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James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R.

A Preacher's Dozen, or Help for Stoking the Homiletic Fires

Is there any group of preachers asked to preach more often than Catholic priests? Within any given week different homilies may be needed for one, even two Sunday Masses (especially if one of the Masses has a lot of children present), several weekday Masses (especially if it is Advent, Lent, or Easter season, or whenever else "a large congregation is present," *Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass*, #25), a baptism, wedding, possibly one or two wake services and funerals, a special occasion like an anniversary Mass or a civil holiday, perhaps a holy day of obligation. It is possible that a conscientious preacher may preach close to a dozen times within a week. How does one keep the homiletic fires burning? The companionship of other preachers helps. Even the voices of other preachers may provide some welcome encouragement. I would like to offer some suggestions in three areas of homiletic literature: works pertaining to motive, method, and models. I have come up with "a homilist's dozen," based on "a baker's dozen": twelve plus one, in case there is one you find insufficiently weighty.

MOTIVE FOR PREACHING:

Periodically it is worthwhile for a preacher to stop and ask, "What am I doing, or trying to do, when I preach?" Four books offer sound reflection by providing a vision of preaching. I think our motives for preaching are rooted in our vision of preaching. First, two recent books by Roman Catholic authors. Mary Catherine Hilker's *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (Continuum, 1997) considers preaching as an exercise of the "sacramental imagination." Preachers are called

to use their imaginations to “reconfigure reality by seeing it through an alternative lens, that is, a lens formed by the vision of the Scriptures and the rituals of Christian liturgy, which enables both preachers and the community to see the world through the prism of God’s promise, fully embodied and revealed in Jesus” (188). Hilkert reminds preachers that grace is to be discovered in everyday experience by looking at life through the lens of a biblical awareness that is self-critical first of all, and is unafraid to face human injustice wherever it is found, while fulfilling the essential task of retelling the story of Jesus as our story.

Another work that restores the focus of what Catholic preaching is about is Robert P. Waznak’s *An Introduction to the Homily* (The Liturgical Press, 1998). Waznak provides preachers with a vision rich in possibilities—the homilist seen as herald, teacher, witness, and interpreter. Yet while preaching has within it the potential to meet different needs at different times in the life of the community, the author picks up on the emphasis on preaching first articulated in the USCC-NCCB document, *Fulfilled In Your Hearing, The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (1982), seeing the homily as offering a biblical interpretation of human existence which enables a community to give thanks and praise. Waznak’s treatment of the values and limitations of the current Lectionary is especially important for preachers who want to be faithful to the gospel message.

Two other books provide insight into this primary work of pastoral ministry: Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann’s *Cadences of Home, Preaching among the Exiles* (Westminster/John Knox, 1997) and Charles Bartow’s *God’s Human Speech, A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Eerdmans, 1997). Brueggemann uses the biblical experience of exile as a “rich and supple” metaphor for the experience of today’s listeners, living in an age when our alliance with the dominant culture has been broken and feeling lost in a wilderness of conflicting world views and values. Brueggemann believes this metaphor “mediates our experience to us in fresh ways and gives access to spiritual resources in equally fresh ways” (11). Preaching, then, becomes a way to bring them to their spiritual home, offering an alternative script that provides a “resonance between dense text and dense life” (75). Exile once again becomes the locus of a new beginning. In a different key, Bartow’s work reminds preachers of the power of the spoken word, that both the reading of the scriptures and their proclamation are a way of “turning ink into blood,” embodying the living Word and en-fleshing it through human words, inflections, intonations, and all else that facilitates “God’s human speech.” This author is especially good for bringing together the insights of current communication theorists, both homiletic and secular, with the contribution of the diverse theologies of preaching rooted in the Reformed tradition.

METHOD

Reviewing your method of preparation can be helpful. Four books come to mind. Two older ones worth looking at are New Testament scholar Gerard S. Sloyan's *Worshipful Preaching* (Fortress, 1980) and homiletician Thomas G. Long's *The Witness of Preaching* (Westminster/John Knox, 1989). Sloyan's short work is rich in practical advice, gems of homiletic wisdom that range from the paradoxical "the chief hazard to effective preaching is having a gift with words" (20) to the very blunt directive, "If a script is your enemy, do not allow it to get near the pulpit. But if there never was a script, do not let yourself near the pulpit" (23). All of Sloyan's suggestions are at the service of liturgical preaching that incorporates hearers into the whole life of the people Israel and into the mystery of Christ in whom we have been immersed by baptism. Thomas Long's work comes from the perspective of the preacher as a witness to the truth of God's Word. The community goes to the Scriptures by means of the preacher who bears their questions and concerns, yet also comes with an openness to being surprised by God's claim. The preacher then witnesses to what has been seen and heard. Especially helpful are the author's two chapters on "Biblical Exegesis for Preaching," and "The Focus and Function of the Sermon," the latter demanding that the preachers ask themselves *what* exactly they want to say and *why*. Many congregations would be grateful for the clarity this alone can bring to a preacher's message.

