

The Homily: Vatican II and Francis de Sales

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We human beings reveal something of our inmost nature, personality, and character in two ways: by what we say, and by what we do, by our words, whether written or spoken, and by our actions. This is true of every man. Sir Winston Churchill, in the darkest days of World War II, revealed something of himself by his memorable stirring exhortations to his countrymen, and by the actions that he performed to implement them; they bore witness to the inner dogged courage and determination with which he faced seemingly insurmountable odds and refused to crumble before them. It was not only his words but his actions, his preparing to fight in the air, "on the beaches and in the streets," that showed the mettle of the man.

DIVINE REVELATION—WORDS AND ACTIONS

The God who loves us has also revealed his nature, his attributes, and his will for mankind by words and actions. Certainly all of us are familiar with his revealing words contained in the Scriptures and Tradition, or Scripture interpreted by Tradition. We may not, however, be quite as familiar with the notion of God's revelation by action, that is, through his interventions in salvation history, and yet this aspect of revelation is equally as important. Indeed, his words, which are the Scriptures, really interpret and expound the message which his interventions proclaim. Some further amplification of this point will be helpful for our present topic.

How has God revealed his nature, his attributes, and his will for mankind by his actions? The Exodus from Egypt, the most important event of Old Testament salvation history, revealed God's power, his will to save, his interest in men, his ability to give life. The Exodus here includes the cluster of events before, during, and immediately after the passage of the Israelites from Egypt. The power of God and his ability to rule nature were manifest in the plagues which broke the resistance of the Pharaoh,

the opening of the sea of reeds for the passage of the Israelites and the destruction of the charioteers, his punishment of certain of their infidelities during the forty years in the desert, and his assistance in conquering Canaan (now Palestine) in the days of Moses and Joshua. His interest in men was shown by his singling out of the descendants of Abraham, a group of nomadic tribes, as his chosen people. He disclosed that he is a saving God by guiding them from slavery and through the perils of sea and desert. During the desert years, his providing them at the needed times with manna, quail, and water, showed him as a God who gives life. When he made a blood covenant with them at Sinai, it seemed to hint, even though vaguely, that he wished to share his life with them. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel or Samaria in 721 B.C., and the later destruction of Juda in 586 B.C., followed by the Babylonian captivity, showed him as a God of justice who punishes infidelity. The restoration of Juda at the time of Cyrus proclaimed him as a God of mercy who began to fulfill the promise of the salvation of the "faithful remnant." The Covenant, the Law, the royal dynasty of David, *et al.*, showed his providence preparing for a fuller revelation in the New Testament.

And, with far greater clarity than the above, the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of the Son of God, the most important events of salvation history, proclaim by action that "God is love" as St. John says. As Karl Rahner has put it, "Christ is the Epiphany of God in our history."¹ In the words of St. John of the Cross: "By giving us His son, his only Word—and He has no other—He has spoken once and for all, in that single word; and He has no need for further speech."² As we watch him in the Gospels show his power over nature, heal the sick, deal mercifully with sinners, welcome children, show his attitude towards persons and things, die for us, and institute his Church and its Sacraments, we can say, "This is what God is like." Here is God himself in human form displaying his nature and character. "Even in his humanity, Christ is the Son of God. The second person of the Blessed Trinity is personally man; and this man is personally God. Therefore Christ is God in a human way, and man in a divine way. As a man, He acts out His divine life in and according to His human existence."³ Christ's love is God's love in a visible form.

THE HOMILY AND VATICAN II

What has preceded is a necessary foundation for what follows. For it would seem that what the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II has in mind in its emphasis on the homily is that through it we may

¹ Karl Rahner, as quoted by René Latourelle in "Revelation, History and Incarnation," *The Word, Readings in Theology* (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1964), p. 41.

² *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Part II, Ch. xxii, No. 4.

