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MDiv, Doctorate in Preaching (Aquinas Institute)

Pastor of St. Bernadette Catholic Church

Chaplain (Maj) KY Air Guard

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Archbishop of Indianapolis

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—Deacon David J. Shea, DMin

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—James A. Wallace, CSsR, author of *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart* and *The Ministry of Lectors* and editor of *Preaching in the Sunday Assembly*, is director of San Alfonso Retreat House, Long Branch, NJ

Rites of Passage

Preaching Baptisms, Weddings, and Funerals

Guerric DeBona, OSB

David Scotchie

Francis L. Agnoli



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Monica Bokinskie. Cover illustration by Martin Erspamer, OSB, a monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, Indiana.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DeBona, Gueric, 1955– author.

Title: Rites of passage : preaching baptisms, weddings, and funerals / Gueric

DeBona, OSB, David Scotchie, Francis Agnoli.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018007528 (print) | LCCN 2018032088 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814645437 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814645192

Subjects: LCSH: Preaching. | Baptism—Sermons. | Marriage—Sermons. | Funeral sermons.

Classification: LCC BV4211.3 (ebook) | LCC BV4211.3 .D43 2018 (print) | DDC 251/.1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018007528>

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INTRODUCTION

Formation by Word and Symbol: The Changing Contours of Preaching during the Sacramental Rites

Guerric DeBona, OSB

The present volume on preaching baptism, marriage, and funerals has been organized in much the same way that my previous preaching commentary on the Sunday Lectionary, *Between the Ambo and the Altar*, has been laid out. The goal is much the same: to evoke that process of preparation for preaching that would involve first and foremost a contemplative and exegetical strategy with the Sacred Scriptures; then a movement to discover how these biblical texts might connect with the liturgy; and finally, how a preaching event might emerge in a variety of sociohistorical conditions based on these scriptural and liturgical textual encounters.

The authors of each of these sections dealing with the church's sacramental "rites of passage" sought a variety of textual and pastoral nuances for the celebration of each occasion. Among the three of us, my section on baptism was perhaps the easiest to manage, just by virtue of the limits of the possible biblical and liturgical texts and adjustments to pastoral occasions. At the same time, though, preachers are aware that there are a number of variants from which to choose when it comes to baptism, depending on the shape of the occasion. Father David Scotchie's section on preaching marriage brings with it a number of biblical choices for this rite of passage, but also offers a number of alternatives for celebrating the sacrament, depending on a number of situations—which are considerable. If the typical Catholic congregation is growing more and more diverse, the assembly gathered to celebrate a couple's union is all the more so, since this congregation will almost always count itself among different religious

confessions as well as the growing (noninstitutional) evangelical community and the unchurched. Finally, Deacon Francis Agnoli occasions his strategy for preaching funerals with a wide variety of opportunities as well; the final rite of passage carries with it texts that necessarily address the seemingly endless human conditions of the funeral, among them the manner of death, the appropriateness of the text to the pastoral need of the bereaved, all in the context of celebrating the life of the departed. To this end, we hope that the wide variety of choices available for celebrating and preaching the funeral rite will give the celebrant and the bereaved a fitting opportunity to celebrate the life of the beloved dead. In all instances, we urge sensitivity for the sake of all those in attendance.

The three coordinates I recommend for contemplating the homily crucially depends on the sociohistorical horizon of the gathered assembly. By my reckoning, preaching becomes actualized when the Word is completed in the ears of those gathered. Therefore the central question for those preaching these seminal moments of transition remains always a live one: Who are those gathered to celebrate these sacraments of baptisms, marriages, and funerals to hear the Word proclaimed? Consider, if you will, some possibilities, past and present. Some of us might remember it still, like faded and discolored snapshots taken from an antiquated Polaroid camera preserved in a scrapbook: A young couple named Jim and Dorothy and married about two years have recently moved only a few miles from All Saints High School where they met; they are expecting their first child. After the child is born, they take her to the parish priest who officiated at their wedding and who has been pastor at St. Gabriel's for twenty years. She is christened Mary Louise. Relatives and friends gather at the family home, where Jim's parents have lived for thirty years. Mary Louise will be the first of several children baptized Catholic and raised in large Catholic elementary and high schools.

We turn the page. Mary Louise has been dating Robert, also raised Catholic for two years. He has just proposed. They tell their parents. They receive instructions from the new associate at St. Gabriel's. It is a large wedding because Mary Louise and Robert each have six siblings. They take a short honeymoon because Robert has to be back in town to work on a new engineering project.

We turn the page. Jim has unexpectedly died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-five. Since he has lived in Middletown, USA, for his entire life and been on the parish council and a eucharistic minister at St. Gabriel's,

there is an enormous funeral. The neighbors rally with phone calls and visits to Mary Louise and the family. Everyone volunteers for a eulogy. Five priests concelebrate the funeral liturgy. Casseroles and cold cuts appear after the Mass and graveside service. Her friends, many of whom she has known since Catholic elementary school, comfort Dorothy.

