



Advancing  
Women in Church Leadership  
**FutureChurch**

# LAY PREACHING: A HEARING AID

*“That was one of the finest homilies I’ve ever heard.  
Is it allowed?”*

Comment made to a lay preacher after Sunday morning Mass.  
Eden Prairie, Minnesota Spring, 1992

*Patricia Hughes Baumer, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Partners In Preaching prepared this resource article for FutureChurch in 2007. For further resources, see [www.PartnersInPreaching.org](http://www.PartnersInPreaching.org) or e-mail [info@PartnersInPreaching.org](mailto:info@PartnersInPreaching.org)*

Preaching is an act of communication. At the outset, we need to be clear that preaching is about the lavish, loving, self-communication of God. It has been said that the emergence of and expansion of diverse ministries in the decades since the Second Vatican Council has resulted from a campaign of self-promotion by the laity. On the contrary, I believe that the practice of liturgical preaching by the unordained has its roots and its flowering in the relentless creativity of God. God's Word will not be silenced.

As a co-founder and Executive Director of Partners In Preaching, a national ministry of training and formation for the lay preaching ministry, I have had a unique opportunity to participate in and observe the development of this ministry, its reception by the faith community, and recently, its increasing suppression by international and national hierarchical leadership. By tracing these three elements, i.e. development, reception, and suppression of lay preaching, this article is intended to free its readers to prayerfully and creatively discern God's will for their local faith communities.

Can the lay preaching ministry enable God's word to be heard more clearly? Can ordained and lay preachers together more vividly illustrate the privilege and responsibility of all the baptized to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth? Pastoral decision makers have a deep desire to comply with Church law. However, they are called to act courageously to uphold core liturgical principles articulated by Second Vatican Council. That commitment to the vision of the Council is becoming heroic as culturally remote curial directives threaten it.

## The Post-Conciliar Expansion of Lay Preaching

Mary of Magdala is the patroness of preachers, the apostle to the apostles, the recipient of the Resurrection commission "Go and tell your brothers." Lay preaching did **not** have its origins in the late twentieth century. Having said that, our understanding of the spirit-directed ways in which the Church has evolved and shaped its ministries over the centuries compels us to remember that Mary was not a "lay preacher" to the twelve who were "ordained" at the Last Supper in the upper room. The earliest believers in Jesus rooted their self-understanding in discipleship, and in witnessing to the Resurrection of the Crucified One. Paul, though not one of the symbolic "Twelve," is honored as Paul the Apostle.

**Ministry:** Over time, roles of service and leadership were shaped to meet the needs of the community. Rituals of selection and ordination were developed. Structures and rituals were formulated and then interpreted through the lens of culture. Through the centuries, the Church continually refines its theological self-understanding and modifies its rituals, practice and structures according to the leading of the Spirit in each age. The Second Vatican Council provides the context for this examination of liturgical preaching by lay women and men.

Awakened to an understanding of itself as "the people of God," the church invited its members to embrace a fuller understanding of baptismal dignity. All of the baptized were called to share responsibility for the mission and ministry of the Church, each according to the gifts given by God for the greater good of the community. Unquestionably, the value of the distinct identity of the ordained minister was retained, but the community was called to examine how ministerial priesthood could flourish while honoring the universal priesthood of the baptized.

Conciliar renewal occurred in the global Church, but we will focus on the particular culture and needs of the United States. As the twentieth century was drawing to a close, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States experienced an "explosion" of ministries. Not only was the permanent diaconate restored, but all over the country it became the norm for parishioners to experience service by women and men, volunteer and compensated staff, working alongside ordained colleagues to provide for the internal needs of the community. This evolution occurred not only because of declining numbers of clergy, but also because thousands of candidates came forward for ministerial education to prepare themselves for vocations to which they believed themselves called by God.

**Liturgical Renewal:** The reforms of the Second Vatican Council most profoundly influenced Roman Catholic worship. In addition to authorizing prayer in the language of the people, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy restored the Liturgy of the Word to its prominent place along side the Liturgy of Eucharist. Lectionary-based scriptural preaching, or homiletic, was heralded as a means of not only celebrating the experience of the presence of God in the Word, but also as a means of preparing the listeners to join in offering praise and thanks in the Eucharistic prayer. Homiletic preaching was a new genre – not primary evangelization, because it is offered to the assembled community of those who already profess belief; not catechesis or moral instruction, for teaching is not the primary focus of communal worship; not theological argument, for probing the Church’s profound scholarly tradition is likewise not the most fitting activity to enhance full and active participation in worship.

