News



Casey Stanton, co-director of Discerning Deacons, preaches about synodality in a Catholic Women Preach video. (NCR screengrab/Catholic Women Preach)



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A new program to prepare women to preach in the Catholic Church has received a $1.25 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., even as current church practice does not allow women to give the homily at Mass.

But the possibility of women's greater participation in the church is currently being discussed at the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican. A working document for the Oct 4-23 synod explicitly mentions "the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings."

"This is a massive investment by the Lilly Foundation in Catholic women's vocations and the possibility of them growing as ministers of the Word," Casey Stanton, co-director of Discerning Deacons, told NCR.

Discerning Deacons will share the grant with its fiscal sponsor, St. Thomas More Catholic Community in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Center for the Study of Spirituality at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana.

The grant will fund a new continuing education program in which participants can earn a certificate in Catholic preaching and ministry of the Word. The funds will pay for planning, faculty/staff and scholarship for participants.

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Stanton said the project is a direct result of listening sessions that were part of the multiyear synodal process, in which organizers heard that Catholics want to hear women preach.

"Preaching is a skill that has to be learned and formed," Stanton said. "So we decided to offer a formation program that was funded, so women are not asked to take on more debt."

The Center for the Study of Spirituality at St. Mary's College, under the leadership of Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan, will be the primary institutional partner in the venture.

"We know that women's voices in the Catholic church are vital," St. Mary's president Katie Conboy, said in a statement. "The partnership between Discerning Deacons and our Center for the Study of Spirituality will contribute to the ongoing, global

Catholic discernment surrounding the call of women to play a stronger role in the church."

The grant is part of Lilly's Compelling Preaching Initiative, which has approved 81 grants over the past two years with the goal of strengthening preaching in U.S. congregations. Recipients include organizations affiliated with mainline Protestant, evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox, Anabaptist and Pentecostal faith communities. Many of the organizations are rooted in the Black Church and in Hispanic and Asian American Christian traditions.

Other Catholic recipients of grants this year include: the Archdiocese of Los Angeles; Catholic Church Extension; Catholic Theological Union in Chicago; the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Corazon Pura, a project of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal; Marian University in Indianapolis; St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota; Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey; and the Philadelphia Archdiocese's St. Charles Borromeo Seminary.

Catholic grantees in 2022 included: America Press Inc.; the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis; the Archdiocese of Chicago; the University of Dallas' Institute of Homiletics; and the University of Notre Dame’s McGrath Institute for Church Life.

"Throughout history, preachers often have needed to adapt their preaching practices to engage new generations of hearers more effectively," Christopher L. Coble, Lilly Endowment’s vice president for religion, said in a statement. "We are pleased that the organizations receiving grants in this initiative will help pastors and others in ministry engage in the kinds of preaching needed today to ensure that the gospel message is heard and accessible for all audiences."

Stanton of Discerning Deacons pointed out that, despite church prohibitions, women currently break open the Word at funeral homes, Communion services and in other venues. "So even if nothing changes in the synod, women are already doing this," she said. "We hope they can do it with the church's blessing."

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