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Preaching *In* and Of the Liturgy

In one of the more celebrated discussions of the topic, Shakespeare's Juliet asks, "What's in a name? that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet?" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, scene 2). While splendid prose, Juliet's assertion is problematic from many perspectives. Language is not neutral, and the words we employ for naming things or addressing others have consequences. This is true in the political and social arena; it is equally true in theology and ministry.

This brief excursus on "naming as consequential" serves to introduce this newly christened column. Previously published under the banner "Scripture for Preaching," the column is as old as *New Theology Review*. It debuted with this journal out of an abiding concern that those who preached the word might be properly grounded in that word. The current editorial board has not abandoned this concern; on the contrary, we are more concerned than ever that *New Theology Review* provides accessible and quality resources to pastoral ministers. It is in the interest of providing such resources that this column has widened its scope, not only helping preachers to plumb the Scriptures which are so foundational for the homily, but also helping them to consider the whole of the liturgical event which is equally foundational.

While it might seem surprising to place other parts of the liturgy on a par with the lectionary readings as a basis for liturgical preaching, such a perspective is a central teaching in virtually all major conciliar and post-conciliar documents. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, for example, teaches that in the homily "the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year" (n. 52). The meaning of the ambiguous phrase "the sacred text" was clarified in the 1964 instruction *Inter oecumenici* which commented: "A homily on the sacred text means an explanation, pertinent to the mystery celebrated and the special needs of the listeners, of some point in either the readings from sacred Scripture or in another text from the Ordinary or Proper of the day's Mass" (n. 54).

The basic understanding of the homily as related to the scriptures or some other liturgical text is repeated in *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* which notes that the homily "should develop some point of the readings or of another text from the Ordinary or from the Proper

of the Mass of the day, and take into account the mystery being celebrated and the needs proper to the listeners" (n. 41). A similar instruction is found in the *Introduction to the Lectionary* (n. 24).

Those who have preached the lectionary texts for any period of time instinctively understand the reasoning behind this teaching. Consider, for example, the major solemnities of the church year: here it is not the Lectionary which sets the feast, but the feast which sets the Lectionary. Easter, Christmas, Trinity Sunday, the Immaculate Conception and all other great festivals do not have gospels which follow in sequence along with the others proclaimed in that year's lectionary cycle. Rather, they are special texts—what the *Introduction to the Lectionary* calls "thematic"—chosen because they reflect some basic image or teaching central to the feast. Just as these feasts, and the whole of the liturgy which celebrates them, are determinative for the lections chosen for that feast, so should these feasts and the whole of the liturgy be determinative for that day's liturgical preaching.

And exactly what does it mean to say that "the whole of the liturgy" needs to be a source of any preaching worthy of the name liturgical? Answer that question by thinking of all the texts besides those from the Lectionary which are proclaimed at Eucharist. Consider the Eucharistic Prayers which *The General Instruction* considers the "center and high point of the entire celebration" (n. 54). When was the last time the texts, action or theology of that prayer held center stage in your preaching? Think of all those invariable prayers which we sing and proclaim each Sunday: the "Kyrie," "Glory to God," "Creed," "Holy," "Lamb of God." Certainly they are a treasury of tradition and belief. Furthermore, they are already deeply rooted in the memories of so many worshippers. What a boon: to preach texts that people could actually recite with you. Then there are the hymns that we sing, the orations that we pray, the blessings which punctuate the rite, and the proclamations of faith.

Besides the texts, however, think broadly about the whole of the liturgy as a potential source for preaching. Consider not just the words, but also the ritual actions, and even the very feasts and seasons that we celebrate throughout the year. What is the significance of the sprinkling rite, especially as it punctuates the Easter season or brings the Christmas season to a close at the feast of the Baptism of the Lord? How does the blessing of the Advent wreath illuminate the strong eschatological message of the First Sunday of Advent? What does it mean for the Church to celebrate feasts of "All Saints" and "All Souls" back to back at the close of the church year? How does the change in a feast's name—e.g., from *Corpus Christi* to the "Body and Blood of Christ" (June 6 this year)—provide an insight into the heart of the liturgical matter?

You are looking for something fresh to say on Pentecost. Maybe you have preached that grand solemnity for decades, and do not know

whether you have another insight into this closing moment of the Easter season. Turn to *Eucharistic Prayer for Masses of Reconciliation II*. Read those stirring lines of the preface which praise divine presence and action in the world and underscore the Spirit's work as a mark of that presence: where understanding puts an end to strife, hatred is quenched by mercy, vengeance gives way to forgiveness. Turn deep into the Eucharistic Prayer, and recall the two pivotal moments when the Spirit is invoked: first over the gifts, then over people. The "consecratory" epiclesis proclaims how the Spirit is at work in this Eucharist, the source of all sanctification. In even more pointed language, the great "communion epiclesis" prays that this very meal-sharing might be a source of the Spirit for us—a new Pentecost—that eliminates all division. Here are texts and accompanying gestures which ring in our assembly's ears and register in their mind's eye. Yet they are so often overlooked or underutilized. The Church wisely teaches, however, that such should not be the case.

This current issue of *New Theology Review* focuses on "Saints." This happy coincidence prompts us to look ahead a few months, where we discover that in August 1999 the solemnity of the Assumption falls on a Sunday. The readings for that day certainly provide rich material for preaching: a first reading from Revelation which speaks of the pregnant woman clothed with the sun; Psalm 132 with its refrain "go up to the place of your rest"; a second reading from 1 Corinthians about Christ as the first fruits of those who have died; Luke's Gospel account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth and her *Magnificat*. While not abandoning those readings, it might help the preacher to begin the homiletic consideration with the day's preface which speaks of Mary as a pattern for the Church and a sign of hope for us on our pilgrim way. Such a text makes it clear that at the core of this solemnity is not Mary but God's care for all shining through Mary. Like the moon, her light is reflective on the sun, her Son. The alternate opening prayer reiterates this insight when it praises God for revealing the beauty of divine power by exalting the lowly virgin Mary—back to its divine source as revealed in Jesus. Resonance for this direction is easily found in the second reading and gospel assigned for the day. Thus the readings are not ignored, but interpreted from the prism of the liturgy.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* teaches that the liturgy—all of it—is the fount and summit of the Church's life. It is a good thing for those called to preach to remember. Thus, preaching is not only *in* the liturgy, it is *of* the liturgy.