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The Life of a Lay Ecclesial Minister

By Sheila Garcia

"No two 24 hours are alike," says Anne Keough, director of Adult and Family Ministry at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Duncanville, Texas, an outer suburb of Dallas. When I talked with Keough, she was supervising a first reconciliation service for 102 children and had just helped two families prepare funeral liturgies.

Keough oversees 28 areas of parish ministry. She teaches, leads a women's spirituality group and assists with family-centered sacramental preparation for reconciliation, First Eucharist and confirmation. She is the first point of contact for all couples wanting to marry in the parish. She provides ongoing parent education and trains catechists and youth ministers to present programs on human sexuality. A major responsibility is to offer enrichment and direction to the many volunteers on whom she relies.

What is the best part about her work? She likes to watch people grow and take ownership of their faith. "I love to make the teachings of the church come alive for people," she says, citing natural family planning as an example. Her least favorite part? "Paperwork!"

Keough's path to lay ecclesial ministry is typical. She and her husband volunteered to start marriage preparation, marriage enrichment and parenting programs at Holy Spirit. This evolved into a part-time paid position, followed by full-time employment since 1987.

Her graduate work in educational administration, along with her experience in teaching and a Marriage Encounter weekend, prepared her for the ministry. In the mid-1980s she enrolled in a master's degree program over three summers in adult Christian development at Regis University in Denver. The program taught her how to exercise leadership skills within church structures. Keough paid most of her educational expenses herself, with some assistance from the Catholic Church Extension Society.

After 30 years, her enthusiasm for her ministry remains strong. Her sources of support include her husband, four adult children, the Eucharist, prayer and spiritual direction, which, she says, "grounds me and pushes me forward." Pope John Paul II's writings on the family provide a firm foundation for her work, and her colleagues in the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers provide practical assistance and mentoring.

Like many lay ecclesial ministers, Keough faces a future filled with challenges. With an increasingly Hispanic population, the parish is preparing for bilingual ministry. And she believes that since the church needs to meet families where they are, it needs to encourage and support parish-based family ministry.

Keough commented that people in her parish are resilient in the face of change. The same can be said of her. In her words, "If God wants it to happen, God will provide."

(Garcia is associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth.)