded number and variety of Scriptural texts, to an expanded number and variety of voices to preach those texts. With increasing frequency, lay men and women are being invited to break open the Word of God. In their acceptance of the call of God and their communities, these lay preachers are a sign of the Church moving once again away from famine and towards abundance.

The emergence of the lay preaching ministry is influenced by several dynamics of contemporary Church life. Among them are 1)°Changes in ministerial leadership; 2)°Heightened expectations for quality preaching; 3)°Recognition of the need for the liturgy of the word to address diverse, multicultural communities; and 4)°Recognition of the gifts of lay persons for the preaching ministry. We will examine each in turn.

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## Changes in Ministerial Leadership

Lay preaching is needed both in situations where lay persons serve in the absence of a priest, and when lay persons collaborate with the ordained clergy in the pastoral work of the Church.

In growing numbers of faith communities, if it were not for lay preaching, there would be no preaching at all. The decline in the number of ordained clergy ministering to ever increasing numbers of baptized Catholics has been extensively documented, most notably by Richard Schoenherr and Lawrence Young in their sociological analysis of the demographics of the priest shortage in the United States. Their work, *Full Pews and Empty Altars*,<sup>2</sup> confronts pastoral planners with an inescapable fact. Tomorrow's need for ministerial leadership cannot be met by today's patterns of personnel preparation or deployment.

Though there are regional differences in clergy/parishioner ratios, the trend is constant nationwide. With increasing frequency, communities gather for prayer and service with leadership provided by unordained pastoral ministers. One of the greatest challenges of these pastoral life coordinators, or pastoral administrators, is the continuation of a vital sacramental and worship life in the communities they animate.

Exercise of the preaching ministry is a primary way in which these lay pastoral leaders can assure that the message of Scripture will address the real life issues brought by the community to its time of prayer. The liturgy of the parish is more readily seen as having its roots in and impact on the balance of the community's common life.

In *The Dilemma of Priestless Sundays*,<sup>3</sup> a comprehensive treatment of the radically innovative practice of Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest, (SWAP), James Dallen explores the many theological and pastoral contradictions which this form of community prayer makes apparent. For example, one measure of theological distortion is the very name given to the rite: Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest. Far more significant is the reality that communities are deprived of Eucharist!

Reception of Holy Communion from the reserved Sacrament is not the equivalent of full, conscious, and active participation in the actions of taking bread and wine, giving thanks, breaking and pouring out, eating and drinking all summed up in the Do this command of Jesus. (Luke 22:19) For the time being, however, communion rather than Eucharist is becoming the not infrequent experience of priestless communities.

Though the focus of Dallen's work is the diminishment of the centrality of Eucharist to the life of the Church, many of the questions which he raises also point to the need to reevaluate the importance of the preaching ministry.

Ecclesiastical documents establishing guidelines for SWAP give evidence of two attitudes towards the practice of preaching by the lay presider. A restrictive mindset is evident in *The Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*,<sup>4</sup> promulgated by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1988. The Directory reinforces the experience of clergy-dependence on the part of the Assembly.

#43. In order that the participants may retain the word of God, there should be an

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explanation of the readings or a period of silence for reflection on what has been heard. Since only a priest or deacon may give a homily,<sup>36</sup> it is desirable that the pastor prepare a homily and give it to the leader of the assembly to be read. *But in this matter the decision of the conferences of bishops are to be followed.* (emphasis added)

There is a striking parallelism between the lay minister's being limited to the reading of a homily composed at another time and another place, even though the intention of the clerical writer may have been the feeding of this gathered Assembly, and the practice of feeding the passive community with consecrated bread from a previous Eucharist. The risk of stale words rivals the risk of stale bread, with little assurance that either can be prevented.

The reading of a prepared homily, like the distribution of communion from the reserved sacrament, also serves as a reminder of the inequality of worshipping communities. In an earlier note, the Directory mandates that participants in the priestless worship be encouraged to unite themselves with the community receiving the ministry of their absent priest leader at the very time they are deprived of it.<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on the Directory's lack of endorsement of lay preaching, Dallen writes, A scripture service without a homily presents as an ideal a cultic notion of worship that is inadequately related to life and mission. Without a homily, the scripture service is the dead husk of the liturgy of the word. Prohibiting lay preaching not only restricts lay ministry but also denies the laity's full membership in the Body of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

*Gathered in Steadfast Faith: Statement on Sunday Worship in the Absence of a*

*Priest,*<sup>7</sup> by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops manifests more acceptance of the potential for lay preaching. While noting the preference of the Directory for a clerically prepared homily, this document implements the Directory's provision for the authorization of lay preaching by local Bishops' Conferences.

