

# Intercultural Competency and the Sunday Homily: In the Footsteps of Pope Francis

by Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J.

Few topics could be more pertinent to the exciting and challenging moment we are living today as the People of God than that of preaching in the context of our nation's and the world's ever-growing diversity. This is so first of all because our US parishes, schools, and Catholic organizations increasingly reflect the same multi and intercultural reality of the global Church with its experience of migration, enhanced communications, and interdependent, global economies. As a result, priestly, diaconal, and all ministerial formation demands cultural competencies as never before. Second, the Church's insistent focus on the New Evangelization urgently requires an appreciation of diversity and of the essential role it plays in the Church's very mission. Preachers and teachers are called to seize the moment and reach out to diverse peoples, cultures, and social classes—what our amazing new Bishop of Rome Francis refers to as the outskirts, the “existential, geographic and economic peripheries of humanity.”<sup>1</sup> This is truly a moment of *kairos* that means stressing the *missiological dimension of both the ministerial and baptismal priesthood* as well as the evangelizing mission of all preaching and teaching in the Church. *Intercultural competence*, in turn, becomes the essential and inescapable tool for executing the outreach and mission.

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It seems especially appropriate as the Church assimilates the remarkable spirit and vision of Pope Francis to place this discussion about intercultural competency and the Sunday homily in the context of a surprising moment of church renewal. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, a new and unexpected phase of Church history opens before our very eyes, one that builds on the vision of the New Evangelization championed by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI but also proposes new horizons, significant reforms, change, and a forward look. The exact nature of the new direction Pope Francis is taking the universal Church is still in embryo, and my remarks must therefore be viewed as tentative at this early

stage. I make this point now, however, because intercultural competence is not only fundamental and integral to the proper understanding and implementation of the Church's identity and mission to evangelize but is also key to understanding Pope Francis' stunning refocusing of many issues in the direction of pastoral care over theological coherence in an effort to achieve a more productive balance. This decisive pastoral initiative of the Holy Father is signaled by his gestures, actions, demeanor, and style more than by his words. Moreover, this renewed focus on pastoral care over theological coherence makes sense especially in light of the need to follow through on the con-

<sup>1</sup> The reference to going out to the peripheries is a constant theme for Pope Francis. See Message of Pope Francis for the XXIX World Youth Day, Jan. 21, 2014, No. 1, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/messages/youth/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140121\\_messaggio-giovani\\_2014\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/messages/youth/documents/papa-francesco_20140121_messaggio-giovani_2014_en.html).

clusions of the Synod on the New Evangelization, which was exemplified, re-energized, and given new twists by Pope Francis in the early days of his Petrine ministry.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, the focus will be on the intercultural competencies needed for effective ministry within the rich context of cultural diversity characteristic of US parishes today. Consequently, matters of ethnicity, race, nationality, and social class will receive great attention. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the larger framework for this conversation goes well beyond those parameters. In numbers 53-62 of *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council insisted on the need for an attitude of optimism toward culture and, more broadly, the modern world. Consequently, what is being proposed by Pope Francis retrieves the spirit of the Council and proposes a fresh, foundational attitude for preaching and teaching today. For the Church, intercultural competence, manifested in engaging the world with openness and even optimism, is a clear directive that reflects the view of the majority of bishops who took part in the Second Vatican Council. With his repeated references to the need for more dialogue, Pope Francis seeks to create a “culture of encounter” that re-asserts this Vatican II orientation in unmistakable terms. Preachers, therefore, will be well advised to take this attitude as foundational. This means that serious efforts must be made to understand contemporary culture and to grasp the mindset of those who disagree with the Church, including, first of all, fellow believers of other Christian communities, as well as the faithful of non-Christian religions. The proper disposition for teaching and preaching today, however, goes even farther than inter-religious dialogue. A dialogical attitude for preaching requires in today’s preacher a serious regard for atheists, secularists, feminists, and for all others who sincerely act in accord with their consciences. Scolding the miscreants, berating the woes of the world, moralism and retreating into a “fortress church” will not do.

