Preaching through the Polarities
A Theological Reflection

Barry Strong, O.S.F.S.

A parish priest and theologian shares his insights and experience of preaching the gospel of life.

As pastor of an ever-growing and diversifying parish in the Southeast, I find that preaching is my main venue for doing pastoral or practical theology. Of course, it is not the only context where pastoral theology is being forged. It is happening intensely within planned and deeply significant counseling sessions. It is also happening during impromptu, down-the-hall, “Father, I got a question” moments. But for the overwhelming majority of parishioners who are, at the moment, crisis-free and not in need of other sacraments requiring faith formation and preparation, their exposure to me is by and large limited to the weekend liturgy, and their conversations with me happen in their head in silence while I am preaching.

Sometimes individuals will choose to take up the conversation I provoked on their way out of church. The comments take all forms: affirmations, questions of clarification, sharing of insight, shock that they had been taught otherwise way back in elementary school, and suggestions as to what I should have said. I see it as an exercise of pastoral theology and ministry because the conversation, albeit

Father Barry Strong is an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, ordained in 1984. He holds a doctorate in Systematic Theology from the Gregorian University, Rome. His previous pastoral experience includes teaching graduate theology and formation work in Washington, D.C. He currently serves as pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Wilmington, North Carolina.
one-sided in the delivery, started in pastoral exchanges, experiences, and contexts long before the drafting. In addition, the preaching is taking place in a community of faith, in a liturgical context empowered by the Spirit, and with the intent of furthering everyday, personal spirituality and the continual transformation of individuals and communities in Christ.

**Preach at Your Own Risk**

However, preaching in the contemporary church as an exercise of practical, pastoral theology (as opposed to preaching as the delivery of one-size-fits-all-centuries, immutable exegesis) carries its own risks. First, today’s preachers must be prepared to have their apostolicity questioned. I am not speaking here of validity of orders in the apostolic succession. I am referring to apostolicity of teaching. While many of the faithful still give the ordained minister the benefit of the doubt when something unfamiliar or challenging is being presented, or decide to wrestle with the issues raised internally, there are also those now at the ready to charge the preacher with infidelity to the tradition of the church. Of course, anyone who is teaching that which is not authentic, due to a defect in education, a lapse in judgment, the poor choice of words, or even just by choice stands in need of feedback and/or fraternal correction. Upon closer inspection, however, in many of these instances, “fidelity to tradition” is in the eye of the beholder and is being narrowly defined as fidelity to a theological accent or time period within church history. Some have chosen to ally themselves with only one authoritative source of teaching (only solemnly defined church teaching or only a certain Catholic “voice” or website) and discredit all others. As a result, it is no longer uncommon for the benefit of magisterial doubt to be awarded to local religious programming on TV or radio or to the latest unsolicited mailing that warns the faithful as to the dire condition of the church rather than to the theologically trained and/or ordained leader who stands in front of them.

There is a second risk factor—polarities. The parish setting is nothing if not diverse. The problem is that the diversities can crystallize into polarities—polarities that do not seem, at first glance, to be open to integration. Working diversity toward integration is always harder than choosing camps. Parishes these days can become fractured along several fault lines—the level of perceived compliance with liturgical norms, the restriction of the church’s pro-life teaching to decrying abortion or its embrace of questioning capital punishment and the justification for war, whether or not the Hispanic ministry program is setting up a parallel rather than integrated church, and so forth. Of course, the struggle for integrated catholicity, which some days can be exhausting, never stops—unless we grow tired of the gathering.
Preachers who are up to the task and are aware of the risks can preach through the polarities and do so for the sake of the apostolicity and catholicity of the church.

A Case in Point

As the October 2005 Respect Life Sunday approached, I asked myself why I had not managed my time better. Not only did I still have to prepare a homily for the liturgies of that weekend, I had also agreed to take part in the annual inter-church Life Chain demonstration promoted by our parish Right to Life Committee as well as preside at the annual Blessing of the Animals celebration in the courtyard sponsored by the parish Youth Faith Formation program. But the issue was not my time management skills, nor was it the parish pets. I was feeling apprehensive about my participation in the Life Chain demonstration and the message I would need to deliver to the parish in order to promote continual conversion to the gospel of life.

I have participated in the local demonstration for a number of years. It consists of area churches lining both sides of a major street holding anti-abortion and pro-life signs in silence. It is a good experience of standing up for the voiceless unborn. In this predominately conservative area, however, most of the time it feels like an exercise in preaching to the choir—horns honking and waves in support. Once in a while, we are met with scowls, thumbs down, and the occasional raised middle finger. I have become very selective as to what sign I will hold. Some, in my estimation, are too heavy hitting. I know from counseling experiences the pain that those who have had an abortion carry. I do not want to add to that. The organizers now say, “Father, we saved your sign for you.” My sign simply proclaims the love and mercy of Jesus.

I usually walk away from the experience questioning what we just did. It was certainly an exercise in democracy, and we literally aired our belief. But did we make a difference? Are we too self-congratulatory because we break out the same signs year after year on cue? What about other gospel of life issues? Would ecumenism fail us if we brought the question of capital punishment into the arena? The war in Iraq? In my preaching, had I become co-opted by the least common denominator approach to Respect Life Sunday?

Reflective Contexts

Catholic theology, of course, embraces the gamut of right to life issues. The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes that teaching in its totality accessible to all. Pope John Paul II, in light of his 1995 encyclical letter, The Gospel of
Life, even authorized the reissue of the volume so that it might include the church’s developing thinking on the problematic practice of capital punishment. He also called into question the manner in which the United States entered the war in Iraq. The bishops of the United States have also called American Catholics to a conversion of mind and heart on these matters.

American political debate, however, is a powerful force in its own right. In the mix of gospel and party politics, it is sometimes difficult to discern which one is the controlling influence. In our post 9/11 heightened sense of patriotism, had Respect Life Sunday and the Life Chain focus on abortion become a way for conservative Christians to lay greater claim to the faith while chiding more liberal brothers and sisters for calling into question the nation’s commitment to the death penalty or the legitimacy of the war in Iraq?

My personal experience told me that these questions were not crazy imaginings on my part. Except in a few instances, the parish has more easily rallied around life issues centering on conception, protesting abortion, or signing petitions against embryonic stem cell research—and to their credit supporting women who chose to bring their child to term—than on life issues more clearly associated with the “until natural death” end of the spectrum. The parish community was also fractured along political lines when it came to the war in Iraq. When statements from the Vatican and the American bishops that questioned the legitimacy of preemptive strike logic were made available to the parish, some were heard to proclaim: Who do they think they are? For some, national pride and party affiliation were trumping church reflection on scripture and tradition—the end of national security must justify all means. For others, presumably not in agreement with the administration, these words from the bishops were the vindication they waited for—it should be preached from the mountaintops. However, when a visiting priest made a pointed remark about the moral shortcomings in the decision-making process of our involvement in Iraq, one man walked out on him after hurling a remark, and others sent me e-mails decrying the mixture of politics and pulpit.

Finally, there was the institutional context of the exercise of my ministry. In light of the sexual abuse crisis in the church, some of the faithful are willing to cast a more critical eye on or downright ignore the clergy’s teaching authority in the socio-political sphere. On the other hand, some have seized on the perception that, in the last national elections, when push came to shove, certain bishops gave clear priority to abortion over other life issues and barred from communion only those Catholic politicians whose voting record was not in line with that Catholic theology, of course, embraces the gamut of right to life issues.
particular Catholic teaching, not capital punishment. Therefore, who should say otherwise?

In light of these contexts, I decided to forge ahead with a homily that would invite the parish community to broaden its perspective on life issues. The task was to bring these reflections and contexts into dialogue with the scriptures that were part of the ordinary cycle of readings (in this case the 27th Sunday of Year A) and not specially chosen for a Respect Life Sunday. The gospel was Matthew 21:33-43, the parable of the vineyard and its wicked tenants. It is essentially a stewardship gospel. I found in it an appropriate context to reflect on the full teaching of a stewardship of life. It provided too a way to bridge the polarities.

**The Homily**

I’d like to begin with an ancient prayer.

“Oh, only for so short a while you have loaned us to each other, because we take the form in your act of drawing us, and we take life in your painting us, and we breathe in your singing us. But only for so short a while have you loaned us to each other.”

It’s actually an ancient Aztec Indian prayer in which the Aztecs thanked the Creator for their life and breath and for their art. They acknowledge life as a gift, *not* a possession. Everything and everyone is *on loan*. God is the only owner.

This is a true stewardship prayer. But sometimes we fool ourselves into believing that we own life and own control over life. We fool ourselves into believing that we actually own the things we have worked for. We forget that we are stewards, not the *owner*. We forget that everything we have as well as our lives on earth is only on loan to us.

Our gospel is a stewardship gospel. It tells us that our Landowner God has equipped this “vineyard” we inhabit with everything we need to live the life to which he calls us. He leases it to us as *tenants*. We are *privileged* to work there. Our gospel tells us that we are not only privileged stewards in the vineyard but we are also free. Our Landowner God doesn’t micromanage. He gives us our duties and trusts us to complete them.

Our gospel reminds us too that because we are free, we are called to be *responsible* stewards. We are answerable to our Landowner God and his judgment of our work is of great concern. Unfortunately, our gospel convicts us of our sinfulness. We start acting as if we own the place. We work here. We want the produce. We’ll deny our Landowner God what rightfully belongs to God. We’ll take advantage of the fact that he doesn’t squelch our rebellion. We’ll silence his servants who try
to remind us of the truth. And when he sends us his son, we’ll take his life, because if we kill the inheritor then we’ll succeed in possessing this vineyard for ourselves. We’ll decide who lives and who dies. We’ll decide who gets what.

Brothers and sisters, we live in a section of God’s vineyard we call the United States. It is a section of God’s worldwide vineyard that entrusts us with profound gifts of freedom. We, as stewards of God’s vineyard here, call ourselves citizens who have the power to shape our own culture and government. But in claiming our freedom and in claiming our power, we can never forget that we are still called to be privileged, free, and responsible stewards who are answerable to the God who is the author and sustainer of all life. God asks us to bear fruits of life, not to abuse our freedom with decisions that take life.

As Christians, we possess Christ’s gospel of life, and as a church we possess over 2,000 years of reflection on its meaning and application. We are called to be the servants in the gospel parable who are sent by the Landowner to remind the tenants about the truth of their life. The problem is we recall that those servants were silenced and maltreated. Sometimes, even as Catholic Americans (or is it American Catholics?), we aren’t up to the task and we begin to allow our culture and our government to shape us rather than the other way around.

Today we celebrate Respect Life Sunday. Today our Landowner God comes to see how his tenants have borne the fruits of life he has given them. He sees many good things but he also sees the myriad of ways we have taken it upon ourselves to take life away. He sends us, his church, to share the gospel of life and call this vineyard to conversion.

The problem, brothers and sisters, is that we haven’t all got the message about the whole gospel of life. Sometimes we excel in one life issue but shy away in another. Sometimes we confront our culture and government concerning one life issue but allow ourselves to be shaped by culture and government on another. Sometimes we don’t know whether we’re acting as Christians first or as Americans first.

Sometimes, we judge others based on one life issue but excuse ourselves on the others. Sometimes it just seems easier to reduce our obligation to promote a full and coherent gospel of life to a single issue.

As a Catholic Church and as churches across this city we have excelled in promoting the pro-life message as it applies to the protection of unborn human life against the practice of abortion. And it is good that we do so as this teaching

Matthew 21:33-43, an appropriate context to reflect on the full teaching of a stewardship of life.
has been part of our tradition since the first century. It is, however, the sole focus of our annual ecumenical Life Chain demonstration.

And yet to be true to the gospel of life and our church’s continual reflection on its applications, we need to examine our consciences on the whole breadth of the fifth commandment. When it comes to the issues of capital punishment, embryonic stem cell research, directly causing death to eliminate suffering, or the moral legitimacy of the war in Iraq, the question is this: Are we being shaped more by the gospel of life or by our own culture and government?

I imagine that if the Life Chain demonstration were joined by signs that called for an end to the death penalty in the United States, a halt on all forms of experimentation on embryos, no mercy killing, and signs that questioned the moral legitimacy of the decision making process that led to the Iraq war—yes, I imagine that the coalition of churches and individuals would fall apart rather quickly. It would, however, represent the fullness of the church’s teaching on life in our day. And it is the full gospel of life that compels me to say so.

That doesn’t devalue the efforts being made to reshape our cultural and governmental attitudes when it comes to the issue of how we treat unborn human life. It does, however, call each of us to see where we are in our openness to embracing the whole of the gospel of life. It asks these questions once again:

• Do we realize that we are on loan to each other, that all life is a gift from God, that we own neither our life nor the lives of others?

• Do we realize, as tenants in the Lord’s worldwide vineyard, that we are the stewards of life?

• Will we remember that we have been privileged with the gift of human life, that we have been given the freedom with which we may choose life or destroy life, and that we are answerable to our God for the choices we make?

We’re called to promote the fruits of life. The end of our reading from Isaiah warned us that when the Lord of Hosts visited his vineyard, he looked around for the fruits of good judgment, but instead found bloodshed. He looked for justice, but instead heard an outcry.

At the end of our gospel Jesus warns: “The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.”

Let’s be busy stewards, busy about producing the fruits of life, all life, so that instead we hear the words “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

**Afterword**

Civil discourse around these and other hot-button topics of our day is fractious, polarized, politicized, reduced to sound bites, marked by clever put-downs,
and at times the demonizing of the other side. We can ill afford to allow those qualities of discourse to continue to infect the nature of ecclesial discourse—how we speak to each other about these things and wrestle with discernment in the faith community.

Judging from the remarks made to me afterward, the homily provided food for thought to both sides of the aisle. Later that afternoon, I went to the Life Chain demonstration and held my sign happy to affirm our parishioners in their participation in this demonstration against abortion. I was also content that they knew that, while this was good, it was not enough. It did not absolve us from examining our attitudes and attending to the “other” life issues.

They knew that Respect Life Sunday needed to be more broadly construed, needed to prick the consciences of Democrats and Republicans alike. For when it comes to socio-political applications of the gospel of life, we all stand in need of a continual conversion of mind and heart.