Classical Rhetoric and the Contemporary Preacher

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The author, a noted homiletician, invites preachers to consider the practical value of the ancient art of rhetoric in preparing their homilies and sermons. Rhetoric’s classical canon reminds preachers of the various steps in the process of preparing a homily that will enlighten and move the hearers of the Word.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) of the Second Vatican Council reinvigorated the role of the Scriptures within the Eucharistic Liturgy, “where the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word” (no. 51). This renewed Liturgy of the Word gave “an exceptional place” to the role of the ancient homilia or homily as the site for the Christian assembly to attend to Sacred Scripture and its proclamation of the workings of God in Christ throughout human history. Later, the USCCB’s marvelous statement on liturgical preaching, Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly (1982), would remind us that the preacher is a “mediator of meaning” (7), who interprets both the Scriptures and the complexities of modern culture in a word of grace for the Christian assembly.

Yet, the restoration of the homily and its discursive form poses potential problems. Indeed, this invitation to discover a user-friendly, “conversational” preaching idiom presents difficulties with structuring the homiletic text, often losing hearers in the process. Kenneth Untener’s Preaching Better (1999) asserts that the...
congregation often finds Sunday preaching a jumbled, disorganized array of different ideas that never seem to go anywhere, much less to deliver what Untener calls a single “pearl of great price.”

We need a kind of rhetorical armature for our preaching; such a template would help craft a language for the vital, triadic relationship that exists among the listener, the preacher, and the text. For centuries, the classical rhetoric of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and later, St. Augustine, provided preachers with a five-step procedure to guide the “activity of the orator”: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. This process underlying the so-called “perennial rhetoric” shaped the efforts of the practitioners of later Christian oratory as well. With modifications gleaned from the conciliar and postconciliar documents, these rhetorical strategies offer an organizing tool for producing the homily, a functional checklist for preaching. My discussion here applies not only to the Sunday liturgical homily, but also to preaching on any occasion involving a group of faithful listeners, a biblical or catechetical text, and a preacher.

**Invention**

Beginning with Aristotle, classical authors have acknowledged the crucial importance of *inventio*. As the word implies, invention is the activity of unearthing new ideas or arguments (in Greek: *topoi*) that form the persuasive backbone of the speech-act. The activity of invention becomes the bedrock, the genius, and originality of the oration. In Book II, Chapter 23 of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle listed twenty-eight universal arguments that the orator could deploy in order to persuade an audience. Although the precise function of the liturgical homily is not to plead a case rhetorically, understanding normative topics such as the “contemplation of opposites” or “induction” remind the preacher of the assembly’s role as a group of hearers. The faithful do not require argument as much as what *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* calls “words to express their faith.” Thus we might say that discovering the “topics” for the Sunday homily ought to be a process that sustains and generates a wealth of ideas, insights, and perspectives about the readings for the sake of the liturgical assembly. Moreover, the process of *inventio* or finding the ideas for a homily should be protracted over a period of days, occurring well in advance of the preaching event itself. Invention thrives on time and prayerful meditation and reflection. Permitting the invention to evolve slowly is especially crucial for gaining more and more potent, fresh observations about a familiar passage; therefore, its practice is vital for addressing the needs of the parish Sunday assembly over a period of several years.

What does the process of *inventio* look like, then, not so much as a persuasive argument but as a rhetorical tool for better preaching? It may be useful to think of the discovery of topics for the homily as dialogical—a friendly conversation—
between three living entities: the biblical text, the contemporary cultural/pastoral context, and the Holy Spirit.

Reading the Lectionary passages several days before they are to be preached provides time for our hearts and minds to ruminate on them; we might jot down images or ideas that we associate with the text that surface throughout the course of the week. Certainly, the practice of lectio divina (“holy reading”) works well in helping the preacher discover the hidden resources of the text. The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber referred to the text as a “Thou,” suggesting an honored, personal relationship with a significant other. Before we can speak about the text, we must allow the text to speak to us. If the text is not speaking to us, perhaps we need to ask it deeper questions.

