

The changing faces of ministry

By Patricia Zapor

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, about the most involved lay people became in the day-to-day activities at the average Catholic parish was as members of the Holy Name Society or the Altar Guild.

With several priests typically assigned to a parish and a nearby convent full of nuns, lay people filled only minor or peripheral roles in most parishes, such as answering the rectory phone, perhaps serving as "room mother" to an elementary school class, leading the Cub Scout pack or volunteering with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Preparing couples for marriage, planning the liturgy, keeping track of finances, running classes for converts and performing all types of pastoral ministry such as sick calls were strictly the job of "Father." Major functions not handled by priests --- teaching at the parish school, religion classes and other education-related roles --- were the responsibility of "Sister."

The post-Vatican II shift toward lay people being in charge of most of those functions started slowly but in the last few years has expanded dramatically.

Father Eugene Lauer, director of the National Pastoral Life Center in New York, said it was not until the early 1990s that it became common for parishes to employ lay people for roles traditionally held by priests, but now laity in those jobs outnumber priests in parish ministry.

Down with piety. Up with power!

periphery = not near the altar

But the proletariat in the pew is rising up... it's time for revolution, comrades!

We're finding strength in numbers...

He said about 31,000 lay people work in professional pastoral capacities at two-thirds of U.S. parishes. That figure does not include teachers and administrators at Catholic schools, and parish support staff such as secretaries, janitors and bookkeepers. Father Lauer said about 28,000 priests work primarily in parishes.

I am lay person; hear me roar.

"That's a dramatic change from 15 or 20 years ago," he told Catholic News Service.

As recently as 1990, there were only 22,000 lay people working as liturgists, youth ministers, social concerns directors, adult education coordinators or in other professional pastoral positions. Before Vatican II, less than 1 percent of such jobs nationwide would have been filled by lay people, Father Lauer said.

"It was almost an unknown phenomenon," he said.

Nuns and religious brothers technically are also defined as laity, but their numbers since Vatican II are even more dramatically reduced than the number of priests.

I am *non-consecrated* or *disaffected* lay person; hear me roar really loud.

A study for the National Pastoral Life Center published in the most recent issue of Church magazine showed that since 1990 the number of women religious in parish ministry has declined from 41 percent to 16 percent.

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, since 1965 the number of religious women in the United States has dropped from 180,000 to 69,000. The number of religious brothers has decreased from 12,000 to about 5,000. The total of 59,000 priests in the country in 1965 has dropped to about 43,000.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Catholic population has grown from 46 million in 1970 to 68 million in 1990. The number of parishes has grown from 17,700 to 18,900.

Lay people now make pastoral visits to the sick; they plan liturgies, run the music groups, schedule the lectors and extraordinary ministers of holy Communion --- who also are lay people -- and run education programs for adults, engaged couples and children who attend public schools.

William D'Antonio, visiting professor at the Lifecycle Institute at The Catholic University of America in Washington, said although the documents of Vatican II opened the door to lay involvement in nearly all areas of parish ministry, those changes haven't been adopted uniformly.

"In some parishes and dioceses there's a great deal of laity involvement," D'Antonio said. But in some places "there's still an awful lot of authority at the top that can prevent the people who make up the church 'at the bottom' from becoming involved," he said.

Research reveals that the sexual revolution has caused an explosion of faith and evangelical witness in our country.

Lay people must plan the liturgies, and clerics should just show up to take instruction. It's the "work of the people," don't you know.

The revolution has met resistance in some quarters...

But keep up the good fight, comrades!

More money = more and better ministry.
Every time.

Father Lauer said larger parishes with more money are understandably more likely to have lay people as their pastoral staff, but there also are some regional differences that may relate to the number of available priests.

For instance, he said, parishes in the New York Archdiocese are less likely to have lay people in professional parish ministry than are parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago. But for various reasons, such as the number of large church organizations and colleges there, New York has a higher ratio of priests who fill some of those staffing needs.

Parishes in the Midwest and the West, where large parishes are perhaps more common, are more likely than those in the East and South to have lay professional staff. "It has a lot to do with whether parishes can afford them," he said.

Forty-one percent of lay parish ministers have master's degrees in their area of work, the pastoral life center study found. Salaries average about \$38,000 a year. While that might seem to be on the low side for people with graduate degrees, Father Lauer said the study found two-thirds of parish ministers consider their salaries adequate.

With women making up 80 percent of parish lay staff, that job is often a second family income, he noted, making a market-rate salary less important for many people.

More telling is that more than 85 percent of parish lay ministers describe their work as meaningful and satisfying, Father Lauer said. And more than 95 percent said they see themselves working in the church indefinitely or at least for the next few years.

Not only are lay people more involved in ministry at parishes, the people in the pews see a strong role for the laity in their church and they are prepared to run parishes with fewer priests.

A recent survey of conducted by the Lifecycle Institute for the National Catholic Reporter found 89 percent of U.S. Catholics say the laity should have the right to participate in decisions about how parish income is spent. Seventy-two percent of those surveyed said lay Catholics should be able to participate in choosing priests for their parishes. Eighty-three percent said they should be included in decisions about when parishes must be closed.

As the number of priests ministering to U.S. Catholics decreases, a majority of those polled for the Lifecycle Institute said they would find it at least somewhat acceptable to bring in priests from other countries or to share priests with other parishes. Among other options a majority of people said they found somewhat or very acceptable are having a lay parish administrator and visiting priests; merging nearby parishes into one; and sometimes having a Communion service instead of Mass.

Majorities said they would not be willing to accept having Mass less often than once a week or closing their parish altogether.

Meaningful and satisfying = effective apostolic ministry.

We're here to stay (especially in chancery offices and the USCCB). Deal with it, clergy. Or get yourselves some good lawyers.

Let's be honest: Do we really need these antiquated icons of patriarchy anymore? I mean, gosh darn it, we're competent to do the job. What else matters?

The third chapter of [*Lumen Gentium*](#)? I don't know what you're talking about.

We'll still let priests visit.

But we don't need that source and summit thing all the time; what is essential is *gathering*. Wherever people get together, there is the *ecclesia*.

No consequences for a lack of faith, please. Or for the failure to foster priestly vocations.