³ E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 13-14.

proclaim that God who has revealed himself in his saving mysteries, which are really the mystery of Christ and God's plan for our salvation. As the *Constitution* states, "The sermon, moreover, should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources, and its character should be that of a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy."⁴ And when we proclaim those wonderful works in the history of salvation, the God who is revealed is a powerful, saving, loving, merciful, just, and life-giving God.

The *Constitution* develops still further the notion of the homily:

Although the sacred liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine Majesty, it likewise contains much instruction for the faithful. For in the liturgy God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his gospel.⁵

By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text, during the course of the liturgical year; the homily, therefore, is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself; in fact, at those Masses which are celebrated with the assistance of the people on Sundays and feasts of obligation, it should not be omitted except for a serious reason.⁶

The two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.⁷

A homily is not a class in Christian doctrine. It is not a taking off from a scriptural text into the preacher's favorite subject or into a moral exhortation that has nothing to do with the Mass, as in the case of the priest who always preaches on St. Joseph no matter what the feast or Sunday is. It is not an interruption of the action of the Mass.

The homily is a part of the liturgical action. Its content is drawn principally from scriptural and liturgical sources. Its character is that of a proclamation of the wonders of God in salvation history. Through the homily the mysteries of faith and of Christian conduct are expounded from the sacred text. The priest opens out the meaning of God's message here and now or opens out one or another redemptive theme contained in the scriptural passages of this Mass during this season of this liturgical year. Ideally, it should include how this congregation, individually and as a people, must respond in faith to the word of God. There should be a

⁴ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 35.2. This *Constitution* will hereafter be referred to as *CSL*. Numbers indicate the articles of the *Constitution*.

⁵ *CSL*, 33.

⁶ *CSL*, 52.

⁷ *CSL*, 56.

possible connection with the sacramental action to follow. The acid test of a homily is whether or not it sheds light on what the Church is trying to say today at this Mass, to this congregation.

As Tavard explains the homily, "It breaks for us the bread of the Word, already present through the reading and meditation of the Scriptures and about to be present also through the Holy Eucharist."⁸ Gregory Baum further enlightens us:

Since the celebration of the Word in the Mass is followed by the celebration of the Sacrament, both of which belong closely together, the sermon proclaiming and explaining the Scriptures must act as a bridge between Word and Sacrament. . .

The sermon must break and distribute the Word so that it is understood, and applied, to the needs of the day and prepare for the encounter of the Lord in the Eucharist. . .

Christ is the one source of grace and He is accessible to us in the Word as well as in the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit truly acts through the Word whether it is announced in the pulpit or expressed in the Scriptural and non-Scriptural parts of the liturgy. . .⁹

THE HOMILY AND FRANCIS DE SALES

This brings us to St. Francis de Sales, his teaching on the homily, and his use of it. What did he say about it? How did he use it? How did he view preaching in general? How did he propose to construct his sermons?

The tentative answers of this article to these questions will be derived from the long letter which St. Francis wrote on October 4, 1604, to his friend, André Frémyot, Archbishop of Bourges, and brother of St. Jane de Chantal.¹⁰ At the time, André Frémyot was 31. Although consecrated as Archbishop of Bourges, he had not yet taken possession of the archdiocese. He made known to Francis de Sales his doubts about his ability and his fears concerning the duty of preaching. The Bishop of Geneva, himself only 37, a priest for 11 years and a bishop for two, wrote this letter, a veritable treatise on preaching, in reply.

He defines preaching as "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."¹¹ This definition differs somewhat from this statement of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*: ". . . its character

⁸ George H. Tavard, *Theology of the Word* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1963), p. 25.

⁹ Gregory Baum, OSA, *Word and Sacrament in the Church* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1963), p. 25.