The purpose of homiletic preaching is to enable an encounter of the listener with God through the integration of the Scriptural text, the worshipping community, and the preacher. Homiletic preaching is integral to the liturgy, and parallels the progression that also takes place within the liturgy of Eucharist. Just as the community offers its gifts which are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ and given as communion so as to strengthen recipients to labor for the coming of the reign of God, so, too, the movement of homiletic. The preacher gathers the life experiences of the community and through the lens of the Scriptures these experiences are transformed into encounters with the ever-present God. The listeners experience communion with God and are moved, first to give praise and thanks, and then to go forth beyond ritual to continue the transformation of the world.

**The Convergence:** Recognition of the importance of the preaching ministry was occurring at the same time as diversity of ministries and ministers was flourishing in the church. Not only were lay ecclesial ministers by the thousands joining parish staffs and serving in additional settings such as chaplaincies in prisons, hospitals, and on campuses, but at the local level the church was welcoming and rejoicing in the gifts for service that the Holy Spirit was pouring out in the church.

The Church’s Code of Canon Law was revised most recently in 1983. At that time, the community was seeking to reflect in its self-understanding and governance the graces of the Holy Spirit that had become evident during the Second Vatican Council. The 1983 Code replaced the Code in effect since 1917.

In the introduction to the 1983 revision of the Code, Pope John Paul II wrote that the purpose of Canon Law was to order charisms, not to stifle them. Relevant Canons from the 1983 appear below. Take note that the revision of the Code specifically authorizes preaching by the unordained.

## **Selected Relevant Canons, Taken from the 1983 Revised Code**

**Canon 759:** In virtue of their baptism and confirmation lay members of the Christian faithful are witnesses to the gospel message by word and by example of a Christian life; they can also be called upon to cooperate with the bishop and presbyters in the exercise of the ministry of the word.

**Canon 766:** Lay persons 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 according to the prescriptions of the conference of bishops and with due regard for canon 767, § 1.

### **Canon 767**

§ 1. Among the forms of preaching, the homily is preeminent; it is a part of the liturgy itself and is reserved to a priest or to a deacon; in the homily, the mysteries of the faith and the norms of Christian living are to be expounded from the sacred text throughout the course of the liturgical year.

§ 2. Whenever a congregation is present a homily is to be given at all Sunday Masses and at Masses celebrated on holy days of obligation; it cannot be omitted without a serious reason.

§ 3. If a sufficient number of people are present it is strongly recommended that a homily also be given at Masses celebrated during the week, especially during Advent or Lent or on the occasion of some feast day or time of mourning.

§ 4. It is the duty of the pastor or the rector of a church to see to it that these prescriptions are conscientiously observed.

*The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary.*

Corriden, Green, and Heintschel, eds. Paulist Press, New York. 1985. 550-553.

**Interpretation and Implementation:** One of the most widely used tools of interpretation of the above canons related to the understanding of the terms “homily” and “homiletic.” In pastoral situations in which preaching by the laity came to be seen as of great benefit to the community, leadership attempted to remain faithful to the intent of the law by noting the semantic distinction that “homily” is preaching by an ordained priest or deacon (bishop presumed) and that lay people, by definition, are incapable of preaching “homilies.” They do serve God and their communities, however, in the ministry of lectionary-based liturgical preaching. The genre of such preaching is “homiletic.” The purpose and structure of liturgical preaching is identical to that of the homily; what differs is only the ordained or unordained status of the preacher.

**In parishes that suffer from a Eucharistic famine because of the absence of ordained clergy, the faithful need not suffer from a famine of the Word of God.**

**The Flourishing of Lay Preaching:** Even before the revision of the Code of Canon Law, the practice of lay preaching became common within the church of the United States. Statistical tracking of this development has been challenging because of the lack of resources and will to study it on a national basis. However, the sixteen-year history of Partners In Preaching in preparing lay preachers for local and diocesan faith communities gives some insight into the emergence and acceptance of this ministry and how it ultimately became visible “on the radar.”

As an ecclesial minister since the early 1970’s, my lay preaching began in retreat ministry, campus ministry and memorial services both on campus and later for a non-denominational hospice program. Having received an M.Div. degree in 1977, I was frequently the first lay preacher and/or the first woman preacher to be called to the preaching ministry by the communities of faith within which I ministered. Partners In Preaching had its origins in a parish faith community already blessed with gifted homiletic preaching by its ordained priest pastor, Tim Power. However, the lay leadership of that community, along with its pastor, valued the diversity of voice that would be made possible by the training and formation of lay voices, women and men. My husband and I, and our two young sons moved to that parish, Pax Christi Catholic Community in Eden Prairie, Minnesota in 1990, just as parish leadership was looking for a resources of people and programs to prepare additional preachers. Before our marriage and Fred’s transition to the world of business, he had been a professor of homiletics. Both of us were experienced preachers. The parish sought out our gifts and invited us to formulate and conduct the inaugural training program.

