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WILTON D. GREGORY*

Liturgical Preaching in the 21st Century[1]

1. Introduction

During the 2008 Bishop's Synod on the Word of God, a fundamental theme which emerged both in plenary sessions and in the small group discussions was that of the homily. Bishops agreed that Sunday morning is the one opportunity each week that pastors have to engage in dialogue with the majority of their parishioners. Indeed, for better or worse, it is usually the quality of the homily which people use to determine the overall quality of the liturgical celebration.

Catholic laity have come to expect a level of homiletic preparation and professionalism in their clergy that is concomitant with what they experience in dealing with professionals in other fields of expertise. Thus, they seek true inspiration, edification, and sound pastoral direction from the homily at the Eucharistic celebration. Here in the United States and I imagine elsewhere, I have repeatedly heard of people who drive great distances to participate in a Mass where the celebrant is known to provide a serious, moving, and compelling homily.

At the same time, however, we are well aware that Catholic preaching has often lagged far behind its counterparts in other Christian denominations. And while some of those churches and ecclesial communities have themselves begun noting a crisis in preaching within their own traditions, that crisis appears to be more significant in our own Church.

* Archbishop of Atlanta, GA.

1. This is the revised version of the text of the *Tenth Annual Monsignor Frederick R. McManus Memorial Lecture* given at the School of Canon Law of The Catholic University of America on November 3, 2016.

As we consider our future as a Church, not only here in the United States but throughout the world, and as we consider the task of the new evangelization in an increasingly secular and even "post-Christian" society at least in the developed world, attending to the significance of the homily is more crucial than ever. It is for this reason that I chose this important topic as the subject for the 2016 Frederick R. McManus Memorial Lecture here at The Catholic University of America, which I am honored and privileged to deliver. More than fifty years after the Second Vatican Council, we are well aware that our liturgical reforms would have been much less developed and implemented, were it not for the vision and foresight of Monsignor McManus (†2005), who served as a *peritus* at that Council along with Benedictine Father Godfrey Diekmann (†2002) of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville.

From a historical survey of the evolution of liturgical preaching over the centuries leading up to the Second Vatican Council and the implementation of the liturgical reforms, we will then consider the homily in light of recent magisterial documents, including Pope Benedict's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* and Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. I will then address our own context here in the United States, and the challenges to faithful preaching in an increasingly multicultural and diverse Church that is our North American reality today in the twenty-first century.

2. A Brief Historical Survey

The very word homily comes from the Greek *homilein* or the Latin *homilia* meaning discourse or conversation with someone. We find the term used in varied ways in 1 Corinthians 15:33, Luke 24:14 and in Acts 24:26 meaning "to be in conversation or speak with." In Acts 20:11, the term was used for the first time, to signify a homily within the liturgical context where Saint Paul offered an informal discourse, preaching "until daylight."

Thus, in the very earliest years of Christianity and building on Jewish foundations, the homily was a simple, extemporaneous address—prepared but not scripted. In the *Prima Apologia* of Saint Justin the Martyr, for example, dated to the middle of the second century, we learn that the President of the liturgical assembly was to "admonish" those present to

imitate the good example of what had just been proclaimed in the Acts of the Apostles and the reading from the Prophets— the more important reading from the New Testament read before the secondary text.[2]

Gradually, the homily moved to a more ordered structure and became more expository in nature. Chief protagonists of this shift were Clement of Alexandria (†220) and his student Origen (†254), and later John Chrysostom (†407) and Augustine (†430) who led the way in the growth of liturgical, exegetical preaching, representing respectively the Greek and Latin branches of the Church.[3]

Chrysostom was known to be a most eloquent preacher, and not surprisingly, was declared the Patron Saint of Preachers in 1908 by Pope Saint Pius X. In a recent work, Yale University Professor Andrew McGowan notes that the homilies of John Chrysostom "are among the first examples of preaching as public theology, addressing questions of civic as well as spiritual significance."[4]

For his part, Augustine's homilies reveal not only the expertise of an accomplished theologian who needed to combat the various heresies of the day, but also that of a pastorally sensitive bishop who was well acquainted with his flock. Above all, Augustine wanted to be a "servant of the word" as he heard that word proclaimed in the Sacred Scriptures, preaching faithfully in the major basilica at Hippo often twice a day. Throughout his ministry of more than thirty years, he believed that the homily had three goals: to explain, to make holy, and to convert.[5]

