

“Although the primary concern of this book is with Roman Catholic preaching, it is an invaluable resource for Protestant preachers to learn about Christian preaching. The book presents comprehensive knowledge about preaching in theory and practice, as well as a rich history of Christian preaching throughout two millennia. The essays in this book, written to the point and in depth on crucial subject matters of homiletics, are excellent teaching materials for both introductory and advanced preaching courses.”

—Eunjoo Mary Kim  
Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics  
Iliff School of Theology

“For the busy pastor or preacher, as well as for all of those inspired by Pope Francis’s call to share the joy of the Gospel with others, here is a trustworthy one-volume resource for insights on preaching from the time of the New Testament to the digital age. Crafted by experts in the fields of liturgical studies and homiletics and experienced preachers and teachers, these essays provide an excellent introduction to the history, theory, and art of preaching. At once informative and inspiring, pastoral and practical, *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching* draws on the riches of the sacramental imagination and addresses opportunities and challenges for preaching in diverse cultural, ecumenical, and interfaith contexts. An essential resource for pastors and preachers as well as for professors and students of homiletics.”

—Mary Catherine Hilbert, OP  
Author of *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*  
Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame



# **A Handbook for Catholic Preaching**

Developed under the auspices of  
The Catholic Academy of Liturgy

*General Editor*

Edward Foley

*Associate Editors*

Catherine Vincie

Richard Fragomeni

*Cosponsored by*

The Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics and  
The Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions

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## Preface

Since the onset of Vatican II (1962–1965), the global Roman Catholic community has given significantly more consideration to the emphasis many sixteenth-century reformers placed on the Word of God and preaching. In particular, liturgical preaching—especially the ancient tradition of the homily—has received serious attention over the past few decades, both in preaching ministries as well as in graduate programs preparing future preachers. It is partly this recognition of renewed vitality around the preaching arts that has spurred the conceiving, designing, birthing, and production of this volume.

This work has an admittedly Roman Catholic origin and trajectory: developing in the Catholic Academy of Liturgy and subsequently cosponsored by that organization, the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics, and the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions. One of the reasons for this “Roman” underscoring is the unusual amount of law, rubrical directives, and official instruction about preaching in our tradition. These exhortations and prescriptions have a singular impact in our communities regarding who can preach, in what settings, and in what capacities. Related is the focal import of sacraments—especially the Eucharist—in the life of our church and the multiple ramifications this has for our particular slant on sacramental and homiletic preaching.

While admitting these particular parameters and priorities for Roman Catholic preachers, this volume was intentionally envisioned as a handbook for “catholic” preaching in the broadest sense of that term. The role of the Scriptures in preaching, the challenges of preaching in a digital age, sermonizing in an interfaith context, and the need for a liberative and prophetic word cut across denominations and even some faith traditions. Thus we have been honored to share this venture with multiple Episcopalian, Jewish, and Lutheran collaborators. At the same time, we hope to highlight some of the distinctive contributions of contemporary Roman Catholic preaching, e.g., its dialogue with Catholic social teaching. Part of our catholic path here has also been to broaden our palette of contributors and engage women

and men, academics and practitioners, established scholars and emerging voices, and lay and ordained of different ethnicities and perspectives, as well as voices from outside of North America. We also believe that the collaborative spirit of this volume—explicitly symbolized in many coauthored entries and implicitly recognized in the rich dialogue between editors and authors who published here without remuneration—also speaks volumes about preaching in a catholic mode.

While this resource is intended to aid those who teach or direct the preaching arts, professors and bishops, working preachers, and pastoral supervisors, the design and writing style were particularly calibrated to graduate students in ministerial studies. Every article—each of approximately four thousand words—was meant to be a self-contained overview of a particular historical period, genre of preaching, homiletic theory, or contemporary issue. This more encyclopedic approach—largely devoid of footnotes yet supported by pertinent bibliography—is intended to provide a sufficiently rich yet thoroughly accessible gateway to major facets of the preaching arts at this stage of the twenty-first century. This approach also, by necessity, limits the number of essays that could be included in such a volume. Thus, there are no individual articles on the preaching of Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), relevant architectural considerations, the impact of Paul Ricoeur's (d. 2005) hermeneutical approaches, or the role of women through the preaching tradition. On the other hand, it is hoped that the extensive indices at the end of the volume, as well as internal cross-referencing, might enable the reader to trace key individuals, ideas, or movements across the broad landscapes sketched in this volume.

Besides our distinguished and generous collaborators, the editors express again our gratitude to our cosponsors of this project and their respective leadership: the Catholic Academy of Liturgy, the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics, and the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions. Finally, we are deeply grateful to the Liturgical Press for supporting this project since its inception, especially Hans Christoffersen and Peter Dwyer.

Edward Foley, Capuchin  
Feast of the Presentation, 2016

# Introduction

*Timothy Radcliffe*

Yves Congar, OP (d. 1995), one of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), asserted that a congregation with good preaching but deprived of the sacraments would, after forty years, be more flourishing than a congregation with the sacraments but no preaching. In case you think that this is a typically Dominican exaggeration, the famous fifteenth-century Franciscan preacher Bernardino of Siena (d. 1444) said that if one had to choose between listening to a sermon or going to church, the sermon was more important. Paul wrote to the Romans: “How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” (Rom 10:14).

If preaching is at the very heart of the Christian community, why is it the focus of so much angst? If we are all missionary disciples, as Pope Francis (b. 1936) often asserts, then how are the laity to preach? Where do we hear the voice of women in the patriarchal church? How can our preaching of the Gospel reach our secularized contemporaries? Then there is the vexed question of the homily during the Eucharist: Should it be entrusted only to the ordained? Why are most homilies so boring?

## **Our Forebears Faced These Questions Before!**

This *Handbook for Catholic Preaching* shows us that these are questions that have been posed from the beginning. Preaching has never been easy. When the Lord asked Moses to return to Egypt to summon the Hebrews to freedom, he answered: “Oh, my LORD, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exod 4:10). Jeremiah tried to refuse the Lord’s invitation to prophecy: “Ah, LORD God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth” (Jer 1:6).