The preaching of a homily is part of most liturgical rites and is, by its very definition, reserved to a priest or deacon. However, the bishop may allow a lay person who is properly trained to explain the Word of God at Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest or a deacon and at other specified occasions.

The pastor may provide a text for the leader to read, or if the bishop has authorized the leader to preach, the minister preaches in his or her own words. It is essential that when the leader is to preach, the text should be prepared well in advance.

Preaching, an irreplaceable ministry for explaining the Scriptures and applying them to the here-and-now of a particular gathering, is a task to be taken seriously by those who have been duly delegated by the bishop. When one preaches in the name of the Church, the great public work of Christ is continued. For deacons, and for those lay ministers who may be delegated to preach within the Lord's Day assembly, a diligence in prayer, commitment to the study of Scripture, growth in faith, and preparation are required.<sup>8</sup>

In areas of the country where official practice limits the preaching ministry to the ordained clergy, faith communities who gather for worship in the absence of a priest are being denied not only the

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experience of being Church nourished by Eucharist, but also Church nourished by the breaking open of God's Word.

I know of a diocese which has inaugurated a training program for lay ministers who are authorized to preside at worship in emergency situations only. For example, should Father be taken ill on a Sunday morning and be unable to secure another ordained priest to preside, then one of these ministers would lead the prayer of the community. Because their leadership is anticipated for unforeseen and therefore unplanned times of worship, these lay ministers are not given any preparation for a ministry of preaching.

How much richer would be the experience of the gathered community if all of these potential presiders had experience of the preaching ministry on a scheduled basis. Familiarity with the basic requirements of any preaching event would enable a lay presider to offer a brief, yet substantive, lectionary-based reflection, even on those occasions when short notice would prevent more extensive preparation.

Years before lay preaching was broadly implemented in the parish setting, it had become a regular component of ministry in other environments. In an attempt to delay the impact of the shortage of ordained clergy on parish communities, a number of dioceses began to withdraw priests from designated specialized ministries, campus, prison, and hospital chaplaincies. The members of these institutional populations were likewise entitled to and expected to receive the spiritual resources of the faith which are provided through the ministry of preaching. Lay campus ministers and chaplains preach regularly, not by way of exception.

In addition to serving in settings where priestly ministers are no longer available, lay persons are sharing pastoral ministry with the clergy to a greater extent than ever before. A 1992 study by the staff of the National Pastoral Life Center, *New Parish Ministers: Laity & Religious on Parish Staffs*,<sup>9</sup> confirms that even parishes still having ordained clergy on staff rely extensively on the collaboration of lay pastoral ministers. This study details the manner in which over twenty thousand paid and volunteer lay staff members have provided continuity of care and even expanded forms of ministry within the communities they serve.

Parishioners of these communities the ones surveyed were the most active within parish life were asked to indicate the ministerial activities in which they felt lay ministers ought to be engaged. Fifty-six per cent specifically cited preaching, while other activities mentioned could be presumed to have a preaching component. Parishioners said they would be accepting of lay ministers leading prayer services (93.7%), conducting wake services (61.4%), presiding at funerals (36.6%), and presiding at weddings (33.7%).<sup>10</sup>

In the light of these pastoral expectations and the likelihood that an increasing number of unordained ministers will be asked to serve as preachers and leaders of prayer, it is sobering that only 59% of those currently serving believe themselves to be adequately prepared to lead prayer, and an even smaller number, 13%, feel adequately prepared to preach.<sup>11</sup>

If comprehensive training/ formation programs are to become more widely available to the lay ministers who are actually leading the prayer of the community, it will be essential that parishes and dioceses regard the lay preaching ministry as authentic in its own right.

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## Heightened Expectations for Quality Preaching

Just at the time when our media-saturated society is coming to set higher standards for those privileged to preach the Word of God, ordained clergy are struggling to allocate adequate time to the preparation of their preaching. If lack of reflection time has always been a complaint, it has become even more so today.

Demand for sacramental ministry cannot be eased by unordained staff members. Increasingly, the priest's time is dedicated to presiding over rituals prepared by others for community members with whom he has had diminished human contact in the non-crisis moments of their daily lives. Priests lament the lack of context for their liturgical prayer. The quality of preaching is suffering.