Following the fourth century, however, both in East and West, noteworthy preachers were in short supply in the generation after Chrysostom and Augustine. Thus, a decline in liturgical preaching ensued which lasted as long as five centuries in the West. In the wider Medieval liturgical context, we must also acknowledge a concomitant decline in the spoken word during liturgical celebrations and indeed, in liturgical participation by the lay faithful. The Mass was celebrated by the priest *sotto voce* as the laity prayed their own devotions, which led to a decreased emphasis on

2. Chapter 67.

3. Alexandre Olivar, "Predicazione nella Chiesa Antica," in *Dizionario di Omiletica*, ed. Manlio Sodi and Achille M. Triacca (Torino: Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1998) 1217–1220.

4. Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014, 2016) 107.

5. Alexandre Olivar, "La duration de la predicacion antigua," *Liturgia* 3 (1966) 143–184.

dialogue or verbal communication between priest and the liturgical assembly. So the spoken word whether in the proclaimed word, the homily, or in the liturgical texts themselves gradually diminished.

Even when preaching within the Latin Church was revived, it had a very different style, far removed from the sort of liturgical, exegetical and expository style so typical of the Patristic era. This would persist largely until the sixteenth century Reformation, with the notable exception of the founding of the Mendicant orders, especially the Dominican and Franciscan Friars. In that period, interestingly, bishops and pastors essentially relegated their own responsibility of preaching to those orders.[6]

Under the direction of Pope Alexander III (†1181), the Council of Tours held in 1163 decreed that the homily should be delivered in the vernacular.[7] This was a very timely decision given the founding of the Order of Preachers only fifty years later in 1216, as the Dominicans sought to move preaching out of cathedrals and monasteries into the urban world of the thirteenth century. In leaving the cloister and living more closely among the people, the preaching of God's word took on a greater urgency as it attempted to respond to and illuminate the challenges and the questions faced by their contemporaries.[8] However, with the advent of Scholastic Theology in the great universities of Europe and the gradual combination of Theology and Philosophy, preaching soon applied Aristotelian logic and dialectic to scriptural interpretation, which understandably tended to be rather mechanical and overly speculative.

The itinerant mission of the Franciscans offered its own unique approach, but it was generally more moralistic in style and content, and much less liturgical or exegetical. It's not surprising then, that in Medieval ecclesiastical literature, there are precious few expositions or exegeses of full books of the Bible when compared with the Patristic period.

With the advent of the Reformation in the sixteenth century and its thrust to return to a more Patristic Church, it was Chrysostom and Augustine to whom the Reformers turned, both for a recovery of the classic liturgical elements of the Patristic age and also of liturgical preaching.

6. John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) 44.

7. Canon 17.

8. Timothy Radcliffe, "The Sacramentality of the Word," in *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, ed. Keith Pecklers (London: Continuum, 2003) 136.

Martin Luther (†1546) rediscovered the full, systematic understanding of this preaching—a rediscovery which was then further expounded upon by other Reformers in a wider exegetical and expository manner of preaching that had not been seen since the time of Chrysostom and Augustine. Ulrich Zwingli (†1531) and John Calvin (†1564), for example, preached their way through all the books of the Bible in a most comprehensive way.[9]

Within the Catholic Church of the sixteenth century, in response to the Reformers advocacy of biblically-based liturgical preaching, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) took up the question in 1546 – early on in the Council in the Fifth Session—advocating courses in Scripture to be established in dioceses and religious houses for the formation of clergy with the goal of improving the quality of preaching, under the supervision of the diocesan bishop. At the same time, it affirmed the age-old Patristic understanding of the intrinsic link between the episcopacy and preaching, and mandated that at least on Sundays and feast days, bishops and pastors should preach in their own cathedrals and churches rather than leaving that task to the Friars.[10] This would be affirmed again in 1562 during the twenty-second session, just before the end of the Council, stressing the importance of vernacular preaching for the spiritual edification of the lay faithful.[11]

As the Council drew to a close in 1563, the articles contained within the final document declared that pastors were obliged to preach at Mass in their parishes on Sundays and feast days. If they were otherwise impeded from doing so, then they should find substitutes.[12]

Even as the Council had insisted that liturgical preaching was of paramount importance in the ministry of a bishop, that mandate could have easily been ignored were it not for reform-minded bishops after Trent who put that conciliar vision into practice.[13] For example, in 1564, just one year after the Council had concluded, Saint Charles Borromeo (†1584) then Archbishop of Milan, convoked an Archdiocesan Synod intended to implement the Tridentine reforms. That synod led to a reform of priestly

9. See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 79–81; 257–260; 346–348; Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 299–322.