Two recent books worth investigating are Alvin C. Rueter's *Making Good Preaching Better, A Step-by-Step Guide to Scripture-Based, People-Centered Preaching* (The Liturgical Press, 1997) and Eugene L. Lowry's *The Sermon, Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Abingdon, 1997). Rueter's book provides exactly what the title promises: a solid homiletical "examination of conscience" in terms of such basic concerns as keeping a sermon cohesive, visual, oral, textual, and *Christian* (!). His voice is supportive; his concern for assisting preachers, both new and experienced, is evident in the tone of his work. Eugene Lowry continues to refine the idea of a sermon having a *plot*, his contribution to what has been called the "new homiletics," an approach to preaching rooted more in induction than deduction, more in story and image than in concept and abstraction, more in "moves" than in "points." Lowry's plot involves a sermon's movement in which ideas, images, or story are arranged in such a way that there is "a strategic delay of the preacher's meaning." Just as a good plot involves suspense and surprise, Lowry's sermon plot invites preachers to develop sermons that promise good news in a way that proceeds from conflict and complication to a sudden shift into an empowering proclamation of the gospel. Lowry's final chapter offers ten steps for preparing such a sermon. While I do not believe there is any *one* best structure, Lowry's has

much to recommend it in a culture like ours that has been so conditioned by the media to narrative movement.

MODELS

St. Augustine observed that while some people learn to speak well by following the rules of good rhetoric, more learn by studying good models. Allow me to present a final group of four. Two collections of homilies by Roman Catholic preachers can be studied to advantage. Walter J. Burghardt's latest collection, *Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters, Biblical Justice Homilies throughout the Year* (Paulist, 1998) again shows the author's work as a unique combination of scholarship, structure, and synergy. Though his structure only varies between a three-point homily and a two-point homily, there is more evidence of study and research in one Burghardt homily than can be found in all the homilies given on any Sunday in many parishes. However, while I learned a great deal from those on the various saints, I wondered why these made so little, if any, use of the Scriptures chosen.

While Burghardt provides for preachers the model of the orator-preacher, Robert P. Waznak gives us the voice of the poet-preacher in *Like Fresh Bread, Sunday Homilies in the Parish* (Paulist, 1993). Waznak's work here offers the *sound* of preaching, with the homilies written in thought phrases, as one would speak. His ability to weave together images from daily life and those of the biblical texts results in cogent flashes of revelation. For effective preaching on Old Testament texts, see Walter Brueggemann's *The Threat of Life, Sermons on Pain, Power and Weakness* (Fortress, 1996). His work is a needed reminder for Catholic preachers of the power of the Old Testament to speak to contemporary situations and of the abiding efficacy of expository preaching. And, finally, there is the most recent work of the poet-essayist Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead, 1998). By her wrestling with the traditional theological vocabulary of the Christian tradition—words like salvation, incarnation, repentance, to name a few—Norris models for preachers the importance of relating the old words to the depths of human experience, to speak to our longings, fears, and hopes. Beautiful work here.

AND ONE FOR GOOD MEASURE . . .

A novel: *Quarantine* by Jim Crace (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998). This fascinating book is an imaginative retelling of the forty days Jesus spent in the desert, only he is not the only human present, four others are out there nearby—three men and a woman—fasting and praying, and another two, abandoned by their caravan because of a sudden, life-threatening illness. The interaction between these figures, and the form Satan takes for Jesus makes this a provocative tale that retains a

sense of mystery and awe often sacrificed in contemporary retellings of biblical stories—and in much contemporary preaching. A haunting book that lingers in the memory, as an effective homily might.

James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R., is the author of Imaginal Preaching, An Archetypal Perspective (Paulist, 1995) and associate professor of preaching at Washington Theological Union.

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