"While qualified lay people can currently preach in the Church, they are prohibited from offering the homily at Mass. Heille and his colleagues, in the spirit of the Synod on Synodality, authored this proposal on lay eucharistic preaching. Informative and grounded in Church teaching, this treatise is an indispensable resource to those committed to understanding the canonical, theological, and pastoral considerations. In response to this proposal, the Vatican has acknowledged the issue and the need for deliberations. As the authors urge, the current gap should not be pitched as competition between laity and clergy. The treatises invite us, more importantly, to reflect on who we are as Church, how our baptism imparts responsibilities and charisms to all the faithful to proclaim the kingdom of God, and how we serve and help each other on this journey. Such reflections foster our imagination of the synodal eucharistic pulpit as a community in a context of adaptation of the liturgy over time."

—Carolyn Woo, former president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services

"Guided by Pope Francis's vision of the future synodal Church, Dominican Gregory Heille has gathered a veritable symphony of expert voices on lay preaching. In this important and timely topic, these preachers and teachers leave no stone unturned for an interrogation of the present state of Christian proclamation, while constructing an artful path forward: from a theology of ministry for lay eucharistic preaching, to a New Testament basis for such homiletics, toward an exploration of genuine, charismatic witness of the prophetic for the twenty-first century. Be ready to take a long-awaited, deep breath into the labor of the Spirit! This text will set the gold standard on a long-awaited exploration on lay preaching for years to come."

—Guerric DeBona, OSB, Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology

Lay Eucharistic Preaching in a Synodal Catholic Church

Edited by
Gregory Heille, OP



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Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Sara Fairbanks

The road to St. Patrick's Cathedral in Auckland, New Zealand, was lined with pink shoes to protest the painful discrimination women experience at the hands of the Catholic Church. The women organizing the protest timed the event during Women's Suffrage Day. In 1893, New Zealand was the first country where women won the right to vote!

JoAnn Ayers, one of the organizers, said, "It's women's suffrage anniversary and we're saying through our event that even though women can run New Zealand—we've had women as prime minister, governor general, and chief justice—in the church we're second class and we're saying to the church it's time for change." While today a small percentage of called, gifted, and theologically trained women do various forms of liturgical preaching, the sight of women preaching the Gospel when most of the faithful gather for Sunday worship is still extremely

1. Peter Kirkwood, "New Zealand Catholic Women Display 'Pink Shoes' to Call for Equality in the Church," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 26, 2022, https://www.ncronline.org/news/new-zealand-catholic-women-display-pink-shoes-call-equality-church.

rare, especially with the pushback against the Second Vatican Council. While laymen can take the diaconal road to the pulpit, women are left in the ditch, half-dead. Like the priest and the Levite, many of the church's clergy pass us by, blind and indifferent to our plight.

Many women preachers excluded from the Sunday pulpit experience heart-wrenching rejection. They are stripped of their baptismal identity as "other Christs," equal partners with Christ in the preaching ministry. As a result, the community gathered for Sunday worship rarely experiences the unique ways that the risen Jesus continues to proclaim the Gospel through the voice and lives of women he so values.

The long-held liturgical tradition signifying that Catholic women lack the capacity, right, and duty to preach at the Sunday Eucharist attacks the dignity of women as created in the image of God. Women in the pews are robbed of the opportunity to hear the gospel preached in their own language, interpreted from women's perspectives and life experiences. Until we frequently see and listen to women preach from the pulpit, we will never say, as I once did many years ago, "Wow, I didn't realize women had the spiritual gifts and capacity to preach with such power and conviction."

Jesus asks us, "Who was a neighbor to the robbers' victim?"The true jolt of Jesus' parable is that the enemy Samaritan turns out to be the good neighbor. The Sunday Eucharist need not be a battleground in a war between the sexes. It's about baptismal call, not competition. Women liturgical preachers are a gift of the Holy Spirit, a fire in the church that enkindles faith. These women, called by the living Christ who dwells within them, have the right and duty to serve in collaboration with their brothers as equal partners in the church's mission of liturgical preaching at the Eucharist.

Promoting synodality, Pope Francis loves to image the church as the Good Samaritan who responds in solidarity to those who are poor and on the margins. Mary's prophetic Magnificat resounds as the mighty are brought low and the lowly raised through roundtable discussions, deliberations, and voting. Mary Magdalene's "I have seen the Lord!" is heard with believing ears from her brothers. The church as the Good Samaritan echoes the voice of Jesus, who beckons women, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matt 7:7)—that is to say, "You are important to me, and I will hear your voice. Your words will not return to me empty."