10. See H.J. Schroder, trans, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978) 24–28.

11. See Keith F. Pecklers, *Worship* (London: Continuum, 2003) 67–76.

12. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council*, 231.

13. Ibid., 257.

formation in Milan which included proper training in liturgical preaching. Nonetheless, a certain crisis in preaching remained throughout the Church, even despite the efforts of the Council Fathers at Trent and reform-minded bishops like Borromeo.

It was within such a context that the Society of Jesus was founded. The Jesuit Constitutions stated that preaching should not be in the Scholastic style which was too dry and removed from people's experience, but rather preaching that touched the emotions and led to a conversion of heart, with special attention to the individual in the assembly as an intrinsic part of the preaching itself. And it was precisely in this post-Reformation context, and the Jesuits' attention to preaching and the various "Ministries of the word," that the newly founded Jesuit Order was considered suspect in some circles, since such advocacy of preaching was not considered to be very Catholic.[14]

The liturgical movement of the twentieth century sought to recover the centrality of God's word within the sacred liturgy and its chief protagonist was the Augustinian Canon Pius Parsch (†1954) of the Monastery of Klosterneuburg in Austria. What emerged there was a movement with a common goal of biblical and liturgical renewal. In 1926, he founded the journal *Bibel und Liturgie* which promoted the relationship between liturgy and Scripture, and encouraged a wider knowledge among the Bible among Catholics, and which would influence a subsequent recovery of liturgical preaching. A renewed interest in patristic studies among Catholics also emerged at this time, already widely present in Anglican, Orthodox, and Protestant circles.[15]

All this would come to full stature in the European *Ressourcement*[16] of the 1940s—an ecclesiologically-based reform movement that desired to return to biblical and patristic sources for the renewal of the Church, which would have major implications for the fundamental role of Scripture within the liturgy and for liturgical preaching grounded in biblical

14. John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 100.

15. Keith F. Pecklers, *The Unread Vision: The Liturgical Movement in the United States of America 1926–1955* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 16–17. See also Boleslaw Krawczyk, *Liturgia e laici nell'attività e negli scritti di Pius Parsch* (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1990).

16. See Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, ed., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and patristic sources.[17] The renewal of biblical studies in France begun in 1935, made an important contribution to this rediscovery.[18]

During the famous Assisi Liturgical Congress of 1956 convoked by the Congregation of Sacred Rites, which gathered more than 1400 people from around the world, the late Jesuit biblical scholar Cardinal Augustin Bea (†1968) stated that a priest who was skilled in offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass but not in breaking open the Word of God for members of the liturgical assembly was only exercising half of his priestly ministry.[19] A number of the major speakers at the Assisi Congress were later invited by the President of Vatican II's Preparatory Liturgical Commission Cardinal Gaetano Cicognani (†1962) to join the Commission, and so it is not surprising to find many of the themes that emerged at Assisi echoed in the various drafts of what would become the Council's Liturgy Constitution, including on the subject of the homily.[20]

3. The Second Vatican Council and Implementation of the Liturgical Reforms

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) sought to restore the homily to its proper place not only within the celebration of Mass, but in other sacramental celebrations as well—the culminating point in the Liturgy of the Word.

Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium* states that "the ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled with exactitude and fidelity. 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 mystery of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever made present and active within us, especially in the liturgy."[21] The text continues: "By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith

17. See Massimo Faggioli, *True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in 'Sacrosanctum Concilium'* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press/Pueblo, 2012) 113–114.

18. See Benedict T. Viviano, "The Renewal of Biblical Studies in France 1934–1954 as an Element in Theological *Ressourcement*," in *Ressourcement*, eds. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, 305–317.

