

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE LITURGICAL HOMILY

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IN HIS ELOQUENT MEMOIR of the twentieth-century liturgical movement, Dom Bernard Botte describes the state of preaching in Belgium at the turn of the twentieth century:

The clergy were poorly prepared for the ministry of the word of God by such substandard teaching. Neither the classes of theology, nor those of Scripture, nor those of the liturgy offered material for preaching. The clergy had nothing to say except for moralizing sermons, the kind they themselves had heard over and over again. They preached out of duty, because it was prescribed, just as they observed the rubrics. I remember the remark of an old Jesuit priest for whom I always had great esteem: 'Preaching is a bore: you repeat the same thing all the time and that bores everybody'. Priests no longer believed in preaching.¹

No doubt Botte must be exaggerating. Surely there were good preachers somewhere. The general state of preaching, however, seems to be accurately described in his dismal account. It does not take much experience to know that preaching has vastly improved in our own day. In good part this improvement is due to the new vision of the connection between liturgy and preaching fostered by the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the sacred liturgy*.²

And yet many people remain dissatisfied with what they hear in church. It seems that, for the most part, Roman Catholic preachers are on their way from moralizing sermons which bore everyone to truly liturgical preaching. This essay will deal with what that preaching might look like. Note, it is not about preaching in general but rather about the homily in the context of liturgical celebration.

What is specific to liturgical preaching? The answer is obvious but seems lost on so many preachers that it must be expressed clearly. The homily is liturgical when it takes place in the context

of the Church's liturgy; i.e., as the *Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass* puts it with regard to the Eucharist: 'it must always lead the community of the faithful to celebrate the Eucharist wholeheartedly'.³ This is to say that the homily is an integral part of the liturgical act; it does not float out there somewhere independent of the services as a whole. When one is preaching liturgically, people should have some sense of why we then proceed to make eucharist, to witness marriage vows, to baptize, etc. In what follows I hope to fill out this basic principle on the basis of my experience as a listener, a preacher and as a student of the Church's worship. My reflection will focus on seven main points: 1. purpose, 2. subject, 3. length, 4. getting interest, 5. the preacher's own experience, 6. strategic preaching, and 7. credibility. Thus these reflections are not so much about the actual preparation of the homily, since abundant literature exists on this subject,⁴ as about getting clarity on the purpose and nature of the liturgical homily as a whole.

1. *Purpose*

What purpose does the liturgical homily serve? All too often one gets the impression that the homilist thinks he has to instruct the people about the meaning of the biblical text, that is, to do exegesis in the pulpit. The result is stultifying. Such a dry examination of the text presumes a basic biblical illiteracy and corresponds to a basic error in our contemporary approach to liturgy, namely that the liturgy must accomplish every thing that the Church must do. Thus the liturgy becomes a tool for adult education, social action, and community building. In significant ways the liturgy does enhance these activities of the Church, but it cannot bear this weight alone. Worse still, liturgy committees, planners, presiders and homilists begin to get the impression that their task is to instruct the assembly about some worthy theme with the result that the assembly itself is alienated, sensing that it is being imposed upon by 'experts'. Simply put, much of contemporary liturgical celebration suffers from forgetting that the liturgy is God's service to us before it is our service to God.⁵

If this mistake is to be avoided the homily can be conceived of neither as a direct exegesis of the biblical texts nor primarily as instruction but rather as prayer-filled reflection on the scriptural text in the context of this particular assembly by a person whom the Church as a whole has certified as a competent witness. This

is in part what ordination does (or better, should) mean. The homilist's task, therefore, is not to instruct the assembly about something with which it is unfamiliar but to inspire and deepen the faith that is already there. The purpose of the homily is invitation to deeper faith or as the excellent document prepared by the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled in your hearing*, puts it:

What the preacher can do best of all in this time and this place is to enable this community to celebrate by offering them a word in which they can recognize their own concerns and God's concern for them.⁶

Therefore, the question the preacher must ask is: how is my understanding of the scriptural readings of the day going to enable *this* community both to celebrate and to deepen their faith in daily life? There is no such thing as an all-purpose homily, suitable for every community at every time. This requires the homilist to know the community well. A visiting homilist is an 'extraordinary' preacher, regardless of ordination.