### **Preaching and the New Evangelization in the Key of Pope Francis**

The Pope clearly prefers to promote a culture of encounter rather than cultural wars as a guiding metaphor or description of how to proceed effectively in carrying out the Church’s mission to teach and preach today in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> The language of culture wars stresses the elements of clash, conflict, and differences while the culture of encounter suggests just the opposite: emphasis on dialogue, a common ground, respect for the views of others even when one disagrees with them, and openness to what is other or different without, of course, losing one’s identity and particularity. If we are to heed Pope Francis’ invitation to move beyond what he deplors as self-referentiality and narcissism in the church, that is, a hunkering down style of Catholicism characterized at times by a combative spirit of hostility to secularism and pluralism, then it would seem that the means for doing so have much to do with cultivating an authentically Catholic identity, a spirit of catholicity, and an abiding desire to reach out to others, whoever they are, with the tender love and mercy of Christ. At this crucial moment of change, I suggest that intercultural competence should become a major focus of concern in the formation of preachers and teachers precisely because, in an age of encounters, it enables ministers and preachers to get beyond themselves and have the tools for attending to the realities of others.

Consequently, in these reflections I attempt to discuss the topic of intercultural competence in the wider context of the New Evangelization and in the key of the remarkable vision provided by Pope Francis. I will review what is

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2 See “Message of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” no. 1 (7-28 October 2012), [www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/sinododocuments/bolletino\\_25\\_xiii-ordinaria-2012\\_inglese/b30\\_02.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinododocuments/bolletino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012_inglese/b30_02.html). Specifically, look to where the bishops begin their conclusions on the New Evangelization by citing Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well of Sychar. This encounter is rich with cultural competencies manifested in the Lord’s dialogue with the Samaritan woman. For more background and perspective on this document’s major conclusions, see Pope Francis, “Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,” November 26, 2013, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html).

3 Pope Francis, “Pope at Mass: Culture of Encounter is the Foundation of Peace,” Vatican Radio, May 22, 2013, [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/05/22/pope\\_at\\_mass\\_cu](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/05/22/pope_at_mass_cu).

meant by intercultural competence and the New Evangelization in relation to the US bishops' *Teaching the Mystery of Faith*, a document that takes seriously the demographic shift that has transformed Catholicism in the United States from a community of persons of European origin to one of Latin American, Asian, and African descent. The bishops' document also acknowledges the reality of socioeconomic factors that explain a dual identity, the bifurcation of US Catholicism between a rather affluent but shrinking middle class and a growing working and immigrant class.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, this document proposes a method for approaching the Sunday homily that strikes the balance, alluded to above, between the role of sound doctrine on the one hand and pastoral sensitivity on the other--the requirement that doctrine truly become life, that is, be truly received by those to whom the Word of God is directed. Additionally, I will propose another highly pertinent resource produced by the US bishops: five learning modules titled *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers (BICM)*, the work of the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, published in 2012 and disseminated today by means of workshops in several parts of the country. Finally, I will illustrate many of the intercultural competencies required for preaching and evangelizing, modeled by Francis in his gestures, demeanor, actions, and words.<sup>5</sup>

### Preaching Inspired by an Appreciation of One's Audience

Pope Benedict XVI has spoken about the process by which God's self-communication in Christ the Word takes root in the hearts and minds of people in the amazingly simple but profound phrase "mutual giving and receiving." To grasp the nature of this process--what allows giving and receiving to succeed or what blocks its transforming power--is the heart of the matter, the central issue, the neuralgic point, of my remarks here. Centuries ago Saint Augustine of Hippo captured the essence of this concern in *De Doctrina Christiana*, his treatise on teaching and preaching in the Church, when he said, speaking of those to whom we preach and teach, that "an eloquent man should speak in such a way that he 'teaches, pleases, and persuades'...the first, the necessity of teaching, depends on what we say; the other two (pleasing and persuading) depend upon *the manner in which we say it*."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say that the preacher should not be judged to have really spoken if what the preacher says is not understood.

