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# **Preaching as Praying:**

## **Complementary Methods for Sacred Eloquence in the Teaching of St. Francis de Sales**

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Who among us can forget the arresting commentary about **the state of preaching** penned by POPE FRANCIS in his first full-length magisterial document? In *Evangelii gaudium* the Holy Father writes: "We know that the faithful attach great importance to it, and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!"<sup>1</sup> While that may elicit a chuckle of assent, it's no off-handed remark. Having been included in an apostolic exhortation, the pope's sentiment — to which he added, "It is sad that this is the case" — is now registered as official Church teaching.

Less memorable, perhaps, but no less stinging was an article published this past summer in the Italian edition of *l'Osservatore Romano*.<sup>2</sup> The article offered an excerpt from a book on "the beauty of Gospel joy at the center of the Christian life." The author, GIULIO CIRIGNANO, claims that the major obstacle impeding the conversion sought by Pope Francis in his plan for the Church "is constituted, in some measure, by the attitude of a good part of the clergy." He describes this mentality as one that is closed off within the horizon "of habitual practices, outmoded language, and repetitive thought without vitality." He then goes on to explain three reasons for this.

First, he claims that a theological and biblical sensibility is scarce among today's clergy, a deficit he attributes to a lack of continuing education. Second, he complains that clergy still operate according to the paradigm of the priest as "solitary protagonist," an image from yesteryear of the pastor as "capo" and master of all things in the parish. Third, and of most relevance for our purpose today, he rails against the prevailing "modality of conceptualizing religious experience" in Counter-Reformation terms of religion rather than faith. For priests, this distinction raises a related concern about preaching, because the modality by which we think generally carries over to the mode in which we speak.

According to Cirignano, while we tend to consider faith and religion to be almost synonymous terms,

in reality, they are profoundly different experiences. ... the God of religion is, more or less, (a) projection of man, of his thoughts, his fears, his needs. It is a hypothetical god. Faith has an entirely different origin. It is the acceptance (or reception) of a humanly unthinkable event. In the experience of faith, it is not, in the first place, man who goes toward God, but the opposite. God renders himself able to be experienced by man, who is invited to accept (or receive) him. Faith is the emptying of man and the fullness of God, in whom man finds his complete dignity.

And Cirignano concludes that "When the priest is marked too much by a religious mentality and too little by a clear faith, then everything becomes more complicated because he risks remaining a victim of many things invented by man concerning God and his will. When it is man talking about God, he does so as man, imagining, hypothesizing, and sometimes replacing Him (God)."

Rest assured, I do not present these criticisms as an indictment of any or all of you here! I know better from my decades of ministering along with you in the diocese of Allentown.

But Pope Francis and his commentators do give us pause to reflect, individually and collectively, on the communicative aspect of our priestly mission. Particularly with regard to our preaching, the question is a valid one. Do we speak more about religion or faith? Are our words from the pulpit more about the human or the divine, more about what people can and should do, or about what God has done and continues to do for us?

The significance of that dichotomy leads to my presentation today, which I am grateful that Msgr. Finelli invited me to give. What I would like to propose is an alternative to Cirignano's lament about how clergy think and speak. He argues that talk of religious experience today suffers from being an outmoded remnant of Counter-Reformation thinking. But what I'd like to suggest to you is that it's actually one of the great Counter-Reformation preachers — ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) — who offers clergy a model of sacred eloquence. In fact, the saint's conception of the preacher's work finds close parallels to the modality of thinking and speaking promoted by the pope with the same name.<sup>3</sup> My thesis, then, is that when we appreciate preaching as praying, through the complementary methodologies expounded by St. Francis de Sales, we will have at our disposal an inspired means for effectively communicating the Good News of religious faith. Undertaking our priestly ministry in this way, neither we nor our people will have to suffer any more from homilies!

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Undoubtedly you all know of **St. Francis de Sales** as a Bishop & Doctor of the Church. His renown comes primarily from his authorship of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, a religious best-seller that has never been out of print since it first appeared in 1609. In the second part of that classic guide to holiness, he spells out a simple approach to prayer that makes meditation do-able for the masses and not just an exercise for contemplative monks and nuns.