The question of preaching by women also surfaces from time to time. Already it was a live issue in Paul’s churches (1 Cor 14:34). In the twelfth

century, many laypeople claimed the right to preach. Carolyn Muessig (see 64 below) shows that the preaching of women was debated in the fourteenth century. Nuns often preached in their monasteries; Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) famously went on preaching tours. Other women preachers approved by bishops include Rose of Viterbo (d. 1252) and Humility of Faenza (d. 1310). Contrary to the common impression that prior to Vatican II preaching was exclusively performed by male priests, Gueric De Bona (see 86 below) shows that before the Second World War women were actively involved in the street preaching of the Catholic Evidence Guilds, especially from Rosary College (now Dominican University) in River Forest, Illinois.

Most of us would sympathize with Anthony Trollope (d. 1882) who, in *Barchester Towers*, laments: "There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silent and be tormented" (Trollope 1857, 49). From the beginning of Christianity, listening to preachers has been a trial for the people of God. Paul preached so long once that a young lad, Eutychus, fell to his death (Acts 20:9). I console myself that never, to my knowledge, has my preaching caused anyone's death! We may lament the magnetic attraction of the new means of communication, but our forebears have also contended with more lively entertainments. Alden Bass (see 55 below) informs us that fourth-century preachers competed against the excitement of the hippodrome, the circus, civic festivals, and the theater. They employed clagues to applaud them and encouraged fans to jump up and down "as occurred in the theater." Even Augustine (d. 430) enjoyed acclaim!

In Syria, another approach was adopted to combat boredom. Sermons were put to music and verse. Ephrem of Nisbis (d. 373), one of the most famous preachers of all times, taught his congregations to sing refrains to keep them awake. Jacob of Serug (d. 521) composed almost eight hundred homiletic poems and was known charmingly as "the flute of the Holy Spirit and the harp of the orthodox church."

In the Middle Ages, preachers employed all sorts of theatrical devices to draw in the crowds. Carolyn Muessig tells us about a Franciscan friar who constructed a sort of chapel near the pulpit from which emerged suitable noise—hammering nails and blowing trumpets—to enliven his description of the crucifixion (see 66 below). In the last century, Gueric DeBona (see 90–92 below) shows how Roman Catholics used radio and television to reach new audiences, especially the "golden voiced" Fulton Sheen, as *Time* magazine called him in 1946.

It is encouraging to discover that our forebears have faced similar challenges in the proclamation of the Gospel, used the new means of communication of their time, and struggled to prevent people from falling asleep!

## Today's Challenges

Preaching in our time does face new challenges, even though they may be no more severe than those of former times. Paul VI (d. 1978), ten years after the closure of Vatican II, wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel" (*EN*, no. 20). Contemporary Western cultures are open to the Gospel in ways that some previous cultures have not been but closed to the Word in other ways.

We live in contexts in which endless images are diffused from tablets and laptops, in films and social media. The film about the death of the Trappist monks in Algeria, *Of Gods and Men* (2010), made an enormous impact when it was first shown in France because its images spoke immediately to generations attuned to the visual. Yet at the heart of our faith is the Word of God. It is a Word that is certainly filled with vivid images, but how can it engage cultures less nurtured by texts?

The twenty-first century is an era of immediate and compressed communication (see 257 below). A tweet is limited to 140 characters. The Word of God, however, is countercultural in ways that are difficult to grasp in a few seconds. God's Word opens up a world of gift and gratitude that radically contradicts our consumerist contexts. Yet how can we engage the attention of an impatient culture, which might not hang around long enough to get the message? Researchers claim that even goldfish have a longer attention span than twenty-first-century humans!

Like the late Roman Empire, many contemporary societies are hooked on entertainment. Education, sports, the news, and politics are under pressure to be entertaining in contexts whose worst condemnation is "boring!" Should we compete and make our worship and homilies entertaining or dare to explore issues in depth and risk being thought dull?

We prepare our preaching for particular congregations or gatherings. We choose words that will resonate with these people and suggest interpretations that will engage with their experiences. At any moment, however, what one has said may be snatched out of that context by the media and placed in a new context of another's choosing, often with the intention of

dramatic effect and of arousing indignation! I once was asked to address an academic committee set up by the Church of England to consider the complex ethical issues raised by homosexuality, only to find the meaning of my words dragged out of context and distorted by furious campaigners who were eager to convict me of heresy!

Contemporary Western societies, as never before, are meeting places of strangers and yet fear difference. Zygmunt Bauman (b. 1920) maintains that the mobility of modern society encourages “the impulse to withdraw from risk-ridden complexity into the shelter of uniformity” (Bauman 2000, 179). Faced with the radically other, our inclination often is to retreat, to turn off, to hibernate. This is known as turtling. One retreats like a turtle into one’s carapace. How can we facilitate a conversation between contemporary contexts and the alien worlds of the Babylonian exile or first-century Palestine? Might not a contemporary reaction be to say “weird!” and turn off?

We Christians—especially the ordained—suffer a crisis of authority. Fred Craddock (d. 2015) has called the preacher “as one without authority” (Craddock 2001). We have lost authority because faith is wrongly thought to be superseded by science, and rightly because of the sexual abuse crisis. Institutions are regarded with suspicion. How can we proclaim the Gospel with authority?

These challenges are probably no more daunting than those faced by the church many times before in her turbulent life, but they are *our* challenges today! In the essays of this handbook, you will find intelligent suggestions as to how we are to confront them. Perhaps I may be forgiven for offering a few brief suggestions of my own, all of which resonate with what is found in this volume.

## **Walking with the Lord**

The disciples walking to Emmaus meet the Lord. Afterward they say: “‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions together” (Luke 24:32-33). That short verse encompasses much of the vocation of the preacher and homilist and even suggests how we may rise to the challenge of preaching in the twenty-first century.