The principle of selection for that initial parish team was inclusive. “Who can most competently and gracefully break open the Word within the Sunday assembly?” A training/formation program based on the 1982 document *Fulfilled in Your Hearing; the Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (USCCB, 1982) was designed and conducted in 1991 and the first team of lay preachers was liturgically commissioned in 1991. At that time there were not yet national or diocesan norms for lay preaching, and in the absence of such norms, parish leadership had the authority to call and commission ministers to meet the needs of local communities.

As word of the acceptance of lay preaching by the Pax Christi community circulated in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, additional pastors and parishes sought out materials to prepare their parishes for this new ministry and to have assistance in the process of selection of candidates. The second training program of Partners In Preaching was conducted on an inter-parish basis three years later, and served additional candidates from Pax

Christi as well as participants from four other parishes in the Archdiocese. As of this writing, Partners In Preaching has conducted eight training and formation programs within the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the most recent one conducted in Spanish as well as English with a translated version of *Empowering a New Voice*, at the program's comprehensive training/formation manual developed specifically for candidates who may not have had access to advanced theological education. It is significant to acknowledge that those programs were conducted with the knowledge of but without the support, either structural or financial, of the Archdiocese. These first initiatives were "from below."

On a national level, two diocesan programs in which Partners In Preaching was privileged to participate were those of the Saginaw, Michigan and Great Falls/Billings, Montana dioceses. In those two local churches, visionary Bishops Ken Untener and Anthony Milone place high value on preaching of the word of God. Saginaw's Ministry Institute invited pastors to select parishioners for training in this specialized ministry, and many of the candidates had already completed the diocesan program for commissioned lay ministry. Bishop Ken met annually with the lay preachers, and experienced mentors provided ongoing internships after initial training and before commissioning. Great Falls/Billings learned of Partners In Preaching by consulting with the Diocese of Saginaw. Great Falls was a vast diocese of 94,000 square miles, and in 1997 that area shared forty-two ordained clergy. Many of the 100-plus candidates enrolled in the program of preparation conducted in that diocese were being prepared to lead Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. The Great Falls program was conducted over a two-year period stretching from 1997 until 1999. Though some sessions were held in "local" vicariates, candidates traveled as far as 450 miles to a centralized training site in the geographic center of the diocese when the group convened for plenary sessions. Thirty-five mentors, priests and lay ecclesial ministers with advanced theological education, collaborated with the training staff of Partners and with diocesan liturgy and ministry staff so that all of the participants could hone their skills in small group workshop preaching experiences.

These program examples are cited to demonstrate that the lay preaching ministry was growing. Though in some areas of the country it remained local and even covert out of fear of the restrictive climate of ministry in those particular locations, in other settings it became a public gift that the Church commissioned in rituals of gratitude. Meanwhile, the larger Church became increasingly subject to an undercurrent of "reform of the reform." It was in this climate that decrees of implementation for the Code of Canon Law were formulated.

**Implementation Norms:** Canon 766, the Canon in which lay preaching is authorized, is one of those canons that conclude with a stipulation that it is to be implemented according to the prescriptions of the conference of bishops. Each national conference of Bishops was charged with the responsibility to determine what norms of implementation would enable the emerging ministry of lay preaching to best serve their local Churches.

Bishops of the United States brought possible norms for a vote several times before the process of approving norms, sending them to the Vatican for approval, and receiving that approval, was completed. A set of norms drafted and approved by the American Bishops in 1999 was denied approval by the Vatican. Eighteen months later, a revised set of norms was approved and granted "recognitio" by the Congregation for Worship.

Examination of the two versions of these norms of implementation reveals the increasing tension between the growing practice of preaching by the unordained, and the desire to preserve the unique identity of the ordained minister.

**Norms approved by the US Bishops on November 17, 1999  
(Denied Roman Recognitio, replaced by Implementation Norms approved  
by the American Conference in November 2001, given below.)**

While preaching is particularly entrusted to those in sacred orders (cc. 762-764), nonetheless, lay persons can be called upon to cooperate with the bishops and priests in the exercise of the ministry of the word (c. 759). The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in accord with the prescriptions

of canon 766, and while maintaining the discipline of canon 767§1 whereby the homily is reserved to a priest or deacon, hereby decrees the following:

The diocesan bishop, in particular cases or through a particular law, can permit well-qualified lay persons to preach or to offer spiritual conferences or instructions in churches, oratories, or other sacred places within his diocese when he judges it to be to the spiritual advantage of the faithful.