Secondly, the current context of ministerial and social involvement is critical for engaging in ideas or topoi for the homily. Christian preaching mirrors the Incarnation when the Word is made visible in human history once again to men and women in the everyday world. The Old and New Testament texts inform our ongoing relationship with our brothers and sisters, which, in turn, gives life to the text that we have been engaging. Such personal encounters help the preacher to formulate fresh topics that address the contemporary culture and the pastoral environment; these emergent ideas answer the question “So what?” that might be raised about the level of meaning of the Lectionary text for the hearers. The homily will speak to the culture if we have encountered a unique set of human lives, all the while meeting the Word of God in lectio divina.

Finally, every text that is preached must be prayed into being: listening to the voice of the Lord in prayerful meditation helps to energize new ideas and insights. A quiet time of listening for the working of the Holy Spirit becomes the principle resource in the lively production of ideas. In the course of salvation history, the Holy Spirit has guided the graced, symbolic encounter of the community of faith with the Scriptures. As we read, pray over, and study the Word of God, that same Spirit can be invoked in the simple prayer, quietly repeated: “Come, Holy Spirit.”

Although the uncovering of topics begins early in the homiletic process, the discovery of new ideas ought to continue throughout the course of the week, ending with a dialogue with the scholarly community by consulting biblical commentaries; the contributions of biblical scholarship are then integrated into...
the process of invention, remembering that *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* says that we are to preach “not so much *on* the scriptures, as *from* and *through* them” (20).

### Arrangement

To my way of thinking, most failures in preaching composition happen at the level of arrangement or *dispositio*, the stage in which the homily is organized. It is absolutely crucial to attend to the discipline of a well-crafted arrangement, since the *dispositio* orients itself specifically for the assembly of hearers. While listening, the congregation reassembles the homily *as they have it fulfilled in their hearing*, and the success with which they do so depends greatly on how the homily has been ordered and arranged. Why this stage tends to frustrate the preacher is quite simple: we are not used to writing for a body of listeners, but for an individual hearer. Our life of learning in its earliest stages has been guided by one-on-one writing encounters; I write for a single other—a teacher, a friend, a coworker. But preaching communicates differently than writing. To acknowledge that the homily is to be unpacked, discovered, and deeply heard by a group of people goes a long way to improving the arrangement of preaching material. David Buttrick’s studies in the phenomenology of preaching, for instance, have demonstrated that people in a gathering will respond differently to language—always slower, for instance—than they would as individuals.

Classical rhetoric emphasized *dispositio* as an important task of the good orator, since knowing how to arrange the ideas that emerged from the process of invention is foundational to persuading an audience. But beyond the strength of rhetorical argument, how we experience the dynamics of narrative can also inform our understanding of the preaching process. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle said that the arrangement of material makes up the very plot itself. Narrative progression and sequence must be ordered in such a way that the listener is engaged in a process that has a beginning, a middle, and, then, builds to a climax and, finally, resolves itself in an ending. The same could be said for the homily, as homiletic theoreticians such as Eugene Lowry and others have pointed out in discussing “narrative preaching.” Lowry’s *The Homiletic Plot* (2000) identifies progressive narrational stages in the homily, a sequence of events that moves the audience through a story-like process. Narrative preaching does not mean that...
the homily must contain a story, of course, only that it functions as one, moving from exciting opening, through suspense, to climax and closure.

Reflecting an awareness of its listeners, a homily may then be effectively arranged as a narrative: from the very beginning of the text, the preacher should have in mind an intention regarding where the text is going; the homily has a trajectory, like a plot in a story. Unfortunately, according to Untener, people often experience preaching as a series of scattered, sometimes interesting, ideas or stories, but without the organic unity that narrative might provide. Grasping the homiletic plot and moving the congregation along in an intentional process from beginning to end provides a unified structure that is listener-centered. Using a series of stories, even if they are interesting, or simply commenting on the biblical texts, even if they are accurate and intelligent, misses the point. Those stories may be fine in a phone conversation, but not in preaching to a group, which needs to be guided and directed quite formally and intentionally.

