

MUSINGS FROM THE EDITOR



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DEAR READERS



Recently, I attended a homily on a mission Sunday at my local parish. In most regards, the mission preacher was a pleasant man, capable of establishing a rapport between his auditors and himself. Yet, the homily was a surrealist icon of what constitutes bad Catholic preaching. A joke, only marginally humorous, opened up the preaching act. The good-humored anecdote served as a vehicle to commence a theological discussion of Mary, a figure not mentioned in the readings of the day. The Scriptures received marginal treatment in the context of a meandering account of the consistencies between the papacies of Benedict and Francis. After twenty minutes, the preacher finally began to discuss the poverty and drug addictions that plagued the mission that he worked with and asked for our support. The request for money, for prayers, for commitment to this mission was *so* disconnected from the rest of the preaching act that it could have stood on its own. Thirty minutes after taking the pulpit, our preacher finished. The assembly stared glassy-eyed and dulled, saddened that rather than receive the wisdom of the Word of God, they were assaulted with a forgettable sermon—one that would be quickly forgotten over the course of the week.

In their recent document on preaching, the American bishops note:

One of the most significant ways in which the Church as the Body of Christ proclaims the dynamic word of God is through the preaching of her ordained ministers, particularly in the context of the Sunday Eucharist. Preaching is nothing less than a participation in the dynamic power of the apostolic witness to the very Word that created the world, the Word that was given to the prophets and teachers of Israel, the Word that became flesh (*Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 1).

The assembly expects that the preaching act not simply communicate information regarding the Scriptures as one might do in a graduate level class in biblical studies. The gathered Church is not searching for humorous narratives that merely entertain. It is not sufficient that the priest, who enables the Church to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice of love, also devotes minimal attention to ministering at the altar of the Word. The assembly is seeking to encounter the Word made flesh through the preached word, to allow the narrative of salvation that took place once upon a time to move the hearts of the faithful here and now. Catholics who go from parish-to-parish looking for an engaging homilist are not simply practicing a form of consumer religion. Instead, they seek preaching that might show them how to live in light of the Paschal Mystery of Christ; what it means to be human for those of us that proclaim that Jesus is Lord.

This duty of preaching is by no means an easy one. It requires the capacity to plumb the depths of the Scriptures for the wisdom of God that seeks to become flesh here and now in the life of the Church. It necessitates a deep understanding of Christian doctrine, not as mere intellectual formulae to be handed on dryly but as an opening up the imagination of the faithful to the fullness of reality that is unfolding in Christ. Preaching today requires a homilist who is acutely aware of the depths of human experience and culture, knowing how the Gospel can illuminate and transfigure all of human life. It demands that the preacher be practical, providing concrete ways that the Word of God can transform every facet of what it means to be immersed in a particular culture: to be married, to have a job, to exist in a society in which the immigrant and the unborn infant are too often trod upon by those with power and prestige. The homilist must learn to show how history itself means something entirely different, beautiful, through Christ.

Such preaching in the modern world requires an extensive formation, one that instills in the homilist intellectual, spiritual, and rhetorical dispositions that are too often unseen among today's preachers. The New Evangelization must strive to inculcate such dispositions in those preachers, who are to continue the apostolic ministry of preaching for the salvation of the world. One such way of approaching this formation is to turn to the "classic" preachers of past ages for ways that they have made the Gospel incarnate in time and space.

Take for example the preaching of John Henry Newman. In a sermon that presents to his auditors an argument for holiness as a pre-requisite to the blessed life (directed against both those who preached that works are not necessary for salvation and who lived a tepid Christian life), John Henry Newman declares:

Heaven then is not like this world; I will say what it is much more like,—*a church*. For in a place of public worship no language of this world is heard; there are no schemes brought forward for temporal objects, great or small; no information how to strengthen our worldly interests, extend our influence, or establish our credit. These things indeed may be right in their way, so that we do not set our hearts upon them; still (I repeat), it is certain that we hear nothing of them in a church. Here we hear solely and entirely *of God*. We praise Him, worship Him, sing to Him, thank Him, confess to him, give ourselves up to Him, and ask His blessing. And *therefore*, a church is like heaven; viz., because both in the one and the other, there is one single subject—religion—brought before us (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, “Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness,” 7).