Implementation of a lay preaching ministry is one response to this problem. In April of 1985, discussions about the feasibility and desirability of lay preaching began in the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Texas. These preliminary discussions with Archbishop Patrick Flores led to the establishment of the Catholic Lay Preaching Guild. One of its founding members, San Antonio surgeon William V. Healey, M.D., wrote of their mission and ministry in a 1990 article in *Priests and People*. The diocesan Guild was founded on the following assumptions:

1)°the Word of God is alive and needs to be spread; 2)°ten per cent of the parishes in this country have no priests and that number is increasing; 3)°it is unreasonable to expect tired, overworked pastors and priests to deliver excellent sermons week after week; 4)°the sermon does not have to be low tide during Mass; 5)°through selectivity

and training, appropriate lay persons can be identified to give sermons; 6)°we would serve as the Archbishop wishes and at the invitation and discretion of the pastors; 7)°because they are exposed daily to expert T.V. and other public communicators, American congregations increasingly presume and expect excellence in public discourse. When they don't receive it, the message suffers; 8)°perhaps our most important assumption is that if this effort is backed by the Holy Spirit, it will succeed. If not, it will fail.<sup>12</sup>

The San Antonio Guild members met weekly for a minimum of two hours, preceded by an hour of Scripture study. Screening requirements were rigorous, although they did not correspond to advanced theological degrees. The major feature of the weekly meetings was the delivery and critique of preaching that would be given in various parishes throughout the diocese in future weeks.

The San Antonio model differs from the lay preaching program of Partners in Preaching primarily in that lay preachers in the Guild were itinerants, preaching in whatever parishes invited them on a given Sunday. But it offers another model of lectionary-based liturgical preaching by lay persons, unencumbered by the concern of what label should apply to it. Homilies are reserved for priests and deacons and we do not give homilies. The precise distinction we will leave for lawyers but the opinion of the Archdiocesan canon law experts and the approval of our work by Archbishop Flores suffices for us.<sup>13</sup>

Responses to lay preaching in San Antonio echo those heard in other places where the Gospel has been given flesh in illustrations drawn from ordinary life. The problems, successes, and failures experienced by this group and their families is broad and

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the vivid presentation of selected events strikes many a familiar chord in the congregations. We have heard you were talking about our family! more than once. We agree with Father Avery Dulles, S.J.: The Church, like secular society, is continually tempted to settle for mediocrity. We are trying not to. <sup>14</sup>

What most impressed me when I spoke with Dr. Healey was his firm commitment to the need for preparation for the lay preaching ministry. He compared the training and formation required to the preparation that would be demanded of someone aspiring to become a surgeon.

Desire alone is not enough, he said. Someone can have a tremendous appreciation of the lifesaving benefits of surgery. They can come to me and say, Dr. Healey, I value what you're doing, I want to be a surgeon. That doesn't mean I offer to let them scrub in with me tomorrow morning. I can affirm their desire, but they first have to demonstrate that they have the knowledge and skills needed to perform competently.

Hearing the passion in his voice, I found myself wondering how greatly the preaching ministry of the Church could be improved if its first law, like that of medicine, would be to do no harm.

Healey's article concludes with a question that compels us to examine again the expectation of quality that has come to include preaching. There is no reason why preaching should not be superb, given the motivation and the time to prepare. Our children deserve it. If excellent motivational talks are given in business and professional situations, why not Church? <sup>15</sup>

Several months after speaking with Dr. Healey, I gave a workshop on lay preaching at a convocation on ministries in the

Church. During the discussion period following my presentation, a priest pastor asked the following question. I was transferred to a different parish a while back. When I met with the parish council, I told them that they didn't need to worry. In the hot summer months, I wouldn't be giving a homily on Sunday. I just don't feel it would be fair to subject the people to my preaching. What do you think of that?

Without any opportunity to listen to his preaching, it was difficult to know which of multiple concerns were being voiced in his plaintive question. It could be that he seldom got any response to his preaching, either positive or negative, and that early on he had internalized a self-image that feared to take credit for a job well done.

If his preaching truly were as poor as the phrase subject the people to my preaching implied, then his burden was enormous. While working to improve his own preaching, so much the heart of priestly ministry, he surely would be relieved to share the privilege of breaking open the Word with parishioners who have been given gifts for interpreting the Scriptures with fidelity and power.

If this community were to initiate a lay preaching ministry, its pastor would be blessed with colleagues who could offer him honest evaluation of the areas of his personal preaching strengths and limitations. Members of the parish would not be deprived of the Scriptural nourishment they have a right to expect.

Clergy such as this priest questioner suffer from drastically limited opportunities to hear other preachers, to learn from them, to experience different styles of presentation and receive fresh insights on the Word. Week after week, they are expected to serve their communities while feeling that the cupboard is bare.

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I remembered another priest's answer when he was asked why he had come to a preaching workshop/retreat that the two of us were attending. This is the first time I've stayed at the same assignment for more than three years. I've gone all through the cycle of Sunday readings and the same ones are coming round again. I need some new material. His smile showed that he was speaking half in jest, but there was a proverbial grain of truth in his motivation. When priests had more frequent opportunities to hear each other's preaching, they had an easily accessible source of reflection on different ways that the same text could speak to a specific congregation.

