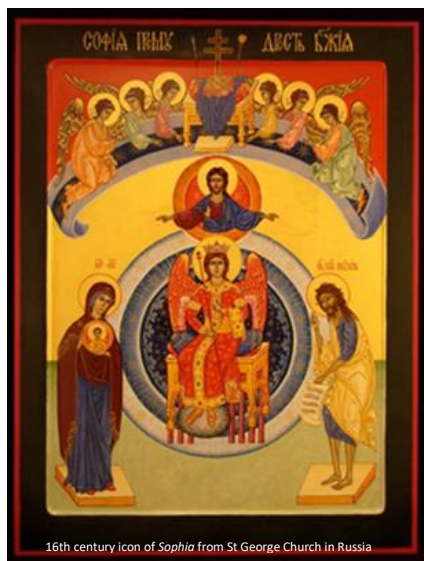


Women and the Word

Dedicated to the Memory of Carmelite Sister Mary Lavin



*Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
in the open squares she raises her voice.*

--Proverbs 20:1

THE BACKGROUND

Almost two years ago, Fr. Lou Papes, a retired priest here in Cleveland, Ohio, was filling in for a vacationing pastor at a funeral. The homily was preached by the pastoral associate, Lisa Frey. Though her studying for a doctorate in preaching from the Aquinas Institute contributed to the structural formation of the homily, what he felt made it such a powerful funeral homily was her perspective on life, faith and death.

A few months later at the Sisters of St. Joseph, Lou heard another woman preach at the Midnight Mass at which he presided. That preacher was Sister Chris Schenk, whose homily was entitled "A Midwife at Bethlehem." Again, he felt the unique perspective of a woman was powerfully evident.

Several weeks later, he was asked to preside and preach at the funeral of Carmelite Sister Mary Lavin. Having recently revisited an article by Mary Catherine Hilkert on the biblical figure of Wisdom led him to see the life of this remarkable Carmelite as nothing short of a **homily** in the deepest sense of the word.

These three events led Lou to gather a team of remarkable women of faith who developed "Women and the Word," a preaching initiative in honor of Sister Mary Lavin which became part of Sabbath Retreats. After wide and diverse consultation, a mission statement was developed, which simply stated the purpose of Women and the Word:

***to create a welcoming and supportive environment
for the preaching of the Sunday Scriptures from a woman's perspective.***

THE PLAN

A series of three or four weekly preachings on the readings *for the following Sunday* is offered by women of faith in a celebration that mirrors the ritual of the Sunday Liturgy of the Word and concludes with a guided reflection/sharing. A common rubric is observed. Celebrations take place on mid-week evenings in parish churches. High schools and senior residences have a daytime schedule.

WHAT THIS INITIATIVE IS:

*An opportunity for both men and women to be exposed to a women's perspective of the Word of God in their local parishes.
A preparation of the mind and heart for the proclamation of the Word at the following Sunday's Eucharist.*

WHAT THIS INITIATIVE IS NOT:

*A substitute for the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist.
A statement about any current ecclesial discipline.*

THE RESULT

Wherever the women have preached in the ten series celebrated during this first year of Women and the Word, those who attend clearly affirm the charism of preaching by women of faith, a small step in the Church's acceptance of the essential role women have in the faith life of the Church. As more people directly experience women preaching, pastors and pastoral staffs are expressing interest in hosting a series in their parishes.

For more information: www.sabbathretreats.org

WOMEN AND THE WORD

A preaching initiative
of Sabbath Retreats.

We're on the WEB!

www.sabbathretreats.org

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Retired Priest, Founder
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Local pastor praises women as preachers

The following is an article written by Father Joe Fortuna, pastor of Our Lady of the Lake Church in Euclid, Ohio and published in the parish bulletin in March, 2017 just prior to a four-week Lenten Series preached by Women and the Word.

A few weeks ago I diverted from my more customary approach to delivering a homily to a form that was more akin to witness. I told the story of how growing up working in my family's funeral business was actually great preparation for being a minister of Church. I noted that I was afraid that I might disappoint my father by "not following in his shoes," but realized years later that he had actually been helping me to hear and respond to my call to be a priest.

I received a great deal of positive comment on this homily. People noted that when I speak about my family and my life experience, they often find a stronger sense of connection to me and to the message I am attempting to deliver. I responded that I try not to do that *too* much, because unless what I share has a direct connection to what the scriptures are calling us to, my witness can be a distraction rather than a help. Worst of all, it can put the focus on me rather than on the Word.

Yet it must be admitted that even when a homilist does not talk *explicitly* about his experience in family and life, he always does speak OUT OF his experience. In other words, his life experience shapes how he hears the Word of God. It sharpens his faith senses to some meanings of the Word and dulls them to others. It serves as a reservoir of images and examples that he might not have personally and directly experienced, but that he noticed and appreciated because of his life experience. And it also shapes HOW he DELIVERS the message he is proclaiming.

If all of this is true, and I believe it is, then it is worth asking if we miss something important when the only voices we hear in homilies belong to men. Are there some life and family experiences of women that sharpen their faith senses to hear some meanings of the Word that dull them to others, just as it happens for men? I believe that a case can be made that we can have a fuller and richer appreciation of the Word if we had the opportunity to hear women preachers at least occasionally.

I want to note up front that I am NOT saying that ALL women hear the Word differently from ALL men, and that ALL women preach differently from ALL men. To say this would be to deny some possibility of common experience in men and women. It would also fall into the trap of saying that ALL women experience the same thing and ALL men experience the same thing. In other words, it would deny individual differences among both women and men.

I also want to note that according to our current Catholic Church's liturgical teaching and law, a homily at Mass is *by definition* that which is proclaimed by an ordained minister after the gospel. Obviously, our Roman Catholic Church ordains only men, so the homily is restricted to men.

But PREACHING is NOT restricted to men! In fact, we need women preachers so that the full range and depth of meaning of the Word of God can be discerned and articulated over time for the good of the Church.

Fr. Joe Fortuna, a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland, is pastor of Our Lady of the Lake Parish in Euclid, Ohio. He holds a Doctorate in Systematic Theology from the Catholic University of America, with a focus in Sacramental Theology. In addition to his parish ministry, he continues to serve as adjunct faculty of St. Mary Seminary.