

**Catholic Women in Homiletical Leadership:
A Discussion of the Current State of Catholic Women Trained in Homiletics**

Karla J. Bellinger

University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana

Prior to the establishment of the DMin degree at Aquinas Institute in 1996, there was no terminal degree in preaching from a Catholic institution of higher learning. Since that time, eighteen Catholic women have obtained doctorates in preaching. In November of 2014, the author surveyed that population to ask: Who are these women who are prepared for leadership in homiletics? What is their current situation? And what are their hopes, frustrations, and dreams? This essay summarizes the responses to those questions in order to open the discussion about Catholic women in homiletic leadership.

The workshop presenter suggested to the priests and the deacons at the preaching conference, “Ask your people, not to rate you from 1 to 5, but ‘What touched you in the homily? What was the message that you heard?’” She went on to talk about the Holy Spirit as the Maker of meaning, especially through the surprising ideas that listeners take away from the homily.

Another presenter had the room full of priests and deacons laughing about the preacher’s credibility with teenagers in our anti-authoritarian world “Who says?” kind of world. She then talked about the authenticity of the homilist and how to connect with young people in today’s wired world.

A third speaker shared how youngsters delight in learning new big words, like “Emmanuel.” She then spoke of the wonder of the small child and how a preacher at a Catholic school Mass could preach of beauty in a way that evokes reverence in a six-year-old.

Who are these Catholic women who are taking a leadership role in the homiletics world? Is this a new thing? And if so, what is the current status of women in homiletic leadership?

Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, women have contributed to the preaching of the gospel. In the last twenty years, in the United States, a new role has arisen within the world of preaching: the training of Catholic women to teach homiletics and to take a leadership role in the homiletics field. This is a trend about which little is known. Who are these women who are prepared for leadership in homiletics? What is their current situation? And what are their hopes, frustrations, and dreams? This study begins to investigate those questions; it is designed to be a first step in opening the discussion about Catholic women in homiletic leadership.

Catholic women preach (as broadly defined) within the institutional Roman Catholic world in many ways—through retreats, workshops, catechetical sessions, and more. So where to find the population of women to query about homiletical leadership? This study draws from two populations: 1) those who have a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching degree (DMin) and 2) those who are concerned enough with the teaching of homiletics to be a 2014 member of the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics (CATH). A population of twenty-seven women fit those two categories.

A questionnaire with twelve open-ended questions was sent to these women in November of 2014.¹ Four women were not found or their emails were returned; four responded that they would fill it out later and had not done so by the publication of this paper; two were too busy; and two were unwilling to respond. The number of completed responses was fourteen, for a return rate of 52%. Of these fourteen, six were religious sisters and eight were lay women; one

¹ See the appendix for the questions of the survey.

had an MA in theology, one had an MDiv, eleven had a DMin in preaching and one had a DMin in another discipline.

History and Demographics

Prior to 1996, there was no terminal degree in preaching from a Catholic institution of higher learning. Those professors who taught homiletics in seminaries did so without formal advanced Catholics homiletics training. Catholic women involved in homiletics leadership obtained a (at the time, rare) degree in theology, commonly the MDiv; others sought homiletics instruction at Protestant institutions. For example, Joan Delaplane, OP, MDiv, helped to found homiletics education at Aquinas Institute. Patricia Hughes Baumer, MDiv, formed Partners in Preaching to promote lay preaching. These women were active in homiletic leadership well before the doctorate in preaching degree was established.²

Since 1996, eighteen Catholic women have received a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching degree.³ Eight of these are religious sisters. Ten are laywomen. The graduation dates range from 1996 to 2014. In the early days of homiletic leadership education, religious sisters predominated (see figure one). There was a sizable gap in the number of graduates between 2004 and 2011, with only two women receiving degrees in that time period. Since 2011, there has been a clear shift toward graduates who are lay women, almost all of whom are married and have children.