These events represent the lives (and the parish neighborhood) of countless Catholics, many of whom helped to build the religious infrastructure that supported their seminal transitions in life in the church: from a babe in arms to a child of God in baptism; from a single adult to a life of marriage with children; from an earthly dwelling to the promise of a heavenly home. The Catholic school system and the parishes that supported them created a catechetical system and network of symbols, rites, and codes structured around a very familial sacramental system. Baptisms, marriages, and funerals were as much a part of Catholic life as regular attendance at Mass on Sunday. These were communal celebrations that provided situational meaning because the community itself was a tightly woven web of relationships, living in close proximity. “This is what we do here” could well be the subtext of thousands of Catholic parishes passing the church’s familial rites of passage down from one generation to the next. But as is well known, the days when we celebrated these sacramental rites in the midst of a strong, highly integrated Catholic culture have vanished in America; and so necessarily are the ways in which we preach them.

Those who preach baptisms, weddings, and funerals in the twenty-first century can no longer presume that their congregations maintain a semblance of traditional religious and biblical literacy, to say nothing of a catechetical understanding of the church’s sacramental life. Why? The reasons are complex and point to the gradual erosion of traditional forms of worship in the United States, meaning structures that initiate, catechize, and foster ongoing membership. There are a number of sociological reasons why Catholic religious membership has been on a downward spiral, which include the loss of a post-immigrant community life, the diminishment of the Catholic parochial school system, and the turning away from institutional religious expressions of contemporary America.¹

1. See, for instance, Patrick W. Carey, *Catholics in America: A History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); James O’Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

Additionally, as our immigrant population increases and blesses our nation with diversity, those who are making these rites of passage have not been formed in European, traditional post-immigrant models but come to these important life transitions in paths quite different from the way our parents and godparents embraced these sacraments. In a certain sense, the people of God have been formed—but by a secular society with its own sets of values and expectations, well outside the pale of Catholic culture or, indeed, the sense of the “metanarrative” we call salvation history.

Our historical and social networks have been transformed considerably over the past several decades and require us to adapt our preaching to a particular cultural horizon. These new sociohistorical conditions are still emerging. The scrapbooks holding the still life of a bygone era have been stored in the attic; and in their place we find something moving, organic, and still changing, even as I write this. No longer limited to parishes or neighborhoods, millions gravitate to social media, or move to worship spaces far beyond the parish boundaries. Family systems are seemingly more complicated than ever and many of these relationships are fragmented. Ten-year-old Juan puts a DVD in the entertainment center and sees his single mother at the Easter Vigil receiving baptism and confirmation as part of a cohort of twenty in the RCIA last spring. Some months later, his half-sister, Rosita, who has a successful business halfway across the country and is now in her mid-thirties, has just uploaded a video of her wedding on Facebook. Her new husband, Rodney, has asked his older son by his first marriage to be the best man while the youngest one serves as an usher for the wedding at Blessed Stanley Rother Catholic Church. A year later, Juan and Rosita’s birth father dies alone in an emergency room. A friend calls a parish priest and asks for a funeral at St. Bruno Catholic Church. A preacher will be asked to name the grace inside the sacramental life of the church in the midst of these diverse and often fragmented concrete circumstances of our contemporary life.

These contrasting scenes from the past and present represent two quite different cultural reflections of religious affiliation and expression; they are reason for us to rethink the role of liturgical, sacramental formation as well as the homily preached on this important occasion. The preacher at sacramental rites today stands in the midst of a very diverse and secular culture, celebrating the most consequential milestones in the lives of his parishioners. How, then, does proclamation of the Gospel become a meaningful, Christ-centered event for those transitioning in a

sacramental rite of passage today? Preachers who proclaim a saving word for their congregations must be a “mediator of meaning,” as *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (1982) refers to the one who unfolds the homily at the liturgical assembly. “Like humans everywhere, the people who make up the liturgical assembly are people hungry, sometimes desperately so, for meaning in their lives. . . . Without ultimate meaning, we are ultimately unsatisfied. If we are able to hear a word which gives our lives another level of meaning, which interprets them in relation to God, then our response is to turn to this source of meaning in an attitude of praise and thanksgiving.”² Whether we are at Sunday Eucharist in a large suburban parish, or celebrating a baptism on Sunday afternoon in an inner-city community, we do so as a particular historical congregation making meaning. That incarnational, sociohistorical horizon in a particular time and place holds a special place when it comes to a sacramental rite of passage, which is anything but an abstraction. Father James Wallace describes preaching at sacramental rites precisely in terms of an incarnation of the Word made visible, a divine response to the weary, to those who are hungry for “meaning.” “The sacraments are encounters with the risen Lord; a primary function of our words is to make the presence of Christ palpable, to facilitate this meeting with Jesus. As a language event, the preaching is one of the integral components of the rite, crucial in bridging the gap between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Sacrament, between anamnesis and mimesis, between remembering what God has done in the paschal mystery of Christ and what we are presently engaged in doing as an act of realizing the presence of salvation in our midst.”³

