I am often dismayed when I read the works of Catholic authors on the topic of preaching. Most often, there are no references to the works of Anglican/Protestant homileticians. Yet, for over thirty years these homileticians have brought new theories, strategies, and insights to the practice of homiletics through a vast number of books.

In the November 1998 issue of *New Theology Review*, my colleague, James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R. showed his familiarity not only with Catholic authors, but with Anglican/Protestant as well, in his essay in “Keeping Current.” I will not repeat his list of theoretical books on homiletics, both Catholic and non-Catholic, but focus only on book-length collections of Anglican/Protestant sermons.

Reading other people’s homilies is an old tradition in the Church. It is reported that St. Thomas Aquinas often read collections of patristic homilies:

He did [this] in order to offset the aridity which is so often the result of abstract and subtle speculative thinking. He himself used to say that after a spell of this sort of reading he found it easier to rise into speculation, so that it did both his heart good by increasing devotion and his intellect by deepening its considerations (Foster: 38).

In his *De Doctrina Christiana*, St. Augustine put it this way: Given a sharp and eager mind, eloquence is picked up more rapidly by those who read and listen to the words of the eloquent than by those who follow the rules of rhetoric (4: 8, 1995).

Good cooks are always reading cookbooks. They may not follow the recipes with exactness. After all, what’s one more clove of garlic among friends?! Good cooks read cookbooks to fire their imaginations and to discover how others are doing it. So, too, preachers can benefit by reading the preaching of others.

I begin with the books of Barbara Brown Taylor. I cannot claim to have read all of Taylor’s books of sermons but I have read...
most of them. Currently my favorite preacher/author, she is an Episcopal priest and rector of Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church in Clarkesville, Georgia. A recent study by Baylor University listed her as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English-speaking world.

Why do I recommend her works? She is primarily an interpreter, a poet, or, in the words of the NCCB 1982 document, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, she is a “mediator of meaning” (7). She struggles to comprehend the gospel in a postmodern world. Her sermons reveal the fright, doubt, and competitiveness of today. But her poetic words break through on every page to offer both a word of challenge and a word of comfort. She is comfortable in the Catholic world. She speaks of Pope John XXIII as “one of God’s great saints.” She draws examples from the lives of St. Teresa of Avila and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Pastor Taylor does not so much interpret the Scripture but amazingly allows the Scripture to interpret us and our communities.

As I mentioned above, I have not read all of Barbara Brown Taylor’s books but here are five I can recommend enthusiastically:

(1) *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993). The book contains two parts. The first part contains seven essays on the following: A Church in Ruins, Call, Vocation, Imagination, Bible, Worship, and Preaching. The first reading assignments I give my students are *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* and Dr. Taylor’s essay on “Preaching.” Her essay is a living witness to the high standards for preaching that our bishops propose in their document. The second part of her book contains thirteen of her inspiring sermons.

(2) *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1997). This book which uses the metaphor of the Israelites’ ingratitude for the manna in the desert contains twenty-nine sermons. Particularly witty are the sermons “The Trickle-Up Effect” and “Why the Boss Said ‘No.’” They are humorous reminders of our stubbornness in the face of God’s great bounty.

(3) *Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). This is the best collection of sermons on suffering and death I have ever read. The author splendidly attends both to the human and divine impact of pain. The title, however, is misleading since it gives the impression that these are catechetical sermons rather than the narrative/poetic ones which they are.

(4) *When God is Silent* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998). This is not a book of collected sermons but the lectures Dr. Taylor presented when she was given the prestigious Lyman Beecher Award at Yale University in 1997. She challenges preachers who do not personally hear God’s Word and God’s Silence and simply contribute to the babel of our times:

> When we run out of words, we are very near the God whose name is unsay-able. The fact that we cannot say it, however, does not mean we may stop trying. The trying is essential to our humanity.

This is a delightful book for meditation and best read in the silence of a retreat.

(5) *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999). This is the latest book of her sermons. It takes its title from her Epiphany sermon when the wise men went back home “by another way”:

> With their arms full of gifts, they [the wise men] crowded into the small space, bumping their turbans on the rafters and snagging their robes on the rough furniture. And all they could see was the baby, who
was not afraid, and whose right eye shone with the same star they had seen before they even left home. It was he, then, whoever he was. They did not have a clue, but they knew what to do. They got on their knees and worshiped him.

There is nothing in this description that is in conflict with historical-critical hermeneutics. It is a perfect example of Paul Ricoeur’s “second naïvété” where what matters is the intention of the scriptural story, to place the assembly in the wonder of God, in a state of true adoration. Pastor Taylor gets better with each book she writes. This particular work manifests the marvelous gift of a storyteller who spins the human and the divine into a stunning moment of grace and truth.

Three other volumes by different authors also merit mention.

(6) Walter Brueggeman, The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). Walter Brueggeman is another favorite author of mine whose works get my homiletic juices to flow. Some, like David Buttrick of Vanderbilt University, have questioned the power and effectiveness of the historical-critical method for preaching today. But when you read the biblical scholar Brueggeman, you know that while his scholarship is sound his own interpretation of why this text sheds light on our own struggles is also homiletically helpful. This particular collection of sermons demonstrates the intelligent way in which he follows the Lectionary. As an Old Testament scholar, he often focuses on the first reading but also creatively brings in either the second reading or the gospel text.

(7) Ronald J. Allen, ed., Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler (St. Louis: The Chalice Press, 1998). Allen teaches preaching and New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. He is not only a good preacher but also an author with an accessible style. In this volume Professor Allen comments on thirty-four ways of conceiving the sermon by offering commentaries on the preaching styles of thirty-four preachers. This would be a wonderful way for preachers who have become stuck in one pattern of preaching to attempt homiletic freshness by attempting other ways of preaching. As a Catholic, I was surprised that only nine of the preachers focused on the gospel reading from the New Common Lectionary. This is strange since, liturgically, the gospel reading is always the starting-point in homily preparation.

(8) Bill Turpie, ed. Ten Great Preachers: Messages and Interviews. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000). Bill Turpie was a Baptist preacher before venturing into work as a television correspondent. When Baylor University released its poll of the most effective preachers in the English-speaking world, the Odyssey Network decided a series on preaching would make good programming sense. This book contains the sermons of ten of those preachers with interviews by Bill Turpie. I was not attracted to all the interviews and sermons. But I did find some favorites: Fred Craddock, Thomas Long, William Willimon, and of course, Barbara Brown Taylor. I not only appreciated the sermons of these four but found the answers to Turpie’s questions most helpful and humble.

I do not recommend the above collections of sermons by Anglican/Protestant preachers as “homily helps” for a particular homily. I view them as great resources for bedtime or spiritual reading. They have the potential to assist us to preach in a fresh way and to see our lives as preachers in a totally fresh way.
References