Mystery novels and Hollywood feature films hook the audience from the very beginning and keep readers and spectators involved until the end. The clues take us, together with Detective Lord Peter Whimsy or Hercule Poirot, through a baffling labyrinth and finally a disclosure, solving the murder. Then again, Dorothy Gale ventures to Oz, but we know she will return because “there’s no place like home.” Aware of our origins and destiny as God’s creatures, we are ourselves part of a divine story, a narrative of salvation history, which continues to be plotted by the Author of life. In shaping the homily as narrative, we participate and reflect in language and symbols our life on earth. Through a unified text, a good homily orders the topics absorbed at the invention stage and moves the congregation to closure, that is, to thanks and praise at the Eucharistic Table.

Practically speaking, this second stage results in an outline that shapes our ideas into a form accessible for the listener. The preacher might imaginatively picture the assembly while organizing the material, the way some playwrights visualize their prospective audience. “How are they responding?” “Are they with me?” “Where am I taking them?” are all valuable questions that guide the homilist and honor the listener. Secondly, economical language strives for textual unity; it may be painful, but eliminate phrases and ideas that do not move the text forward. Rid the text of phrases that scatter the subject, even if it means placing that favorite saying on an index card for another homily. Lastly, consider

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that the overall strategy of the homily should be narrative insofar as the listener participates in every sentence as a kinetic progression toward a solution and closure.

An important consideration in this context is to make sure that the introduction really pushes forward and leads directly into the body of the homily. Many preachers spend altogether too long on the introduction, discussing this and that, or recalling a personal event or encounter; such lengthy “introductions” lack a destiny and true purpose, which is to launch the body of the text. Imagine that after every few sentences of the homily the congregation is saying to themselves, “Tell me more!” and not “Where is he going with this?” That is narrative suspense. That keeps the plot going. Moving the text ahead and striving for organic unity begins with the utterance of the first sentence. When arranging the text, it cannot be overstressed that the homily exists for the sake of the people of God. If the words of the preacher go unheard, then that text might be likened to Jesus’ parable of the seed sown on rocky ground: it dries up, rather than grows up.

Style

Antiquity distinguished certain modes of style, categorized under the heading of *elocutio*. These are usually termed the low, middle, and high elocutions. The Roman orators knew that these styles would be useful, depending on the function of the oration. The low or plain style was best for teaching (*docere*); the middle or moderate style for delighting or pleasing (*delectare*); the high or grand style to motivate or persuade audiences (*movere*). Americans tend to value plain speech and might use middle or high rhetorical conventions less frequently, perhaps even as a parody of highbrow culture. In Book III of *De Oratore*, Cicero associates conversational, or plain language, with vivacious speech. Hence, the kind of informal language featured in Christian preaching might be thought of not so much as casual but as personal, enthusiastic, and practical—the kind of vernacular Jesus practiced when preaching the parables.

When it comes to style, it might be useful to consider the enormous range of discursive language available to us in popular culture and acknowledge the complexities that exist in this range of communications. People listen to advertising or the nightly news day after day. Youth groups participate in their own generational language system, to say nothing of listening to hip-hop and rap music. We increasingly find ourselves among many multicultural dialects in this country. What kind of style will best fit the moment of preaching? A youth leader engaged in catechetical preaching would do well to know that the style appropriate to a large assembly of adults will most likely not be terribly effective in the milieu of youth culture. The insights of classical *elocutio* remind us of the intrinsic value of words: they are there not just to take up space or simply inform, but to shape
and transform. And as Cicero stresses in *De Oratore*, the good speaker ought to cultivate an individual style in the selection of words, while possessing a broad range of knowledge.

Another classical author, Quintilian, advised in Book Five of *Institutio oratoria*, that language should be plainly understood, correct, and elegant. Choosing just the right word or expression will improve preaching greatly. Preachers might pay close attention to wordsmiths, writers who attempt to shape people’s minds for a living. Listen carefully to commercials on television, expressions in print ads. Why did this particular word make the product more attractive? What are the code words deployed by commercial and political language that are most persuasive? Writers from Henry James to Natalie Goldberg continually urge that, when it comes to description, the more specific and colorful the better. Here, again, preachers should aim for a rhetoric conducive to preaching rather than argumentation. The Good News is preached, not manipulated. Preachers nevertheless compete for the attention of those who have been bombarded by countless clever words and expressions every week in the mass media. Preachers, above all people, should be aware of the power of language, since we are enabling the faithful to imagine a vision of the kingdom of God. Invariably, the question of preaching style is going to grow more and more complex in the years to come. The insights of Carl Andrew Wisdom, O.P., in *Preaching to a Multi-generational Assembly* (2004) speak intelligently to the variety of congregations emerging in the church and the preaching strategies available in order to sow the Word more fruitfully in the culture of diversity.

Ultimately, the use of style, like the arrangement of ideas, is going to depend largely on the assembly and its particular cultural conditions. It must be acknowledged that the language of preaching is under considerable suspicion in the age of pluralism. Our society offers options and menus rather than sound teaching or biblical insights. Preaching, then, needs to resist two extremes: becoming too overbearing and patriarchal on the one hand, or too relativistic and bland on the other. The faithful come to hear God’s Word in order to make sense of their lives and give thanks to God in Christ. They do not wish to hear condescending, turgid platitudes, or canned theological expressions. At the same time, God’s people, the baptized, await a healing, teaching moment so that they might continue to fulfill their Christian destiny and promises. Preaching style ought to challenge as well as invigorate.

**Memory**

The use of *memoria* is perhaps the most dreaded activity of a speech-act; it has its origins in the most ancient forms of oratory. Memory was a key component in the oral culture of ancient Western civilization, as stories were
passed down from one generation to the next. The Desert Fathers and Mothers
used to commit to memory not only passages of the Bible, but the entire Scrip-
ture! Until recently, memorizing not just a speech but various texts of English
literature and the Bible were a standard component of elementary and sec-
ondary education. Memorizing patristic homilies was a typical practice in early
Christian oratory.

The underlying significance of memory in oration is obvious enough: once the
topics for the homily have emerged, been arranged, and then, finally, written in
suitable language, the homiletic text needs to be owned. For some, that may
mean memorizing. Others, however, may wish to use a manuscript because say-
ing just the right word is very important. Regardless of whether a homily is
memorized word for word, if the preacher is just mouthing ideas that have not been internalized,
the whole event will appear flat and inauthentic.

I ask my students in the Introduction to Preach-
ing class to have a text prepared, to take it with
them to the ambo if they would like, but to
really preach it, not read it. There is a world of
difference between a homily that is preached
and one that is simply read. Before executing a
homily, preachers should have a clear intention
of what they are doing as bearers of the Word.
Much of the homily will be preached through
words, but a significant portion of the Good
News is witness. An applicable analogy is found
in acting. When actors memorize their lines, the
process liberates them to take on the character
more fully, and engage with other characters on the stage. Similarly, when the
homily is intentionally owned and internalized, the faith experience of the
preacher emerges in both language and gesture, and a full preaching experience
engages the listener. Freed from a “script,” preachers can more directly encounter
both the biblical text and the world of the assembly, providing a greater witness
to the Gospel.

A useful exercise at this point is to transform the finished preaching text back
into an outline. Although this strategy is not memorizing the text, it serves
several purposes: it helps to review the principle ideas or topics; it enables the
preacher to see if the arrangement of the text is coherent, and moves and orga-
nizes itself around the listener; it allows for a conversational language style,
perhaps spontaneously, to break through. This “second outline” may not differ
immensely from the first one, when the preacher was arranging ideas and topics,
but the outline at the end of this process is exponentially different from a sketchy
pattern of ideas jotted down a few hours before preaching. This latter style of

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**Delivery**

The last of the five activities of the orator is called *pronuntiatio* or simply, “actions.” A poorly delivered homily brings frequent complaints from parishioners. Any speech is going to sink or swim depending on the ability of the speaker to communicate the language effectively through voice and body. Unfortunately, a preacher might have ingenious ideas that are well arranged and in magnificent language, but if the homily is rushed or inaudible, the entire speech-act fails.

The reasons for a dysfunctional delivery may or may not be the fault of the individual preacher. Poor sound systems in parish churches or parish centers contribute to an inability to hear preaching well. Furthermore, the faithful are increasingly influenced by a kind of carnival culture, one whose bread and butter hinges on entertaining. Entertainment through spectacle, in one form or another, makes up the way people live their lives from *Good Morning America* to Oprah to “reality” TV. To imagine that several hundred listeners are going to appear for an hour on Sunday and be enlivened by a preacher who barely speaks above a whisper, together with bad posture, a flat tone, and wooden gestures, is naive. Years ago, seminarians were often required to take several classes on voice production. Much of this public speaking preparation has unfortunately fallen away because of the increasing demands in other areas of seminary education. Yet if we claim “faith comes by hearing,” what are we saying if we don’t make homiletic performance a priority?

Delivery can always be improved and even the best preachers could benefit from practicing their presentation aloud. There are a number of books on the market available for improving voice production. Simply reading a poem aloud in an empty church can help develop an ear attentive to word production and enable a preacher to become accustomed to self-evaluation and self-monitoring during the preaching moment. Furthermore, “delivery” means attending not only to the quality of the speech—its sound production, articulation, and expression—but also to the nonverbal messages that take place during the homily. We also know that those involved in public speech have always placed great
value on body language. The ancients were on to something that we have verified over the last fifty years in communication theory. Most communication, strikingly, happens by nonverbal gestures.

Videotaping the homily and examining it later continue to be effective tools. Actors and musicians watch and listen to their rehearsals. The famous pianist Glen Gould said that he learned more from listening to his recorded practice sessions than from anything else. Also, asking some listeners for honest feedback to the preaching event will almost certainly be a concrete way of evaluating delivery. “What did you hear?” remains a seminal question. After all, those who are the listeners form the partnership with the preacher and that relationship should exist in ongoing creative and critical dialogue.

Delivery will also be contingent on the worship space. Is this a big church with 1500 people, or a small parish of 150? The commonsense rule of thumb is that the bigger the church, the bigger the gestures and the greater the volume and expressiveness of the voice. Also, the preaching will have to adapt to the congregation. Obviously, if one is preaching catechesis for a group of fifth graders in a school auditorium, the use of animated gestures will go a long way in getting the message across. Finally, with the increasing number of foreign-born priests preaching in this country, courses in accent reduction are often needed. Well-enunciated English, with appropriate volume and intonation, is imperative for having preaching reach all those in the Christian assembly. Respect for Christ’s assembly means that good delivery must be a priority for all preachers.

**Conclusion**

Classical rhetoric has much to tell us these days and can contribute to the quality of expression in contemporary Christian preaching. Being so keenly aware of the hearers of the word, orators from the past can help us even now to speak to the Christian listener. The rhetoric of preaching exists to engage the Word for the sake of others. In the end, we know that all fruitful preaching requires a thoughtful meditation on topics, an arrangement of our ideas into a structure that suits the contemporary listener, the use of language that is authentic and appropriate, and a presentation that offers a fully embodied performance. And we should never, never be persuaded otherwise.

**References**


