

PREACHING IN THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY



# Preaching in the Sunday Assembly

A Pastoral Commentary  
on *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*

COMMENTARY AND TEXT

The Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics

*James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R., Editor*



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Illustration courtesy of Photos.com.

*Fulfilled in Your Hearing* Copyright © 1982, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder.

Excerpts from documents of the Second Vatican Council are from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, by Austin Flannery, O.P. © 1996 (Costello Publishing Company, Inc.). Used with permission.

© 2010 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Preaching in the Sunday assembly : a pastoral commentary on  
Fulfilled in your hearing : commentary and text / The Catholic  
Association of Teachers of Homiletics ; James Wallace, editor.

p.        cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8146-3346-5 — ISBN 978-0-8146-3936-8 (e-book)

1. Preaching. 2. Sermons. I. Wallace, James A., 1944–

II. Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics. III. Catholic  
Church. National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Bishops'

Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry. Fulfilled in your hearing.

BV4211.3.P733 2010

251.0088'282—dc22

2010020277

# Contents

Editor's Preface	vi
Introduction	vii
I: The Assembly	1
II: The Preacher	16
III: The Homily	26
IV: Methodology	42
A Final Word	57
Appendix A: <i>Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly</i>	58
Appendix B: <i>Fulfilled in Your Hearing: A Narrative History</i>	103
Bibliography	117

## Editor's Preface

Although almost thirty years have passed since *FIYH* was first published, it remains a rich and respected guide for understanding, crafting, and engaging in the homiletic event. At the same time, there have been many developments and changes over these decades in such areas as cultural context, biblical interpretation, liturgical theology, and homiletic methodology that suggest the value of a critical revisiting of the document so that its initial forward trajectory can be maintained. This effort seems especially important because the United States bishops have signaled their intent to craft a new document that will either build upon or possibly supersede *FIYH* as the official statement of the United States church on preaching in the Sunday assembly. In light of these developments, this commentary will both commend the enduring strengths of *FIYH* and suggest where a new document could amend and even correct some of its elements.

All references to church documents will give paragraph numbers. Although the initial publication of *FIYH* did not provide paragraph numbers, for ease of reference this commentary will use the numbering found in Appendix A.

James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R.

# Introduction

This pastoral commentary celebrates twenty-five years of *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly (FIYH)*, published by the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry in 1982. In October 2008, the Synod on the Word of God in Rome marked another important moment in which the universal church stepped forward to reflect on the ministry of the Word in Catholic life. The very fact of this synod affirms the ongoing work of all who are committed to improving Catholic preaching.

The road that led to this pastoral commentary began with a close rereading of *FIYH* by the membership of the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics (CATH) at an annual meeting in West Palm Beach in November 2006. CATH is a small but vital network for men and women who teach preaching in Catholic seminaries, schools of theology, deacon formation programs, and other ministry formation settings in the United States. In 2006, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops invited CATH and several key Catholic organizations to give input about a possible new document on preaching. While thoughts of a new document were put aside until after the Synod on the Word of God, our CATH conversation triggered renewed appreciation of the profound influence that *FIYH* has made on preaching and preaching education these past twenty-five years.

Serendipitously, CATH was approached in 2007 with a generous offer to fund continued reflection on *FIYH*. This enabled a

CATH writing team to convene in St. Louis in September 2007 and April 2008. The funding also supported another annual meeting in St. Paul in November 2007 at which the entire CATH membership worked to conceive the scope and vision for this pastoral commentary on *FIYH*.

In these conversations, CATH welcomed two members of the original Priestly Life and Ministry subcommittee and writing team—William Skudlarek, O.S.B., the principal writer of *FIYH*, and Fred Baumer. Their stories about the subcommittee were so fascinating that CATH membership arranged for further interviews and research in order to include an appendix on the history of *FIYH* in this commentary.

The CATH writing team organized its work according to the original divisions found in the document: the assembly, the preacher, the homily, and homiletic method. The following is a listing of the members of the writing team and the sections on which they worked. When a section had a principal author, an asterisk (\*) is placed after his or her name.