¹⁰ Let 229 (12:299-325). Quotations from this letter hereafter will be taken from *On the Preacher and Preaching*, trans. J. K. Ryan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

should be that of a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy."¹² However, St. Francis' announced purpose for preaching—that its hearers “may have life and have it more abundantly”¹³—comes closer to the intent of the *Constitution*. This is also true when the question of the matter of the sermon is considered, for if a preacher adheres to St. Francis' advice he will turn to Sacred Scripture as a primary and indispensable source of sermon material. He tells us:

St. Paul says to Timothy in one sentence, “Preach the Word.” We must preach the Word of God. “Preach the Gospel,” says the Master [Christ]. St. Francis [of Assisi] explains this when he commands his friars to preach on virtues and vices and on hell and paradise. There is sufficient matter in Sacred Scripture for all of that, nothing further is needed.¹⁴

Furthermore, he sees a close relationship between the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers and doctors:

Is there no need then to make use of Christian doctors and the writings of the saints? It is indeed necessary to do so. What else is the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church except the Gospel explained and Holy Scripture expounded? In other words, the difference between Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Fathers is like that between a whole almond and an almond cracked open so that the nut can be eaten by anyone, or like that between a whole loaf of bread and a loaf broken into pieces and distributed. On the contrary, therefore, it is necessary to make use of such works, for they have been instruments by which God has communicated to us the true meaning of his word.¹⁵

Given the homiletic character of much of the patristic preaching, such advice could indicate some proximity between the viewpoint of St. Francis de Sales and that of Vatican II.

Again, he sees a relationship between the Scriptures and the lives of the saints: “. . . what else is the life of a saint except the Gospel put into practice? There is no more difference between the written Gospel and the lives of the saints than between music set down in notes and music that is sung.”¹⁶ Since they are such, they too can be quite useful in preaching the word.

These counsels concerning the dominant importance of the Scriptures in preaching must be complemented by his instructions on how to interpret

¹² *CSL*, 35.

¹³ *On the Preacher and Preaching*, p. 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

the Scriptures in a sermon. This is especially true with respect to our purpose here since the homily in the eyes of Vatican II should interpret for the congregation what the Church is trying to say to the faithful at this Mass in the liturgy of the word.

“But as far as possible,” he writes, “the passages must be interpreted very naturally and clearly. Now we can make good use of Scripture by explaining such passages in any one of the four ways that the ancients have indicated:

Littera facta docet; quid credas, allegoria;

Quid speres, anagoge; quid agas, tropologia.¹⁷

There are four senses of Scripture: the literal, the allegorical, the anagogical, and the tropological. (See Michael Moore's article, “The Prophets and the *Introduction*,” p. 13 for an explanation of these senses.) It is sufficient here to consider briefly some of the holy Doctor's comments concerning their use in preaching.

Concerning the literal sense, St. Francis de Sales tells us that “preaching must be based on the commentaries of the doctors; this is all that can be said about it. . . . Where there is a difference of opinion among the Fathers we should refrain from bringing forward opinions that must be refuted, since no one mounts the pulpit to dispute against the Catholic Fathers and doctors. . . . However, we can rightly set forth various interpretations, praising and evaluating all of them one after the other. . . .”¹⁸ The literal sense emerges from the text itself, correctly interpreted.

The allegorical sense consists in seeing certain persons, events, and things of the Old Testament as prefiguring persons, events, and things of the New Testament. St. Francis de Sales urges the preacher, first, “to take an allegorical sense that is not too far-fetched, as do those who make allegories of everything. . . . Secondly, where it is not really apparent that one thing is a figure of the other, we must not treat such things as if one were a figure of the other, but simply by way of comparison. . . . Thirdly, it is necessary that the allegory be becoming. . . . Fourthly, we must not make over-elaborate allegories, as they lose their persuasive power by their length and seem affected. Fifthly, the application must be made clearly and with good judgment so as to relate skillfully the various parts to one another.”¹⁹

The anagogical sense relates scriptural stories to what will take place in the next life, e.g., as regards the two sons of Isaac, “Esau represents the body, which is the elder, for before the soul was created, the body was made both in Adam and in us. Jacob signifies spirit, which is younger. In the other life the spirit will surpass and dominate the body, which will

