

Lay Preaching at St. Patrick's Church, Victor NY

Robert Pizzutiello

Lay Preaching had a long and vibrant history at St. Patrick's Church in Victor. This article chronicles the development of this ministry under Pastors George Wiant and Timothy Niven, while Matthew Clark served as the Eighth Bishop of Rochester. The Lay Preaching Committee met regularly for 20 years supporting Sr. Barbara Moore and this powerful ministry. Lay preaching was terminated at St. Patrick's in 2014 by order of the Ninth Bishop of Rochester, Salvatore Matano, citing Canon Law.

How did Lay Preaching emerge at St. Patrick's Parish?

St. Patrick's Church is located in Victor, NY, a growing community of about 14,000 residents, approximately 20 miles from the Cathedral of the Diocese of Rochester. In 1990, Father George Wiant (1935-2015) became pastor, bringing his rich experience as a parish priest, Catholic High School Chaplain and ministry with the migrant workers and the rural poor of the Diocese of Rochester.

Under Father Wiant's leadership, St. Patrick's grew into a thriving community, driven in no small measure by the gifted scriptural and pastoral preaching of Fr. Wiant and Bishop Emeritus Joseph Hogan, then in residence at the parish. Fr. Wiant and Bishop Hogan regularly shared preaching duties with a deacon and lay leaders in the parish (committed religious, religious educators, music ministers, parents, and other guest homilists). The rich diversity of experience and spiritual paths of the preachers touched the swelling members of St. Patrick's parish, opening each person to many and varied connections between scripture, church tradition and the daily lives of the faithful.

In 1994, Bishop Hogan became unable to continue to live independently at the Hogan House, and he moved to the care of the Sisters of St. Joseph Infirmary in Pittsford, NY. Sr. Mary Kay Ryan, another member of the regular preaching rotation, had recently retired. Faced with an urgent need for expert preaching, Fr. Wiant asked Barbara Moore, RSM, an experienced and respected preacher, if she would "help out in the preaching rotation for a while." Responding once again to her call to the ministry of preaching, which had begun years earlier at St. Monica's parish in Rochester, Sr. Barbara agreed and promptly began preaching at St. Patrick's. This ministry became a monthly staple of accessible and at times challenging preaching, often focused on the Gospel message of inclusion, and with particular emphasis on recognizing and ministering to people on the margins.

1. [Bishop Hogan] authorized Saturday-evening Masses, lay lectors and extraordinary ministers of holy Communion and Communion in the hand, and he also took an active role in ecumenical and interfaith relations. He helped found Genesee Ecumenical Ministries, and worked with Rabbi Judea Miller on social issues. He also played a key role in a successful boycott of a clothing manufacturer that was accused of treating its workers unfairly, according to Father McNamara's diocesan history. He helped to expand the role of the laity called for during Vatican II, created the Office of Black Ministry, established a diocesan Pastoral Council, and gave the laity more say in diocesan and parish decisions. He appointed women religious and laypeople to serve as pastoral assistants. A month after New York decriminalized abortion in June 1970, he wrote a pastoral letter that condemned it as immoral. He also visited diocesan missions and started a sister-diocese relationship with the Mexican Diocese of Tabasco. Bishop Hogan is most known for his 1975 pastoral letter, "You are Living Stones," which received national acclaim and was noted for its post-Vatican II vision of laity and clergy working hand in hand. The document also prompted the establishment of the permanent diaconate program in the diocese. Bishop Hogan resigned in 1978 due to ill health but remained in the Rochester area teaching at St. John Fisher College, among other roles. He died Aug. 27, 2000. - See more at: <http://www.catholiccourier.com/in-depth/previous-topics/new-era-in-diocese-begins/bishops-at-rochestere28099s-helm-kept-calm-amidst-storms/#sthash.pT06fKBl.dpuf>

