



History of Lay Preaching Part Three: Lay Preaching During Mass? *

Lay Preaching: can it happen during Mass, or not? Today many voices would loudly proclaim, “Absolutely not!” Yet others, well versed on this issue and Church law, would offer a more nuanced response: “Yes, under certain very specific circumstances.” Their “yes,” furthermore, presumes that such preaching follows upon the proclamation of God’s Word.

Why does this matter? For those of us who have experienced its power and value, lay preaching is a source of nourishment and deepening faith, offering both comfort and challenge for the week ahead. In my diocese of Rochester, New York, lay preaching began in the 1970s, emerging out of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, lay preaching mushroomed, until by 2014 roughly 150 committed lay people had been authorized to preach in nearly 90 faith communities of the diocese (mainly in parishes and on college campuses). Moreover, they were well prepared because St. Bernard’s Seminary (founded in 1893) was transformed over the summer of 1981 into St. Bernard’s Institute. The latter was designed for the formation of lay ministers and “permanent deacons,” along with continuing education for priests.

Before 2001, when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued national norms, lay preachers in the Rochester diocese were called forth by their pastors. Afterwards, they were authorized by the norms of the local bishop. Always, they were required to possess maturity in faith and character and the ability to communicate, along with proper preparation through study, formation, and prayer. By that time, of course, lay ministry had blossomed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with more and more laity earning their Master of Theology degree (the permanent diaconate degree) and /or the Master of Divinity degree, the same one held by priests. In fact, from 1982 until the present, a total of

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544 lay men and women received these degrees. Specifically, 306 women and 148 men (outside the diaconate) earned the M.A., while 50 women and 40 men received the M.Div. (Beginning in 1993, that number included people from the newly formed Albany branch of St. Bernard's.)

Lay Preaching: Rooted in Scripture and Tradition

Where, then, shall we begin our search for the origins of lay preaching? With Jesus, of course. Time and time again, Jesus encountered ordinary people, so transformed that they named his truth. Consider the man born blind, for example, fearlessly proclaiming to religious leaders that Jesus was healer, prophet, and man sent from God. Or the Samaritan Woman, whose life was so changed that she became the first evangelist to her people, bringing many to faith because of her “testimony.”

There were also many women who followed Jesus, along with men. Pre-eminent among them was Mary of Magdala: leader among the women disciples, the first witness to the risen Jesus, the first one sent by him with the Good News of Easter! In the East, in fact, she became known as “apostle to the apostles.” Her bold proclamation, “I have seen the Lord!” reverberates to this very day in all authentic preaching, whether lay or ordained. There's strong evidence, as well, that women leaders of house churches (gatherings of disciples in homes, some 300 years before churches were built) preached during the Eucharist, especially in communities associated with Paul: like Prisca and her husband Aquila, the deacon Phoebe from Cenchreae (near Corinth), and Lydia in Philippi. Paul even named one of their contemporaries, Junia, along with her husband Andronicus, as “outstanding among the apostles,” willing to suffer imprisonment for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel. (See Romans 16:7.)

Nonetheless, women's voices in Church have often been mute—even silenced. Still, mystics over the centuries have made their voices heard in Church. Like 12th century multiply-gifted Rhineland mystic and Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who was actually invited by her bishops on preaching tours, when she was in her 60s! Yet, here it is, 50 years after the Second Vatican Council intended to open up Church doors and windows; and lay people are still often barred from pulpits in the Roman Catholic

Church.

How can this be, when the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)—which scanned our entire Tradition—kept lifting up the dignity of lay people? In particular, the Council erected four pillars (or Constitutions) upon which our life together depends. Each one recognized and proclaimed the sacredness and dignity of the laity as well as the ordained. While distinctions were still maintained between the two, lay persons were now recognized as full-fledged members of God’s People by virtue of their baptism, no longer simply “Father’s helpers.” Surely, the expansive vision of Jesus was at work here.

- “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (of 4 December, 1963), for example, proposed to “impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change,” to promote unity among Christians, and invite others into this life (paragraph 1). Baptism is the key, unlocking the door to full participation; indeed, the presence of Christ is found in the entire worshipping Church, as well as in the priest, the Eucharist, and the Word of God (paragraph 7). Therefore, “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations,” to which the baptized “have a right and obligation” (paragraph 14). Might that not include lay preaching for those so gifted and formed?
- The following November the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” upended our primary vision of Church. Though still hierarchical, Church is first and foremost “the People of God,” intended to reflect the “Light of Christ.” As such, the “holy People of God shares also in Christ’s prophetic office: it spreads abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love.... The whole body of the faithful” shares in the anointing of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who distributes gifts among these faithful, making “them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church” (paragraph 12). Furthermore, church leaders are *obliged* to test out all these gifts rather than extinguish them (paragraph 12). Many of us have experienced lay preaching as one of

these many gifts.

- Concluding the work of this great Council, like bookends to the above named Constitutions, were “The Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation” (November, 1965) and “The Pastoral Constitution on Church in the Modern World” (7 December, 1965). The first of these insists that the entire Church—the faithful, along with their leaders—must respond to the outpoured love of God by becoming a *listening* Church. While the bishops have a special role in passing on the Tradition—which can grow with the guidance of the Holy Spirit—*any* of us who activate our listening skills, especially through contemplation, have much to offer the Church (paragraph 8). Why is *listening* so essential? Because it makes possible the Church’s mission: that the entire world may “hear the summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, through hope it may come to love” (paragraph 1). Finally, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” extended this principle of deep listening to the world in which we live. The Church—all of us—“carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task” of saving humankind (paragraph 4). For we are *all* made in God’s image. While retaining the primacy of Jesus Christ, we must dialogue with the world, aware that the Holy Spirit offers us a fuller understanding of the truths of our faith in all places, at all times. It’s been said that the best preachers hold the Scripture in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

What does the law say?

