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Ordinary Professor of Liturgical Studies and Sacramental Theology

Author of *Serving the Body of Christ*

The Catholic University of America

Between the Ambo and the Altar

*Biblical Preaching and The Roman Missal,
Year B*

Guerric DeBona, OSB



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For the priests of the
Archdiocese of Indianapolis
and the people they serve

“He loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end.”
—John 13:1b

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Introduction: Biblical Preaching and the New *Roman Missal*

The Geography of the Homily

It is no exaggeration to say that we live in a world choked with words. From texting with smartphones to blogging on the Internet, we face a glut of language day after day. Paradoxically, we strain to establish relationships with one another that really connect. Indeed, this age of global messaging has been far from communicative. Instead, we are a culture of individual selves, more often isolated than not by the very words we form, longing for true community and reconciliation. In the end, no multiplication of words or virtual encounters via the latest technology will satisfy the human yearning for connecting to the deepest center of our being and the lives of others. Only the Word made visible will satiate that terrible hunger.

That is the mission of Christian preaching when the community of faith gathers as the eucharistic assembly: to unearth a liberating Word to the weary, the downtrodden, and the alienated. As Christ tells those gathered to hear the words of Scripture broken open to them in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, God has sent him “to proclaim liberty to captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19, NAB). The liturgical homily exists, then, for the purpose of deepening the faith of the baptized. In the often quoted words from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the Second Vatican Council, “By means of the homily, the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year” (52). Preaching is meant to guide the Christian community into a deeper celebration of the Eucharist and engage the faith community in the “richer fare”

2 *Between the Ambo and the Altar*

of the Scriptures as they unfold in the Sunday Lectionary and in the experience of the faith community.

This banquet of God's saving word served at the eucharistic celebration emerges from the Scriptures and the church's liturgy itself. As the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says, the homily "is necessary for the nurturing of the Christian life. It should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners" (65). The preacher, then, engages the assembly in its particular historical horizon with the language of faith and tradition in order to draw the congregation into the paschal mystery of Christ's sanctification for his church. Preaching is a grace-filled convergence among preacher, text, and God's people. As a constitutive component of the liturgy, the homily "points to the presence of God in people's lives and then leads a congregation into the Eucharist, providing, as it were, the motive for celebrating the Eucharist in this time and place."¹ As the USCCB document *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* enjoins us, "Every homily, because it is an intrinsic part of the Sunday Eucharist, must therefore be about the dying and rising of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial passage through suffering to new and eternal life for us."² The preacher facilitates the congregation's discovery of the Word unfolding in the very midst of sacred space and, in so doing, discloses the mystery of God's faithful love, together with the thanks and praise that is at the heart of the Eucharist, the height and summit of our worship as the people of God. As Pope Benedict XVI writes in *Verbum Domini*, quoting *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,

Here one sees the sage pedagogy of the Church, which proclaims and listens to sacred Scripture following the rhythm of the liturgical year. This expansion of God's word in time takes place above all in the Eucharistic celebration and in the Liturgy of the Hours. At the center of everything the paschal mystery shines forth, and around it radiate all the mysteries of Christ and the history of salvation, which become sacramentally present: "By recalling in this way the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens up to the faithful the riches of the saving actions and the merits of her Lord, and makes them present to all times, allowing the faithful to enter into contact with them and to be filled with the grace of salvation." For this reason I encourage the Church's Pastors and all engaged in pastoral

work to see that all the faithful learn to savor the deep meaning of the word of God which unfolds each year in the liturgy, revealing the fundamental mysteries of our faith. This is in turn the basis for a correct approach to sacred Scripture.³