These two priest-pastors remind us that a heightened expectation of quality preaching is coming not only from an educated laity, but from many clergy themselves.

### **Recognition of the Need for the Liturgy of the Word to Address Diverse, Multicultural Communities**

When the Second Vatican Council called for the reform and renewal of the liturgy, its stated intent was to enable that full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful that is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.<sup>16</sup>

A major force in the renewal of the liturgy was the process of what theologians have come to call enculturation. The universality that marked preconciliar rites gave way to cultural adaptation.

Even in the liturgy the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters that do not affect the faith or the good of the whole community; rather, the Church respects and fosters the genius and talents of the various races and peoples. Provisions shall be made even in the revision of the liturgical books for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples, especially in mission lands.<sup>17</sup>

To the majority of the church's members, the most striking and immediate result of the enculturation process was the use of the vernacular throughout the liturgy. Another directive, that the rites should be marked by a noble simplicity within the people's power of comprehension and as a rule not require much explanation,<sup>18</sup> gave even added rationale for the use of the language of the people.

In the Revised Order of Worship, the liturgy of the Word was established as complementary to the liturgy of Eucharist, the two forming a single act of worship.<sup>19</sup> It is in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal that the homily is referred to as an integral part of the liturgy, increasing the effectiveness of the word.<sup>20</sup> Preaching was to draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources.

As subsequent years made clear, adaptation of the liturgy required far more than a process of translation from one language to another. Particularly if the liturgy of the word were to be most effective, further change might be necessary. Four years after the General Instruction of the Roman Missal was promulgated, another document was published which had additional, far-ranging implications for the preaching ministry, the lay preaching ministry in particular.

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The 1973 Directory for Masses with Children provides for preaching by someone other than the ordained presider, particularly when such preaching would enable a more effective explanation of the word. With the consent of the pastor or rector of the Church, one of the adults may speak to the children after the gospel, especially if the priest finds it difficult to adapt himself to the mentality of the children.<sup>21</sup>

The same pastoral sensitivity which gave rise to this precedent for lay preaching in Masses with children has since been manifested by the development of the lay preaching ministry when and wherever lay ministers are more familiar with the mentality of the people.

Earlier, we discussed settings in which lay pastoral ministers provide primary pastoral care throughout the week, and then are joined by ordained clergy at the time of weekend worship. In addition to testifying to the unity of pastoral care and liturgy, there is an element of speaking the language of the people prominent here. If the preaching is to become a living word in the here and now, it will be shaped by the understandings within a specific community. Preaching is communication, impacted as much by the listeners as by the speaker. Every unique preaching event is a cultural artifact, shaped by the experience and the history of the community in which it occurs.

To speak of multicultural ministry, then, is to speak not only of communities in which a variety of ethnic groups worship side by side. The challenges of the Anglo priest serving in an Hispanic parish, or of the white deacon preaching in the Afro-American community are only more obvious examples of the need to fully enculturate the preaching of the Gospel.

What does it mean to speak the language of the people? Certainly it requires more than Father speaking Spanish, or Deacon Joe adopting the cadence and echoing refrains of a Black congregation. A language consists of more than words, a culture is shaped by deeper realities than can be expressed by language alone.

The recognition of the need for a diversity of preachers and a diversity of spiritualities was one of the two major motivations for the establishment of the lay preaching ministry at our home parish of Pax Christi in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. The question providing the point of departure for lay preaching in the Directory of Masses for children was the same question raised by our parish leadership. What will enable the message of the Scriptures to be heard week after week by the twelve thousand members of our worshipping community? The quality of the preaching by the ordained clergy at Pax was excellent, but insofar as it was exclusively clerical preaching, it was the preaching of males, who, with the exception of the parish deacon, were celibate. A consideration of the need for enculturated preaching would be incomplete without a discussion of the need for preaching by women.

Under the current discipline of the Church, preaching by women is, by definition, lay preaching. By welcoming the ministry of lay preachers, church communities can at last hear preaching in its human fullness. The arguments for lay preaching extend beyond, but include at their heart, the need for women's preaching.

One of the finest treatments of this subject can be found in *Women Preaching the Gospel*,<sup>22</sup> an address initially delivered by Mary Catherine Hilkert at the Women in the Church Conference held in Washington, D.C. in October of 1986.