### ***Project Direction***

Fr. Gregory Heille, O.P., past-president of CATH and project director; Professor of Homiletics and Vice President and Academic Dean at Aquinas Institute of Theology, Saint Louis, Missouri; editor of *Theology of Preaching: Essays on Vision and Mission in the Pulpit* (Melisende, 2001)

### ***Editor***

Fr. James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R., editor of the commentary; Professor of Homiletics at Washington Theological Union, Washington, D.C.; author of *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feasts and within the Rites* (Liturgical Press, 2002) and *The Ministry of Lectors*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Liturgical Press, 2004)

### ***The Assembly***

Dr. Miguel Díaz, Professor of Theology, The College of Saint Benedict, Saint John's University, and Saint John's School of Theology-Seminary, Collegeville, Minnesota

Fr. Jan Michael Joncas, Associate Professor of Catholic Studies, University of St. Thomas, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author of *Preaching the Rites of Christian Initiation* (Liturgy Training Publications, 1994)

Dr. Deborah Organ\*, President of CATH; Clinical Social Worker and Pastoral Minister at Holy Rosary Parish, Minneapolis, Minnesota

### ***The Preacher***

Fr. Donald Heet, O.S.F.S., Secretary/Treasurer of CATH; Associate Clinical Professor and Director of Doctor of Ministry Program, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

Sr. Theresa Rickard, O.P., President and Executive Director of RENEW International, Plainfield, New Jersey

Fr. James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R. (See under Editor)

### ***The Homily***

Fr. Gueric DeBona, O.S.B., out-going President of CATH; Professor of Homiletics, Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, Saint Meinrad, Indiana; author of *Fulfilled in Our Hearing: History and Method of Christian Preaching* (Paulist Press, 2005)

Fr. Edward Foley, O.F.M.Cap.\*, Duns Scotus Professor of Spirituality and ordinary Professor of Liturgy and Music at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, Illinois; general editor of *Commentary on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (Liturgical Press, 2007) and author of *From Age to Age* (Liturgical Press, 2008)

Sr. Mary Margaret Pazdan, O.P., Professor of Biblical Studies at Aquinas Institute of Theology, Saint Louis, Missouri; Promoter of Preaching for the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, Wisconsin; author of *Becoming God's Beloved in the Company of Friends: A Spirituality of the Fourth Gospel* (Wipf and Stock, 2007)

### ***Homiletic Method***

Dr. Fred Baumer, Vice President for Organizational Effectiveness at BI Worldwide, Minneapolis, Minnesota; co-founder

with Patricia Hughes Baumer of Partners in Preaching, Eden Prairie, Minnesota; lecturer in preaching at Saint John's School of Theology-Seminary, Collegeville, Minnesota; member of the writing team for *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (NCCB, 1982)

Sr. Mary Margaret Pazdan, O.P. (See under The Homily)

Fr. William Skudlarek, O.S.B., Secretary General of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, Rome; principal writer of *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (NCCB, 1982)

Sr. Honora Werner, O.P., Councilor to the Prioress of Caldwell Dominican Sisters, Caldwell, New Jersey; Director of the Doctor of Ministry in Preaching at Aquinas Institute of Theology, Saint Louis, Missouri

### ***Appendix: A History of Fulfilled in Your Hearing***

Ms. Trish Sullivan Vanni, doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California; Project Director of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project

While the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry chose to address *FIYH* to priests and bishops presiding and preaching at the Sunday Eucharist, the introduction to *FIYH* acknowledges the role of deacons as ministers of the Word and also the responsibility of the entire Christian community, by virtue of baptism, for the proclamation of the Word of God. Clearly, *FIYH* has been read with great benefit by Catholic bishops, priests, deacons, and lay ecclesial ministers, all dedicated to the proclamation of the Word of God. On careful consideration of today's ministerial context, the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics chose to address this commentary to all Catholics charged by virtue of their ministry with proclaiming the Word of God, as well as to seminarians, candidates for permanent diaconate, and other ministerial students taking their first courses in preaching. Keeping in mind the growing frequency in the United States of preaching in the absence of a priest, the writing team also chose to nuance such words in the original document as "Sunday" and "homily" with the use of additional expres-

sions such as “the Lord’s Day” and “the Word.” We believe that both *FIYH* and this commentary can be studied with benefit by those who preside and preach at the Eucharist and by those who minister in the absence of a priest. Of course, we also welcome an international and ecumenical readership to *FIYH* and to this commentary.

