They Fear This Course the Most

by Eileen D. Crowley

“fear this course the most,” one student said to me this summer. Why? “We will cover aspects of ministry that I have avoided for many years.”

The course he feared most is Lay Leadership of Prayer and Preaching, an introductory course required of all lay students taking our Master of Divinity and Master of Pastoral Studies degrees at Catholic Theological Union. Another student likewise admitted, “If it were not required, I would have avoided this class at all cost.” Why this fear?

My students are not unskilled communicators. These adults, who range in age from their twenties to their sixties, come to this graduate course with diverse professional and ministerial backgrounds. In their professional work, they make informal and formal presentations. As part of their paid or volunteer parish ministries, they teach children, teens, and adults. They lead retreats. They lector. They serve as choir directors and cantors. They organize rallies to protest social injustices. They know how to stand up in front of a group to teach, to proclaim, to lecture, to exhort, or to lead an assembly in song. However, at the idea of leading a community in public prayer, most are terrified.

My graduate lay ministry students are not atypical, I dare suggest. Their fears are not unreasonable. Explicitly or implicitly, some priests have told them to “stay in your place.” While of course not all priests have communicated this warning, my students have often enough gotten this message directly or indirectly through stories other lay people have shared. Liturgical presiding can be dangerous if you are a member of the laity.

Lay people in public liturgical leadership in the Roman Catholic Church are part of a complex ecclesial phenomenon that has been evolving since the 1960s. Some of my students have been serving in ministry roles for decades, first as parish volunteers and then as paid staff members. Students in their twenties often come to graduate theological studies having spent a year or more in post-college missionary work. Other students in their late fifties and sixties are looking at retirement as not too far off and are preparing to devote themselves full time to ministry as soon as they can. Some are religious sisters or brothers, because they too are members of the laity and must take this course. My students serve in the United States and Canada, as well as Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. Generally speaking, they all fall within the category of lay ecclesial minister.

For survey purposes, Mark M. Gray defines a “lay ecclesial minister” (LEM), as “someone with professional training working or volunteering in a ministry at least part-time.” However, bishops may define more narrowly who

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counts officially as lay ecclesial ministers in their diocese. Gray edits a research blog called 1964 for The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. In a May 11, 2012 blog entry, he reported on the results of data compiled on “U.S. Catholic Populations and Parish Life, 2010.” Of the 74,470,000 people who self-identified as Catholic, 50,298 lay Catholic adults reported that they were active in paid or volunteer parish ministries. Of them, some 38,000 were LEMs. Gray concluded, “There is one LEM in the U.S. for every 2,556 people who were baptized and raised Catholic.”1 And these statistics do not count the thousands upon thousands of Catholic lay people who work in ministries outside of the parish.

Whether or not my students’ bishops have tagged them as LEMs, they are all in the same boat when it comes to leadership of public prayer. They are paddling as fast as they can, but to where, they might not be sure. They never, or only rarely, have seen lay people in liturgical leadership. “I’ve seen a lay presider during some blessing rites, and lay presiders leading the morning and evening prayers at the NPM (National Pastoral Musicians) convention,” one of my students reported. “My parish doesn’t allow lay presiders leading morning or evening prayers.” In the past I have heard repeatedly the refrain, “My pastor would never let me do that.”

Ah, permission. There’s the rub. In a hierarchically-ordered organization, those on the lower rungs need approval for doing something typically performed by those on a higher rung. Consequently, lay Catholics usually do not step forward to lead a community’s public prayer. As one of my students explained, “When I think back over my liturgical experiences I realize that I have been very much a supportive participant, only coming forward when necessary or asked to.” Most lay Catholics have been conditioned by Roman Catholic culture to expect a prayer leader to be a priest, deacon, or someone who has been formally called to this role because no ordained person is available.

As boys or young men, many seminarians may have watched priests preside and imagined themselves in that role. Most Catholic lay people, whether female or male, have never imagined they would stand before an assembly to lead a community in public prayer. Never. Their first task in my course, then, is to dare to imagine themselves in this role.

