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Dutch priests endorse right of laity to choose presiders

By PATRICIA LEFEVERE

Dutch Dominican priests are proposing a bold solution to the priest shortage in the Netherlands: Have the laity select leaders from their own faith communities and designate them as the official presiders at Mass.

Using a model based in the early church, the Dominicans propose that the communities then present their chosen local leaders to bishops and request that they be ordained.

The leaders selected may be men or women, homosexuals or heterosexuals, married or single, the Dominicans say in a 38-page booklet, *Kerk en Ambt* ("The Church and the Ministry"), which was widely distributed to Dutch parishes, religious orders and bishops on Aug. 31.

The Dominican authors of the booklet, subtitled "Toward a Church with a Future," maintain there is no theological barrier, but only a clerical impasse -- the law of celibacy -- to ordaining a lay clergy. They cite, for instance, a statement made by the fifth-century Pope Leo the Great: "He who has to lead all should be chosen by all."

Although the booklet reflects questions being raised not only by many of the 4.4 million Catholics in the Netherlands, but by the faithful in many parts of the Catholic world, the primate of the Dutch Catholic church, Cardinal Adrianus Simonis of Utrecht, quickly objected.

Dominican Fr. Jan Nieuwenhuis, one of the booklet's four authors, noted in an interview that Dominicans had anticipated official displeasure over the booklet's distribution without the cardinal's permission. "We knew if we requested it, it would be forbidden, so we went ahead," Nieuwenhuis told *NCR*.

A number of faith communities in the Netherlands are already offering lay-led services or Word and Communion, sometimes called a Eucharist, sometimes given less direct labels. According to the Dominican booklet, some worshipers no longer distinguish between a Mass and "service of Word and Communion," regarding the two to be "of equal value." Many Dutch Catholics are of the mind that with widespread parish closings and importation of foreign priests to fill remaining gaps -- combined with the church's ban on ordaining women and married men -- the official church has opted to protect its priesthood over and against the right of faith communities to celebrate the Eucharist. Abandoning laws that limit ordination to celibate men would be in the best interest of God's people, given their hunger for the Eucharist, the Dominicans assert.

Further, the booklet notes that faith communities are already going their own way, often substituting their own prayers for official texts. According to an unofficial English translation of the booklet, such prayers from below are favored because "they are on the same wavelength as matters people are concerned with in their daily lives." The words and actions laid down by church authority are time and again experienced as obstacles," with the result that many Dutch Catholics "surreptitiously choose their own way," the Dominicans report.

What one finds in the Netherlands is "an underground church, where things happen and bishops do not know, or pretend not to know, and where many parishes don't dare to speak of their situations because they are afraid of the bishops," Nieuwenhuis said. He noted that the nontraditional services are attracting many newcomers -- youth as well as "the gray-haired."

"We have returned to the catacombs, while above the ground no one can or wants to know what is happening down there," the booklet asserts.

The report is based on decades of experience in Dutch churches -- the authors are all senior friars -- and is theologically rooted in part in the writings of Holland's most famous theologian, Flemish Dominican Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx. Schillebeeckx's writings came under Vatican scrutiny three decades ago over alleged heresy in his book *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. Although Schillebeeckx, who turns 93 in November, was not consulted by the Dominicans writing *Kerk en Ambt*, his ideas permeate its pages, and four of his books are referenced.

Dominican Fr. Andre Lascaris, another of the Dominican authors, noted that some parishes have a Liturgy of the Word and a Communion service with pre-consecrated hosts. But Lascaris said a Eucharistic service with pre-consecrated hosts is like receiving "bread and wine" from someone else's table. Imagine, he said, going to a restaurant where "you sit down and they bring you food from another restaurant" in a city far away.

Lascaris, a theologian with the Dominican Study Centre for Theology and Society in Nijmegen, said he hopes that the booklet's recommendations "will bear fruit in the next generation."

Nieuwenhuis said he expects criticism from his own Dominican master general, who was to return to Rome in late September. On Sept. 28, the Vatican issued a statement noting the surprise of the Dominican's Rome-based curia over the document. But Nieuwenhuis is heartened by favorable reaction on the Dutch Dominican Web site, especially from sisters, who, he said, "see this as a new future for the church."

[Patricia Lefevere](#) is a longtime contributor to *NCR*.

On the Web

An English translation of "The Church and The Ministry" may be found in the Special Documents section of [NCRonline.org](#). John Allen's analysis of the document is available in his Daily Column for Sept. 27 on [NCRcafe.org](#).

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