19. Augustine Bea, "The Pastoral Value of the Word of God in the Sacred Liturgy," in *The Assisi Papers: Proceedings* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1957) 74–90.

20. See Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948–1975* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990) 11–13.

21. *Sacrosanctum concilium* 35.

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 . . ."[22]

The Council's decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus* affirms that "it is the duty of pastors to preach God's word to all the Christian people so that, rooted in faith, hope and charity, they will grow in Christ, and as a Christian community bear witness to the charity which the Lord commended.[23] In *Presbyterorum ordinis,* promulgated by Blessed Paul VI (†1978) just one day before the close of Vatican II, it stated that "the proclamation of the word through preaching is the most important duty of a priest."[24]

The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* is even more explicit: "For in the readings, as explained by the homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering them spiritual nourishment: and Christ himself is present in the midst of the faithful through his word."[25] Writing in the pages of *Worship* during the final months of the Council, Monsignor Frederick McManus stated that "the proclamation and preaching of God's word constitute a divine call, to which the Eucharistic celebration is a response."[26] As a proclaimer of the word, then, the preacher is God's mouthpiece—God, as it were, speaking to His people through the preacher.

In 1975, just ten years after the Council, Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi,* affirmed the importance of proper liturgical preaching when he noted that parish communities are actually "held together" thanks to the Sunday homily.[27]

In 1982 here in the United States, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly.* It is quite a brief document with only four short chapters, yet despite its brevity, the text continues to offer precious guidelines for preachers.

22. *Sacrosanctum concilium* 52. See also Gebhard Fesenmayer, "The Homily in the Eucharistic Celebration," in *The Liturgy of Vatican II* (Vol. II), ed. William Baraúna (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966) 2: 64–82.

23. *Christus Dominus* 30/2.

24. *Presbyterorum ordinis* 4.

25. *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* 55.

26. Frederick R. McManus, "The New Rite of Mass," *Worship* 39/3 (March, 1965) 140.

27. *Evangelii nuntiandi* 43.

Indeed, although published more than thirty years ago, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* is actually very much in sync with what Pope Francis articulates in *Evangelii gaudium* so many years later: the assembly and its reception of the message as the primary focus rather than the preacher or the eloquence of the homily itself; preachers should be in touch with their congregations so that they know their needs, and can thereby more effectively preach a word that the particular assembly needs to hear; attending to the ethnic, social, and economic diversity within the particular liturgical assembly so that a positive message of inclusion rather than exclusion is preached.

Fulfilled in Your Hearing describes the preacher as a "Mediator of meaning" who needs to be a listener before he speaks, hearing both the voice of God in his preparation, and the voice of the assembly in all of its need. This listening described as "a way of life" rather than "an isolated moment"[28] will also enable the preacher to engage in critical dialogue with contemporary culture which includes the arts.[29]

4. *Verbum Domini* and its Reception

Already in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* following the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist, Pope Benedict noted that the quality of homilies needed to be improved. But in his 2010 apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* following the 2008 Synod on the Word, Benedict was even more explicit:

> The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God's word is present and at work in their everyday lives. It should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer and the Eucharistic liturgy. Consequently, those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart.

Pope Benedict continues:

28. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: USCC, 1982) 7–10.

29. Ibid., 13.

> Generic and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God's word should be avoided, as well as useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message.[30]

In the United States, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* was published by our Bishops' Conference in 2012, as a response to *Verbum Domini*. The text acknowledges that poorly prepared homilies are a cause for discouragement on the part of the laity even to the point of leading some away from the Church. Of particular significance is the document's treatment of the unique cultural and social context of the United States and various factors that have revealed new challenges to the Church's mission and the credibility of her message in this country: a strong emphasis on the individual and individual choice; the sexual abuse crisis; political polarization; relativism; consumerism and a focus on the material; a growing gap between rich and poor; attitudes of prejudice and racism; the decline of young adults in Church membership. At the same time, the text notes a hunger for a deeper spirituality on the part of many. Underlining the intrinsic connection between Eucharist and mission, it states clearly: "a homily that does not lead to mission is . . . incomplete."[31]

The preacher is described first and foremost as a man of holiness; a man of scripture; of tradition; a man of communion who always speaks with respect and reverence for others. That respect and reverence includes the way in which we speak about other Christians in our homilies, as well as the way we preach about Muslims and Jews.[32]

The document insists on respect for and attention to the various immigrant groups that have arrived in the United States in the past fifty years. Highlighted in particular is the treatment of the rapidly growing Hispanic/Latino population in the U.S. Church and the need for preachers to learn from and be exposed to various forms of Hispanic popular piety, and ordinary life in those families and communities so as to better understand the challenges they face.[33]

30. *Verbum Domini* 59.

31. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2012) 4–5.

32. Ibid., 33–41.

33. Ibid., 37–40.

5. Evangelii Gaudium

In *Evangelii gaudium: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, Pope Francis offers one of the most comprehensive treatments of the homily in magisterial documents since the Second Vatican Council, dedicating a full twenty-four numbers to this topic.[34] He does so in Chapter Three of the text. He writes:

> The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor's closeness and ability to communicate with his people. We know that the faithful attach great importance to it, and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. 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.[35]

He presents the preacher as an instrument of God who "displays his power through human words,"[36] stating that the homily is not so much a time for meditation or catechesis as "a dialogue between God and his people." But being an effective instrument of God within this dialogue means that the preacher must "know the heart of his community."[37] Well aware of the post-Conciliar risks in preaching and indeed, in the liturgy itself, where the preacher has at times appeared more like a talk show host or entertainer than God's mouthpiece, Pope Francis cautions against idiosyncratic preaching "as a form of entertainment like those presented in the media." At the same time, however, he affirms that the homily needs to be dynamic and uplifting and avoid sounding like a lecture or speech.

The Holy Father also addresses the imbalance which can occur within worship at times, when the homily is so long and developed, that the Liturgy of the Eucharist which follows almost appears as secondary:

> A 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

34. *Evangelii gaudium* 135–159.
35. Ibid., 135.
36. Ibid., 136.
37. Ibid., 137.

> of faith. If the homily goes too long, it will affect two characteristic elements of the liturgical celebration: its balance and its rhythm.[38]

Evangelii gaudium affirms that "Preaching should guide the assembly, and the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist." In other words, liturgical preaching is ultimately about our ongoing conversion to Christ—preacher and assembly together. It is about our lives being transformed—converted to Christ—by hearing that word proclaimed leading to the celebration and reception of the Holy Eucharist, so that we live differently as a result. Taking those words to heart will mean taking our preaching more seriously because so much is at stake.

The homily should be characterized by "the closeness of the preacher, the warmth of his tone of voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking, the joy of his gestures." So it should be characterized more by a "heart-to-heart conversation which 'possesses a quasi-sacramental character,' as opposed to a homily which is "purely moralistic or doctrinaire."[39]

Evangelii gaudium also stresses the importance of preaching that is contextualized and inculturated. While much attention has been given to this particular aspect in the years following Vatican II, the challenge of contextualized preaching becomes increasingly urgent, especially here in the United States as more and more parishes even in smaller cities and towns are multicultural and multilingual.[40]

Pope Francis argues for adequate homiletic preparation as a nonnegotiable in the life of a preacher:

> I presume to ask that each week a sufficient portion of personal and community time be dedicated to this task, even if less time has to be given to other important activities. Trust in the Holy Spirit who is at work during the homily is not merely passive but active and creative. It demands that we offer ourselves and all our abilities as instruments which God can use." He offers strong words for lazy preachers! "A preacher who does not prepare is not 'spiritual'; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received." What follows is a methodology for proper preparation with "humility of

38. Ibid., 138.
39. Ibid., 140; 142.
40. Ibid., 143–144.

> heart," as the starting point: prayer and 'awe filled veneration of the word', taking time to meditate upon it and study it . . .[41]

God's word needs to be personalized, the Pope argues, so that we become intimately familiar with it and "penetrated by it." This will help both the authenticity of the preacher as well as the credibility of the homily.[42] But as the preacher listens attentively to God's voice in preparing the homily, he must also "keep his ear to the people" so that he is attuned to what they need to hear and answering the questions that they are actually asking. What is called for is a "spiritual sensitivity for reading God's message in events."[43] The Holy Father concludes his treatment of the homily by encouraging the use of an attractive image, a concrete example, which can make the message easier to grasp. He writes: "A good homily, an old teacher once told me, should have 'an idea, a sentiment, an image.'"[44]

