

LITURGICAL PREACHING BY WOMEN

A New Sign Language of Salvation

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WOMEN IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH are excluded by law from receiving the sacrament of ordination and are forbidden publicly to proclaim and preach the gospel at the Eucharist. I am a Dominican sister of the Order of Preachers, whose identity and gifts as a preacher are not fully acknowledged nor fully celebrated by my own church, simply because I am a woman. Although women are barred from preaching and formal public leadership roles in the liturgical assembly, these legal pronouncements do not reflect the reality of women's active leadership within a great diversity of ministries in both the Catholic community and in the world. Catholic women are proclaiming the gospel with their lives, making visible in word and deed the saving mission of Christ in our world. Furthermore, large numbers of these women in a wide variety of ministries are trained in theology and homiletics and *are* preaching the gospel in liturgical as well as non-liturgical settings across the country.

Dominican sister and feminist theologian Nadine Foley OP was elected prioress of her religious community in 1986. As she and her newly elected Leadership Council prepared for their installation liturgy, important decisions needed to be made, including who would proclaim and preach the gospel. The present Code of Canon Law, of course, prohibits women from preaching the homily at the eucharistic liturgy and, to complicate matters further, a clerical dignitary planned to attend. After much deliberation, the liturgy planning was finalized. Nadine would definitely preach. She stood before us at the pulpit, a distinguished, white-haired woman of sixty years, and in her deep, stately voice began her homily with words from Alice Walker's *The color purple*: 'I am a woman . . . I may be ugly and ignorant . . . But I am here'. As she stood in a place where for centuries only men have stood, she herself became a visible word enfleshing the gospel she preached: 'Mary Magdalene was *sent* by Jesus . . . She, a woman, was *sent* with an apostolic mission. And it is for the same purpose that we

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are here.' Through Nadine's word, the living Word *sent* each of us. By her prophetic example the Spirit affirmed our true identity as women. We are women gifted through baptism with the radical capacity and fundamental imperative to preach the gospel from the pulpit and in every other place and way in fulfilment of our Christian mission to the Church and world. Like Nadine, Christian women are saying 'I am here', and the 'subversive memory' of women's equal discipleship is brought to light and the praxis of resistance and hope is begun. As women preachers, we say boldly 'I am here' to transform religious patriarchal structures and to undo the ritual devaluing of women which claims that liturgical preaching or any formal leadership role in the Roman Catholic Church is an exercise of wisdom and authority of which women are not capable. Our insistent 'I am here' is a self-affirming, self-empowering claim to our own apostolic succession, as women called to be a redemptive word of God in our Church and world.

Non-ordained men and women preachers together saying 'I am here' create a liturgical symbol that challenges the integrity of the institutional Church, calling it to a continual process of conversion and to the creative renewal necessary for the effective preaching of the gospel. We challenge the institution's restriction of the eucharistic homily to ordained males because this practice ritually denies the authentic basis for preaching, and the sacramentality of every baptized Christian actively participating in the preaching mission of Christ. As our dominant image of Church shifts from hierarchical institution to the pilgrim people of God, the foundation of preaching has come to be rediscovered as residing in baptism and Christian praxis, not holy orders. A purely juridical mission can no longer serve as the basis for preaching the gospel. Rather, in the words of Edward Schillebeeckx, 'the foundation of a Spirit-filled proclamation of the gospel "with power" is, therefore, faithfulness to the life-praxis of Jesus himself'.¹ Liturgy ought to mirror our Christian faith. And our Christian faith maintains that all women and men, created equal in the image of God, are empowered by the Spirit through baptism to preach the gospel in word and action. Through the liturgical symbol system of our Christian worship, then, we must give authentic witness to our broadening experience of the mediation of Christ's saving grace through the mutual giftedness of the Church as the people of God.²

