

Preaching as Praying: Complementary Methods for Sacred Eloquence

by Thomas F. Dailey

Who can forget the arresting commentary about the state of preaching penned by Pope Francis in his first full-length magisterial document? In *Evangelii gaudium*, the Holy Father writes, “We know that the faithful attach great importance to it [preaching], 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!”¹ While that comment may elicit a chuckle of assent from those who have shared the experience, in the pulpit or in the pews, it is no off-handed remark. Having been included in an apostolic exhortation, the pope’s sentiment—to which he added, “It is sad that this is the case”—is now registered as official Church teaching.

Less memorable, perhaps, but no less stinging is a commentary on the clergy excerpted from a book on “the beauty of Gospel joy at the center of the Christian life” and published in the Italian edition of *L’Osservatore Romano*.² The author, Giulio Cirignano, claims that the major obstacle impeding this joy, and the conversion sought by Pope Francis in his plan for the Church, “is constituted, in some measure, by the attitude of a good part of the clergy.”

He describes this mentality as one that is closed off within the horizon “of habitual practices, outmoded language, and repetitive thought without vitality.” He then goes on to explain three reasons for this.

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First, Cirignano claims that a theological and biblical sensibility is scarce among today’s clergy, a deficit he attributes to a lack of continuing education. Second, he complains that clergy still operate according to the paradigm of the priest as “solitary protagonist,” an image from yester-year of the pastor as “*capo*” [head] and master of all things in the parish. Third, and of most relevance for our argument, he rails against the prevailing “modality of conceptualizing religious experience” in Counter-Reformation terms of religion rather than faith. For preachers, this distinction raises a related concern because the modality by which one thinks generally carries over to the mode in which one speaks.

According to Cirignano, while people tend to consider faith and religion to be almost synonymous terms, “in reality, they are profoundly different experiences....the God of religion is, more or less, (a) projection of man, of his thoughts, his fears, his needs. It is a hypothetical god. Faith has an entirely different origin. It is the acceptance (or

1 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 135, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter cited in-text as EG).

2 Giulio Cirignano, “La conversione chiesta da Papa Francesco: Abitudine non è fedeltà,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (22-23 July 2017). The article (available at <http://ilsismografo.blogspot.com/2017/07/vaticano-la-conversione-chiesta-da-papa.html>) is excerpted from a chapter entitled “Il clero dorme” (“The Clergy Sleeps”) in *Bellezza del gaudio evangelico: Al centro della vita cristiana* (Livorno: Mauro Pagliai Editore, 2017).

reception) of a humanly unthinkable event. In the experience of faith, it is not, in the first place, man who goes toward God, but the opposite. God renders himself able to be experienced by man, who is invited to accept (or receive) him. Faith is the emptying of man and the fullness of God, in whom man finds his complete dignity.” He concludes that, “When the priest is marked too much by a religious mentality and too little by a clear faith, then everything becomes more complicated because he risks remaining a victim of many things invented by man concerning God and his will. When it is man talking about God, he does so as man, imagining, hypothesizing, and sometimes replacing Him [God].”

Preachers may cringe at the criticism, but the claims made by Pope Francis and his commentators do inspire reflection on the communicative aspect of the mission to proclaim the Good News. The question remains valid. Do today’s preachers speak more about religion or faith? Are words from the pulpit more about the human or the divine, more about what people can and should do, or about what God has done and continues to do for us?

The significance of that dichotomy leads to our consideration of an alternative to Cirignano’s lament about how clergy think and speak. While he argues that talk of religious experience today suffers from being an outmoded remnant of Counter-Reformation thinking, we propose, on the contrary, that one of the great Counter-Reformation preachers—St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622)—can serve as a source and model of sacred eloquence for preachers. In fact, the saint’s conception of the preacher’s work finds close parallels to the modality of thinking and speaking promoted by the pope with the same name.³ What we suggest is that when they appreciate preaching as praying, through the complementary methodologies expounded by St. Francis de Sales, today’s preachers will have at their disposal an inspired means for effectively communicating the Good News of religious faith. Undertaking the communication of the Word in this way, neither preachers nor people will have to suffer any more from homilies!

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622)

The renown of St. Francis de Sales, Bishop and Doctor of the Church, comes primarily from two modes by which he communicated the truths of the faith. First, he was a widely and highly regarded spiritual director. His numerous letters of spiritual counsel evidence an “inspired common sense” that continues to appeal to readers seeking holiness in the world. A number of those letters he re-wrote and edited under the title of *An Introduction to the Devout Life*, a religious best-seller that has never been out of print since it first appeared in 1609.

In that work, the saint anticipates the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the “universal call to holiness” as a life of virtue lived according to one’s particular vocation.⁴ Because prayer gives the inspiration for, and impetus to, this devout life, the second part of that classic guide to holiness spells out a simple approach to prayer that makes meditation “do-able” for the masses and not just an exercise for contemplative monks and nuns.

Second, St. Francis de Sales was a prominent and popular preacher. In the decree by which he was named a Doctor of the Church, Pope Pius IX hailed him in these words: “Through his teaching he handed down the most insightful maxims and was successful in restoring the dignity of sacred eloquence damaged by the evil of the times to the ancient splendor exemplified by the Holy Fathers; learned speakers emerged from this school and abundant benefits redounded to the entire church because of them. And so Francis is regarded by all as both restorer and teacher of sacred eloquence.”⁵ Foregoing the historical arguments that support those papal accolades, it suffices

3 See Thomas F. Dailey, “From Francis to Francis: How a Saint and a Pope Share a Vision of Preaching,” in *Love Is the Perfection of the Mind: Salesian Studies Presented to Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS on the Occasion of His 90th Birthday*, ed. Joseph Chorpenning, Thomas Dailey, and Daniel Wisniewski (Center Valley, PA: Salesian Center for Faith & Culture, 2017), 19-34.

4 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), chapter five: “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church,” http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

5 Pius IX, *Dives in Misericordia Deus* (16 November 1877). Translation available at www.desales.edu/fileserver/salesian/PDF/PiusIX-Dives.pdf.

to say that Francis de Sales was so highly esteemed for his skills as a preacher that he is credited with converting an entire region by his words and was invited to deliver sermons for liturgical seasons in churches and dioceses throughout France.

The saint also theorized about the art of ecclesial oratory in a short treatise called *On the Preacher and Preaching*.⁶ He had composed it as a letter in response to a newly appointed bishop who asked for his advice. Readers find in that work pearls of wisdom that remain pertinent for those who take to pulpits today. For example, he opines that “The supreme art [of preaching] is to have no art” since “To love well is sufficient for speaking well.” He also claims that if preachers “say marvelous things, but do not say them well” then “they are nothing,” whereas if they “say only a little but say it well” then they will have said “very much.” Perhaps his most popular principle is the direct, even blunt, advice he gives to the new bishop, namely, “if you can’t be good, at least be brief.”

From the saint’s thoughts about preaching, we can draw a parallel to what he teaches about praying. He himself does not propose a connection between the two subjects. But the three interconnected steps to both exercises point to the saint’s insightful grasp of the process by which people grow spiritually. As such, they offer a helpful method to form what preachers do in the preparation and delivery of their homilies.

Salesian Meditation

To set the stage for this proposal, we must first review St. Francis de Sales’s teaching on mental prayer, or meditation, as distinct from vocal praying. Following an intentional preparation that includes becoming aware of God’s presence and invoking God’s assistance, Salesian meditation follows a route from considerations through affections to resolutions, all of which are linked to a particular mystery of God revealed to us in the Sacred Scriptures.

To initiate this way of praying, the saint counsels the use of our imagination to concentrate upon a particular person or place or happening in which God acts. In keeping with his own Jesuit training, he says that this is best accomplished by closely reading a biblical story and picturing ourselves as being present then and there. By focusing our consciousness in this way—by putting ourselves into the scene—we become part of a living story. We see what is happening. We hear the words being spoken. We touch those present. By means of our physical senses, we mentally conjure the reality of the divine mystery before us.

While it may seem like this way of thinking is just “making things up,” in the spiritual life this focusing of one’s attention serves to re-present the event to us and thus to draw us into an encounter with God. With that mystery in mind, the saint counsels us to allow the Holy Spirit to guide the action of prayer from thought (considerations) to feeling (affections) to action (resolutions).

First, by an act of our mind, we thoroughly consider one or more details about the scene we are picturing. What is really going on there? What is actually being said there? What do we hear in the specific words spoken? What do we see in how people react to what is happening? What do we actively think – about the event being narrated and about ourselves as re-living that event in the present moment?

In the realm of prayer, this narrative thinking is no mere intellectual exercise. The purpose of considering the biblical story with such thoughtfulness is to arouse in us a sense of the holy. It seeks to excite an affection in our hearts that inspires us in a sacred way. For St. Francis de Sales, this second element is pivotal to the process of meditation, for it is in and on the human heart that the Spirit acts most powerfully.

⁶ Francis de Sales, *On the Preacher and Preaching*, trans. with an introduction and notes by John K. Ryan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964).

The saint enumerates the possible affections we may excite in this process: “love of God and neighbor, desire for heaven and glory, zeal for the salvation of souls, imitation of the life of our Lord, compassion, awe, joy, fear of God’s displeasure, judgment, and hell, hatred of sin, confidence in God’s goodness and mercy, and deep sorrow for the sins of our past life.”⁷ Whatever be the kind of affection that arises through our reflection, the point he emphasizes in meditation is to allow our hearts to be touched by God, to be kindled by the flame of divine inspiration. Furthermore, being so stirred to feel something for God and about God and with God, we will thereby be moved to act in union with the divine will.

That is the last step in the process of meditation, and it, too, is an important one. Devotion, according to St. Francis de Sales, is not simply a thought or a feeling. Holiness is something to be enacted! Thus, Salesian meditation always concludes with a resolution, a decision to do something specific and concrete, preferably something that can be accomplished that same day. This is how conversion comes alive. We seek an alignment between our human reality and the divine mystery about which we prayed, in a way that directs us to change our lives for the better.⁸

Considerations, affections, and resolutions—these are the three progressions that drive meditation in the Salesian tradition. They arise from, and correspond to, the human faculties of our mind, our heart, and our will. Of the three, the affections of the heart occupy the central place and play the decisive role in mental prayer. As we shall now see, a parallel triptych appears in the saint’s advice on preaching, where once again the middle term stands as the most important.⁹

On the Preacher and Preaching

In his letter St. Francis de Sales offers this definition of the homiletic task: “to preach is the publication and declaration of God’s will ... to the end of instructing and moving (people) to serve his divine Majesty in this world so as to be saved in the next.” To accomplish this, the saint says, “the preacher must bring light to the intellect and warmth to the will.”

In the first place, then, preaching entails instruction. Just as Salesian mental prayer begins with the mind, in thoughtful consideration of a biblical mystery, so preaching needs to “bring light to the intellect” regarding the biblical texts that are proclaimed.

Especially in an age when biblical literacy is on the wane—where it exists at all!—preachers have much to do in helping people to understand God’s holy Word. But this does not mean that preaching is primarily exegesis or catechesis, as the Vatican’s recently published *Homiletic Directory*¹⁰ clearly points out. On the one hand, “The people of God have a great hunger to explore the Scriptures, and pastors should provide them with opportunities and resources that enable them to deepen their knowledge of God’s Word. However, the Sunday homily is not the occasion for in-depth biblical exegesis: there is not the time to do this well, and more importantly the homilist is called to proclaim how God’s word is being fulfilled here and now.” On the other hand, “the homily is not catechetical instruction, even if catechesis is an important dimension of the homily. As with biblical exegesis, there is not the time to do this properly; furthermore, this would represent a variation on the practice of presenting a discourse at Mass that is not really integral to the liturgical celebration itself.” Practically speaking, either an academic lecture on the fine points of biblical scholarship or a lesson in religious education filled with theological terminology or the jargon of ecclesiastical discourse would overwhelm most people in the pews!

7 Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. and ed. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 2003), part 2, chap. 6, 78.

8 See also Thomas F. Dailey, OSFS, *Praying with Francis de Sales* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1997).

9 What follows draws from Thomas Dailey, OSFS, “The Soulful Homily,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (May 2000): 56-60.

10 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Homiletic Directory* (Vatican City, 2014), no. 6, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20140629_direttorio-omiletico_en.html.

For this reason, and keeping in mind the liturgical nature of the homily,¹¹ preachers today would do well to adopt the Salesian admonition of speaking briefly but well and to recognize the limited ability of listeners to pay attention, let alone assimilate what the preacher is saying. As a popular dictum puts it: “the mind can only absorb what the backside can endure”! So, while preaching does need to get people to think biblically and spiritually, homiletic instruction can be more effective if it focuses on a single element of the day’s readings—a striking development or dominant image or memorable saying. Exploring just one dimension to the sacred story told on a particular day or expounding on just one insight from a given passage can suffice to make a powerful and lasting impact.

Preaching also includes motivation. Just as Salesian mental prayer concludes with a resolution on how to act in keeping with divine inspiration, so preaching needs to “bring warmth to the will” by moving hearers to act on God’s Word in their lives.

Especially in an age that relegates religion to worship—at least for those who still go to Church!—preachers have much to do in helping people to bring their faith to bear on all aspects of their lives. But note that in the homiletic progression suggested by Francis de Sales, the call to action is a final step, not a first one. For this saint, preaching does not begin with morality, nor does it speak primarily in exhortations (“let us . . .”) or demands (“should” or “must”) for Christian living.

We find an echo of this in Pope Francis, who said in his first published interview that “the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives,” whereas “[t]oday sometimes it seems that the opposite order is prevailing.”¹² Of course, both the pope and the saint are concerned that preachers inspire people to lead good lives. But when preachers start with that, or focus exclusively on that, their words risk falling on deaf ears, and homilies end up sounding like a “command performance” rather than a declaration of God’s saving deed that inspires and impels the hearer to act accordingly.

For St. Francis de Sales, that impulsion comes from the middle element in the process, the bridge between intellect and will that is the human heart. During meditation, this link is forged by the affections, which are stirred by consideration of the biblical mystery and which move the will to a resolute response to that revelation. So, too, in the process of preaching, affective delight at hearing God’s Good News connects knowledge of the biblical text with the conversion that follows as the effect of hearing the sacred Word.

St. Francis de Sales is careful to distinguish what he means by giving “delight” in preaching. Far from his mind is any notion that a preacher should be an entertainer! Nor does he think it occurs when an audience is impressed by the preacher’s oratorical flair or rhetorical skill. The delight in one’s heart of which the saint speaks comes from an appreciation of the Word of God itself, just as teaching the intellect and moving the will are dependent on that same Word. Similarly, Pope Francis calls this delight a “new joy in the faith” that comes from hearing the preached word, whose message at heart is always “the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ” (EG, no. 11).

In other words, the Gospel delight to which St. Francis de Sales alludes is the fruit of persuasion. It comes from the conviction that we can live differently or live better in light of what God has revealed in the sacred Scriptures.

11 The *Homiletic Directory* emphasizes this by stating that the homily “is not only an instruction, it is also an act of worship” and “also possesses a sacramental significance” (no. 4). The document summarizes the liturgical character of the homily in terms of its particular dynamic: “it reflects on the meaning of the readings and prayers of a given celebration in light of the Paschal Mystery; and it leads the assembly to the Eucharistic celebration in which they have communion in the Paschal Mystery itself” (no. 15).

12 Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God,” interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro, *America* 209/9 (30 September 2013). Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 34: “The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ’s message.”

On this point, however, the seventeenth-century Master offers no further elaboration, likely because in his day one generally presumed that effective teaching, on its own, would motivate listeners to lead a good life.

Unfortunately, times have changed. Today's congregations actually need to be persuaded, to hear directly and experience personally the link between God's saving truth and their lived response. The homiletic task is to make that connection for them and with them. As Pope Francis puts it, "Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings" (EG, no. 44).

That task of connecting God's love and our life is probably more challenging today than in the saint's time. However unwittingly, our culture 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 ask "So what?" when confronted with a biblical truth newly disclosed to them. With so many demands on everyone's time in the hectic pace of contemporary life, the unspoken question "Why should I?" confronts any preacher's attempt to exhort faith-filled behavior.

Consequently, to foster a desire for holiness where today it is not necessarily assumed, the preacher must actually give his congregation "good news." More than providing knowledge about the text, the preacher needs to convince his hearers as to why biblical truth is really "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 Sacred Scripture themselves are "good" for them, in a way that no other good in this world can match or surpass.

For St. Francis de Sales, the homily registers as truly Good News when the homilist preaches God's Word "*cor ad cor*." In his letter *On the Preacher and Preaching*, he explains this classic phrase: "In a word, it means to speak with affection and devotion, with simplicity and candor, and with confidence, and to be convinced of the doctrine we teach and of what we persuade. . . . Our words must set aflame, not by shouts and unrestrained gestures, but by inward affection. They must issue from our heart rather than from our mouth. We must speak well, but heart speaks to heart, (whereas) the lips speak only to men's ears."

To speak "*cor ad cor*" is to be inspired and inspiring. For this to happen, 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. Pope Francis says it more boldly in a homily at the ordination of priests: "May this be the nourishment of the People of God; may your homilies not be boring; may your homilies touch the heart of the people because they come from your heart, because what you're telling them is what you carry in your heart. It is in this way that the Word of God is passed on and thus your teaching will be a joy and support to Christ's faithful; the fragrance of your lives will be your testimony, because examples edify, whereas words without examples are empty, mere ideas that never reach the heart and even do harm: they do no good! May you continue the sanctifying work of Christ."¹³

And that brings preaching back, full circle, to praying.

Preaching as Praying

It has always and rightly been said that effective preaching begins with praying, that the preacher needs first to be a person of prayer. But what we suggest here goes beyond that. Salesian spirituality can guide the homilist to treat

¹³ Francis, homily at the ordination of priests (26 April 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150426_omelia-ordinazioni-sacerdotali.html.

preaching *as* praying. Why? Because the process that goes on in his heart when he speaks with God in meditation is the same process that can be followed when he speaks to people from the pulpit.

In prayer, the Holy Spirit speaks to the heart, inspiring it with affections that flow from a consideration of supernatural mystery and that lead to a resolution to act in accord with that divine revelation. In preaching, the effective homilist speaks in similar fashion to the hearts of others, persuading them with the Good News that is expressed in the texts of the Bible and that is enacted in the lives of believers.

The key to both is the middle term—affections in prayer and persuasion in preaching. By connecting the divine Word to human hearts — his own and his people’s—preachers enter and “continue the sanctifying work of Christ,” thereby fulfilling their priestly mission.

When preachers bring these complementary methodologies together, their homilies will engage people in a way consistent with, and distinctive to, liturgical experience. Preaching becomes praying as from the pulpit the homilist leads those in the pews through the same spiritual progression that has the power to transform their lives. From head to heart to will, from instruction to persuasion to motivation – that is how divine inspiration still happens!

For preachers themselves, when they preach as they pray, they fulfill the prayer said before they speak, namely, for God to be in their hearts and on their lips that they might proclaim his holy Gospel worthily and well. For the people, preaching as praying becomes what St. Francis de Sales calls an “ordinary means of inspiration,” which he describes in his *Treatise on the Love of God* as “a heavenly ray which brings into (their) hearts a light full of heat, by which it makes (them) see the good and inflames (them) with a desire to pursue it.”¹⁴

Thus, the complementary methods of praying and preaching proposed by St. Francis de Sales provide a practical effective response to the criticism of clergy with which this article was introduced. For the Salesian emphasis on preaching, “*cor ad cor*” offers a sure and certain way to communicate an experience of the God of faith, whom all people yearn to encounter, more so than the God of religion, whom so many today have abandoned.

And when preachers hear and speak the Good News of our merciful God, they will give voice to that positivity¹⁵ and fervor,¹⁶ that warmth and joy¹⁷ about which the Holy Father also speaks in *Evangelii gaudium*. By preaching as they pray, they can realize what Pope Francis means when he says, “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” (EG, no. 135). Then the Sunday experience in parishes will no longer be sad—for the people or the preacher!

14 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, book 8, chap. 10; trans. John K. Ryan (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1975), vol. II, 82.

15 Francis, EG, no. 159: “Another feature of a good homily is that it is positive. It is not so much concerned with pointing out what shouldn’t be done, but with suggesting what we can do better. In any case, if it does draw attention to something negative, it will also attempt to point to a positive and attractive value, lest it remain mired in complaints, laments, criticisms and reproaches. Positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity.”

16 Francis, EG, no. 143: “The challenge of an inculturated preaching consists in proclaiming a synthesis, not ideas or detached values. Where your synthesis is, there lies your heart. The difference between enlightening people with a synthesis and doing so with detached ideas is like the difference between boredom and heartfelt fervour. The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people.”

17 Francis, EG, no. 140: “This setting, both maternal and ecclesial, in which the dialogue between the Lord and his people takes place, should be encouraged 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.”