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The human experience of the preacher is central both in terms of how one understands the Gospel and how one touches the human experience of others, that is, how one communicates the mystery of salvation as a living reality. Attempts to name what distinguishes women's experience from that of men often fall into stereotypical categories: women are more compassionate, intuitive, sensitive, relational; men are more logical, assertive, objective, and the like. Similarly, the claim is made that women's preaching—or at least feminist preaching—is more relational, more rooted in experience, more in a narrative style, more collaborative, and so on than is the preaching of men. I think that is simply not always the case.

However, it is true that women's experience of sexuality and life, the relation of woman to body, nature, the childbearing and nurturing processes and the *historical* experience of marginalization, exclusion, and subordination within society and the church, constitute a different framework for perceiving reality from that of men. Without being able to spell out the dimensions of gender differences, I would still claim that women bring a different experience of life to the hearing and preaching of the Gospel. What is most basic here is that because women both hear and speak the Gospel in a different voice the whole community is impoverished if we hear of God only as interpreted in and through the male, and primarily celibate, experience of life. The story of Jesus, which we believe is the story of God, is inexhaustible. The richness of the mystery which we proclaim is diminished and

distorted when we fail to hear the Good News as reflected through women's stories.

Restriction of the public proclamation of the Gospel in the name of the Church at the key moment of the community's celebration and identity—the Eucharist—suggests implicitly that men have a privileged hearing of the Gospel whether by divine plan or by Church discipline.

On the other hand, the very reality of a woman preaching, particularly in the liturgical context, shatters traditional stereotypes and suggests a new vision of church and ministry, a new vision of humanity—female as well as male—as imaging God, a new vision of the image of Christ as located in baptism, and ultimately a new vision of God. Here it is not simply a question of inclusive language and richer imaging of God, though that too is fundamental, but the depths of women's experience of God which we have in many ways just begun to explore. As preachers women are called to give birth in new ways to God's word and wisdom.<sup>23</sup>

A Church that is growing in the recognition of the need for enculturated preaching of the Gospel is a Church that will sense an urgent need for preaching by women, which will remain lay preaching unless and until women are admitted to the diaconal, priestly, and episcopal ministries.

The fourth and final dynamic of contemporary Church life which leads to the growth of the ministry of lay preaching is the demonstrated competence of the lay ministers who have already begun to break open the Word.

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## Recognition of the Gifts of Lay Persons for the Preaching Ministry

In September of 1994, Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., issued a revised set of Norms for Preaching in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In doing so, he was accepting the recommendations of a Preaching Qualifications Task force which had been convened a year earlier.

The Milwaukee Norms are significant for several reasons. From the outset they make clear that all who share the preaching ministry are to be qualified and competent, priests, deacons, and lay persons alike. The preaching ministry is grounded in the Church's duty and right to preach the gospel to all nations (LG 12; Canon 747). Through Baptism all participate in this mandate which Jesus gave to the Church. Lay persons are to witness the gospel by word and example and are to cooperate with the bishop and priests in the exercise of the ministry of the Word (Canon 759). This does not exclude the ministry of preaching. In the history of the Church, especially in the first centuries of Christianity, there have been many noteworthy and effective lay preachers.<sup>24</sup>

After briefly describing the more familiar preaching ministries of bishops, priests, and deacons, the Norms offer a more extensive presentation of the basis for preaching by lay persons. They cite the precedent set in the Directory for Masses with Children, considered above, and another 1973 authorization of lay preaching by the Congregation of Clergy in response to a letter from the German Conference of bishops.

The Milwaukee document breaks no new ground in acknowledging the need for lay preaching by those in pastoral formation, some of whom preach as lay persons in the course of their preparation for ordained ministry. The Norms also note the need for an expanded preaching ministry because of the appointment of lay parish directors, who under ordinary circumstances share responsibility for preaching at Eucharist with the priests who are assigned to assist them.

What is significant however, is the ecclesial recognition that lay preaching is called for, not only because of the decreased availability of ordained ministers, but because of the growing competence of lay persons in this ministry.<sup>25</sup>

In the Milwaukee Norms, competence is assessed according to twenty-nine criteria, grouped in five categories: 1)°Personal Development, 2)°Critical Thinking, 3)°Communication Skills, 4)°Global Perspective, and 5)°Academic Background. All preachers of the Archdiocese, clergy as well as laity, are assessed according to these criteria. Authorization to preach is granted either by the Chancery or the local pastor/parish director, and correlates with a listing of settings, liturgical and devotional.<sup>26</sup>

## Summary

The lay preaching ministry is emerging at this time in the life of the Church because of four significant dynamics: changes in ministerial leadership, a concern for consistent quality preaching, the recognition of multicultural diversity in the worshipping community and the recognition of the gifts of lay persons for the preaching ministry.

