

REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S.

The John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary (Archdiocese of Philadelphia)

Founding Director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture
@ DeSales University (Center Valley, PA)

From Francis to Francis: How a Saint and a Pope Share a Vision of Preaching

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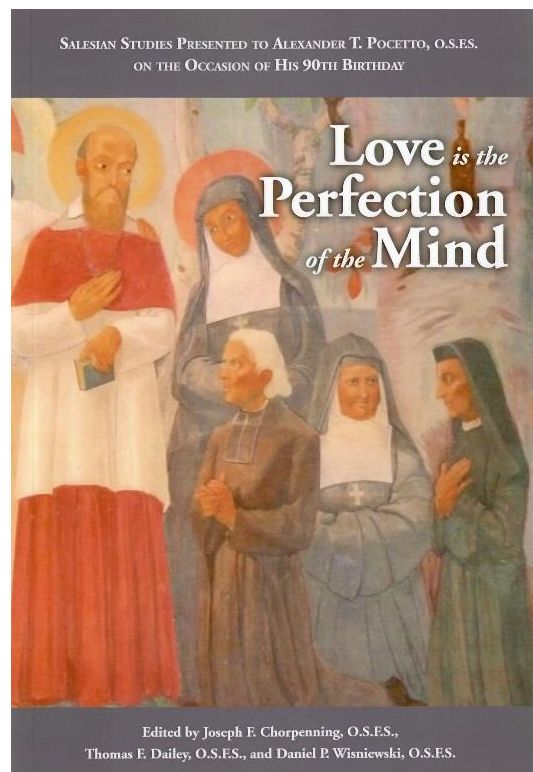
Love Is the Perfection of the Mind:

*Salesian Studies Presented to
Rev. Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS
on the occasion of his 90th birthday*

edited by Joseph Chorpenning, OSFS and
Thomas Dailey, OSFS and Daniel Wisniewski, OSFS

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In my introduction to Live Today Well,¹ I drew parallels between two namesakes: St. Francis de Sales and Pope Francis. This essay expounds on one of those similarities, namely their shared vision of homiletics and their common concern for cultivating the art of preaching.

Although he does not share their name, Fr. Alexander "Sandy" Pocetto has also been admired for the many ways in which he fulfills the herald's mission shared by the saint and the pope. Through his speaking and writing, he, too, proclaims the gospel in a way that teaches, persuades, and motivates people to believe in the love of God.

It is my honor to offer this small tribute to my Oblate confrere, whose life and work have inspired me (and countless others) more than he knows.

Two works, written centuries apart, share a powerful vision. "On the Preacher and Preaching" by St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622)² and "The Joy of the Gospel" (*Evangelii gaudium*) by Pope Francis³ both focus attention on the spiritual and ecclesiological importance of preaching. For the saint, the desire to offer advice on the art of homiletics sprang from pastoral and fraternal charity: "Love cannot keep silent where the interests of one we love are involved" (OPP, 31). For the pope, the decision to address this topic in his first apostolic exhortation issues both from public concerns about this ministry and from his personal conviction that 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" (EG, 135).

The State of Catholic Preaching

Unfortunately, that happy experience is generally lacking in our day. Some report improvements in the state of Catholic preaching, but studies reveal that the poor quality of homilies is a primary reason why people no longer attend Mass.⁴ Conversely, research also shows that when seeking a new place of worship people seek a church where preaching is done well.⁵

But attending to the [p.20] importance of homiletics has not been a staple of Catholic culture. Even after the liturgical changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council, preaching has not been high on any list of congregational concerns. Fr. Richard John Neuhaus pointed out years ago⁶ that this may be due to a specifically Catholic conception of the liturgical minister and the liturgical rites. On the one hand, he says, the *in persona Christi* character of Catholic clergy positions them to be valued not for their oratorical talents but for their personal qualities of being "holy, kindly, and approachable." On the other hand, the Catholic Mass situates the sermon within the broader scope of the Liturgy of the Word, which in turn Mass-goers tend to view as "the preliminary to be endured on the way to the Liturgy of the Eucharist."

Notwithstanding liturgical sensibilities, or a lack thereof, Catholics do suffer from the absence of artful preaching. Among the causes of congregational aggravation are three common

problems identified by Benedict XVI,⁷ which align with three commonplace attitudes among Catholic preachers recently critiqued by John Conley, SJ.⁸

The pope emeritus speaks out against “(g)eneric and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God’s word.” That penchant for abstraction comes in many forms, from the “keeping it light” that Fr. Conley mentions to the dense exegesis that mistakes the liturgical pulpit for an academic podium. The divine word is also obscured when it is “hijacked”⁹ and replaced with contemporary stories that supposedly offer greater relevance or meaningfulness.

Benedict also critiques the “useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message.” Sometimes this happens through efforts to entertain; other times it comes from an attempt to give a personal witness. However unintentional, thinking “it’s all about you” (Conley) diverts the divine word from its intended destination, namely the mind and heart and soul of the hearer.

