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“Preaching Politics from the Pulpit”

by

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Introduction – a dangerous topic!

(1) Preaching is Politics ... of a different kind.

- Campaigns reflect a partyocracy.
- Faith obliges us to help shape society.

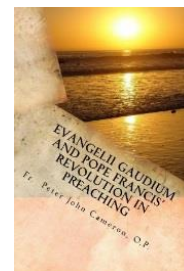
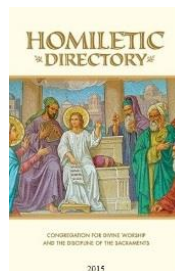
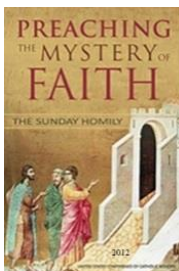
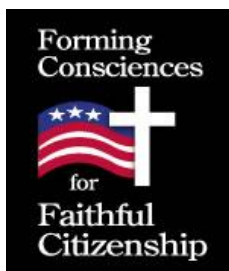
(2) Preaching is Evangelization ... in a different way.

- Catechesis is an important dimension of the homily.
- The homily is not catechetical instruction.

(3) Preaching is Worship ... and knowing that makes all the difference.

- Proclamation precedes exhortation.
- God’s Word remains paramount.

Conclusion – suggested virtues for the preacher



INTRODUCTION:

As men in formation for the priesthood, one of the great things you will learn, hopefully, is the art of sacred eloquence. But in this realm, as a great Doctor of the Church, ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, once wrote, "the supreme art is to have no art," for "one becomes a preacher by preaching" (SFDS, "On the Preacher and Preaching").

For you who will soon be ordained deacons or priests, you will be preaching during the time of this year's electoral campaigns. So, Msgr. Baker asked me to share my thoughts with you on the topic of "Preaching Politics from the Pulpit." That's actually a pretty simple task. Here's my advice: DON'T! ... good night ☺

Well, of course, your Rector is not going to let me off with that easily. And, since I drove three hours to speak with you, and you've sacrificed your afternoon to listen to me speak, I suppose I should say something more than just one word of advice!

The more I thought about what to say here, the more I realized this is not such an easy task. The topic leaves a lot of room for debate because the terms are not as clear as they may seem. Yes, "the pulpit" is obvious, but "politics" and "preaching" may not be, which makes linking them a challenge.

So, what I'd like to do this afternoon is offer you three propositions, each with a "difference" for you to consider. My three statements are noted on the outline you received. (By the way, I always like to give an outline – not just so that you can follow along but, more importantly, so that you know when I'm getting close to the end!) Now, the outline may seem ambiguous, if not downright contradictory. So please bear with me, and at the end you can decide whether I've resolved the dilemmas. Then we can discuss this topic however you'd like.

PROPOSITION #1: Preaching is Politics ... *but of a different kind.*

On the outline, you'll see that I specify that this is a "dangerous" topic. That's because the term "politics" has taken on the dint of something disdainful, a messy mud-slinging that people find almost despicable. The term conjures up a hardened contrast of opposing viewpoints, with a ruthless competition for votes that leads to vociferous rancor across the aisles; in turn, this constant conflict creates inertia, at worst, or requires compromise, at best. All too often, politics seems mostly to pander to base emotions or self-interests, and the current presidential campaigns have done little to change that picture.

Seen in this way, politics has become politicking, an exercise in "party-ocracy" rather than an expression of democracy. That which should be an "elevated form of charity" in its "use of legitimate power for the attainment of the common good" has devolved into decadent discord (Pope Francis). Service to society has been supplanted by the egoism of the electorate.

Because politics is so contested, rules need to be in place to govern the contests fairly. And one such rule is a regulation of the Internal Revenue Service, amended in 1954, which states that tax-exempt entities – and this includes religious organizations and all those who represent them – "are prohibited from

participating or intervening, directly or indirectly, in a political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for elective public office" (PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012).

Some groups, mostly our Protestant brothers and sisters in the pulpit, have advocated opposition to this law through the Pulpit Freedom Sunday initiative, but it doesn't seem to have gained much traction. Others, like Catholic Answers, have challenged the constitutionality of that regulation in court, but without SUCCESS (PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012).

So, as it stands the IRS regulation makes it pretty clear that we should not preach politics from the pulpit, unless, that is, you want to jeopardize the tax-exempt status of your diocese! It's true that there have been no prosecuted infractions of this rule in sixty years, at least not with preachers as defendants. But that's not to say there never will be, especially if you consider the government's recent willingness to beat up on the Little Sisters of the Poor! So, do you really want to be the test case? Frankly, it's not worth the risk, and it's far above your pay-grade (and mine!).