This brief paragraph from Newman’s sermon is an icon into a way to engage culture so that the Word might become flesh in the memory, the understanding, and the will of the assembly. The image of heaven as a place of worship establishes a connection between heaven and earth: the one who participates in liturgical prayer learns the divine speech of heaven. Simultaneously, Newman’s rhetoric is self-implicating, requiring the auditor to wonder if his or her own discourse has been adequately transfigured through the liturgical speech of the Church. Have my thoughts, my desires, and my interests, been so infused with this heavenly speech that my interior life has become an offering of praise, a place of worship, a space for asking God’s blessing. Newman’s sermon is historically grounded, designed to heal the life of any auditor who dares to incline his or her ear to the medicine of the divine Word. It changes the individual, and thus the Church’s history.

A homily that opens up a space for the Word to become flesh does not need to be related to cultivating the interior life of the Church alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and martyr, preaches in an interruptive manner that demands that the Christian open up a space for the Word to become flesh in the drama of human history. In a sermon delivered in the days following Hitler's take-over of power, Bonhoeffer preaches on the faith of Gideon (Jdg 6:15-16; 7:2; 8:23). Bonhoeffer exhorts:

Is this a tall tale like others? Any who says so has failed to understand that Gideon is still with us, that the old story of Gideon is being played out in Christendom every day. I will be with you in the face of the enemy... What does Gideon do? What do we do? We rustle up all our own forces; we reach out for every means of help; we calculate, we weigh, we count; we arm ourselves with offensive and defensive weapons. Until then, suddenly and unexpectedly—nobody knows the hour—the living God is there and assails us again; if you have faith, lay down your weapons; I am your weapon. Take off your armor; I am your armor. Put away your pride; I am your pride. Do you hear that, church of Gideon? Let God alone; let the word and the sacraments and the commandment of God be your weapons; don't look around for other help; don't be frightened. God is with you. Let my grace be sufficient for you [2 Cor 12:9]. Don't try to be strong, mighty, famous, respected, but let God alone be your strength, your fame and honor. Or don't you believe in God? (*Gideon: God Is My Lord*, 72).

The narrative of the Scriptures is no longer simply a tall tale that offers a maxim that the assembly might appreciate on a Sunday morning. Instead, the Word of God thunders in the assembly, demanding that Christians cease seeking security at all costs. To read the Scriptures in the Church is not simply to recount a history long ago forgotten but to offer a choice to the assembly: do you choose life, or do you choose death? Bonhoeffer at no point needs to address the specific political situation that provoked his preaching. He simply encounters God's Word in all of its naked clarity, and he composes a sermon that invites his auditors to do the same: "The cross over the world—that means that human beings, even the most noble, go down to dust whether it suits them or not, and with them all the gods and idols and lords of this world. The cross of Jesus Christ—that means God's bitter mockery of all human grandeur and God's bitter suffering in all human misery, God's lordship over the world" (73)—a stunning message for us to hear in the midst of political discord that tears apart a country.

Preaching for the New Evangelization must find a way for the Word of God to speak anew in our various histories. It is no longer enough to entertain, to please, to develop a rapport between priest and assembly. It is no longer enough to lead the assembly to come to pleasant insights about the Triune God, about Christ, about the moral life. Elsewhere, Newman preaches, "any one...who thinks it enough to come to church to *learn* God's will, but does not bear in mind to do it in his daily conduct, be he high or be he low, know he mysteries and all knowledge, or be he unlettered and busily occupied in active life, he is a fool in His sight, who maketh the wisdom of this world foolishness" ("Knowledge of God's Will Without Obedience," 26). Preaching for the New Evangelization will form the preacher to speak God's Word in the concreteness of human history, to invite the assembly to change their

way of life and learn to love anew the God who first loved us. The preacher offers a word that echoes in the parish, in the church building. But this word is never the preacher's alone. Instead, it is the Word of God, entrusted to the Church, constantly calling the Church to become fully herself, if only she gives herself over to the logic of divine love revealed in the Scriptures.