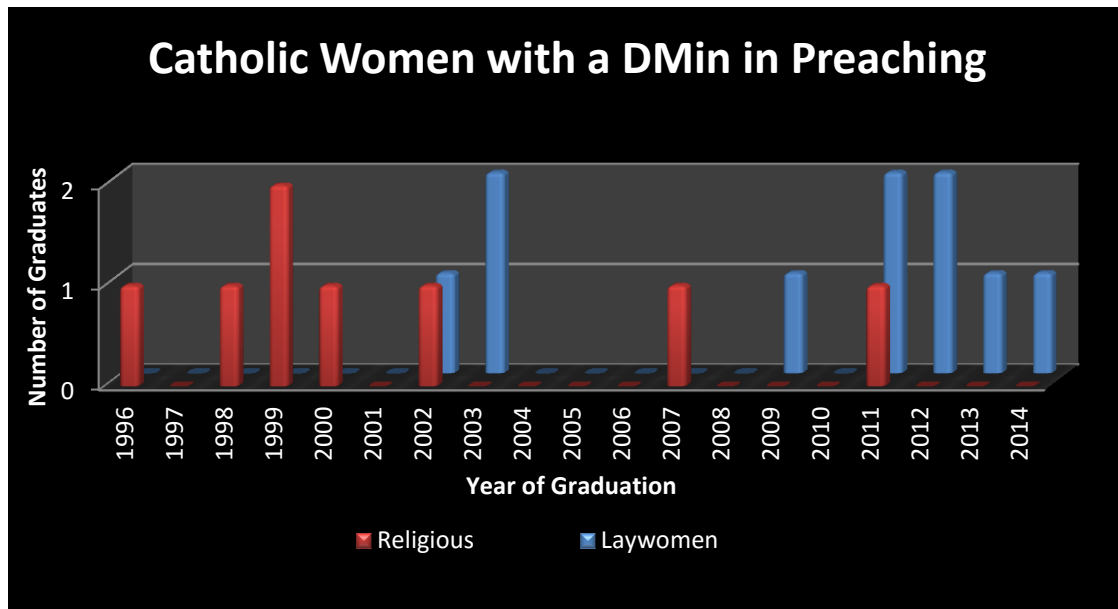


Figure 1 - Catholic women with a DMin in Preaching degree, by year of graduation

² The DMin is a practical, hands-on degree; there is no Catholic PhD in preaching. This means, as an unintended side effect, that women who are not permitted to teach in Catholic seminaries, are also largely shut out of Protestant seminaries and other university teaching positions that require a PhD.

³ Seventeen of these graduated from Aquinas Institute of Theology in Saint Louis, MO; one graduated from a Protestant seminary. There may be other female Catholic DMin graduates of Protestant institutions who are not members of CATH and thus were not found and included in this study. Eleven out of the potential eighteen, or sixty-one percent (61%), of the women known to have doctorates in preaching responded to the survey.

Women's Roles in Homiletic Leadership

What are these homiletically educated Catholic women doing with their training in homiletics? Out of the fourteen survey respondents, none of these women has a full-time paid position in homiletics. Nine are doing something homiletical on a part-time basis with various clergy populations: one directs a preaching program that combines with the leadership of a non-homiletical program to be a full-time position; one teaches seminarians as an adjunct professor; five teach in diaconal preaching programs with varying levels of responsibility; three focus on the ongoing education of clergy or work in other homiletical capacities. Homiletical involvement is creative: these women seek out ways to influence homiletics even without a full-time income in the field. Three do consulting and/or work as independent contractors. Five have written books and/or articles about preaching; two books have been published this year (2014). Four are on the "speaking circuit." Three others do not work with homiletics leadership at all. Two are retired.⁴

Current Roles in Homiletic Leadership

Full-time in homiletics – 0
Part-time in homiletics – 9
 Directing DMin students (1)
 Teaching seminarians (1)
 Teaching deacons (5)
 Ongoing formation/other (3)
Consulting/independent contractor – 3
Write books, articles – 5
On the "Speaking circuit" – 4
No involvement, not retired – 3
Retired – 2

What do these women do when/if they are not involved in homiletic leadership? Three are parish directors of religious education (DRE) or lay pastoral associates. Three have diocesan leadership positions—two of these have responsibilities that include the formation of deacons and/or lay people. Two are involved in spiritual direction and three minister on retreat teams. One teaches full-time at a university in another discipline.

Where do these women see themselves making an impact in the field of homiletics? Those who teach in some capacity see that teaching as a source of influence:

- My main influence is in the teaching I do.
- Teach permanent deacons. What you teach and what they are able to grasp, will be taken in some format to the ambo.
- Helping with teaching future deacons.
- In this archdiocese, women do not teach in the seminary division, therefore we do not teach seminarians.
- Part of the homiletic team at the seminary; we have made an impact on the quality of preaching in our parishes throughout the diocese due to the ordinandi that we have sent forth.