Finally, the most common complaint about Catholic preaching is that it lacks conviction and passion, which the pope emeritus attributes directly to a failure in prayerful preparation. When other pastoral matters take precedence, or when personal engagement with the sacred text is lacking, the preacher tends to “rely on the Holy Spirit alone” (Conley) to make up for the preparation he has neglected. But listeners know what they do not hear, and they respond accordingly. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops notes, a “steady diet of tepid or poorly prepared homilies is often cited as a cause for discouragement on the part of laity and even leading some to turn away from the Church.”¹⁰

[p.21] In sum, to use the rather pointed expression of a Philippine archbishop, the Catholic Church suffers today from “homily abuse.” This, he says, is an “abuse of the kindness of the people who are forced to listen to long, winding, repetitious, boring, unorganized, unprepared, mumbled homilies.” “In jest but certainly with some truth,” he further notes that people today consider homilies to be “one of the obligatory scourges that they must go through every Sunday.”¹¹

Suffering such a scourge is not peculiar to contemporary church life. Even St. Francis de Sales had to grapple with “abuses” from the pulpit by ministers of his time. In an extensive study on the saint’s preaching,¹² Dom Benedict Mackey cites three common problems experienced in the pulpits of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe.

Some preachers focused on argument and frequently resorted to the (mis)use of philosophical and theological Scholasticism. As Mackey points out, an overreliance on erudition tended to create “a tightened web of abstract deductions (and) subtle argumentations, an inextricable chain of divisions and subdivisions which wearied the attention without clarifying the intelligence” (p. 82).

Other preachers sought to appear learned and tried to infuse their words with the language and logic of the Renaissance. As Mackey describes it, “(i)n place of borrowing from the Bible the majestic allure of style, the burst of colors, the force of thought and the grace of images, the

preacher went to gather flowers on the Parnasse or transported from Olympus some stories which degraded his ministry and dishonored his word” (p. 82).

Then there were those whose grandiose words mistook style for substance. Their affected rhetoric missed the homiletic mark. Mackey cites Charles-Emile Freppel (1827-1891), bishop of Angers and a noted scholar of oratory, to describe this penchant among preachers: “One makes efforts, one marches gropingly, one searches adventurously for the true tone of the pulpit, but some seek it too low and crawl in triviality, (while) others perch themselves too high and are lost in turgidity. No one encounters the right way because all are distanced from the natural” (p. 84).

It would be left to Francis de Sales to initiate the restoration of sacred eloquence in his time and place.¹³ In our day, Pope Francis has called for a reform of the *ars dicendi* of preachers,¹⁴ and his own preaching discloses how this can be done.

The Holy Father begins by acknowledging common complaints about the state of Catholic preaching. In his apostolic exhortation, he minces no words, [p.22] stating at the outset 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!” (EG, 135). His emotive analysis and helpful advice in what follows express his pastoral investment in the ministry of preaching.

Consistent with the problems noted above, Pope Francis critiques an abstract, academic approach to preaching. “A preaching which would be purely moralistic or doctrinaire, or one which turns into a lecture on biblical exegesis, detracts from this heart-to-heart communication which takes place in the homily” (EG, 142). Preferring synthesis to analysis, he points out that the “difference between enlightening people with a synthesis and doing so with detached ideas is like the difference between boredom and heartfelt fervor” (EG, 143).

So, too, the pope repeatedly emphasizes the fault of digressing from the sacred and inspired message of the Word. For him, the homily “cannot be a form of entertainment like those presented in the media,” because the “preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of faith” (EG, 138). Similarly, he says it is not necessary “to talk about the latest news in order to awaken people’s interest” (EG, 153).

Finally, the Holy Father laments the lack of preparedness of many preachers. He boldly discounts the passive reliance on the Holy Spirit that too many preachers adopt as a failsafe. “A preacher who does not prepare,” writes the pope, “is not ‘spiritual’; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received” (EG, 145). He points out how “Some people think they can be good preachers because they know what ought to be said, but they pay no attention to how it should be said, that is, the concrete way of constructing a sermon. They complain when people do not listen to or appreciate them, but perhaps they have never taken the trouble to find the proper way of presenting their message” (EG, 156).

Today, both the saint and the pope can come to the aid of Catholic preachers by offering solidly-grounded advice on the art of homiletics. Though worlds apart in terms of ecclesial contexts, we see that these two preachers share a common ground in terms of preparing, arranging, and delivering a homily. Their instruction on these matters holds a key to the revitalization of this form of ecclesial speech.