What you may know less about is his prominence as a preacher. In the decree by which he was named a Doctor of the Church, Pope Pius IX hailed him in these words:

Through his teaching he handed down the most insightful maxims and was successful in restoring the dignity of sacred eloquence damaged by the evil of the times to the ancient splendor exemplified by the Holy Fathers; learned speakers emerged from this school and abundant benefits redounded to the entire church because of them. And so Francis is regarded by all as both restorer and teacher of sacred eloquence.<sup>4</sup>

In the interest of time, I'll forego the historical arguments that support those papal accolades. Suffice it to say that Francis de Sales was so highly esteemed for his skills as a preacher that he is credited with converting an entire region by his words and was invited to deliver sermons for liturgical seasons in churches and dioceses throughout France.

The saint also theorized about the art of ecclesial oratory in a short treatise called *On the Preacher and Preaching*.<sup>5</sup> He had composed it as a letter in response to a newly-appointed bishop who asked for his advice. In that work we find pearls of wisdom that remain pertinent for those who take to pulpits today. For example, he opines that "The supreme art [of preaching] is to have no art" since "To love well is sufficient for speaking well." He also claims that if we "say marvelous things, but do not say them well, then "they are nothing," whereas if we "say only a little but say it well," then we will have said "very much." And then there's my favorite bit of advice, when he tells the new bishop, "if you can't be good, at least be brief."

From the saint's thoughts about preaching, I'd like to draw a parallel to what he teaches about praying. He, himself, does not propose a connection between the two subjects, as far as I am aware. But in my view the three interconnected steps to both exercises point to an insightful grasp of the process by which people grow spiritually. As such, I believe they offer us a helpful method to form what we do in the preparation and delivery of our own homilies.

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To set the stage for this proposal, let's review St. Francis de Sales's teaching **on meditation**.<sup>6</sup> Following an intentional preparation that includes becoming aware of God's presence and invoking God's assistance, Salesian mental prayer follows a route from considerations through affections to resolutions, all of which are linked to a particular mystery of God revealed to us in the Sacred Scriptures.

For this way of praying, the saint counsels us to use our imagination to concentrate upon a particular person or place or happening in which God acts. We best accomplish this by closely reading a biblical story and picturing ourselves as being present then and there. By focusing our consciousness in this way — by putting ourselves into the scene — we become part of a living story. We see what is happening. We hear the words being spoken. We touch those present. By means of our physical senses, we mentally conjure the reality of the divine mystery before us.

It may seem like we're just making things up. But focusing our attention in this imaginative way serves to re-present the event to us and thus to draw us into an encounter with God. With that mystery in mind, we then allow the Holy Spirit to guide us from thought to feeling to action.

First, by an act of our mind, we give thorough consideration to one or more details about the scene we are picturing. What's really going on there? What is actually being said there? What do we hear in the specific words used? What do we see in how people react to what's happening? What do we actively think – about the event being narrated and about ourselves as re-living that event in the present moment?

But this narrative thinking is no mere intellectual exercise. The purpose of considering the biblical story with such thoughtfulness is to arouse in us a sense of the holy. It seeks to excite an affection in our hearts that inspires us in a sacred way. This second element is pivotal to the process of prayer, for it is in and on the human heart that the Spirit acts most powerfully.

St. Francis de Sales enumerates the possible affections we may excite in this process: "love of God and neighbor, desire for heaven and glory, zeal for the salvation of souls, imitation of the life of our Lord, compassion, awe, joy, fear of God's displeasure, judgment, and hell, hatred of sin, confidence in God's goodness and mercy, and deep sorrow for the sins of our past life."<sup>7</sup> Whatever be the kind of affection that arises through our reflection, the point he emphasizes here is to allow our hearts to be touched by God, to be kindled by the flame of divine inspiration. And being so stirred to feel something for God and about God and with God, we will thereby be moved to act in union with the divine will.

That's the last step, and it, too, is an important one. Contrary to popular thinking about spirituality, devotion, according to St. Francis de Sales, is not simply a thought or a feeling. Holiness is something to be enacted! Thus, Salesian meditation always concludes with a resolution, a decision to do something specific and concrete, preferably something we can accomplish that day. This is how conversion comes alive. We seek an alignment between our human reality and the divine mystery about which we prayed, in a way that directs us to change our lives for the better.