Writing and speaking about preaching is a place where these women have made a difference—preaching conferences, journal articles, and books are sources for their voices to be heard:

- writing for Ed Foley's upcoming book on preaching
- do conference speaking where a good number of priests and deacons are present
- published six articles last year, a book this year
- still do some work with an older book on preaching

⁴ Many serve in more than one of these roles, thus the numbers do not add up to fourteen responses.

Some see the personal relationships formed with clergy as effecting preaching improvement, especially through personal coaching or mentoring:

- I see an opportunity in coaching or supervision of deacons or priests.
- Evaluating and training missionary speakers
- Private coaching of preachers and advising small groups of clergy
- Mentoring seminarians
- Mentoring doctoral students/candidates

Women’s Roles as Preachers

When preaching is defined more broadly than giving a homily at a Sunday liturgy, where does this talented group of women preach? Ten of them do retreats, workshops, convocations, and/or missions: they “model effective speaking through other venues.” Where do they find these “gigs”? One respondent says, “Women are not ‘allowed’ to preach, so, any opportunities usually are created by word of mouth and connections.” In their words, here are some of their venues for preaching:

- Days of Recollection to various groups, especially during the Seasons of Advent and Lent
- Retreats for women/parish councils
- Training lectors/proclaimers
- Just did a diocesan lay convocation, about to be the keynoter at a deacon convocation
- Preached retreats each year throughout the USA and Canada
- In faith formations sessions, at retreat days, and at funeral vigils
- I have occasionally preached at Morning Prayer for the [lay] formation program.

Place where you preach (as broadly defined)

Retreats, missions, workshops – 10
Home parish, Sunday Eucharist – 1
Parish events/bible studies/formation sessions – 3
Motherhouse/retirement center – 4
Online at word.op.org – 4
Conference presentations – 3
Everyday life – 1
Nowhere – 2

Three lend their voices to parish events, bible studies, and formation sessions. One preaches liturgically on a monthly basis in her home parish with her bishop’s permission. Four preach at their motherhouse or retirement center: “community jubilees... and at evening prayer when invited to do so.”

Three women speak of giving conference presentations: I am “on the speaking circuit at present. I do workshops / retreats / key note talks for a variety of different dioceses and religious congregations.” Four women preach online at the Dominican preaching site, www.word.op.org.

Have these opportunities differed in the past? One woman said that the prospect to work in homiletics has been “like a reversed trumpet”— many, many opportunities had been open to her at first and they have now narrowed to almost none. She finds that where there was once much enthusiasm for Catholic preaching formation, in the past fifteen years, it has declined to very little. Three of the women surveyed had been employed in full-time homiletics positions in the past. Two had been “promoters of preaching” for their religious order. Four others described a formerly more robust picture of their part-time homiletics work. Recent graduates and lay women (from figure one, the two run in close parallel) describe the greatest challenges in the opportunities to use their homiletical education.

Occasions for the practice of preaching have also changed. Lay preaching flourished in the 1990's in many dioceses:

- In the past, I preached at least once a month on Sundays.
- Preached at weekday communion services weekly.
- I used to enjoy it very much—we had lay preachers at Mass once/month. That has pretty much shut down, except for two parishes where a lay preacher gives a homily before Mass and the presider recaps that briefly (though supply preachers don't always get the memo).

During their doctoral coursework, some women practiced preaching:

- Several years ago I had the opportunity to preach to my local congregation once a month when I was preparing for my doctorate. After receiving the doctorate it lasted for about another year at which time I was reported to the Archbishop by someone in the congregation. The pastor was reminded of Canon Law rules by the Archbishop and he no longer felt comfortable allowing me to preach. The pastor had been ordained only two years.
- I used to do a homily at the “word and communion” services in the Catholic school where I taught. Then the bishop decreed that only deacons and priests can preside at communion services, so that was shut down.

In the mid-2000's, possibilities for lay preaching began to diminish. For those deeply involved in the training of lay ministers, this has been discouraging. When asked about her preaching leadership, one woman says that opportunities are “None. Tired. Getting out of it.” Two women are not finding occasions to preach. Another said, “I am used to much more experience. I feel stifled now.” Today, in late 2014, lay preaching at the Sunday Eucharist is largely a brief and past memory in the U.S. Catholic experience.

Several women focused on the broader sense of preaching in everyday life. They have found meaning in the relationships that they nurture:

- Initially, I may have thought of preaching as speaking specifically from the ambo; certainly my knowledge and my thoughts have changed. While that is a part of it, how one lives their life is for me a big part of preaching.
- My family is my joy. Preaching is my joy. Loving God and loving others is my joy.

