

WE SPEAK THE WORD OF THE LORD: A PRACTICAL PLAN FOR MORE EFFECTIVE PREACHING

By Daniel E. Harris: Chicago: Acta Publications, 2001. (Paper, \$14.95, 213 pages)

Preachers have a need for ongoing education and formation in their field of preaching. Daniel Harris addresses that need in *WE SPEAK THE WORD OF THE LORD*. The book is designed, the author says, primarily for those who have already been trained in homiletics and are now preaching. Specifically, it is addressed to Roman Catholic Sunday preachers. But he has also written for seminarians and Catholic lay ministers engaged in preaching retreats, prayer meetings, days of prayer, etc. In the light of his focused reading audience, Harris has done his job well.

Even though the author claims to address this book to those “who have had training in homiletics” (p.6), he is taking no chances! He spends four chapters discussing the basic nature of the homily in the light of Vatican II’s renewal of preaching and the important statement about the homily made by the American bishops in, *FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING*.

He takes a moment to review the development of Christian preaching and the historical struggle between Catholics and Protestants over sacraments and the Word. He then devotes a chapter to the characteristics of effective preaching addressing such issues as: the purpose of preaching, style, language, focus, teaching vs. proclamation, stories, and the identity of the preacher. Harris develops his reflections by asking: “what makes an outstanding homily? Then he discusses characteristics that help a homily fit the description of “outstanding”: proclaims the scriptures, witnesses the faith, in touch with people’s lives, imaginative, hopeful, engaging, has one central idea, clear and simple. The explanations accompanying each characteristic tend to be brief. Considering the fascinating appeal to listing qualities of an “outstanding” preaching, I would have liked more time spent on these areas. There are far too many ordinary homilies preached on Sunday morning and helps toward preaching “outstanding homilies” would be pure gold! I found this shortcoming in the book: it attempts to cover a lot of preaching territory, and some sections are just too brief for a sufficient discussion of the topic they are covering.

Harris spends some time explaining and using David Buttrick’s homiletic theory. Buttrick is a major voice in contemporary preaching. Traditionally preachers have emphasized structuring a preaching according to deductive reasoning, moving from one developed premise to another, towards a logical conclusion. Contemporary homileticians, influenced by narrative theology and recent biblical scholarship, have turned away from such syllogistic development towards a more narrative flow in their preaching. One of Buttrick’s contributions has been to emphasize preaching as an oral-aural event and to develop a theory of structural movement based on language modules he calls “moves”. Harris uses Buttrick’s method to study “moves” within selected Gospel passages and then he uses these insights in the preachings he provides as examples. Thus, one of the book’s strengths, is to make the reader aware of some contemporary homileticians and theologians such as Buttrick---as well as Burghardt, Wardlaw, Waznak, Hilker, Tisdale, Pazdan, Delaplane, Long, Lowry, etc.

WE SPEAK THE WORD OF THE LORD includes practical material for constructing a preaching, listening to the listeners and getting feedback (he provides sample feedback forms). It also addresses the spirituality of the preacher, justice preaching, and daily homilies and preaching at funerals and weddings—he provides samples for these last types of preaching.

The book concludes with a discussion guide. Harris suggests using each of the book's eight chapters for preaching reflection groups and provides reflective questions to accompany each chapter. He also gives recommendations for how a group could discuss and critique homilies by its members, thus providing important, but often missing, feedback for our preaching.

WE SPEAK THE WORD OF THE LORD is a practical book for preachers and it also provides a broad overview of some recent developments in preaching theory.

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