Earlier references have been made to Canon 766 of the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law, authorizing preaching by lay persons if it is necessary in certain circumstances or if it is useful in particular cases.<sup>27</sup> Many in the Church have reached a consensus that this stipulation is best interpreted in the broadest light. This is especially true when communities of whatever size in the Church determine that the preaching charism has been bestowed on some of their lay members.

In the Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae disciplinae leges* promulgating the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law, Pope John Paul II wrote The purpose of the Code is not to substitute for faith, grace, charisms, and especially charity in the life of the Church or of the Christian faithful. On the contrary, its very purpose is to create an order in the ecclesial society so that, while giving priority to love, grace and charism, their ordered development is facilitated in the life of the ecclesial society as well as in the lives of the individuals who belong to it.<sup>28</sup>

The movement towards competence in the preaching ministry enables all members of community, ordained and lay, to give priority to charism. It is precisely this movement that empowers a new voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #51. A most helpful source for documentation related to lay preaching and other pastoral liturgical developments is *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource*, Ed. by Mary Ann Simcoe. Chicago. Liturgy Training Publications. 1985. Citations in this manual from international or national church documents are taken from this source unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Schoenherr and Lawrence A Young, *Full Pews and Empty Altars: Demographics of the Priest Shortage in United States Catholic Dioceses*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. 1993.

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<sup>3</sup> James Dallen, *The Dilemma of Priestless Sundays*, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications. 1993.

<sup>4</sup> *The Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, Congregation for Divine Worship, English Translation '1988, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference. Footnote<sup>36</sup> refers to Canon 766-767 of the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, #42.

<sup>6</sup> Dallen, p.130.

<sup>7</sup> *Gathered in Steadfast Faith: the Statement on Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest*, Bishops Committee on the Liturgy, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference. 1991.

<sup>8</sup> *GSF*, Norm 55 F, p.9

<sup>9</sup> Philip J. Murnion, *New Parish Ministers: Laity & Religious on Parish Staffs*. New York: National Pastoral Life Center. 1992.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> William V. Healey, M.D., A Catholic Lay Preaching Guild: Assessing the Experience of the Guild in San Diego, *Priests & People* Vol. 4 No.10, November, 1990. 414-416, 422

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>14</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>16</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #14

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, #37,38

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, #34

<sup>19</sup> General Instruction on the Roman Missal, #8

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, #9

<sup>21</sup> Directory for Masses with Children, #24

<sup>22</sup> Mary Catherine Hilkert, Women Preaching the Gospel, in *Women in the Church I*, Ed. by Madonna Kolbenschlag. Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press. 1987. 65-91

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87

<sup>24</sup> Revised Norms for Preaching in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Introduction, July 28, 1994.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>27</sup> John M. Huels, Lay Preaching in Canon Law, Emmanuel June, 1988. p.246.

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<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Sacrae disciplinae leges*, quoted in *An Introduction to the Code of Canon Law*, James A. Coriden. Mahweh, New Jersey: Paulist Press. 1991. p.5

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# The Selection of Lay Preaching Candidates

*By Patricia Hughes Baumer, M.Div.*

## Competency and Candidate Selection

The training/formation program for the ministry of lay preaching is competency based. The specific criteria for selecting candidates are established by focusing on what constitutes quality preaching. For example, to say that the prospective candidate is to be a person of prayer is very true, but not very helpful. Each Christian is called to be a person of prayer, and prayerfulness does not differentiate one ministry from another.

The preacher has the privilege and responsibility of enabling the Scriptural texts to speak to a specific gathering of believers in a specific time and place. Preachers are members of the faith community in which they speak, and use the life and language of that community to enable an awareness of God's action and presence. The knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics necessary for preachers can be determined from this description of preaching.

A clarification is helpful at this point. Despite the fact that the larger Church community has until recently limited the ministry of liturgical preaching to ordained ministers, some local communities are already blessed with lay members who are prepared and trained to preach.

Over the last several decades, lay women and men have been able to complete programs of theology or pastoral ministry training, and some have had preparation comparable to that of candidates for ordination. The establishment of a lay preaching ministry will provide the opportunity to recognize and call forth the ministry of these individuals who up until this time may have lacked the opportunity to preach on a regular basis.

It would be unfortunate, however, if lay preaching came to be understood only as preaching by unordained yet professional ministers, women or men. If that were the case, this ministry could lead to one more source of alienation separating full time pastoral professionals from other baptized members of the community who have not had access to advanced ministerial education. Father Philip Murnion refers to this tendency as staffism,<sup>1</sup> a distortion that is just as damaging as the clericalism which it mimics.

In addition to ministerial staff members, there will be lay members of the community who will have the personal characteristics which make them suitable candidates for a training/formation program in which they can acquire knowledge and skills. The selection of content modules and workshop experiences to be completed during any training program will depend on the background of the candidates.