In terms of today's realities, we can perhaps say, invoking a concept familiar to our age of science, that Saint Augustine already suggested 1500 years ago that any method attempting to effectively teach, please, and persuade must begin inductively. That means paying attention first of all to the audience in front of the preacher and, as it were, bracketing the content of the teaching, the doctrines and propositions of faith. This is not because these are irrelevant but rather because, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it in the *Summa Theologiae*, "a thing known exists in a knower according to the mode of the knower." In another place he says, "Whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the receiver."<sup>7</sup> In today's world and increasingly in the standard parish situation, a premium must be placed on the ability of ministers, especially those involved in any form of teaching or preaching, to demonstrate real openness and hospitality, which show in an ability to focus on the other. Knowledge, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities for building intercultural relationships allow the Sunday preacher to penetrate the mind and most especially the heart of his listeners. In a world characterized by unprecedented travel, migration, and communications, intercultural abilities become more essential than ever. We need look no further than our parishes, dioceses, presbyterates, schools, and seminaries to grasp the urgency of this point.<sup>8</sup>

4 *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 2013), 39.

5 *National Catholic Reporter* journalist John L. Allen, Jr. captures the tone, spirit, and high expectations for this pontificate in its early months in "Francis at 100 Days: the World's Parish," June 17, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/news/Vatican/francis-100-days-world-s-parish-priest>.

6 Saint Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, book 4, ch. 12, in "Christian Instruction," trans. John J. Gavigan, OSA, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 2 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc, 1950), 193.

7 In Latin, "*Cogitum...est in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis*." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*: Latin text and English translation, vol. 3 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 14. "*Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*" from *Summa Theologiae*: Latin text and English translation, vol. 11, 23.

8 See the issue of *Seminary Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2012), devoted entirely to intercultural competence in seminary formation.

In connection with this idea about the central importance of knowing one's audience and of being inductive and pastoral in one's approach to preaching, it must be observed that the formation of priests in the past two centuries has not served the Church well. A corrosive Enlightenment attitude of modernity has too often dominated the approach to pastoral care, catechesis, teaching, and preaching. This attitude emphasizes the cognitive and rational apprehension of the Gospel and Church teaching, focusing on doctrinal and propositional formulations of belief and moralistic exhortations that obviously fail to motivate. Seeking credibility in a rationalistic way, in the way of the world of the Enlightenment, Church preachers and teachers often succumbed to a dry, excessively conversational, insipid, formalistic approach toward preaching, one that stresses the mind over the heart. The rise of Pentecostalism, what some have called renewalism, as arguably the most dynamic, contemporary trend in worldwide Christianity with both Protestant and Catholic branches suggests that today more than ever preachers must proceed in an affective, pastoral, and spiritual way. There must be a pedagogy that acknowledges the need for an affective revolution that begins with cultivating the ability to really know one's audience and, even more importantly, love one's audience. As St. Augustine says, lead one's hearers to "find pleasure in what you promise, dread what you threaten, hate what you condemn, embrace what you praise, grieve over what you emphasize as deplorable, rejoice when you say something he should rejoice at, pity those whom in your discourse you set before his eyes as objects of pity..."<sup>9</sup>

This kind of sensibility is precisely what intercultural competence is all about, and Pope Francis is a remarkable example of a preacher and teacher who understands what effective evangelization requires today. It means getting beyond the tendency to become what Pope Francis calls self-referential-to hunker down and close oneself off in the sincere but mistaken desire of fostering Catholic identity. What Catholic identity really demands, however, is "going out to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery." These are existential, geographic, and economic peripheries that obviously go beyond sacristies, parish boundaries, and one's own personal, cultural limitations and comfort zones.<sup>10</sup>

The hospitality so essential for spiritual growth and effective preaching is an openness to the Other who is God and to the other who is my neighbor. Neighbor is, of course, understood in terms of the Gospel not as the one who speaks my language, agrees with me about most things, and belongs to my social class, nationality, race, and even religion but as the Good Samaritan of the parable or the Samaritan woman at the well, the other whom most Jews of Jesus' time would have simply despised. Intercultural competence for ministry and evangelization presupposes and requires the capacity of the preacher to lovingly enter into other people's worlds, that is, the world of other cultures, languages, attitudes, and beliefs with the hope of experiencing God's presence and the Holy Spirit in the heart of all people. A loving God created not just the people of one's own culture and race or even one's own co-religionists. God literally loves all and desires their salvation. The practical implications of this truth become more demanding and real in the congregations preachers must face every day.

