

**Beyond the Pulpit in the Catholic Church of South Korea:
Responding to Dr. Sabrina Müller**

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Abstract: *Dr. Sabrina Müller advocates nurturing diversity in preaching by integrating feminist and cultural insights into the field of homiletics. In response, this paper compares her research to another study on feminism, emphasizing that gender and culture encompass more than just sex and race. Further, this paper attributes the stagnancy of the preaching ministry within the Catholic Church in South Korea to a lack of motivation to adapt to changing times and a tendency to rest on the laurels of past triumphs, particularly in the realm of modern democratic history. To address the issue, embracing the Synodality of the Catholic Church, which aligns with Dr. Müller's focus on diversity in the preaching ministry, is imperative. This approach offers a remedy for the church to overcome the monotonous tendencies of clericalism and the gender-discriminatory practices influenced by Confucianism.*

Introduction

The Catholic Church in South Korea has historically been male-centric, influenced in the East by Confucianism. However, encouraging signs suggest that change for diversity may be on the horizon, both within and outside the church. Movements such as feminism in the 1970s and the Synodal journey of the Roman Catholic Church from 2021 have challenged the status quo. Notably, Pope Francis established a new commission to study the possibility of Catholic women deacons in 2020.¹ In 2022, the proportion of international residents in South Korea had reached nearly 5% of the total population, signaling a shift toward a more multicultural society.² The church provides conditions for nurturing such diversity.

While agreeing with Dr. Müller's assertion about the importance of enhancing diversity in ministry, I seek to encourage individual and qualitative solutions rather than statistical and quantitative ones. The matter is not about the number of female or male instructors/writers in the teaching ministry but about the ability of all preachers and teachers to recognize and appreciate preaching talents across gender and cultural identities since representation in gender and race do not guarantee the values and fruits of equality.

Diversity in Gender and Cultural Issues

In recent times, there has been an increase in female participation in leadership roles within Catholic churches in South Korea. However, entrenched clericalism and male-dominant tendencies remain. While I agree with Dr. Müller's suggestion that more female preachers, writers, and teachers of preaching could amplify the voices of women, critical questions remain as to whether biological sex inherently dictates any gender behaviors and values.

Feminism, or feminist philosophy, consists of diverse discourses across its developmental history. Eric Matthews provides an insightful summary of feminism and feminist

¹ Bernadette Mary Reis, "Pope institutes new commission to study women deacons," *Vatican News*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-commission-women-deacons.html>.

² Bo-eun Kim, "Korean society grows more diverse but still struggles with multicultural integration," *The Korea Times*, October 26, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/01/177_361433.html.

philosophy in French, exemplifying its multifaceted nature.³ After feminist activists achieved women's voting rights in 1945, feminist thinkers and writers such as Simone de Beauvoir developed their ideas, questioning the premise that "women are not regarded as subjects in their own right, merely as objects in the world of men."⁴ De Beauvoir has endeavored to identify sexual differences and to fight against the proposition.⁵ Her thoughts have influenced Luce Irigaray, who has argued that language itself is a product of masculine society and thus it is not an efficient tool to identify the full subjectivity of women.⁶

Irigaray's linguistic and psychoanalytic study urges women "to create a language of their own, fitted to female subjectivity and recognizing sexual difference as existing between subjects."⁷ Julia Kristeva is another feminist thinker and has claimed that "the subject, although it has its roots in biological drives, only comes to fulfillment in the symbolic order, so that its identity is social and changeable rather than biological and fixed."⁸ Unlike Irigaray and Kristeva, Michèle Le Dœuff does not utilize linguistic nor psychological analysis but focuses on philosophy.⁹ Le Dœuff criticizes philosophers such as Bacon and Sartre for their use of feminine images with negative connotations.¹⁰ After securing female voting rights in 1946, feminist thinkers such as de Beauvoir, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Le Dœuff, expanded the discourse of feminism, incorporating linguistics, psychoanalysis, and philosophical imagery into their exploration of gender dynamics and subjectivity.