2. *Subject*

Once one has realized that the purpose of the liturgical homily is the expression of faith by the preacher in order that the members of the assembly might celebrate the liturgy and lead deeper Christian lives, an important question arises as to the subject of the homily. Here my experience as listener, preacher and student of liturgy has convinced me that each Sunday homily can only be about one aspect of the Christian life. The key word here is *modesty*. For some reason many preachers tend not to realize that the liturgical life of Christians is cumulative in its impact. Everything does not happen all at once every Sunday. Rather the liturgical experience is the gradual process of people being formed more deeply into what they already are—the Body of Christ. And the effective preacher is one who does not expect 'on the spot' results, but rather communicates the patient confidence that the Word of God will do its work when it is attended to week after week. As George Guiver has rightly written with regard to daily liturgical prayer: 'It is missing the point of the exercise always to expect a pay-off on the nail'.⁷ We read only discrete portions of the scripture a Sunday at a time because we can only absorb so much on any one occasion.

My rule of thumb is that people walking down the street after the Sunday Eucharist ought to be able to respond to questions from their acquaintances regarding the subject of the Sunday homily with 'the preacher talked about such and such today'. Of course this requires that the preacher be very clear in preparation about what it is exactly that he wants to get across. This procedure has the further advantage of convincing the preacher beforehand that he has something to say. In my experience people have a much easier time listening to someone who looks and sounds as if he has something to say. At times, when I am doubtful that I am getting my main point across, I will even ask the congregation if I am making myself clear. No verbal response is needed; the very faces and bodies of members of the assembly give me the answer. I think that even verbal response should be welcome in our churches. It is clear, for example, from the transcripts of the homilies of St Augustine that the people felt very free to respond with laughter, applause, tears and shouts. This tradition is maintained particularly in African-American churches and could well be incorporated into other racial/ethnic groups as well.

3. *Length*

How long should a liturgical homily be? The correct but facetious and somewhat unhelpful answer is: as long as it needs to be. This is dependent upon the listening habits of the assembly. Among some groups a homily that lasted only ten minutes would be an insult to the assembly. Among others a homily that went on for twenty minutes would be unconscionably long. In my opinion the average length of an effective homily in a middle-class suburban American parish ought to be from seven to nine minutes, which happens to be the average length of time between commercial advertisements on American television. But other factors are important as well, for example the length of the liturgy as a whole, having something particular to say that will take either a shorter or longer period of time, a significant occasion or an event in the public sphere. Here too the body language of the assembly should be an indication to the preacher as to how long to continue. Preachers who cannot 'read' the body language of a congregation are poor communicators. And poor communicators make dreadful preachers.

4. *Getting interest*

In my experience, if I hear the homilist begin with the words: 'In today's three readings. . .', I have already received automatic permission to let my mind wander to what I am cooking for supper, or how the car is running, or what I will be doing in my next class or lecture. . . . This introduction is (almost always) a signal that the preacher is going to do a rather dry textual exegesis with no significant point to it all. Especially in parishes where people have been positively anaesthetized by poor preaching, it is necessary to begin with something—a phrase, a story—that will capture the assembly's interest. I think many homilists regard this simply as a gimmick, but I fear that they overestimate the ability of ordinary people to listen to reasoned argument. In order for people to be 'rendered benevolent' as they used to say, they must be grasped by an image; i.e. more than their reasoning abilities must be engaged. This is not to say that there is absolutely no room in the homily for reasoned argument, but rather that such argument will only be heard if the imagination has been alerted.