As a church of the Good Samaritan, we must never demonize our brothers and sisters but lovingly stand our ground and learn to listen and speak the truth. With God's grace, our secret hearts will risk giving voice to our dream that women and men will one day exercise an equal partnership in the church's preaching mission. We ask our church: Where do you stand? Will you pass women by, or will you lift them up? Brothers and sisters, won't you be my neighbor?²

^{2.} These welcoming remarks to participants at our symposium on "The Pastoral Charge for Lay Catholic Eucharistic Preaching" were preached at Night Prayer at Aquinas Institute of Theology on March 12, 2024. The symposium also received preachings by Kayla August, Megan McElroy, Megan Effron, Wayne Cavalier, and Kerstin-Marie Berretz.

A Synodal Path Forward

Gregory Heille

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

-Galatians 3:28

hen it comes to laywomen or laymen preaching the homily at Catholic Mass, notwithstanding the canonical prohibition of this practice, the question "Won't you be my neighbor?" invites a synodal reexamination in light of the church's theology and practice of baptism, Eucharist, and ministry.

In December 2022, eight lay ecclesial ministers currently studying or having graduated from Aquinas Institute of Theology's doctor of ministry in preaching asked their faculty to more intentionally give theological backing to their preaching ministry, lest they be all dressed up for the preaching ministry but have no place to go to exercise their calling. In March 2024, we responded to this petition with a synodal symposium on "The Pastoral Charge for Lay Catholic Eucharistic Preaching." The twenty-seven preachers and theologians participating

in this symposium submitted a formal petition to the Synod on Synodality for its second session in Rome in October 2024, and we were delighted to see the fruits of our labor in the following mention of lay preaching at the Eucharist in the Instrumentum Laboris for the second session: "Many of the demands expressed above also apply to laymen, whose lack of participation in the life of the Church is often lamented. In general, reflection on the role of women often highlights the desire to strengthen all the ministries exercised by the laity (men and women). There is also a call for adequately trained lay men and women to contribute to preaching the Word of God, including during the celebration of the Eucharist."1

This book presents the talks and responses from the symposium, the symposium petition to the Synod on Synodality, and several academic and personal essays on the topic. The last book of this nature was Preaching and the Non-Ordained: An Interdisciplinary Study, edited by Nadine Foley, OP, published by Liturgical Press in 1983, and based on a conference held by the Dominican Leadership Conference in Columbus, Ohio, in 1982. You can find the opening remarks from that volume reproduced at the end of this book.

For many reasons, an ecclesial conversation about lay preaching in the Catholic Church, and particularly at the Eucharist, has fallen silent for many years. In this synodal moment, many preachers and theologians think it is time to reopen the conversation on this vexing topic.

^{1.} XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session, "How to Be a Missionary Synodal Church" (October 2024), under "Foundations," in a section titled "Brothers and Sisters in Christ: A Renewed Reciprocity," 18; emphasis added.

Canonical Background

While the Roman Catholic 1917 Code of Canon Law forbade preaching by the laity (c. 1342 §22), the 1983 Code of Canon Law, following the Second Vatican Council's theology of the laity, acknowledged the possibility of lay preaching by associating the call to preach the Gospel with baptism (c. 759) and stating circumstances where it may be necessary or advantageous for laypersons to preach in a church or oratory (c. 766), while explicitly reserving the eucharistic homily to a priest or deacon (c. 767 §1). The pastor is to observe these canons conscientiously (c. 767 §4), and the norms of the bishop are also to be followed (c. 772 §1).

In May 1987, the Pontifical Commission for the Authentic Interpretation of the Code of Canon Law issued a complementary norm concerning canon 767 §1: "Preaching by lay faithful may not take place within the celebration of the Eucharist at the moment reserved for the homily."3

In November 1988, the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops drafted guidelines based on their interpretation of canon law. ⁴ These guidelines stated: "The Code of Canon Law places two restrictions, which are fundamental to these guidelines: The preaching of a homily during the Eucharist is strictly reserved to the ordained, and preaching by lay persons, when it occurs in a

- 2. "All laymen, religious as well, are forbidden to preach in church."
- 3. "USCCB Decree Implementing Canon 766 of the Code of Canon Law," USCCB Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter XXX-VII (December 13, 2001): 49-50.
- 4. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Guidelines for Lay Preaching," National Catholic News Service, Origins 18, no. 25 (1988): 402-4.

