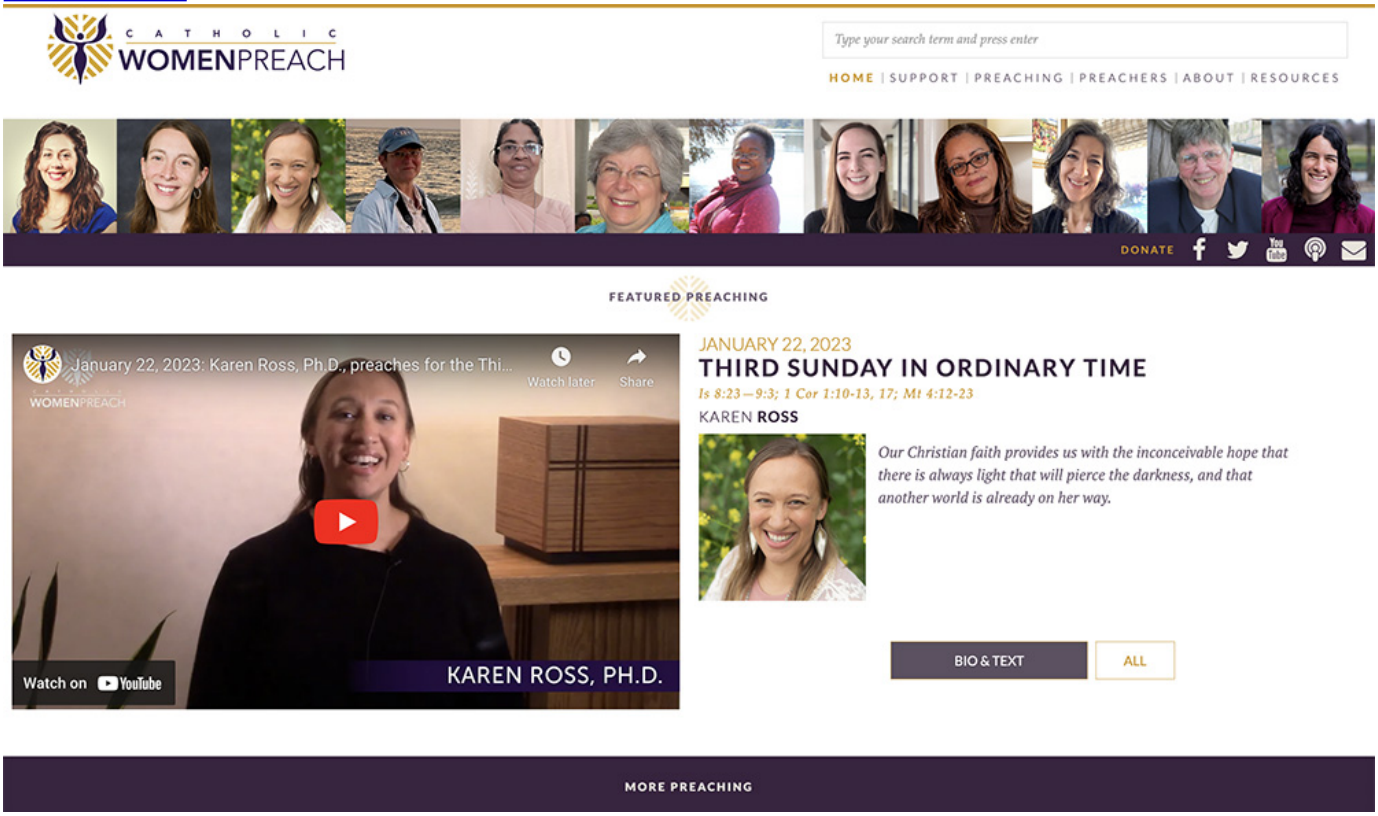
Opinion
NCR Voices



The Catholic Women Preach website is seen in a screenshot taken on Jan. 25. (NCR screenshot)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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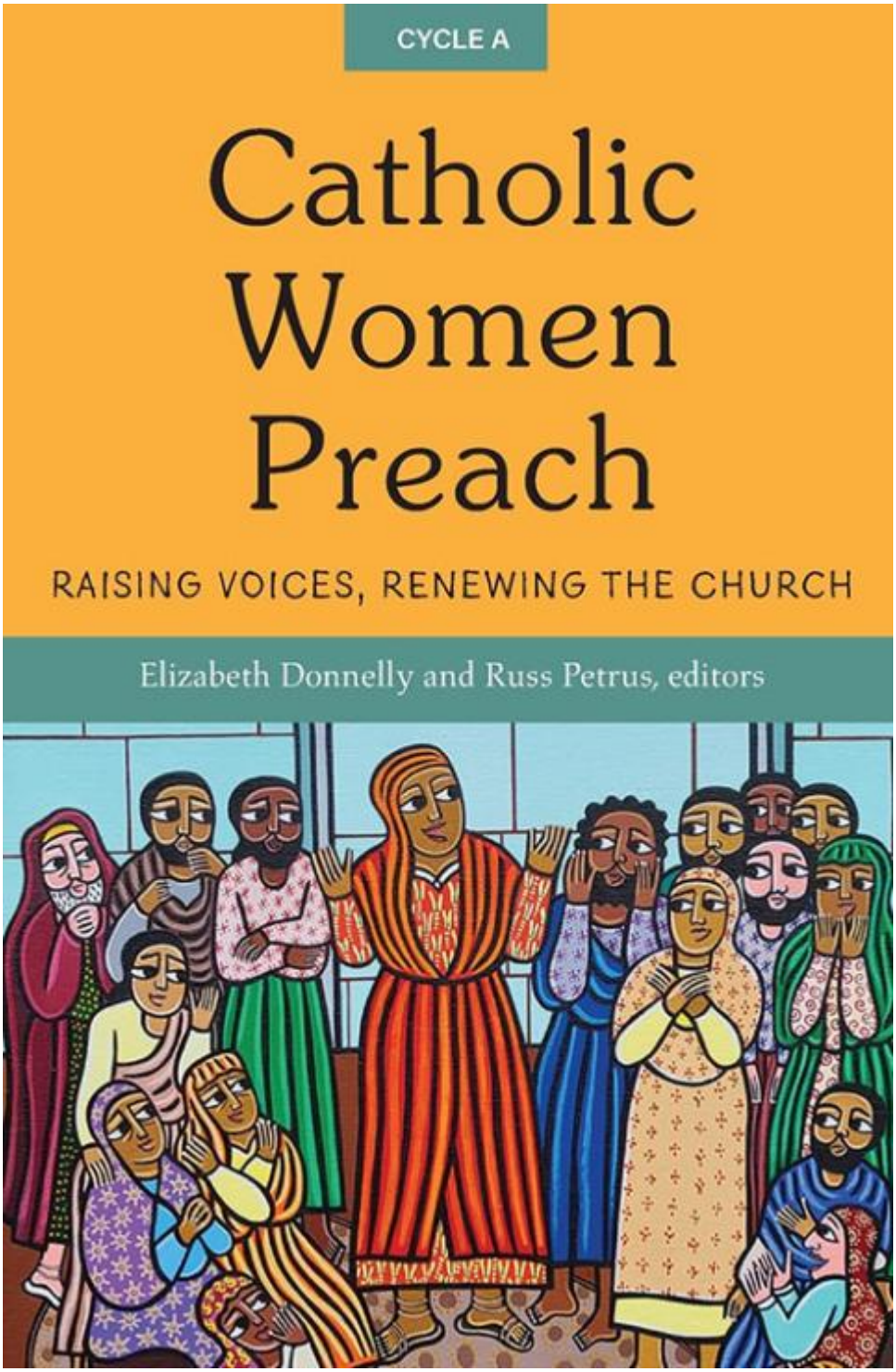
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Pope Francis made waves last weekend with his off-the-cuff remarks calling homilies at Catholic churches "a disaster." Most of the headlines, including NCR's, highlighted the pope's advice to preachers to keep it under 10 minutes.