Evangelii gaudium warns against using elevated theological language which preachers might have learned in the seminary, but which is largely beyond the grasp of the average Christian: "The greatest risk for a preacher is that he becomes so accustomed to his own language that he thinks that everyone else naturally understands and uses it."[45] Finally, he states that a good homily is one which focuses on the positive rather than the negative, on what we as a community might do better rather than lamenting the ills of the present age: "Positive preaching," he notes, "always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity."[46]

6. Preaching a Sacramental Word in a Post-Conciliar Church: The Challenges That Await Us

I have quoted at length from this apostolic exhortation because I believe that what it says about the homily is vitally important. *Evangelii gaudium* offers us rich fare as we reflect upon the liturgical homily in our own day, and Pope Francis offers us much food for thought. Indeed, his words might

41. Ibid., 146.
42. Ibid., 149–152.
43. Ibid., 154.
44. Ibid., 156–157.
45. Ibid., 159.
46. Ibid., 158.

well serve as a sort of examination of conscience for those of us who are preachers: "for what we have done and what we have left undone!" We are further helped by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments' recently published *Homiletic Directory,* desired both by Pope Benedict and now Pope Francis, as a pastoral guide for homiletic preparation. The limits of time do not allow me to address its content here, but I strongly encourage a careful reading of the text.[47]

How then, to find a way forward? It must be said that this challenge to faithful preaching in the twenty-first century begins with the diocesan bishop himself as the chief pastor and indeed, the chief liturgist of the diocese, as the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* reminds us.[48] During the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist at which I was a participant, I stated the following in my intervention:

> We bishops in our role as the primary preachers in our local churches must lead by our own good example rather than merely asking our priests and deacons to be better prepared homilists for our people. We must not forget that ours is the Church that has produced John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, and Patrick—saints known not only for their holiness of life, but also for their eloquence as preachers of the Word of God.[49]

Recognizing the seriousness of this challenge as we consider our future as a Church, and the deep hunger on the part of so many Catholic laity for a homily that enriches their faith, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, proposed in his intervention at the Synod on the Word that the Church would do well to proclaim a "Year of Preaching," following the 2008 Pauline Year. He also suggested that preachers might appropriately include the laity of their parishes in their homiletic preparation—in other words, meeting with them weekly to prayerfully reflect upon the readings for the following Sunday—so as to hear their needs and concerns, their joys and hopes enlightened by the lectionary readings for that particular week.

Today in November, 2016, our world and our Church are in a very different place than on December 8, 1965 when the Second Vatican Council

47. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *The Homiletic Directory* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

48. *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* 22.

49. Wilton D. Gregory, "Synod of Bishops XI Ordinary General Assembly: The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church," 4.

drew to a close. Of course, it is the same Christ and the same "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" in terms of fundamental doctrine and belief, but the ecclesiological and sociological landscape has changed significantly, and this does and will have serious implications for the credibility of our own preaching as the multicultural Church of the twenty-first century continues to emerge. Technological advances; the ever-changing world of social media; the plight of migrants and refugees; climate change and concern for the future of our planet as articulated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*—these are just a few realities that were not on the radar screen fifty years ago.

In other words, we need to ask ourselves how the vision of humanity and communion proclaimed in the Bible sheds light upon current situations of globalization and migration; of poverty and unemployment; of acts of terrorism; of violence and conflict; of growing racial tensions in the cities of this nation; of broken relationships; of loneliness and aging. And at the same time, as we read the news whether in print editions or via social media, how does the Bible—the scriptural passages which our three-year Lectionary offers us for the coming Sunday or feast, help us to find a way forward in light of current events and crises?

Some years ago now, the former Master of the Dominican Order Father Timothy Radcliffe had this to say during an address he gave in Rome:

> Our preaching will only gather in the people of God, if we honestly name their sorrows and joys. We have to be seen to speak truthfully, to tell things as they are. Do people recognize their lives in our words? Does their pain and happiness find some space in our words? Do they recognize the truth of their experience in what we say? . . . Telling the truth is more than accurately reporting the experience of our people. It is letting the story of Jesus disclose the true meaning of our lives.[50]

This is well articulated in the Council's Decree on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* when it states that "Bishops . . . should, together with their priests, so preach the news of Christ that all the earthly activities of faith will be bathed in the light of the Gospel."[51] Dominican

50. Timothy Radcliffe, "The Sacramentality of the Word," in *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, ed. Keith Pecklers (London: Continuum, 2003) 140–141.