When it comes to preaching the sacraments today, then, how can we understand our proclamation to the people of God *using language as an event* that gathers and announces the enfleshment of the Word made visible? One way to construe preaching the sacraments is to begin to note the emergence of a variety of ways to interpret sacramental theology over the past fifty years or so; these theologies grant us a vital perspective on preaching so that we might *name grace in the present tense*, as it were, for those gathered to celebrate Christ among us. Generally speaking, when

2. USCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: NCCB, 1982), 7.

3. James A. Wallace, CSsR, *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feasts and within the Rites* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 78.

these theological speculations concerning sacramental theology have sought to discover an *experiential model* for celebrating the church's rites of passage, they help us unfold the task of *preaching as a formational moment*. When it comes to encountering these rites of the church, as Peter Fink suggests, "The focus of attention is on the liturgical enactment of the sacraments, rather than on sacrament as an abstract theological concept."⁴ To take this proposition a bit further is to ponder precisely how meaning becomes mediated and embodied in a sacramental hermeneutic for contemporary culture. As the ancient precept has it, sacraments are for the people, *sacramentum propter hominem*. And as people change so is the rite culturally expressed and interpreted in and for the Body of Christ. Further, we know that Christ is present in the very act of celebrating the sacraments through rite, symbol, and language, since the risen Lord has passed these mysteries of salvation on to the church. Therefore the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that when celebrated validly, the very elements of the rite itself signify the reality of the sacrament. Concerning the grace of baptism, for instance, the *Catechism* says, "The different effects of Baptism are signified by the *perceptible* elements of the sacramental rite. Immersion in water symbolizes not only death and purification, but also regeneration and renewal. Thus the two principal effects are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit" (1262).⁵

The *perceptible* elements of sacramental rites themselves suggest a hermeneutic of real presence that the preacher unfolds in an enculturated idiom for those gathered by extending the rite into proclamation. An experiential model of sacrament is good news for preaching, then, since it is an essential task of the preacher to name God's saving acts, even as the Word proclaimed in the assembly has revealed these mysteries. As

4. Peter E. Fink, SJ, "Sacramental Theology after Vatican II," in *New Dictionary of Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 1110. For an excellent overview, see David N. Power et al., "Sacramental Theology: A Review of the Literature," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 657–705; Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Paul Bradshaw, ed., *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (United States Catholic Conference—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997). See also David N. Power, OMI, *Sacrament: The Language of God's Giving* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

sacramental symbols and language of the rites draw the congregation into an incarnational reality of the risen Christ, the preacher unfolds meaning in the present circumstances, taking his cue from the very action of the sacrament itself. As Karl Rahner says in his discussion on the theology symbol, “The sacraments make concrete and actual, for the life of the individual, the symbolic reality of the church as the primary sacrament and therefore constitute at once, in keeping with the nature of this Church a symbolic reality. Thus the sacraments are expressly described in theology as ‘sacred signs’ of God’s grace that is, as ‘symbols,’ and expression which occurs expressly in this context . . . As God’s work of grace on man is accomplished (incarnates itself), it enters in the spacio-temporal historicity of man as sacrament, and as it does so, it becomes active with regard to man, it constitutes itself.”⁶ In other words, rather than deducing concepts embedded in an abstract understanding of sacrament, the one who unpacks the Word for God’s people in the preaching event draws from the concrete experience of the Scriptures and the liturgy itself, together with an exegesis of the assembly.

With this critical stance in mind, preachers drink from the wellspring of the Scriptures proclaimed, together with the church’s texts and teaching on the sacraments; we pass that overflowing sacred cup, freshly remembered, to those gathered around the Word. As part of the liturgy itself, the homily becomes not so much a text as it is an event-in-time that repositions and shapes the congregation. According to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the very experience of sacramental rite is formative. “Because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith.’ They do, indeed, confer grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practice charity.”⁷ So if the sacraments embody the presence of Christ in his church, always constituting a concrete reality of a particular

6. Karl Rahner, SJ, “The Theology of Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations Vol. IV*, trans. Kevin Smyth, 241-42 (New York: Seabury Press, 1966, 1974).

7. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 59.

person in a sociohistorical community, then the church's preaching must en flesh this concrete experience for the hearer. Drawing on the theology of Rahner's notion of the human subject being constituted as a "hearer of the word," Mary Catherine Hilkert says that grace as the spiritual mystery "has to be manifested in concrete, historical, visible ways. God's presence is mediated in and through creation and human history, but that mystery remains hidden and untapped unless it is brought to word. The proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments (Augustine's 'visible words') bring the depth dimension of reality—grace—to recognition and thus effective power."⁸

Preaching must *reorient the hearer to the Good News*, then, meaning that the one who speaks on behalf of the church to the gathered assembly makes the saving works of God in salvation history concrete to those who desire to live a deeper faith experience. While offering a word to the weary that will rouse them, the preacher reestablishes God's narrative of salvation through anamnesis in a world that has lost its collective memory. The preacher finds himself to be reflective of the risen Lord appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Though the followers of Jesus are downcast, the Lord (re)interprets the Sacred Scripture in light of God's messianic event in Christ who stands before their very eyes, waiting for the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf to receive a graced proclamation. "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And he said to them, 'Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem' " (Luke 24:45-47).

Those who have been dissuaded by doubts and fears are reshaped by the Word. To be sure, then, we take as our point of departure for preaching sacraments a mode that is distinctly pastoral, and driven by the church's mission. As *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965), tells us, "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails

8. Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 47.

to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men, of men who, united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men” (1). Preaching at the Eucharist as well as the sacramental rites opens up a space of longing for the Holy God, who forms and reforms us. I think we can presume, then, that preaching unleashes the Word among us in order that American Catholics might become what Sherry Weddell has called “intentional disciples.” In this regard, “our personal response at the moment of receiving baptism or another sacrament is only the beginning of a lifetime of responding in faith to God’s grace. If we don’t intentionally seek to continue to grow in our faith, the initial grace we received can be thwarted.”⁹

Finally, it is worth a final reiteration that this volume is designed to be useful in the cultural milieu of a variety of hearers, engaging a pastoral mission suited to a particular time and place. The Sacred Scriptures and the liturgical texts are in dialogue with God’s holy people. As Pope Francis reminds the church, “The preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people. He needs to be able to link the message of the biblical text to a human situation, to an experience which cries out for the light of God’s word.”¹⁰ Preaching the rites of passage, or proclaiming Christ’s living presence through the sacraments, must meet the faithful where they are—sometimes fragmented, often confused, searching for the God who already seeks them. It is for them, the people of God, that this text has been envisioned.

9. Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 113.

10. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* (Frederick, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2013), 115.

PREACHING BAPTISMS

Guerric DeBona, OSB

The following section of the present volume is designed as a preaching companion for the revised *Rite of Baptism for Children*,¹ according to which, “after the reading, the celebrant gives a short homily, explaining to those present the significance of what has been read. His purpose will be to lead them to a deeper understanding of the mystery of baptism and to encourage the parents and godparents to a ready acceptance of the responsibilities which arise from the sacrament” (45). The RBC is very succinct as well as directive regarding the homily at baptism. If the preacher is strategic in following the overall arc of the guidelines in the rite, the homily will give new life to those gathered about God’s work of redemption as that saving act becomes disclosed in their midst through the sacrament of baptism.

Let me say more about a strategy for the homily. I have laid out a dynamic for preaching in the pages that follow in a way that mirrors what I have already suggested previously in the three-volume commentary on the Sunday Lectionary, *Between the Ambo and the Altar*. The approach is a simple one: understand through study and *lectio divina* the biblical readings; then begin to make connections between the biblical and liturgical texts; and finally, develop a preaching tactic from these conversation partners. When it comes to preaching baptism, there is, of course, a wealth of symbols and liturgical language to draw out the biblical readings. In his excellent overview of preaching within the celebration of the sacraments, James Wallace, CSsR, says that the sacramental rites “are events of divine-human communication which effect transformation by offering

1. *Rite of Baptism for Children*, English Translation Approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and Confirmed by the Apostolic See (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002). All references are to this edition, also referred to as RBC.

meaning rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word of God.²² Practically speaking, there will be occasions in which the celebrant (and family) may prefer to use one reading; other opportunities may occur when the baptism will benefit from two. So I have created a commentary in these pages that accommodates both liturgical circumstances. The first four of these selections deploy one gospel reading, while I have paired two readings with ten others. I hasten to add that, as with *Between the Ambo and the Altar*, each tri-part commentary is designed to be suggestive and idea provoking. And I will underline that description especially when it comes to the section titled “Strategy for Preaching.” I have included a focus sentence that might follow a reading that best suits the biblical text, the liturgical language, and the hearers. My overall hope is that the preacher will not necessarily follow my ideas as much as my strategy for preparing the homily by first interrogating the biblical text then recognizing the liturgical features with which that Scripture might be in dialogue. Finally, the preacher must attend to the needs of the listeners, especially when it comes to leading them to “a deeper understanding of the mystery of baptism.” By my reckoning, the process of preparation for preaching expands with the generous association between texts that already share common features. So the liturgical texts for the celebration of baptism and the readings that the church has suggested for inclusion in the rite are dialogue partners; that conversation thrives by designed and imaginative association with one another.