### Unpacking Intercultural Competence

Underlying the teachings of the US bishops' latest instruction, titled *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, is an acute awareness of the dramatically changing demographic, social, and cultural context the Church finds herself in today. How does intercultural competence help preachers respond to the new and evolving circumstances of Catholic life? As mentioned earlier, one can speak of intercultural competence as consisting of three fundamental ele-

<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 193

<sup>10</sup> These words were uttered at what some consider the turning point in the cardinals' efforts to find a suitable successor to Pope Benedict XVI. See "Church must not be Self-Centered, Pope Francis Told Cardinals" in *Catholic Herald*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2013/03/28/church-must-not-be-self-centred-pope-francis-told-cardinals>.

ments: attitudes, knowledge, and skills. I now discuss in more detail these core elements presented in the USCCB's five module workshop, titled *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers*<sup>11</sup>.

### *Attitudes*

The most basic of all attitudes needed for preaching in today's hugely diverse cultural and social class context is openness to what is different and what is other. This means openness to cultures other than one's own. In this regard, Pope Francis quoted Pope Benedict XVI, who gave us much to think about when he said, "Christians who are afraid to build bridges and prefer to build walls are Christians who are not sure of their faith, not sure of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> Now culture can be understood as the central certainties by which we live. We must assume a cautious and even self-critical attitude toward our certainties, as the then Cardinal Bergoglio pointed out in a 2007 interview by using the example of Jonah, the reluctant preacher, who thought he knew all about the Ninevites and had effectively written them off. God showed him another path that took him out into the streets of Nineveh and into the heart of a people that God loved but Jonah did not. Jonah thought they were hopeless. Reflecting on how certain Jonah was about the Ninevites, Cardinal Bergoglio observed, that "Our certainties can become a wall, a jail that imprisons the Holy Spirit. Those who isolate their conscience from the path of the people of God don't know the joy of the Holy Spirit that sustains hope."<sup>13</sup> Consequently, what is necessary in the missionary preacher, according to Cardinal Bergoglio, is a desire to learn about and engage other cultures. If that basic curiosity is lacking, then like Jonah, one is sorely limited as a preacher, teacher, and evangelizer.

This fundamental openness to others can also be understood as hospitality, one of the basic dispositions needed for growth in the spiritual life. Hospitality demands that an effective preacher be more than just technically competent. Hospitality, moreover, is not just an ad hoc necessity of the moment or the result of finding oneself in a shared or multicultural parish, a seminary with increasing numbers of international seminarians, or a presbyterate made up more and more of international priests. No, the preacher needs to cultivate this radical hospitality today as a lifetime project or a way of life. It is a spirituality, not just a passing need. The preacher lacks authenticity when he fails to give signs of respect and love for others, signs that flow from conviction and habit and not just the demands of the moment, which show mere tolerance and not real love. Finally, an attitude of cultural mindfulness reveals itself in an ability to actually notice and appreciate differences that are expressive of the unique humanity, beauty, and particularity of diverse cultures.

An example of the wrong attitude in intercultural experiences is the often-told story about the American tourist who goes off to Italy and only wants to eat McDonald's hamburgers. The preacher and teacher, like the tourist, is missing so much if he or she cannot take the risk of experiencing the unknown, thus moving beyond his or her preferences and certainties.

### *Knowledge*

Knowledge means knowing or possessing more than one perspective on reality, breaking out of a one-shoe-fits-all mentality. It is not what may be called a univocal mindset or a weak pastoral imagination, one that finds it hard or impossible to adapt, accommodate, or tailor old ideas and practices to new situations. It means exercising a Catholic analogical imagination rather than a dialectical one and realizing that the same reality can have differing but

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11 *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers* (Washington DC: USCCB Publications, 2012), 9.

12 Pope Francis, "Pope Francis at Wednesday Mass: Build Bridges, Not Walls," Vatican Radio, May 8, 2013, <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-at-wednesday-mass-build-bridges-not-w>.

13 Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, "What I Would Have Said at the Consistory," *30 Days*, November 2007, [http://www.30giorni.it/articoli\\_id\\_16457\\_13.htm](http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_16457_13.htm).

not necessarily contradictory interpretations.<sup>14</sup> It is not always a matter of either/or but rather both/and. Moreover, anthropologist Edward Hall's analysis of cultures in terms of low and high context sheds light on related challenges that preachers face.<sup>15</sup> This refers to the fact that some cultures focus on the content of a message while others pay as much or more attention to the surrounding gestures and tone of the speaker. Not knowing about these cultural differences significantly affects the outcome of one's preaching and teaching. Intercultural knowledge also refers to one's familiarity with other languages. With each new language a person acquires a remarkable new way of feeling, thinking, and apprehending the world that enhances cultural and even human sensitivity, thus enabling preachers to face diverse congregations with greater confidence and effectiveness. That is why the bishops' instruction wisely urges seminary and diaconate formation programs to offer Spanish-language and cultural immersion programs.<sup>16</sup>

### *Skills*

There are three basic skills which intercultural preaching demands today: empathy, the ability to tolerate ambiguity, and the ability to adapt one's way of communicating and behaving. These skills may be understood as aspects of emotional intelligence that allow one to better navigate the social world, the world of a parish, for example, with its rich variety of cultures, classes, and personalities. The ability to empathize gives credibility to the homilist and teacher, appeals to affectivity, and allows him or her to reach the heart and not just the mind of the listeners. Pope Francis not only reveals a strong pastoral rather than theological bent in his preaching and teaching but also reveals a spiritual one. This is demonstrated in the affective quality of his way of communicating and his ability to move people to emotions, inspiring joy, smiles, and even laughter. He places abstract religious principles in real life, down-home situations that make the point, for example, insisting that "priests must smell of the sheep."<sup>17</sup>

Effective intercultural communication, that is, preaching, depends to some extent upon the preacher's ability to tolerate ambiguity. Toleration of ambiguity allows a preacher or teacher to relate in at least a neutral if not positive manner to what is outside the preacher's experience. In interaction with diverse cultures and social classes, a preacher will often experience differences and the unknown. This can be very disconcerting to anyone but is especially so to one who possesses an either/or dialectical way of thinking and imagining, which may make it more difficult to relate to others. The ability to tolerate or live with differences must be cultivated by today's preacher, who willy-nilly will be exposed to the "exotic" contexts of ministry in today's multicultural, economically bifurcated church. To ignore or discount differences on the one hand is a form of cultural insensitivity. On the other hand, to dwell upon these differences is also insensitive. The challenge is to deal with ambiguity and find a proper balance.

A third skill relates to having a facility to adapt one's way of communicating and behavior to the sensibilities and preferences of others. Rigidity of message and demeanor are diametrically opposed to the manner or style that will win others over and render them more disposed to receive the preacher's message. It was quite revealing to notice Pope Francis beginning his homily to a large group of cardinals gathered for Mass by looking his audience straight in the face, casting a loving gaze upon them, pausing to consciously take their presence before him inwardly to heart, and then opening with simple, heartfelt words like these: "I am happy to be here with you this morning. I love you and hold you in high regard." Even more telling was the remarkable way Pope Francis introduced himself to the world on the balcony of St. Peter's on the day of his election. He calmly said, "Buona Sera." No pope in memory ever inaugurated his ministry in such a disarming manner as saying good evening and, even more

<sup>14</sup> Theologian David Tracy explores the difference between a Catholic and Protestant approach to imagination in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), xii.

<sup>15</sup> Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, Homily of Pope Francis, Chrism Mass, March 28, 2013, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130328\\_messa-crismale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale_en.html).

meaningfully, asking the community gathered there and indeed the whole world to bless him instead of proceeding according to protocol and blessing the people. This made his audience, not the person of the pope, clearly the focus of the moment. In this Pope Francis reveals a remarkable ability as a preacher to touch base with his hearers and bring his point home.

Anecdotally, reports are coming in at this time from all over the country regarding the return of lapsed Catholics to the church, Reconciliation, and Holy Communion. When asked why they are returning now, the answer is, “We like this pope.” Diocesan and religious order vocation offices are registering many more inquiries. Yes, it seems the Church is enjoying the results of Pope Francis’ skills as chief preacher of the faith! Can we follow his lead?