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Each lay preaching training/formation program will need to determine what level of knowledge and skills is to be present in candidates *before* they begin the process. Participants who have already had access to academic preparation and formation still benefit from workshop preaching and peer critique, while possibly helping to mentor additional candidates. It is possible to form a candidate group with both experienced and inexperienced lay preachers as members.

A word of caution is in order here. Many churches are still operating out of a model of ministry that pre-supposes omnicompetence from their ordained or full-time staff members. The pastoral minister can be expected to be skilled in pastoral counseling, teaching, leadership of prayer, and administration. As increasing numbers of staff people are hired for specific functions, the expectation of competence is narrowing somewhat. However, with the establishment of the ministry of lay preaching, there is a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge again that selection for a ministry is neither a reward for previous volunteer work within the community, nor a means for staff to become more visible to parishioners.

Selection for the lay preaching ministry ought to follow from a recognition of the willingness and ability to preach well, or the recognition of the aptitude to grow in the knowledge and skills that would make such a ministry a fitting use of a person's talents. Staff persons may or may not be suitable candidates for this ministry. Just as they ought not be selected only because they are already serving in another capacity, so they ought not be passed over only out of fear of duplicating a previous structure in which the leader was assumed to be competent in every area.

## Criteria for Group Membership

Before selecting individual preaching candidates, a community needs to determine the pastoral needs that lay preachers will meet. In what settings will their ministry be exercised? How frequently will candidates be expected to preach? On average, lay preachers who serve in this ministry in addition to keeping other full time work commitments can preach comfortably three or four times a year. For those whose major time commitment is made within Church ministry, more frequent preaching may be possible and even desirable. It is the responsibility of each calling community to prepare enough preachers so that persons in this ministry have adequate time to prepare for each preaching assignment.

The most basic principle of selection is inclusivity. The lay preaching ministry is most powerful when each member of the worshipping community has the opportunity to say on occasion, There is a person like me. Lay preaching enables a community to experience the wealth of diversity present within it.

Does the community have women and men? If so, then are there male and female preachers? Does the community have members with diverse lifestyles? If so, then single, married, and religious preachers will en flesh the gospel with different illustrations drawn from different life experiences. In forming the candidate group, no one should be excluded *a priori*. The question always returns, Who can competently and gracefully break open the Scriptures for this gathered people in this time and place? There are numerous examples within Scripture itself in which God has chosen unlikely recipients of a variety of gifts. The call of the community needs to be as creatively expansive.

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## Criteria for Selection of Individual Candidates

### Familiarity with Scripture and Liturgy

The preacher needs to become familiar with Sacred Scripture. Through the process of exegesis and an understanding of hermeneutics, the preacher approaches the text with an appreciation and knowledge of its original meaning within the biblical context and the variety of ways that it can be translated for believers in our day. The preaching ministry, however, is distinct from the ministry of biblical scholarship or teaching. Modules of the training/formation program can familiarize candidates with the process of exegesis and interpretation, and with the printed resources which assist preachers in this step of preaching preparation. Candidates need not come to the program with comprehensive scriptural knowledge, but the ability to read and understand scriptural commentaries is essential.

The training/formation program will enable the participants to understand the function of preaching within the larger activity of worship. Participants will need to be familiar with the purpose of the lectionary, the rhythm of the Church's liturgical year of feasts and seasons, the relationship of the Word to the celebration of the Church's other sacraments in addition to the Eucharist. Once again, candidates will have a greater or lesser knowledge of these areas of liturgy before beginning the program, and can learn more while in training.

### Communication Skills

Many individuals have never had the opportunity to determine their level of skill presenting material to a large group. While

all candidates can grow in communication skills, a basic willingness to learn and a comfort level with public speaking is an essential indication of suitability for the preaching ministry. This is not to say that prospective preachers may not experience even significant apprehension when confronted with the privilege and responsibility that this ministry represents. But the individual who experiences public speaking more as burden than blessing is clearly not called to exercise this ministry.

If the candidate cannot proclaim the word so that it can be heard within the community, then the preaching ministry is an inappropriate setting for use of that person's talents. Some individuals with a deep love and understanding of Scripture may function more effectively in another form of ministry such as spiritual direction or pastoral counseling. This becomes evident when these individuals lack the communication skills to proclaim or interpret the word in the more public context of worship.

Another component of communication is the ability to know one's audience. The preacher speaks for the sake of, and is more or less effective depending on the ability to assess whether what is said is what is being heard. The act of preaching is not private or solitary. Knowledge of the community is deepened by listening before and while one speaks.