Rather than taking a didactic approach to an inspiring document, we chose to proceed by way of commendation and recommendation. This allows for recognition of those insights and features of *FIYH* that continue to deserve notice and celebration. At the same time, attention can be given to present-day issues of cultural context and the wealth of emerging insights recently developed in the fields of biblical interpretation, liturgical theology, and homiletic methodology. The five areas of context, hermeneutics, liturgy, mission, and theology emerged in our discussions as helpful signposts or rubrics for organizing an examination of each section of *FIYH* with a view to making recommendations. We hope these recommendations will prove helpful to preachers and preaching students, as well as to bishops and their advisors, as we work together to address issues pertinent to preaching in today’s church in North America. CATH hopes to be a vital partner in this continuing conversation.

Gregory Heille, O.P.



# I: The Assembly

*Deborah Organ (principal author),  
Miguel Díaz, and Jan Michael Joncas*

The 1982 document *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (hereafter, *FIYH*), began with a consideration of the gathered assembly as the primary context and starting point for preaching the Word. We affirm *FIYH*'s decision to make the assembly its starting point, and, in the first part of this section, we hope to provide additional nuance to its description of the assembly. Furthermore, we explore some practical implications for preaching that flow from the even more diverse contexts and characteristics of today's assemblies. In the second part of this section, we consider the impact of current ecclesial reality on the life and practice of local assemblies, as well as reflect on a methodology for developing the parish as a place where differences and even conflicts can be engaged in a way that creates a setting for liturgy, learning, and new life.

## ***Diversity in Today's Assemblies: Characteristics and Worldviews***

*FIYH* affirmed the importance of the preacher's knowing the assembly gathered for worship and made a creditable effort to identify ways in which assemblies may be diverse, recognizing this possibility even in congregations apparently homogenous.

## 2 *Preaching in the Sunday Assembly*

Its analysis of diversity employed categories such as age, ethnicity, race, gender, and social and economic status (8). It also acknowledged the presence within the assembly of “the joyful and the bereaved, the fervent and the halfhearted, the strong and the weak” (8). These categories remain vital in our own day.

Consider a parish like San Jacinto. San Jacinto is a community of approximately nine hundred families centrally located in a large metropolitan area. Originally established sixty years ago to serve a Polish community, the parish continues to offer Mass in Polish occasionally, and the regular English Sunday liturgy is attended by a few elderly Polish speakers, along with approximately seventy English-speaking parishioners. The pews are jammed, however, at the later Spanish Mass with hundreds of mostly first-generation Mexican and Ecuadorian families. While a remnant of the English-speaking community still remains in charge of many of the parish’s operations, newer Spanish-speaking parishioners are beginning to come forward in an effort to involve themselves in parish ministries and to express their formational and sacramental needs. Diversity is certainly present, as is the possibility for conflict, emerging around the use of parish meeting rooms and other resources. The parish is clearly at a crossroads in its identity and mission. The pastor wonders how to preach to his diverse community, both at the separate liturgies conducted for each language group and at the occasional bilingual liturgies the parish has recently, and somewhat tentatively, decided to try. Fortunately, there are resources available to help preachers like this pastor.