To accomplish this the assembly's interest must be 'piqued' from the outset. Otherwise people will drift off immediately into cloud-cuckoo-land, as I do more often than I want to admit. If this happens to me (who after all have a deep existential and professional stake in these matters) I assume that such is the case with the vast majority of my fellow listeners. An interest-getting beginning to a homily also alerts me to the fact that the homilist has thought out all of what he wants to say fairly thoroughly and that, even if I do not get the point at the outset, there will be something of interest for me here somewhere down the line.

The ability to capture and maintain the interest of the assembly also has a great deal to do with the stance of the homilist. By this I mean his use of a text as well as literally where and how he stands. First the text. I find that most often a text works only to distance myself from people with whom I wish to communicate. People seem much more engaged when the preacher knows what he wants to say well enough to dispense with a text. When a text must be used—and this depends upon the occasion as well as the ability of the homilist to remember—then it should be used the way an effective politician uses a written speech, i.e. as a jumping-off point for communication. After all, even scholarly papers at academic conferences do not come off well when they are simply read.

On a more basic level the stance of the preacher also involves where and how he stands. A pulpit as well as a text can act as a shield to block the homilist from the people. It would be more effective for the preacher to have nothing physical intervene between him and the assembly—depending of course on sight-lines, the architecture of the church overall, portable microphones, and acoustics. In any case, stance also has to do with the body-language of the homilist. The most effective preachers I have heard use their very bodies, not just their mouths, faces and arms, to communicate what they are saying. Perhaps homilists need to see themselves preaching on videotape—once with the sound on and then again with the sound off—to know how they are communicating bodily. These comments about stance also apply to the voice modulation of the preacher. There are certain (monotone) speech patterns which render listeners practically comatose.

5. *The preacher's own experience*

Storytelling has become one of the most popular and effective ways of getting the interest of the assembly and avoiding the pitfalls of arid exegesis in the pulpit. It has the added advantage of capitalizing on the narrative nature of the gospel itself; i.e., to tell a story is to respect the way that Jesus himself preached, thus rendering the homilist at least potentially a more faithful witness in proclaiming the good news.

The more I hear young preachers, many of whom have forgotten the point that telling stories is an effective means of preaching, the more I become convinced that we need to reflect further on the relation between stories and the preacher's own experience. All too often homilists seem to have gained the impression that the only authentic way of proclaiming the gospel is to relate it to their own experience. The end result is that they end up seeming to preach about themselves rather than about the Lord; i.e., instead of preaching *out* of their experience, they preach more *about* it.

To be genuine, to preach as one person of faith to the whole community of faith assembled is surely to preach out of one's experience. As Karl Rahner once wrote somewhere, each priest has only profoundly appropriated a few insights into the gospel and must preach out of those. We must preach out of the core of our human experience of faith, or not preach at all. As one priest friend once remarked: 'My preaching got an awful lot better when I decided that I would only preach what I believe'. But there is a

fine line between preaching out of that experience of faith and preaching about one's experience. This is not to say that homilists should not occasionally refer to themselves and their own experience or that of their families and close friends. It is rather to argue that a homilist must be aware of whether or not he is becoming solipsistic in his communication of the gospel message. The temptation to become solipsistic is exacerbated by the fact that people tend to like hearing stories about the preacher because they render him more accessible, more human. Thus preachers tend to be rewarded emotionally when they preach about themselves. I fear that many people might find this cute. And being cute is not the same as sharing one's faith and interpreting the faith of the community.

6. *Strategic preaching*

In recent years I have become more and more convinced that the key to understanding liturgy is to realize that the liturgical experience of the assembly is cumulative. Everything cannot be accomplished all at once on a particular Sunday. Ritual is about patterns that emerge in the faith life of the community, patterns that are based on the root metaphor of Jesus Christ, who died and rose for us and continues to live in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus planning for major liturgical feasts and seasons that does not respect the ongoing experiences of the assembly is off the mark. The trick, I tell parish liturgy committees, is not preparing for the Easter Vigil so much as it is understanding and preparing for the 'Seventy-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time'.

