

PREACHING BETTER: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR HOMILISTS
by Ken Untener. New York: Paulist Press, 1999. Paper, \$10.95.

Back in 1975, Bishop Ken Untener started keeping notes “Columbo style”, he says, on what people liked and didn’t like about homilies they heard at Sunday mass. He wanted a view from the pew, and he got it; lots of them. People were very willing to talk about their experience of preaching. From what he heard and in order to improve the quality of preaching, he started “the Saginaw Program” for preachers in the diocese where he is bishop.

He chooses four priests and a deacon or lay homilist and asks each to tape their next homily. He adds one of his own to the mix. Then the group gathers and begins a feedback process that continues for four sessions. The preachers submit homilies for discussion for each of the subsequent sessions. Also invited to the group are two women; one the diocesan director of communications, the other a systematic theologian and spiritual director. The last element in the process involves lay people from outside the diocese who participate through the mail. They are sent the taped homilies and then give their feedback. This book tells what Untener has learned about preaching from these sessions. He describes the book as “straight talk for experienced homilists.”

The book contains not just the mechanics of homily preparation, but the attitude and spirituality that is essential for good preaching. Untener encourages the preacher to find ways to make the preparation process prayerful—and enjoyable. The metaphor he uses to describe the preacher’s task is that of someone who enters a kitchen filled with the smell of something already cooking—the Lord is doing the cooking. The preacher is the helper, the one who has “to help the flow of what Christ is doing....” (page 11) Thus, the preparation process will be more enjoyable because the preacher does not have to feel alone or the burden of coming up with something original week after week. He sees help for us preachers in the fact that it is the scriptures that are being proclaimed; our job is to “help them along.” As a result, “attention is less focused on the homilist, more on the Word of God.” (page 15)

He critiques what “isn’t quite a homily”: reheated, old “microwave homilies”; “carry-outs”, coming from elsewhere, not the “kitchen”; teachings, preachings “about” the scriptures; preaching based on accommodated senses of the text, “triggered by” the text, but not “flowing from” the scriptures. From the above you can tell that this book is chatty and very informal. Some of its “chapters” are one or two pages long. But its seeming casual tone can betray what it is: a reflection on

preaching based on very concrete examples by someone who has had a passion for good preaching. Untener taught homiletics, so he also has a way of bringing in his knowledge of the history of preaching and the expectations Vatican II had when it called for a renewal of Catholic homiletics.

His topics are many. He speaks of the preparation process, goals the preacher should have in forming the homily, use of stories, getting feedback, introductions, conclusions, editing, language, weekday preaching, involvement of the assembly, justice and much more. Each are treated succinctly. The chapters contain sections entitled: “some tips”, “other approaches”, “an example”, “feedback from the folks”, “a practical lesson”. He is succinct and gets to the point quickly. This is an easy read and a valuable one. He accomplishes his goal—to be practical and draw from a rich experience so as to help veteran homilists. He succeeds at this goal.

The lay preacher should not be put off by his aim to address “veteran preachers”, nor by his focus on the Sunday homily. While he does want to help improve the current quality of Sunday preaching, and who can blame him for this, his process is very inclusive. He does draw upon the lay preachers of the diocese and includes laity in his feedback sessions. What he says about preaching is applicable to a variety of settings in which any preacher may find her/himself. This is a good book. It has practical information, and it is a quick read. Give it a try.

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