### *Culture as Dynamic and Transformative*

Since the publication of *FIYH*, new resources have emerged that offer a framework for responding pastorally and homiletically to the culturally diverse characteristics and backgrounds found in parishes like San Jacinto. In *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*, James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers identify culture as a broadly inclusive category of diversity in that many of the ways that people differ involve some aspect of their cultural worldview (Nieman and Rogers, 15). The authors

stress the dynamism of culture, noting that, while there may be essential dimensions of culture that remain constant throughout our lives, we are also engaged in a continual process of exploration, transformation, and learning in relation to our culture of origin and its influence on us and, even more so, when we have moved into a different cultural context. For example, immigrants who have lived awhile in the United States frequently go back to their countries of origin to visit and discover how much they themselves have changed. While they may have continued to live into and out of their original cultural heritage, they also have been engaged and influenced by the cultural forces of their new homeland. Some understanding on the preacher's part of the dynamics of cultural transformation is essential for preaching that connects with multicultural communities.

New expressions of faith are coming to birth in parishes that include significant representation by more than one cultural group. Often clergy who come to the United States from around the world to serve people from their own country of origin are surprised by how liturgy and faith expression have evolved from what they knew in their countries of origin. This is true even in parishes sensitive to providing an environment that affirms and attempts to preserve diverse cultural expressions of faith. There is movement in some United States parishes toward the creation of "intercultural community." This name was devised by Alejandro Aguilera Titus of the Secretariat for Hispanic Ministry at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to describe a parish community that seeks to maintain important cultural traditions by engaging in authentic and enriching dialogue with people of different cultural backgrounds, with the goal of becoming one community. This concept has been adopted as a central part of pastoral planning in Hispanic ministry by some local churches, including the Archdiocese of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Intercultural parish communities represent a significant move away from what can be called "parallel communities" that have been so common in United States Catholic dioceses for the last twenty-five to thirty years. In these parishes, two or three cultural groups use the same parish facilities but with complete

#### 4 *Preaching in the Sunday Assembly*

autonomy. All too often one group experiences some degree of marginalization. The goal of the intercultural community is to have a true community of all groups while not losing diversity.

Bilingual or even trilingual liturgies are becoming more common in parishes, particularly on special occasions. Shared planning and a good deal of expertise are necessary in preparing for these events, so that these occasions can provide the opportunity for everyone present to pray and participate. There is no getting around the fact that everyone sacrifices for bilingual liturgies, even the best planned ones, but there is the possibility that everyone will also benefit. Most people have a preferred language of prayer, and it is a sacrifice to have some elements of the liturgy in another language. The sacrifice is worth it, however, when people from the different language groups have begun to care about one another. If a parish has worked to bring people together in various contexts and valued relationships are forming, community members often become more motivated to pray together in the liturgy. The preaching, then, at bilingual and trilingual liturgies has the potential to build bridges, share differences, and foster unity.

#### *Cultural Transformations, Negative and Positive*

Cultural encounters and the resulting transformation can have a negative impact. A recent workshop in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, included role-playing by indigenous women exploring what they saw as the greatest challenges facing their communities. The first challenge they identified was dealing with the effects of migration. Their role-playing depicted a son returning to his family after a number of years in the United States; he had many new material possessions, but clearly had moved away from the collaborative mindset that is a core value of these indigenous communities. The women also reflected on the role that dominant cultural values in the United States, experienced either through migration or exposure to media, have played in the erosion of the moral fabric of their community through the introduction of permissive sexual mores.

Nevertheless, cultural transformation is often positive. The experience of “Aasha” is a case in point. She came from Somalia to the United States with her husband five years ago. They had one son when they arrived; then, a daughter was born in the United States. From the beginning of their ten-year marriage, Aasha’s husband had beaten her regularly and, increasingly, severely. During a recent incident, a neighbor called the police and Aasha’s husband was taken into custody, and she and the children spent a month in a domestic violence shelter. Through participation in a domestic violence survivors’ group, Aasha’s cultural belief that a husband had the God-given right to mistreat his spouse and children was challenged, and she developed new confidence in her own worth and in her ability to provide for her son and daughter. Without this exposure to another culture’s relational values, no change is likely to have occurred.