### ***“Were not our hearts burning within us?”***

As many of the contributors to this handbook show, hearing the Word of God is not primarily receiving information about God. As Thomas Aquinas

(d. 1274) famously asserted, in this life we are joined to God as to the unknown. Hearing the Word is an explosive and ecstatic experience in which we are lifted out of ourselves and see the world anew.

It all begins with joy. Note that the disciples only refer to this joyful burning of their hearts *after* their eyes were opened in Emmaus. Before that, they had experienced a puzzling and intriguing joy of which they could make no sense and could not name. It is to be hoped that this is a joy we may, perhaps in a tiny way, embody. It is the beginning of our preaching; it is not a determined jollity: "Smile because Jesus loves you." Personally I find that sort of forced cheeriness deeply depressing! It is an often quiet joy that is large enough to carry sorrow.

This joy is described as burning within them. The encounter with God is being ignited by a fire that does not consume one—like the burning bush Moses came across in the wilderness (Exod 3:2) or the fire that engulfed the three young men in the furnace but did not burn them (Dan 3:27). Our burnt hearts are made tender.

Augustine says in *De catechizandis rudibus* that teachers should communicate with *hilaritas* (2:4) so as to provoke delight in their students. *Hilaritas* is usually translated as "cheerfulness," which suggests that we should liven up our homilies with a few jokes to stop the congregation from going to sleep. I suspect, however, that here *hilaritas* means something more like exuberance, mirth, an ecstatic joy. When preaching takes off, we are exhilarated. *Hilaritas* carries us out of ourselves.

Sometimes—maybe rarely—the Word of God erupts in our lives, liberating us from old assumptions. This was the effect of Jesus' parables. Van Thanh Nguyen writes: "More than just telling stories, however, Jesus spoke often in parables that were subversive and counterintuitive, grabbing the attention of those who heard them" (see 41 below). So in our preaching we hope and pray that we shall share with the people of God some tiny experience of how the Word of God bursts into our lives. This is the happening of grace, what my first tutor in the Dominican Order, Cornelius Ernst, OP, called the "genetic moment."

Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love. It could be said that Christianity is the consecration of the genetic moment, the living center from which it reviews the indefinitely various and shifting perspectives of human experience in history. That, at least, is or ought to be its claim: that it is the power to transform and renew all things: "Behold, I make all things new." (Ernst 1974, 74)

This is the *hilaritas* that may—just sometimes—be detonated by our preaching.

Ultimately, no faith can be kept floating solely by experiences of emotion, however ecstatic. This is why so many converts to Pentecostalism drift away when religion seems dull and routine. This is why all preaching must reach toward the great doctrines of the church, which—as Michael Connors and Ann Garrido (see 124ff. below) show—keep alive a sense of the great mystery of our faith, even when the *hilaritas* is burning low. Contrary to popular belief, doctrine is not dry and dull but liberates the mind from the narrowness of any culture and enables us to glimpse the fullness of a truth beyond all words.

It would, however, be encouraging to see signs of delight on the faces of one's listeners from time to time. If we see only glazed eyes and furtive glances at wristwatches, we may be discouraged. Given the resistance of contemporary Western contexts to our preaching—perhaps even more in Europe than in the United States—it may be harder to penetrate that crust of indifference. The following words in that verse from the Emmaus narrative may offer us some clues as to how, with God's grace, to ignite a small fire in the hearts of our listeners.

### ***“While he was talking to us”***

Jesus joins in the conversation of the disciples as they flee from Jerusalem. He listens to their disappointment at the apparent failure of his mission: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” The encounter with the Lord begins in conversation. Edward Foley points out that the Greek word *homilia* occurs only once in the New Testament (1 Cor 15:33), where it means communication or companionship (see 156 below).

Great preachers in the past often literally conversed with their hearers. Augustine's preaching included passionate interaction with the congregation. Peter Brown writes: “Brilliant, urgent at times, intransigent, his sermons are better described as ‘dialogues with the crowd.’ They are often inconclusive dialogues. One senses in them the constant presence of the unpersuaded, the indifferent and the downright disobedient” (Brown 2000, 446). If this was the reaction to the greatest preacher in Western Christianity, we should not be too abashed when our efforts seem to be fruitless!

Pedro di Cordoba (d. 1525), one of the Dominicans who arrived in the Americas with Columbus (d. 1506), astonished witnesses by refusing to preach to the indigenous people from the lofty height of a pulpit. Instead he sat on a bench, at their level, and talked to them as to friends. Robert

Bireley tells us that the seventeenth-century Jesuit Julian Maunoir, “the Apostle of Brittany,” prepared the way for his missions by dialoguing with the crowd (see 79 below).

Recently the four Roman Catholic dioceses of Algeria had a yearlong exploration of the emerging identity and mission of the church in this Muslim land. As part of that process, the baptized were invited to describe what they were talking about “on the road.” Hundreds reported what was on their mind and in their hearts: priests and religious, parish members, prisoners, students from other countries who had come to study in Algerian universities, migrants hoping to reach Europe. For months, the whole Roman Catholic Church in Algeria was talking on the road to Emmaus. We all listened.

Most of our preaching does not literally take the form of a dialogue. Even so, it should spring from our participation in the conversations of our communities, attending to what puzzles people, burdens them, inspires them, and gives them hope. The preacher should be listening in, learning about the things for which the sheep of this flock hunger. The homily does not just offer answers, which would be to halt the conversation. Rather, it facilitates its ongoing evolution, unsnagging it when it has become entangled, releasing the conversation from blind alleys, opening up new perspectives, and waiting to see how the conversation evolves. Our preaching serves the conversation of the community.

