Telling the Story

Toward an African American Catholic Theology of Preaching

Maurice J. Nutt, C.Ss.R.

Those who feel called to minister to African American congregations must see it as their duty to develop the art of effective, Spirit-filled preaching. Nutt develops here three essential elements of an African American Catholic theology of preaching to ground and inspire these preachers.

When black* preachers are moving the hearts and souls of their black congregation through their powerful preaching, a loud shout of “tell the story preacher” may be heard from some satisfied soul sitting in the pew. The story of African American Catholics is one that tells of a people who were both faith-filled and faithful to a God who never fails. It is a story of persistence and perseverance under discouraging circumstances. It is a story of a people who held tight to God’s unchanging hands when the dark clouds of racism overshadowed their way. With great self-determination and steadfast activism, African Americans carved a place for themselves within the Roman Catholic Church in America. Once known as a mission church and a mission people, the African American Catholics of today are a people committed to the work of spreading the Good News of the Gospel among themselves and others.

* While it is most common to use the term “African American” in making reference to the children of the African diaspora, for the purpose of this article “black” and “African American” will be used interchangeably.

Maurice J. Nutt, C.Ss.R., D.Min., is pastor of Holy Names of Jesus and Mary Church in Memphis, Tennessee. He is assistant professor of preaching at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. He is also adjunct professor in the Religious Studies Program at Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia.
African American Catholics experience a double invisibility. In the black world, they are marginalized because of their religious identity as Catholics; in the Catholic world, they are marginalized because of their racial and cultural identity. Yet, they have not allowed their perceived double invisibility to deter their mission of evangelization.

In their 1984 pastoral letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, addressed to the Catholics of the United States, ten African American bishops made the bold statement that African American Catholics had “come of age.” They had matured to adulthood and were no longer the helpless missionary children of the predominantly white U.S. Catholic Church. While the tone of the pastoral letter was respectful and appreciative of the many gifts that had been shared with African American Catholics, these bishops nonetheless affirmed that they, too, as African Americans, had gifts to share with the universal Catholic Church. They wrote, “Evangelization means not only preaching but witnessing; not only conversion but renewal; not only community but the building up of the community; not only hearing the Word but sharing it” (*What We Have Seen and Heard*, no. 2).

African Americans are a biblical people, and there remains today a great vitality in spreading the Word of God. This Word has been a tremendous source of support and consolation through the anguish and afflictions endured over centuries. Many times it has been “a word from the Lord” that has sustained them throughout their struggle with the evils of racism. However, in most cases the Word of God is not effectively preached to many African American Catholics. Every Sunday, many endure homilies that are not Spirit-filled and that lack relevance to their lives. Other homilies are not based on the Lectionary readings or do not inspire witness to the goodness of Jesus. It remains a mystery why many African American Catholics return to liturgies that give them neither life nor the hope of eternal life. Some African Americans contend that Mass has always been fairly boring. Others maintain that their love for the Eucharist calls them back to the Catholic Church every Sunday. Some also acknowledge that their faith is so strong that even if the priest doesn’t have the Word, the Word of God is still deep within them.

For the most part preaching in our Catholic churches is notoriously uninspired. Those who feel called to minister to African American congregations must see it as their duty to develop the art of effective, Spirit-filled preaching. Black preaching is a black folk art, but this does not mean that whites cannot be trained in certain
techniques of this black liturgical art. Some white pastors have acquired the ability to preach in the black genre without doing a disservice to the integrity of their own identities. Conversely, many white preachers use their identity as an unacceptable excuse for mediocrity. Preaching in the black genre implies preaching with an eloquence that exegetes both the scriptural text and the congregation. The Good News must be addressed to this particular people, and the hermeneutical application must connect to their own situation.

**Work of Evangelization**

Preaching plays an important role in the evangelization of African Americans:

> We blacks are people of the Word. We are by culture, by history, preaching orientated. We come from a preaching tradition. Preaching sustained and nurtured us during the days of slavery. Preaching gave us hope “in days when hope unborn had died.” Preaching enables us to keep on keeping on. Preaching enables us to be truly opened to receive Eucharist, the bread of life. So one of the greatest gifts, we, as black people, can give to the Church today is preaching. For in authentic black preaching the spirit is renewed. (Jeanmarie, 85)

The Holy Spirit calls us all to the work of evangelization. It is important that those who have received the Gospel of Jesus Christ spread the Good News. Like Paul, Christians must be compelled to confess, “Preaching the gospel is not the subject of a boast; I am under compulsion and have no choice. I am ruined if I do not preach it!” (1 Cor 9:16).

