

I. Toward a Definition

One of the most obvious trends in contemporary Church life is a confluence of Christendom. While many differences remain between the major branches of Christianity, there is nevertheless a discernible centripetal movement. One of the most obvious manifestations of that coming together is in worship. A quarter of a century ago Sunday duty for the average Catholic meant going to a Mass at which the liturgy of the Word passed unobtrusively while for a main-line American Protestant it meant attending a service at which a half-hour long sermon was preached and the hymns, prayers, and readings that preceded it were regarded as and often referred to as the “preliminaries.” Now Catholics devote much attention to the proclamation of the Word of God, both in the vernacular reading of the proper lections from scripture and in the homily that follows. Protestants, on the other hand, now have a far more liturgical and often eucharistic context for their preaching than they had formerly and have begun to adopt the Church calendar, the three-year lectionary cycle, vestments, fixed liturgies rather than extempore prayers, and many other features that had been previously identified with Catholic worship.

While the ultimate explanation for this confluence is probably theological and intermediate reasons are

sociological, the most obvious proximate historical cause of the major shift in Catholic ethos is the Second Vatican Council. Its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* especially is quite explicit about the importance of the proclamation of the Word of God. It speaks of "the two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy" and goes on to say that these two parts are "so closely connected with each other that they form but a single act of worship" (#56). Indeed, the homily "is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself; in fact, at those Masses which are celebrated with the assistance of the people on Sundays and feasts of obligation, it should not be omitted except for a serious reason" (#52).

The content of sermons is also specified:

The sermon, moreover, should draw its content mainly from scripture and liturgical sources, and its character should be that of a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever made present and active in us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy. (#35).

This new emphasis on preaching, however, has caught many deacons, presbyters, and even bishops in a state of unpreparedness. It is all very well to say that one should preach, but what does one do when one preaches? Many have felt like Noah in the comedy routine of Bill Cosby. When God said, "Noah, build me an ark," Noah replied: "Ri-i-ight! What's an ark?" This lack of basic understanding of the task of preaching was brought home to me in one of the preparations I made to write this book. In order to

investigate the present state of preaching in the Catholic Church I began to go every Sunday I was free to a different parish to hear what was being proclaimed and how the proclamation was made. Here are some of the results:

- On the Sunday beginning the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity I heard a homily that was more an instruction on the current state of ecumenical negotiations than anything else. This lecture, given in a flat, unemotional voice, listed positive accomplishments: we no longer re-baptize, there is better cooperation on weddings, etc, but there is no intercommunion yet. The speaker seemed in favor of Christian unity and appeared to regret that more has not yet been achieved, but his approach was legal—informing the faithful of exactly what is and is not allowed. Only at the end did he refer to the scriptural propers, although his allusion was appropriate. And his only emotional appeal also came at the very end when he said that we should feel about the disunity of Christians as we would feel if we sat down at the family table and there were empty seats.
- On the Fourth Sunday in Lent I heard an Irish Jesuit give what amounted to an Ignatian meditation on the gospel, John 9:1-13, 24-38, delivered with a delightful brogue. He began by reconstructing imaginatively the story of the healing of the man born blind and then went on to apply it to the life of the faithful by saying (with, it seemed to me, little basis in the text) that the sin of the Pharisees and chief priests was envy. He then defined envy and illustrated it in the lives of children, and showed how it

is present in all states of life, including that of priests. After saying that we should learn to recognize it and its cause in ourselves and noting the theological objection to it that it denies the presence of Christ in the uniqueness of the envied person, he said that when we overcome envy we become like the blind man who was healed.

- On the Fourth Sunday in Easter the sermon I heard, after a tip of the hat to Mother's Day, concerned and was addressed to children who were making their first communion. In a vocabulary and with concepts that were appropriate to this audience the preacher alluded to the gospel by saying that just as the Good Shepherd calls his sheep by name, so they would be called by name when they received holy communion that day. The parents were then told that, just as one may enter the sheepfold by the gate or by some other way, so life is like a wall in which there are four doors: wealth, power, fame, Jesus (surely the options are more numerous!). The importance of parental example was stressed.
- On the World Day of Prayer for Vocations I heard a young priest begin his homily by reading a letter from the Cardinal on the subject of vocations. Then he told of going out to his seminary for ordinations on the eleventh anniversary of his own admission to the presbyterate. After telling about an interruption of the event by women seeking ordination, he told of the critical annual decline in the size of seminary classes. Next he spoke of vocations to the priesthood, to the religious life, and to the lay state. In the course of the homily he made some apt references to scrip-

ture. As a coda he spoke also of the "ministry of forgiveness," since the ordination Mass he had attended had been on the day the Pope was shot and the Holy Father's forgiveness of his assassin had been made known.

- The specially made altar frontal was decorated with a mortar board over a rolled diploma in one corner and a lamp of learning diagonally across from it with a legend in between of "God's Blessing . . . Graduates." The Trinity Sunday homily was about having a personal relation with each of the divine Persons and there was an extended analogy to the family. Rain on the roof, a wailing siren, and the soft, Spanish-accented voice of the preacher combined to make hearing difficult. It was acknowledged that how God can be both three and one is a mystery to be accepted on faith. Other than the analogy to family life, there were virtually no illustrations and few allusions to the Bible.

One could not easily derive a definition of Christian preaching from these examples. There were a number of special days with no liturgical status to which attention was called from the pulpit, one heard Church regulations and moral exhortations, and there was even an effort at theological analysis. The homilies, though, had little in common that enabled the listener to induct what one does when one preaches. The nearest to a definition afforded by those examples would be something like: "talks given at Mass." Since in order to do something well, one must know what one is attempting to do, an effort will be made to define preaching. At first the definition will not be

normative but phenomenological. That is, it will not so much say what preaching ought to be as offer a description broad enough to cover almost everything that takes place in Christian preaching. This description will be taken as a definition of "sermon" and will not be limited to what Catholics do, but will seek to include all Christian preaching. It will be followed by an effort to refine and restrict the definition so that it will apply to the homilies expected at Mass by the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Thus this second definition will be specifically Catholic and will take on a normative dimension.

It should be pointed out at the beginning, though, that there is no significant difference in meaning between the English words *sermon* and *homily*. The decision indicated above to distinguish between them is purely arbitrary and for the sake of convenience; it has no basis in the general history of the usage of the two words. It may be, though, that the fathers of the Second Vatican Council used the word "homily" more consistently for preaching at the eucharistic assembly because "sermon" had a pre-conciliar association with long, didactic, sometimes apologetic addresses that could be made on any occasion. By using homily they hoped to avoid evoking such connotations.

Some scholars have tried to break down the etymology of homily into its original Greek components and thus suggested that it means "communicating with a crowd," but surely this is the etymological fallacy of assuming that the present meaning of a word is gov-

erned by the roots from which it was derived. The word *homilia* existed in Greek and was used in essentially the meaning of its English cognate for many centuries, just as *sermo* had a similar place in Latin. Grady Davis sums up the evidence very well when he says that as a rhetorical term in secular Greek *homilia* meant an informal, discursive talk characterized by digressions, but in its technical Christian meaning it came soon to refer to an ordered exposition of a passage in scripture (*Design for Preaching*, p. 162). The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* uses sermon and homily interchangeably. Thus the words are synonymous and the following distinction between them is offered only for the purpose of analysis.

A definition of sermon that encompasses most of the phenomena that bear that label is:

A sermon is a speech delivered in a Christian assembly for worship by an authorized person that applies some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a biblical passage, to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.

Every element in this definition is important. To say that a sermon is a speech is to communicate information devoid of surprise, but much that will be said later in the book derives from the difference between oral and written discourse. Public speaking is a particular sort of transaction between a speaker and an audience. One who wishes to communicate effectively through this medium will pay heed to the

principles that have been discovered to operate on such occasions.

There is more surprise in saying that a sermon is delivered in a Christian assembly for worship. After all, the most basic Christian proclamation is evangelization, is seeking to communicate the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to those who have not yet heard this message in such a way that they could respond to it. Now that going to church is no longer required for respectability in this country, one seldom finds the totally unconverted in Christian assemblies. Thus a sermon is distinguished from evangelization. This is not to say that one is more important than the other, but only to note that they are not the same thing. Christian preaching is also to be distinguished from catechesis, from Christian teaching.

Yet both the proclamation of the gospel and instruction in the faith occur in sermons delivered at worship. Not all of the faithful assembled on Sunday morning are equally faithful in the sense that they believe the Christian construction of reality with the same degree of conviction and commitment. Fr. Fred Baumer has distinguished between the worshiping assembly and the worshiping community, i.e., all of those who are present when worship occurs and those who are really bound together in faith. The congregation on Sunday morning will be as mixed a bag as the audience of Peter the Hermit T.S. Eliot described in one of the Choruses from his play, *The Rock*:

And among his hearers were a few good men,
Many who were evil,
And most who were neither,
Like all men in all places.

Some of those at Mass will be in need of conversion, some will need their faith reinforced, and most who live in our very secular society will find the Catholic faith in continuous need of re-legitimation. Participating in worship and listening to sermons is a vital part of the total effort to construct reality in a Christian way. There are, of course, many other purposes for preaching in the Christian assembly, but the others will be discussed later.

Preaching is not done by just anyone. All Christian bodies have ways of authorizing spokespersons and only the utterances of members of that group carry the authority of preaching. This authorization has a number of aspects. It implies that the speaker has been lifted up by the community to represent God to it and it to God. A recognition of gifts and calling is involved as well as a certification of training and commissioning. All of these things are necessary to give the speech of a Christian the authority of preaching. Naturally, there are other members of the body who speak. Occasionally there is one with a charism of a prophet who will communicate with the Church and society from outside the official structures and channels. Charisms, however, are bestowed directly by God, and the Spirit blows where it wishes. The preacher of sermons, though, is representative of the community and receives divine authorization through the community.

Just as preaching is not done by everyone, it is also not all speech in the Christian assembly by authorized persons. It is a particular genre of speech in which the historic faith is brought to bear on the lives of the community. Sermons are concerned with the “So What?” of Christian belief. They deal with living out the faith that was professed in baptism.

Because this first definition is phenomenological rather than normative, it cannot specify that all sermons are based on portions of holy scripture. Once during the Second Vatican Council a Benedictine theologian was visiting the campus of the liberal arts college where I taught. When he heard that the local Methodist minister was to be the speaker in chapel that day, he was delighted because he looked forward to hearing some real biblical preaching. As it turned out, there was not a single reference to holy writ in the entire talk. Since the argument from *esse* to *posse* is good, one is able to have a sermon that does not seek to focus the perspective of a biblical passage on contemporary Christian living and celebration. The sad impoverished possibility is borne out by some of the preaching I heard when I went sermon tasting in Roman Catholic parishes in preparation for writing this book. This is simply to say that there can be bad sermons. To march under the banner of sermons, though, a speech must seek to apply a point of doctrine to the lives of members of the congregation.

The attentive reader may have recognized by now that the exercise under way is form criticism. It is an effort to list the discriminating characteristics of a

literary genre or *Gattung*. Saying that this genre accomplishes its purpose through the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices calls attention to a marked feature of the sermon. It is a form of persuasion rather than demonstration. While deficiency in logic is a serious shortcoming in a sermon, the major means used to convince the audience are not airtight arguments. Rather, the preacher seeks to persuade by analogies and examples. Usually these are narrative. Part of the explanation for this strategy comes from the oral nature of homiletical communication; it is keyed to the ear instead of the eye. Another part comes from the way that the Bible does most of its proclamation through narration. Still another part is derived from something to be discussed in more detail later, the way that the sermon is directed more to the “deep memory” of archetypal images than it is to the surface memory of conceptual thought. Many preachers never seem to learn the difference between a sermon and a lecture. The difference lies mainly in the strategy for persuasion that is employed, the nature of the argument and the evidence that is offered.

This point cannot be made too strongly. Since emphasis on the proclamation of the word has come to the Roman Catholic Church very recently and since most clergy seldom have or take the opportunity to hear someone else preach, one of the major reasons for a low standard of preaching is the lack of good examples. While there are Catholic preachers around fully as good as the best Protestant “pulpit giants,” others who preach seldom get a chance to hear them.

There is a lack of good models. Most Protestant ministers spent most of the Sundays before they went to seminary attending divine service in which a sermon was considered to be the major ingredient. By the time they began to preach themselves, they knew what good preaching sounded like. Few Catholics have had that sort of exposure. The narrative shape of preaching, then, is something that they have had to intuit.

The last element in this definition of a sermon is that it seeks to move members of the congregation to accept the application of the point of doctrine to their lives made in the sermon and to act on the basis of it. Several important points are involved here. First, preaching seeks to *move* people. This is to say that there is to be emotional as well as intellectual appeal. The use of narrative assists greatly in that effort. In the history of preaching there has been, of course, sheer emotionalism that has cultivated hysteria. Such tactics are manipulative and immoral. Yet human beings are not computers. A person is not converted who has come only to accept that the Christian construction of reality is intellectually valid. No, full conversion requires that one's life be centered around that conviction. While some emotional responses are shallow, the deepest responses always have a powerful emotional dynamic. It is this dynamic that leads the convert to act on the basis of a newfound conviction. Congregations, then, are to be *moved* and they are to be moved to *act*. Beliefs that do not have behavioral implications and impetus are not significantly different from unbelief.

The narrowing of this general definition of sermon to the point that it is normative for Catholic homilies looks like this:

A homily is a sermon preached at the eucharistic assembly by a bishop, presbyter, or deacon that applies a point of doctrine drawn from that day's gospel to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it both in their participation in the liturgy and as they go forth into the world.

It should be obvious that homily is a species of the genus sermon. The significance of the restrictions in this definition can be appreciated readily. A homily is a sermon preached at Mass. The liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy go together. Christians are "constituted" by the eucharist, as the fourth-century martyr Felix said at his trial (quoted by Massey H. Shepherd, *The Worship of the Church*, p. 5).

The persons authorized to preach are bishops, presbyters, and deacons. To say this is merely to note what is set down in The Code of Canon Law of the Roman Church: the faculty to preach eucharistic homilies may be granted only to bishops, priests, and deacons (C. 1342). In recent years there has been a certain amount of interest in having lay persons, especially members of religious communities, preach at Mass. Someone has suggested that lay Dominicans are authorized to preach by virtue of membership in

the Order of Preachers, but Simon Tugwell O.P. has argued convincingly to the contrary (*The Way of the Preacher*, pp. 132-33). This restriction also appears to be supported by the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* when it says: "In liturgical celebrations each person, minister or layperson, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy" (#28). In the guidelines concerning the homily at Mass promulgated by the Archdiocese of New York there is provision for laity to make remarks at points in the liturgy other than that specified for the homily. More inclusive provisions may lie in the future, however, since many recognize that the ability to preach is at least a talent and may be a gift or charism. At any rate, all persons do not share in it equally and the insistence on ordained status may mean that the faithful are subjected to bad preaching when good is available.

An arbitrary and editorial note is injected in the specification that the homily always be based on the gospel. The *Constitution on the Liturgy* does say that "the sermon should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources" and goes on to say that "its character should be that of a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ," which seems likely to be the part to be derived from the Bible, and that this is "ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy" (#35), which is obviously to draw on liturgical sources. It also says that it is "from the scripture that lessons are read and ex-

plained in the homily" (#24), which sounds like an invalidation of all those homilies I heard that did not explain the lessons appointed for that day. Some, however, would say that the homily should treat all of the lessons appointed, not just the gospel. According to Skudlarek, there are many who believe that doing so is involved in the very concept of liturgical preaching (*The Word in Worship*, p. 40). Since he himself has pointed out that epistles and gospels are given course readings rather than chosen for their common themes in the three-year lectionary cycle, and since it is so hard to make one point clearly in the time available for a homily, I believe that the homily should begin with the gospel and bring in the other lessons only if they are serendipitous. I am comforted to have the support of my colleague Fr. Kavanagh in this. His nineteenth principle is: "The homily is always on the gospel of the day, and one never preaches unless one has something to say." He also takes the position that the preacher is the president of the assembly.

The final way in which the definition of sermon is sharpened to refer to the homily at Mass is that the action in response to it has two aspects. First, it enables the worshipers to participate more fully in the eucharistic liturgy because they have been fully involved in the liturgy of the word. The history of salvation and the mystery of Christ that are proclaimed in the homily are made available and experienced in the sacrament. The appropriation of this salvation is made more self-conscious by the preaching that has preceded it. That salvation, however, is not confined

in its present expression to the duration of the assembly. It is to be lived out in the daily life of all who share in it. They receive suggestions of how this is done appropriately in the homily.

So much for defining what one does when one preaches. Now it is time to see how it is done.