All preaching is at least implicitly conversational because God’s revelation is. Benedict XVI (b. 1927) wrote in *Verbum Domini*, “[T]he novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us” (*VD*, no. 6). The preacher’s role is gently to facilitate the conversation between God and God’s people as well as within the community. Revelation is dialogical because the very life of God is the eternal conversation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A contrast is sometimes made between proclamation of the Gospel and dialogue, with the implication that dialogue is less directly kerygmatic and tinged with relativism. The truths of our faith can only be proclaimed, however, through conversation, implying both the confidence to say what one holds most dear and the humility to listen. The earliest documents of the New Testament are Paul’s letters, one-half of his passionate conversation with his churches. Reading them is like listening to someone talking on the phone and having to guess what the person at the other end of the line is saying. The Jesus of John’s gospel is above all a man of conversation. Indeed, the canon of the New Testament is the eternal conversation of the gospels. Francis Watson observed: “A consensus slowly emerged that the

four gospels are to be read alongside each other and that no other gospel is permitted to share in their intertextual conversation” (Watson 2013, 614).

If my preaching does not even slightly ignite my hearers, maybe I need to mingle in the crowd more, overhear what pains and puzzles them and what gives them joy. I learned what little I know about preaching when I was a university chaplain. I would go to the pub with some students after the Sunday evening Mass and discover what they really thought about my homilies! It was a painful experience, but I have never regretted it.

### *“On the road”*

The disciples in the Emmaus story are, of course, walking in the wrong direction. They are fleeing Jerusalem, the place of revelation, where the Lord must make his ascension. They are, as it were, antidisciples. But Jesus does not bar their way or command them to return. He walks with them, respecting their freedom and sharing their journey.

It belongs to the vocation of a preacher to enter the skin of those whom he or she addresses and inhabit their doubts, knowing them from within. Even their failures are our own. Fr. Chuck Gallagher (d. 2013), the founder of Marriage Encounter, said of preaching: “You gotta start by saying, ‘We lepers’ and not ‘You bums.’” Fr. Tony Philpot sees this identification with the congregation—even though it can tear you apart—as crucial to the vocation of the diocesan priest. One can relate what he says to any preacher. One of the most respected priests in England, he was spiritual director at the English College in Rome. In 1988 he attended a lecture in Cambridge given by the then-Cardinal Ratzinger. It was a wonderful, intelligent lecture, but it seemed vastly remote from what his parishioners were living. He felt torn apart. He wrote:

It is uncomfortable, occupying the space between the rock and the hard place. It is uncomfortable to belong to the world of orthodoxy, and yet spend so much of my time and energy with the unorthodox, and indeed to belong to their world too. I would want to say to men preparing for diocesan priesthood that this divided heart is the characteristic pain of their vocation, and if they experience the pain, it is a sign that they will be good priests. (Philpot 1998, 88)

This is the pain of every preacher. Someone, I forget who, described preaching as swinging between the horns of a dilemma. Jesus was often confronted with dilemmas: should the woman caught in adultery be stoned? If he said yes, where was his mercy? If he said no, where was his obedience

to the law? Should people pay tax to Caesar or not? Always he escaped the snare of the hunter and found a word that was both gracious and true, because he is indeed the Word of God “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Because we are not the Word of God, we may swing awhile, only able to offer a tentative way forward or a partial response. Then our hearers will see us not as great masters, experts in theology and biblical study who have all the answers. We will be seen as being like them, disciples who are still learning and who may sometimes walk in the wrong direction. Then we might have true authority, because we only say what we believe to be true. William Hill wrote, “God cannot do without the stammering ways in which we strive to give utterance to that Word” (Hill 1992, 186). Paradoxically, such words may have more authority than those of preachers who are boiling over with conviction. Usually loud conviction is in inverse proportion to actual confidence. As Robert Morneau admits: “[P]eople easily spot a phony” (see 12 below).

By swinging between the horns of dilemmas, rejecting facile answers and living honestly with our doubts, preachers slowly discover their own voice. When I was a young friar, Blackfriars Hall at Oxford was blessed with several great preachers I admired enormously. When I began to preach, I usually imitated one or other of them, sometimes switching my model halfway through a homily, like a boy going through puberty, whose voice has not yet settled into maturity. Only slowly did my own voice emerge. I still lose it sometimes. Some patristic fathers taught that each of us is a Word of God, for we are spoken into existence. When we speak in our own voice, then somehow that Word of God which we *are* is heard and has a chance of convincing people. It will be a voice without pretention, maybe a quiet voice, but authentically our own and so God’s too. Then it may have authority, though even Augustine, as we saw, often failed to persuade.

### *“While he was opening the Scriptures to us”*

What are the Scriptures that we preachers are called to open, and how might this be a special challenge today? As many contributors to this book remind us, the preacher encounters the Word of God above all in the Lectionary. As far back as the mid-third century, there is evidence of the emergence of a lectionary. It was renewed at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), and Vatican II in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for its revision so that “a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the Table of God’s word” (SC, no. 51).

We treat the Lectionary with honor. It is usually solemnly carried in procession at the beginning of the Eucharist; it is incensed, accompanied by acolytes with candles, and kissed. This is the Word of God that summons

each of us to come to the Lord. It gathers us in the community of the church. This is an especially Roman Catholic sense of the Word of God.

The Word of God, as found in the Lectionary (see 35 and 119 below), places us within the repeated story of the liturgical year, reaching from Advent to the feast of Christ the King. It challenges us to transcend the little stories we may tell about ourselves, the little triumphs and failures of our careers. We are summoned beyond all generational and ethnic and national stories, with their tales of aggression and competition. Our story is that of God's love of humanity, and of the whole of creation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the global community does not always offer stories with much hope with the steady growth of terrorism and the threat of ecological catastrophe. The story of the liturgical year, embodied in the readings of the Lectionary, reaches forward to the kingdom and so is a story of hope.

This long story of salvation is embodied in the medieval cathedrals of Europe. To go to those great centers of prayer is to be embraced by a story of fall and redemption told in stone and stained glass. Every human life has its meaning inside this great adventure, in which our companions are the heroes of all ages.