Evangelization is both a call and response. It is the call of Jesus reverberating down the centuries: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). The response is, “Conduct yourselves, then, in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27). Evangelization means not only preaching but witnessing, not only conversion but renewal, not only entry into the community but the building up of the community, not only hearing the Word but sharing it.

The Good News of the Gospel not only transforms those who hear it, but it must also transform those who preach it. “The person who has been evangelized,” Pope Paul VI wrote, “goes on to evangelize others” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 24). However, evangelization is not done in a vacuum; it is performed within in a particular context. Pope Paul VI elaborated:

> The obvious importance of the content of evangelization must not overshadow the importance of the ways and means. This question of “how to evangelize” is permanently relevant, because the methods of evangelizing vary according to
the different circumstances of time, place and culture, and because they thereby present a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and adaptation. On us particularly, the pastors of the Church, rests the responsibility for reshaping with boldness and wisdom, but in complete fidelity to the content of evangelization, the means that are most suitable and effective for communicating the Gospel message to the men and women of our times. (no. 40)

The National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan promulgated by the National Black Catholic Congress in 1987, while stating that its primary purpose was to discuss issues relating to the evangelization of African Americans on the local level (within dioceses and parishes), never adequately addressed the need of a model of inculturated evangelization of African Americans to Catholicism. The National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan merely encourages the development of evangelization programs that are rooted in the black spiritual experience. I submit that the preaching of the Word of God in a style that speaks to the heart and soul of the African American community is vital and must precede any programs of evangelization. In the great commission, Jesus did not instruct us to “go ye therefore” and set up programs, policies, and procedures. He instructed us to go preach!

**Essential Elements of Black Catholic Preaching**

Before exploring an African American Catholic theology or understanding of preaching, one must first ask if there is an “official” Catholic theology of preaching. Dominican theologian Mary Catherine Hilkert maintains that with the liturgical renewal of the 1950s and 1960s and the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church officially reclaimed a theology of revelation centered on the word of God. Hilkert asserts, “The Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, Dei Verbum, urged a return to the word of God as the source of renewal for the entire church. While the Catholic Church has consistently moved toward a stronger emphasis on preaching and its importance, we still have no fully developed theology of preaching” (440).

Therefore, Catholics look to their theology of revelation prescribed by Dei Verbum to glean insights into a possible Catholic theology of proclamation. Dei Verbum describes an understanding of grace and a sacramental theology of revelation as “the mystery of God’s self-communication in love which occurs in and through creation and human history: a mystery recognized and named in salvation history and culminating in Jesus Christ” (no. 6).

Any Christian theology of preaching must center on Jesus Christ as Word of God. According to Hilkert, an appropriate starting point of any Catholic theology of preaching is the Incarnation—the mystery of God’s fullest Word has been spoken in history, in a human being, in human experience. Rather than beginning with
the power of God’s Word as something totally other and beyond our experience, Hilkert proposes we begin with the revelation of God, which is to be discovered in the midst of—and depths of—what is human. She asks the question: “Can we reflect on the mystery of preaching as the naming of grace in human experience?” (448). Implicit here is the additional question as to whether we can announce God’s path of liberation from the midst of the disgrace of our experience. As we move toward articulating characteristics of an African American Catholic theology of preaching, African Americans answer these questions with a resounding, “Yes, we must!”

**The Holy Spirit and Preaching**

Holy Spirit-filled preaching is a requisite for many African American Catholics. In fact the person who preaches the Gospel makes a statement about the Holy Spirit just by entering the pulpit. Even before the first word is uttered, presuppositions and definitions from across the centuries speak volumes about the Spirit-led event to be experienced by the preacher and the congregation. According to James Forbes, “The preaching event itself—without reference to specific texts and themes—is a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood expression of the theology of the Holy Spirit” (19). In formulating an operative theology of proclamation, Forbes maintains:

The preaching event is an aspect of the broader work of the Spirit to nurture, empower, and guide the church in order that it may serve the kingdom of God in the power of the Spirit. It is a process in which the divine-human communication is activated and focused on the word of God and is led by a member of the community of faith [the preacher] who has been called, anointed, and appointed by the Holy Spirit to be agent of divine communication. That person’s authority is grounded in the self-revealing will of God as articulated and elaborated in the biblical witness. In addition, the preacher’s authority is confirmed or ordained by the community of faith in response to the continuing counsel of the Holy Spirit. (20)

If preachers intend to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who calls them to serve the kingdom in our time, they need all the power available to them. We live in a culture that has lost contact with the living spirit of Jesus. We need preaching that is more than delightful rhetoric. At the other end of the spectrum, mere ranting, raving, and excitement from some spirited preacher will also not suffice. The people of God need and want some sense of the Spirit accompanied by power sufficient to comfort and sustain them in the struggle of their Christian journeys.

Pope Paul VI, in his exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, emphasized the important role of the Holy Spirit in Catholic preaching by maintaining
that the Spirit impels each individual, as evangelizer, to proclaim fervently the Gospel. Convinced that without the Spirit powerfully present in our preaching and witness evangelization would be ineffective, this Pope declared, “[w]ithout the Holy Spirit the most convincing dialectic has no power over the heart of [human beings]” (no. 75).

The 1982 document Fulfilled in Your Hearing encourages Catholic preachers under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to preach so as to lead the faithful to praise God. This document contends that preachers must first recognize the active presence of God in their own lives, as broken and shattered as they may be, and out of that brokenness affirm and witness to the congregation that it is still good to praise God and even give thanks. There is a clear mandate from the church that urges Catholic preachers to be Spirit-filled preachers. Unfortunately, too many preachers refuse to receive the church’s message and thus the anointing.

Within the context of black preaching, the preacher is expected to be anointed by the power of the Holy Spirit prior to any attempt to preach the word. Regardless of one’s ability, strength, or study habits, the sermon or homily is ultimately a product of the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables the preacher to utter “what thus says the Lord.” James Cone indicates that there can be no preaching unless the preacher is called by the Holy Spirit:

In order to separate the preached Word from ordinary human discourse and thereby connect it with prophecy, the black church emphasizes the role of the Spirit in preaching. No one is an authentic preacher in the black church tradition until he or she is called by the Spirit. (23)

Preaching in the black tradition is indeed dependent upon the Holy Spirit. The challenge for preachers in the African American Catholic community is to free themselves to be used by the Holy Spirit and to cease trying to quench the Spirit. An African American Catholic theology of preaching requires Spirit-filled proclamation—a requirement that is certainly non-negotiable.

Preaching as Celebration

In African American preaching, the preacher always presents a revelation. This revelation is communicated with inspiration and celebration. It is a matter of glorifying God and involving the hearers. The preacher is not an impartial reporter of what happens between the divine and God’s people in human history as recorded in Scripture. The preacher is one whose experience resonates with those in the biblical stories; therefore, the preacher is both recorder and witness. The biblical story is the preacher’s story, and it becomes the congregation’s story as well.
In gratitude for these manifold blessings, African Americans tend to shout; they celebrate with the abiding conviction. To echo the sentiment of a popular song, “If I don’t praise the Lord, the rock’s gonna cry out” (Jones). Celebration is an integral, authentic, and wholesome aspect of worship in African American preaching and worship. The point of celebration comes when the biblical story becomes the preacher’s and the people’s story. There is a “blessed assurance” that what God did for the biblical protagonists God is doing for the community right now.

The aim of celebrating Eucharist is to remember and celebrate the salvation that Jesus offers through his paschal mystery. *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* contends that the “challenge to preachers is to reflect on human life with the aid of the Word of God and to show by their preaching, as by their lives, that in every place and at every time it is indeed right to praise and thank the Lord” (28).

African American sermons or homilies do not only end in celebration, but the whole preaching event itself is a celebration. “We in the African American tradition have cultural roots which demand that the sermon end in celebration” (Mitchell, 12). It is true that climax might be that concluding portion of the sermon in which phrases and sentences are presented in ascending order of rhetorical forcefulness. However, this might or might not be the point of highest celebration for the preacher and people.