Warranting circumstances might be, among other reasons, the absence or shortage of clergy, special language requirements, or the expertise or experience of the lay person so deputed. In every case, care must be taken that such preaching, conferences, or instructions not be confused with the homily.

### **Norms passed by the American Bishops on November 14, 2001, and approved by Rome on November 27, 2001.**

Preaching the Word of God is among the principal duties of those who have received the sacrament of orders (cc 762-764). The lay faithful can be called to cooperate in the exercise of the Ministry of the Word (c.759). In accord with canon 766 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops hereby decrees that the lay faithful may be permitted to exercise this ministry in churches and oratories, with due regard for the following provisions:

If necessity requires it in certain circumstances or it seems useful in particular cases, the diocesan bishop can admit lay faithful to preach, to offer spiritual conferences or give instructions in churches, oratories or other sacred places within his diocese, when he judges it to be to the spiritual advantage of the faithful.

In order to assist the diocesan bishop in making an appropriate pastoral decision (Interdicasterial Instruction, *Ecclesiae de Mysterio*, Article 2§3), the following circumstances and cases are illustrative: the absence or shortage of clergy, particular language requirements, or the demonstrated expertise or experience of the lay faithful concerned.

**If God so loved the world as to entrust us with the Word, may the Holy Spirit of God remove the fear that prevents the institutional Church from entrusting the preaching of the Word to all those called and gifted by God.**

The lay faithful who are to be admitted to preach in a church or oratory must be orthodox in faith and well qualified both by the witness of their lives as Christians and by a preparation for preaching appropriate to the circumstances.

The diocesan bishop will determine the appropriate situations in accord with canon 772§1. In providing for preaching by the lay faithful the diocesan bishop may never dispense from the norm which reserves the homily to the sacred ministers (c.767§1;cfr. Pontifical Commission for the Authentic Interpretation of the Code of Canon Law, 26 May 1987, in AAS 79 [1987], 1249). Preaching by the lay faithful may not take place within the Celebration of the Eucharist at the moment reserved for the homily.

Look carefully at the two implementation decrees. Note that they permit the lay person “1) to preach, 2) to offer spiritual conferences, or 3) to offer instructions.” As a principle of interpretation of law, when something is positively permitted, logic dictates that there must be “a there, there.” In other words, there may be some who would say that lay people could be engaged in the ministry of the word as catechists. True, but that ministry would fall within the category of instruction. Also, retreat preaching has for some time been a shared ministry of presbyters and lay people working in mixed teams. This form of lay preaching falls within the category of the offering of spiritual conferences.

So what, may we ask, is meant by the positive authorization permitting the lay person “to preach?” The basic form of preaching is experienced by the community of the Church when it gathers for worship.

The 2001 norms of implementation for Canon 766 do not dictate where lay preaching is to occur, but stipulate that it is not to take place “within the Celebration of the Eucharist at the moment reserved for the homily.” This prohibition replaces the language of the 1999 norms which stated, “In every case, care must be taken that such preaching, conferences, or instructions not be confused with the homily.”

How are pastoral leaders to address the internal inconsistency presented by these new norms? The most fundamental principles of liturgical prayer dictate that preaching occurs after the proclamation of the Word of God, so as to prepare the listeners to enter more fully into whatever liturgical action will take place as response to the Word. When liturgical preaching by a layperson occurs during non-eucharistic worship, the placement of the preaching event after the proclamation of the Word is not in question. Such worship services are occurring with increasing frequency precisely because of the absence of ordained clergy.

However, the other circumstances in which the norms anticipate the utilization of the lay preaching ministry expressly include not only the absence of clergy, but also the “shortage of clergy, particular language requirements, or the demonstrated expertise or experience of the lay faithful concerned.” These circumstances envision times when lay preaching would still be of benefit to the community within its celebration of Eucharist. One valid pastoral approach to the revised norms is that respect for the traditional shape of the community’s worship would take precedence over implementation norms emphasizing the identity of the minister of the Word. Relocating the preaching event alters and renders less effective its function within the prayer of the community. It is essential to recall the fundamental re-shaping of the liturgy that was mandated by the Second Vatican Council. Even members of the hierarchy whose spirituality so often focuses on obedience as a foundational virtue will need to confront an uncomfortable reality. Obedience to the letter of the law as it is spelled out in the 2001 norms of implementation jeopardizes obedience to the spirit AND letter of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy promulgated by the Second Vatican Council.