### **Preaching and the People’s Faith and Practice**

Reading the US bishops’ recent reflection on preaching for the Sunday liturgy, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, in the key of the recent example of preaching given us by Pope Francis is quite a remarkable exercise. The section in Part III titled “The Preacher as a Man of Communion” ponders the major impact that cultural and social class diversity are having on the Catholic Church in the United States. This section stresses the importance of respecting the popular piety of the faithful and gives many examples of what this means for preachers. This is the very same concept that Pope Francis has raised repeatedly in his ministry as bishop in Argentina and now as Bishop of Rome. The central point that the Holy Father makes about popular piety is not that the popular devotions need to be tolerated, catechized, or purified of whatever they lack but rather that these practices and most especially the people themselves actually communicate God’s Spirit to the whole Church. Were we all not struck by Pope Francis’ assertions in his first public messages about God’s unconditional love, his tenderness, and the accessibility of forgiveness and reconciliation? His sources for such assertions, interestingly enough, were not theologians from the Gregorian University but rather an elderly lady whose confession Father Bergoglio had heard years before and faithful laity the Holy Father had met in parishes or at popular religious shrines. We are no longer surprised to hear about Pope Francis’ grandmother who was his principal teacher in the faith! Indeed, Pope Francis has been deeply influenced by what is called the *Teología del Pueblo*, a form of Latin American theology that gives pride of place to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the Christian faithful as the People of God.<sup>18</sup>

### **From the Mind to the Heart, from Theology to Pastoral Practice**

The admiration of Pope Francis’ preaching expressed by many across the world is due in my opinion to the fact that, unlike some preachers and even popes, the current Holy Father tends to avoid theologizing, that is, an explicit focus on doctrine that stresses the cognitive, propositional aspects of grasping the Word of God and the formulations of faith. Rather, Pope Francis’ method gives pride of place to the pastoral context, namely, the human beings in front of him, his audience, and the possible ways that Church teaching can really take on flesh and blood and become life. Hence his preaching is not self-referential or narcissistic. His approach avoids turning back to some ideological or theological agenda. Rather, Pope Francis chooses to remain dialogical by entering into a relationship of give and take, expressing mutuality in human relationship and showing deep regard for the hearers of the Word by putting them first. Thus, in a demonstration of his good instincts as a preacher, he quickly summarized his five page discourse to the young students of Jesuit schools that he met with on June 7, 2013. He put his prepared remarks down and used the typical language of the children and teenagers before him, referring to his prepared text as boring, in order to pursue an engaging dialogue with them. In doing this the Holy Father not only revealed a

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18 Perhaps the most telling illustration of Cardinal Bergoglio’s indebtedness to the Theology of the People, a contextual form of Latin American theology, is his relationship to fellow Argentine Jesuit Juan Luis Scannone and to the revered diocesan priest theologians Lucio Gera and Rafael Tello, who are considered the fathers of this theology. See Carlos Galli, “Testigos” in *Revista Vida Pastoral*, Año LIII, No. 314, Enero/Febrero <http://www.san-pablo.com.ar/vidapastoral/?session=articulos&id=689>.

personal penchant for spontaneity but also demonstrated a profound sense of how the quality of relationships with people, with audiences, can make or break the effectiveness of even the most well prepared, technically precise preaching and teaching in the Church.

*Preaching the Mystery of Faith* brings home the point I am trying to make here in a section titled “Speaking with Respect and Reverence for Others.” The bishops raise these concerns in the context of the Church’s commitment to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. But the point has a broader application to encounters with those who differ in terms of practices and beliefs or are simply different on account of culture, social class, gender, and so forth. The focus on religious diversity in the context of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, moreover, is not an addendum to the Church’s mission and identity. On the contrary, the disunion of the followers of Christ continues to be one of the main obstacles to the effective preaching of the Gospel, a place where the churches have simply failed to put their money where their mouth is. That is why sensitivity to other Christian communities and to other religions is for us a profoundly religious, theological, and pastoral concern. To speak intelligently about our separated brothers and sisters and people of other religions or no religion at all requires knowledge and experience. One might argue that something similar is true with respect to persons and realities that one might call secularist. It is somehow inadequate and even counterproductive to approach them first as adversaries, as those with whom we do not share full agreement and communion. In a statement that captures the spirit of preaching that deals effectively with all the forms of diversity experienced by today’s preachers, the bishops wrote:

Whether commenting on other faith communities or on the secular culture in which we are immersed, the homily is not a place for bitter invective, coarse rhetoric, or stereotypes and caricatures of other people’s religious traditions or ethnic backgrounds. Prophetic challenge of false values is a legitimate and often necessary responsibility for preaching that draws its inspiration from Sacred Scripture. But the Eucharistic context of prayer and thanksgiving should encourage a tone of charity and respect in homilies even when using words of admonition or warning.<sup>19</sup>

With regard to preaching specifically in Hispanic contexts, the bishops’ instruction highlights the fact that the Church’s evangelizing mission requires a pastoral approach that seeks to integrate rather than assimilate Hispanics and other non-European Catholics into the parish, diocese, school, and Catholic organization. This means that the gifts of Hispanic and other cultures must be affirmed rather than ignored or, worse, actively denigrated. Much harm has been done to Hispanics and other non-European Catholic communities by well-intentioned but mistaken preachers, teachers, and pastors who think that the Church’s task is to Americanize our congregations. The result of this can be the uprooting of profoundly Christian/ Catholic values regarding the supernatural, the centrality of community, Christian marriage and family, solidarity with the poor, and other basic values that are often contradicted in the modern American milieu. The focus of preaching, therefore, must be on evangelization, not Americanization. Along with this is the need for cultural discernment that provides everyone with a proclamation of the Word and reflections that critically engage all cultures and place them *all* in judgment before the Good News of Jesus Christ.

### **Preaching as Dialogue, Discernment and Engagement with New Frontiers**

Much of what I have said so far about diversity and preaching is echoed in Pope Francis’ message to the editors of *Civiltà Cattolica*, a semi-official journal of the Holy See. In his brief remarks he stressed three key concepts that directly pertain to the US bishops’ understanding of diversity as it relates to preaching the Sunday homily. The three words are “dialogue,” “discernment,” and “frontier.” First, in the face of diversity the communicator’s posture must

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<sup>19</sup> *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 41.

be, as already mentioned, dialogical instead of monological. It must arise from mutual regard and respect for others. Second, the action flowing from faith is often not self-evident and cannot be mechanistic. Rather, it requires discernment, which involves study and knowledge of the realities around us, intelligence, and broad consultation, as well as prayer and the will to do what is right. Third, the communication of the Word must engage the frontiers of the world, including new, unfolding situations and contexts that the Church has never before had to face and about which it may have little competence. Pope Francis summarized the gist of his remarks to communicators and, I would suggest, to Catholic preachers by saying, “The main task is not to build walls but bridges.”<sup>20</sup> Who can deny that by developing intercultural competencies, one acquires what is necessary to build bridges across the tremendous cultural, social class, and ideological divides of today’s world?

## Conclusion

Grounded in the Trinitarian love revealed to us in Christ, the loving embrace of others is the primordial task of all preaching and teaching in the Church. One of the essential requirements of accomplishing this task is intercultural competence: attitudes, knowledge, and skills in the area of cultural and other forms of human interaction. To effectively preach the Sunday homily means that preachers today for a host of reasons must learn how to reach out to others more often and more effectively than ever before in the history of the Christian faith. That is why Pope Francis has proposed what he calls “apostolic fervor and courage”<sup>21</sup> as the most needed virtues for our time. Apostolic fervor and courage for preachers, I would suggest, begins with a firm resolve inspired by the internal action of the Holy Spirit and the preacher’s magnanimity and generosity rather than with external practices or religious appearances. This is where preaching, prayer, and spirituality meet. This is what is needed as we contemplate our bishops’ instruction in *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* and follow in the footsteps of Pope Francis. We ask for the grace to really become culturally competent and effective preachers. Indeed, we humbly ask the Lord for the grace to authentically become what we preach.<sup>22</sup>

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20 “Francis Address to La Civiltà Cattolica,” June 14, 2013, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20/30614\\_la-civiltà-cattolica\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20/30614_la-civiltà-cattolica_it.html).

21 See Pope Francis on *parrhesia* in his Homily for Mass on Feast of St. George, April 23, 2013, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130423\\_omelia-san-giorgio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130423_omelia-san-giorgio_en.html).

22 See Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernández, “Bergoglio a secas,” *Redacción de Atrio*, May 18, 2013, <http://www.atrío.org/2013/05/bergoglio-a-secas>.