The people of no previous era have had such a profound sense of the vast stretches of time of our universe's existence, created 13.5 billion years ago. And yet the people of no era have been so absorbed by the present moment, the immediacy of the "now generation." One challenge for the preacher today is to open the Scriptures so that people today sense the exhilaration of this great adventure, to be pilgrims with our hearts set on the kingdom. Martyrs truly witness to a faith that points to the kingdom, and there have never been so many martyrs as today. We need them!

The Scriptures, however, also come to us in another book, the Bible. We attend to the Word of God in this volume in a different way. It is illuminated not by candles carried by acolytes but by commentaries written by scholars. We are challenged to be obedient to the truth of the Word of God. This has been an especially Protestant perception.

Often we preachers may be tempted to scavenge the Word of God for texts that will support our agendas. God is right because God agrees with me! We seek proof texts to use in our campaigns for or against the ordination of women or as a justification for our governments to bomb or invade another territory. But this is to make the Scriptures serve me rather than humbly accepting the vocation to be the servant of the Word (*DV*, no. 10). Solid, patient biblical scholarship summons me back to the text, to its gritty otherness and challenging truth. We are reminded that it was written in a foreign language whose nuances must be respected. I cannot simply use it

at my whim! The Lectionary and the Bible have their own authority and invite obedience in different ways. Both are necessary. Today we also encounter the Scriptures in a third form, on the web. This offers challenges and opportunities which are dealt with in other places in this volume (see 21 below), and which I explore elsewhere (Radcliffe 2016).

***“That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem;  
and they found the eleven and their companions together”***

Now they go home to Jerusalem. They will join the eleven and their companions who are gathered together. This is the church, the gathering of the people of God. The final goal of all our preaching is to invite people home to God. Pope Francis wrote, “The church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open . . . where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems” (EG, no. 47). This means being ministers and preachers willing to encounter and invite those who feel the need to take up again their path of faith.

We are called to accompany people—mentally, spiritually, and even sometimes physically—in their meandering journeys, with the hope of eventually helping them find a spiritual home. They cannot be driven home by threat or manipulation, for then it would not be truly their home. They must find their way there freely and with joy, their hearts burning within them. We walk with them.

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## Abbreviations

AA	<i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i> , Vatican II, "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity," 1965
AGD	<i>Ad Gentes Divinitus</i> , Vatican II, "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity," 1965
b.	born
BCE	Before the Common Era
c., cc.	canon, canons
ca.	<i>circa</i>
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994
CE	Common Era
CELAM	<i>Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano</i> , The Latin American Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church
CIC	<i>Codex Iuris Canonici</i> , The Code of Canon Law, 1917, 1983
CT	<i>Catechesi Tradendae</i> , John Paul II, "On Catechesis in Our Time," 1979
CUA	Catholic University of America
CVL	<i>Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry</i> , The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005
d.	died
DMC	"Directory for Masses with Children," Congregation for Divine Worship, 1973
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i> , Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," 1965

- EG *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis, "The Joy of the Gospel," 2013
- EN *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI, "On Evangelization in the Modern World," 1975
- FIYH *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*. Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1982. Numbering according to the text as it appears in *The Liturgy Documents, Volume One*. 5th ed. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2012. Pp. 527–55.
- Gr. Greek
- GS *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," 1965
- HD "Homiletic Directory," Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2014
- ICEL International Commission on English in the Liturgy
- IGMR2002 *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*, the promulgated form of the 5th edition of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, associated with *MR2002*, 2002
- IO *Inter Oecumenici*, Sacred Congregation of Rites, "First Instruction on the Orderly Carrying Out of the Constitution on the Liturgy," 1964
- It. Italian
- Lat. Latin
- LG *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 1964
- NCCB National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the USA (1965–2001)
- NCWC National Catholic Welfare Conference of the Catholic Bishops of the USA (1919–1965)
- No., nos. number, numbers
- OLM1981-Pr Introduction (*Proemium*) of the *Ordo Lectionum Missae, editio typica altera*, 1981

PBC	Pontifical Biblical Commission
PO	<i>Presbyterorum Ordinis</i> , Vatican II, "Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests," 1965
PTCM	"The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Community," Congregation for the Clergy, 1999
PTMOF	<i>Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily</i> , United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2012
RCIA	Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
RM	<i>Redemptoris Missio</i> , John Paul II, "On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate," 1990
RS	<i>Redemptionis Sacramentum</i> , Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "On Certain Matters to Be Observed or to Be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist," 2004
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i> , Vatican II, "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," 1963
SaCar	<i>Sacramentum Caritatis</i> , Benedict XVI, "Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission," 2007
ST	<i>Summa Theologica</i> , Thomas Aquinas. Online at <a href="http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum015.htm">http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum015.htm</a>
Syr.	Syriac
Tanner	Norman Tanner, ed. <i>Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils</i> , 2 vols. London and Washington, DC: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990.
USCCB	United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (from 2001)
VD	<i>Verbum Domini</i> , Benedict XVI, "On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," 2010



# **Introductory Essays**



# Preaching as a Spiritual Exercise

*Robert F. Morneau*

Preaching is a gift and a responsibility, a vocation and a duty, a delight and a sacrifice. As an art and a skill, it demands effortful discipline. When preaching is done well and is inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is one of the most powerful exercises leading to spiritual growth, namely, greater union with God and with the community. A key question is: what ingredients must be present for preaching to be a meaningful spiritual experience? I maintain that four ingredients are essential and nonnegotiable: prayer, study, creativity, and a love for language.

Before discussing each of these components of disciplined preaching, we might note what preachers are about, that is, the preacher's job description. In *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (FIYH, no. 29) the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry articulated these objectives:

- provide the congregation with words to express faith,
- interpret life in relation to God,
- make connections between human existence and God's concerns,
- lead people to a greater unity of faith,
- face the ambiguities and challenges of the human journey, and
- share a vision of life that is faith filled.

What a demanding and challenging task! Yet, by God's grace and courageous commitment, preachers can meet these objectives in various ways at various times. It is possible when preaching is truly a spiritual exercise.