I have titled this preaching commentary *Between the Ambo and the Altar* in order to locate the liturgical geography of the homily and call attention to the place of preaching as the site for the faithful “to savor the deep meaning of the word of God which unfolds each year in the liturgy, revealing the fundamental mysteries of our faith.” As is well known, for many years the sermon functioned as a kind of misplaced little island at the Roman liturgy; it became a harbor for boatloads of parish announcements or themes that were loosely drifting out to sea. Most of these were well-intentioned sermons but something like castaways unmoored, poorly integrated into the liturgy itself. When the restoration of the ancient *homilia* was promulgated with the Second Vatican Council, the character of preaching the Word shifted from a lone island adrift in a vast ocean to a strategic bridge connecting two vast continents. The purpose of the homily in the age of the new evangelization is to preach the Good News of Christ’s saving work as it is disclosed in the entire Bible, God’s living Word among us, and this disclosure is to lead the baptized assembly to praise, thanksgiving, and mission. “The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives. It should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer and the Eucharistic liturgy. Consequently, those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart” (*Verbum Domini* 59). By accounting for God’s activity in Christ throughout salvation history, the homily deepens the faith of the Christian assembly, instilling in the faithful a heartfelt desire to gather at the eucharistic sacrifice. So by definition, the homily exists for the sake of the hearer of the Good News, to transition this congregation from Word to sacrament, from the ambo to the altar. And from the altar to mission.

The present series, which begins with this volume, is meant to be an application of preaching in the context of the church’s Lectionary inside the language of the Sunday liturgy. From the perspective of

the Sunday homily and the interests of those who preach week after week, I think that there remains a marvelous opportunity to discover a dialogue that exists between the liturgical texts—the presidential prayers and eucharistic prayers, the prefaces for Ordinary Time as well as feasts and solemnities—and the Scriptures themselves. I think we should view our dialogue with the Sunday liturgy as both culturally local and broadly universal. Just as the Scriptures have been passed down to us and are made applicable for our day by exegetical methods such as historical criticism and other ways of study, so too are we able to draw in the church’s liturgical tradition for the homily as a constitutive dialogue partner. As of this writing, there have already been some fine introductions to the translation and implementation of the new *Roman Missal* (2011), such as Paul Turner’s *Pastoral Companion to the Roman Missal* (WLP, 2010). Indeed, the probing of the vast resources of the liturgy and the Scriptures from which this celebration has emerged allows for what Louis-Marie Chauvet calls “*la Bible liturgique*.”⁴ Drawing from Chauvet and echoing the *GIRM*, Edward Foley and Jon Michael Joncas remind us that the preacher may explore further resources for the homily, among them the “liturgical bible,” which “may refer to all liturgical texts apart from the lectionary.” These include the major and minor euchologies such as the eucharistic prayers, prefaces, collects, the invariable (e.g., the “Holy, Holy”), and optional texts for the day (e.g., prayers for the blessing of an Advent wreath or newly restored Blessing over the People during Lent), “as well as the words of the hymns, songs and acclamations that are sung during worship.”⁵ I hasten to add that this liturgical language is not simply a resource for the preacher, but the living text of the faith community that has unfolded over the centuries. Yes, we are a historical, culturally specific faith community but always in dialogue with sacred history and how God has shaped us through the mediation of the church. The liturgy and the Scriptures that are the spine of the Body of Christ, as it were, form a marvelous dialectic for the preacher to witness the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Homiletic Arc

In addition to providing a resource for the preacher by way of commentary, my hope is that the present text will contribute to an understanding of homiletic process as well. After teaching preach-

ing to seminarians for over a dozen years and giving workshops to priests, deacons, and other ministers, I can say that one of the most difficult concepts to grasp—but one of the most essential to learn—is the essential organic unity of the homily. The late Ken Untener and others have stressed the frustration present in hearers in the congregation who complain about the homily having too many ideas and failing to challenge the call to mission in the world on a practical level.⁶ Every preacher should certainly have some kind of method that serves as a kind of armature for the text, moving the homily along and structured around the listener. We cannot rely on our subjective, privatized voice to preach to a community of believers. All of us have been trained as solitary writers from an early age, but those who preach write for a congregation of ears, not a single pair of eyes. In this regard, homiletic strategy is very much in order so that the baptized assembly might listen to the word of God with faith and understanding, unencumbered by the personal eccentricities of the preacher. For those who are interested in developing a method of homiletics more fully, I would recommend the works of David Buttrick, Eugene Lowry, and Paul Scott Wilson, all of whom have written extensively on crafting the homily.⁷