Still, there is a bit of an escape clause, at least according to what our statewide Catholic conferences think. As we in Pennsylvania were told, "Church officials and employees are permitted ... to instruct the faithful about the Church's teaching on moral and social issues and (to) identify such issues as important current political topics." But an added proviso notes that "Care must be taken ... not to identify any particular candidate's views as preferable on such issues" (from the "Political Activities Guidelines for Catholic Institutions in PA" by the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference).

More than a legal technicality, that commentary toes the line between an endorsement and an instruction. While we may not offer the former, the latter is, in fact, an obligation of the Church, as the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops explains well in the document called *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (hereafter FCFC). We are called "to participate in shaping the moral character of society" as a requirement of our faith (FCFC, no. 9). We, clergy, have the responsibility to do this by helping Catholics form their consciences correctly, by guiding them with regard to the moral dimensions of public decisions, and by encouraging them to carry out their responsibilities in public life (FCFC, no. 15).

In other words, our preaching is political – all the time! – because it's meant to shine the light of God's holy Word on the very real struggles and challenges that people face in this world (FCFC, no. 1). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls this the "missionary" task of preaching, because preaching is meant to have an impact on society (Cameron, pp. 8-9). As the Holy Father reminds us, we are set apart to give people that infinite love which alone can cure their infinite sadness (Cameron, p. 6).

So, the question before us this evening is how best to do that from the pulpit during a campaign season. On the one hand, we must never tell people whom to vote for (or not vote for), not just because it's illegal to do so but because it risks infringing on the freedom of conscience of those to whom we preach. On the other hand, and as a means to inform those consciences, we can and should address the moral issues that affect their electoral choices ... which brings us to my second proposition.

PROPOSITION #2: Preaching is Evangelization ... *but on a different level.*

That our parishioners, in general, lack sufficient understanding of the moral and social teachings of the Church is, by now, an understatement. Remember, though, that it also serves as an indictment ... their lack of knowledge is our collective failure. That's why we are constantly exhorted to engage in a "new" evangelization, so that all our efforts at educating the faithful – our methods, our ardor, and our expressions – must continually be renewed.

One of those methods, the one that is our focus here, is preaching. As the USCCB reminds us in their 2012 document called *Preaching the Mystery of the Faith*, "when we have the privilege of preaching the homily ... we also have an invaluable opportunity to advance the Church's catechetical ministry" (p. 21). These days, we might take advantage of that opportunity by highlighting the four pillars of Catholic Social Teaching, namely, the dignity of the human person, subsidiarity, the common good, and solidarity – each of which is explained, in detail and with policy implications, in the document on *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. Catechetical preaching in a campaign season can specifically engage the "life" issues that are so often points of contention in political discourse: abortion, poverty, care of the earth, and assisted suicide (cf. Bishop McElroy's article on "The Greatness of a Nation," in *America* magazine, 2/15/16).

Common to these multiple social concerns is the realization, not always or clearly appreciated, that the right to life – from conception to natural death – is fundamental and primordial; it comes first because it is the foundation to any and all other rights. This is why the Bishops say a "consistent ethic of life" serves as the anchor with which to secure a just society (cf. FCFC, no. 40).

But here my proposition runs into a snag. The recent *Homiletic Directory*, published in 2015 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, explicitly states that "the homily is not catechetical instruction, even if catechesis is an important dimension of the homily" (HD, no. 6, emphasis added). And Pope Francis affirms this in *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 137), when he directly quotes St. John Paul II's claim that "The liturgical proclamation of the Word of God ... 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" (Cameron, p. 30).

It would seem, then, that the documents on preaching reflect divergent schools of thought; in this, they disclose the crux of tonight's challenge: do we preach as a way to catechize the faithful about moral matters impacting society, or is catechetical instruction beyond the purview of the pulpit? Should our homilies expound upon Catholic social teaching, or is this really just "preaching politics" in a cleverly disguised way?

The resolution to this homiletic dilemma, it seems to me, is part practical and part spiritual.

The practical part is simple – we just don't have enough time in a homily to explore the rich insights of Catholic Social Teaching. Owing to your fine education here at the Mount, you yourselves no doubt understand the depths and distinctions of sound moral theology. But think about how many class hours it took for you to learn this! To try to work through all that in the brief time of a homily would require

oversimplifying very important clarifications, and that, in turn, would likely end up distorting the clarity of the Church's teaching.

For example, suppose I were to preach on the morality of "cooperation with evil" and imply, or even state, that voting in one direction or another puts one's soul at eternal risk because of such complicity. This kind of stark claim would fail to do justice to the complexities involved in making moral choices. Why? Because I would also have to explain the nuances of intentionality in the act of voting, the relation between intrinsic evil and other seriously grave matters, the dilemma posed when all the candidates promote something intrinsically evil, and the reality of a given candidate's ability to exert real influence on any one issue – all of which are matters dealt with thoroughly in the document on *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (nn. 34-36).

(On a side note, this oversimplification is also a danger latent in political questionnaires. I recall receiving a flier that listed then Congressman Pat Toomey as being pro-abortion. I know Senator Toomey fairly well. There are few, if any, politicians as faithfully Catholic as he is. But because he once voted favorably on a bill that allowed for abortion, while at the same time further restricting the number of them, he was labeled as pro-abortion, which is patently absurd.)

But, please, don't get me wrong! I wholeheartedly recognize and affirm what the Bishops' Conference teaches in that document on political responsibility, namely "that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose policies promoting intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions" (FCFC, no. 37). Teaching our people this fundamental moral truth would, itself, be a valuable contribution that we can make in the parishes.

But I also agree with the Sacred Congregation in its claim that to do this sort of catechesis thoroughly requires more time than we have at our disposal during the Mass. If at that time we attempt to teach moral theology comprehensively, the homily would necessarily be long, which may just provoke rather than persuade the congregation; at the very least, it would likely create a traffic jam in the parking lot! So, hopefully, we can find other ways to impart these important teachings and to discuss their implications in the real life of our people.

But beyond the practical limitation of time, there's another, more important and more spiritual reason why turning the homily into a political lesson in moral theology is not especially appropriate or beneficial ... and that brings me to my third and final proposition.

PROPOSITION #3: Preaching is Worship ... and knowing this makes all the difference.

The USCCB document on *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, the Pope's apostolic exhortation on the *Joy of the Gospel*, the Holy See's *Homiletic Directory*, and even the various liturgical books all emphasize that the homily is a genre of speaking distinct in its focus and unique in its form. Put simply, the homily is an act of worship. Its liturgical character is what defines its essential features.

Here's how the various documents describe the essential elements of preaching:

- The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* calls it an exposition of the sacred mystery being celebrated while taking into account the particular needs of the listeners (no. 65).
- The introduction to the *Lectionary* notes that a homily "sets forth the mysteries of faith and the standards of the Christian life on the basis of the sacred text" (no. 24).
- *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* champions "the pattern in Paul's proclamation of the Christian message," which takes the shape of "announcing the mysteries of redemption and then drawing out the meaning of these mysteries for the Christian life" (pp. 22-23).
- And the *Homiletic Directory* speaks of three important movements in the dynamic of any homily: from the proclamation of the Paschal mystery, to that mystery becoming present in the Blessed Sacrament, to carrying the presence of that mystery into the world in which we live (nn. 12-14).

In all these descriptions, a common pattern emerges: first the proclamation, then the exhortation. In other words, preaching is first and foremost an announcement of what God has done for us, not an instruction on how we should act. (And, yes, I've actually heard some homilies that never even mention God!) Proclaiming the joy of God's saving mystery always comes first. Specifying how to live according to the faith flows from this and is a consequence of it.

In other words, we don't preach in order to give a lesson in theology; we preach in order to inspire people to live differently. This happens, says Pope Francis, when we give them "an idea, a sentiment, (and) an image" of the wonders of salvation, when we offer to them what Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P. calls a proposition of "my life for the better because of a Love" – God's love – "that has come to claim me" (Cameron, p. 36).

That life-claiming Love comes to people not through theological concepts, but in the person of Jesus Christ. Our task as preachers is to share Him with our people. This we do from the pulpit by engaging them on a personal level in a way that fosters their encounter with the concrete reality of God. In his sermons, Blessed John Henry Newman "exults in the fact that Christianity discloses to us not a divine principle but a Divine Agent." And that Divine Agent works His transformation of human life not through education for the mind, but by the experience of grace in one's heart and soul. As Newman rightly points out, "The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description." And he famously adds, "Many a man will live and die upon a dogma; no man will be a martyr for a conclusion" (see John Crosby, *Personalist Papers*, pp. 236-237).