If we presume that the overall goal of the homily is to draw the hearer more closely into the web of divine mystery as that encounter is disclosed in baptism, then I will here suggest a kind of checklist of attributes for the homily. Prospective preachers at baptism will have their own emphasis on these characteristics, to be sure, and these will vary according to pastoral need. But I present here a short list of features that might characterize a typical baptismal homily. These are, incidentally, in no particular order. The baptismal homily should: be Catechetical; Honor the biblical text; be Image dominated; and be Liturgical and Diverse in its reach. These characteristics (conveniently) spell out the anagram CHILD.

2. James A. Wallace, CSsR, *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feasts and within the Rites* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 76.

Catechetical

Most dioceses mandate a period of preparation for the couple presenting their child for baptism. The guidelines for the RBC specifically link this religious education of the parents as a duty for the pastor who is to gather groups of families together in preparation “by pastoral counsel and common prayer” (5). So the homily will draw on a catechesis and prayer formation *already* established by a portion of those gathered and can deepen the experience of their understanding of the sacrament (as well as their commitment to raise the child in the faith) through an encounter with the Scriptures and the language and symbols of the liturgy. I would say that it is crucial that when it comes to catechesis and preaching, the homily does not simply rattle off some abstract theological sayings about the sacrament of baptism; rather, the preacher should attempt to deepen an understanding of what is *already present*. Echoing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that doctrine ought to be deployed in a systematic and organic way, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* observes that “catechesis in its broadest sense involves the effective communication of the full scope of the Church’s teaching and formation, from initiation into the Sacrament of Baptism through the moral requirements of a faithful Christian life.”³ Certainly, there are abundant areas of doctrine that might be explored, not only from the perspective of the parents and godparents but also for the hearers who have gathered with them to celebrate this sacrament of initiation; for example: questions such as how baptism incorporates the newly baptized into the church by sanctification from original sin, making the neophyte a child of God; exploring the mystery of Christ’s own baptism as a witness to the incarnation; responding in faith to the new reality of this baptism by faithfully engaging the church’s teaching in dialogue and witness. These subjects and more are topics for catechetical preaching. That catechesis will be more effective, as we shall see shortly, when church doctrine becomes supported by the biblical and liturgical aspects of the homily.

3. USCCB, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2013), 23. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (United States Catholic Conference—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 5.

Honor the Biblical Text

The instructions in the RBC say that the homily is to lead those present into a “deeper understanding,” which cannot occur without a prayerful encounter with the biblical readings. Much like the Sunday homily, preaching for the sacrament of baptism springs from an encounter that is voiced through the Scriptures. The preacher is the first among hearers, listening attentively with the whole church, together with this particular gathered assembly witnessing to the Christian sacrament of initiation. Above all else, the word of God is living and active, transforming the lives of those who hear, as St. Benedict advises his monks, “with the ears of the heart.” Quoting his predecessor, Pope Francis reminds the church that “[a]ll evangelization is based on that word, listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to. The Sacred Scriptures are the very source of evangelization. Consequently, we need to be constantly trained in hearing the word. The Church does not evangelize unless she constantly lets herself be evangelized. It is indispensable that the word of God ‘be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity.’”⁴ It is critical that the Scriptures engage those present by unfolding God’s activity in Christ, of which baptism is a symbolic witness. That does not mean, of course, that the homily becomes a kind of heady, abstract dissertation. No, the Scriptures are pathways to a deeper understanding of the mystery of faith, a gifted encounter with divine revelation that has been passed on to the church. In turn, the ecclesial community remembers the works of the Lord and the joy of the risen Christ active in the lives of God’s people. Whether there are one or two readings, the biblical witness contextualizes the present circumstances of the celebration of the sacrament in the local church by communicating the working of the divine plan throughout history. Salvation history is present here and now. By attending to the readings and how they are applicable to the lives of those gathered, the preacher will be able to “bring the hearers to a more explicit and deepened faith, to an expression of that faith in the liturgical celebration and, following the celebration, in their life and work.”⁵

4. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* (Frederick, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2013), 128.

5. USCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: NCCB, 1982), 27.

Images

It should come as no small surprise that the use of images is crucial to the development of any homily. We know that the more concrete the language, the more the homily will be retained by the hearer. “Language is often abstract, but life is not abstract. Teachers teach students about battles and animals and books. Doctors repair problems with our stomachs, backs and hearts. Companies create software, build planes, distribute newspapers; they build cars that are cheaper, faster, or fancier than last year’s. Even the most abstract business strategy must eventually show up in the tangible actions of human beings.”⁶ In addition to the principles of rhetoric that suggest concrete language in the homily, the preacher takes his cue on the use of imagistic language, symbols, and metaphors from the Bible and the liturgy. Consider the images that are deployed in many of the biblical readings commonly used for the celebration of baptism: water from a rock; new heart versus stony heart; water flowing from the temple; buried with Christ; baptized into one Body; clothed with Christ; bond of peace; living stone; anointed on head with oil; dwell in the house of the Lord; radiant with joy; heavens being torn open; the kingdom of God belongs to such as these; he is one; he came to Jesus at night; born of water and the Spirit; a spring of water welling up to eternal life; rivers of living water will flow from within him; he smeared the clay on his eyes; I am the true vine; you are already pruned; immediately blood and water flowed out. If we take our initiative from Scripture itself, then the homily will be a bounty of images. Further, the ritual of baptism is itself a fragrant and tactile series of gestures linked with the biblical witness and meant to communicate God’s love to those assembled. From the cross traced on the head of the child at the beginning of the rite to the anointing with the oil of catechumens to investing with the white garment and to the passing of the lighted candle and chrismation, the sacrament of baptism is a feast of images. These visual moments of human contact incarnate God’s word among us in sacrament. The homily might use these very images or extend the sacramental imagination in a variety of ways for the benefit of the hearer.

6. Chip Heath and Dan Death, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007), 99–100.

Liturgical

The language of the liturgy is always a suitable conversation partner for the homilist; all the more so when preaching inside the sacramental rites. When paired with the Scriptures, the dialogue between the word of God and the church's ritual language becomes irresistible for the preacher. The liturgy extends into time and space, or what the Scriptures have revealed in mystery, gifted story, and symbol. The church's language puts sinews on those strong bones, breaking into our comfortable worlds and reorienting us to God's future. Just as an example of the way the RBC recalls the Scripture, we could note the many instances that the Blessing and Invocation of God over Baptismal Water recalls the readings just proclaimed and accounts for the Scripture in contemporary and transformative ways for those gathered. If Mark 1:9-11 has been proclaimed, there are abundant interpretations to mediate meaning for the assembly, with the help of this excellent liturgical text invoking God's sanctification. The Blessing and Invocation is a salutation to the gift of water as a tributary of sanctification, "a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament." The allusions to water as receiving the Spirit of God at the "very dawn of creation . . . making them the wellspring of all holiness"; or the waters of the great flood as a sign that would "make an end of sin"; or again, the waters of the Red Sea through which Israel was led out of slavery and was "an image of God's holy people, set free from sin by baptism." All of these flashpoints in salvation history speak to the christological theophany on the Jordan: "In the waters of the Jordan your son was baptized by John and anointed with the Spirit" (91). This text, as so many treasures in the liturgy, points to a reality in the gospel that might be expanded in the homily before the *Blessing* actually occurs. I will underline here as well that glossing these liturgical texts in concert with the biblical readings provides a powerful catechetical moment: the unfolding of the incarnation and the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry in a trinitarian moment in the theophany at the Jordan; Jesus, truly God and truly man, has sanctified the waters for all humanity by the will of the Father and the working of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the liturgical language functions in harmony with the biblical text in order to remind the congregation that the homily is "by definition a profound ecclesial act."⁷

Diversity

We know that more and more baptisms are celebrated with diverse communities; this pluralism is all to the good for the good and the growth and prosperity of the church and its mission. Our culture in America is at a critical juncture when it comes to racial and class divisions, as well as policies and attitudes toward immigrants and migrants. Much of these attitudes, especially those governing race and immigration, are driven by fear and, frankly, excessive nationalism. Those who preach will certainly encounter diversity in their hearers, but it is well to remember that the church was founded in the midst of diversity at Pentecost. For Pope Francis, “Differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, but the Holy Spirit, who is the source of that diversity, can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelization. Diversity must always be reconciled by the help of the Holy Spirit; he alone can raise up diversity, plurality and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity.”⁸ This blessing of peoples of mixed cultures and backgrounds is expressed in several ways. Those gathered for the celebration will be various in everything from age to language. Although the homily will be relatively brief (about 5 minutes, for instance) compared to Sunday preaching, a wide net for evangelization is cast in order to catch the multiple experiences of the listeners. An older population will have a tough time grasping rapid-fire contemporary images for which they have little or no reference point. For those in the congregation who are either unchurched or attend any church less frequently than a few times a year, ecclesial references are not going to go anywhere. Then there is a language barrier, especially in parishes with growing Hispanic/Latino communities. In the latter congregation, it is absolutely necessary to make all feel welcome because hospitality, the welcoming of the neophyte into the church community, is a foundational principle of the sacrament of baptism. Ideally, the language will be a bridge, not a hindrance, to building a sacramental community. If we do not attend to the diversity and blessing present in the gathering of diversity itself, then the ritual of baptism, which pours out upon a neophyte divine hospitality in God’s word and communicated by ritual, will not be effectively communicated. As *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* reminds

8. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 99.

us, “Good preaching honors the experience of immigrant families and sympathizes with the challenges of adapting to life in the United States. In this regard preaching must reflect insight into the Church’s evangelizing mission, which requires cultural discernment based on gospel values that go beyond those of any particular culture.”⁹ How the preacher regards the assembly of those who have come to witness the baptism is critical to the celebration.