From the beginning, as in the work of the Council of Jerusalem (early 50s), the Church has wrestled with ways of ordering the Holy Spirit’s gifts and new insights. Both gift and order are essential. The question is: where is the balance, for the good of the Church? The passionate debates by the authors of Vatican II documents clearly revealed such tensions, oftentimes resulting in compromise. So it is that both the insights and tensions of Vatican II made their way into the 1983 Code of Canon Law. This Code confirms that “lay people, like all Christ’s faithful, are deputed to the apostolate by baptism and confirmation” ... to make known “the divine

message of salvation” (#225.1). “They can also be called upon to cooperate with Bishops and priests in the exercise of the ministry of the word” (#759). Importantly, lay preaching is possible in circumstances of “necessity” or where “advantageous” (#766), as long as the homily—a unique form of preaching—remains with the ordained (#767.1). Here’s why. Only the priest (who presides at the Table) and the deacon (who serves at the Table) share the food of the Word *and* the Eucharist; they alone, then, signify the intimate connection between the two. And yet, there’s “wiggle room.”

After all, the Eucharistic Prayer belongs to the entire assembly, even though it is led by the priest. Furthermore, a lay reflection might become a “necessity” when it is difficult to understand a foreign priest. Or when the pastor recognizes the need to build up the faith community by inviting gifted voices to preach. Or when the pastor is stretched so thin that another well-prepared perspective will be invaluable to the assembly. It might even be “advantageous” when the gifts and expertise of a well-qualified lay person can—in dialogue with the priest—more fully open up the theme that is preached.

Such is the law. What about the values underlying the law? Canon lawyer John Huels names four. (1) Preaching is generally the role of the presider, with the homily given pride of place. (2) Preaching must always be offered by qualified, competent people, to nurture the faith of God’s People. (See canons 231.1 on lay formation, 232-264 on clerical formation.) (3) The Christian faithful have the right to be formed by God’s Word and the sacraments. In the words of canon 213, “Christ’s faithful have the right to be assisted by their Pastors from the spiritual riches of the Church, especially by the word of God and the sacraments.” (4) To this end, as noted above, the laity themselves may on occasion reflect on God’s Word, as long as the homily is reserved to the priest or deacon. John Huels concludes: “The point of all this is to emphasize that preaching is not a power of orders, not a function that must be reserved to the ordained alone. Rather, it is a duty that pertains especially to the ordained.” (See *Lay Preaching at Liturgy*, published 1996 by *Liturgy Training Publications*, p. 188).

One more legal question must be raised concerning the March 19, 2004

Papal statement “Redemptionis Sacramentum.” Can it narrow the 1983 Code? Written at the request of Pope John Paul II and prepared by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, with the collaboration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it asserted (#64) that a priest may “never” entrust preaching to a lay person during Mass. Yet it must be recalled that the Vatican was pressuring bishops at this time into liturgical uniformity under Roman control.

Furthermore, this executive statement was not retroactive. By then, numerous bishops’ conferences had taken on their rightful responsibility of issuing norms for lay preaching. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops did so in November, 2001, along these lines: (1) under specific circumstances, lay preaching was possible when “necessary” or useful, (2) lay preachers “must be orthodox in faith and well qualified” by their preparation and the witness of their lives, and (3) lay preaching must not take place during Mass “at the moment reserved for the homily.” The following spring our bishop issued preaching norms consistent with these; it was understood that a dialogue following the homily complied with the law. And that understanding remained until a new bishop was installed in the winter of 2014.

In summary, then, we know that law can be interpreted in a variety of ways. We also can point to the ministry of Jesus, occasional lay preaching over the centuries, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in gifting and calling laity to the pulpit. My mother was one of many who valued Spirit-filled preaching, whether lay or ordained. In her words, “All I need is a Word to get me through the week and music to lift my soul.”

Some of us, in reflectively listening to world and church events, are reading the “signs of the times” in this way. We know and believe that the riches of the Roman Catholic Tradition are able to feed hungry souls. We also know and believe that an expansive view of the Vatican II Constitutions and Code of Canon Law can breathe new life into Christ’s faithful. With the mushrooming of lay ministry, we know and believe that the Spirit of God has been very busy calling people into the ministry of preaching, doling out the gifts required along with the courageous persistence to respond, so that this ministry might be fruitful. Indeed, we know and believe that lay

preaching is one of those gifts, able to enliven the hearts and faith of many of God's People. We know and believe that preaching of any kind is a sacred responsibility, which must always be approached with prayer, hard work, and the intention to make the best possible use of God-given gifts. While we are aware that each bishop has the ultimate authority in this area, we *must*—for the sake of the People of God—raise the question, yet one more time. Can lay preaching, indeed, happen during Mass? For *that* is the time when the whole community gathers.



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Why does preaching matter to me?

Can you remember a homily you heard 32 years ago? I can. It changed my life. In July, 1983, I participated in my first preaching workshop, given by Dominican Sister Joan Delaplaine. A powerful preacher and expert professor of preaching, she “became” the man at the pool of Bethsaida, by the Sheep Gate. Ill for 38 years, Jesus confronted him with this question, “Do you want to be healed?” He replied (to us), “you may think that’s easy to answer, but it’s not.” As she listed all the reasons why she simply was not sure whether or not she wanted to be healed, I could literally feel a fire in my belly. Wow! I must learn how to do this!

Preaching is a sacred responsibility for me. I have worked long and hard to give my best: to pray with the Scripture, to meet with a homily team for an hour of conversation on the readings, to search out commentaries, and always to wait on the Spirit of God for a spark of truth, on which to build the reflection. Preaching is a joy, a challenge, and a calling.