Additionally, the witness of one's life and the unique experiences of women provide a source for preaching:

- I preach wherever I am. Preaching rarely needs words. Preaching is also the way one lives his or her life.
- To give the feminine perspective on the Word—refreshing, creative, merciful.
- Post-abortion ministry to incarcerated women holds preaching potential for me and for influencing the field of homiletics. Male clergy do not really want to preach on pregnancy, birth and abortion and this area offers unique opportunities for women to find their preaching voices and change lives.
- Some of the best preaching happens away from the ambo.

The Joys and Frustrations of Homiletically Trained Catholic Women

When asked about both the joys and the frustrations of being a homiletically trained woman in the Catholic Church, these women had much to say. This is the first time that some of them have had a venue through which to voice their experiences. One said, “I have found that a Catholic woman in homiletics can sometimes be in a very lonely place because the numbers are few.” As the responses have been categorized, it is apparent that these women have much in common; since they are so spread out geographically and by graduation cohort,⁵ rarely do they have an opportunity to discuss these experiences together.

Two joys surfaced most consistently: 1) touching the lives of others and; 2) the sense of fulfilling a call to share the gospel. Joy comes from the making a difference in someone’s life and the responsiveness of audiences:

- One joy has been when a member of the assembly says that he or she saw the scriptures, or the world, or his or her own life differently. The God of scripture is still with us in the living text of our lives.
- ...the thought that maybe there’s some young woman or girl in the assembly thinking, ‘Hey, she’s doing that... I could do that, too... and I’d like to,’ and that there’s some young man or boy who doesn’t think that anything out of the ordinary is happening.
- I am filled with joy when the fruit of my prayer, reflection on the word and crafting a homily, all comes together and touches the hearts of those listening.
- I love the idea of “something to talk about in the car on the way home,” and I hope to pose the right kinds of questions that give all of us every chance to keep the conversation going.
- This kind of work really has been a great joy to me. I get to meet lots and lots of people and touch their lives and have them touch mine, even if just for a brief moment. But I begin to discover a wonderful network of spirit-filled people that are all over the country—indeed, world.
- The responsiveness of audiences (harder online to get feedback), the joy of someone’s life being impacted for the better.
- People’s response is also a source of joy for me as I recognize God’s Spirit at work through me and them.
- [I take pleasure in] the joy of someone’s life being impacted for the better.
- The “aha!” moments.

The second most common joy came from a sense of fulfilling a call, from loving to preach the gospel, wherever and whenever that preaching occurs:

- When I have preached at Morning Prayer, I have enjoyed sharing the message and encouraging the formation participants.
- Writing reflections, and giving presentations on various topics.
- ... considering how many obstacles women in preaching face, that some of us are

⁵ Note from figure 1, how spread out are the DMin graduation rates. In the recent model of preaching DMin education, women in the same cohort have seen each other (intensively) twice per year. The earlier residential DMin programs afforded a greater degree of interaction. Neither model assures post-graduation communication and interaction. The overwhelming majority of these women’s doctoral classmates have been male Roman Catholic clergy, occasionally interspersed with a few female Protestant ministers.

- out there preaching.
- I am most “myself” when preparing to preach and preaching.

As mentioned earlier, joys also come from personal and family relationships, teaching deacons and seminarians, and using the homiletical education to be an effective speaker in diverse situations.

Frustrations are also a part of the experience of many Catholic women trained in homiletics. Disrespect and the lack of opportunities were the two frustrations most frequently mentioned. This can lead to “a sense of sadness. Not bitter, but sad.” Some responded that “Frustrations abound!” and “My frustrations are many, too many to list.” Again, the emotion of sadness was expressed: “Numerous. Sad to see the doors closing for women. A valuable voice.”

When the responses were categorized, the greatest frustration for these trained and talented women was disrespect. Disrespect and dismissiveness came from many quarters:

- Disrespect is probably #1. It is difficult to count the number of people including clergy making remarks, i.e., “You may have a doctorate in preaching, but you can’t preach, you’re not allowed.”
- The push-back from clergy – “who do *you* think that *you are* that *you* can teach us anything about preaching?”
- Disrespect of reputation when you are out of the box in their eyes.
- An undertone of dismissiveness in the attitude of clergy – they are cordial to your face, but then make disparaging comments about you, to each other, behind your back.
- Not being acceptable as a potential hiree for a position in homiletics in many Catholic institutions.
- It frustrates me when I meet young men who dismiss women as unable to preach. But I am in a space now where I tend not to interact much with those young men and so they don’t bug me much.
- One frustration is convincing leadership (ordained and non-ordained) that women can offer credible pastoral preaching. There seems to be minimal respect for the knowledge, skill, credentials, experience and commitment of women as preachers.
- I notice a different set of standards and expectations when I do preach. For example, the community where I preached my reflections for the DMin requirements had a so-so preacher in my well-informed opinion. He needed more feedback than I did. But the community thought he was great because they see the collar and because he has an on-going relationship with them as a person of authority in that community. When I preached, the community saw it as fulfilling an assignment rather than fulfilling a vocation to preach.
- Recently, I was privy to a conversation with Bishops to hear what they felt were the issues in their Diocese with preaching. None of them had a word to say about hearing from women. This leads me to believe it is not on their list of concerns.
- I believe women do not support other women. I observe that, generally, women still need the approval of men in my opinion. And in the church, men “allow” women to preach.
- Well, for one thing when our diocese was looking for someone to present on homiletics for the priest convocation, the head of hiring said, “I know you’re capable, but I don’t think it would go over. You know...”

The second frustration that arose most commonly from the responses of these women was the lack of opportunities to use their gifts and experiences as women. The assumption may be that they would all complain about not being able to preach at Eucharistic celebrations. While this did come up in response to this question, it was not the only source of frustration. Opportunities to give feedback were sought. The silencing of the female experience was also felt as painful:

- The voices and experiences of women strengthen the church—find a way for those silent voices to be heard.
- Being trained, having 15 years of experience under my belt, teaching homiletics, and yet not having a regular venue/format.
- Not being allowed to preach at Eucharistic celebrations ordinarily.
- I do get frustrated when I see terribly poor preaching in Mass and it frustrates me not to be able to say something substantive in those situations.
- The greatest frustration is that I am able to teach those preparing for ordination but am not able to preach as freely as they are able.
- My own personal “impostor syndrome”... given I don’t preach often or regularly, when I do, I sometimes doubt my own vocation. I know I shouldn’t do this, but I do.
- My frustration is that it seems like only the women are speaking up for a chance to preach. Why isn’t the whole body of Christ asking to hear from the whole body of Christ?
- Finding a regular pulpit. Really I suppose, finding a community that affirms my vocation to preach. Right now for me, it’s the [] motherhouse.
- It is difficult to improve when you don’t have regular access to a pulpit.
- Lack of opportunity, letters of protest to the bishop, lack of institutional standing...don’t get me started. I get discouraged that even though I preach regularly, that preaching doesn’t exist in the context of any institutional recognition, and that it takes place by the permission of a long line of men. Don’t get me wrong—I’m GRATEFUL for that support and for the courage and forward thinking that it takes to provide that support. I’m just sad that it’s necessary.
- My frustration is heightened when I hear homilies that do not offer deep nourishment or challenge or cause one to experience God in a variety of ways and I know of several women who can do that.

A few women were so busy that they didn’t have time for frustration or have processed those frustrations:

- I realize this is going to sound odd, but I have very few.... Mostly that it is because I’ve given up trying to look for opportunities to preach during Mass, and simply respond to invitations that do come my way. I am not at all against those who struggle to create opportunities—indeed, I am grateful for their efforts and do think that there is a real place for struggle within the church. I just have stopped doing it myself, because I am so busy as it is with what I *can* do, that I don’t have the time/energy to try to create more opportunities.
- I don’t really have time to be angry; it is not part of my call right now.
- I am working really hard to do whatever I can to improve Catholic preaching; I have had frustrations in the past and I am sure that I will have them in the future,

but at this moment, I am so focused on what I am doing, that frustration has to take a back seat for now.

Advice for a Catholic Woman Considering Furthering Her Education in Homiletics

Knowing what they know and experiencing what they have experienced in the field of Catholic homiletics, what advice would these women give to another woman who is considering furthering her homiletical education? This particular question created the greatest volume of ink of all of the questions in the survey. The advice closely paralleled the experienced joys and the frustrations mentioned earlier. Quite a few women said “Yes!” and “Go for it!”:

- I would say to her “follow your dream.” I would say, “Do not allow anyone to take away your joy.” I would also tell her that many people will try to discourage her because of the circumstances of the church, but preaching is not just speaking to the congregation on Sunday morning; rather, it is a way of life.
- I would greatly encourage her to do so and then to take every opportunity that comes her way to preach, even in churches of other denominations.
- I use what I learned in the field of homiletics every day of my life, in ways that have nothing to do with Sunday Eucharistic preaching.
- And really, if a call has been placed on your heart, do you have any other option than to follow it?
- If you are called to preach, the Lord will open a door. Be ready. Study. Listen to good preaching and look for opportunities outside of the Eucharistic liturgy to offer the gifts you have for this ministry.
- Be brave. Be honest. Be creative. Be prepared to work very hard!

