

## A Homily By Any Other Name: Lay Preaching in the United States

Predictably, the *Official Catholic Directory* for 1998 contains some dispiriting news. While the U.S. Catholic population has grown to more than 62 million, the number of men ordained to serve as pastors continues to decline. According to an analysis of the *Directory*, fully one-fourth of all U.S. diocesan priests are now retired, sick, or otherwise absent from active duty. The number of parishes without a resident priest has grown to 2,460, or more than 13 percent of all parishes.

In reading the signs of the times, one wonders who is left to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to all the people in those priestless parishes? And what of those parishes that are fortunate enough to have a priest, but are still severely understaffed? How can the Church in the United States possibly fulfill canon 213 in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which states that “The Christian faithful have the right to receive the word of God and the sacraments”?

One answer—and it remains a highly controversial one—is that lay people are beginning to preach at Mass in unprecedented numbers. This became clear to me as I undertook research for a master’s thesis in 1997–1998. While there are no national data available, Patricia Hughes Baumer, a leading trainer of lay preachers, calls lay preaching “a vastly underreported phenomenon.” In some cases, individual bishops are authorizing lay persons to preach at Mass, especially in parishes with lay administrators (or so-called “pastoral coordinators”). In other cases, pastors are quietly giving lay people the nod without their bishop’s consent. One such pastor summed up his reasoning this way: “One, I have a bunch of people here who know what they are doing, and I want to give them the chance to do it. Two, I want to foster the notion of lay ministry here in the parish. And, three, I am the only ordained cleric in this parish. I think I’m a pretty good preacher. It’s one of the things I do well. But there is no way I can preach effectively fifty-two Sundays a year.” Whatever their reason, the clerics doing the authorizing think they have a basis in canon law.

When the revised Code of Canon Law was promulgated, it contained a provision on preaching that marked a complete turnaround from the law in the 1917 Code. Canon 766 of the revised code expressly

grants lay persons permission to preach in a church or oratory under certain circumstances. Specifically, the code allows lay persons to preach if doing so is "necessary" or "useful." The question is: What exactly does that mean? Some bishops apparently feel it is necessary or useful when they have parishes without a resident pastor. Some pastors seem to think it is necessary or useful when they themselves are overworked.

Since the code was published, a number of canon lawyers and liturgists have commented on the lay preaching provision in a host of journal articles and books. They agree that canon 766 clearly allows lay people to preach anywhere they like outside church; inside a church, they need the approval of a cleric. They also agree that canon 767 reserves the homily to a priest or deacon. Here we come to the heart of the matter. Just what is a homily? Canonist James H. Provost argues strongly that "the term 'homily' has become a technical term attached to what a priest or deacon does, and not a restrictive term describing what actually happens during a liturgy" (Provost, 1983:148). For Provost, any time an ordained man speaks at a liturgy, you have a homily. Any time a lay person speaks at any liturgy, you cannot have a homily. Canonist John H. Huels picks up this theme and explains it this way: "Another way of putting it is to say that a homily is like a presidential address: Only the president can deliver the presidential address" (Huels, 1988:21). Indeed, Baumer and others involved in lay preaching generally avoid the word "homily," preferring to speak in terms of "Lectionary-based, liturgical preaching."

Most commentators see room in the canons for lay people to preach at Eucharist, however, even if their preaching cannot be termed a homily. Provost sums his thinking up as follows: "From a careful reading of the revised code, it seems that a lay person could on occasion preach in place of the ordinary or extraordinary minister (an ordained priest or deacon) who would usually provide a homily. The conditions under which this could be done would depend on the physical or moral unavailability of the ordained ordinary or extraordinary minister and could arise from pastoral need" (Provost, 150). The physical unavailability is clear enough: There simply is not a priest or deacon there to preach. Moral unavailability is a bit slipperier. It could mean that the priest or deacon does not have sufficient command of English to preach effectively. Or that he is uncomfortable preaching at a Mass for children (the 1973 *Directory for Masses With Children* specifically allows for such a case).

Whenever and however lay people might preach at Mass, the commentators are clear to say it should not become such a regular practice that it displaces the preaching of the ordained. In Provost's terms, the extraordinary minister should not become the ordinary minister.

In the late 1980s the U.S. bishops attempted to spell out guidelines for lay preaching. In brief, the guidelines repeated that the homily is reserved to a priest or deacon. It also barred lay people from preaching after the reading of the gospel. Instead, a lay preacher—having been duly authorized by the bishop or pastor—could only address the congregation after either the greeting or the Prayer after Communion (“Guidelines,” 1988). Ultimately, however, the Holy See rejected the guidelines. Thus, at this time, there is no national legislation in place governing lay preaching, and individual bishops are on their own in figuring out what to do.

