

## Pope Francis and Sacred Preaching

- Introduction
  - We're now in the proximate preparation for the celebration of Jesus' nativity. Without looking past the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we are beginning to think about what we're going to say not only to our regular salt-of-the-earth parishioners — to try to help them experience a little bit of the Joy to the World and learn from the Shepherds, Magi, Blessed Mother and St. Joseph how to adore God-with-us not in a manger but in the Holy Eucharist — but also to the many who come whom we don't see at all during the rest of the year but who, thanks be to God, still come at least on Christmas.
  - We're living in an age of where the new evangelization isn't just a much talked about idea, but a necessity and a way of parish life. And Christmas is probably the greatest opportunity we have over the course of the year to reach those baptized brothers and sisters who are no longer living in full fidelity to their baptismal promises and journeying with us in Christ's footsteps.
  - We're all praying for them that they may experience something a week from now that might inspire them to take up again the regular practice of the faith. Preaching for them is a bigger challenge than preaching for our regulars for a few reasons: they don't really know us and therefore are evaluating us without context and are prone to misinterpret what we say; they only hear one homily a year, and so there's a little more pressure on us not to repeat the main insights and ideas of last year or the year before; and they don't really practice the art of listening to God speaking through the homily and so it often proves harder to get and keep their attention. Preaching for them requires a different type of spiritual preparation and perhaps a different style of preaching altogether.
  - That's why I thought it would be worthwhile for us, as we prepare to proclaim and ponder the good news of great joy for all the people, to ponder Pope Francis' insights in *Evangelii Gaudium* on sacred preaching. The missionary transformation of the Church that he announced in that apostolic exhortation, which is to become programmatic, he said, for all aspects of the Church life, was written in a particular way for celebrations like Christmas. Our preaching on Christmas is in a particular way supposed to exemplify most the type of missionary homilies Pope Francis is calling on bishops, priests and deacons throughout the world to proclaim.
  - So I'd like to ponder together with you in the presence of the Lord Jesus some of what his earthly vicar is exhorting us to do. He wrote this section, he said, to "renew confidence" in our preaching through which God reaches out to his people and because he knows many priests find preaching a burden and, because of that, often spread that burden to their people. There's so many good insights that come from Pope Francis' 44 years of priestly experience.
  - To make things simple and hopefully a little more easily memorable, I've re-organized the most "meticulous" papal primer on preaching in Church history into four points focusing on the purpose of liturgical preaching, the messenger, the message and the style.
- The point and purpose of liturgical preaching
  - Pope Francis first indicates what preaching is *not* supposed to be:
    - It's not, he says, a "form of entertainment."
    - Neither is it supposed to be a weekly commentary on current events.
      - He says we shouldn't speak about the latest news to awaken people's interests.
      - These commentaries on current affairs listened to more informatively than performatively, leaving listeners "without being challenged or changed."
    - It's not a lecture or speech on biblical exegesis
    - It's not meant to be a catechetical session or even a meditation.
  - What it's supposed to be is a bridge to a heart-to-heart dialogue between God and his people.

- A liturgical homily promotes a heart-to-heart dialogue between God and his people, proclaiming the deeds of salvation and restating the demands of the covenant.
    - It takes up the dialogue God has already established and leads to sacramental communion.
    - This dialogue is more than the communication of truth. It's a expression of love for each other, of an exchange of persons, through the medium of words.
    - The preacher's task is to join loving hearts of the Lord and his people, strengthening covenant and bond of charity. The hearts of believers allow God to speak, with the preacher as an instrument to express God's word and the people's own feelings so that afterward they can continue the conversation. The word is a mediator, bringing God, faithful and intermediary together.
    - It should guide the assembly and preacher to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist.
    - For this reason, the preacher needs to keep his ear to the people and find what they need to hear. He must contemplate his people, their habits, aspirations, limitations, worldviews, learning their language, so that he can link it to their human situation that needs God's word.
    - This double-contemplation will lead to a "synthesis" between the Gospel and culture.
  - The homily is part of the offering made to the Father and a mediation of the grace that Christ pours out.
  - It's quasi-sacramental, since faith comes from what is heard.
  - The homily is meant to help form a people
    - The Church is a pilgrim people advancing toward God.
    - We're not meant to remain a group of individuals, but a family.
    - Magi came together to cross the desert. Shepherds came together to adore Jesus. It's a mutual journey.
    - Francis insists that Jesus didn't call apostles to form an exclusive or elite group.
    - Everyone is meant to be "welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel."
  - And the homily is meant to call and help form people to be evangelized evangelizers
    - Evangelization is not the task of professionals while others are "passive recipients." The entire people of God is meant to proclaim the Gospel
    - We're not supposed to be "disciples *and* missionaries," but rather "missionary disciples."
    - Preaching flourishes in the service to the mission of evangelization, helping others to take up their own mission. Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples.
    - Just as the first disciples immediately told others about the salvation they had found, so we should do the same.
    - Life is simple not the same with Jesus as without him. In one of the most moving passages in the exhortation, Francis says, "It is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize."(266)
- The Messenger
  - Francis says several things about the one preaching the word so that people will have ears to hear the word he seeks to proclaim for God.
  - Francis says that people today thirst for authenticity, for credible witnesses, for preachers who speak of a God they know and for a minister who communicates he's at least striving to treat them the way they believe God treats them and wants them to be treated.
  - First, the preacher should be:
    - close
    - approachable

