

THE LAITY AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

- Topic: Theology of the Laity and the Ministry of the Word
Convener: Mark E. Wedig, Barry University
Moderator: Patricia Walter, Aquinas Institute of Theology
Presenter: Sara Fairbanks, Barry University
Respondent: Mary Catherine Hilkert, University of Notre Dame

Sara Fairbanks' paper, "*Dei Verbum* 2002: A look at a Theology of the Laity and Ministry of the Word in Our Times," explores a theology of the laity and the ministry of the word gleaned from Vatican II documents in order to provide a basis for the development of a more explicit ministry of lay liturgical preaching for the contemporary Roman Catholic Church. Fairbanks begins her discussion of lay participation in liturgical preaching, however, by demonstrating the caution in the contemporary Roman Church concerning the role and function of the laity in ministering the word in liturgy. She cites the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) decree on lay preaching (January 2002) where lay liturgical preaching is relegated to either the introductory rite or postcommunion remarks. Fairbanks shows how the papal documents of John Paul II and Paul VI back up that caution by emphasizing the distinct role and power between laity and the ordained in the liturgy. Recognizing the ambiguity of the Church she nonetheless finds in the documents of Vatican II possibilities for a more advanced view of lay proclamation and goes on to interpret the Council in terms of providing a foundation for the laity as effective ministers of the word in liturgy.

Fairbanks interprets the Vatican II documents concerning lay ministry of the word by focusing on two major themes. First she underlines the identity, divine call and capacity of the laity as ministers of the word. As participants in the divine nature of God, the laity are affirmed in their identity as preaching God's word. The entire Church, and not the hierarchy alone, are entrusted with the word of God. Furthermore the laity are sacramentally consecrated for a full, conscious, active share in the prophetic work of Christ and the mission of the Church and are called and gifted with special charisms for evangelization, teaching and preaching. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit the laity are to undertake the ministry of the word in all its forms.

Secondly, Fairbanks emphasizes the theme of the indispensable role of the laity in the Church's ministry of the word. Here she demonstrates that the Vatican II documents stress how the laity promote the Church's prophetic mission by virtue of their secular character. The laity preach the gospel from the cutting edge of contemporary life. Postconciliar legislation made that ministry evermore explicit in creating lay liturgical ministries. As liturgical ministers the laity embody the full charge of the assembly to preach the word of God.

Finally, Fairbanks claims that these two themes, culled from the documents of Vatican II, can lead to understanding an explicit role of the laity as preachers

in the context of the liturgy. The expanding nature of ecclesial ministry opened up by Vatican II broadened the pastoral charge of the laity as ministers. The Church's preaching mission must mirror that pastoral charge within the worshipping assembly. These people, who have been entrusted with the ministries of the Church, can be commissioned to preach out of their charge and share the liturgical preside with the ordained. Furthermore the laity should exercise the charism for proclamation that originates in their ministry.

Mary Catherine Hilker's response develops and challenges some of these ideas about lay ministry of the word. Especially Fairbanks' distinction between the laity's involvement in the secular sphere and their explicit pastoral charge of the Church prompts the question in this case of the laity's proper ministerial role. By virtue of their involvement in the pastoral care of the community, could not one argue that the laity are fulfilling an ordained function? Hilker goes on to explore the question of the laity sharing in the presidential ministry of the worshipping assembly. As primary ministers, should not the laity embody a "concelebrated" liturgy, especially as the Church at worship in the Eucharist? Hilker cites those who argue that such participation in the presidential ministry would not fracture the sacrament of unity. Finally Hilker explores Fairbanks' ideas about the preaching charism of the laity. Does not the charism of preaching prompt the question of its ordering? Hilker agrees with Fairbanks that one can be called to public ministry of the word that includes liturgical preaching, but not to ordained ministry/sacramental ministry. With the laity taking part in a greater pastoral charge, however, does not that ask for an expanded understanding of ordination to include other forms of commissioning and public recognition and authorization by the Church of the preaching charism?

MARK E. WEDIG

*Barry University
Miami Shores, Florida*