church or oratory, requires authorization by the diocesan bishop." Later, the bishops repeated: "Laity or religious should not speak at the time designated for the homily lest the impression be given that the person is giving the homily in the strict sense."5 Though approved by the bishops, the Vatican Congregation on the Clergy rejected these guidelines because "guidelines" are not binding. Eleven years later, in November 1999, the plenary meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved the "Decree Implementing Canon 766 of the Code of Canon Law," which took effect for all dioceses in the United States in January 2002 and was posted on the USCCB website. In this decree, the bishops state: "The lay faithful who are to be admitted to preach in a church or oratory must be orthodox in faith, and wellqualified, both by the witness of their lives as Christians and by a preparation for preaching appropriate to the circumstances." In alignment with the 1987 complimentary norm mentioned above, the USCCB statement also says: "In providing for preaching by the lay faithful the diocesan bishop may never dispense from the norm which reserves the homily to the sacred ministers."6

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* issued in March 2003 complies with these laws and norms: "The Homily should ordinarily be given by the Priest Celebrant himself or be entrusted by him to a concelebrating Priest, or from time to time and, if appropriate, to the Deacon, but never to a lay person" (66).⁷

- 5. USCCB, "Guidelines for Lay Preaching," 403.
- 6. "USCCB Decree Implementing Canon 766," 49.
- 7. General Instruction of the Roman Missal, approved by the USCCB, November 12, 2002, and confirmed by decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments,

In March 2004, the Catholic Church's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued Redemptionis Sacramentum ("Instruction on Certain Matters to Be Observed or to Be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist"), which stated:

The homily on account of its importance and its nature is reserved to the Priest or Deacon during Mass. As regards other forms of preaching, if necessity demands it in particular circumstances, or if usefulness suggests it in special cases, lay members of Christ's faithful may be allowed to preach in a church or in an oratory outside Mass in accordance with the norm of law. This may be done only on account of a scarcity of sacred ministers in certain places, in order to meet the need, and it may not be transformed from an exceptional measure into an ordinary practice, nor may it be understood as an authentic form of the advancement of the laity. All must remember besides that the faculty for giving such permission belongs to the local Ordinary, and this as regards individual instances; this permission is not the competence of anyone else, even if they are Priests or Deacons.8

While the church expressly forbids lay preaching in the place reserved for the homily at the Eucharist, perhaps we should admit that lay preachers frequently

March 17, 2003. A footnote to GIRM 66 refers to the Pontifical Commission for the Authentic Interpretation of the Code of Canon Law, 1987 response to dubium regarding c. 767 §1.

^{8.} Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Redemptionis Sacramentum, "Instruction on Certain Matters to Be Observed or to Be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist" (March 25, 2004) 161.

preach at the time reserved for the homily. In local instances, pastoral leaders make a quiet decision that, in their circumstances, it is necessary or certainly advantageous for a layperson to preach the homily. In today's climate of missionary discipleship and more widespread theological and ministerial formation, many laypeople are motivated and qualified to preach at Mass. Should the church forbid them to do so, or could the church create well-regulated pathways for lay preaching of the homily at Mass when it is advantageous or necessary? What might the eucharistic pulpit look like in a synodal church aspiring to live according to a vision of the people of God, as articulated by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council?

Issues Addressed by the Symposium in St. Louis

As mentioned earlier, in March 2024, five months after the first session of the Synod on Synodality in Rome in October 2023, twenty-seven theologians and preachers from North America, Europe, and Asia met at Aquinas Institute of Theology with these questions in mind. We asked the participants to reflect on the following problem: "Canon law permits lay preaching but restricts lay ecclesial ministers from preaching the homily at Mass. Many theologically trained lay ecclesial ministers have received preaching formation but do not receive an ecclesial commission to preach. Can a theological case be made for the church to charge or commission a more extensive and diverse pool of qualified lay preachers and evangelists to preach the Word of God at the Eucharist?"

The steering committee proposed the following tentative listing of issues for renewed discussion, research, and exploration as participants prepared for the event.

Canonical Issues

Canon law has clarified that the people have a right to hear the Word of God and that bishops are responsible for seeing that the Word is preached. Canon law does not restrict preaching by the laity outside churches and oratories. Canon 766 admits that laypeople may preach in a church or oratory when "necessity requires it in certain circumstances or it seems advantageous in particular cases," thus allowing for a wide range of lay preaching at Word services, Morning and Evening Prayer, etc. However, the preaching of the eucharistic homily remains reserved for ordained clergy. Additional legislation on lay preaching is the prerogative of the national conferences of bishops.

Some canonists suggest that there ought to be a distinction maintained between the power of jurisdiction and the power of orders as this pertains to the authority to preach. The power of jurisdiction is associated with canonical mission, which seems to extend beyond the clerical state. Canon 129 §2 states, "Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law." This canon about the power of jurisdiction could be used to defend the possibility of charging laypeople to preach at the Eucharist.