51. *Gaudium et spes* 43.

Sister Mary Catherine Hilkert speaks of this as "naming grace." She writes: "Naming grace means 'naming the present' – trying to identify where the Spirit of God is active in contemporary human life and in communities of believers who make the gospel a concrete reality in limited and fragmentary, but still tangible ways."[52]

7. Conclusion

As we consider our common liturgical future as preachers of God's holy word, we are invited first and foremost to listen—to give ourselves over to God's grace and attending to the voice of the Spirit, so that we will be empowered to preach good news—the good news of God's forgiving love—the good news of God's mercy: "mercy within mercy," rather than judgment or condemnation, as Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii gaudium*.

Attending to the voice of the Spirit, then, means that homiletic preparation must always begin in silence—in prayer and contemplation—asking for the grace of preaching the words that Christ would have us preach, rather than our own. This is because preaching is not solely an act of human communication but more importantly, divine proclamation. Saint Paul knew this quite well, as did John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo along with the other Church Fathers. The German Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (†1945) once stated that "the proclaimed word is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word."[53]

At the end of the day, there are varying degrees of communication and oratorical skills, and some have been gifted with more talent in this area than others. But it is only through God's grace that preaching becomes proclamation—sacramental and effectual within the life of the Church. For those of us entrusted with the ministry of preaching, it is about giving ourselves over to God's grace as God's instruments—instruments that enable God to work through our human limits and speak a healing word to those so desperately in need of hearing it. So it is actually not within our own ability to construct "a good homily." That is God's work.

52. Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1998) 193.

53. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Proclaimed Word," in *Theories of Preaching*, ed. Richard Lischer (Durham: Labryinth Press, 1987) 28.

We can only attempt to preach faithfully in the name of Christ—praying and preparing well, and trusting that God will do the rest. Such attentiveness to the Lord's voice means that we will need to be equally attentive to what's going on in the world—our hearts and minds, eyes and ears open to discerning where God's mission is at work both globally and also in the very local community where the Church dwells.

Perhaps our homilies need to be more modest then—more honest—stating only those things that we actually believe ourselves—words which we, too, are willing to act upon, as we give ourselves over to the ongoing conversion in our own lives as proclaimers and preachers of the word: "Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach," as the bishop says to the newly ordained deacon in presenting the Book of the Gospels during the ordination rite.[54] Such honesty in preaching will lead to greater authenticity as we proclaim the word, and will make our own words with all their human limits, more credible.

I conclude with the words of the late Dominican Father William Hill (†2001):

> The Word, which is the bearer of God's life and meaning for us, incarnates itself in human history, midway between the one who utters it and those who listen. But we must take seriously the fragility of the human situation here. God's act in history is a *kenosis*; God's intentions remain those of setting up the kingdom in and through the weak things of this world. And so, paradoxically, God cannot do without the stammering ways in which we strive to give utterance to that Word. It is part of faith to accept that.[55]

ABSTRACT

When considering the future of the Church in the United States and throughout the world, and the task of the new evangelization in an increasingly secular and even "post-Christian" society, certainly in the Western

54. *The Roman Pontifical* (Washington, DC: The International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 1978) 185.

55. William Hill, "Preaching as a 'Moment' in Theology," in *Search for the Absent God*, ed. Mary Catherine Hilkert (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 186. Quoted in Paul Janowiak, *The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in the Liturgical Assembly* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press/Pueblo, 2000) 187.

world, then the significance of the homily is more crucial than ever. The author starts with a historical survey of the evolution of liturgical preaching over the centuries leading up to the Second Vatican Council and the implementation of the liturgical reforms. He then considers the homily in light of recent magisterial documents, including Pope Benedict's post-synodal apostolic exhortation Verbum Domini *and Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation* Evangelii gaudium. *Finally, he addresses the United States context, and the challenges to faithful preaching in an increasingly multicultural and diverse Church that is the North American reality today in the twenty-first century.*