- welcoming
  - warm
  - joyful
  - unpretentious
  - ready for dialogue
  - patient
- The Pope says he should be striving for holiness, stating the obvious truth that “The greater or lesser holiness of the minister does impact his proclamation.”
- He should enjoy passing on the faith to others.
  - Jesus enjoyed talking with people, Francis says. The preacher should strive to communicate that same enjoyment.
  - To do so, like Jesus, he must get beyond others’ weaknesses and failings to see what Jesus sees and loves in them.
- He must also strive to know those whom he addresses.
  - The preacher must know the heart of his community, where its desire for God is alive and ardent, and where the once loving dialogue has become barren.”
- Message
  - The message, Pope Francis says quoting Blessed John Paul II, is the “joyful, patient, progressive preaching” of the incarnation, birth, life, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus has got to be the center and hero of the homily, not the minister, and we should seek to bring the “fragrance” of Christ’s closeness and personal gaze.
  - Pope Francis has been giving a lot of attention since his election on the “progressive and patient” aspects of that proclamation. He says our preaching must begin and emphasize above all the kerygma, so that we make sure that the secondary issues of the faith don’t triumph over the primary, so that the various “no’s” of living the Gospel don’t drown out the fundamental “yes.”
    - He says the kerygma is first not just because it should be at the beginning, but also because it’s principal.
    - In a previous section of the exhortation, he said, “It needs to be said that in preaching the Gospel a fitting sense of proportion has to be maintained. This would be seen in the *frequency* with which certain themes are brought up and in the emphasis given to them in preaching. For example, if in the course of the liturgical year a parish priest speaks about temperance ten times but only mentions charity or justice two or three times, an imbalance results, and precisely those virtues which ought to be most present in preaching and catechesis are overlooked. The same thing happens when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God’s word.” (38)
    - If instead of kerygmatic preaching the people receive a purely moralistic or doctrinaire preaching, or a lecture on biblical exegesis, it will detract from the heart-to-heart communication that is the point of preaching.
  - He’s phrased the kerygma himself in a few different places in the exhortation:
    - “The personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship.” (128)
    - “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.” (164)
  - For the preacher to preach the kerygma, he says, he must believe it. The preacher must know that God loves him, that Jesus has saved him, that his love has the last word.
  - Even though the preacher begins and proportionately emphasizes the kerygma, Pope Francis stresses that his missionary preaching involves more than the kerygma.
    - Jesus, Francis reminds us, calls us to teach others to observe all that he commanded us on how to respond to his love with the love of neighbor. This points to ongoing formation, maturation and growth. Evangelizing preaching is meant to stimulate the desire for growth until Christ lives us.