Pastoral Issues

The people of God have a right to hear the Word of God preached in a way that is consonant with their experience. Sometimes, a layperson can do this. Some canonically permissible but limiting examples include preaching to children and preaching to people in a language not known by the priest. For the most part, however, women and men rarely, if ever, have the chance to hear the Word preached out of women's experience as women.

On the one hand, if preaching is a charism given for the good of the church, it should be exercised by those who have the gift. On the other hand, there ought to be a connection between leadership in the church and preaching. In many parishes, a layperson who knows the community well, often a woman, serves as pastoral leader with responsibility for the faith formation of the community. When this pastoral leader has received the requisite theological education and pastoral formation for preaching, could they have authority as an "ordinary minister" to preach the Word at the Eucharist to the people?

Theological Issues

In discussions about the authority to preach at the Eucharist, there is tension between preserving the identity of the ordained minister and meeting the needs of the people of God. Both values need to be respected if the dialogue is to be effective.

The theological foundation for lay preaching lies in the charism given to all the baptized for ministry and mission. There are diverse ecclesiological interpretations regarding the authorization to preach at the Eucharist. In an ecclesiology where the bishops have the exclusive exercise of the teaching office in the church, it would seem that ordination is required of all who participate in the bishops' faculty to preach. Vatican II, however, has presented us with strands of a different ecclesiology, as seen in some canons in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, in which laypersons share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly office by their baptism.

No exceptions would ever apply if preaching at Eucharist was "absolutely intrinsic" to ordination. However,

exceptions have been made. In addition to those stated above related to the needs of children and language differences, the German bishops allowed lay preaching from 1973 to 1981, with Rome's approval. However, this approval has since been withdrawn.

Liturgical Issues

Those who propose a very restricted understanding identify four essential elements when defining the homily: reflection on the Word of God or another liturgical text, proclaimed by an ordained minister, after the gospel, at the eucharistic liturgy. The argument for offering exceptions to this restriction goes something like this: if a homily is the preaching of an ordained minister proclaimed after the gospel at Eucharist, then the preaching of a layperson at Eucharist cannot be called a homily but is more appropriately given a different name—for example, "reflection on the Scriptures," "lectionary-based liturgical preaching," or simply "preaching." This admittedly nominalist approach to the homily is not very persuasive for some.

Another way of looking at the homily is by examining its purpose. Suppose the purpose is primarily teaching or instruction. Then, it seems logical to reserve the homily to the theological expert, who, until recent times, was unquestionably the ordained priest. In Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly (1982), a more nuanced understanding of the purpose of the homily was proposed by the American bishops: that of "a scriptural interpretation of human existence which enables a community to recognize God's active presence, to respond to that presence in faith through liturgical word and gesture, and beyond the liturgical assembly,

through a life lived in conformity with the Gospel." In this understanding of homily as an "interpretative act" the preacher must understand the diverse experiences of the assembly to "interpret the human situation through the Scriptures." This understanding allows for and, some would say, demands a greater diversity of preachers than ordained males.

By generally agreed liturgical principle, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist form an essential unity. As a manifestation of that unity, ordinarily, the one who presides at the Eucharist ought to preach. This practice cannot, however, be considered an absolute since liturgical law allows a priest other than the presider or even a deacon to preach at the Eucharist. Might qualified laity also be considered "extraordinary ministers of preaching" at the Eucharist, with a canonical mission to preach much as the ordained receive faculties to preach?

^{9.} Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1982), 29.

^{10.} Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled* in Your Hearing, 20.

Statement to the Synod on Synodality

A Proposal for Lay Eucharistic Preaching to Further a Synodal Church in Mission

As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace.

—1 Peter 4:10 (ESV)

Part I. Our Work: Connecting Lay Preaching at the Eucharist to Synodality and Mission

he Dominican Preaching Network—a collaboration of three Dominican schools of preaching in the United States, Germany, and the Philippines—convened twenty-seven scholars and practitioners of preaching from March 11–14, 2024, to reflect on the guiding principle of "a synodal Church in mission" through the lens of lay eucharistic preaching. We conducted our work attending to synodal documents, specifically commissioned scholarly papers, listening and discussion sessions, panel presentations, and thematic analysis, all situated within a synodal listening process. We prayed together. We asked the Spirit's help. As a community, we now share the fruits of our discernment and submit them for

further discernment by the Synod in October 2024 and the Synod's study group on "theological and canonical questions concerning specific forms of ministries."

