

WRITTEN TEXT BECOMES LIVING WORD: THE VISION AND PRACTICE OF SUNDAY PREACHING, Stephen Vincent DeLeers.

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The Second Vatican Council brought about sweeping changes in the Catholic Church, particularly in liturgical reform. Among the changes was a renewed attention given to liturgical preaching. Since 1969 liturgical documents, books and directories put focus on the homily and Stephen DeLeers thinks the result of all this attention has not only resulted in a renewal of preaching among Catholics but has made a distinctive contribution to the practice and vision of Sunday preaching. One of his reasons for writing this book, DeLeers says, is the hope that it will contribute to ongoing ecumenical dialogue on preaching God's Word. (He also hopes it will repay some of our debt for the contributions made by modern Protestant homileticians.)

The first two chapters briefly review thirty years of documents since Vatican II that have addressed liturgical preaching. DeLeers' writing style is crisp and economical, and he deftly summarizes the evolution of the modern homily based on these documents. As he points out, not all church documents on the homily followed a direct line of development. Since the Council there were many attempts to return liturgical preaching to an earlier sermon model with an emphasis on "doctrinal preaching." But, as the book's survey of documents shows, a significant renewal of Catholic preaching has emerged and DeLeers sums up what the documents have said about the homily under five characteristics. He then dedicates a chapter to each of these characteristics. Throughout the book DeLeers not only elucidates a homiletical theory, he also makes specific and practical suggestions for how a preacher can fashion and deliver the kind of homily he is describing.

The homily is a Personal word. "Before anything else...the Sunday homily is the word of a person of faith, the word of a person who has experienced the Lord and who wishes to share that experience." (page 53). Paul VI said that our modern world thirsts for authenticity and a homily that is personal will communicate verbally and non-verbally the preacher's authentic love of God and pastoral love for the assembly.

The homily is a Liturgical word. It is an integral part of the liturgy, and the preacher will: communicate a sense of the sacred; speak on behalf of those assembled for worship; reinforce their identity as church; effectively proclaim the scripture passages; interpret them for our lives and make connections between the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. "Preachers who succeed in encouraging active participation in the liturgy will find assembly members reporting that they felt 'involved' in a true 'celebration,' as opposed to passive attendance at a lecture" (page 85).

The homily is an Enculturated word. The preacher shows a deep understanding of the customs, mentality, local conditions, prejudices, stories, etc. of both individuals and groups. The Pontifical Biblical Commission gave a theological rationale for inculturation. "The theological foundation of inculturation is the conviction of faith that the Word of God transcends the cultures in which it has found expression and has the capability of being spread in other

cultures, in such a way as to be able to reach all human beings in the cultural context in which they live” (pages 88-89). If a homily is successfully enculturated, people will experience how God’s Word is relevant to their particular lives. “When we successfully correlate the faith experiences of our scriptural forebears with those of our people, we have truly done our homiletic best” (page 1012).

The homily is a Clarifying word. It addresses head as well as heart and, while not “explaining” the mystery, does use conceptual language when explanation is necessary. DeLeers says that making a “central point” clearly is an important discipline and results in our listeners having a clear sense of what we are saying and what kind of response we might hope from them.

The homily is an Actualizing word. A well-preaching homily “increases the efficacy of the Word” (page 119). Preachers communicate a sense of “urgency,” for we realize that through the proclamation and preaching of the scriptures, God speaks to us today. Facts and information are not at the heart of preaching—Jesus Christ is. Preachers who believe this and preach accordingly become effective witnesses to what we have experienced and are attempting to do---elicit an encounter with Christ. DeLeers acknowledges the insights of the theologian Mary Catherine Hilker, OP (Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination. New York: Continuum, 1997), who describes preaching as the act of “naming grace,” i.e. naming the ways God is actively present in our lives.

As DeLeers enumerates these five characteristics of homiletical preaching, he gives helpful hints how we can prepare and deliver such homilies. To illustrate each of the characteristics the author provides a sample of his own preaching and then discusses his preaching intent and method in the light of the specific characteristic he is illustrating. (That takes courage!) The book concludes by presenting a method for preparing a Sunday homily that will be personal, liturgical, enculturated, clarifying and actualizing. The final chapter suggests ten strategies for improving one’s preaching.

I like this book a lot. It presents excellent background and theory on the homily as well as practical material that any preacher, beginner or experienced, will find useful. It focuses on Catholic Sunday preaching and hence is oriented to the ordained preacher, but the material is applicable for any one who preaches in a liturgical setting.

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