- Formation involves entering more deeply into the kerygma.
    - We need a pedagogy and mystagogy that can help people step by step to enter into the mystery, one virtue at a time, patiently leading them to maturity, freedom and responsibility
  - Francis also says that our preaching should be prophetic.
    - Pope Francis pointed out in a Dec 16, 2013 homily that prophecy involves “three times,” the past, the present and the future. The prophet first is aware of the past and all God has done and promised; it’s a living memory. Second, he contemplatively applies that living memory to the situation of the present and the particular circumstances of his listeners. And third, on the basis of that application, he guides them with hope and courage on the right path toward the future..
    - In the exhortation, he talks about how this all works, saying the memory should overflow, like Mary’s, with the wondrous things of God. Everyone’s hearts should sense that each word of Scripture is a gift before a demand.
- The Style
  - The fourth and last part schematic part would be about the style of preaching, about which Pope Francis said the most. He said that good preaching means not just knowing what to say but how to say it. (156)
    - He laments that preachers often haven’t taken the trouble to find the proper way to proclaim the message. The method is also a profoundly spiritual concern.
    - He said it’s a great act of love of neighbor to refuse to offer a product of poor quality. Do we love our neighbor enough to refuse giving a poor quality homily?
  - What are the elements of a high quality homily?
    - First, it’s well-prepared
      - Preparation is so important, Pope Francis writes, that a “prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity should be devoted to it.”
      - For pastors who don’t have enough time, he asks a shift in priorities, even if less time will be given to other important activities.
      - The Holy Spirit, he said, demands our active and creative cooperation.
      - A preacher who doesn’t prepare is not “spiritual” but dishonest and irresponsible with his gifts.
      - This type of preparation, he said, isn’t quick, easy and immediate, but patient. In order to carry out this type of persevering remote, proximate and immediate preparation, it requires love for the God of whom we’re preparing to speak and who speaks to us, and love for the people to whom we’re going to speak.
    - Second, it’s prayerful. It begins, Francis says, with calling on the Holy Spirit in prayer.
    - Next, it’s Scriptural
      - The biblical text has to be the foundation of our preaching, Pope Francis indicates, and we need to give it our full attention. This involves both careful study as well as prayerful reading, in which we say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”
      - The homily and all evangelization is based on the word of God, listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to, especially through the Eucharist
      - The preacher must develop great personal familiarity with the word of God. Exegetical and linguistic aspects not enough, but docile and prayerful heart needed. We should examine whether we’ve grown in love for the word we preach
      - If we have a lively desire to hear the word, we’ll communicate it to God’s people. Words must resonate in heart of pastor before they’ll do so in the faithful.
      - Word must become incarnate in preacher’s daily life, to communicate to others his contemplation. Must be penetrated by the word before we think about what to say to others If the word hasn’t really touched his life through prayer, he will be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow impostor.

- Preparation begins with reverence for the truth of the word of God. We take the time to study it and to speak to God about it lest we distort it.
- We must understand meaning of the words we read, not just exegetical details but its principal message. If the preacher doesn't make this effort, his preaching won't have unity or order, but it will just be an accumulation of disjointed ideas incapable of inspiring others. A common defect in tedious and ineffectual preaching, he said, is the inability to transmit the intrinsic power of the text.
- He must also consider the effect the author wanted to produce. A consoling text shouldn't be used to correct errors; an exhortation to teach doctrine; a summons to mission to talk about the latest news.
- Prayerful reading of the Bible is not separate from study; it should begin with study and go on to discern how that same message speaks to his own life. We should ask, "Lord, what does this text say to me?" How is my life to change? What troubles me about this text, or attracts me and why? What temptations arise? We should apply it to our own life, to avoid excuses for watering down the meaning of the text. We should not be afraid of the demanding aspect of the text, which can rob us of the pleasure.
- It's not enough for the preacher to have a personal familiarity, but he should try to preach in a way to inspire his listeners to hunger for a similar familiarity. Sacred Scripture, he says, must be a door opened to every believer. Evangelization demands familiarity with God's word, which means parishes, dioceses and associations must provide for serious, ongoing study of the Bible.
- In liturgical homilies, the preacher should be on fire based on his preparation with Sacred Scripture.
  - They should be words that set hearts on fire.
  - To speak from the heart means our hearts are not just on fire but enlightened by the fullness of revelation and historical path of God's word in heart of Church.
- He should be humble
  - He has to recognize his poverty and abandon himself to Christ, whose message must penetrate the preacher's entire being, not just mind. When this happens, the Holy Spirit can place on his lips the words he couldn't find himself
- He should be simple
  - Simplicity shows itself with the language we use, so that people can understand it.
  - The greatest risk for a preacher is to become so accustomed to his own language that he thinks everyone else understands and uses it.
  - To adapt language to the people, we need to share their lives and pay loving attention to them.
- He should be clear.
  - Simplicity and clarity are different. Our language can be simple and still not clear because of disorganization.
  - There's a need for thematic unity so that people can easily grasp his line of argument.
- He should be practical
  - One is to use familiar, practical, every-day images, to appreciate and accept the message we're communicating.
  - It can help people to savor the message, awaken desire and move the will.
- He should be positive
  - His own heart and the hearts of listeners should be able to sense that each word of Scripture is a gift before a demand

- He should point out not what shouldn't be done, but rather what we can do better. It should indicate the positive and attractive value, filling listeners with hope, liberating them from negativity.
- In moral catechesis, Francis says, we should show the attractiveness of a life of wisdom, self-fulfillment and enrichment, which can help people better understand the rejection of evil that endanger life.
- We should behave as and be joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of goodness and beauty of a life of fidelity rather than experts in dire predictions and dour judges
- He even says priests, deacons and the laity should gather periodically to discover resources to make preaching more attractive and positive. That brings us to the next point.
- His preaching should aim to be beautiful
  - The preacher must attend to the “way of beauty.” Proclaiming Christ is not just showing something to be true but beautiful, capable of filling life with joy even in difficulties. Preaching is not about communicating abstract truths. The beauty of the images used by the Lord can encourage the practice of good.
  - Beauty can be a path leading to an encounter with Jesus.
  - Preachers and the whole Church need to have a renewed esteem for beauty as a means to touch the human heart and enable the truth and goodness of Christ to radiate within it. We only love what is beautiful.
  - Formation in the way of beauty ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith.
- His preaching should be eschatological
  - It should make us desire the embrace of the Father who awaits us in glory.
  - The preacher should try to help people to feel that they live in the midst of the baptismal embrace and the eternal one
- His preaching should be brief
  - The homily must not become more important than the celebration of faith, or violate its balance or rhythm, Francis says.
  - He adds elsewhere the wisdom of Sirach, who teaches, “Speak concisely. Say much in few words.”
  - He doesn't define what he means by “brief,” but if he practices what he himself recommends, he's probably thinking about 15 minutes, which is the average length of his homilies on Sundays and solemnities.
- His preaching should be modeled on a mother's conversation with her children.
  - The Church preaches, Francis says, like a mother, evangelizing her family, loving her children, teaching them what is for their benefit, counting on their trust.
  - A Mother listens to concerns and learns from children.
  - A spirit of love guides conversations and corrections.
  - Preaching is better understood when it is taught in the “mother tongue” because heart is better disposed. In that circumstance, the preaching becomes like a style of music inspiring encouragement, strength and enthusiasm.
  - The fact that he learned the faith primarily from his grandmother obviously influences this metaphor. If the inspirational heroes in his life had been male coaches or spiritual fathers, he likely would have accentuated the necessary paternal side to preaching, challenging sons and daughters courageously to strive beyond their comfort zones. We see both the paternal and maternal sides in Jesus' preaching.
- Concluding prayer
  - It's worthwhile, though, to finish with Pope Francis' exhortation toward a maternal style of preaching.

- Pope Francis concludes *Evangelii Gaudium* by focusing our attention anew on maternal preaching by helping us ponder and pray to the Mother Jesus gave us from the Cross to help to evangelize us and the entire Church to become more like her first born Son.
- Without her, Pope Francis says, we can “never understand the spirit of the new evangelization.” There is a Marian style to the Church’s work of evangelization and therefore there should be a Marian style to our homilies.
- We see in Mary a revolution of love and tenderness, which, Pope Francis says, “aren’t the virtues of the weak but the strong who don’t need to step on others to feel important.”
- She teaches us how to ponder things in our heart, to contemplate the mystery of God in the world, in history and in daily life. She sets out in haste to serve others as a model of contemplation and evangelization
- And so, as we prepare for our Christmas homilies and for the homilies of the rest of our life in which we try to convey the good news of great joy that God-with-us is always with us — like he is now with us in his presence in the Holy Eucharist — seeking to save and sanctify us, we can make Pope Francis’ rich prayer to Mary our own:
  - *Mary, Virgin and Mother, you who, moved by the Holy Spirit, welcomed the word of life in the depths of your humble faith: as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One, help us to say our own “yes” to the urgent call, as pressing as ever, to proclaim the good news of Jesus.*
  - *Filled with Christ’s presence, you brought joy to John the Baptist, making him exult in the womb of his mother. Brimming over with joy, you sang of the great things done by God. Standing at the foot of the cross with unyielding faith, you received the joyful comfort of the resurrection, and joined the disciples in awaiting the Spirit so that the evangelizing Church might be born.*
  - *Obtain for us now a new ardor [and] a holy courage to seek new paths, that the gift of unfading beauty may reach every man and woman. ...*
  - *Star of the new evangelization, help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice and love of the poor, that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth, illuminating even the fringes of our world. Mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones, pray for us. Amen. Alleluia!*