1. John 3:1-6

Readings from the Ambo

With its dramatic turn centered on Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus by night in a quest for understanding, John 3:1-6 remains a centerpiece for the unfolding mystery of Christian baptism and initiation into the church community. Nicodemus (and the Woman at the Well of Samaria, his foil later in chapter 4) provides John with a showcase for the Lord’s disclosure of the presence of God in mysterious signs in the midst of darkness because “[h]e himself understood it well” (John 2:25b).

As the text tells us, Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, but singled out as a particular and somewhat forward-thinking character among the elders. For instance, we later learn that when there is discord among his peers concerning Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, it is Nicodemus who questions the rash judgment of the chief priests and other Pharisees when he says, “Does our law condemn a person before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?” (John 7:51). Toward the end of John’s gospel, it is Nicodemus (recalled as the one who “had at first come to Jesus by night”) who brings a preposterously lavish “mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds” (John 19:39) to anoint the crucified Jesus. Nicodemus’s search for the Lord by night, then, becomes part of a larger tapestry in the Fourth Gospel, deploying the interplay between light and darkness that the author has used as a dominant image from the beginning (cf. the Prologue) and running throughout the text. That a leader from the Jewish community seeks clarification in the midst of darkness reminds us that the Light—Jesus himself—doubles for the revelation of that which will overcome the night of sin and evil. More particularly,

9. *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 40.

it is the revelation of the kingdom of God (an expression more common in the Synoptics than in John's gospel) to Nicodemus that becomes the ultimate disclosure of the Light, since seeing that apocalypse appears to be the very reason for being born again from above: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (NRSV). Along these lines, we might recall that the invitation to "come and see" was linked as well to discipleship early in the gospel when Philip invites Nathaniel to come and see Jesus, who, in turn, promises the young man from Cana in Galilee that he "will see greater things than this"—a vision of the Son of Man (John 1:45-51).

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, then, establishes some literary characteristics that will haunt John's gospel: plays on words, irony, misunderstandings, and some character development absent from the Synoptics. In a sense, Jesus' meeting with this Pharisee is like the dawn illuminating the night, attempting to break through the shadows of morning. Nicodemus's presence later in the gospel reminds us of how slow the process of the knowledge of coming to see the kingdom of God in Christ really is, since, when the question of Jesus' identity occurs later in chapter 7, the Jewish leader more or less defaults to a question about the Law. Jesus' admonition to the member of the Sanhedrin to be "born from above" (*anōthēn*) in the earlier chapter does not appear to be absorbed by Nicodemus by chapter 7. In chapter 3, the conversation suggests something like a dialogue of misunderstanding based on a new way of seeing things that has yet to unfold for one still in relative darkness. Nicodemus, therefore, is not unlike the crowds who, later in the Bread of Life Discourse, misunderstand the new way of seeing the kingdom: How can someone be born again from his mother's womb? How can he give us himself to eat? These questions betray the fundamental blindness at night that John seeks to expose to the sun: the presence of darkness or misunderstanding while standing in the presence of the true Light. To grasp the dance between darkness and light, ignorance and knowledge, falsehood and truth, is to recognize the invitation to conversion at the heart of the sacrament of baptism. Those who are baptized are initiated into the light of Christ: they are, quite literally, the Enlightened.

Connecting the Bible and the Liturgy

Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus and the disclosure of the vision of the kingdom of God for those born anew is a text that marvelously interfaces

with the RBC for reasons that should be fairly obvious. It is not a coincidence that the (re) naming of the children becomes the first order of the way the rite wants to reimagine this new addition to the Christian community. As he has explained to Nicodemus, the Lord wants to alter our way of seeing things by giving us another language, the language of the kingdom; it is not a system based on nature, or a pragmatic identification. But Jesus has handed the church a new alphabet of the kingdom, enabling us to speak differently, even as the mouth of the newly baptized will be opened for proclamation at the end of the rite itself. Furthermore, there is a new condition, linked with the new name for each of the neophytes: baptism, being born anew is the inheritance we have from the New Adam, since they are now children of God. The RBC advises that the celebrant may choose other words for the dialogue with the parents concerning the naming of their children, but the questioning might mirror the search by night so emblematic of Nicodemus's dialogue with Jesus. Indeed, the conversation between the two represents a very human journey toward God, a searching for meaning in the midst of emptiness: the open heart seeking a new understanding, with a new name now so that a new way of living in the new order of creation might be born anew.