Preaching regularly at St. Patrick's was part of a journey into preaching that began for Sr. Barbara in the 1970s, when she served as Pastoral Associate at St. Monica's Church in the city of Rochester. In 1980, Sr. Barbara resigned from St. Monica's and ceased preaching in Roman Catholic churches when Bishop Clark began enforcing the liturgical norms cited in the 1980 Vatican's Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship. Sr. Barbara embraced a local jail ministry, and her lay preaching ministry continued and expanded primarily in ecumenical settings. She responded to a growing number of invitations from Christian Churches to preach resulting from her interfaith jail ministry. In later years, because of revised Canon Laws, Bishop Clark reversed his interpretation of Canon Law to allow lay men and women to preach within certain limits, and personally reconciled with Sr. Barbara.

While the great majority of St. Patrick's parishioners warmly embraced Sr. Barbara's preaching, her presence as a regular preacher and some of her words challenged parishioners to evaluate long held positions about people who have been marginalized, including women, the poor, the outcasts and the many to whom scripture records that Jesus devoted particular emphasis. Always respectful of people's personal history and individual faith journey, Sr. Barbara often asked questions that caused people to think about the Gospel's application, rather than making decrees about what might be right or wrong. While many parishioners praised Sr. Barbara for her challenging insights, others would often question her after Mass about particularly troubling implications of her message – and even her presence at the ambo. By listening carefully and engaging each person with love, Sr. Barbara earned the respect and affection of the great majority of St. Patrick's parishioners, who looked forward to her monthly preaching visits.

What is a Lay Preaching Committee?

Always seeking to deepen her understanding and expertise of her call to preaching, in 2001 Sr. Barbara decided to enroll in the Doctor of Ministry Studies program at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL. With the support of her local community, The Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, Barbara embarked on a structured academic study of preaching, a challenging academic endeavor to which she brought 30 years of lived preaching experience. The four-year D Min. program required annual extended periods of on-campus residence, a steady flow of study and writing which could be performed remotely, and a monthly preaching experience under the guidance of a Lay Preaching Committee. When Sr. Barbara asked me if I would serve as Chair of her Lay Preaching Committee, I was humbled and intrigued. I gladly accepted her invitation, somehow sensing that this would become a pivotal step in my own spiritual journey.

Together we created a list of potential Lay Committee members of the St. Patricks' community. She initially invited 6 members and in short order we convened the first meeting. Father Wiant enthusiastically supported Sr. Barbara's efforts, yet initially declined to join the committee, lest his presence introduce any potential impact on the free flow of ideas among the lay members of the committee. The charge of the Lay Committee was to provide guidance and feedback to Sr. Barbara and report to her Faculty Advisor at McCormick Theological Seminary:

1. Meet monthly in advance of each scheduled preaching assignment to share the scripture readings and one another's relevant experience and react to Sr. Barbara's ideas for the homily. Since Sr. Barbara visited St. Patrick's parish monthly, she always asked the Committee about any specific situations in the parish to which she should be particularly sensitive. The Lay Committee became her link to the ongoing life of the parish.
2. Critically review and assess each homily based on criteria which we developed into a form of score sheet.
3. Video tape a few of Sr. Barbara's homilies each year, to provide her with an opportunity to objectively and critically analyze her strengths and opportunities for improvement.
4. At the Lay Committee meeting following each homily, the committee members shared their candid assessments of Sr. Barbara's preaching, offering kudos for successes and suggestions for improvement where appropriate.
5. Periodically, the Chair of the Lay Committee summarized the committee's findings in a report to Sr. Barbara's Faculty advisor at McCormick Theological Seminary.

After our initial Lay Preaching Committee meetings to set up the process and explore our individual and collective sense of this ministry, Sr. Barbara's first scheduled preaching under her new D Min program was scheduled for the weekend of September 16-17, 2001. In the aftermath of the Tuesday September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, emotions were high and St. Patrick's Church, like so many others, would be filled to overflowing. Father Wiant insisted on sticking with the preaching schedule, allowing Sr. Barbara the singular opportunity and challenge to use her preaching gifts to address the community's searing spiritual hunger. Sr. Barbara began her homily with a sincere deep expression of empathy and shared pain. Based in the scriptural texts and grounded in our common humanity, she conveyed a message of God's unwavering love in the face of unfathomable tragedy and loss. While her words no longer come to mind, her message and the emotion in the church were powerful and indelible, marking the beginning of a new phase of lay preaching at St. Patrick's.