In the preacher, love for the Word will be accompanied by a love for words. The preacher is an artist who uses words in much the same way that a painter uses color or a potter, the clay. The preacher does more than communicate information. The preacher touches hearts. Some gifted teachers may lack the ability to integrate fact with feelings. While we learn from them, we are seldom moved to change. Preachers need to know what they want to

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say, and choose which of several ways they might be able to say it most effectively. They also need to sense what difference they want their words to make. Why tell one story rather than another? Why repeat this phrase or substitute another? Why continue to speak when the time for silence has arrived.

### **Personal Characteristics**

**Mature Faith.** In the Acts of the Apostles, we read of the choice of Matthias to take the place of Judas among the Apostles. Peter says, One of the men who accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)

The preacher within the Christian community has the privilege of announcing the Good News of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At any given time in our lives, one or another dimension of the Gospel may be prominent. However it is essential that the person called to preach the Gospel within the community has personally experienced the full range of this reality: repentance, service, death and resurrection. Faith can be authentic and yet immature.

An individual whose self-knowledge is limited to the identity of repentant sinner can not effectively proclaim the call to confident and intimate discipleship. The individual whose personality has been so wounded by the perception of failure or the experience of extensive suffering may not yet be capable of proclaiming the message of Easter. Christ *has* died, but Christ *is* risen. And Christ will come again.

During the process of screening potential preaching candidates, the selection team will have an opportunity to learn the

reasons applicants feel called to the preaching ministry. The completion of the application form and discussion of the responses found in it provide an opportunity for faith-sharing and exploration of spirituality.

Within the community individuals will be at different places in their spiritual journeys. Each potential preacher has a unique life experience and will have the opportunity to use that experience as a lens through which to read the gospel. Those called to preach must demonstrate the ability to distinguish the particular and the universal, and to understand how any experiences, especially their own, are partial and incomplete.

**Self-Knowledge and Self-Disclosure.** The effective preacher invites listeners to eavesdrop on an encounter with God and to overhear God speaking in the language of human life. The preacher is a translator. The preacher is one who makes connections, who can bring the listener to an experience of faith without relying on exclusively religious language. God, church, faith, and religion are closely related and yet distinct realities. They are woven together in each of our lives in unique patterns. Authentic preachers reveal the artistry of the design of their own lives without presenting it as a pattern to duplicated.

For example, a person may have been profoundly moved by a cursillo or by a marriage encounter weekend. Ordinarily, preaching within the Sunday assembly is neither the time nor the place for recruiting future participants for these or similar experiences. The gospel may focus on the call to go apart for awhile. The preacher may be led to illustrate the text with a personal account



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of the value of a break from routine and the benefits that such an experience provides. But the anecdote will flow from the text and lead back to it. Listeners will be left free to make the application to their own lives as is possible, without feeling either guilty or deprived when they are unable to replicate the preacher's experience.

The sharing of life stories or personal experience makes for compelling preaching only when stories are chosen to illuminate the Word. The potential preacher needs an acute sensitivity to the impact of stories in order to appreciate how an anecdote will either focus or divert the attention of the listener.

A preacher's spirituality moves far beyond a tolerant acceptance to a deep reverence for the faith experience of others. The richness of diverse cultures and races becomes apparent in the wide variety of devotional practices found within communities. The sensitive preacher will be eager to become familiar with as many customs and practices as possible.

**Openness to Feedback.** The greatest growth in preaching comes as the preacher is able to hear and accept the response of colleagues and listeners. Faith and good-will are not at issue when someone preaches; the first is unknown, the second, presumed. When listeners offer suggestions for improvement, the competent preacher is open to listen and free to try other approaches.

It is also essential that the preaching candidate have enough confidence in the feedback process to offer feedback to colleagues and coordinators in the training/formation program. It may be necessary to overcome an initial reluctance to participate in peer review. Many church people have internalized all too well the social maxim "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

## Confidence in the Process

A community that initiates a lay preaching ministry is open to hearing God speak with a new voice. The process of selecting candidates for this ministry is an act of faith in the God who delights in creation and says that it is good, all of it is good. Not all members of the community will be given the gift of publicly breaking open the Word of God, but all will be blessed in the listening. Candidates who respond to the invitation to participate in a training/formation program can be reassured that it will provide an opportunity for further discernment both on their part and on the part of the coordinating team. Together, they will learn if preaching is an appropriate ministry to be exercised by this person in this time and place. Whatever the decision, candidates and those who call them can give thanks and praise that our God is faithful. God will speak.

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<sup>1</sup> Murnion, Philip J., "The Potential of the Priestless Parish," *Priests & People*, February, 1994. p. 53.