With *Between the Ambo and the Altar*, I have in mind something less like a method and more like process, moving from Scripture to liturgical text to homily. Therefore, I have structured the book around three coordinates that seem to me to be the most productive way of engaging a preaching dialogue between the Sunday Lectionary readings and the liturgical texts that surround them. The first section is meant to be a prayerful reflection on the Lectionary for the day. I have avoided commentaries but used only some (minor) native ability in biblical languages, together with a good study Bible. Over the years, I have found that scholarly biblical commentaries are quite useful but usually only *after* a kind of naïve reading of the text, a precritical reflection, which Paul Ricoeur has called “the first naïveté” or “the spontaneous immediacy of reader to subject matter.”⁸ Such reading of the sacred text allows me to sink deeply into the word of God without a gloss. At the same time, a study Bible with adequate footnotes affords the opportunity to make very general historical and textual connections that aid in the life of prayer and contemplation. I am suggesting, then, that this first section of exploring the biblical text become the initial starting point for the homily, best accessed about

a week before the homily is to be delivered and, ideally, integrated into Morning or Evening Prayer.

The second section is devoted precisely to establishing a substantial connection with the liturgical texts and making some links with the Scripture. "Connecting the Bible and the Liturgy" is rather subjective and personal, and it is my hope that the preacher will bring a wealth of associations to such a process of connections between Scripture and the liturgy, or between the ambo and the altar. These musings on the prayers in the liturgy are meant to be pastoral suggestions for homiletic building blocks rather than formal theoretical arguments. To this end, I have taken each of the Lectionary cycles (A, B, C) and evinced some connection with the liturgical texts for that particular Sunday. My goal here is certainly not exhaustive; in fact, it is far from that. As every seasoned preacher knows, homiletics relies on making associations and connections for an increasingly diverse congregation of listeners. My aim is that preachers, new and experienced alike, will begin to mine the wealth of material already present in the liturgy and the Scriptures for a multicultural and multi-generational assembly. Although there are numerous elements in the "liturgical Bible" to consider, as well as many possible partners for establishing the homiletic text, I have confined myself mostly to the newly revised translation of the presidential prayers and prefaces of *The Roman Missal* in an effort to glean material for preaching. There is a wealth of potential present in these texts for reflection. I have avoided historical explanations of the prayers, but simply recommend what might be considered a point of departure for constructing the liturgical homily. In some rare instances, I have alluded to the previous (revised) *Sacramentary's* (1985) translation or, again, sometimes averted to the original Latin itself as a way of mining the depth of the church's liturgy. So saying, the wise homilist's attention to these prayers demonstrates an attention to what *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (1982) refers to as the preacher's unique role as "mediator of meaning." The preacher stands in the midst of the Christian assembly as an interpreter of the Word within a particular culture articulating a powerful witness, nurtured by the faith of the church. As Daniel McCarthy has demonstrated with his commentaries on selected Collects originally published in *The Tablet*, the liturgy itself is a catalyst to such preaching.⁹ Careful meditation on the liturgical prayers in the manner of *lectio divina*, while reflecting on a given Sunday, solemnity,

or feast that celebrates these days, will undoubtedly assist the preacher not only in the homily itself but also with the entire Eucharistic Liturgy for the various needs of these particular hearers of the gospel.

Finally, I have included a third section on "Strategy for Preaching" as a kind of point of homiletic integration for each Sunday. As with the previous two sections, I hardly expect that each reader will come to the same homiletic text as I did in the course of this process, but I simply recommend one that strikes me as a plausible outcome of my own engagement with the texts. The paradigm remains the same, though, for each of the Sundays, feasts, and solemnities presented in the liturgical year. If we follow the process for preaching in this book, we move from a meditation on Scripture as it is given in the Lectionary then on to a connection of these texts with the liturgical prayers for the given Sunday (or perhaps some other relevant liturgical text) to the emergence of the homily itself. In terms of a watershed moment in preaching preparation, I regard the primary task of this third stage of the homiletic process a narrowing down to a single declarative sentence, which I have called here the homiletic core idea, but which has also been termed by others a "focus sentence."¹⁰ Discovering a homiletic core idea, a foundation for an uncluttered, pristine armature from which to hang eight to ten minutes of words each week, is not easy, but absolutely necessary. It is the sentence that should be in the mind of every congregant after the homily is over in answer to the question, "What did you hear?"

