

# “PREACHING POLITICS FROM THE PULPIT”

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panel presentation by

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My intervention this evening focuses on preaching as a communicative act ... and a basic principle to which all communication acts must adhere.

Before getting to that, let me state up front my presuppositions:

- Should we be clear in presenting the social/moral teachings of the Church?  
*Absolutely!*
- Should we be courageous in speaking truth to power for the common good?  
*Absolutely!*
- Should we preach politics from the pulpit?  
*Absolutely NOT!*

Now, you probably agreed quickly with the first two answers, so the third one may come as a bit of a surprise.

But I draw that conclusion from a basic principle of communications, one so fundamental that even the U.S. Bishops cited it in a document about preaching.<sup>1</sup> The principle is this:

***What is communicated is not what is said, but what is heard, and what is heard is determined in large measure by what the hearer needs or wants to hear.***

Let me unpack the three elements of that principle in light of tonight’s subject.

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<sup>1</sup> USCCB, Bishops Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*, 1982.

First, consider ***“what is said.”***

When what we say is about politics in general, or voting in particular, we end up reducing, rather than amplifying, the voice of the Church in the public square. God may have chosen kings, but God never told people whom to vote for. The Church works in the world of diplomacy, but the Church never says whom to vote for. Why, then, would preachers speak in a way that declares, suggests, or implies how to vote?

Some think they can word such a homily carefully, so that it doesn't cross the line into an endorsement. Some think it's OK to speak about voting indirectly, as in telling people who “not” to vote for. But either way, what they say is still meant to be political.

The inevitable result is that the preacher's words are reduced to just one more voice amid the cacophony of campaigners. The homily unavoidably speaks from a partisan position. And the voice of the Church risks ending up on the losing side ... which will create a serious credibility problem for the next election cycle.

Second, consider ***“what is heard.”***

People do have ears to hear! And when their ears detect that the homily is about politics, their spines also react. By its very nature, the subject matter raises hackles and automatically divides us.

When politics is heard in a homily, some will clap with approval. But they're the proverbial choir who already agree with what the preacher has to say.

Others who hear it will simply leave – either giving up their attention or actually giving up their seat to go out the door. This includes folks on both sides of the political aisle.

Even more so, what is heard in a political homily can be offensive, even though that's not the preacher's intention (I hope).

If voting entails making a prudential judgment – *and it does!* – then it's the people in the pews who bear responsibility for it. As a personal responsibility, that judgment includes being properly informed, for sure. But ultimately the choice is theirs, not ours to make for them.

Respecting people's freedom should also prevent holy imposition or intimidation – which is what happens when preachers tell people, with the authority that comes from a pulpit, how they should be voting (or not voting). Words heard as threats are especially ineffective. Simplistically stating that people's souls are at risk, or that they're not truly

Catholic, if they vote in a particular way, brings the preacher forcefully into the realm of someone's conscience – which is sacred space between that person and the Lord God that deserves our utmost respect.

Lastly, consider “***what the hearer needs or wants to hear.***”

Put simply, politics is not what people come to Church to hear! The faithful come to Church because of their faith, to hear and speak words of worship. What they want is what the Church alone has to offer – a sacred refuge from the secular chaos.

The Sunday liturgy transcends the fracas of political discourse in society through an experience of the hope held out by life in the Kingdom of God. Congregants do not need to be reminded of Caesar when they have come to render to God what belongs to God! What they seek, and what they will benefit from, is the Good News of the Gospel as the antidote to the everyday news of electoral campaigns, which are poisonous enough.

In sum, preaching as a communicative act will work well only when what is said and what is heard meet together in a message that *God* intends as the fulfillment of what people at Mass want and need to hear. But that sort of encounter is complicated when what we say is political and what they hear is how to vote.

To be effective as a communicative act, preaching about Catholic social teaching with respect to the rights and responsibilities of voters would have to explain multiple and complex factors in order to deal with those subjects properly.<sup>2</sup> Yes, we need to teach that. But, given its limited time and intended purpose, the homily is simply not the correct or the best medium for doing so.

Granted, preachers want to take advantage of having a captive audience. But we don't fulfill our primary duty as clergy to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel to them if we usurp that opportunity by diving into the mud and muck of partisan waters.

Should we preach politics from the pulpit? *Absolutely not.*

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<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Bishops document on *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* is 92 sections in length!