One significant way to support this kind of authentic worship is to commission officially within the Roman Catholic Church the liturgical preaching of women and non-ordained men who are both theologically

trained and gifted with the charism of preaching. Ecclesial experience confirms that not all gifted preachers are called to ordination and that not all who are ordained are gifted preachers. Therefore, the priest presiding within the liturgical assembly could welcome and call forth gifted preachers to proclaim the Word effectively without dividing word and sacrament or undermining the leadership of the ordained minister. Official church recognition and the responsible ordering of these people's gifts within ecclesiastical structures and liturgical events would recreate a ritual sign language of salvation that illumines rather than subverts the meaning of the text 'Go and preach the gospel to all nations' (Mk 16:15). For as women and lay men publicly proclaim the gospel during the key event of the Church's celebration of its deepest identity – the word and eucharist – they not only correct the patriarchal and androcentric ritual language, but also create the possibility for new models of God, Church and society that are emancipatory for women and men.³ Given the limitations of this article and my own feminist context as a white, middle-class woman of the United States, I will focus my discussion on the positive values gained through liturgical preaching by women of the Roman Catholic tradition in the United States.

Patriarchal and androcentric sign language: a contradiction of the gospel

Critical to this discussion is the work of liturgist Mary Collins who, in her book *Worship: renewal to practice*, raises a fundamental consideration of pivotal importance for the effectiveness of liturgical preaching. She asserts that our liturgical symbols, ritual behaviours and speech about God that support a patriarchal and androcentric understanding of the mediation of God's saving power, fail to express the fullness of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.⁴ Her theological judgement is rooted in the classical dictum that word and sacrament are effective if no obstacles have been placed in their way by the human participants. In order to grasp the full implications of her thesis, it is important to understand how the complex patterning of ritual symbols functions to express more powerfully than words the content of our faith in God and our experience of saving relationships.

Collins states that, according to the proceedings of the 1973 meeting of North American liturgists, the primary Christian religious symbol emerging in our culture today is the human person. If this is true, then what happens ritually between and among the persons, who are, in Christ, the primary symbols of divine activity, is absolutely critical for

the effective preaching of the gospel. Ritual interactions work to define identity and to express our experience of saving relationships. In the liturgical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, the male celibate clergy monopolize the performance of central liturgical actions signifying the saving presence of Christ within the community. They assert their superiority as the primary mediators of grace between God and the people by wielding control over the use of dominant Christian symbols, for example, water, oils, bread, wine and the word. Furthermore, laws for extending ritual participation and the use of sacred symbols also originate with the male clergy.⁵ Defining the role of women in the ministry of the word at eucharist, for example, the 'Third instruction on the correct implementation of the constitution on the sacred liturgy', promulgated in 1970, states that women may 'proclaim the scripture readings, with the exception of the gospel'.⁶ Likewise, directives for revising the selections of Scripture to be included in the lectionary also rest in clerical control.⁷

Another way to establish and maintain these power relationships through liturgical sign language is the conferring of insignia designating identity, role or status, such as vestments, rings, croziers, the clerical collar or the veil. Controlling access to certain sacred spaces central to worship, such as the communion table and the pulpit when the gospel is being preached, is another way of defining spiritual identity and ritualizing power relationships.⁸ Collins observes that women, and most lay men, are placed in the peripheral role 'as though they and their embarrassing gifts were invisible', while the male clergy, distinguished by liturgical garments, occupy the central position as the legitimate representatives of God.⁹ Posture and religious gestures within the liturgy can also communicate dominance and subordination: for example, who stands while others kneel; who gives the blessing while others bow their heads to receive it. She further explains that people who do little are not without a significant role to play, for their passivity is instrumental in enabling the power structure to stand securely. Patriarchal and androcentric sign language, then, works through the redundant patterning of a message in several codes simultaneously, to define identity ritually and to reinforce power relationships supporting the institutional Church.¹⁰