Many Catholics would agree that sermons in the average parish could be improved, but length is hardly the most problematic part. While I have been lucky to have pastors with above-average preaching abilities, ordination in the Catholic Church does not always coincide with gifts in public speaking and interpretation of Scripture.

Sadly, the church currently limits the pool of potential preachers to less than half of the Catholic population: men.

But thanks to a website — and now a three-volume series of books — Catholics can access preaching by Catholic women. Catholic Women Preach offers theologically informed perspectives by Catholic women with weekly reflections available as videos, audio/podcasts and written texts.



The cover of the first volume of *Catholic Women Preach* for Cycle A of the Lectionary (Courtesy of Orbis Books)

Originally launched in Advent 2016 as a project of FutureChurch, the website features 384 reflections by 232 women for Sundays and holy days of obligation — so far. Preaching in Spanish and by women of color is being prioritized, and reflections

for feast days of women such as Mary of Magdala or Deacon Phoebe have also been added.

"If we truly have a Corinthians notion of church — that people have been given different gifts for the nourishment of the whole body of Christ — why is it that we assume that only ordained men have been given the gift of preaching?" asks Elizabeth Donnelly, a member of Catholic Women Preach's steering committee and its preaching coordinator.

"The whole church is impoverished when people in the pews are not able to hear women break open the Word with their own perspectives," she said.

Donnelly is co-editor of *Catholic Women Preach: Raising Voices, Renewing the Church*, which collects homilies from the project in book form. The first volume, for Cycle A of the Lectionary, was released by Orbis Books in November and includes a forward by Dominican Sr. Barbara Reid, president of Catholic Theological Union. Volume 2 is scheduled for next October in time for Lectionary Cycle B, with a forward by theologian Cecilia González-Andrieu of Loyola Marymount University. Volume 3 will come in 2025.

"If we're not listening to women, we're only listening to half the church," said Russ Petrus, FutureChurch's program director and co-editor of the book series. "They have a different lived experience that people in the pews can really relate to in their daily life."

Ellie Hidalgo, co-director of Discerning Deacons, has done three reflections for Catholic Women Preach. On the feast of Christ the King in 2020, Hidalgo told a story about her niece remembering the poor during a dinner with her Cuban American family as an example of someone with a "God-shaped heart" building the *reino de Dios*, or kingdom of God.

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"Catholic Women Preach gives me an opportunity to name and value more deeply my experiences of God's presence in my own life and in my faith community," Hidalgo said, adding that she appreciates being able to "tell stories of faith from my own experience as a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a neighbor, a friend — from my own lived experiences as a woman."

In her conversations with Catholics about women and the diaconate, Hidalgo regularly hears that people would like to see women deacons, in part so they can hear women preach. The topic was also brought up during synod listening sessions hosted by Discerning Deacons, she said.

The working document for the continental stage of the synod on synodality includes mention of women's preaching: "After careful listening, many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate."

Although some parishes and dioceses have allowed preaching by women (sometimes as "reflections" after Communion or at a Good Friday service, which is not a Mass), a new pastor or bishop often shuts it down.

Some of the most inspirational and meaningful homilies I've ever heard were from women, and I agree that the people of God miss out when women are not allowed to preach. It's also a justice issue and hurts the church's credibility.

With nearly half a million views on YouTube for Catholic Women Preach, women's preaching is reaching people — with or without the institutional church's help. And nearly all of them are under 10 minutes.

A book celebration for Catholic Women Preach *will be held 5:30-7:30 p.m. Feb. 2 at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry. More information about how to attend in person or virtually can be found here.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 3-16, 2023** print issue under the headline: Find better homilies at Catholic Women Preach.