Those who rename their children are also charged with the light of guidance. The celebrant tells the parents and godparents, "Receive the light of Christ," even as they are asked to carry on what has already occurred in baptism when the children have been "enlightened by Christ." The child has been given the light of understanding in the midst of community, the family of humankind. "This light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly." The parents and godparents become agents of the church, micro-communities that will eventually blossom into larger portions of the human family. In a very real sense, they are "sponsoring" or witnessing for the rest of the church community who are now part of the children's family. Yet the sobering implication here of the burden of such guardianship is clear enough. Parents and godparents are to "keep the flame of faith alive" in those who have now been enkindled by the sacrament. Hence, the meaning of the candle should not be lost on those who will discharge this responsibility of sponsorship: they are entrusted with helping the child see a new vision by the light given to them, requiring them to be born anew and see that God's word is a lamp for their steps, a light for their path. Therefore, parents and godparents are crucial symbols in and of themselves, torches

burning in the night that hope to set ablaze the vision of the gospel that is the light of the Christian faithful. In a certain sense, the parents and godparents might find a thoughtful parallel with Nicodemus as an elder searching and guiding not only for himself but for Israel. Guardians carry the light in the ongoing revelation of truth in the midst of darkness.

Strategy for Preaching

The first few chapters of John's gospel—with special attention to chapter 3—are the ideal site into which the preacher might probe the mystery of baptism. In fact, these chapters are so rich that they also provide an apt catechetical instrument for parents and godparents when it comes to instructing these guides for the newly baptized well *before* the rite. Additionally, among those gathered in the early pages of the Fourth Gospel are fascinating characters who en flesh the exploration of the human subject's search from darkness to light, marginalization to community, apathy to faith. Nicodemus comes to the Lord not only as a member of the Pharisees and leader in the Jewish community but as a kind of Everyman haunted by the darkness and searching for the light of Truth. Therefore the focus sentence for this homily on John 3:1-6 might be that the children are brought to the light of baptism this moment as the Lord rescues them and us from the powers that bind us.

The net cast here in preaching this passage in the context of baptism is necessarily broad in its reach. The hearers will be parents and godparents and other family members, perhaps young couples who are themselves searching for the light of understanding when it comes to raising a child by faith. We know that raising a child is not an easy task these days—as if it ever was—but the Scriptures and the rite are not simply texts with formulas for a ritual of initiation; no, they are consoling messengers in helping to shed some light on accompanying a child throughout life with understanding, love, and mercy. Here, an introduction could position Nicodemus as something like a guardian or parent in Israel, since he is longing for rebirth not only for himself but also for the nation as an elder in the Sanhedrin, the people of Israel. Clearly, he seems to have come to an understanding of Jesus' identity slowly, and when he does so it is as an elder or older family member grieving, delivering at Jesus' burial an overabundance of oil and spices.

That introduction, which draws on the loving Christian sponsorship of the parents of those (or the one) to be baptized, moves us nicely into the body of the homily, which could begin with: The Lord has claimed those to be baptized as his own and made them children of light. (A very brief excursus from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1213–84, on baptism could follow with a theological explanation here and, crucially, be accompanied by a visual image or short story dealing with something like initiation to support the doctrine.)

But the homily, like the rite itself, does not end there. Parents and godparents have only just begun their search with their children, and so they are entrusted with the light to keep that search burning. A reference to the baptismal candle and its connection to the pascal candle would be appropriate in this context. An illustration would go a long way to complete this thought: Can you imagine taking your children on a camping trip in a dark forest without a lamp, or even a match to light a lantern? So the church has given us a bright light taken from the Easter candle: let this be our guide along our journey with Christ.

Now: a caveat, if you please. When it comes to dealing with images of light and darkness, these strong words are not an invitation to polarize or project pet peeves onto the congregation, small as it may be. Those who wish to represent contemporary culture as utter darkness ought to remember that we are all part of this culture that we are called to illuminate through Christ's presence. There is nothing in the gospel we have just heard to indicate that Nicodemus or Israel or their culture remains part of some dark underworld, although this member of the Sanhedrin remains associated with the mystery of the night when he brings the lavish gift of spices to anoint Jesus' body in John 19:39-40. He is a seeker. Much like those gathered to celebrate baptism, he is looking for the Lord in the midst of obscurity and even death, holding only a fragile candle as he does so.

2. Matthew 28:18-20

Readings from the Ambo

There are a few things to observe as we begin to unpack this very last portion of the Gospel of Matthew. The first of these is that this commissioning of the eleven disciples comes from the "authority" (Greek: