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*Our congregations need direct reference
to the persuasive element
that links truth and response in our homilies.*

”The soulful homily”

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In an engaging article in the November 1999 issue, Gary Coulter highlights the importance of “The Scriptural Homily” (pp. 62-66). There he emphasizes the centrality and richness of Sacred Scripture as the “stuff” of the sermon, as contrasted with non-scriptural issues as the subject matter. There, too, he offers a strong appeal to read the texts of the Fathers of the Church and learn from them, since they were preachers chronologically close to, and personally moved by, the events of which they speak. In general, his thesis is sound and worthy of reminder: “Presenting the truth, the homily should awaken a response from the people, moving their minds and hearts towards a deeper faith that leads to their salvation.”

But a big question remains: how is one to effect this awakening? The example that Coulter gives (“There is something of ___ in Sarah”) is a clear demonstration of how scriptural texts and events can be incorporated in a homily. There we hear about the Incarnation, the Presentation, John the Baptist, and even St. Therese. We see reference to the writings of John, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Paul, and the Psalms. But this is an “occasional” homily, one dedicated to a particular event rather than to the “routine” preaching that takes place in Sunday sermons. What unifies the example used by Coulter is the event which occasions it (i.e., the funeral of a five-year-old girl), not the readings of the day. And on an occasion such as this, the attention of the audience would either be guaranteed or precluded; that is, the congregation might pay particular attention to the preacher, or would be quite out of sorts due to the experience of a tragic death.

In addition, Coulter often refers to how Scripture is to be “used” in the homily. While his choice of verbs could be attributed to the limits of language or ascribed to authorial convenience, the repeated reference to this action has a subtle implication, however unintended. To “use” Scripture is to envision the Sacred Word as a tool, as something secondary to the primary task at hand, which is to preach. But Sacred Scripture, in a certain sense, is preaching. As such, the task of the homilist is to facilitate God’s speaking to believers through God’s own Word, a sacred duty that demands a particular

“attitude” to be taken toward the inspired text and to be cultivated in the act of preaching.

In sum, Coulter’s article could well be complemented by a more methodological focus, one which tries to establish the link between the “truth” of the scriptural homily and the “response” which it is meant to evoke. For preaching that teaches may offer knowledge to one’s mind. And preaching that exhorts may provide impetus for one’s action. But only preaching that shares the beauty and warmth of the “good news” will bring salvation to the heart and soul . . . that is, to the person wholly redeemed by Jesus Christ. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate this homiletic reality through recourse to one of the Church’s master preachers: St. Francis de Sales.

“On the Preacher and Preaching”

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), bishop of Geneva, once wrote a “letter” by this title to Andre Fremyot, the new archbishop of Bourges, in response to the latter’s query for advice on this episcopal duty as he moved to his new see (1604). Reference to the practice of a bishop’s preaching in this text is, of course, historically conditioned. The “sermon” at the time was often rendered as a speech, separate and distinct from the Eucharistic celebration and much longer than a homily given in our day. Moreover, the importance and popularity of the sermons was unquestioned; to deliver a sermon was a public and communal event for the town, and there was little competition for the listener’s attention! And, in light of the controversies with the Protestants that were swirling all about, the need to teach accurately and preach well was of special importance.

The letter is likened to a fraternal exhortation on the part of this Doctor of the Church. In his typically deferential manner, he writes at some length despite his insistence that “I do not hold the common opinion”—and this, from one whose collection of sermons fills numerous volumes! To his friend and colleague, St. Francis de Sales offers simple and direct advice, with words on the art of preaching that are memorable even for modern day prelates. Some of these aphorisms give the reader a taste of his wisdom: “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.” “The supreme art [of preaching] is to have no art.” “I like preaching that issues from love of neighbor rather than from indignation at them. . . .” And, ultimately, “To love well is sufficient for speaking well.”

Yet this homiletic instruction is not merely a compilation of pious thoughts or pithy statements. Adopting a typically scholastic framework, St. Francis de Sales gives a thoroughgoing analysis of the conditions for preaching, the elements adopted in an interpretation of the Word of God, and the method for how one must preach. While the letter is, in one sense, a very personal appeal from the pen of a friend, it is also a short treatise which offers to preachers today a methodology that supports and complements the role of preaching which Coulter has explained. As a transition to our examination of this method, consider St. Francis de Sales’ own definition of preaching: “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.”

Problematic preaching?

From his many instructions in this letter, we can cull a basic structure to the sermon that includes five important elements: an introduction, teaching, persuading, moving, and a conclusion. The “introduction” is simply an oratorical device whose purpose is to get the listeners’ attention. The conclusion is a recapitulation (“with some brief but more animated and vigorous words”) that serves to link the Word with the Eucharist that follows. What concerns us here are the three main elements and the relation among them.

The first element—to teach—corresponds to Coulter’s focus on “truth” as this involves a fusion of horizons between the writers of the Word and those who are presently listening to it. While many advances have been made in our understanding of Sacred Scripture, a problem in this regard may be the role of biblical scholarship itself. In contemporary homilies, there is, at times, too little scholarship, and the preacher resorts

simply to repeating the text or retelling the story. At other times, there may be too much scholarship, as when the preacher overwhelms the congregation by giving a full-scale “commentary” on the text.