### *The Fear Factor*

An ecclesial community can be a place where people of different cultural backgrounds engage one another with mutual benefit. Such engagement must be intentional, since the potential always exists for the parish to increase the polarity between people with different characteristics, affirming stereotypes and increasing experiences of marginalization for at least one of the groups. Some long-time parishioners, for example, may resent people of different backgrounds who come to their parish speaking different languages. At the root of the resentment is often the fear of difference, as well as fear of losing the parish community they have known and loved. The homily can be one of the instruments for naming and confronting such fears while offering an alternative vision of what it means to be a Christian community, a pilgrim people, the body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit to honor the gift of diversity and work toward ever greater unity.

### *Frameworks and Strategies for Preachers*

Current resources have also reflected on what needs to be done to create liturgical environments where diverse congregations

can pray and celebrate together. They agree on the importance of reflecting on the many nuances of diversity present in today's assemblies, so that fear of difference may give way to new understanding and respect. Nieman and Rogers suggest that preachers use four "frames" to identify common areas of diversity: ethnicity, class, displacement, and beliefs (Nieman and Rogers, 20). Their work includes naming the characteristics of each frame and offering some communication strategies useful for preaching. Cathy Black, in *Culturally Conscious Worship*, also names various elements for viewing diversity of background within an assembly, each in the form of a continuum, with a view toward balancing and blending elements in multicultural worship so that all can participate. For instance, she points out that some people experience God in a largely personal way, while others see God revealed more in community; some are well versed in doctrine, while others have little or no catechetical background. Black's work offers resources to assist preachers trying to respond to the challenge of congregational diversity in its many forms by broadening the repertoire of possible approaches and thereby leading to more effective preaching as well as the creation of "spaces" for dialogue.

As *FIYH* asserted, diversity encompasses categories other than race, culture, and ethnicity. These include age, gender, class, economic situation, and educational background. Andrew Carl Wisdom, O.P., in his book *Preaching to a Multigenerational Assembly* offers practical help to preachers wishing to address the generational diversity in their congregations. While people do not always fit neatly into any one generational group, such as the "Boomers" or "Generation X" in their faith expression, and while particular designations and descriptions will yield to others as a generation passes on, nonetheless, incorporating within a homily what Wisdom calls "generation specific cues," that is, illustrations and expressions designed to appeal to each age cohort, helps to assure that the message of a preaching event will both engage and be understood by all present. Such cues lead to and flow from what homiletician Joseph Webb calls "hub symbols" (Webb, 49). Wisdom proposes that Catholic preachers must

understand the basic hub or core symbols of each generation, and go on to discover how the sacramental context of our liturgy offers transgenerational hub symbols (Wisdom, 59ff). From these the preacher can design a homily that is intergenerational.

Preaching has the potential to be either a barrier or a bridge to intercultural understanding. The relationship between the preacher and the assembly is a key component in developing homilies that foster and support a community's engagement with diversity, both within and outside the Christian community. Because many react to diversity with fear, dread, or weariness, it is crucial that preachers come to know their own people, so that homilies reflect and speak to the realities of human existence in this particular time and place, rather than speaking in generalities or reinforcing stereotypes of differing cultural characteristics. Preachers, as well as communities, may need to have their assumptions and judgments challenged. This is most likely to happen in ongoing relationships that go beyond the Sunday assembly, but it can begin with what is done in preaching.

By beginning with a call to focus on the assembly in its diversity, *FIYH* made a significant contribution to ensuring the relevance of the homily for its listeners. Over the last twenty-five years, the conversation this has provoked has grown and developed in significant ways, benefitting from the experiences of local communities like San Jacinto and through the work of theorists like Black, Nieman, Rogers, and Wisdom. Further assistance can be found in a more recent sociological study of American Catholics in *American Catholics Today* by William D'Antonio, James Davidson, Dean Hoge, and Mary Gautier.