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Ars Praedicandi - The Shared Method of a Saint and a Pope

With an astounding willingness to preach “each and every time he was asked, or when he thought it necessary, or useful for the good of souls,”¹⁵ St. Francis de Sales sought to give, and taught others to give, “fatherly sermons.”¹⁶ Pope Francis shares this parental solicitude as he calls upon preachers to have a “maternal attitude,”¹⁷ one that he, himself, displays in the “meditations” given at daily Mass in St. Martha’s, his residential chapel.¹⁸ In both cases, the saint and the pope demonstrate a remarkable convergence around four key questions about the art of preaching.

(1) What does a preacher do?

Instruction in homiletics necessarily acknowledges the multiplicity of dimensions that preaching comprises,¹⁹ as well as the diverse occasions that contextualize a preacher’s work. Nevertheless, every act of preaching proceeds from an understanding of what the preacher intends to do. Here the saint and the pope share a vision of what preaching is meant to be, and their consideration of the preacher’s purpose governs their reflections on how to preach well. After all, as the saint points out, “It is the end that moves the agent to act, for every agent acts both for an end and according to an end” (OPP, 31).

In a definition rare for its comprehensiveness, and steeped in the four causes of Aristotelian philosophy,²⁰ St. Francis de Sales states: “to preach is the publication and declaration of God’s will, made to men by one lawfully commissioned to that task, to the end of instructing and moving them to serve his divine Majesty in this world so as to be saved in the next” (OPP, 67). The link between “instructing” and “moving” will be explained below. At this point, what should be noted is the saint’s emphasis on communicating God’s will as the preacher’s foremost concern.

For Pope Francis, a similar focus figures prominently in his instructions. Citing St. John Paul II, the current pope highlights the importance of proclaiming the divine will and our response to it. “It is worth remembering that ‘the liturgical proclamation of the word of God, especially in the eucharistic assembly, is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his people, a dialogue in which the great deeds of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the covenant are continually restated’” (EG, 137). Moreover, like St. Francis de Sales, Pope Francis points out that this proclamation is to be both instructional and motivational, “a proclamation that concentrates [p.24] on the essential, the necessary, which is also what is most stirring and attractive and makes the heart burn, as (it did) for the disciples in Emmaus.”²¹

Both the saint and the pope understand, and emphasize, that the focus of preaching is not the preacher’s word, but God’s. Its purpose is not, primarily, to exhort what people should do, but to proclaim what God has done for them. Attending to this divine intentionality creates the proper perspective for preaching, for the task of the homilist is to facilitate God’s speaking to believers through God’s own Word. Rightly understanding this sacred duty as what is to be cultivated in the pulpit, the preacher can set about the task of preparing what he is to do.

(2) How should the preacher prepare?

For both the saint and the pope, preparation is critical to effective preaching; in the words of the former, “there is nothing that is more helpful to a preacher, makes his preaching more profitable, and is so pleasing to his hearers” (OPP, 21). In a remarkable similarity of instruction, both insist that this preparation extends far beyond the actual drafting of a homily to encompass the entire spiritual character of the preacher. Although they use different terminology, both Francis’s consider four parallel aspects to be critical in a preacher’s preparation, each of which is elucidated in greater detail in the pope’s apostolic exhortation:

for ST. FRANCIS DE SALES ²²	for POPE FRANCIS (EG, 146-155)
• habitual recollection	• reverence for the truth
• intimate commerce with God	• personalizing the word
• study & meditation on the sacred Writings	• spiritual reading
• the spirit of observation	• an ear to the people

Known for his conscious awareness of God’s never-ending presence, St. Francis de Sales revered the all-inclusive power of Sacred Scripture, writing “There is sufficient matter in Scripture for all of that (which must be preached); nothing further is needed” (OPP, 37). As Pope Francis explains, citing Blessed Paul VI, a preacher’s reverence is an “attitude of humble and awe-filled veneration” that “recognizes that the word is always beyond us, that ‘we are neither its master or owners, but its guardians, heralds and servants’” (EG, 146). From this reverential attitude comes the need to “understand the meaning of the words we read” and [p.25] to recognize “what the author primarily wanted to communicate ... not only the author’s ideas but the effect which he wanted to produce” (EG, 147). This, for the pope, is “the intrinsic power of the text which has been proclaimed,” and a preacher’s attention to it helps prevent misguided and/or ineffective interpretations (EG, 148).

Recognition of this power of Sacred Scripture invites a continual colloquy with God in prayer. St. Francis de Sales considers prayer a necessity for anyone who seeks holiness; in his classic *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he claims for it a unique power: “Since prayer places our intellect in the brilliance of God’s light and exposes our will to the warmth of his heavenly love, nothing else so effectively purifies our intellect of ignorance and our will of depraved affections.” He especially counsels a mental or meditative form of prayer that centers on the Gospel accounts of

the words and deeds of the Lord, where “You will learn his ways and form your actions after the pattern of his.”²³

So, too, Pope Francis desires that preachers “personalize” the Word of God in their own lives and “be the first to hear the word” which they are to preach. Confidently does he state that “The Sunday readings will resonate in all their brilliance in the hearts of the faithful if they have first done so in the heart of their pastor” (EG, 149). Because today’s congregants “thirst for authenticity,” and prefer listening to living witnesses, preachers “need to let (themselves) be penetrated by that word which will also penetrate others, for it is a living and active word” (EG, 150). Still, that Word is a two-edged sword. Thus, while the pope notes that what is essential “is that the preacher be certain that God loves him, that Jesus Christ has saved him and that his love always has the last word,” he also adds that “if he (the preacher) does not take time to hear God’s word with an open heart, if he does not allow it to touch his life, to challenge him, to impel him, and if he does not devote time to pray with that word, then he will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow impostor” (EG, 151).

Beyond the importance of personal prayer, both the saint and the pope emphasize the need for study and learning. St. Francis de Sales was, himself, an immensely learned writer, whose erudition no doubt contributed to the wisdom of his preaching.²⁴ The biblical texts which he so often cites permeated his formation as a preacher; so steeped was he in God’s Word that one could claim he “had so assimilated the Sacred Bible that he possessed its language, its content, and its phrases in such a way that he used them as we do the words of our mother tongue.”²⁵

[p.26] For an appreciation of Sacred Scripture that goes beyond academic learning, Pope Francis recommends the practice of *lectio divina*.²⁶ “This prayerful reading of the Bible is not something separate from the study undertaken by the preacher to ascertain the central message of the text; on the contrary, it should begin with that study and then go on to discern how that same message speaks to his own life” (EG, 152). In this way, he writes, the preacher allows God’s word to enlighten and renew himself before he passes this divine inspiration on to those to whom he speaks.

Finally, both the saint and the pope emphasize the need for a preacher to prepare his words by also being attentive to the ones to whom he speaks. St. Francis de Sales readily demonstrated this cognizance. Vincent Kerns points to his “unusual sympathy born of true understanding” and his faculty of “putting himself into touch with his audience ... according to the particular needs, dispositions, social habits and conditions of his listeners.”²⁷

Pope Francis describes this aspect of preparation as extending “an ear to the people.” For the Holy Father, preaching is a pastoral task and an exercise in evangelical discernment that attends, necessarily, to both God’s message and the needs of the faithful. The preacher, he writes, “needs to be able to link the message of a biblical text to a human situation, to an experience which cries out for the light of God’s word” (EG, 154). This act of situating the preached word calls for, and emanates from, a “broad and profound sensitivity to what really affects other people’s lives.” In

this way, as the pope wittily suggests, the preacher “should never respond to questions that nobody asks” (EG, 155).

By adopting these approaches – a reverential attitude, personalized prayer, spiritual study, and an attentiveness to the lived realities of one’s congregation – a preacher in the school of the two Francis’s will find himself in an incessant state of preparation for his sacred task. And with that preparedness, he is well positioned to put his ideas in working order.

(3) How should the preacher arrange the content?

Each preacher undoubtedly has his own specific way of organizing his thoughts and words, but both the saint and the pope offer general advice on what elements should be included in any homily. Interestingly, they also concur on the ordering of these elements. Having been steeped in rhetoric through their Jesuit education, both suggest three fundamental actions that take place in a good homily.

For St. Francis de Sales, those three elements derive from his understanding that “the preacher must bring light to the intellect and warmth to the will” [p.27] (OPP, 32). In his letter on the subject, the saint also speaks of the necessity of delighting the congregation, not in the sense of entertaining them, but in terms of linking the instructional and motivational aspects of the homily: “What soul is so unfeeling that it does not take great pleasure from learning the path to heaven in so good and holy a way, and does not feel the greatest consolation in love of God?” (OPP, 32-33). Thus, we might chart the Salesian triad for good preaching as a matter of instructing, persuading, and moving.²⁸

With respect to bringing light to the intellect, St. Francis de Sales calls for more than “a general intention of teaching God’s ways” and says a preacher “ought to aim at some particular point in each sermon.”²⁹ What that point may be depends on the biblical text in question, and in his letter on the subject he explains how to understand and communicate it through the multiple “senses” of Scripture (i.e., literal, allegorical, anagogical, and tropological).³⁰ He also explains what else may be incorporated in making one’s point (e.g., nature, history, the lives of the saints) and how to go about making that point (e.g., appealing to reason or using illustrations and comparisons). At the same time, he does not counsel trying to cover everything about a biblical text comprehensively!³¹

Having taught his hearers, the preacher must still convince them. While one might assume that effective teaching would, on its own, motivate listeners to live a good life, the reality is that congregations today need a direct reference to the persuasive element that connects the light of the intellect to the warmth of the will. Given society’s information overload, those hearing homilies may unconsciously ask “so what?” when confronted with biblical truths proclaimed in their midst, and any preacher who seeks to inculcate behaviors associated with discipleship is likely to be met with an unspoken “why should I?” For this reason, after teaching the congregation about the sacred Word, the preacher in the Salesian tradition must actually *give* them the Good News. This is the element of “persuasion” that goes beyond mere knowledge of the biblical texts to convince people

that the sacred truth they hear in the liturgical readings is truly news for them in the current and specific situation of their lives.

Then, *after* winning them over to how God's words and deeds in Sacred Scripture are actually good for them in a way that surpasses all other goods, the preacher can "move" them with exhortations to act accordingly. To this end, St. Francis de Sales often counsels the promotion of virtues as a concrete means by which the affective love experienced in the hearing of the Good News can come to life in an effective love that characterizes the daily existence of those who [p.28] hear the Word proclaimed and preached, as it has done, for example, in the lives of saints.

Instructing-persuading-moving is likewise the conceptual paradigm taught by Pope Francis, though he uses different terminology and occasionally reverses the arrangement of the first two elements. In his interviews about preaching, the pope also offers several helpful images to elucidate how all three components work together.

First, the pope notes that "(a) beautiful homily, a genuine sermon must begin with the first proclamation, with the proclamation of salvation. There is nothing more solid, deep and sure than this proclamation. Then you have to do catechesis. Then you can draw even a moral consequence. But the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives."³² Elsewhere, he describes this proclamation as an "announcement," an angel-like action that distinguishes preaching from giving a conference.³³

Then for the pope comes catechesis. While this involves teaching or instruction, the manner in which he promotes this element emphasizes its persuasive dimensions. Metaphorically, he speaks of acting as a "sower" of desire that will lead listeners to advance on their spiritual journey. Having reaped the value of the Word in his own heart, and having communicated that knowledge to his audience, the effective preacher "shows the directions in which it can be put into practice, and at the same time he sows a desire, a new hope, if he finds fertile ground that is suitable for the growth of the seeds."³⁴ The preacher does this, in the pope's second image, by adopting a maternal approach that "nourishes with affection, creating an adequate communicative and affective environment so that the Lord may dialogue with his people."³⁵ In this motherly conversation (EG 139-141), the preacher persuades with language that evokes encouragement or enthusiasm and with words that set hearts on fire (EG 142-144). By the warmth in his words, the preacher shares *the* Word effectively; about this persuasive power, Pope Francis writes: "Far from dealing with abstract truths or cold syllogisms, it communicates the beauty of the images used by the Lord to encourage the practise of good. The memory of the faithful, like that of Mary, should overflow with the wondrous things done by God. Their hearts, growing in hope from the joyful and practical exercise of the love which they have received, will sense that each word of Scripture is a gift before it is a demand" (EG 142).³⁶

[p.29] Sharing the Scriptural gift in this loving way then leads to a consideration of how the faithful might live it out in their lives, and this call to goodness constitutes the third element in the pope's triadic arrangement. For the Holy Father, the moral or behavioral consequences of what has been proclaimed stem from the dialogue initiated by a loving God. As for the saint so for the pope, this

exhortative element of the homily follows upon the instructional and motivational elements. Preachers who instead begin with, or focus primarily on, how people are to live their faith miss the mark; our discipleship is not a condition of faith but follows from, and is a response to, the truth and beauty that the preached Word intends to communicate. In this respect, “Christian identity, as the baptismal embrace which the Father gave us when we were little ones, makes us desire, as prodigal children ... yet another embrace, that of the merciful Father who awaits us in glory. Helping our people to feel that they live in the midst of these two embraces is the difficult but beautiful task of one who preaches the Gospel” (EG 144).

Whether one arranges his homily according to the rhetorical strategy of St. Francis de Sales (instruct-persuade-move) or the dialogic meditation of Pope Francis (truth-beauty-goodness), both methods of ordering one’s thoughts and words highlight the middle term. In other words, preaching that teaches truth may offer knowledge to one’s mind. And preaching that exhorts goodness may provide impetus for one’s action. But only preaching that shares the beauty and warmth of the “good news” will move the heart and soul of listeners to embrace, and be formed by, the salvation offered to them in Jesus Christ.³⁷

(4) How should the preacher deliver his words?

While proper arrangement is critical to the preparation of a homily, skilled delivery is also essential to communicating effectively. Here, again, the saint and the pope share similar views on how a preacher should preach, particularly in terms of style, language, and length.

Unlike the forced affectation for which preachers in his day were known, St. Francis de Sales championed a more Stoic style. He counseled the use of language that is “clear, simple, and natural, without display of Greek, Hebrew, novel, or fancy words” and without use of “prefatory and ornamental phrases.” He suggested, more generally, that preaching be “spontaneous, dignified, courageous, natural, sturdy, devout, serious, and a little slow” – all in contrast to the pedantic attitudes, gestures, and language adopted by his contemporaries. Those who heard the saint preach testified to how he followed his own sound advice: [p.30] “Say marvelous things, but do not say them well, and they are nothing. Say only a little but say it well, and it is very much” (OPP, 63-65).³⁸

One speaks well, according to the saint, when one speaks heart-to-heart; after all, he writes, “the lips speak only to men’s ears.” Preaching from the heart means being “convinced of the doctrine we teach and of what we persuade.” It becomes heartfelt when it is delivered “with affection and devotion, with simplicity and candor, and with confidence” (OPP, 63-64). This is a manner of preaching which, eschewing any sort of controversy or confrontation, “issues from love of neighbor rather than from indignation at them” (OPP, 66).³⁹ As he wrote at the outset of his letter: “To preach well it is sufficient to love well” (OPP, 16).

That sufficiency leads St. Francis de Sales to posit that speaking well does not require speaking at great length! While he does counsel preaching often – “there is need only for this to become a master” (OPP, 72) – nevertheless he claims it “is always best that our preaching be short rather than long” (OPP, 66). According to Camus, the saint recounts having learned from

experience that “the more you say, the less people will remember it; and the less you say, the more they will profit.” From this, he concludes with an experiential judgment shared by congregants still today: “Indifferent preachers are bearable if they are brief, but even good preachers become intolerable when they are lengthy. Depend upon it there is no more detestable quality a preacher can possess than tediousness.”⁴⁰

For his part, Pope Francis shares many of the same concerns regarding homiletic delivery. Beyond reproofing tedium,⁴¹ he takes it a step further by claiming that attentiveness to “the way we preach is likewise a profoundly spiritual concern,” for it entails both love of God, in the preacher’s best use of his God-given talents, and love of neighbor, in the preacher’s giving people the best he can do (EG, 156).

With the saint, the pope emphasizes the need for a restrained style, something he clearly demonstrates in his morning meditations. This means, first of all, that preachers should use simple language, not academic jargon or specialized words “which are not part of the ordinary language of their hearers.” A simple style also calls for clarity of expression so that the homily does not “end up being incomprehensible because it is disorganized, lacks logical progression or tries to deal with too many things at one time” (EG, 158). To bring about this simplicity and clarity, Pope Francis strongly recommends that preachers employ imagery: “An attractive image makes the message seem familiar, close to home, practical and related to everyday life,” while also helping people to “savour the message, awaken a desire, and move the will towards the Gospel” (EG, 157).

[p.31] The pope’s own simple, sometimes homespun, and always thought-provoking images facilitate the heartfelt preaching of which the saint spoke. So, too, do his messages. While preachers may sometimes need to be quite strong with their words – as is the Holy Father in his accusations or warnings⁴² – nevertheless the pope counsels preachers always to speak positively, “not so much concerned with pointing out what shouldn’t be done, but with suggesting what we can do better” (EG, 159). As Antonio Spadaro points out, the pope’s own preaching reveals how one can be “proactive, indicating a direction and shaping the future ... not by concealing problems but rather by revealing them, always showing the road ahead.”⁴³ To do this well, the pope instructs preachers always to exhort, never to command.

Finally, Pope Francis also recommends brevity in homiletic discourse. He instructs preachers to use measured words in a brief talk that avoids “taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture” (EG, 138). He models this in his morning meditations, which typically are “focused on only one point, one topic: in order to have that clarity which facilitates comprehension.”⁴⁴ He also models the importance of speaking to persons, rather than reading to them.⁴⁵

Whether in terms of language, style, length, or other features of the delivery of a homily, St. Francis de Sales and Pope Francis both agree that paying attention to how one speaks is of great importance for effective preaching. In this, as in all their shared instruction, the two Francis’s are of one mind and one voice.

Two Masters, One Vision

Despite being separated by four centuries, St. Francis de Sales and Pope Francis share an uncanny semblance of speech and of example when it comes to the art of preaching. Their instructions, summarized in this essay, disclose a common concern for the state of Catholic preaching, as well as a common instruction to bring about more adept homiletics.

One might surmise that their commonalities with regard to preaching stem from a shared formation in spirituality – both Jesuit and Salesian⁴⁶ – which the saint experienced during his studies in Paris and Padua,⁴⁷ and the pope learned while attending a Salesian school in Argentina.⁴⁸ This may well be so and deserves further investigation. For now, what we know for sure is that both Francis's – the saint and the pope – can be considered masters of sacred eloquence, both in their [p.32] own preaching and also through the teaching they offer to all who are called to share the Word of God from the pulpit today.

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¹ THOMAS DAILEY, *Live Today Well: St. Francis de Sales's Simple Approach to Holiness* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2015), 3-6.

² FRANCIS DE SALES, *On the Preacher and Preaching*, Trans. John K. Ryan (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1964). This lengthy letter offers fraternal advice “on the right ways to preach” to Andre Frémyot, the brother of St. Jane Frances de Chantal, on the occasion of his taking up residence as the archbishop of Bourges. Hereafter cited in-text as OPP.

³ POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, 24 November 2013. Online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. Hereafter cited in-text as EG.

⁴ WILLIAM J. BYRON and CHARLES ZECH, “Why They Left: Exit interviews shed light on empty pews,” *America* 206/14 (30 April 2012). Online at www.americamagazine.org/issue/5138/article/why-they-left.

⁵ PEW Research Center, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” 23 August 2016. Online at www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/1-the-search-for-a-new-congregation/.

⁶ RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS, “Low Expectations and Catholic Preaching,” *First Things* (April 2004): 62-64.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, 30 September 2010, no. 59. Online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html.

⁸ JOHN J. CONLEY, S.J., “How not to preach,” *America* 212/3 (2 February 2015). Online at www.americamagazine.org/issue/how-not-preach.

⁹ JAMES FIELD, “Don't hijack the homily,” *U.S. Catholic* (May 2007): 24-26.

¹⁰ *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2012), 2.

¹¹ Archbishop Socrates Villegas, in a homily to priests on Holy Thursday (2 April 2015), as reported online at www.rappler.com/nation/88758-bishop-warning-homily-abuse.

¹² DOM BENEDICT MACKAY, *St. Francis de Sales as Preacher: A Study*, trans. Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S. (Bangalore, India: Indian Institute for Spirituality, 1992).

¹³ As noted in VINCENT KERNS, *Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching* (Visakhapatnam, India: S.F.S. Printing, 1976), 15, the document from Pope Pius IX conferring on St. Francis de Sales the title of Doctor of the Church includes this affirmation: “He gave the wisest precepts and, after the example of the holy Fathers, caused the dignity of sacred eloquence, which had become lowered in the lapse of time, to be restored to its ancient splendor. From his school came those most eloquent orators who produced such abundant fruit throughout the whole Church. He was held by all, therefore, to be the restorer and master of sacred eloquence.”

¹⁴ JORGE MARIO BERGOGLIO, S.J., “*L'Ars Celebrandi*,” online at www.vicariatusurbis.org/SITO/L'ars%20celebrandi.pdf. In this presentation for the 2005 plenary assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the future Pope Francis argued specifically for the publication of a text that would elucidate the pastoral and spiritual approaches to be assumed by the celebrant of Sunday Masses, including commentary on how the priest speaks in pronouncing the prescribed texts and in the “free formulation” of the homily.

¹⁵ E.-J. LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, the Thinker, His Influence*, trans. Rory O’Sullivan, O.S.F.S. (Bangalore, India: S.F.S. Publications, 1987), II, 58. Kerns, *Pulpit and Pew*, claims: “In Paris, alone, one year, he preached 365 sermons” (p. 1). See also J. P. CAMUS, *The Spirit of S. Francis [p.33] de Sales, Bishop and Prince of Geneva*, trans. H.L. Sidney Lear (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921), 279-280, who recounts the story of how the saint’s father complained that he preached so frequently that no one thought much of him, to which the saint responded, “Believe me, we don’t preach half enough” and added, “*nunquam satis dicitur quod nunquam satis discitur*” (what is never repeated enough is never learned enough).

¹⁶ LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales*, II, 54-56: “He was therefore a father to his people and his ideal was to speak as a father to his sons; his goal was ‘the fatherly sermon’.” Cf. KERNS, *Pulpit and Pew*, 15, citing another letter from the saint in which he gives advice on the “fatherly sermon of a bishop.”

¹⁷ JORGE MARIO BERGOGLIO/PAPA FRANCESCO, *Nei tuoi occhi é la mia parola: Omelie e Discorsi di Buenos Aires 1999-2013*, introduzione e cura di Antonio Spadaro, S.I. (Milano: Rizzoli, 2016), xxvi.

¹⁸ The brief homilies given by Pope Francis, summaries of which are published by Vatican Radio, have become a new source of papal teaching but are categorized in a way different from the scripted homilies he proclaims on public occasions. The former Vatican spokesperson, Fr. Federico Lombardi, has explained that these “meditations” differ from official papal teachings in as much they are given spontaneously, rather than from prepared texts, and are intended to communicate with more familiarity than formality. In *Nei tuoi occhi*, xxiii, Fr. Spadaro describes them as “inspired inflection” (*estroflessa*) – not the elaboration or explanation of concepts, but a spoken word that embraces the pope’s own humanity together with that of his audience, thereby creating a language of real interlocution. A collection of these homilies, edited and introduced by Fr. Spadaro, has been published in English as POPE FRANCIS, *Encountering Truth: Meeting God in the Everyday*, trans. Matthew Sherry (New York: Image, 2015).

¹⁹ See EDWARD FOLEY (ed.), *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), which includes chapters on the biblical, doctrinal/catechetical, mystagogical, and liturgical/sacramental genres of preaching.

²⁰ RYAN, *On the Preacher and Preaching*, 101-02, n. 5: “This definition sums up the essential character of preaching as St. Francis de Sales sees it.... It is a real definition, a statement of the essence of the thing in question. It gives the essential, objective nature of preaching in terms of its four causes. The material cause is God’s will; the formal cause its public declaration; the efficient cause, one sent to preach. It will be noted that the definition gives both the proximate and the remote final cause of preaching, the latter being the salvation of the hearer.”

²¹ *Encountering Truth*, xx.

²² MACKAY, *A Study*, 16.

²³ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Images Books, 2003), pt. II, chap.1, p. 70.

²⁴ RYAN, *On the Preacher and Preaching*, 14: “Because of his thorough education in philosophy, theology, law, and classical literature, and because of native genius, capacity for study, and industry, his knowledge is wide and deep but never obtrusive or used without need.”

²⁵ L. GROUPI, “Formazione teologica di S. Francesco di Sales,” estratto dalla tesi di laurea, *La formazione di San Francesco di Sales al suo magistero ecclesiastico* (Roma: n.p., 1951), 87.

²⁶ In four stages – *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio* – this method of engaging with Sacred Scripture incorporates (1) a *reflective reading* of a biblical text, (2) a *meditative listening* to what the Holy Spirit is saying through the text, (3) a *prayerful conversation* with God in response to the Spirit’s inspiration, and (4) a *silent appreciation* of God’s living word being communicated in the text.

²⁷ KERNS, *Pulpit and Pew*, 5, 8 (citing Amedee de Margerie).

²⁸ One could suggest a close comparison here with what St. Francis de Sales teaches about mental prayer (“meditation”) in the second part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, where he explains the three major movements as considerations of a biblical scene, affections inspired in the heart, and resolutions to act in ways that make one’s prayer effective.

²⁹ CAMUS, *The Spirit of S. Francis de Sales*, 283.

³⁰ PAULINE VIVIANO offers a helpful explanation of these medieval concepts online at www.usccb.org/bible/national-bible-week/upload/viviano-senses-scripture.pdf

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³¹ *On the Preacher and Preaching*, 56: “When we discuss a gospel containing many statements, it is necessary to consider those on which we wish to dwell, see what virtues they treat, speak briefly about them in the way I have stated for a single text, and run through and paraphrase the others.”

³² *Encountering Truth*, xx.

³³ *Nei tuoi occhi*, viii: “The homily is the announcement of the Word of God, the conference is the explanation of the Word of God. The homily is the announcement, it is to do (as) the angel. The conference is to do (as) the doctor/professor.”

³⁴ *Encountering Truth*, xxi.

³⁵ *Encountering Truth*, xxiii.

³⁶ Cf. his homily at a Mass with priestly ordinations (26 April 2015), online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150426_omelia-ordinazioni-sacerdotali.html: “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!”

³⁷ See THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., “The Soulful Homily,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (May 2000): 56-60.

³⁸ KERNS, *Pulpit and Pew*, 11, quotes at length the laudatory estimation regarding the saint’s admirable judgment, judicious language, beautiful thoughts, and poised delivery given in testimony by the famed grammarian, Vaugelas.

³⁹ Cf. CAMUS, *The Spirit of S. Francis de Sales*, 297, on the fault of “scolding the absent.”

⁴⁰ CAMUS, *The Spirit of S. Francis de Sales*, 295.

⁴¹ *Evangelii gaudium*, 140: “Even if the homily at times may be somewhat tedious, if this maternal and ecclesial spirit is present, it will always bear fruit, just as the tedious counsels of a mother bear fruit, in due time, in the hearts of her children.”

⁴² The pope admits as much in *Nei Tuoi Occhi*, 15: “Yes, it’s true . . . sometimes they (his words) hit with a stick. Sometimes it is necessary to hit with a stick, sometimes to provoke, sometimes the one and the other at the same time.”

⁴³ *Encountering Truth*, xxix.

⁴⁴ *Encountering Truth*, xxix.

⁴⁵ In *Nei tuoi occhi*, vii, the pope recounts having become convinced, ever since his seminary days, “that nothing should come between the preacher and the people of God.” He says “what I try to do still today is look into the eyes of the people. Even in St. Peter’s Square.”

⁴⁶ On this shared lineage, see FRANÇOIS CHARMONT, *Ignatius of Loyola and Francis de Sales: Two Masters, One Spirituality*, trans. Sister M. Renelle (St. Louis: Herder, 1966).

⁴⁷ For a summary of the Jesuit influences on St. Francis de Sales, see EUNAN McDONNELL, *The Concept of Freedom in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales* (Peter Lang, 2009), 28-30.

⁴⁸ See the personal recollection about his education written by Jorge Mario Bergoglio on 20 October 1990 and published by the ZENIT News Agency on 4 February 2014, online at <https://zenit.org/articles/father-bergoglio-s-1990-recollection-of-his-salesian-education>.
