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Preachers

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The key words in Canon 766, Father Kennedy said, are *necessary* and *useful*. Since neither the national bishops' conference nor the diocese have issued norms on what is considered necessary and useful, he said that the decision on who can preach "falls to the local pastor."

Mack, who serves as pastoral associate at the Catholic Communities of St. Anne/St. Gregory in Palmyra and Marion, argued that lay preachers are indeed necessary and useful as the number of priests steadily shrinks in our diocese.

"Let's face it, we are living in extraordinary times," Mack commented. "When Father Bob (Robert Gaudio) is doing a wedding and a funeral on a Saturday, how can he possibly prepare a homily on the weekend?"

Father Gaudio is the only active priest serving at St. Anne/St. Gregory. There is no deacon on staff.

Yet Father Baker, when asked if lay preaching could be permissible because priests are overloaded with other responsibilities, replied, "That argument doesn't convince me. I preach every Sunday."

He charged that interpreting canon law to permit lay preaching is similar to twisting the U.S. Constitution so that abortion can become legalized.

The USCC's Verbeek said that bishops across the country, also, are split on this issue. She said that differences arise over the word "useful" in Canon 766.

"There is a certain ambiguity," remarked Verbeek, associate director for the national conference's Secretariat of Doctrinal and Pastoral Practices.

No national directive is imminent, Verbeek added. She said that the nation's bishops attempted to establish norms on lay preaching in the early 1990s, and that she also served last year on a committee — which included bishops — that addressed the subject. No consensus was reached either time.

"The decision was that this was best left to the local level," Verbeek said.

Women gain acceptance

Reaction to female lay preachers in this diocese has been split, according to women interviewed for this story.

Although Sister Sobala said there was

"immediate acceptance" when she preached at the University of Rochester, the going was not so smooth when she began preaching at St. Mary's Church shortly after arriving there in 1982.

"The first few years were very rocky in general. The community felt they had another good preacher; at the same time, there was a small group of naysayers," Sister Sobala recalled. "They reported the situation to the national and international hierarchy."

"I do know what it's like to have somebody get up and walk out," added Gloria Ulterino, who has preached since the mid-1980s.

"When it does happen, it's a numbing kind of thing. It leaves you very empty," Workmaster remarked.

Ulterino suggested that the image of females at the pulpit has fueled the bulk of the controversy.

"If all you're used to is that (the preacher) has to be the priest or deacon — especially if this person looks real different — then it's going to raise questions," Ulterino said. She currently serves as director of the diocesan Office of Women in Church and Society.

However, Sister Sobala said, resistance to female preachers has diminished in recent years.

"Given a chance, communities will find the preaching of women as valuable and life-inspiring as male preachers," Sister Sobala said. "Now I find, at least among our parishioners, that the quality of the preaching and the message conveyed are much more important. People are becoming connoisseurs of good preaching."

Mary Lou O'Connor, a parishioner at St. Gabriel's Church, Hammondsport, noted that while her parish is "very conservative," parishioners have welcomed the preaching of Sister Anne Michelle McGill, SSJ, St. Gabriel's pastoral administrator.

O'Connor reported that she's "finding the community is very receptive to this. I have not heard any complaints at all."

Sister McGill became the diocese's first pastoral administrator when she came to St. Gabriel's in 1994.

Ulterino and Mack said that churchgoers enjoy the chance to hear viewpoints other than a priest's or deacon's.

"It is important to hear a variety of voices," Ulterino remarked.

"The people of God very much want a full perspective — and no one person has that perspective," Mack said.

Where to draw the line?

While diocesan officials say there is some flexibility regarding preaching, they are very clear in their opposition to the Gospel being read by a lay person.

Workmaster and Father McKenna cited the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, an official church text that gives doctrinal and liturgical explanation of the structures, elements and ministries at Mass. Chapter 2, Section III, No. 34 states:

"It is desirable that the Gospel be read by a deacon or, in his absence, by a priest other than the one presiding; the other readings are proclaimed by a reader. In the absence of a deacon or another priest, the celebrant reads the gospel."

"My line to the pastor is, 'I can support you in your right to call qualified people to preach. But I cannot support lay persons proclaiming the Gospel before the preaching, since the liturgical law is rather specific,'" Workmaster said.

Father Paul Schnacky, pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Wayland, has established a policy that appears consistent with diocesan officials' wishes. He said that he allows for lay preachers "on special occasions," when such guest speakers as Marriage Encounter coordinators "can present a topic better than I can."

However, he added, "I still read the Gospel myself, on any occasion."

On the other hand, Sister McGill reads the Gospel regularly at St. Gabriel's and at St. Mary's Church in Bath, where Father Robert Hammond — sacramental administrator for St. Gabriel's — is pastor.

"We both think it's important that whoever breaks open the Scripture, reads the Scripture," Sister McGill said.

Father McKenna acknowledged that he is aware that several lay people in the diocese read the Gospel even though "it's pretty well outlined in the norms that this is not permitted."

"I haven't talked to them, so I don't know what their rationale is," Father McKenna said.

Father Baker said that he approves of such lay roles during a communion service, when there is no priest or deacon available. But he said that he has never attended a Mass when a lay person has either preached or read the Gospel.

On the other hand, Father Edward Palumbos, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church, said that lay people were already preaching and reading the Gospel when he arrived at the Greece parish as

pastor in 1992. He has continued to promote that practice, as he did in his prior assignment as pastor at Church of the Good Shepherd in Henrietta.

"It's my judgment call," he said. "I have not gotten any flak for it."

Father Palumbos defended his policy by saying that church law should not determine which ranks of people are allowed to preach or read the Gospel, but rather "to ensure that competent, qualified people are given access to the pulpit."

If anything, Sister McGill remarked, church lawmakers should place more restrictions on who preaches, rather than who says the Gospel.

"It seems to me they'd be more careful about who was breaking open the Word than who was reading it," she said.

Ulterino, who said that she, also, has proclaimed the Gospel at Mass, agreed.

"The one who is able to open it up is also the one who is able, hopefully, to proclaim it," she commented.

Sister Sobala said that she has read the Gospel at St. Mary's Church since 1986.

"We're not to destroy the Gospel; that is anything but true," she said. "I very much want people to be caught by the fire of the Gospel."

More preachers to come

Father McKenna predicted that the priest shortage, combined with more advanced lay theological training, will fuel further expansion of lay preaching.

"It's obvious that many people have had a formalized education equivalent to a priest or deacon," Father McKenna said.

Father Kennedy noted that an ever-increasing number of lay people are being admitted to the Master of Divinity program at St. Bernard's Institute. National guidelines for this program, he said, list preaching courses as requirements.

However, Father Kennedy warned, the availability of these preachers does not guarantee that pastors will permit them to preach — or read the Gospel.

"My job is to tell people what canon law and liturgical law is. I can't tell a parish or pastor what to do," Father Kennedy said.

The subject has enough unresolved issues, Father McKenna said, that the diocese may soon establish official directives about lay preaching and Gospel reading.

"Maybe it's an appropriate time to put together some norms and guidelines," the chancellor remarked. "Perhaps there are some misunderstandings and there is a need for clarification."

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