## Preaching and Prayer

Before proclaiming and interpreting God's Word, preachers must never fail to spend sufficient time meditating on the Scriptures. *Lectio divina* is a proven discipline in preparing for the preaching ministry. This method employs the mind in discursive pondering, the heart in affective response, and offers an invitation to quiet the mind and heart so that the prayer of

loving attention (contemplation) might be experienced. Preaching devoid of prayer might still impress the congregation with a show of intelligence and eloquence, but it will be lacking a Spirit-filled discourse.

George Herbert (d. 1633), the Anglican priest and poet, states well the relationship between preaching and praying in his verse "The Window":

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?  
He is a brittle crazy glass:  
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford  
This glorious and transcendent place,  
To be a window, through thy grace.

But when thou dost anneal in glass thy story,  
Making thy life to shine within  
The holy Preacher's; then the light and glory  
More rev'rend grows, and more doth win:  
Which else shows wat'rish, bleak, and thin.

Doctrine and life, colors and light, in one  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and awe: but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the ear, not conscience, ring. (Herbert 1981, 183–84)

Transparency eventually wins out. Perceptive hearers will detect quite readily whether the preaching has the quality and tonality that only prayer can give: reverence for the Word, respect for the human condition, a deep sense of grace and sin, an authentic faith, and an epistemological humility precluding any trace of spiritual arrogance. Prayer purifies and purges preachers. It is no surprise that the prayer corner is often neglected.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (d. 1972) understood the power and necessity of prayer in the preaching ministry. He wrote: "If the vast amount of time and energy invested in the search of ideas and devices for preaching, if the fire spent on the altar of oratory were dedicated to the realm of prayer, we would not find it too difficult to convey to others what it means to utter a word in the presence of God" (Heschel 1954, 79). It is in prayer that the preacher's mind and heart lies open to divine inspiration in a special way. It is in that sacred "trembling silence" of which Augustine (d. 430) speaks that we are given access to divine wisdom that far exceeds our limited human intelligence. Unless this spiritual exercise of consistent and authentic prayer is undertaken, our preaching will be wanting.

There is yet another significant dimension of prayer and preaching. The preacher must not only ask for the guidance and inspiration of the Holy

Spirit in the task of preaching but also should also pray for the congregation that the Holy Spirit might make the people gathered for worship receptive to the wisdom and power of God's Word. The great Dominican theologian Yves Congar (d. 1995) put it this way: "The preacher has to beseech him [the Holy Spirit] earnestly to come both into his poor words and into the hearts of those who hear them" (Congar 1997, 1:x). To bring this level of intentionality to the preaching ministry is a sign of maturity and manifests a deep understanding of the human condition.

The preacher's prayer is talking things over with God. It is a mutual discourse between friends, a respectful listening and responding, a precious time of graced silence. The fundamental question that a preacher brings to the prayer corner is: "What is the message that you want me to deliver to your people today?" In his excellent book *Faith Maps: Ten Religious Explorers from Newman to Joseph Ratzinger*, Michael Paul Gallagher, SJ, writes: "Christian prayer means relaxing into the reality of being loved by God, in order to rise, each day, into the gritty realism of loving" (Gallagher 2010, 152). When preachers experience their being loved by a gracious God, their preaching will convene in some fashion the mystery that our God is Love itself.

Just as regular evaluation of our preaching is important, so too should we assess the quality of our prayer. In a conference given by Fr. Dan Felton, vicar-general of the Diocese of Green Bay, he challenged the ministers gathered to deal with three questions regarding our spiritual lives: what should we start doing, what should we stop doing, and what should we keep doing. These questions are relevant to our preaching and prayer life, for example:

Is there anything we should START doing?

read Augustine's *Confessions*, observe a daily personal devotion,  
make a retreat?

Is there anything we should STOP doing?

speed-reading the Scriptures, multitasking while praying, daydreaming?

Is there anything you should KEEP doing?

pondering religious poetry, praying Psalm 23, singing great hymns?

Start! Stop! Keep!

Assess these imperatives each week.

## **Preaching and Study**

The claim is often made that writing well demands reading broadly. The same claim might be made regarding the preaching ministry. Preachers who

do not read and do not have a sustained, disciplined intellectual life will soon find themselves with little of any significance to say (but this does not mean that they may not have a lot of *insignificant* things to say). Though the reading of quality periodicals is commendable, more is required. Returning to the classics (Augustine's *Confessions*, the *Imitation of Christ*, the mystics) and exploring the writings of the great theologians (Karl Rahner [d. 1984], Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthasar [d. 1988]) provide insights and faith maps that enrich the preacher's theological horizons and eventually, it is hoped, the worldview of the congregation. Preachers would do well to read Michael Paul Gallagher's *Faith Maps*, mentioned above. Gallagher summarizes in a masterful way the faith insights of such scholars as Maurice Blondel (d. 1949), Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan (d. 1984), Charles Taylor (b. 1931), Dorothee Soelle (d. 2003), Flannery O'Connor (d. 1964), and Pierangelo Sequeri (b. 1944). Delving into the thoughts of these intellectuals and people of faith provides much material to share with the faith community.

Although a trend toward anti-intellectualism might be too strong an accusation against our times, certainly a high level of pragmatism reigns. The pastoral dimension of ministry over the intellectual is emphasized (and maybe rightly so). This is not, however, an either/or issue. Quality time must be devoted to ongoing theological formation lest the elements of truth and wisdom get shortchanged.

Besides reading the great classics and theological scholars, preachers would benefit by the reading of poetry (Gerard Manley Hopkins [d. 1889], Langston Hughes [d. 1967], Jessica Powers [d. 1988], Alice Walker [b. 1944]); the writings of social scientists (Robert Bellah [d. 2013], Peter Berger [b. 1929], Paul Gilroy [b. 1945]); the stories of excellent novelists (Georges Bernanos [d. 1948], Frederick Buechner [b. 1926], Willa Catha [d. 1947], Sandra Cisneros [b. 1954]). Add to these disciplines the great documents of the church that require constant rereading because of their clarity and vision: Pope Paul VI's (d. 1978) *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) and *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Pope Francis's (b. 1936) *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG).