I posit that the conclusion is not the only point of celebration in “good” traditional black preaching. If celebration means ecstatic talking, hearing, and involvement in the story, then in most black sermons celebration is interspersed throughout, with greater intensity toward the end. Olin P. Moyd states, “When the preacher engages in narration and storytelling with imagination and with celebration at several places throughout the proclamation, the preacher and the audience are drawn into an identification with the biblical characters in the story, and the historical event becomes an existential event. Thus, celebration is the natural response” (109).

The sermon or homily participates in a celebration elicited by the *kerygma*, or the Good News. An African American Catholic theology of preaching affirms celebration within the preaching event. The preaching should reflect black people’s lived experience of the Word. Through black preaching, the faithful are theologically informed; they are inspired; and they are empowered to “run on just a little while longer,” knowing that by God’s grace everything will be all right. This is something to celebrate!
For liberation theologians, God intends to liberate the world from oppression. African American homiletics professor Carolyn Ann Knight defines oppression as “a form of sin in which a person or community exploits other persons or communities. . . . Oppression is frequently systemic, that it results from patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that are transpersonal” (223). The oppressive tendency is so deeply embedded in some social structures that oppressors do not even know that they are oppressors! Among the most common and deeply entrenched systems of oppression are racism, sexism, poverty, classism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, and ecological abuse. Religion, too, can be used to oppress. African Americans are victims not only of racism; they experience all the aforementioned oppressions.

Liberation preachers, including those who preach in African American Catholic parishes, believe that God operates through the processes of history to free humankind and nature from oppression. Knight posits that “God aims for all people and all elements of the natural world to have their own integrity, secure living conditions, freedom, opportunities to relate with all created entities in love and justice. The best liberation preachers are aware that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressive ideas, feelings and actions” (223). Those preaching for liberation alert both oppressed and oppressor to God’s present activity in using individuals and groups to move toward a world in which all live together in love, justice, dignity, and shared material resources.

Pope Paul VI expressed similar sentiments about preaching and living the truth that truly liberates, “[t]he Gospel entrusted to us is also the word of truth. A truth that liberates and which alone gives peace of heart is what people are looking for when we proclaim the Good News to them” (no. 78). In the same vein, Pope John Paul II urged us to “defend with force the dignity and the rights of every [person] against the oppressions and vexations of the powerful. Set oneself to true reconciliation among [humanity] and Christians” (no. 73).

The U.S. bishops assert in Fulfilled in Your Hearing that faith leads to an active response and a transformation of one’s life.

A response can take on many forms. Sometimes it will be appropriate to call people to repentance for the way they have helped to spread the destructive powers of sin in the world. At other times the preacher will invite the congregation to devote themselves to some specific action as a way of sharing in the redemptive and creative word of God. (19)

In addition to the emotion so important to African American preaching style, preachers in African American settings have a moral and theological responsibility to develop a sound hermeneutical approach to the Gospel. This demand, while
not exclusive to the African American community, is an expectation from the people because of their constant struggle with racial, economic, and political oppression. The preacher is compelled to say something that addresses the needs of the people—directing the message to their head and heart. This holistic message will teach blacks how to live as Christians and how to relate their religion to freedom practices.

Those who sit in the pews need to hear a word of power and spirit—a word of liberation. With the help of the preacher, blacks are able to celebrate in spite of the reality of oppression and injustice because they believe that God is faithful and just. Preaching without celebration is de facto a denial of the Good News in any culture. The preacher celebrates and encourages others to celebrate; however, the preaching ministry must also include liberation. Without liberation, there can be no authentic celebration.

A Message of Consolation and Challenge

A ny attempt to formulate an African American Catholic theology of preaching must take into consideration at least three salient directives. First, an African American Catholic theology of preaching is null and void without the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Only under the influence of the Holy Spirit can a preacher boldly speak a prophetic message of consolation and challenge to God’s people. Second, an African American Catholic theology of preaching is one of celebration. The preacher in these settings must identify—become one with God’s Word and God’s people—and announce and experience the good news of God’s ongoing deliverance. Finally, an African American Catholic theology of preaching is de facto liberation preaching. Preachers in African American Catholic settings are charged with helping the community envision the practical implications of liberation and encourage the people to participate in God’s liberating initiatives. Homilies must encourage oppressors to repent, to turn away from complicity in oppression, and to turn toward God’s liberating work in history. Preachers must uplift the oppressed with God’s message of hope and the assurance that “trouble don’t last always.”

References