Some pastoral leaders and presiders choose another strategy to preserve the shape of the liturgy. They offer an introduction to the entire Liturgy of the Word, or an introduction to the preaching event itself in “the moment reserved for the homily,” i.e. the moment immediately following the proclamation of the Word. This introduction would not be confused with the homily, but rather would witness to lay preaching as a ministry of collaboration rather than substitution. This solution would enable the faithful to be offered access to the Word of God to which they are entitled by baptism, while respecting the preaching gifts that the Spirit bestows on diverse baptized members of the community, female as well as male, for the common good.

**The Attempted Suppression of Lay Preaching:** In March of 2004, the document *Redemptionis Sacramentum* was issued by the curial Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments. This document is an Instruction, a non-legislative document, and as such does not supersede existing law, including the norms of implementation for Canon 766 that received Roman approval in 2001. Allow me to quote from “Lay Preaching; By Whose Authority?” by Canon Lawyer Elissa Rinere, CP, printed in the May/June 2006 issue of PREACH magazine, © World Library Publications. 29 (The entire article is available for personal downloading from the website of Partners In Preaching: [www.PartnersInPreaching.org](http://www.PartnersInPreaching.org))

In a tone far more restrictive than the Code or our national norms, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* directs all “instruction or witness” provided by the laity be placed outside Mass entirely. If, for a serious reason, the preaching is within the Mass, it is placed after the Post-Communion prayer (74) Canon 766 is cited in the instruction, but incorrectly. Where the canon states “Lay people may preach in church or oratories...” the instruction cites the canon as saying “Lay people may preach outside of Mass in churches or oratories...(161.) Canon 766 does not contain the words “outside Mass.” Lastly, where an earlier instruction in 1997 deferred to Episcopal conferences for the determination of circumstances within which lay preaching is permitted, this document narrows the field to a scarcity of priests of the needs of a specific community (161). Because an instruction cannot ---or at least should not---overrule existing legislation, the USCCB norm on lay preaching remains in place.

## Lay Preaching as a Hearing Aid

We come full circle to questions of the Church's need for effective preaching of the Word of God, and to the vision of the Second Vatican Council which recognized the dignity of all the baptized and their sharing in the mission as well as the ministries of the Church. The Church is steward of the gifts or charisms bestowed on the baptized. Woe to that steward that buries the gifts rather than allowing them to bear fruit.

In our own day, in each of our parish communities, how can the voice of God be heard most clearly? Language is as indispensable to the liturgy of the word as bread and wine are essential for the liturgy of Eucharist. In parishes that suffer from a Eucharistic famine because of the absence of ordained clergy, the faithful need not suffer from a famine of the Word of God. And in dioceses that have imported non-native clergy so as to preserve the possibility of Sunday Eucharist, is it not also imperative to enable a vital preaching of the Word of God so that the Assembly can hear God's word in their own language, as did the believers on the first Pentecost?

It is time to move beyond semantic distinctions of liturgical preaching and homiletic, beyond the boundaries of reflections on the Scripture placed AFTER the Eucharistic prayer for which they are intended to prepare the listeners for full and active participation.

Preaching is not about the minister, lay or ordained. Preaching is about God's gathered people waiting for the Word, and most of all about a God who throughout history has been encountered in the Scriptures and through the spoken word interpreting those Scriptures within worship. If God so loved the world as to entrust us with the Word, may the Holy Spirit of God remove the fear that prevents the institutional Church from entrusting the preaching of the Word to all those called and gifted by God. If this is your prayer as well, I invite you to become sharers in the ministry of Partners In Preaching, in its vision and in its mission.

### **The Vision:**

Believing that the people of God have the right to have the word of God preached to them, the **vision** of Partners In Preaching is that every local faith community would have competent, diverse and empowered lay and ordained voices for ritual preaching.

### **The Mission:**

Through education, research, and advocacy, the **mission** of Partners In Preaching is to prepare and support women and men, ordained and lay, for the church's ministry of ritual preaching, and to raise awareness of the role and value of lay preaching within the Christian community.

With your support, we commit ourselves to the present, as well as the FUTURECHURCH.

*Patricia Hughes Baumer, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Partners In Preaching prepared this resource article for FutureChurch in 2007.  
For further resources, see [www.PartnersInPreaching.org](http://www.PartnersInPreaching.org) or e-mail [info@PartnersInPreaching.org](mailto:info@PartnersInPreaching.org)*



*Advancing Women in Church Leadership* is a project of **FutureChurch**.  
Feel free to make copies for others and send for our organizing packets (\$10 and \$2s/h)

**FutureChurch**  
17307 Madison Avenue, Lakewood, Ohio 44107  
[info@futurechurch.org](mailto:info@futurechurch.org)  
[www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org)

