Canned homilies—whether purchased by subscription or downloaded from the Internet—are the bane of authentic liturgical preaching. No, this is not the rant of another homiletic purist, but rather the challenge of the Roman Catholic understanding of the homily, from the Second Vatican Council onward. To better understand this challenge, I will review fifteen years of developing Catholic insight into one particular aspect of the homily, and then look at some practical implications of this development.

Adapting the Word

Insights into the nature of the homily came gradually. The homily was restored in 1963, in Sacrosanctum Concilium (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 35; cf. 24, 52). The next year, the Congregation for Rites began the process of unfolding the implications of the conciliar restoration. The Congregation wrote that the homilist should be “taking into account the particular needs of the listeners” (Inter Oecumenici [First Instruction on the Proper Implementation of Sacrosanctum Concilium] 54 [ICEL: 100]). Liturgical preaching was not to be generic and timeless but rather suited to the particular identity of a particular assembly.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council’s Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) was adopted. In paragraph 44, it furthered the insight that all preaching must be adapted to its listeners:

The Church learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and language of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of the wisdom of their philosophers: it was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all men and the requirements of the learned, insofar as this could be done. Indeed, this kind of accommodated preaching of the revealed Word must ever be the law of all evangelization. (Flannery: 946, alt.)

Five years later, this general “law” was applied to homiletic preaching. The Third
Instruction on the Proper Implementation of Sacrosanctum Concilium (Liturgicae instaurationes 2a) insisted that the homiletic task is “to make clear to the faithful the proclaimed word of God and to make it fit the sensibility of our age” (ICEL: 161). Post-conciliar Catholic preachers were to master the skill of adaptation and accommodation of the revealed Word to the needs of the hearers.

Inculturating the Word

In 1979, Pope John Paul II contributed a new term to Roman Catholic understanding of the ministry of the word: “inculturation.” The term comes from missiology, and would eventually be applied directly to liturgical preaching. A more generic use came first:

As I said recently to the members of the Biblical Commission: “The term ‘acculturation’ or ‘inculturation’ may be a neologism, but it expresses very well one factor of the great mystery of the Incarnation” (AAS 71 [1979]: 607). We can say of catechesis, as well as of evangelization in general, that it is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. For this purpose, catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components; it will learn their most significant expressions; it will respect their particular values and riches. In this manner it will be able to offer these cultures the knowledge of the hidden mystery (cf. Romans 16:25; Ephesians 3:5) and help them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought (Catechesi tradendae [Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in Our Time; hereafter CT] 53).

Inculturation as a concept, then, combines the task of accommodation of the gospel with an explicit statement of its intended result—original expressions of Christian life.

John Paul II’s description of this accommodation is a good one which could fruitfully be applied across the spectrum of the ministry of the word, from evangelization to acts of catechesis and of preaching:

a) they must be linked with the real life of the generation to which they are addressed, showing close acquaintance with its anxieties and questionings, struggles and hopes;

b) they must try to speak a language comprehensible to the generation in question;

c) they must make a point of giving the whole message of Christ and his Church, without neglecting or distorting anything, and in expounding it they will follow a line and structure that highlights what is essential;

d) they must really aim to give to those who use them a better knowledge of the mysteries of Christ, aimed at true conversion and a life more in conformity with God’s will. (CT 49)

Finally, the direct application of this developed theology of inculturation to preaching came in a 1993 papal address, as John Paul II received and commended The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, a document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The Pope said:

The Bible exercises its influence down the centuries. A constant process of actualization adapts the interpretation to the contemporary mentality and language. . . . [I]n order for it to have profound effect,
there must be inculturation according to the genius proper to each people. In our day, a great effort is necessary, not only on the part of scholars and preachers, but also those who popularize biblical thought: they should use every means possible, so that the universal significance of the biblical message may be widely acknowledged and its saving efficacy may be seen everywhere. (De tout coeur 15).

Actualization and inculturation are here denominated as among the means by which preachers release the power of the word. The Pontifical Biblical Commission document itself explains these processes in some depth, and shows them to be at the heart of liturgical preaching (see IV[B], IV[C(3)]).

This brief survey of official documents highlights one important aspect of the journey of the restored homily. Early on, the Church understood that the needs of the homily’s listeners somehow needed to be taken into account. “Adaptation” and “accommodation” were shorthand for that concern. Ultimately, the much richer concept of “inculturation” became regnant. The authentic homily is an inculturated homily which at once incarnates the eternal Word in the language and symbols of a particular assembly and empowers that assembly to bring forth new expressions of Christian life in the world.

The Inculturating Preacher

The implications of inculturation for our preparation and preaching are manifold. I highlight some of the most important ones.

No Canned Homilies. As should be obvious by now, a homily written by someone other than the preacher, written for some non-existent, “generic” community, is a homily lacking in the necessary characteristic of inculturation. While it is possible to glean helpful elements from the homily of another, it is on balance more fruitful to study and pray over the scriptures with your particular assembly already present in mind and heart.

Local Images. Eminent homiletician David Buttrick wrote that “Homiletic thinking is always a thinking of theology toward images” (Buttrick: 29). The inculturated homily is one in which the images are drawn from the daily life of the particular assembly. For inspiration in this, the preacher need only reflect upon the preaching of Jesus, the master of thinking theology toward local images.

Local Knowledge. The preacher cannot accomplish the goal of inculturation, then, without knowledge of the assembly’s “significant expressions . . . particular values and riches” (CT 53); in short, the “real life of the generation [being] addressed . . . its anxieties and questionings, struggles and hopes” (CT 49). How do we accomplish this? Part of the answer lies in a commitment to awareness and to theological reflection. The sweet burden of the Word entails a dedication to watching and listening closely to the ebbs and flows of culture—national, regional, local, ethnic. Beyond such observation, though, we commit ourselves to theological reflection, the conscious act of bringing together the stuff of life with the stuff of our tradition.

But there is more that can be done. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, in her book Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art, suggests that a disciplined exegesis of the liturgical assembly is as necessary and as possible as an exegesis of the scriptural texts. She recommends careful attention to the “culture texts” of the congregation: its stories, archives, demographics, art and

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architecture, rituals, events and activities, and prominent and marginalized people. Tisdale shows how these “texts” can reveal much of the assembly’s unique identity, including its views of God, humanity, nature, time, and the Church. The inculturating preacher is by necessity a cultural anthropologist and ethnographer.

Underneath all of the preacher’s efforts toward inculturation is nothing less than the mystery of the Incarnation. Just as the Son of God was born in a particular culture and at a particular time and yet revealed the eternal God, so too the words of the preacher, though drawn from a particular congregational culture, express the everlasting revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

References


Note

1 Flannery has “this kind of adaptation and preaching . . .”; the Latin has: “. . . accommodata praedicatio lex omnis evangelizationis permanere debet.”