



IL RUOLO DELL'OMELIA NELLA NUOVA EVANGELIZZAZIONE. S.E.R. MONS. J. AUGUSTINE DI NOIA



THE ROLE OF THE HOMILY IN THE NEW EVANGELIZATION ACCORDING TO THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM* OF POPE FRANCIS

S.E.R. MONS. J. AUGUSTINE DI NOIA, O.P.

Introduction

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* devotes a great deal of attention to the place of preaching in the new evangelization, not only in the twenty-four paragraphs specifically dedicated to the topic of the homily (135-159), but in many other passages as well. This should not surprise us.

In many ways, preaching is at the frontline of the new evangelization because its finality is to awaken again in the hearts of believers the joy that arises from “a full relationship with Christ, mankind’s only savior. Only from a personal relationship with Jesus can an effective evangelization develop” (Pope St. John Paul II, quoted in Dulles 2009, 31). The Apostolic Exhortation considers this proclamation specifically with attention to the joy in Christ that preaching should arouse. The opening words of *Evangelii Gaudium* make this critical point: “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.” Pope Francis continues: “In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy...” (§1).

Evangelii Gaudium identifies the homily and its preparation as one of the seven topics central to this new phase of evangelization, precisely because it is here that the faithful can encounter again and again the joyful message of Christ. Following Father Peter John Cameron’s analysis of the treatment of preaching in *Evangelii Gaudium*, we may usefully

consider the topic under four headings: (1) the renewal of preaching; (2) the responsibility of the preacher; (3) the homily; (4) preparation for preaching (Cameron 2014).

The Renewal of Preaching

Fundamental to the renewal of preaching is a recognition on the part of pastors that the faithful, in the first place, really *need* to hear the Gospel of joy. “If something should rightly disturb and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life” (EG §49). The preacher’s vocation is to declare that “our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love” (§265).

What is more, even in the midst of the secularism characteristic of modern life, there is in fact a great hunger to hear the message of Christ. “Let us renew our confidence in preaching based on a conviction that it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and that he displays his power through human words” (§136). What may appear to be religious indifference often masks a hidden thirst for God which needs to be identified and addressed by effective preaching. The pope goes so far as to say that today “our challenge is not so much atheism as the need to respond adequately to many people’s thirst for God, lest they try to satisfy it with alienating solutions or with a disembodied Jesus who demands nothing of us with regard to others” (§89).

Critical for the renewal of preaching as a moment of the new evangelization is the recovery of the central core of the kerygma, which can never be taken for granted but “must ring out over and over: 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). An essential feature of the new evangelization enacted in preaching is that the preacher can never presume that basic elements of the kerygma are well-known and understood and thus not in need of repeating. “The first proclamation is called ‘first’ not because it exists in the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways...” (§166).

In order that the proclamation of the keygma maintain its clarity and simplicity, preaching must focus on the “elements most needed today.” The kerygma “is the message capable of responding to the desire for the infinite which abides in every human heart. The centrality of the kerygma calls for stressing those elements which are most needed today: it has to express God’s saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part; it should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness, and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at times more philosophical than evangelical” (§165). For this reason, the pope insists that “a renewal of preaching can offer believers, as well as the lukewarm and the non-practising, new joy in the faith and fruitfulness in the work of evangelization. The heart of this message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ” (§11).

Essential to the renewal of preaching is the recognition of its sacramental character. “A preaching which would be purely moralistic or doctrinaire, or one which turns into a lecture on biblical exegesis, detracts from [the] heart-to-heart communication which takes place in the homily and possesses a quasi-sacramental character” (EG §142). In the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, this point receives an ample theological explanation: “The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of

Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. By approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God's word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard" (VD §56). It is not just words and ideas that are communicated in preaching but realities. "Realities are greater than ideas. This principle has to do with the incarnation of the word and its being put into practice....The principle of reality, of a word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew, is essential to evangelization" and thus to preaching (EG §233).

The Responsibility of the Preacher

The fundamental locus of the preacher's responsibility lies within his own response to God. "Concern for the way we preach is likewise a profoundly spiritual concern. It entails responding to the love of God by putting all our talents and creativity at the service of the mission which he has given us; at the same time, it shows a fine, active love of neighbour by refusing to offer others a product of poor quality" (§ 156).

Although personal and spiritual, this concern is not merely turned inwardly, but must open out to the needs of the community to which the preacher is called to minister the Word of God and the Sacraments. "The preacher must know the heart of his community, in order to realize where its desire for God is alive, and ardent, as well as where that dialogue, once loving, has been thwarted and is now barren" (§137). This solicitude embraces those who are close by, but especially those at "the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel" (§16).

"The preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the Word, but he also has to contemplate his people. In this way he learns of the aspiration, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life in the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering, while paying attention to actual people, to using their language, their signs and symbols, to answering the questions they ask" (§154). The preacher can count on the Holy Spirit to assist him in attaining this closeness to his people for "the same Spirit who inspired the Gospels and who acts in the Church also inspires the preacher to hear the faith of God's people and to find the right way to preach at each Eucharist" (§ 139). Without this pastoral familiarity and even intimacy with his people, the preacher's effectiveness will be greatly weakened. "We need to develop a broad and profound sensitivity to what really affects people's lives. Let us also keep in mind that we should never respond to questions that nobody asks" (§ 155). The preacher "needs to be able to link the message of a biblical text to a human situation, to an experience which cries out for the light of God's Word" (§ 154).

In addition to the closeness to his people that is indispensable for the effective preacher, there is the need for him to be an authentic witness. The role of witnesses has been central to the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the Church's history. As the pope wrote in *Lumen Fidei*, "It is through an unbroken chain of witnesses that we come to see the face of Jesus" (LF §38). No less urgent is the role of witnesses today when "people prefer to listen to witnesses: they thirst for authenticity and call for evangelizers to speak of a God whom they themselves know and are familiar with, as if they were seeing him" (EG § 150). The words of the preacher will fall on deaf ears if his life does not bear witness to the message he proclaims. "Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence" (§151).

Along with a pastoral familiarity with his people and the witness of an authentic Christian life, the preacher's responsibility encompasses a willingness to assume the attitude of dialogue. In preaching, "the first step is personal dialogue, when the other person speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes, and concerns for love ones or so many other heartfelt needs. Only afterward is it possible to bring up God's Word,...always keeping in mind the fundamental message: 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). Father Cameron considers this point "one of the most important innovations" in the pope's teaching on preaching and the homily (Cameron 2014, 30). The Holy Father is describing the fundamental stance or attitude of the preacher as one of dialogue when he says that "the homily takes up once more the dialogue which the Lord has already established with his people" (§ 137). Employing a powerful analogy for this approach to preaching, the pope writes that "The Church is a mother [who] preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child, knowing that the child trusts that what she is teaching is for his or her benefit... (§ 139). Even if the homily at times may be somewhat tedious, if this maternal and ecclesial spirit is present, it will always bear fruit, just as the tedious counsels of a mother bear fruit in due time, in the hearts of her children" (§ 140).

This dialogical element in preaching requires that "we need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives" (§ 171).

The Homily

Evangelii Gaudium provides a great deal of practical guidance on the nature, conception, structure and language that should characterize the construction and delivery of the homily.

Everything flows from the liturgical context of the homily. *Evangelii Gaudium* quotes *Dies Domini*, the Apostolic Letter of Pope St. John Paul II to introduce this important point: "The liturgical proclamation of the word of God, especially in the eucharistic assembly, is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his people, a dialogue in which the great deeds of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the covenant restated" (DD § 41). This has been a constant theme in the conciliar and post-conciliar magisterium whenever the nature of the homily is treated. At various points, the documents of the Second Vatican Council insist on the homily's role in the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* §§ 24, 35, 52, 56), on the principles of the biblical interpretation in the liturgical homily (*Dei Verbum* §§ 9-13, 21), and on the preacher's understanding of the Bible and the liturgy (*Dei Verbum* § 25; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* §§ 4, 18). In line with this consistent teaching over the past fifty years, *Evangelii Gaudium* declares that the homily constitutes a "distinctive genre, since it is preaching situated within the framework of a liturgical celebration" and should thus be "brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture," respecting in this way the "balance and rhythm" of the liturgical celebration" (EG § 138).

A recognition of the distinctive nature of the homily will guide the preacher in his own conception of his task. He should recall that in the homily the faithful "want someone to serve as an instrument and to express their feelings in such a way that afterward, each one may choose how he or she will continue the conversation" that God has begun and

continues, having been allowed to speak, as it were, as “the hearts of believers keep silence” (§ 143). For this reason, a “good homily” should be “positive”—“not so much concerned with pointing out what should not be done, but with suggesting what we can do better”(§ 159).

The Holy Father is determined to offer some remarkably practical advice regarding the construction of the homily—an area that he says is urgently in need of attention precisely because the lack of adequate structure is one of the most painful aspects of the experience of preaching for many. “Some people think that they can be good preachers because they know what ought to be said, but they pay no attention to *how* it should be said, that is, the concrete way of constructing a sermon” (§ 156). The simplicity of a sermon does not guarantee its clarity: simple it may be, but if the sermon is “disorganized, lacks logical progression, or tries to deal with too many things at one time,” it can “end up being incomprehensible” (§ 158). The pope insists that the homily have “thematic unity, clear order, and correlation between sentences, so that people can follow the preacher easily and grasp his line of argument” (§ 158). In summary, the Holy Father passes on advice that he received himself: “A good homily, an old teacher once told me, should have an idea, a sentiment, an image” (§ 157): an idea or proposal that is clearly stated and that can be remembered and evoke an affirmative or negative response; a sentiment that moves the congregation, and an “attractive image” that “makes the message seem familiar, close to home, practical, and related to everyday life” (ibid.). “The homily cannot be a form of entertainment like those presented in the media, yet it does need to give life and meaning to the celebration” (§ 138).

The pope’s advice on the length and language of the homily draws mainly on the liturgical context of this distinctive genre of communication. As we have seen, he writes that “A preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of faith. If a homily goes on too long, it will affect two characteristics of the liturgical celebration: its balance and rhythm” (§ 138). The length of a homily must be proportioned to the other essential parts of the liturgical celebration as a whole. What is more, “This context demands that preaching should guide the assembly, and the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist. This means that the words of the preacher must be measured, so that the Lord, more than his minister, will be the center of attention” (§ 138).

In a similar way, the language employed by the preacher must be suited to the liturgical context of which the homily forms but an integral part. “The greatest risk for a preacher is that he becomes so accustomed to his own language that he thinks that everyone else naturally understands and uses it. If we wish to adapt to people’s language and to reach them with God’s word, we need to share in their lives and pay loving attention to them” (§ 158).

Preparation for Preaching

Evangelii Gaudium is particularly eloquent on the subject of preparation for preaching—“so important a task that a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection, and pastoral creativity should be devoted to it.” The tone of this section of the Apostolic Exhortation is quite personal: “With great affection,” the Holy Father writes, “I wish to stop for a moment and offer a method of preparing homilies. Some may find these suggestions self-evident, but I consider it helpful to offer them as a way of emphasizing the need to devote quality time to this precious ministry” and, despite the many responsibilities of pastors, “I presume to ask that each week a sufficient portion of personal and community time be dedicated to this task, even if less time has to be given to other important activities” (§ 145).

The Holy Father stresses the properly spiritual aspects of this responsibility to prepare well for preaching which “demands that we offer ourselves and all our abilities as instruments (cf. Rom 12:1) which God can use. A preacher who does not prepare is not ‘spiritual’; he

is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received" (§145). If the preacher "does not take time to hear God's Word with an open heart, if he does not allow it to touch his life, to challenge him, to impel him, and if he does not devote time to pray with that Word, then he will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow imposter" (§ 151).

This remarkably strong language reflects the profundity of the pope's understanding of preparation for preaching which for him must be seen as "an exercise of evangelical discernment, wherein we strive to recognize—in the light of the Spirit—a call to resound in the historical situation itself. In this situation, and also through it, God calls the believer" (§ 154).

Perhaps the most important phase of an adequate preparation for preaching is a contemplative engagement with the scriptural text, a true *lectio divina*. "The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit, which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to live a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others" (§ 264). The preacher has to resist the temptation to ask what the text before him means for other people (§153) and consider first what the word of God means for himself: "The Sunday readings will resonate in all their brilliance in the hearts of the faithful if they have first done so in the heart of their pastor" (§ 149).

The contemplative pondering of the scriptural text, beginning with prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will seek "to discover its principal message, the message which gives structure and unity to the text" (§ 147) and to communicate this message in an ordered and clear way in the homily itself.

Conclusion: Preaching and the New Evangelization

Taken together with other pertinent passages throughout *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraphs 135-159 in effect constitute a kind of "mini-handbook" for preaching in the context of liturgical celebration. It has not been possible to do justice to the contents of this mini-handbook in this brief presentation today. Readers, especially preachers, will have to study and ponder these paragraphs to discover their riches for themselves. It would be safe to say that probably no document in previous papal magisterium matches the range and directness of the practical suggestions for preaching contained in this Apostolic Exhortation.

In its discussion of preaching and the homily, it is especially noteworthy that *Evangelii Gaudium* stresses the importance of a focus on the central mysteries of the faith—the Blessed Trinity, God's love for us, and the passion, death and resurrection of Christ—and the necessity of relating all other doctrines of faith and morals to these mysteries. This emphasis is characteristic of the new evangelization or, to use the expression of Pope Francis, this "new phase of evangelization." To continually put forward in evangelization, in preaching, in catechesis the trinitarian and christological center of the Christian message and the joy it evokes, and never to take it for granted that people, even the faithful, are already familiar with these mysteries—these are fundamental elements of the new evangelization. It is important to note, as we conclude, that in this and other significant ways, *Evangelii Gaudium* is continuous with the renewed emphasis on the centrality of evangelization that has marked the papal and conciliar magisterium of the past fifty years.

Bibliography

Vatican Council II: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*; *Dei Verbum*.

Pope Paul VI: *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975)

Pope John Paul II: *Dies Domini*(1998)

Pope Benedict XVI: *Verbum Domini* (2010)

Pope Francis: *Lumen Fidei* (2013); *Evangelii Gaudium* (2014)

* * * * *

Steven Bogulawski, OP, & Ralph Martin, eds., *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles* (Paulist Press, 2008)

Peter John Cameron, OP, *Evangelii Gaudium and Pope Francis's Revolution in Preaching* (Amazon.uk, 2014)

J. A. Di Noia, OP, "Clearing Away the Barriers: Preaching to Young Adults Today," Carl Peter Lecture (North American College), *Origins* 38 (2009), 490-94.