By the same token liturgy preaching requires strategic planning. This problem does not (or should not) usually arise when the assembly is accustomed to hear the same person preach week after week. But it does when there are a number of regular preachers and (with a vengeance) when a number of 'guest' homilists are brought in from the outside. When I am asked to be a guest homilist, I am well-served by attending the community's celebration for several weeks in advance, so that I can build on what other preachers have been saying. Otherwise, no matter how rhetorically brilliant the homily, the assembly is not being respected as an ongoing community of faith.

Strategic preaching also requires a sense of the wholeness of a Gospel (during Ordinary Time) and of the integrity of the liturgical seasons. The current Roman Catholic lectionary is far from perfect, but there is a rhyme or reason in the selection of scripture passages

for the various seasons. The lectionary itself, as well as the context of a passage in its original biblical setting, is a hermeneutical key or principle for homiletic interpretation. All too often one gets the impression that the preacher is unaware that anyone might have preached the good news last week, or last month, or last year. Often enough one finds that the preacher has no idea, to use an obvious example, that the proclamation of John 4, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, in the lectionary's Cycle A is connected liturgically with the illumination of candidates for baptism, the scrutinies, and the subsequent gospels from John 9 and 11 as well as the passion narrative.

I do not mean to say that the preacher can ignore what has happened this week to the community or in the community, but that the on-going worship life of the community and the way it is formed by the Church's annual celebration of the liturgical cycle are a vital means of respecting the assembly's experience as a whole.

7. Credibility

I have saved the most important and most intangible feature of the liturgical homily for last. In a way all of the other aspects of the homily surveyed here depend on it. In a way if it is present and a number of the other features are disregarded, it still covers a multitude of sins. I mean the credibility of the homilist as a person of faith. Rhetorical skills, tactics, strategies, exegetical knowledge and knowledge of doctrine and theology, none of these suffice if the assembly cannot perceive the preacher as a person of deep faith committed to communicating the gospel. Every time I hear a homilist I ask myself if this person is believable. If he is, I listen. If he is not, I feel free to wander. No technique can take the place of the credibility of the preacher. This means that the homilist must be above all a person with a passionate commitment to prayer and to the people of God. If this be the case, then whatever comes out of his mouth in the pulpit will have a beneficial effect that the community's faith will have been deepened. If this not be the case, then the exercise of liturgical preaching, or any preaching at all is futile.

Conclusion

These brief pages have been an attempt on my part to reflect on the status of liturgical preaching in our churches today and on those elements which preachers need most attend to. If I have

seemed to concentrate most on the problems, it is because there are a number of simple considerations which will surely be of value to preachers in our current situation. On the whole, however, we can be grateful that the situation described by Dom Botte at the beginning of our century is no longer true. We do believe in the value of preaching—and that is a giant step forward.

NOTES

¹ Botte, Bernard: *From silence to participation: an insider's view of liturgical renewal*, translated by John Sullivan, (Washington DC, 1988), p 7. Throughout this essay I will use male pronouns to designate the gender of the homilist. Here I mean only to respond to the usual situation in Roman Catholic churches. No bias at all is meant against women preaching. On the contrary—would that it were so.

² *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* # 51-52, also 24; see also, *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* # 41-42; and *Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass*, # 24-25.

³ *General Instruction on the Lectionary* # 24.

⁴ See Melloh, John Allyn: 'Publish or perish: a review of preaching literature, 1981-1986' *Worship* 62 (1988), pp 497-514.

⁵ This notion is well conveyed by the German word for worship, *Gottesdienst*, which can mean both God's service to human beings and the service of human beings to God.

⁶ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in your hearing: the homily in the Sunday assembly* (Washington, DC, 1982), p 8.

⁷ Guiver, George: *Company of voices: daily prayer and the people of God* (London, 1988), p 24.