### *Engagement of the Senses*

Another contribution of *FIYH* is its call for preachers to engage the various senses in the preaching event. Such engagement is nothing new in Catholic life. Earlier generations may fondly recall the liturgical experiences of their youth that made use of incense, floral decoration, color, music, and other sounds to evoke a sense of God's presence and to call them to reverence. These have been as significant as the words of the liturgy in creating an effective

setting for encountering the sacred. Throughout the history of the church in the United States, immigrants have brought their images and stories of how God has been present in the lives of their communities of origin, how Jesus has held the central place in the hearts and devotional life of the people, and how the Holy Spirit has taken a unique role in preserving their faith and trust in God. It is also common in many parishes in the United States to see shrines dedicated to Mary, Mother of Jesus, honored in various cultural expressions, a testimony to her instrumental role in the deepening of the community's faith in Jesus Christ.

Preachers do well to avail themselves of appeals to all the senses in preparing to preach. As oral and aural communication, preaching can engage the senses on multiple levels. Involving the imagination through sounds and images that evoke new perspectives on reality and new possibilities, rather than only describe them, goes far toward engaging a listener beyond the intellect alone. More resources for the development of imaginative preaching are available now than in 1982.

### *Engagement through Technology*

Recent technological innovations in worship and preaching have met with mixed reviews. Some congregations have added screens to their sanctuaries, putting music and visual images up during liturgy. Sometimes projected images help to focus prayer; at other times they distract. Various efforts to respond creatively to the technological boom of the last decade have been made. One preacher even set up computer capability to text with teenagers in the congregation during his Sunday sermons!

While we believe it is important to acknowledge attempts to use technology to deepen community ties and improve the quality of the liturgical experience, it is equally important to critically evaluate them. In some cases, parishes may fall into the trap of replacing direct person-to-person communication with technology to the detriment of community growth. The use of technology in worship needs to be carefully monitored to assure it is enriching a community's faith formation rather than riding a current trend of offering entertainment.

### ***Diversity in Today's Assemblies: Larger Ecclesial Currents and Contexts***

While affirming the ongoing contribution of *FIYH* in calling preachers to recognize the diversity that exists within a community, we believe that the complexity of local assemblies deserves even further consideration. Such reflection necessitates taking into account insights gained from the perspective of several larger influences on a community's identity and liturgical life. We do not claim to include here all of the larger trends that affect parish life, such as the impact of present-day political and global issues, nor will we speak directly to current social issues that threaten to tear parish communities apart. We do judge, however, that the polarity and conflict that are part of life due to systemic impact may be served by strategies we present in this section on the assembly. We now focus on systemic identity and mission within the larger Roman Catholic Church.

#### *An Ecclesial—and Homiletic—Identity Crisis*

Because contemporary assemblies include so many people of diverse cultural backgrounds and other differing characteristics, we no longer can assume a common faith experience uniting the participants in a Sunday assembly. Complicating matters further is the presence in the assembly of varying beliefs that are prioritized differently. This can have implications for what people expect from a homily. Some might desire to hear more on doctrinal and moral matters. In reaction to an age hesitant to affirm one truth over another, or any absolute truth at all, some may want their preacher to provide greater clarity and firm guidelines based on church teaching. Others may ask preachers to connect the Scriptures with their lives while allowing them room to arrive at their own applications to specific areas in life.

While everyone from the recent 2008 Synod of Bishops on the Word of God to Pope Benedict XVI to local bishops' conferences throughout the world to people in the pews on Sundays (and, in some cases, people who are no longer in those pews because of what they characterize as "bad preaching") is calling for better

preaching, the universal church has yet to agree on what constitutes “good” preaching. Studying all official church documents over the last forty years reveals that both a scriptural/dialogical approach (as in *FIYH*) and a doctrinal/educational approach to liturgical preaching (as in John Paul II’s *On Catechesis in Our Time* [48]) have found their supporters. Such diversity can, however, lead to an identity crisis for preaching. Here is one instance of how that tension was experienced

### *A Parish Battleground*

Nearly eighty years ago, St. Barnabas Parish began as the hub of an urban neighborhood. Established by Irish immigrants, it remains largely Caucasian while including a number of African American and a few Asian families. For about the last twenty years the parish has been a microcosm of larger church identity, with a number of people who closely identify with the call of Vatican II for greater lay participation in the church and society, as well as a number of people who embrace the current movement to affirm and retrieve traditional devotional practices and greater understanding of the doctrinal content of the faith.