Reflecting on the development of gender dynamics, amplifying the voices of more female members through participation in preaching ministry, as suggested by Dr. Müller in her presentation, could serve as a catalyst akin to the impact of women's suffrage. The political participation of women did not fulfill the goals of feminism; similarly, the church would not achieve the diversity of gender in homiletics simply by inviting more female preachers, teachers, and writers. All of God's people, including preachers, need to learn how to recognize and value the unique gifts of female or male preachers.¹¹ Like gender discourse in the educational environment of homiletics, Dr. Müller asserts that inviting instructors from diverse ethnic backgrounds will increase sensitivity and support for cultural diversity in teaching preaching. However, racial representation alone does not guarantee support for these values, as race and performance are separate entities.¹²

Among second-generation immigrants or even the one-and-a-half generation who arrive in a foreign country at a young age and feel at home in their new country, many traditional parents raise them to practice the cultural values and behaviors of their country of origin while others encourage their children to quickly adapt to the foreign language and culture of their new home. I have encountered a few Korean Americans in the US who are more like Koreans than some Koreans living in Korea, enjoying Starbucks coffee and American dramas via Netflix. Not all Korean immigrants in foreign countries are born with cultural sensitivity simply because they are from another country unless they recognize and choose to nurture the cultural values of their

³ Eric Matthews, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 187.

⁴ Ibid., 188.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 190.

⁷ Ibid., 193.

⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁹ Ibid., 200.

¹⁰ Ibid., 201, 202.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 94.

¹² Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 93.

country of origin.

The authenticity and traditionality of a personality are not solely determined by his or her place of origin but rather by dedicating time and energy to intentionally nurturing their identity and practices in light of their first culture. On the one hand, diverse witnesses can represent their particular identities, e.g., a female preacher proclaims the Good News with her insights that male preachers cannot access. On the other hand, for the sake of cross-referencing and reconciliation of two extremes, a male preacher may learn from feminist theology and demonstrate their appreciation of this, while a European teacher may inspire Asian students from their perspective. In such cases, truth may be conveyed across differences not necessarily on the basis of a person's gender or nation of origin but according to the message they hope to share.

Character Formation

Dr. Müller pointed out a crucial issue by quoting Liz Shercliff's observation, "I don't feel I've been taught to preach as myself. I have been taught to preach like a man."¹³ The issue could potentially arise in Korea when the Catholic Church accepts female students for diaconate ordination at some time in the future.¹⁴ She reasoned that, statistically, male Europeans have written most of the teaching materials for preaching in Switzerland. However, statistics alone cannot fully represent the breadth of diversity represented in the literature. An author's sex or race might not determine their insights and perspectives for preaching; rather, it is what they have developed for preaching from their society and culture that is most influential. For example, an Asian male preacher who has not invested time and energy into understanding the inherent privileges afforded to men in his own culture will not address them effectively in ministry. Thus, students need more male and female instructors to help them gain self-knowledge of their gender and culture as well as the gifts and liabilities of these.

Preachers and students studying to be preachers may not agree on what constitutes feminine or masculine gifts for preaching as these are conveyed by teachers or writers of preaching resources. Still, they will likely agree that everyone has a unique journey toward shaping their preaching talents and styles. Although the Catholic Church does not name which preaching gifts belong to each gender or culture, many preaching professors expect their students to demonstrate certain developmental markers in their preaching and students tend to fit themselves into the expectations of gender and culture in their professional performance before recognizing how gender and cultural expectations have influenced their performance.¹⁵ Making effective volume, pitch, and articulation to deliver a message is one thing, and expressing one's interpretation, personality, and experience of gender and culture is another thing.¹⁶ As they try out various models and styles, students may begin to discern what they have learned through their experiences in childhood, school, and into the present time. In the process, they may distinguish both their innate, God-given gifts and those of their societies.

The multiple aspects of feminism encourage the importance for homiletic practitioners to nurture diversity not only by making the quantitative balance between female and male instructors and writers but also by recognizing gifts that arise from their experiences of "doing"

¹³ Liz Shercliff, *Preaching Women: Gender, Power, and the Pulpit* (United Kingdom: SCM Press, 2019), xv.

