

THEOLOGY OF PREACHING: ESSAYS ON VISION AND MISSION IN THE PULPIT

ed. Gregory Heille, OP (London: Melisende, 2001)

In *Theology of Preaching: Essays on Vision and Mission in the Pulpit*, Linus Edoguo quotes an Ibo proverb that says, when you get up from your seat you must have a purpose or a destination in mind. Applying the proverb to preaching, he says how foolish it would be to get up and not know where you are going as a preacher. That's what the nine essays in this collection are about: when we preach, what are we about and where are we going? Gregory Heille, OP, who directs the Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program at Aquinas Institute in St. Louis has assembled essays on the topic from graduates of the program. Their writings reveal a very diverse group of preachers---men and women, lay and clerical, first and third world, urban and rural, ecumenical--- though mostly Catholic.

This book first helps us hear how experienced preachers vision their task. Then it challenges us to enter a similar reflective process. No matter what our ministry, we all operate under theological presumptions. And so, whether we have articulated it or not, we preachers all have a theology of preaching. The question is, whether or not we are conscious of that theology and how it influences us. It would be preferable to make explicit the theology that is guiding our preaching so that we can be aware of it, detect the influence it has on all aspects of the preaching process and decide if, upon examination, we need to make any adaptations in our theological premises. With the help of this book, we might be able to make changes in the underlying assumptions we have, consciously or unconsciously, about the important ministry of proclaiming God's Word.

This text helps remind us that in the Catholic tradition, preaching is the "first theology"---it is the ministry that reflects on the Word's meaning in our modern setting. Systematic theology serves preaching and is the "second theology." Systematic theology helps the preacher not only have a solid foundation and necessary tool for interpreting the Word but aids our theological understanding of our preaching mission. Since these writers were also participants in the only Catholic Doctor of Ministry program in preaching in the country, the reader gets a glimpse into what such students are studying in the program. Theologians most often quoted are the Evangelists, Aquinas, Schillebeeckx, Rahner, Sobrino, E. Johnson, Congar, Kung, Schneiders, Barth and Bonhoeffer. But to help them articulate the topic at hand, their vision and theology of preaching, two theologians

are cited most frequently and seem to have been major influences: Douglas John Hall and Mary Catherine Hilbert. (All draw from Mary Catherine Hilbert's helpful distinction between the Protestant "dialectical imagination" and the Catholic "sacramental imagination.") One suspects these two were used in the program as primary resources. Thus, readers of these essays have a guide for further study in the subject of the theology of preaching.

The essays help open up the imagination as we reflect on how we approach our own preaching. Several writers employ metaphors to describe their approach. Linus Ebele Edogwo names the preacher a "wine tapper," based on the African tribal person who must carefully draw palm wine from the sap of the palm tree. James Hayes uses the "sigh," the audible breath that expresses both sadness as well as longing and yearning, to describe preaching. Daniel Francis, influenced by Thomas Long and James Wallace, calls himself a "preacher-witness". The "witness" is molded by the experience of Christ and takes up the role of proclaiming what he/she has experienced. David Buttrick, quoted by Francis, calls preachers "pulpit poets" whose task is to image a new world. Also cited is St. Paul's metaphor of the preacher as "ambassador," one not sent to proclaim his or her own words, but those of the one who sends.

Reading this smallish book can seem a simple task---at first. But the reader should be prepared to do some serious work with each of these authors. First, the writers see both external and internal threats to the success of preaching. We first world preachers face the external cultural threats of secularism and indifference to faith. There is a strong internal threat as well, as we are reminded of the current limitations on the success of Catholic preaching by the restriction of Eucharistic preaching to ordained men. We are also invited, through their ministerial reflections, to draw a parallel to our own preaching experience. In addition to well-known theologians, other "serious thinkers" have contributed to these conversations---artists, poets, literary authors and musicians (Aaron Copland inspired Audrey Borschel's view that preachers have to articulate the contrasting tones of both God's presence and distance in our lives.) So, be prepared to reflect on preaching from various contexts and theological perspectives. Then turn an analytical eye to your own preaching to ask the questions prompted by this book, "What is my calling as a preacher?" and "What am I doing when I preach?"

---reviewed by Jude Siciliano, OP
Promoter of Preaching
Southern Dominican Province, USA