Over those years the parish has been served by two pastors. The first, a self-described liberal, preached regularly on the Second Vatican Council’s call to be a community engaged in the pursuit of social justice. During his years at the parish, the more traditional Catholics felt significantly alienated, while those of like mind with the pastor established a number of social justice initiatives. The second pastor evidenced an interest and concern with doctrine. Those with a similar perspective were relieved at his arrival and felt that they could “come out of the shadows.” The former group of parishioners, however, now felt alienated and displaced, although some were also pleased to see a resurgence in the participation of young people who seemed thirsty for knowledge about the church. Preaching in this community became a battleground between passionate people with different perspectives, though it must be acknowledged that still others did not care about these theological differences but came to church for different reasons.

### *Preaching in a Polarized Context*

One danger of preaching in a polarized context is that the preacher's perspective will contribute to making whole groups of people invisible. The story of St. Barnabas signals the importance of the preacher's self-knowledge and willingness to move beyond one's subjective perspective in order to relate to the parish community. When an assembly includes people with different perspectives on current ecclesial "hot-button" issues, whether social or sexual, political or theological, differences frequently are glossed over or the parish becomes a battleground. The reality and challenge of real differences in parish communities make it necessary to go beyond the relationship between preacher and congregation as emphasized in *FIYH* to the development of relationships between members of the community themselves. In order to offer a foundation for this assessment, we appeal to some theological roots of the Catholic tradition.

### *Diversity and the Trinity*

While the above reflections on diversity and context may appear to be largely sociological and anthropological, we believe that the relationship between diversity and unity merits specific attention here and, in fact, is at the heart of our Catholic faith and doctrine. We wish to underscore diversity as a *positive* reality to be lived with and engaged, rather than a negative challenge to be reduced and overcome. *FIYH* tends to treat diversity as a problem to be "solved" by appeal to a common faith. The document argues: "While the diversity of every assembly is a factor that needs to be taken seriously by the preacher, and all the more so when the diversity cuts across racial, ethnic, economic, and social lines, this diversity should not blind us to another even greater reality: the unity of the congregation" (9). In such a view, diversity seems more a hurdle to be cleared than a gift to be cherished.

*FIYH* does not sufficiently articulate that the unity achieved through faith in Christ can only be brought about *in* and *through* diversity. We must keep in mind how the doctrine of the Trinity offers an invaluable resource for understanding how plurality is not an obstacle but is essential in constituting and safeguarding

the unity of faith. Our communion with each other is grounded in a shared faith in God who reaches out to us “finally sending his only Son in human flesh.” This Son Jesus, who “expressed the fullness of the Father’s love by accepting death on the cross,” is now glorified by the Father, and we, as believers, now witness to the kingdom of God “present both in and through Jesus, and still to come to its fullness through the power of the Holy Spirit” (10). Simply stated, the Trinitarian relationships in the one God frame the way in which we know God and the way in which we are called into the new community of the kingdom together.

Out of this Trinitarian perspective we focus on developing communities of dialogue and moving away from polarity. In practical terms, we experience unity in Christ through relationship in community, in all of its grace and messiness. How is it that diverse, often polarized, assemblies can create the context for living out of this diversity-in-unity in the here and now? While good preaching is only one factor in a community’s engagement with both conflict and diversity, it is certainly an important one. Sunday homilies can lift up, name, challenge, and affirm the work that the community does all week long to bring faith and life together and extend that engagement to other settings in which its members find themselves. Preaching can help create the context where some very difficult but necessary conversations can begin.

### *Creating a Context for Dialogue in Assemblies*

In 1999, the Harvard Negotiation Project published *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. Its first premise was that many interactions, particularly if they involve conflict, are “battles of messages” in which each participant is attempting to prove that he or she is right. The result of these “battles” is seldom dialogue, but rather power struggles. It is possible, however, to transform difficult conversations into learning ones that allow participants to maintain their perspectives while actually learning something about people who may view things differently. If we go into a conversation needing to win, then whoever

is on the “other side” or has a different perspective cannot be right, because then we would be wrong—and lose!