After a year or more, Father Wiant was so impressed by the process of Sr. Barbara's interactions with the Lay Committee that he asked to join the meetings as an observer to learn, on the condition that committee members would continue to speak freely and consider him as "just another member of the committee." The Committee gladly agreed to his request, and welcomed his presence. Each year, Sr. Barbara would ask if the Committee members could think of any else who should be invited to join. "Who are we missing?" Barbara would ask, seeking to ever broaden the Committee membership to represent the diversity among the parish. With this occasional infusion of new members and the unavoidable attrition of a few members who moved away or could no longer attend the meetings, the Lay Committee continued to evolve and thrive, with each member looking forward not only to Sr. Barbara's monthly preaching, but also to our committee meetings to review her most recent homily and explore the next one.

In 2002, Bishop Matthew Clark clarified the process for authorized lay preachers to participate in the ministry of preaching, with the provision that the homily would be delivered by the ordained priest or deacon. Sr. Barbara was appointed an authorized lay preacher by Fr. Wiant and the practice of preaching at St. Patrick's was modified to conform to Bishop Clark's instructions.

Father Wiant retired in 2003, and Father Timothy Niven was appointed as pastor. Keenly aware of the positive impact of Sr. Barbara's preaching on the parish, Fr. Niven continued Sr. Barbara's role as an authorized Lay Preacher. Under Father Niven's pastorate, Sr. Barbara continued to participate in the ministry of preaching at St Patrick's until 2014.

The Lay Preaching Committee met regularly for four years, until the Spring of 2004 when Sr. Barbara completed her doctoral dissertation, "Lay Preaching: An Outsider in an Inside Place. What is the 'Authority' of the Lay Preacher?" At a party celebrating Sr. Barbara's accomplishment, she thanked each member of the committee for their generosity of time and Spirit, thinking that this would be our final meeting. However, the committee members strongly expressed their personal love and devotion to Barbara, the value of the process of shared homily preparation. Each member expressed the positive impact of the small Christian community into which the Lay Preaching Committee had evolved. After some engaging discussion, the Lay Committee agreed to continue to meet regularly, though we would no longer rigorously evaluate each homily or videotape. This change would allow more time for exploration of the scripture readings for the homily to come.

What happened to Lay Preaching at St. Patrick's Parish?

On January 3, 2014, Salvatore Matano was installed as the ninth Bishop of Rochester. Citing a different interpretation of Canon Law, Bishop Matano wrote to several individual pastors

requiring that they cease any form of lay preaching at mass during the homily time. Father Niven wrote to Bishop Matano explaining the history and significant pastoral benefits of Sr. Barbara's preaching. Many parishioners, including a brave teenage girl, wrote of their personal experience and benefit from Sr. Barbara's preaching. Bishop Matano responded to Fr. Niven (and in similar manner to each adult parishioner) that the practice of lay preaching must cease in the Diocese of Rochester. In obedience to Bishop Matano, Father Niven informed Sr. Barbara. In March 2014, Sr. Barbara wrote to the members of St. Patrick's, thanking Father Wiant for his initial invitation, Fr. Niven for his support and the parish members for their "personal and communal support, affection, and interest." She would not preach again at St. Patrick's

To this day, Sr. Barbara's preaching is fondly remembered. Her presence is missed by many whose lives she touched, and hopefully her impact will remain.

About the author:

Robert Pizzutiello has served continuously as a music minister in the Diocese of Rochester, beginning with the Newman Community at the University of Rochester in 1973. He and his wife Mabelle joined the St. Patrick's community when they moved to Victor in 1991. He served as chair of the Lay Preaching Committee.