Considerations, affections, and resolutions – these are the three progressions that drive meditation in the Salesian tradition. They arise from, and correspond to, the human faculties of our mind, our heart, and our will. Of the three, the affections of the heart occupy the central

place and play the decisive role in prayer. As we shall now see, a parallel triptych appears in the saint's advice on preaching, where once again the middle term stands as the most important.<sup>8</sup>

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In his letter ***On the Preacher and Preaching***, St. Francis de Sales offers this definition of the homiletic task: "to preach is the publication and declaration of God's will ... to the end of instructing and moving (people) to serve his divine Majesty in this world so as to be saved in the next." To accomplish this, the saint says, "the preacher must bring light to the intellect and warmth to the will."

So, in the first place, preaching entails instruction. Just as mental prayer begins with the mind, in thoughtful consideration of a biblical mystery, so preaching needs to "bring light to the intellect" with regard to the biblical texts that are proclaimed.

Especially in an age when biblical literacy is on the wane — where it exists at all! — we have much to do in helping people to understand God's holy Word. But this does not mean that preaching is primarily exegesis or catechesis.<sup>9</sup> Talk from the pulpit is not meant to be an academic lecture on the fine points of biblical scholarship, or a lesson in religious education filled with theological terminology or the jargon of ecclesiastical discourse. Frankly, either would overwhelm most people in the pews!

Instead, we would do well to adopt the Salesian admonition of speaking briefly but well, and to recognize the limited ability of listeners to pay attention, let alone assimilate what we are saying. As a popular dictum puts it: "the mind can only absorb what the backside can endure"! So, while we do need to get people to think biblically and spiritually, homiletic instruction can be more effective if we focus on a singular aspect of the day's readings. A striking development or dominant image or memorable saying — exploring just one dimension to the sacred story told on this particular day, or expounding on just one insight from this particular passage, can suffice to make a powerful and lasting impact.

Preaching also includes motivation. Just as mental prayer concludes with a resolution on how to act in keeping with divine inspiration, so preaching needs to "bring warmth to the will" by moving hearers to act on God's Word in their lives.

Especially in an age that relegates religion to worship — at least for those who still go to Church! — we have much to do in helping people to bring their faith to bear on all aspects of their lives. But note that in the homiletic progression that Francis de Sales suggests, the call to action is a final step, not a first one. For this saint, preaching does not begin with morality, nor does it speak primarily in exhortations ("let us ...") or demands ("should" or "must") for Christian living.

We find an echo of this in Pope Francis, who said in his first published interview that "the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives," whereas "(t)oday sometimes it seems that the opposite order is prevailing."<sup>10</sup> Of course, both the pope

and the saint are concerned that preachers inspire people to lead good lives. But when we start with that, or focus exclusively on that, our words risk falling on deaf ears, and our homilies end up sounding like a "command" performance rather than a declaration of God's saving deed that inspires and impels the hearer to act accordingly.

For St. Francis de Sales, that impulsion comes from the middle element in the process, the bridge between intellect and will that be the human heart. In the course of mental prayer, this link is forged by the affections, which are stirred by consideration of the biblical mystery and which move the will to a resolute response to that revelation. So, too, in the process of preaching, affective delight at God's Good News connects knowledge of the biblical text with the conversion that follows as the effect of hearing the sacred Word.

Francis de Sales is careful to distinguish what he means by giving "delight" in preaching. Far from his mind is any notion that a preacher should be an entertainer! Nor does he think it occurs when an audience is impressed by the preacher's oratorical flair or rhetorical skill. The delight in one's heart of which the saint speaks comes from appreciating the Word of God itself, just as teaching the intellect and moving the will are dependent on that same Word. This delight is what Pope Francis calls "new joy in the faith" that comes from hearing the preached word, whose message at heart is always "the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the Gospel delight to which St. Francis de Sales alludes is the fruit of persuasion. It comes from the conviction that we are able to live differently or live better in light of what God has revealed in the sacred Scriptures. I say he alludes to that because this seventeenth-century Master generally presumes that effective teaching, on its own, will motivate listeners to lead a good life.

Unfortunately, our experience today is not the same. Our congregations actually need to be persuaded, to hear directly and experience personally the link between God's saving truth and their lived response. Our homiletic task is to make that connection for them and with them. As Pope Francis puts it, "Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings."<sup>12</sup>

That task of connecting God's love and our life is probably more challenging today than in our saint's time. However unwittingly, our culture has inculcated, even in believers, a certain indifference to the appeal of God's Word. With so much information at hand through a variety of technological means, the unconscious tendency for a congregation is to say "so what?" when confronted with a biblical truth newly disclosed to them. With so many demands on everyone's time in the hectic pace of contemporary life, the unspoken question "why should I?" confronts any preacher's attempt to exhort faith-filled behavior.