Through the interplay of ritual actions and religious speech in the liturgy, male symbols and speech about God are used exclusively, literally and patriarchally to define the very nature of God with whom we dialogue. Although, in theory, metaphors for God are meant to describe the divine-human relationship and not the identity of God,

who is Spirit, in the subliminal power of the imagination the maleness of God is taken literally and uncritically to describe the true male essence of God. One outstanding example, highlighted by Elizabeth Johnson, is the Nicene Creed, proclaimed in church Sunday after Sunday, century after century: 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth'.¹¹ She further explains how the exclusive, literal male symbol of God is then cast in the image of the ruling man within the patriarchal system. Divine Mystery, named God the Father, is used to justify patriarchy or father-rule in family, society and Church. Male-centred symbol systems have been created by men and used by them to name God, reality and women in their own terms. When God is viewed predominantly in the image of one sex rather than both sexes, and in the image of the ruling class of this sex, then this class of men is seen as sacred, actually possessing the image of God and the divine right to rule.¹² Furthermore, the maleness of God and Jesus has been used to refute the likeness of women to God and Christ, making them unsuitable for leadership within church governance or the liturgical assembly. Thus, the use of androcentric God-language within the liturgy becomes another way to define identity and reinforce power relationships.

As we analyse the religious meanings operating in our liturgical rituals, we must ask the critical questions: Is this ritual expression congruent with our understanding of God, the human person and our experience of saving relationships? Does this liturgical speech and sign language promote the preaching of Jesus Christ? Does it express the fullness of the gospel? Increasing numbers of Christian women, newly awakened to their own cherished identity as equally created in the image of God and equally called by God to full discipleship within the faith community, respond with a resounding 'No!' The identity imposed upon us by the sexist speech and sign language of the liturgy contradicts our basic self-understanding as one in Christ through baptism, sent to be 'other Christs' to our Church and world. Through patriarchal rites we are defined by men as inferior and religiously dependent; the goodness of our own bodily existence is ritually denied. We are silenced, without a voice, judged incompetent to preach the gospel publicly in the name of the Church. Mary Catherine Hilkert, in her forthcoming book *Naming grace: preaching and the sacramental imagination*, observes:

Restriction of the public proclamation of the gospel in the name of the church at the key moment of the community's celebration of its deepest identity – the eucharist – to ordained males suggests implicitly

that men have a privileged hearing of the gospel whether by divine plan or church discipline.¹³

Despite the fact that the male-centred symbol system of the liturgy identifies the celibate male as the only institutionally sanctioned icon of the divine Saviour, women celebrate their own bodiliness as a natural symbol of divine activity and the paschal mystery of Christ. Feminist theologian Maria Clara Bingemer writes eloquently of woman as *imago Christi*, giving her body and blood for the life of the world. She states:

Feeding others with one's own body is the supreme way God chose to be definitely and sensibly present in the midst of the people. The bread that we break and eat refers us back to the greater mystery of Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection. It is his person given as food; it is his very life made bodily a source of life for Christians. It is women who possess in their bodiliness the physical possibility of performing the divine eucharistic action. In the whole process of gestation, childbirth, protection, and nourishing of a new life, the sacrament of the Eucharist, the divine act, happens anew.¹⁴

Feminist theologians recognize that the full reality of woman needs to enter equally into our symbolism of God as well as into our symbolism of Christ. Because of the androcentric nature of our tradition and a naïve physicalism that reduces the Christ to his male sex, women have been excluded from sharing the image of Christ in full. Condemning this approach, Elizabeth Johnson asserts that those who live the life of Christ founded on communion in the Spirit are the *imago Christi*. The image of Christ is not based on sexual similarity with the human man Jesus, but on conformity to his teaching and lived example of justice and love carried out through the power of the Spirit. Therefore, the fitness and capacity of women and men to be icons of Christ is identical. Being conformed to Christ is not a sex-distinctive capacity. Furthermore, the whole Christ is the redeemed community of faith in the Spirit called to further the saving mission of Christ in the world through corporate acts of healing, compassion, justice and liberating love. Through liturgical preaching, women name themselves as icons of the incarnation and reject the false identities and inferior roles placed upon them in sexist rituals as a contradiction of the gospel truth.¹⁵