There is great mobility in today's church as parishioners move easily from one parish to another. One reason for this migration: "People go where they are nourished." If the homily, Sunday after Sunday, fails to provide some insight into the relationship between life and faith, people will often move to where they can find that connection. In other words, people have appropriate expectations. Pope Paul VI captured some of these expectations when he wrote:

The faithful assembled as a Paschal Church, celebrating the feast of the Lord present in their midst, expect much from this preaching, and will greatly benefit from it provided that it is simple, clear, direct, well adapted, profoundly dependent on Gospel teaching and faithful to the Magisterium, animated by a balanced apostolic ardor coming from its own characteristic nature, full of hope, fostering belief, and productive of peace and unity. (EN, no. 43)

Unless there is serious study, there is little hope that the people will be fed. In her excellent work *Naming Grace*, Mary Catherine Hilkert (b. 1948) writes: “To take on the life of the preacher is to commit oneself to becoming a contemplative and to embrace ongoing study as part of one’s vocation” (Hilkert 1997, 140). Study is a spiritual exercise that keeps the mind keen and alert. Preaching arising out of scholarship holds the promise of giving the congregation a perspective that makes life meaningful and faith intelligible, while filling the heart with hope.

We are all called to be lifelong learners. It is never too late to plunge into serious intellectual work. Our hunger for meaning, wisdom, and truth is never satiated.

*Learning*<sup>1</sup>

Is it too late to learn,  
to learn to live in the dark,  
to live in the light,  
to live?

Like the art of loving,  
the art of living is a *fine* art,  
demanding risk and truth and hope.

The dark contains graces and dangers,  
this “lunar” spirituality.  
The dark holds its terrors too,  
the great field of unknowing,  
lostness.

It’s never too late to learn—  
and we must remember  
that it’s the truth that sets us free.

—Robert Morneau

<sup>1</sup>Inspired by reading Taylor 2014.

## Preaching and Creativity

Creativity doesn't just happen (except in rare geniuses). Similarly, effective preaching doesn't just happen (except when the Holy Spirit reigns in the heart of the preacher). Creative preaching, i.e., life-giving preaching, requires skillful use of the imagination and the ability to bring freshness and vitality to the age-old message of God's love and mercy revealed in Jesus. Creativity helps to relate the Good News to the unique circumstances of a particular context in an engaging, challenging, and captivating manner.

In *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth (d. 1850) offers a profound insight into the creative process that preachers undertake:

The mind of Man is fram'd even like the breath  
And harmony of music. There is dark  
Invisible workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, and makes them move  
In one society. (Wordsworth 1970, 10)

Jesus, *the* preacher, spent considerable time in the workshop of his imagination reconciling the mystery of life and death as he spoke about the grain of wheat having to die so as to live, or finding one's life only by losing it, or experiencing happiness in persecution. Disciples of Jesus are called into that same workshop to engage in that spiritual exercise known as creativity, an act whose conditions "are so intimate and secret that no one can penetrate into them from outside," as Simone Weil (d. 1943) claims (Weil 1951, 86). Only those who enter into that imaginative world can draw close to emulating Jesus' metaphors and similes.

The Emmy-winning "televangelist" Bishop Fulton Sheen (d. 1979) captured the imagination of millions of people in his televised preaching (see 89–92 below). His piercing eyes, his dramatic flair, his use of a chalkboard, his J.M.J. logo ("Jesus, Mary and Joseph") drew people into listening intently to the Gospel message he proclaimed. His creative, life-giving preaching led people to go forth and give life to others. Creativity is about life, life received and life shared. Made in the image and likeness of a creative God, we emulate God by being creative in a fresh, vital, and enthusiastic way.

One means to foster creativity is the "spiritual exercise" of keeping a journal, a journal not only of our daily encounters but also a journal that notes carefully the insights from the books we read, the plays we see, the art we view. Carefully and intentionally processing the inner and outer events of our life provides abundant material for the preaching ministry. The old adage contains so much truth: "Experiences unreflected upon dehumanize."

What does humanize our life and foster creativity is to take seriously the instances of joys and sorrows that God sends us. Preaching then will rely on “real” life, experienced and processed. The congregation will know that preachers have been out on the streets, as Pope Francis admonishes them to be (*EG*, no. 49). Such preaching has an authenticity that connects the preacher’s life with the lives of the congregation.

Sacrifice is a spiritual exercise: giving up one thing for another. The creativity demanded in preaching also demands sacrifice and self-denial. When Jesus commanded the disciples to go and take up God’s mission, they not only left their fishing nets or tax booth or Friday night get-togethers but also left family and friends to fulfill their mission of evangelization. Theirs was a sacrificial, creative, generative life. Alan Jones, in *Exploring Spiritual Direction*, makes it clear what creativity demands:

The creation of the simplest thing requires sacrifice because, in order to create, something has to be given up: time, energy, and alternative possibilities. The creative artist has to make everything he does serve his artistic vision. Creativity, then, requires sacrificial single-mindedness. (Jones 1985, 113)

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul wanted that faith community to think of him as a servant of Christ and a steward of God’s mysteries (1 Cor 4:1). Paul saw himself and the early followers of Jesus as coworkers with God. One of God’s supreme gifts is creation. We are not only a part of the mystery of creation but are also invited to make that mystery present to others by being creative, by giving life in all circumstances of life. To do that well, preachers must invoke the Holy Spirit to empower them to be creative and imaginative.

Creativity also has another component: the moral life. It is not only the imagination that is involved here but also the conscience. Truly creative preachers, to be fully authentic, must live the Gospel message. The preacher’s character is a significant factor in the communication process.

### *Character Preaching*

Preachers, by necessity, must use words.

After all, a message there is to deliver.

But Monica, St. Augustine’s mother,  
preached to her husband by way of character.

It was her moral life,  
her abiding affection,

her hidden, but visible faith  
that won over her spouse.