Having come to a core homiletic sentence, the preacher will then need to develop practical tactics as to how this idea will become a reality for the congregation. For most Sundays, feasts, and solemnities, the best guide to understanding tactics is posing the question: What are some concrete images, relevant stories, or illustrations that will make the core homiletic idea a reality in the heart of the hearer? Tactics are culturally specific and will have strong pastoral application. The preacher ought to instinctively know that the day-to-day activity of the parish and the world at large will, by and large, inform tactics. If one is preaching to a youth group, there is no sense using stories, vocabulary, or illustrations that are more appropriate to the retired members of the parish. Then again, parishioners will be directly affected by the economic and political happenings around them, which will inflect the meaning of the homiletic core. If there has been a tragic death in the parish family, the homiletic event for

the next Sunday (let's say, it is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A, the gospel for which is the raising of Lazarus) will carry a different freight than if such sadness were not part of the community. Again, these homiletic strategies are only meant to be suggestive and not prescriptive.

As every seasoned preacher knows very well, abstractions are the kiss of death when it comes to homilies, and so the tactics for achieving a core homiletic idea should be as concrete as possible and structured in a way that the congregation may follow it with ease, with a logic that is slow and available. Remember—tactics are practical actions with measured goals; in this case there is a single target: the core homiletic idea. What must be done to achieve that goal? As I have suggested earlier, homiletic methods are designed to organize a structure around the listener. We cannot presume that simply because I am speaking the fruits of my meditation and study that the congregation is unpacking the homily and getting to the depth of the core homiletic idea. The homiletic idea gives something precious to the baptized, enfleshing the word of God; it is a deepening of the reality of faith, a pondering of the mysteries of Christ, an exploration into God's creation. So in order to get to a theological understanding of the word of God, we ought to taste the aroma of fresh bread in that language.

In a word: the people of God don't want our stale crumbs in our preaching. "Homilies are inspirational when they touch the deepest levels of the human heart and address the real questions of human experience."¹¹ The worst possible response anyone can evince after preaching the word of God is for a faithful member of the congregation to respond, "So what?" Good tactics in homilies, like creative strategic planning, ensure that there is a measurable outcome. "So what?" Homilists should take care that this primary question is the subtext of every preaching event because no congregation should walk away from the Eucharist with that question lingering in their hearts. If we don't have a method or a structure of some kind to achieve the incarnation of our words, then we may have a great private meditation, but not much by way of evangelization. Jesus did not preach in parables for nothing: they are stories designed around the hearer to challenge, affirm, and unfold the kingdom of God.

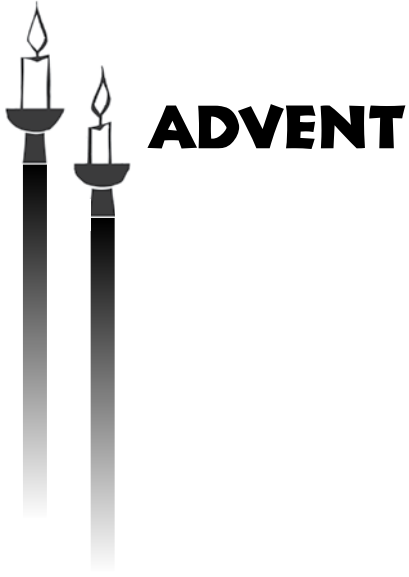
It is a great privilege to stand in the midst of the baptized assembly and mediate meaning for those who have faithfully gathered at

the Eucharist. Our preaching begins long before we come to the ambo and remains in the hearts of the congregation well after we leave the altar. Pray God that our own words become sown in the field of the Lord and reap a bountiful harvest.