Polarity in parish communities deepens when conflict is seen as win-lose. Polarity also tends to deepen if conflict is not engaged at all but is brushed under the rug on the mistaken assumption that people of faith will naturally do their best to “get along” and live without conflict. But when passionate people come together, difficult conversations *will* occur due to the high level of importance placed on matters of faith not agreed on.

*Difficult Conversations* reframes conflict and difference from win-lose situations to learning opportunities. The strategies provided may be useful for parishes looking to form a setting for dialogue. Such interaction can be nurtured by preaching that opens the door to a positive and enriching engagement of diversity. For example, if a parish forum is organized so that parishioners can air their perspectives on an important church issue, laying ground rules that reinforce listening to learn rather than to win, this effort may significantly and positively impact the experience for parishioners without denying differences and conflict.

Homiletic preaching can pick up the threads of the conversations happening within and even outside of the community. Preachers, while speaking with integrity from their own perspective, can deepen the dialogue within a community and reinforce the work being done. Such reflection makes it necessary for the preacher to be part of the ongoing dialogue and foster an environment of openness and safety for people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. If the preacher has a significant leadership role in the community, whether and how that person engages dialogue and conflict may also impact the hearing of the Sunday preaching by some of the faithful. The need for continued development of seminary and lay ministry formation in both homiletics and conflict management is clear.

### *Clergy Demographics and Community Blending*

It would be irresponsible to write a piece on the Sunday assembly in the twenty-first century without referring to the

continuing shift in Catholic clergy demographics. Both the continued decline in the number of priests and the growth of lay ecclesial ministry have influenced the composition of assemblies in significant ways. Dioceses all over the country are restructuring their parishes, resulting in the blending of parishes with very different histories. Talk about difficult conversations! The process of renaming the new parish resulting from the merging of three small rural parishes in the Upper Midwest is fraught with as many potential cultural pitfalls as is the most urban multicultural parish. Diocesan planning is also presenting new configurations of professional parish leadership, and, in some places, those leaders are trained laypeople. The implications for the ministry of preaching are many and, as yet, largely unexplored.

The priest serving as pastor to three or more parishes is one result of shifting ecclesial demographics. This phenomenon has recently been explored in depth and breadth by Katarina Schuth, O.S.F., in her book *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes*. Schuth gathered data from approximately one thousand priests for the book. The results of her survey that provide information on their quality of life were largely uplifting—most of the priests (over 97 percent), having to devise new ways to connect with their various congregations, reported high or moderate satisfaction with their relationships with parishioners (see *Priestly Ministry*, appendix B, question 49). The study confirms the enduring value and importance of relationship as the basis of parish life, and thus of effective preaching, and indicates the need to continue to develop models of preaching that meet the needs of new and different configurations of parish communities.

### *Conclusion*

In many respects, the San Jacinto and St. Barnabas parishes are dealing with the same issue: how to engage diversity to further the growth and life of a unified assembly, rather than to bring about stagnation and polarization. Both examples point out that diversity has many faces in today's assemblies, and they affirm that the church continues to be transformed both by its leaders and people and what they bring to the assembly, as well

as by larger trends taking place in society. Preaching, as a form of communication at the heart of parish life, can play a decisive role in forming the identity of the assembly, leading it toward either communion or polarization. That is a choice preachers and communities make every Sunday and throughout the week.

We affirm the vision of *FIYH* for homiletic preaching as beginning with the assembly in its diversity and unity, recognizing that the ecclesial environment has changed since 1982 and that the identity and composition of local assemblies continue to shift and change. We are grateful for the resources developed during these years that offer frameworks and practical helps for preachers and assemblies. This work enables preachers to carry on the dialogue essential to the development of preaching that is truly “a scriptural interpretation of human existence which enables a community to recognize God’s active presence, to respond to that presence in faith through liturgical word and gesture, and beyond the liturgical assembly, through a life lived in conformity with the Gospel” (81).