

# COLUMNISTS

## Lay ministry figures show change, challenge

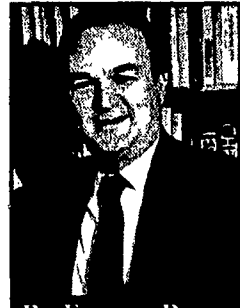
A recently published study undertaken by the National Pastoral Life Center on behalf of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Committee on the Laity presents a profile of parish lay ministry in the United States as of 1997.

The study builds on a previous survey conducted by the NPLC in 1992, and compares both reports. (The copyrighted texts are reprinted in the April 30, 1992, and July 1, 1999, issues of *Origins*.)

The current study notes a 6 percent increase in the size of Catholic parishes since 1992. However, attendance at Sunday Mass has declined by 6 percent since 1992, the 14th year of John Paul II's pontificate. The average parish has 2,496 parishioners, but average attendance is only 1,033, or just over 40 percent.

In the same time period, the number of parish priests has declined 12 percent, from 30,955 to 27,154. Accordingly, in more than 2 percent of the nation's parishes (or about 450), pastoral responsibility for the parish is now exercised by someone other than a resident priest-pastor. That individual may be a deacon, a woman religious, a layperson, or some combination thereof.

Also, 17 percent of parishes have been merged or clustered and placed under a single pastor. Fortunately, the number of



essays in  
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By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

parish lay ministers has been rising. Lay ministers (not including school or support staffs) have increased by 35 percent, to 29,146. More than 20,000 are full-time, and just under 9,000 are part-time (but working at least 20 hours a week).

The most common positions that lay ministers fill at the parish level are religious education (34 percent), general pastoral minister, including parish-life coordinators (about 25 percent), youth ministry (over 10 percent), and liturgy and music (almost 16 percent).

The NPLC study finds that 63 percent of U.S. parishes have lay ministers, up from 54 percent in 1992. But that means that 37 percent still have no formal lay involvement in parish ministry. One may wonder about the quality of parish life in such places, because where lay ministers

do function, everyone involved, including the pastor, insists that lay ministers make "a significant contribution to almost all aspects of parish life."

The profile of the non-ordained parish minister has also changed since 1992, when 42 percent were religious and 59 percent were lay. In 1997, a speck under 29 percent were religious and 71 percent were lay.

"Because the average age of the religious is considerably older than that of the lay people, this trend toward lay people will only continue," the report observes. "This has important implications for education, training and formation for parish ministry."

Even more significant is the fact that 82 percent of lay parish ministers are women. This percentage is only slightly lower than in 1992 because there are fewer women religious in the total.

But the reality remains: The church is clearly dependent upon its women ministers for the effective day-to-day operations of nearly two-thirds of its parishes. The study acknowledges, by implication, that the church has not found a way of "engaging" a significant number of men.

Still another pair of statistics poses a particular challenge to pastoral leadership in Hispanic parishes (and their bish-

ops). While 17 percent of U.S. parishes require Mass in Spanish, only 4.4 percent of lay parish ministers are Hispanic.

But that isn't the only problem requiring attention. The study finds that two-thirds of lay parish ministers have served in another parish. At least a fifth of them have left their previous positions because of "employment conditions," including a change of pastor.

In far too many of these instances, pastors with an openness to and capacity for collaborative ministry are replaced by priests with ecclesiological and pastoral attitudes that can only be described as clericalistic and authoritarian, with a measure of awkwardness (and worse) toward women in ministry.

The inadequacy of salaries, however, "is the reason most cited as possibly causing parish ministers to go on to other employment," outside the church.

Msgr. Philip Murnion, director of the NPLC, and David DeLambo, of the Diocese of Cleveland's Office of Pastoral Planning, are to be commended for this important study. It remains to be seen whether there will be realistic and constructive responses to it.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## To forgive is the right thing, for many reasons

24th Sunday: Matthew 18:21-35. (R1) Sirach 27:30-28:7. (R2) Romans 14:7-9.

A woman with 14 children, ages 1 through 14, sued her husband for divorce on the grounds of desertion.

"When did he desert you?" the judge asked.

"Thirteen years ago," she replied.

"If he left 13 years ago, where did all these children come from?"

"Oh, he kept coming back to say he was sorry."

Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven."

This is a hard teaching. But Jesus is right. Sometimes we forgive because it is healthy for our own mind, body and spirit. Hating someone, resenting someone, despising someone takes its toll on us.

Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "I make it a practice to avoid hating anyone. If someone's been guilty of despicable actions, especially toward me, I'd try to forget him. I used to do this: I'd write the man's name on a piece of scrap paper, drop it into the lowest drawer of my desk. Over the years that drawer became a sort of private



a word  
for  
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

wastebasket for crumpled-up spite and discarded personalities. Besides, it seemed to be effective, and helped me avoid harboring useless black feelings."

Resentment and hatred are "useless, black feelings." Usually they do more harm to us than to the person we resent. That's the one reason we forgive.

A more basic reason is because Christ told us to forgive. Sometimes it is difficult to tell Christians from everybody else in society, but this is where we should be different.

Steven McDonald, a New York police detective, was paralyzed by a teenager's bullets in Central Park in July 1986. McDonald, 29, was shot by a bicycle thief, Shavod Jones, who put three bullets into McDonald's head and spine, which crippled him for life.

McDonald forgave Jones, who in time apologized for the terrible act.

Years later, McDonald returned to the spot in Central Park where he was shot and led onlookers in the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon."

That's what it means to follow Jesus: to forgive not only because it is our benefit, but because Jesus asked us to.

However there is one more reason why we forgive: It is because we have been forgiven.

Jesus followed his admonition to Peter with a story. He said the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One owed him about a million dollars. Since this servant was not able to pay his debt, the master ordered that he and his wife and children be sold to repay the debt.

The servant pleaded for time. The master took pity on him and canceled the entire debt.

Well this servant who had been forgiven an enormous debt met a fellow servant who owed him a hundred dollars. And he seized him and began to choke him, saying "Pay back what you owe."

The fellow servant pleaded for time.

But his creditor threw him into prison. The other servants, distressed, told the master. He was furious and handed him over to the torturers.

God forgives us our sins, a million dollars; he expects us to forgive our neighbor's indiscretions, a hundred dollars.

We pray, "Forgive us AS we forgive." Don't destroy the bridge over which you must cross.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

Monday, September 13

1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 7:1-10

Tuesday, September 14

Numbers 21:4-9; Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

Wednesday, September 15

1 Timothy 3:14-16; John 19:25-27 or Luke 2:33-35

Thursday, September 16

1 Timothy 4:12-16; Luke 7:36-50

Friday, September 17

1 Timothy 6:2-12; Luke 8:1-3

Saturday, September 18

1 Timothy 6:13-16; Luke 8:4-15

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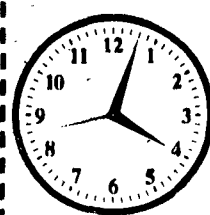
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