Feast of St. Gregory the Great
Saint Meinrad School of Theology and Seminary, 2012

Notes

1. USCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982), 23.
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2012), 15.
3. Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Word of the Lord (Verbum Domini)* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2010), 52.
4. Louis-Marie Chauvet, "La Dimensions bibliques des texts liturgiques," *La Maison-Dieu* 189 (1992): 131–47. Chauvet demonstrates the foundational influence of the biblical text on the Christian liturgy, citing just some of the more obvious examples.
5. Edward Foley, Capuchin, "The Homily beyond Scripture: *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* Revisited," *Worship* 73, no. 4 (1999): 355.
6. Cf. Kenneth Untener, *Preaching Better* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).
7. Cf. David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletic Plot* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999 [1980]).
8. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347–53.
9. Daniel McCarthy, *Listen to the Word: Commentaries on Selected Opening Prayers of Sundays and Feasts with Sample Homilies* (London: Tablet Publishing, 2009).
10. Cf. Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005 [1990]), 99–116.
11. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 15.



First Sunday of Advent

Readings from the Ambo

*Isa 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19;
1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37*

The portrait of the community in the **First Reading** for the First Sunday of Advent by the author commonly referred to as Third Isaiah (about 535–20 BC, or sometime after the return from exile) is adrift and searching. “Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways, / and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?” The passage is something like a penitential lament (like Psalm 80), asking the Lord to be yoked back into a more familial relationship with him. If the return from exile has already occurred and the rebuilding of the temple has subsequently begun or (as some have argued) even been completed, then what is missing is a divine center pole, a compass pointing to the divine. There seems to be a loss of the memory of God when the prophet cries, “There is none who calls upon your name, / who rouses himself to cling to you.” The lament, then, is that God’s deeds have been forgotten, and so common memory, collective memory or what we might call the religious imagination, has failed to unite the community. The sadness and intensity of the cry becomes heightened with the prophet assuming the voice of the people and represents a substantial shift in tone from the other oracles in the corpus we know as Third Isaiah. Vanished is the eschatological hope of Second Isaiah previous to these oracles, and yet this present text, with its plaintive cry, wants to gather us into its fold and take us into Advent, accompanied by the prophet.

The **Responsorial Psalm** reinforces the urgency of Isaiah’s prayer: “Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.” The prayer for both Isaiah and psalmist is urgent. There is

no longer any more time for wandering. The petition is for a father, not a patriarch who is powerful enough to “rend the heavens and come down, / with the mountains quaking.”

The necessity for action and zeal has been absorbed by Jesus in his admonition to the disciples in Mark’s Gospel to be watchful. Be alert! The passage comes at the end of a string of apocalyptic prophecies in chapter 13 and just before the events leading up to Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection were about to unfold, beginning in chapter 14. Being alert and awake and not wandering into sleep is obviously an applicable irony for the soon-to-be dozing disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane (in Mark 14:37-42) as it is for an eschatological forecast for the church during Advent. Jesus takes on a prophetic role here, moving us toward the Day of the Lord. There is a tonal shift from the **First Reading** present in this **Gospel**: the invitation to stay away is hope for the future precisely because of the engine of zeal with which Jesus captures the need to stay awake. Far from a lament, this **Gospel** sets a tone that is a summons to action, a trumpet blast before the final chords will be sounded at the end-time.

Perhaps Paul would say that every one of us is drowsy except God, who is “faithful, / and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” That fidelity is the other side of a God who will come quickly and is near at hand. And it seems to be a divine virtue that Isaiah is counting on as well—the father whom we await to be our shepherd, since we are the clay and he is the potter. All is the work of his hands.

Connecting the Bible and the Liturgy

If the Isaiah text might be characterized as something like a sad lamentation for a people who are wandering after a period of exile and are now in a period of collective amnesia about God and his works, the church’s prayers represent a kind of counterpoint to the Isaiah text, inviting the assembly to hasten toward Christ. In this regard, the alertness that Jesus demands in the **Gospel** is illuminated in a brilliant way through the liturgy. As a baptized assembly, we must be ready and keep watch. The implication is that the reign of God is for neither the slow of foot nor the faint of heart. “Resolve” is what the **Collect** will ask of God in order to cure our sloth. “Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, / the resolve to run forth to meet

your Christ / with righteous deeds at his coming." Even while we are urged to gather to the future kingdom, Isaiah's lament reminds the Christian assembly of the potential loss of community, especially marshaling of the just into the kingdom of God. Isaiah's text has a crucial function of naming the deep sin of separation, fragmentation, and forgetfulness present in every community. At the same time, the liturgy provides the impetus to want to be of one heart and one mind, "worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom." The liturgical prayers, then, disclose the redeemed community for which Isaiah longs: all the faithful are invited to be gathered in hope and promise, to leave the wandering and restless heart behind, even as the church pours forth its prayers to be gathered into one sheepfold, the person of Christ himself. The image of being gathered at his right hand (*eius dexteræ sociati*) deployed in the Collect conjures the landscape of the righteous shaped by the potter's hand at the end-time.