Intrigued by the idea of lay people preaching at Sunday Mass, I visited two parishes to hear lay preachers in action. I also asked ten lay preachers to respond to a brief questionnaire about their activities. Seven of these individuals preach periodically in an urban parish, two are women religious who preach regularly in a very small rural parish without a resident priest, and one preaches twice a month at the parish she administers. Among other things, the survey assessed these preachers’ level of training, method of homily preparation, knowledge of diocesan regulations about lay preaching, and opinions about the challenges and frustrations of preaching and the response of the assembly to their preaching.

Seven of the ten returned questionnaires. Clearly, this is a small sample and this survey cannot be taken as representative of lay preachers in general. Nevertheless, the findings are interesting. All the preachers said their ministry was rewarding, though they also described the preparation of homilies as extremely difficult and demanding. Six of the seven were unaware of any diocesan guidelines regarding lay preaching, and indeed, these six functioned without their bishop’s knowledge or consent. One respondent even voiced an inappropriate hostility at the idea that his bishop had the right to issue guidelines.

Three areas struck me as particularly noteworthy.

1. *Adequate Understanding and Preparation of the Homily.* While all the lay preachers I interviewed had some theological training, it ranged from a handful of workshop courses to a doctor of divinity degree. The unevenness of the training these preachers have received is a major concern. Catholics in this country often complain that the preaching in their parishes is poor. Lay preaching ultimately will fail if it merely substitutes one brand of poor preaching for another. The U.S. bishops’ guidelines for lay preaching, though never formally promulgated, state that lay preachers must be “persons who have solid grounding in the basics of Sacred Scripture, theology, tradition, and liturgy” (“Guidelines,” n. 2c). Thus, it is critical that if lay people are to preach in church, they must be at least as well-prepared as ordained ministers

of the Word. That would mean a minimum of a master's degree that includes courses in homiletics, liturgy, and the ministry of presiding. It seems unlikely that a series of workshops, however well done, can substitute for a graduate degree from an accredited Roman Catholic school for ministry.

The survey suggested that these preachers spent considerable time preparing their homilies. They acknowledged that the process involved Scripture study as well as prayer. Several of them specifically noted that their preparation involved reflecting on their own life experience in terms of the gospel. Yet it is difficult to ascertain to what extent these preachers follow the homiletic method outlined in the U.S. bishops' fine 1982 document *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (FIYH, 1982). That method consists of reading, listening, praying; study and further reflection; letting go; drafting; revising; practicing; and preaching. Certainly, it is worrisome that one preacher I interviewed said with something like pride that he does not feel the need even to write out his homily!

2. *The Joys and Frustrations of Preaching.* The lay preachers I spoke with acknowledged that preaching is hard and demanding work, even for professionals who regularly speak in front of large audiences. One preacher spoke of "the struggle of the blank page" and another said she experiences "the greatest terror of my life" in preaching. One said she was glad she did not have to preach more often than she does. How often do folks leave Sunday Mass muttering "I could preach a better sermon than that!" The fact is, they cannot. Effective preaching takes considerable learning, practice, and skill. No one—ordained or lay—should be allowed at the ambo unless he or she is fully prepared.

3. *The Effect on the Spiritual Life of the Preacher.* Every preacher acknowledged that preaching affects both the listener and the preacher. As one said, "This wrestling [with Scripture] is an occasion for spiritual growth and helps to keep me from becoming complacent." This is a healthy understanding of the preacher's role. Another reflected that by struggling to make the gospel real in his own life, he came to understand the kinds of struggles that other parishioners endured. This sense of solidarity with the faithful is an important virtue for preachers to practice.

It is impossible to know how many parishes now experience lay preaching at Mass beyond the annual appeal for the bishop's collection or similar occasions. Similarly, there are no data now available on how many bishops have addressed the issue through norms or guidelines in their dioceses, or how many are aware of parishes experimenting with lay preaching at Mass and simply look the other way. My find-

ings suggest that the practice is probably more widespread than many would like to admit. They also suggest that the quality of the preaching being practiced by lay people is no better—and in some cases is worse—than that of the men ordained to do the job.

The U.S. bishops are nearing the end of their Ecclesial Lay Ministries Project, a three-year study of lay ministry, and are expected to issue guidelines for the training, certification, and hiring of lay pastoral staff. They are not expected to address the issue of lay preaching. Given the extent of the practice—and the potential problems—it may be time for the bishops as a whole to take up this thorny issue once again.

#### REFERENCES

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