

**EVANGELIZING CULTURE
BY CHRISTIAN SMITH**

TO IMPROVE CATHOLIC HOMILIES

PART II: LESS MORALISM, MORE GOSPEL



Giotto, Saint Francis
Preaching to the Birds,
c. 1290



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In the spring edition of *Church Life*, I addressed one problem with Catholic homilies: the tendency to focus on too many points, rather than a single teaching or idea woven throughout the homily. The second common problem with bad Catholic homilies is this: far too many preachers neglect the Christian Gospel, true evangelization, and instead merely peddle sentimental moralism. Too often Catholic homilies are bad because they do not *always* work from and toward the amazingly Great News of the Christian Gospel.

The center and key of all reality is that *God the Father has primordially loved every human being from all eternity and is at work reconciling each of us and our entire sinful world to himself in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Now that is great news! And that Gospel message is the *only* and *totally sufficient* basis, orientation, and motivation from which all of Christian faith and life must be believed and lived. There is no other foundation, no other reason, no other energy than this good news for anything that happens with and in us. Every good idea we believe, every good work we do, every good attempt to grow and live better lives for ourselves and others must be rooted in and energized by that Gospel message. Otherwise, our preaching is just

a lot of human-centered good intentions, with which the world is already saturated. Even worse, moralism can easily slide into mechanisms of institutional social control. That is not Christianity.

Unfortunately, it must be said, far too many Catholic homilies consist of merely touting various moralistic admonishments and encouragements. Some such homilies fail even to be discernibly *Christian*—many could very well be offered at the Rotary Club or Unitarian Universalist Association. Be a good person. Care for others. Try to forgive. Love God better. Care about social justice. *Et cetera.* All of these messages are obviously good, but they *must* be animated, motivated, and directed by the reality of the Gospel.

Homilies that peddle moralistic admonishments and encouragements are at bottom, *no matter how nice sounding*, massive failures to speak the truth; to reorient listeners to the one and only important reality named above. The authentic Christian Gospel is the heart of what the Church has to say, the only starting point and ultimately the sum of what she is about. For Catholic homilies to say anything else while neglecting the Gospel is a massive failure.

This truth has been said many times, but it bears repeating: people are not well motivated by feelings of guilt or sentimentality. Such inducement of guilt or sentimentality does not get anyone very far (nor are they the way of the true God). Life is difficult and change is hard. So, homilies need to cut out the inducement of guilty feelings and sentimentality designed to prod people to “try a little harder.” So, what then remains? What has the power to motivate real human change, but is also distinctively Christian? *Unconditional, faithful, genuine love*. And what is this love’s only source? Nothing else but God the eternal Father, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, at work to reconcile the world to himself. This Christological and Trinitarian approach must be the starting line, the touchstone, the launch pad of every single Catholic homily delivered.

Of course the Gospel is inherently embedded in Church liturgies, in the Christian calendar, and much else besides. Even so, God’s primal love and salvation for humans are so easy to forget that the liturgical words and practices readily become rote. We humans easily focus, not on the Church’s truly Great News, but instead on our own problems, interests, and efforts. This self-oriented idolatry is an ever-present temptation, keeping us away from living in the freedom and love in Christ.

But the ever-evangelizing Christian Gospel—not our little “doings” and “tryings”—is ultimately what reality is about. Therefore, every Catholic homily must recurrently, continually, and unfailingly draw the attention of its hearers back to the central fact of all reality—God’s eternal love for and reconciliation of humanity in Jesus Christ—as the *basis for* everything else that is said and done.

Let’s say it another way: Humans never could or should live good and right lives in order that God might love and save them; that is pure anti-gospel moralism. No, God has already absolutely loved and saved humans in Jesus Christ, period. That’s the good news. And in light of that unalterable fact, we humans are now free to live good and right lives in communion with God and each other, which leads to human flourishing. That is the evangelization that everyone needs to hear again and again.

Ultimately, the problem with Gospel-empty homilies is that they unintentionally make Jesus Christ and the Church expendable. *Everyone* needs Christ and the Church for the Gospel and Eucharist. But *nobody* must have Christ and the Church for sentimental moralism. That can be found anywhere. Homilies without the Gospel thus advance the unintended but real effect of communicating that the Church is superfluous, just another chattering voice in the cacophony of cultural noise.

Homilies play a limited but important role in the Mass; they are not everything. Homilies are, however, valuable opportunities to reflect on the meaning and implications of the Scriptures. But any reading from the Scriptures can itself be meaningless to listeners, if not positively misguiding, when it does not work to direct them—like the pointing finger of John the Baptist—to the life-giving person of Jesus Christ. Whatever else

of value that gets said in any homily must always be oriented and informed by proclaiming and unpacking the implications of Jesus Christ, the Great News.

So, those who prepare and deliver Catholic homilies must consciously work to *make every single one* explicitly *Christocentric* and thus *Trinitarian*. First and foremost, homilies must not be about what their listeners must *do*, but rather about what *God* the Trinity has done for *them*. Only then will our own actions make any sense. No homily should ever be delivered that does not explicitly reference and motivate its central point by proclaiming the Christian Gospel. Every homily must in one way or another re-declare and work within the truth of the particularly Christian, re-evangelizing, fantastically Good News. When the Gospel gets preached in this way, people will want to come and hear it, and it just might change their lives.