A few women would discourage another from the following the path that she had taken:

- Become Protestant. No really.
- Do not assume you will be using the education and formation in the field of homiletics ~ in fact, you may become frustrated.

Other women responded with a qualified “maybe”; they suggested that a woman think very carefully about her goals in pursuing graduate work in homiletics:

- Do it for yourself; don’t expect it to become your career or you set yourself up for disappointment.
- Well, it will be a somewhat difficult field to break into if you are hoping to be able to do it as a career, i.e. earn a decent salary doing it. However, if money is unattached to your consideration—there are truckloads of opportunities to use what you learn in terms of public speaking and teaching in the Catholic tradition. The number of parishes and small Christian communities who are looking for good speakers/retreat offerings on any given topic are endless. I have to turn down far more than I say “yes” to.
- She needs to create environments in which to preach because of the rarity of preaching at Sunday liturgies in a parish. There are other possibilities, but often those possibilities may not be looked upon as preaching. For example, I consider song as preaching, and reflections I give on retreats or on days of reflection to be a form of preaching.

- To prepare yourself for a future that God is planning for the Church? In my own thinking, I knew that God was calling me to preach in the Church. My only obligation was to prepare myself the best I could for that call, not to actually succeed at that call. I figure that when I reach the pearly gates, God will say “Did you do the best that you could with the gifts that you were given?” and I want to say “yes”.
- Be prepared to prepare for a ministry that may be exercised only in the distant future.
- Think carefully and vocationally. I would not advise any woman to choose homiletics as a career path, but only for the joy of learning more about it and because God is calling her.
- Understand the [stained-]glass ceiling is in place. Possibly she won’t be the one to break it but she will bump it and pave the way for others to do the same.

Areas for Growth and Hopes for the Future

What is the future of women in homiletical leadership? Where are there areas for growth? One woman felt that there is a change in the air: “With greater shared-leadership under Pope Francis, there may be much greater input from women at all levels.” Another woman looked at this question from a historical point of view:

Well, I guess you could say that the potential for growth is everywhere, given how restricted, regulated, and rejected our presence can be. And I make that comment knowing, especially after a conversation with Joan Delaplaine several years ago, how far even the concept of women preachers has come. As more women enter the field and the people of God become accustomed to hearing the scriptures interpreted by both women and men, my hope would be that we could simply think of homilists (and I’m using that term deliberately)—not women or men preachers, the way we think of doctors, not “women doctors” or “men doctors.” I think that [those] whom God calls to vocation, the Church rejects to its detriment and to the detriment of the people of God.

In the current Church climate, seminary positions in homiletics are closed to non-ordained applicants. Those women who have recently applied to available Catholic seminary positions have been rejected because they are not male clergy, even though their qualifications may be markedly higher than those who are ultimately selected for the position. Among those women in preaching who are trained to teach homiletics, there was some hope expressed about other institutions:

- If the seminaries are not open to women, how about the universities? Hope that university preaching/witness/evangelization programs can grow to support women who can teach how to preach the gospel—through homiletics and in everyday life.
- Women can teach when the institution does not require an ordained instructor!
- Academia has provided rich opportunities for women to create opportunities to preach and teach and evangelize so we need to continue to support one another there.

Simmering beneath the surface is a hope that their voices may one day be heard:

- I think women have the potential to bring the homily to a new place. There are so many lived experiences quite frankly that mostly white single males do not bring to the table. One of the primary reasons I wanted to impact homiletics as an African American woman was to understand how “my” story fit into the realm of the Scriptures. I did not hear that on Sunday morning. Rarely do I hear it still. If I allow myself to think about the rules of Canon Law, I am not permitted to even tell my story at least on Sunday morning. Jesus never said, Love God, and judge others or Love God, silence the rest. Where is that found in the Scriptures? My hope is that women will soon be able to offer their gifts and talents to the fullest for the benefit of God’s kingdom.
- This [the preaching of women] should never be viewed as a threat to the pastor; the pastor is responsible for all ministries (music, Eucharistic ministers, lectors, etc.), and this could include the homily (although if I were pastor, I’d have a hard time giving my preaching spot to any one---including the deacon!)
- I would say time’s a wasting.....we are trained and ready....what are you so afraid of? I would say the faithful deserve better preaching in diverse voices.
- With the married permanent deacons who preach, many of them depend on their wives to give them feedback, critique and ideas. I am aware of this through the deacons and deacon formation students with whom I work.
- I hope the ecclesial powers start looking for women to preach. That they realize they need all the voices in the choir, so to speak.

A second hope is that someday there will be institutional change, whether in Canon Law, in changes in ordination requirements, and/or in being given faculties to preach. It may not be an expectation, but it is a hope:

- If we can become deacons, or the position of pastoral associate opens the privilege up to women.
- Give the women who are prepared opportunities to preach even at the Eucharist.
- Theoretically potential areas for growth should be where lay ministers are, given the majority of them are women. It is my hope that trained, lay preachers can regularly preach the homily.
- I see growth in the Catholic Church when they loosen up the Canon Law. That is my hope and my dream.
- For women to be allowed to preach at the Sunday liturgy—for the good of the Church.
- I would draw attention to the fact that it is the Holy Spirit who gives charisms; preaching is a charism. Ordination does not make a preacher. I would ask the church to call forth men and women to serve in the church according to his or her God-given charisms.

In the midst of institutional push-back, the creativity of these women shows itself in their hopes for the future of preaching. Many feel called to preach the Word of God; they believe that they can make an impact in non-traditional and non-Eucharistic ways. They suggest that growth will come as homiletically-trained women take every opportunity that comes their way:

- I hope that by taking advantage of opportunities to preach more, people will realize the gift that is offered and create more possibilities for it.

- I think that opportunities to preach during Mass are limited for the time being, but I have visited places where there are parish life coordinators who preach on a somewhat regular basis during SCAP services. Definitely lots of opportunities for women in prisons, retreat centers, conferences, Advent/Lent prayer services, RCIA, nursing homes, school settings, campus ministry, Catholic health care gatherings, etc... My hopes would be that we just start doing it in a variety of places and stop waiting to be asked to do it specifically in Mass.
- As someone teaching deacon candidates, I believe that I have a direct influence!
- Potential for women in non-traditional areas—consulting, retreats, workshops.
- Women need to take every possible opportunity for preaching—and invent a few!
- We need to hear women in order to come to wholeness as a body! In this day and age it is unbelievable that as a church we do not allow women to preach or to be ordained. Our whole image of God is skewed by this as well.
- [Women] bring a unique and refreshing, deep and creative perspective. They should be included on a regular basis.
- The Church is lacking when women’s voices are missing from the pulpit. Women preachers add a dimension, an understanding, missing in our present situation. Inclusion of women would only enrich the Church.
- Consider re-defining homiletics as preaching in a variety of settings, not just the Eucharistic liturgy.
- Outside of the mainstream, we can be creative in finding venues of influence.
- Additionally, I believe that my own preaching (OK, I *hope* that my own preaching!) influences the field both present and future.
- I continue to encourage our Dominican sisters to preach as well as our Dominican associates, both women and men. I urge preaching at prayer services, retreats, etc. because these possibilities are available to all who have the gift for preaching.
- We need to talk about the authority to preach, honoring the vocation of preaching as emerging from our baptism not ordination, and about lay preachers supporting lay preachers. We need to create our own opportunities to preach.
- Preaching online is a new pulpit completely opened to us women.

Interest in Coming Together

Being so spread apart, how much conversation is going on among women trained in homiletics? Would they be interested in further conversation with other women in the field? Currently, some of the respondents have no other homiletically trained women to converse with but would be interested in that type of conversation:

- Not much lately, but I have been in the past—and I miss it.
- Minimally. Yes, I would be interested. Post-DMin, I miss the dialogue, the learning, the support, the community, feedback etc., etc.
- Rarely. Yes.
- No. Yes, definitely!

Conversation among groups of women trained in homiletics occurs primarily through CATH meetings, the Academy of Homiletics, and the Notre Dame summer preaching conferences.

Other than those venues, conversations tend to be one-on-one, among those who have continued to stay in touch as friends, or with others in a religious community or work setting. Some women are satisfied with these relationships and are not interested in engaging in a wider conversation:

- Only privately. Good enough.
- I was at one time [in conversation]; I was a member of the Academy of Homiletics, of CATH, and of various Dominican women’s groups. Because of other congregational responsibilities, I have stepped back from that.
- Not right now. (*not clear if that is an answer to the first question or the second or both*)
- I am not in conversation per se with other women in homiletics, but I do have the opportunity to engage with women who are quite capable in this area even though they do not have the formal training.
- Right now I am not directly involved with women trained in homiletics. I don’t think I would be interested in conversing for myself, however, I would welcome resources and ideas for the women in the lay ecclesial ministry track of the diocesan common formation program.

In the middle are those who have some conversation already going on and might ponder further conversation on a conditional basis, depending on what that conversation entailed:

- Yes, some. Maybe, maybe not.
- Yes... Possibly interested in other women but I’d rather the conversation be inclusive.
- I am in contact with other women who’ve been trained in homiletics and have the gift of running into them on a somewhat regular basis at conferences and what not. I don’t think I could add another regular gathering in my life right now, but I would continue to enjoy conversing with women in this field!

From the ambivalence of the responses, there does not appear to be a clear mandate for “The National Association of Catholic Women in Homiletic Leadership” to be up and running any time soon, but further conversation may be warranted. Support, encouragement, and camaraderie can strengthen these women in their ministries.

What Other Questions Need to Be Asked?

This survey focused on Catholic women who are trained to be leaders in homiletics: those invested enough in the teaching of homiletics to be members of CATH and/or those who have doctoral degrees in preaching. When asked if there was anything else that needed to be asked, the topic “women in homiletics” engendered questions about the broader population of Catholic women who themselves “preach,” as well as inquiries into sources of authority to preach. These suggested research questions would broaden the study of “Catholic women in homiletics” further:

- What other populations of women should we be looking at? How broadly are we defining “preaching” and who is authorized to do it?
- I suppose the big question, one to which I have no answer, is: *Should women be seeking access to the [Catholic homiletics] field, or is the field itself irremediably damaged?* The surface-level questions—and they’re important—are easier to ask

and easier to mobilize people for, but under each of these is a profound question about what the people of God really need and how we are to participate in God's saving, self-giving love for the cosmos.

- Ask about “the difference in funding of programs in homiletics between clergy and the laity.”
- Why not ask the church community what they need?

Conclusions

Women trained in homiletic leadership are a recent phenomenon in the Catholic Church. Their numbers are small. Many work part-time in homiletical leadership, creating opportunities wherever and whenever they can. These are talented women who have much to offer; it is as an entire cadre of star quarterbacks sit on the sidelines. The field of Catholic homiletics needs all the help that it can get—even Pope Francis says that clergy and laypeople suffer through homilies: “The laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!”⁶ As lifelong listeners of homilies, women trained in homiletics have a unique perspective to share on how to improve preaching in the Catholic Church.

What can be done to help? Since most opportunities come through personal contact or word of mouth, those who are in positions of authority can open doors to create places for women to use their gifts and their training for the service of the Catholic Church. How? From the words of women themselves, their first desire is to be respected for the education and talents that they have. Secondly, recommending/engaging them as speakers, unlocking occasions for employment/teaching, and providing venues for writing are meaningful ways for these female voices to be heard. The women can also continue (or improve) their support of each other, both by conversation and by mentoring those who come after them.

What is to come? One respondent gave this piece of advice to Catholic women in homiletic leadership: “Be brave. Be patient. Be hopeful.” Only God knows what the future holds.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* #135.

Appendix

Survey Questionnaire

Catholic Women in Homiletics

Opening the Conversation

Please answer as completely as you are able by filling in this Word document and then reattach it to the original email. All responses will be kept confidential.



- 1) What is your educational level in homiletics? Year of completion?

- 2) What is your current position? Full-time? Part-time? A homiletics position – yes or no?

- 3) Please list relevant positions that you have held in the past. Was it a homiletics position – yes or no?

- 4) What do you see as your current opportunities to influence the field of homiletics? Sunday homilists?

- 5) Where do you currently preach (as broadly defined)? What are your joys?

- 6) If your answer to (5) has been different in the past, how has that differed?

- 7) Where do you see potential areas for growth for women to impact homiletics? What are your hopes?

- 8) What frustrations do you/have you had as a Catholic woman in homiletics?

- 9) What advice would you give to a woman who was considering furthering her education in homiletics?

- 10) Are you in conversation with other women trained in homiletics? Would you be interested in conversing with other women in homiletics?

11) What other questions do we need to ask so that we best portray a well-rounded picture of the situation of women in homiletics?

12) If you could say more to the Church about women in preaching, what would you add?
Anything else?