¹⁴ Joshua J. McElwee and Christopher White, "Synod Ends without Action on Women Deacons, Mention of LGBTQ Catholics," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 10, 2023, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezp.slu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=173422729&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁵ Richard F. Ward, "Finding Voice in the Theological School," in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

gender as preachers.¹⁷ Understanding how preachers' society forms their gender/cultural identity and performance in preaching, teaching preaching, and writing about preaching, preachers may begin to name the connection between their gender/culture and their performance in preaching. Unless instructors recognize the interrelationship of gender, culture, and preaching gifts, they cannot help their students to do so. As a male instructor, for example, I wonder if I can effectively teach male Korean seminarians about their unique masculine Korean character, strengths, and tendencies for preaching. To do so, I need specific training to enhance my understanding of gender, race, and other social factors.

Synodal Church in South Korea

The preaching ministry within the Catholic Church in South Korea has straggled far behind Dr. Müller's discourse on transformative, power-sensitive homiletics characterized by polyphony and hope. Preaching itself is not a significant subject among Korean Catholics, but acting for practices, especially social justice, is. During the tumultuous period from the 1960s to the 70s, Koreans suffered from dictatorships, and Catholic lay ministers, religious sisters, and priests went out on the streets to promote civil movements and democracy. Dictators threatened and jailed the protestors. Nevertheless, Catholic priests celebrated Masses and prayed in front of police lines, standing together with workers and the persecuted.

Preachers during this time focused on exposing the apparent evils of abusive powers. Even non-Christians found solace in the church's teachings of justice. Catholics endured persecution and won the war against dictators, savoring the sweetness of triumph. There was no urgent need to refine preaching or even to invite people to Catholicism because people naturally gravitated toward the church, aligning themselves with the victors' side. As a result, the church was satisfied with how it had chosen to respond to the crisis. The survivors hesitated to accept diverse thoughts and revitalization. Ironically, the nostalgia for the church's achievements in the past impeded its leadership in preparing for next steps in the future. In addition, Confucianism, a national philosophy for over five hundred years in Korean and its cultural tendencies of male chauvinism and hierarchical structure remained within the Catholic Church. Often, many members have justified the remnants of Confucianism as a tradition of the church.

Fortunately, an increasing number of both female and male lay lecturers are emerging with compelling messages, prompting Catholics to recognize the problems of clericalism and the lack of diversity within the church. Instead of leaving the church, they are raising their voices in advocacy for participation, diversity, and collegiality. Moreover, the universal church is also inviting the local churches to undergo revival. The world meeting, the Synod, was for the bishops but Pope Francis invited all members of the Catholic Church to participate in Synodality, "the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journey together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim Gospel."¹⁸

In adapting the synodal message for the preaching ministry, preachers no longer operate as solo performers but invite support groups of his or her church members to aid in preparing their sermons, learn from civil experts to explore intersections between biblical messages and

¹⁷ Sara Salih, *Judith Butler*, 62.

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 70 a, accessed 17 February 2024, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

social issues, and receive feedback from their congregations.¹⁹ By doing so, the church acknowledges that “all the baptized are qualified and called to be missionary disciples.”²⁰ Both preachers and congregations can enhance the ecclesial diversity for the preaching ministry as they challenge themselves “to intensify the mutual collaboration of all in evangelizing witness based on everyone’s gifts and roles, without clericalizing lay people and without turning the clergy into lay people.”²¹

Conclusion

The Korean Catholic Church has historically lacked strong motivation to enhance the diversity of gender and culture in the preaching ministry. This is due in large part to Korea being a predominantly single-ethnic country that is highly influenced by the male-dominated and hierarchical culture of Confucianism. However, as it transitions into a multicultural society and as some church members challenge traditional Confucian practices, there is a growing recognition of the need for diversity. Additionally, the synodal church requests preachers to nurture diverse perspectives in the preaching ministry, inviting all church members to play a role in the development of sermons. Reflecting on Dr. Müller’s insights in her presentation, this respondent hopes to see further developments of preaching with greater awareness of gender and cultural influences that impact this important ministry of the church in Korea.

¹⁹ Bishops’ Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1982), 12, accessed 17 February 2024, <https://www.usccb.org/upload/fulfilled-in-your-hearing-homily-Sunday-assembly.pdf>.

²⁰ *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 104.

²¹ *Ibid.*