This is why, I think, the *Homiletic Directory* states that catechetical instruction is only a dimension of, not the substance of, preaching ... because theological education – much as this is needed and is our job to provide – does not, of itself, offer motivation to follow the Lord. Were catechetical instruction to be the sole, or even the primary, focus of our preaching, people who listen to our homilies will agree or disagree, while some will simply not care. But, and I can tell you this from personal experience, few will be newly inspired. Only if we focus our homilies on God's saving work in our midst, and persuade our listeners that this really is "Good News" for them, can we then propose to them how this redeeming mystery can have an effect in the living out of their daily lives.

This is the properly liturgical dimension to preaching. The implications of that for your ministry should now be more obvious.

As a proclamation of redemption, let your homily focus on, and flow from, the "intrinsic power of the text" of Sacred Scripture more so than from the contentious power of news cycles. God's word is a far richer resource than the stuff of any political debate.

As a liturgical expression, let your speech propose, rather than impose, what the Church teaches and what our faith believes in terms of our role in society. Inspiration offered with imagination generates interest, whereas instruction that comes off as indoctrination leads to indifference or sometime even indignation.

As an act of worship, let your message from the pulpit not be the expression of your own thoughts on the issues of the day, but instead the expression of the *Holy Spirit* speaking through you the words of God's loving mercy which is there for us every day. This is ultimately the message we have to offer, one that speaks divine truth to the heart more than to the mind.

To make your preaching more an act of worship, to make your homilies more "heart-to-heart" and more inspiring, let me suggest, by way of conclusion, three virtues for you to cultivate, so that you can be who you are as preachers and be that well.

CONCLUSION:

A first virtue, one not ordinarily associated with preaching, is what Pope Francis calls "tenderness" or simply "nearness." As is obvious in any discussion of politics, people struggle. They struggle with the issues affecting them. They struggle with others opposing them. They struggle with the decisions they need to make in the voting booth.

God's saving word is our response, the best response, to the struggles people face. Our task in preaching is to bring that divine Word to them, bridging the gap between then and now. As Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "the Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness" (no. 88). And the Holy Father continues, "If we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel, surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people's hearts" (no. 265).

A second virtue for your consideration is prudence or discretion. As is also obvious when we talk about politics, people clamor a lot. They debate and they discuss; they critique and they complain. But when they come to Church, what they want, what they really need, is something else. They expect us to bring them into a different realm, one that transcends the mundane realities of earthly existence. As Pope Francis tells us, "the preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people. ... In the course of the homily, the hearts of believers keep silence and allow God to speak" (EG, no. 143).

Discretion facilitates that conversation through the choice of the homily's content and the manner in which it is presented. Yes, we need to be sufficiently prudent so as not to cross the line into political endorsements. But it's also prudent of us to recognize that as an element of the liturgy, preaching is also a prayerful time, a time for you to direct people in conversation with God's holy Word. But we only have a brief time for this conversation! So, let it be a time to appeal to their freedom, as well as their faith. And, in contrast to much of what passes as political speech nowadays, let ours be saving speech, a speech that Pope Francis says should be "positive" in as much as it "always offers hope, points to the future, (and) does not leave us trapped in negativity" (EG, no. 159).

Finally, a third virtue for preachers young and old is reverence. Politics too often turns to personal attacks and negative ads. In today's media age, the campaign advantage comes through popularity, whether of personalities or positions. In the end, majorities win, even at the risk of devolving into "might makes right."

But from the pulpit, what we're about is truth, the "might" that really makes right because it comes from the revelation of God's saving words and deeds, which are disclosed to us in the Sacred Scriptures and explicated for us in the teachings of Sacred Tradition. Proclaiming that truth and persuading people that that truth is Good News for their lives will always be our primary task. As preachers, we revere God's truth when we first let it speak to us in our own hearts, in prayerful dialogue with the sacred Word. This we should do not only to understand better the saving mystery for ourselves, but also to know how to speak about that mystery in light of the needs of our people. Reverence for God's holy Word will distinguish good preaching from that "tedious and ineffectual preaching" which we know is all too prevalent in our churches. As Pope Francis reminds us, "To speak from the heart means that our hearts must not just be on fire, but also enlightened by the fullness of revelation and by the path traveled by God's Word in the heart of the Church and our faithful people through history" (EG, 144).

As we end now, I hope that my words to you have not been tedious or ineffectual! Then again, you may be wishing I had stopped with that one word with which I began!

In any case, let me take this opportunity to thank Msgr. Baker for his invitation, thank you for your kind attention, and assure you of my prayers for your sacred ministry as preachers of God's holy Word.