Consequently, in order to foster a desire for holiness, where today it is not necessarily assumed, the preacher must actually give his congregation "good news." More than providing knowledge

about the text, the preacher needs to convince his hearers as to why biblical truth is really "news" for them in the current situation of their lives. More than exhorting a way of acting on the part of humans, the preacher has to win them over to seeing how God's words and deeds in Sacred Scripture are themselves "good" for them, in a way that no other good in this world can match or surpass.

For St. Francis de Sales, the homily registers as truly Good News when we preach God's Word "*cor ad cor*." In his letter *On the Preacher and Preaching*, he explains this classic phrase:

In a word, it means to speak with affection and devotion, with simplicity and candor, and with confidence, and to be convinced of the doctrine we teach and of what we persuade. ... Our words must set aflame, not by shouts and unrestrained gestures, but by inward affection. They must issue from our heart rather than from our mouth. We must speak well, but heart speaks to heart, (whereas) the lips speak only to men's ears.

To speak "*cor ad cor*" is to be inspired and inspiring. For this to happen, the preacher himself must hear the good news, so that those who listen to him will, in turn, see and hear what is so good about the news that he is proclaiming in the homily. And that brings preaching back, full circle, to praying.

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It has always and rightly been said that effective preaching begins with praying, that the preacher needs first to be a man of prayer. But what I am suggesting today goes beyond that. In my view, Salesian spirituality guides us to treat **preaching as praying**. Why? Because the process that goes on in our hearts when we speak with God in meditation is the same process that we can follow when we speak to people from the pulpit.

In prayer, the Holy Spirit speaks to our own hearts, inspiring them with affections that flow from a consideration of supernatural mystery and that lead to a resolution to act in accord with that divine revelation. In preaching, the effective homilist speaks in similar fashion to the hearts of others, persuading them with the Good News that is expressed in the texts of the Bible and that is enacted in the lives of believers.

The key to both is the middle term – affections in prayer and persuasion in preaching. By connecting the divine Word to human hearts – our own and our people's – we thereby "continue the sanctifying work of Christ" that Pope Francis reminds us is our priestly mission.<sup>13</sup>

When we bring these complementary methodologies together, our homilies will engage people in a way consistent with, and distinctive to, liturgical experience. Our preaching becomes praying as from the pulpit we lead those in the pews through the same spiritual progression that has the power to transform their lives. From head to heart to will, from instruction to persuasion to motivation – that's how divine inspiration can and will happen!

For ourselves, when we preach as we pray, we fulfill the prayer said before we preach, namely, for God to be in our hearts and on our lips that we might proclaim his holy Gospel worthily and well. For our people, preaching as praying becomes their "ordinary means of inspiration," as St. Francis de Sales calls it, for "Inspiration is a heavenly ray which brings into (their) hearts a light full of heat, by which it makes (them) see the good and inflames (them) with a desire to pursue it."<sup>14</sup>

My hope today has been to show you that the complementary methods of praying and preaching proposed by St. Francis de Sales provide a practical and effective response to the criticism of clergy with which I introduced this talk. For the Salesian emphasis on preaching "*cor ad cor*" offers a sure and certain way to communicate an experience of the God of faith, whom all people yearn to encounter, more so than the God of religion, whom so many today have abandoned.

And when we hear and speak the Good News of our merciful God, we will give voice to that positivity<sup>15</sup> and fervor,<sup>16</sup> that warmth and joy<sup>17</sup> about which the Holy Father also speaks in *Evangelii gaudium*. Then the Sunday experience in our parishes will no longer be sad — for the people or the priest!

By preaching as we pray, we can realize what Pope Francis means when he says, "The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God's word, a constant source of renewal and growth."<sup>18</sup> My prayer is that God's grace will make it so for all of you.

+ May God Be Blessed +

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<sup>1</sup> POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (24 November 2013), no. 135.

<sup>2</sup> GIULIO CIRIGNANO, "La conversione chiesta da Papa Francesco: Abitudine non è fedeltà," *l'Osservatore Romano* (22-23 July 2017). The article (available at <http://ilsismografo.blogspot.com/2017/07/vaticano-la-conversione-chiesta-da-papa.html>) is excerpted from a chapter entitled "Il clero dorme" ("The Clergy Sleeps") in *Bellezza del gaudio evangelico. Al centro della vita cristiana* (Livorno: Mauro Pagliai Editore, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See THOMAS F. DAILEY, "From Francis to Francis: How a Saint and a Pope Share a Vision of Preaching," in Joseph Chorpenning, Thomas Dailey, and Daniel Wisniewski (eds.), *Love Is the Perfection of the Mind: Salesian Studies Presented to Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS on the Occasion of His 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Center Valley, PA: Salesian Center for Faith & Culture, 2017), pp. 19-34.

<sup>4</sup> PIUS IX, Apostolic Brief *Dives in Misericordia Deus* (16 November 1877). Translation available at [www.desales.edu/\\_files/teacher/salesian/PDF/PiusIX-Dives.pdf](http://www.desales.edu/_files/teacher/salesian/PDF/PiusIX-Dives.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> FRANCIS DE SALES, *On the Preacher and Preaching*, translated with an introduction and notes by John K. Ryan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964).



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<sup>6</sup> This section draws extensively from chapter 11 of THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., *Live Today Well: St. Francis de Sales's Simple Approach to Holiness* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, translated and edited by John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 2003), part 2, chapter 6, page 78.

<sup>8</sup> What follows draws from THOMAS DAILEY, O.S.F.S., "The Soulful Homily," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (May 2000), pp. 56-60.

<sup>9</sup> CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, *Homiletic Directory* (Vatican City, 2014), no. 6: "The liturgical nature of the homily sheds light on its unique purpose. In considering this purpose, it might be helpful to say what the homily is not. It is not a sermon on an abstract topic; in other words, the Mass is not an occasion for the preacher to address some issue completely unrelated to the liturgical celebration and its readings, or to do violence to the texts provided by the Church by twisting them to fit some preconceived idea. Nor is the homily simply an exercise in biblical exegesis. The people of God have a great hunger to explore the Scriptures, and pastors should provide them with opportunities and resources that enable them to deepen their knowledge of God's Word. However, the Sunday homily is not the occasion for in-depth biblical exegesis: there is not the time to do this well, and more importantly the homilist is called to proclaim how God's word is being fulfilled here and now. Next, the homily is not catechetical instruction, even if catechesis is an important dimension of the homily. As with biblical exegesis, there is not the time to do this properly; furthermore, this would represent a variation on the practice of presenting a discourse at Mass that is not really integral to the liturgical celebration itself. Finally, the time for the homily should not be taken up with the preacher's personal witness. There is no question that people can be deeply moved by personal stories, but the homily should express the faith of the Church, and not simply the preacher's own story."

<sup>10</sup> POPE FRANCIS, "A Big Heart Open to God," interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro, *America* 209/9 (30 September 2013). Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 34: "The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ's message."

<sup>11</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 11: "A renewal of preaching can offer believers, as well as the lukewarm and the non-practising, new joy in the faith and fruitfulness in the work of evangelization. The heart of its message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ."

<sup>12</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 44.

<sup>13</sup> POPE FRANCIS, homily at the ordination of priests (26 April 2015): "May this be the nourishment of the People of God; may your homilies not be boring; may your homilies touch the heart of the people because they come from your heart, because what you're telling them is what you carry in your heart. It is in this way that the Word of God is passed on and thus your teaching will be a joy and support to Christ's faithful; the fragrance of your lives will be your testimony, because examples edify, whereas words without examples are empty, mere ideas that never reach the heart and even do harm: they do no good! May you continue the sanctifying work of Christ."

<sup>14</sup> FRANCIS DE SALES, *Treatise on the Love of God*, book 8, chapter 10; translation by John K. Ryan, volume II, page 82.

<sup>15</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 159: "Another feature of a good homily is that it is positive. It is not so much concerned with pointing out what shouldn't be done, but with suggesting what we can do better. In any case, if it does draw attention to something negative, it will also attempt to point to a positive and attractive value, lest it remain mired in complaints, laments, criticisms and reproaches. Positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity."

<sup>16</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 143: "The challenge of an inculturated preaching consists in proclaiming a synthesis, not ideas or detached values. Where your synthesis is, there lies your heart. The difference between enlightening people with a synthesis and doing so with detached ideas is like the difference between boredom and heartfelt fervour. The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people."

<sup>17</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 140: "This setting, both maternal and ecclesial, in which the dialogue between the Lord and his people takes place, should be encouraged by the closeness of the preacher, the warmth of his tone of voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking, the joy of his gestures."

<sup>18</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 135.