Eloquence is not to be dismissed;  
words have incredible power.  
But in the end it is the preacher's character  
that gives the message authenticity.

—Robert Morneau

## **Preaching and Language**

Preaching is about communication; it is about using language effectively and wisely. A great deal of communication is nonverbal: facial expressions, posture, gestures, etc. Communication is also about words that link mind to mind, heart to heart. Finding the right words to convey the Gospel message is challenging; finding the right use of language is an art that calls for discipline.

As a spiritual exercise, preaching is intimately involved with expressing in words the truths of the faith, the moral imperatives by which we are to live, the stories and parables that have the power to shape our days. Preachers do not necessarily need an extensive vocabulary (though the range of one's lexicon is significant), but the words that are part of their lexicon should clarify and express forcefully the mystery of God's love and the Paschal Mystery. Paul, a noted preacher indeed, denied that he was gifted with eloquence. For him, eloquence was not the issue. Rather, his call was to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Redeemer.

Surveys regarding the quality of preaching have not been favorable. One major criticism of preachers is verbosity—simply too many words. To counter this criticism, preachers need to exercise an economy of language. A seven- or eight-minute homily, well-crafted and to the point, is greatly appreciated over a fifteen- to twenty-minute homily that simply rattles on and on and on. Succinctness is an admirable virtue in effective preaching.

Preachers who listen to great lyrics like those of Leonard Cohen (b. 1934), Paul Simon (b. 1941), and rapper Nasir Jones (b. 1973) or read a variety of literary genres—poetry, short stories, plays, novels, memoirs, and essays—have access not only to richness of vocabularies but also to the use of language at its finest. Reading and rereading the works of Cervantes (d. 1616) and Shakespeare (d. 1616), the poetry of Emily Dickinson (d. 1886) and Rainer Maria Rilke (d. 1926), and the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (d. 1882) and Mary Oliver (b. 1935) provide preachers with a treasury of syntax, grammar, and lexicons. Although this reading might not be labeled

“spiritual” reading, it really is. Preachers are put in contact with truth and wisdom, insights and meaning systems, and the whole gamut of human affections.

Henry David Thoreau (d. 1862) would have us believe that words are “the choicest of relics.” The implication here is that words are or can be holy, drawing us closer to God and to one another. But the opposite is also true: words can alienate and cripple relationships. A word once spoken is irreversible and, like an arrow flung from a bow, will have its effects come what may. Preachers are well advised to ponder the power of words—especially the Word of God, or *dabar* in Hebrew—and to realize both their ambiguity and the inability to control their effect. Words can heal or hurt, build up or tear down, bring life or death. Using words well is an art and discipline that needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Paul saw himself as Christ’s servant and God’s steward. I am convinced that he would also maintain that preachers are servants of words, indeed servants of the Word of God. Christian preachers are to proclaim *the* Word, Jesus, who came to redeem the world. Sermons and homilies that drift from the central proclamation of Christ crucified and risen are to be questioned.

This brings us to the issue of the principle of limitation. Words are never totally adequate in expressing the mysteries of our faith. Language simply cannot capture the fullness of reality. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) understood this in his insistence that the only way to talk about God was through analogy, a type of speech that stresses both similarity and difference (*ST* I, q. 13, art. 5). Despite this bothersome fact, words are still filled with wonder and power. Wordsworth reminds us: “How wond’rous the power of words, how sweet they are / According to the meaning which they bring” (Wordsworth 1970, 108). Every vocation works within its limitations. Preachers will never be completely satisfied with their discourse (nor will their congregations). We need to come back time and time again to hear other dimensions of the sweet and wonderful power of words to ponder the multiple levels of meaning.

Sometimes a single word or a short phrase can hold us spellbound for hours on end. In order for that to happen, however, we must be receptive and available.

*What’s in a phrase?*<sup>2</sup>

pausing doesn’t stop time  
but it does suspend activity

<sup>2</sup>Inspired by reading McEntyre 2014.

and enables the soul to catch its breath  
to slow down and ponder  
to consider carefully whatever is at hand

pausing over a phrase of God's word  
and inviting that phrase to touch one's heart  
brings about a gradual transformation  
and reshapes one's interiority

there is much in a phrase—  
buried truth, irritating challenges,  
surprises galore

—Robert Morneau

## Final Thoughts

A theme that is dear to Pope Francis is the need to cultivate a “culture of encounter.” My sense is that he would want preachers to “encounter” their assemblies, their “hearers,” seeking feedback again and again regarding their preaching ministry. Not only are preachers, according to Francis, to “take on the smell of the sheep” (*EG*, no. 24) but they are also to “contemplate” their people and keep “an ear to the people” (*EG*, no. 154). It may be that in such listening, with ears to the ground, preachers will be made aware of their own need for the other spiritual exercises we noted above: prayer, study, creative exercises, and the pursuit of a love of language. In the process, we might also learn that assemblies crave preachers who cultivate humility, simplicity, availability, and the gift of empathetic listening.

While writing this essay, I asked several members of the local worshiping community in which I serve as presider and preacher to comment on the ministry of preaching. Their insights and observations provide a basis for other “spiritual exercises” besides those mentioned above. Their comments are also an invitation to my future as a preacher, and maybe yours. They said:

- be genuine—people easily spot a phony
- assure the assembly by your preaching that you are a fellow pilgrim
- be humble
- talk about things people deal with in their daily lives
- form a “homily helper” group of parishioners who meet weekly with the preacher to break bread, pray, critique the previous week’s homily, and offer ideas for the coming Sunday

- avoid theological abstractions
- focus on God's love, forgiveness, and compassion revealed in Jesus

This provides, at least for me, a preaching syllabus that will occupy me as long as God allows me to exercise the ministry of preaching. May each of you, in your own way, discover the syllabus that your own people reveal to you; may it not discourage you but only uplift you; and may all of us in our inadequacy in the face of this most amazing call submit ourselves in mind, heart, and soul to this highest of callings.

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