Many lay ecclesial ministers discern a call from God and receive theological and ministerial training and formation to preach. Canon law permits lay preaching and yet restricts lay ecclesial ministers from receiving an ecclesial commission to preach the homily at Mass. We gathered as a group of theologians, ecclesiologists, preachers, and a canonist to consider this obstacle to lay preaching at Mass. Responding to the Synod's question about our Catholic identity as a synodal Church in mission, we now offer a constructive homiletic and ecclesiological appeal to charge or commission a more extensive and diverse pool of qualified lay preachers and evangelists to preach the Word of God at the Eucharist.

Part II. Convergences: Co-responsibility for the Ministry of the Word

We discovered among ourselves a remarkable number of places of deep agreement:

- The vocation of the baptized includes a share in the prophetic office of Christ; this office includes the proclamation of the Word.
- Within the Eucharistic celebration, an essential moment is the Liturgy of the Word: readings, Gospel proclamation, and homily. The Word arises within the gathered community, and the People of God hunger for both Eucharist and Word.

- That the gathered Assembly might attend ever more fully to God's Living Word made present in a liturgical communion between God and God's People in the Liturgy of the Word, the Church calls forth prepared liturgical ministers of the Word from within the Assembly—Lectors, Cantors, Catechists, and Preachers.
- The Eucharist, the source and summit of our life in Christ, is a synodal act. Therefore, the Church must listen to the voice of the Spirit and discern the many charisms for preaching in the community, given by the Spirit for the benefit of the Church to nourish those gathered at the Eucharistic table more fully.
- The task of the synodal Church is to listen humbly, speak boldly, and dialogue attentively, conscious that the Spirit gives multiple gifts/charisms for Eucharistic preaching. If the Church does not make efforts to discern charisms among the baptized, it cannot live fully its synodal identity.
- The Spirit is at work in preaching by diverse lay and ordained people from the centers and the margins, reflecting the variety of languages, genders, ethnicities, ages, races, social classes, sexualities, geographies, and cultures. We see the fruit already in diverse contexts, including churches and oratories; Eucharistic preaching is another appropriate context.
- The Church continues to experience an urgent and long-identified need for more effective proclamation of the Word and for preaching that reflects intercultural competence.

Part III. Our Proposals

To reflect a synodal Church more fully, we seek an opening of the ministry of the Word by incorporating a more comprehensive range of ministries under this umbrella. As scholars, theologians, and preachers, we believe that calling forth the *homiletic* preaching gifts of laypersons allows the Word of God to reach more people in a way that they can understand and connect to their experience. Specifically, our discernment leads us to two proposals:

- 1. Rather than waiting for a complete revision of canon law, we propose to address the question of lay Eucharistic preaching canonically by an amendment to Canon 767 §1, to read as follows:
- Can. 767 §1. Among the forms of preaching, the homily is distinguished by its placement within the Eucharistic celebration. In addition to concelebrating priests or deacons, properly prepared laity may be admitted to preach the homily, in accordance with the prescriptions of the Conference of Bishops.
- 2. In view of Item 1 above, we propose expanding the use of installed ministries, such as Lector, Catechist, or a newly instituted ministry of Lay Preacher. We believe that local communities need to call forth persons who might discern the preaching charism and receive formation to exercise this ministry in their Eucharistic Assemblies. Our ancient tradition records a lay ministry of Teacher or Reader that included proclaiming the Word and expounding on the Word in the liturgy (*The Apostolic Tradition* and the *Canons of Athanasius*). This tradition can be restored by enriching the currently instituted min-

istries of Lector and Catechist to include preaching and by instituting a new ministry of Lay Preacher. Pope Paul VI recovered the tradition of lay liturgical ministries by establishing the instituted ministries of Lector and Acolyte. Pope Francis further revitalized these ministries by opening them to women, instituting the ministry of Catechist, and calling for further development of lay ministries in local churches.

Liturgically, our proposals hold a promise to expand the theological understanding and ministerial reality of lay preaching at Eucharist; theologically, we invite a grounding away from the distinction between clergy and laity toward the relationships of community and ministry. Ecclesially, we seek a Church in which the baptismal call of every believer, given by the Spirit for the benefit of the Church, will be more fully realized, including the ministry of the layperson as preacher at Eucharist. Therefore, we submit our work to the Synod and its Ministries Study Group for further discernment, and we offer to assist in providing our theological study.

Submitted by Gregory Heille, OP, convener of the Symposium on the Pastoral Charge for Lay Catholic Eucharistic Preaching

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Symposium Participants

"The Pastoral Charge for Lay Catholic Eucharistic Preaching"

A Homiletic and Theological Symposium
March 11 to 14, 2024
Aquinas Institute of Theology,
St. Louis, Missouri

Participants

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- Kayla August, MPS, Boston College PhD student in Theology and Education (Preaching), School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College
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