Liturgical preaching by women: creating a new sign language of salvation

Both Mary Collins and David Power use the ritual studies of social anthropologist Victor Turner to explain the dynamic process of ecclesial reform and liturgical renewal.¹⁶ Accordingly, Turner's theories suggest that the Church is a process rather than a static entity. As process, it is created and recreated out of the struggle to resolve the tension between *structure* and *anti-structure*. Structure refers to the institutional reality of the Church that needs to be supported by rituals and symbols. Anti-structure designates the human bonds of community often forged through marginality and structural inferiority. The freedom and creative power of marginalized communities will be the source of imaginative ecclesial reform and ritual development as the institution submits to the continual conversion process of becoming Church. Therefore, the Church always needs to have a certain capacity for iconoclasm within itself. Enlivened by the Spirit, it must be able to break the restrictions of its own structures in order to respond to the prophetic voice of those who live marginally to it. In the western churches those prophetic voices will come from communities of women, racial minorities, the poor and others alienated from the hierarchical institution.

Because of their importance to the support of the institutional Church, central liturgical rites will be the last rather than the first place to give witness to new models of God, Church and society that are emancipatory for women and men. The research of Mary Collins suggests that before a symbolic form representing profound religious ideas can be put into use in public worship, it must be refined in 'play', that is, ritualizing activities in marginal ministerial situations outside central parochial structures. Women in a wide variety of ministries participate in this solemn symbolic 'play' to give ritual expression to new patterns of saving relationships. Feminist rituals are a significant witness to the saving activity of God through the prophetic agency of women saying 'I am here'. Liturgical preaching by women is one way feminist liturgies make women visible and audible, thereby creating new symbols and speech about God that promote the emancipation of women and the restoration of authentic community within the body of Christ.¹⁷

Through liturgical preaching, women break their silence and publicly claim their apostolic succession as equal disciples of Christ, called to preach the gospel. No longer the 'silenced majority' gathered for worship, we claim our equal right to share the choice of language, once

held exclusively in clerical hands. By doing more than reading and reciting the words written by men, we challenge the implication that we have nothing to say and that our work in Christ is secondary. We affirm that women have the authority and competence to represent the Church and humanity as fully as men do. Most importantly, we demonstrate that God chooses to speak to the community through the voice and words of women.¹⁸ Through liturgical preaching, women eradicate the false memory of patriarchal and androcentric rituals that have systematically excluded women from preaching and leadership in the Christian churches: a memory that contradicts the biblical witness that recalls how God spoke through Mary and Martha, the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus as well as through the fishermen of Galilee.

Informed by the work of historical retrieval and reconstruction done by feminist biblical scholars and theologians, feminist preachers contribute to the transformation of our God-language by bringing forward alternative equivalent images of God, male and female, found both in Scripture and in the rich diversity of women's experience. Because of the androcentric nature of Scripture and tradition, the proper use of female imagery in our speech about God is underdeveloped and peripheral. Through liturgical preaching, women have the opportunity to introduce the full reality of women into our symbolization of God and Christ. We create new images of God drawn from our own everyday experiences, which can illuminate the diversity of divine attributes, activities and relationships with humanity and the world. By enhancing our God-language with female metaphors of God, men and women preachers can do a great deal to mitigate androcentric speech and to heal the imagination, so long assailed by the dominant male metaphor. We do so with caution, however, remembering that our symbols are drawn from a culture and tradition that are patriarchal and androcentric, and, therefore cannot be used without passing the scrutiny of critical feminist principles.¹⁹ Through liturgical preaching, women themselves become a symbol that functions to shatter the exclusivity of the male icon of God and the divine Saviour. As any true symbol participates in the reality it signifies, women as preachers become a new channel of divine revelation, restoring to women their dignity as *imago Dei*.

Liturgical preaching by women, then, is essential to the preaching mission of the Church. The patriarchy and androcentrism in society and Church, which promotes the belief that men are superior to women and that the ruling male is the model for all others and, thus, can speak for

all others, is gradually dismantled as feminist preachers give voice to their experience of God from the unique perspective of women. As we proclaim God's story as heard within women's story, women enter fully into the symbolization of humanity. In order to reveal the mystery of God with us, women reveal themselves, believing that the personal, loving ways of God can only be known through sharing what is most profoundly personal in their own lives of faith. It is in this full expression of humanity, male and female, that the fullness of the gospel is revealed.

