

PREACHING TO THE HUNGERS OF THE HEART; THE HOMILY ON THE FEASTS AND WITHIN THE RITES

James W. Wallace, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002.)

Wallace calls the homily since Vatican II a “work in progress.” The first phase was influenced by the Council’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” which returned to the word “homily” to describe liturgical preaching. The homily entered the second phase when the American bishops published “Fulfilled In Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly” FIYH. This document did a lot to refocus the understanding and function of the homily. The homilist is described in FIYH as a “mediator of meaning,” who provides the gathered assembly with a “scriptural interpretation of their lives.” In other words, the homily is supposed to feed our hunger for meaning. In this book Wallace proposes a third phase in our understanding of the homily. The Sunday homily, he says, should address the hungers of the heart for Wholeness, Meaning and Belonging. But Wallace’s premise is that the other liturgical celebrations are also a rich source for feeding these hungers. In this book he sets about showing how specific types of liturgical celebrations are best suited to address each of the three deep human hungers.

Before he deals with these hungers he dedicates a first chapter to an overview of the homily’s development in Roman Catholic liturgical life. Here he provides more than enough footnotes and bibliography to direct the reader to further studies. Using the gospels’ bread discourses he also draws out spirituality for the preacher. The Word, he says, not only nourishes those who hear it preached, but should first be consumed by the preacher. Just as this “feeding on the Scriptures” (p.11) nourished the prophets, it must nourish the preacher as well. Thus, preachers are to spend more time and effort actively listening to and assimilating the Word. This book is a fine “how to book,” for it suggests ways to put the author’s suggestions into practice. But it also calls the preacher to a deeper spirituality of the Word; for without the time spent dwelling with and listening to the Word, our preaching risks becoming merely doctrinal instruction, moralizing or a historical reconstruction of a past age.

In chapter two he shows how the feasts of the Lord (the Easter Triduum, Corpus Christi, Christ the King, etc.) speak to the hunger for wholeness. These solemnities bring us more deeply into the key moments of salvation and help fulfill our longing for completeness. We humans are fragmented and incomplete and these feasts bridge the gap of time and space to allow us to experience salvation as a present and active force. So, for example, Easter can draw us closer to the God of creation and redemption and Christmas to God’s perfect enfleshment in Christ and in our daily lives. Wallace treats not only the feasts, but also each liturgical season, to show their theological importance and how they allow us to enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ.

Chapter three shows how our hunger for meaning can be addressed in the sacramental rites. These celebrations are “communal ritual celebrations that have served to bond communities of believers through the ages” (p.70). Wallace offers a theological reflection on the rites and gives characteristics of the type of homily one would preach within these settings. These rites, he says, enable us to “recognize God’s presence and the workings of grace in both daily and

special events in the human story and to make insightful and integral connections with the biblical writings, especially the words and deeds of Jesus” (p.93). In other words, the “sacramental imagination” enables us to see that all is holy.

Two chapters are dedicated to preaching through the saints as a way to address the human hunger for belonging. Saints, he says, can play various roles, acting as models, mentors and metaphors for us humans. The second of these chapters focuses on Marian feasts. We have had lots of excess baggage from pre-Vatican II days that can keep Mary aloof from our daily struggles. Religious art has not always been helpful either in its presentations of Mary as “the Fairy Queen” and the “lovely Lady dressed in blue.” I have been using his suggestions for daily preachings through the saints. I find his approach practical and succinct. He outlines concrete ways to facilitate the preparation of such preachings. In fact, each of his chapters has both suggestions for how to prepare the type of homilies he is suggesting and several of his own homilies as illustrations. As a preacher, I find the inclusion of his own homilies both a bold and humble offering. But they are very good homilies, and he need have no trepidation.

Preaching preparation cannot be merely reduced to a technique that one slavishly follows, as if preparing a gourmet meal from someone else’s recipes. So, even as Wallace describes how to practice his approach, he always calls the preacher to a deep spirituality that focuses on the Word of God. When, for example, he speaks of preaching through the saints, he calls us to immerse ourselves in three worlds: the world of the listener, the world of the biblical text and the world of the saint---and challenges us to find connections between the three. The combination of theological and liturgical reflection, practical guides for preaching preparation and the encouragement to the preacher to enter into a deeper engagement with the Word combines to make this very nourishing reading for the preacher. The book is valuable, not only for specific liturgical preachings, but for any preaching that seeks to address the empty spaces in the hungry hearts of those assembled to hear a word spoken by a person of faith—the preacher.

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