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41. “The letter teaches facts; allegory what you must believe; anagogy what you should hope for; tropology what you must do.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

completely serve the soul without any contradiction."²⁰

The tropological sense relates the scriptural stories to what obtains in the soul and conscience. "Tropologically, Esau is self-love, while Jacob is love of God in our souls. Self-love is the elder, for it is born with us; love of God is the younger, because it is acquired by the sacraments and repentance . . . and when it is in the soul, self-love serves it and is its inferior."²¹

These last two senses are what are commonly called accommodated senses, by which scriptural texts are used by preachers to explain some doctrine or moral lesson. While the allegorical, anagogical, and tropological senses could be used in homiletic preaching, it does not necessarily follow that the explanations of Francis de Sales indicate an identity or proximity of viewpoint with the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Before we attempt to draw any conclusions, a glance at his advice on methods of preaching will be of value.

Concerning methods he says, "To help you in this regard, I will discuss it with you, whether you wish to preach on some story, such as the Nativity, Resurrection, or Assumption, some scriptural text . . . , an entire Gospel, or various texts, or the life of a saint together with a text."²² He lists, then, several possibilities. Let us consider his advice on each of them.

The first possibility is preaching on some story related in the Scriptures. "Consider how many persons there are in the story you wish to preach on, and then draw some reflection from each of them. One can take up the principal point in a mystery, such as the Resurrection . . . and then consider what precedes and follows this point. . . . In all mysteries we can consider the following points: who? why? and how? . . . After setting forth the story in brief paraphrases, we can sometimes draw from it two or three considerations. The first is what we must learn in order to build up our faith; the second, to increase our hope; the third to enflame our charity; the fourth, for imitation and practice."²³

The Gospel story is to be explained with the response of the faithful in mind. The various senses of Scripture and the various sources of interpretation would be used for this purpose.

The second possibility exists "When you wish to preach on a text . . . , that is, a particular passage drawn from the Scriptures. Then, "you must reflect on what virtue it refers to . . . when you have discovered in the text you wish to discuss the virtue it indicates, you can reduce your sermon to method, considering in what the virtue consists, its true marks, its effects, and the means of acquiring or practicing it." Another method is

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

to explain "how the virtue treated is worthy of honor, useful, and delightful or pleasing." Still another method is "to point out the goods that the virtue gives and the evils that the contrary vice brings on us."²⁴

On the other hand if we preach on a Gospel containing many statements, he says we should "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."²⁵ He says this method is less fruitful.

Finally, if we preach on the life of a saint, the method is different. "It is helpful to consider how he fought against the devil, the world and the flesh." We should describe "what the saint accomplished"—in the way of his virtues, his sufferings, either by martyrdom or mortification, or his miracles. We may also consider "how we must honor God in his saint and the saint in God, how we must serve God in imitation of his saint, how we must pray to God through his saint's intercession."²⁶

CONCLUSIONS

Did Francis, then, in practice, preach a homily as Vatican II envisions it? What we have stated here is based on what he said in his letter to Archbishop Frémyot; presumably, at this time, he was preaching as he indicated in the letter. It is at least probable that he continued this manner of preaching for some time afterwards. However, a detailed consideration of his actual sermons would be necessary before any firm conclusions could be made in answer to our question. No more can be affirmed here than a few tentative conclusions drawn from the letter.

He does advocate a homily, especially when he treats of developing the story of a feast or historical event of Scripture. Such a homily seems to differ somewhat from that which we have outlined in the beginning of this article. His use of a scriptural text or a Gospel containing many statements may not always be a homily in our sense of the term, because his extended emphasis on virtues may not have permitted him to open up the scriptural text of the day as advocated by Vatican II.

His development of the life of a saint is not a homily as the *Constitution* understands it, although it would be scriptural in nature. Yet even Vatican II seems to leave room for occasional sermons not on the Scriptures or liturgy, especially on feast days not of obligation and on special occasions.

He does not mention the concept of salvation history, the revelation of the mystery of Christ, or the close connection between the homily and the liturgy of the day. Any further conclusions must await a serious study of his advice and method in actual application in the sermons of the Saint himself.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.