Given our present-day situation, in comparison to the lengthy sermons preached by St. Francis de Sales and others in the Church of his day, it might be of great benefit for us to adopt his admonition of speaking briefly but well. Considering the time allotted to the homily, and the ability of listeners’ to assimilate what is being said, perhaps preachers today should focus on only one aspect of the day’s scriptural texts, one dimension to the multiplicity of teachings and richness of insight that the inspired Word offers us. St. Francis de Sales explains several ways to “break open” this Sacred Word, for example, using the four “senses” of interpretation, advancing “proofs,” or suggesting “similitudes.” But nowhere does he suggest that we adopt all of these in a single sermon!

With regard to the third structural element—to move—we see here a comparable focus on Coulter’s sense of the importance of a “response” on the part of listeners. While transforming faith into action is certainly a valid concern, one problem with modern day preaching, notoriously that of the Catholic variety, is to consider morality as the starting point, or to treat behavior as the focal point, of the homily. How often are the contemporary preacher’s words geared toward exhortation (“let us . . .”) or the text of a homily tempered with requirements (using “should” or “must”). But, without the necessary “persuasive” element, this concern for good living may easily fall on deaf ears. In that case, even the more engaging homily will end up sounding like a “command” performance rather than a declaration of God’s saving deed that impels the hearer to act accordingly.

Salesian persuasion

What St. Francis de Sales offers us is the notion that “moving” the congregation to lead a good life is the result of good preaching; that is, it is a response born in the heart and soul that happens when the preaching is done well. To be sure, this continual conversion of believers is a goal that the preacher has in mind: “Therefore, the

preacher's end is that the sinner dead in iniquity may live to justice, and that just men, who possess spiritual life, 'may have it more abundantly' and become more and more perfect. . . ." And to achieve this goal, the saint describes the two homiletic elements just mentioned, namely, to instruct or teach, and to move: "To sum it all up, the preacher must bring light to the intellect and warmth to the will."

But what links these two tasks, and makes them effective, is the middle element in the structure—the technique by which the preacher is able to persuade the congregation. This unifying element between Coulter's "truth" and "response," and St. Francis de Sales' "instruct" and "move" is not fully delineated in the saint's letter on preaching. He does take pains to respond to a prevalent opinion of his time that good preaching must give "delight" to the audience. But here he makes an important distinction in claiming that "there is a delight that follows upon learning and movement of the will." Quite different from a preaching that entertains, which he does not counsel, true homiletic delight "is not distinct from teaching and moving but dependent on them."

With this caveat in mind, we must nevertheless fill in what is lacking in the saint's small treatise on preaching, a remedy that can be made sense of by inference rather than citation. His letter focuses on the teaching element, and appeals to the need to move a congregation to action, but it does not explicitly treat the subject of persuasion. That is, he presumes that effective teaching, itself, will motivate the listener to live the good life. But, while providing light to the intellect and warmth to the will is necessary, as even Coulter recognizes, the difficulty with putting this into practice in the modern day pulpit is that our congregations need direct reference to the persuasive element that links truth and response.

In other words, we live in a postmodern culture that is quite different from seventeenth century France. However unwittingly, it has inculcated, even in believers, a certain indifference to the appeal of God's Word. With so much information at hand through a variety of technological means, the unconscious tendency for a congregation is to say "so what?" when confronted with a biblical truth newly disclosed to them. With so many

demands on one's time in the hectic adventure of life today, the unspoken position "why should I?" confronts any preacher's attempt to exhort particular behavior.

While keeping in mind St. Francis de Sales' notion that true homiletic "delight" issues from the combination of teaching and moving, we might say that in today's world preachers need to persuade their congregations to smile! St. Francis de Sales alludes to this when, for example, he comments on how to preach with regard to virtues. Though it is not the method he most prefers, he does acknowledge that one way to preach about the Christian life is by "showing how the virtue treated is worthy of honor, useful, and delightful or pleasing." But this assumes that the goodness of a virtuous life is, in fact, something to be preferred or desired on the part of the listener!

To encourage this preference and desire, where today it is not necessarily assumed, the preacher in the Salesian tradition must actually give his congregation "good news." More than providing knowledge about the text, the preacher must convince his hearers as to why this truth is truly "news" for them in the current situation of their lives. More than exhorting a way of acting on the part of humans, the preacher must win them over to seeing how God's words and deeds in Scripture are themselves "good" for us, in a way that no other good surpasses. And to do this, the preacher himself must hear the good news, so that those who listen to him will, in turn, see and hear what is so good about the news that he is proclaiming in the homily.

Attitude before the Word

This brings us, in conclusion, to the need for prayer on the part of the preacher—an obvious truth, perhaps, but one whose methodological connection to the scriptural and soulful homily is not always made evident. Standing, sitting, or kneeling before the biblical text about which the homily is to be crafted, the preacher is not there to "use" God's Word in service of his own, but, instead, to be used by God, in and through the Word he reads and the homily he speaks.

The prayer of the preacher can take place at two points: remotely, in preparation of the homily to be delivered, and proximately, just prior to speaking the words. Consider that the one who ascends the pulpit first prays silently that God be in his heart and on his lips that he might “worthily proclaim the Gospel.” How easy it would be to add a petition that we might also preach good news!

When this prayerful approach to preaching becomes part of the preacher’s preparation, whether remote or proximate, then the scriptural homily will become also a soulful one. Then, too, will we begin to appropriate the personal and spiritual truth with which St. Francis de Sales concludes his letter on the preacher and preaching: “We must not seek our own honor but that of God. Let it be, and God will seek for ours.”

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