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LAY PREACHERS

WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO TALK, AND WHEN? QUESTIONS ENDURE

When Joan Workmaster first began preaching 12 years ago, she remembers the congregations' reactions as being decidedly mixed. "A number of people were very supportive, but a number questioned it — not the quality, but if I should be doing it. There were others who got up and left, and didn't come back until I was done," said Workmaster, who was then a staff member at St. Joseph the Worker

Church in Liverpool, Diocese of Syracuse.

Although lay preaching has become more commonplace since that time, Workmaster said that several people still wonder if preaching other than by a priest or deacon — especially by women — is permitted.

"This is one of the things we probably get the most calls about," noted Workmaster, diocesan director of the Office of Liturgy. "Basically, the question is, 'Is it true that women can be allowed to preach?'"

Further questions arise, she said, due to the fact that several lay preachers in this diocese — women and men — are also proclaiming the Gospel during Mass.

For while diocesan officials say that church law can be interpreted to allow for lay preaching, they emphasize that lay people are not permitted to proclaim the Gospel at Mass.

"We can support lay preaching in 1,000 ways, be it men or women. But the law is very specific about who may proclaim the Gospel," Workmaster stated.

Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor, termed lay reading of the Gospel as "inappropriate."

"I think those rules are important to observe," Father McKenna said.

Father Kenneth Baker, SJ, for one, call for a strict interpretation as well of the rules concerning lay preachers, especially when a priest or deacon is present.

"Vatican II established essential differences between ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the laity," said Father Baker, editor of *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* magazine. "Preaching is reserved to those who have orders."

"That's the way I look at it, too," said Father Frederick Bush, pastor of Holy Spirit Church in Penfield. He noted that lay people have never preached or read the Gospel in the 26 years he has served the parish.

"If we have guest speakers, they give a five-minute talk right after the homily," Father Bush said.

What the law says

In many other diocesan parishes, however, lay preaching has become a common practice in recent decades. (For purposes of this article, the term "lay people" includes all men or women who are not ordained. By canonical definition, women religious are included in this group as well.)

Father Robert Kennedy, who teaches preaching courses at St. Bernard's Institute, said that Rochester appears to "have more experience" than most dioceses in its usage of lay preachers. However, he and Workmaster said there are no official statistics on the number of lay preachers here.

Siobhan Verbeek, an official with the United States Catholic Conference, said that there is a similar lack of official national statistics. She did note that the diocese of Helena, Mont., and the archdioceses of San Antonio, Milwaukee, Seattle and St. Paul/Minneapolis are among other areas of the country that actively promote lay preaching.

Most lay preachers in this diocese are pastoral associates or pastoral administrators. These roles are generally filled by women but not limited to them. For example, Dean Condon, pastoral administrator at Guardian Angels Church, Henrietta, also preaches.



Sister Anne Michelle McGill, pastoral administrator at St. Gabriel's Church, Hammondsport, preaches October 25

The number of lay preachers has risen so quickly that Deni Mack contacted approximately 50 female preachers in this diocese for a 1996 book, *Extraordinary Preaching*. Co-authored by Mack and Roslyn A. Karaban — a professor of pastoral counseling at St. Bernard's Institute — the book contains sermons by 20 women.

Support of lay preachers by diocesan hierarchy is evident in Bishop Matthew H. Clark's article, "The Pastoral Exercise of Authority," which he was asked to write for the August edition of *New Theology Review*. Bishop Clark appears to promote lay preaching even in circumstances when priests are regularly available to give homilies.

"Why cannot competent lay men and women, associated intimately with their pastors in ministry and teaching, be allowed to preach at the Eucharist?" Bishop Clark queried in the article.

According to Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, the mind-set was quite different when lay people began preaching in diocesan parishes in the late 1960s. Prior to that time, she said, "Anyone other than a priest did not speak in church."

Most of the early lay preachers were women religious involved in campus ministry. For instance, Sister Sobala — now a pastoral associate at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester — began preaching at the University of Rochester shortly after joining the Newman Community staff there in 1971.

This role further opened up to people other than priests when the first class of permanent deacons was ordained in the Rochester diocese in 1982. Deacons are allowed to give homilies under Canon 767 in the Revised Code of Canon Law:

"Among the forms of preaching the homily is preeminent; it is a part of the liturgy itself and reserved to a priest or deacon."

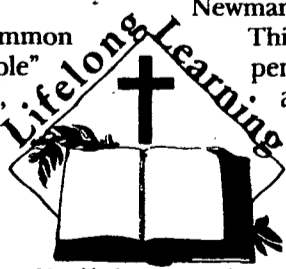
In recent years, lay people, also, have been preaching in increasing numbers. Workmaster explained that this practice is allowed under Canon 766:

"Lay people can be admitted to preach in a church or oratory if it is necessary in certain circumstances or if it is useful in particular cases ... with due regard for Canon 767."

Father Kennedy stressed that Canon 766 allows lay people to speak during the same portion of Mass as the homily, as long as it is termed *preaching* rather than delivering a homily.

"The homily is a particular form of preaching. Preaching is a kind of genus," he explained.

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Story by staff writer Mike Latona • Photo by Greg Francis