Valuable to this discussion is the theology of Karl Rahner, who describes the task of the preacher as the twofold task of poet and priest. He highlights the importance of revealing the hidden depths of human experience as the only way to speak a word from the heart of God to the human heart. In defining the task of the poet, Rahner quotes Goethe's definition of a true poet, as someone to whom "a God has given the power to say what he [*sic*] is experiencing", while others remain silent in their agony and in their bliss'.²⁰ As priest, he explains, the preacher offers not his own word, but the word of God, which is no less than God's very gift to all humanity. As priest and poet, then, the preacher must enfold not only the word of God, but the human word *as well*, in order that God's word may be heard as the answer to the human question. If, as Rahner says, the breadth and depth of human experience must be expressed by the preacher in order for the word of God to be heard, how can a male, celibate priesthood give voice to the many, diverse experiences of women? Only when men and women, who represent every Christian life-style and social location, are allowed to preach, will every facet of human experience be lifted up to the light of the human poetic word in order that God's message may be heard. Only women can speak adequately of the struggle, suffering and joy experienced by women, and they alone of the ways God has entered their lives with sustaining, liberating love. Thus, the Christian gospel cannot fully and effectively be proclaimed if women do not step forward and boldly answer, 'I am here'.

NOTES

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, "The right of every Christian to speak in the light of evangelical experience "in the midst of brothers and sisters"" in Nadine Foley (ed), *Preaching and the non-ordained* (Collegeville, 1983), p 36.

² See Mary Collins, 'The baptismal roots of the preaching ministry', and Sandra Schneiders, 'New Testament foundations for preaching by the non-ordained' in Nadine Foley (ed), *Preaching and the non-ordained*, pp 111-130, 60-90; James A. Wallace, 'Preaching by lay persons' in Peter E. Fink (ed), *The new dictionary of sacramental worship* (Collegeville, 1990), pp 975-980.

- ³ See Mary Collins, *op. cit.*, p 130. For a criticism of liturgical preaching by the laity as disruptive of the presidency of the assembly – see David Power, *Gifts that differ: lay ministries established and unestablished* (New York, 1980), pp 154–5.
- ⁴ Mary Collins, *Worship renewal to practice* (Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1987).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 85, 102.
- ⁶ *Liturgiae instaurationes* in Austin Flannery (ed), *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents* (Boston, 1990), p 217.
- ⁷ For a critical examination of the androcentric hermeneutic operative in the choice of readings selected for one widely used version of the three-year lectionary, see Marjorie Procter-Smith, 'Images of women in the lectionary' in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Collins (eds), *Women: invisible in theology and Church, Concilium* 182, (December 1985), pp 51–62.
- ⁸ Collins, *Worship*, pp 85, 102.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p 82.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 102, 109.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* (New York, 1993), p 32.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p 37.
- ¹³ Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming grace: preaching and the sacramental imagination*, unpublished manuscript, p 150.
- ¹⁴ Maria Clara Bingemer, 'Women in the future of the theology of liberation' in M. Ellis and O. Maduro (eds), *Expanding the view* (New York, 1990), p 188.
- ¹⁵ Johnson, *She who is*, pp 71–5. On the need for women to reject sexist rites, see Mary Daly, *Beyond God the father* (Boston, 1973), pp 140–6.
- ¹⁶ Collins, *Worship*, pp 59–71; David Power, 'Symbolism in worship: a survey II', *The Way* vol 14, no 1 (January 1974), pp 57–66.
- ¹⁷ Collins, *Worship*, pp 83–6.
- ¹⁸ Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In her own rite: constructing feminist liturgical tradition* (Nashville, 1990), pp 127–31.
- ¹⁹ For a summary of this critical feminist principle, see Johnson, *She who is*, pp 30–31.
- ²⁰ Karl Rahner, 'Priest and poet' in *Theological investigations* 3 (Baltimore, 1967), p 309.