At the very beginning of Lay Leadership of Prayer and Preaching, my students learn about Canon Law related to liturgical leadership. They are usually shocked to discover the many liturgies where lay leaders of prayer are anticipated and permitted: liturgies of the word apart from eucharistic celebrations; liturgy of the hours; penitential services (Appendix II in the Rite of Penance); the minor exorcisms and blessings in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; rites related to pastoral care of the sick and prayers on the occasion of death; rites in the Book of Blessings; funeral vigils, funeral liturgies outside of eucharist, and rites of committal; and, in some cases, baptism and marriage.

Zeni Fox, professor of Pastoral Theology at Immaculate Conception Seminary in New Jersey, has been tracking and writing about lay ecclesial ministry. She has authored and edited seminal books on this topic. Since 1994, she has assisted bishops with the data and insights derived from her extensive research and her own personal experience of being a seminary director of lay ministry. In her most recent edited volume, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: Pathways toward the Future*, she provides insights from systems theory that might be helpful to lay ecclesial ministers, as well as to bishops, priests, and deacons. It turns out that the tensions my students feel in taking on the role as lay presider come in part from changing boundaries in our ecclesial system. They serve at a pinch point.2

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The emergence of lay ecclesial ministers is a change that is impacting the church in the United States (and even in the larger church) in many ways. It is not just that there is now a body of ministers who are different in some ways from others we are familiar with in recent centuries, but also that there are new relationships with other ministers, and therefore new boundary issues to resolve; new roles to develop and stabilize, in themselves, and in relation to others’ roles; new patterns of interaction to engage and refine; new ways of differentiating one individual from another; new ways of explaining ourselves to ourselves in light of our tradition. A whole system is in flux.³

Many of my students are still adjusting to their new relationship with the mission of the church and with their co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord, as well as with the rest of the community. When they encounter the task of lay presiding in my class, they run smack into whatever identity and boundary issues they may not yet have sorted out. They may ask, “Who am I to be doing this?”

In some parishes, lay ministers are commissioned or are the subject of a blessing upon their taking on their main ministerial roles, such as becoming director of religious education, catechist, or parish life administrator. Fox points to the importance of these rituals and suggests looking at them afresh.

The role of blessings and rituals for lay ecclesial ministers, in dioceses and parishes, should be analyzed. Existing blessings and rituals should be used and others created as needed. As a deeply sacramental people, the use of symbol and ritual is central to identity as Catholics. Appropriate blessings and rituals for lay ecclesial ministers will be central to their identity as ministerial leaders and will facilitate the acceptance of their leadership by their communities.⁴

Unfortunately, these rituals usually deal only with the lay ministers’ main roles as teachers or administrators. The texts and symbols of these rites most likely do not explicitly reference the liturgical roles that these lay ministers will be expected to perform because of their ministries.

In visiting the sick, lay ministers may lead a short liturgy of the word with communion at a bedside but be unclear how to do the service for a group of residents waiting in the common room of the assisted living care facility. “Most recently as a CPE [Clinical Pastoral Education] student I was asked to hold a service on Sundays at the Rehabilitation Unit,” one student recalled. “I felt like I was flying by the seat of my pants, and would actually pray that no one would attend.” Still others find themselves presiding because their family expects that they, with their theological studies, must be the most qualified to lead their family prayer in time of a crisis: “I presided at the bedside of my husband’s grandmother as we had to remove her from life support.”

What difference might it make if parishes and other church-related institutions were to acknowledge ritually that, in many circumstances, liturgical leadership is integral to ministerial leadership? Perhaps such rituals might reduce some of my students’ anxieties related to straddling the current “rigid boundaries between clergy and laity, and at times between laity and vowed religious.”⁵ These lay presiders could stop worrying about someone thinking, “Who does she think she is?” Having been trained in the basics of lay presiding, they could serve simply and humbly with joy and courage.

³ Fox, 198.
⁴ Fox, 209.
⁵ Fox, 210.