Paul himself is quite sanguine and confident about the sanctifying role of our redemption and clear about where true fidelity resides: in the God who continues to call not only for the future, but now. So too, the **Prayer after Communion** urges the faithful to remember that "we walk amid passing things" and asks God to teach us by the mysteries we celebrate "to love the things of heaven / and hold fast to what endures." This advice from Paul is sound teaching for keeping vigil. It is one thing to will ourselves to watch, but it is quite another to remember that we live amid passing things and intend to keep our eyes on what endures. To observe the latter causes us to desire to keep watch and maintain vigil out of a hunger for what we long for—the things of heaven.

Strategy for Preaching

In 2003 Peter Steinfels published a provocative book called *A People Adrift*, which projected a potential crisis for the American Catholic Church. Steinfels says that American Catholicism is on the verge of either an irreversible decline or a thoroughgoing transformation. Folks may disagree with the apocalyptic tone, but there is a way in which we might read the state of affairs in American Catholicism as the equivalent to exile, some of which is self-imposed to be sure. If we find ourselves in a state of exilic wandering—and who does not at one time or another—perhaps we might consider

the powerful line in the **Collect** that encapsulates the Sunday liturgy and is echoed throughout the readings: "Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, / the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ." I am reading "resolve" here, the *voluntatem* as the Latin text puts it, is another way of expressing the "good zeal" that Benedict reminds the monk in chapter 72 of the Rule is so crucial for keeping us honest and headed toward seeking God. If we have lost that zeal, or worse, turned to wicked zeal, then setting our minds on righteous deeds and remembering God's works in our lives and the lives of others is very much in order this Advent.

It is probably not an accident that Benedict is so strongly weighted toward the good zeal; he gets this quality from God himself. Recall that the prophet says when it comes to the Messianic Promise that so envelopes this season: the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. The question of maintaining zeal over the long run (or even the short run, for that matter) in running the ways of God's commands is not easy. When we add to this strain on perseverance the reality of more and more members of the Christian community losing heart and drifting off, then mustering the good zeal becomes even more difficult to embrace. A good question to ask during Advent, then, is how can my zeal be ignited at God's coming? Returning to Steinfels' observations, a question that the American Catholic Church might consider is: where is the center of our life in Christ that will set the ignition on a nonpolarized, nonadversarial, noncynical mission? That is the good zeal.

There may be a tendency for the preacher to begin the homily with "watch and stay ready." Fair enough. But how does this warning get the congregation to love the things of heaven and keep vigil for the one who is to come? Further, beginning with watching deflates the narrative tension that should be building in the homily throughout the text. The preacher should presume that keeping watch is a kind of "aha" moment toward which the homily is headed, a kind of climax to a homiletic narrative. Therefore an interesting homiletic core would be: if we know what really mattered in life, we'd be more aware than ever of God's gifts and even more of his own presence that has yet to come.

- I. We might begin with a question to start the ball rolling. Did you ever hear the story about someone who found out that he

had just a day to live? What do you suppose he thought about? Examples of possibilities, which should be specific and colorful, even poignant.

- II. This is followed by the challenge of what our own list might be. Name the specifics that might impact the parish locally.
- III. These are values that endure. God will come with all of these in his arms, because we are the things most precious to him.
 - A. God wants to gather us in also from our exile, even more than we want the things that are precious to us.
 - B. Image here: a mother and her newborn, a child first coming home from school, a reunion between siblings or friends.
- IV. So we can resolve to keep vigil to meet Christ because in him all our desires will be fulfilled. We are that close during Advent (Second Reading).