



THE  
PREACHING CHURCH

*The Poor as Sacra Praedicatio*

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## Chapter 6

# Preaching as Dialogue

The word “homily” means conversation—a simple dialogue. A dialogue involving listening and speaking is non-dualistic but never one-sided. It is dual unity, *nepantla*, a communion of two different points of view brought together by holistic speech. The homily, too, is dialogic. It can never be simple monologue where the “preacher” gives religious truths to passive listeners. Our tradition has not often seen the Holy Preaching holistically. Seldom is the Sunday preaching a dialogue.

What would happen if we returned to the roots of the ancient word in order to discover anew the Holy Preaching? For even when the Holy Preaching is the traditional Sunday sermon, there can be profound dialogue at work. It will help the preacher—and the preaching community—to reflect on how this conversation, this dialogue, unfolds.

In April 1707, George Friedrich Handel (1685–1759) composed *Dixit Dominus*, a choral setting of Psalm 109.<sup>1</sup> The phrase *Dixit Dominus* (“The Lord says”) dominates the first part. *Dixit* is repeated over and over. *Dixit Dominus*—God says, God speaks. Our ancient belief is that God is not silent. God speaks. We, God’s

1. [http://imslp.org/wiki/Dixit\\_Dominus,\\_HWV\\_232\\_\(Handel,\\_George\\_Frideric\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Dixit_Dominus,_HWV_232_(Handel,_George_Frideric)).

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holy people the preaching Church, listen—and respond. Our dialogue is with the Triune God, the poor, creation.

Theology is never consigned only—or primarily—to the academy. In the early centuries, the Fathers and Mothers spoke of theology as “the contemplation of the Holy Trinity.” Theology is lived in the life of the people, in the life of the Church community. It has been pointed out that the Fathers and Mothers generally did not teach in the academy. Rather, they *preached* in the midst of the people of God. St. John Chrysostom (347–407), perhaps the greatest preacher in Christian history, *did* theology by a Holy Preaching in dialogue with the people. The homiletic dialogue with the people was the icon (Bruno Forte), the image, of the *perichoresis* within the Holy Trinity. The Fathers and Mothers rightly understood that theology could not be divorced from the people or its intimate connection with the Triune God. Archbishop Joseph Raya, when referring to St. John the Evangelist, calls every theologian a “troubadour of love, a singer of love.”<sup>2</sup>

Is the Holy Preaching a “contemplation of the Trinity”? This question must be relentlessly pursued if we are to understand the dynamics of preaching and approach it as the life-blood of the Triune God in the people. A living theology of proclamation must be recovered if the Holy Preaching is to survive into the twenty-first century and beyond—a theology significantly different, rooted in the Trinitarian contemplation of the Fathers and Mothers.

If preaching is dialogue, if theology is contemplation of the Holy Trinity, some time must be spent developing a Trinitarian approach to the Holy Preaching. This approach will be rooted in ecclesiology, which, strictly speaking, is theology proper and its only *raison d’être*.

Western thought views dialogue largely from an analytical perspective, the viewpoint of the subject, asking questions like: “*what* is the function of dialogue, *how* does dialogue happen, *in what* does dialogue consist, *why* does dialogue happen”? They approach dialogue from the philosophical viewpoint rooted in the Greco-Roman tradition of “question-answer” and the priority

2. Raya, *The Transfiguration*, 51.

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of the subject. In this analytic approach, the question is mostly static; and the answer even more so. Dialogue becomes *monologue*. Monologue never listens. In monologue, the subject is all-important; the other loses ground quickly. Think of how often you are a “step ahead” in conversation, even with your closest friends. We even complete the sentences of our “dialogue” partners before they are finished! The Holy Preaching, a dialogue meant to have a conversational tone understood by all—children, poor, women, men—often ends in monologue, the ordained preacher the only “partner” who understands what is said! The exceptions—like John Chrysostom, Antonio de Montesinos, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—are few. In this dialogue, the *real* conversation is that of the Triune God—which the preacher and the preaching people “overhear.” Antonio de Montesinos understood this (“I am the voice of Christ crying in the wilderness”) when he stepped into the pulpit during Advent of 1511 to denounce the oppression wrought by the Spaniards upon the *Taino* indigenous of the island of *Quisquilla*, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he preached resistance to the Nazi oppression.

The preaching giants of our tradition were great because they knew the importance of *listening*. Human dialogue at its best can reflect the *perichoresis* of the Holy Trinity, participating by grace, as St. Maximus Confessor says, in the *one* Word spoken by the Trinity. St. Ephrem the Syrian uses a vivid image: When teaching us to speak, God holds a mirror in front of God’s divinity, and the reflecting surface points toward us, as when one teaches a parrot to speak. We are slow learners, but God is patient and loving. God *listens*. God has spoken one Word; it reverberates in the *perichoresis* of the Holy Trinity.

How do we listen to one another? How do we converse with one another? Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes from prison that the Christianity of the future will be less formal preaching and more “prayer and doing God’s justice.”<sup>3</sup> Prayer—the “contemplation of the Holy Trinity”—can only happen through silent waiting, as

3. DBWE 8:390.

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Bonhoeffer says.<sup>4</sup> Action for justice requires prayer and contemplation in silence before the living God. We also need to practice silent listening before one another. Our culture reacts against silence. It needs to be nurtured intentionally—particularly in our places of worship.

Recently, I was present at the blessing of a public locale sponsored by a Church group. As the deacon was proclaiming the gospel (incidentally, Matt 25:31–46), the cell phone of one of the staff rang. She rose, went off to the side where everyone could still see and hear her, and . . . answered the telephone! Silence eludes us, even in our worship. The Triune God, though, *listens in the silence of the Word*. God *hears* the cry of the poor (Pss 34:17, 69:33). God *hears* the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant (Exod 22:22–23, Deut 10:18, Zech 7:10, Jer 7:6). God *hears* the request of Abraham and Sarah for a child (Gen 17:16). God *hears* the Israelites enslaved in Egypt (Exod 3:7). The Scriptures are filled with the speaking God who *listens in silence*. We, icons of the God who listens, need to practice once again the art of listening if we are to become the preaching Church.

What if the preaching Church nurtured “ears to hear” (Matt 11:15, 13:9, Mark 4:9, Rev 3:22) and a heart for dialogue? What if people were taken seriously as active participants in the Holy Preaching? What if we “overheard” the *perichoresis* of the Divine Three in the poor, in creation, in one another? Perhaps these questions can form a “starting point” for a reevaluation of the theology of preaching that “speaks” to people of the twenty-first century—particularly the poor, the immigrant, indigenous peoples, women, people alienated because of sexual preference, and many others. Can we see that the Holy Preaching is icon of the Dialogue in the innermost depths of the Holy Trinity? Can we catch the “energies” (St. Gregory Palamas) of the grace of the conversation?

Perhaps it is blasphemous to think that can unravel the conversation of the community of the three Living Persons. We can be sure, however, of the Word “uttered” in that sacred space: Jesus. Theologians from Aquinas to Rabner have maintained that this is

4. De Lange, *Waiting for the Word*.

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the Word spoken by God, resounding in mystery, never exhausted by other words. That is why God is reticent to speak and quick to listen in silence. Karl Rahner speaks of the silence of God in eternity, “where the only Word spoken is Jesus Christ, reverberating through the ages.”<sup>5</sup> All other words pass through this Word, spoken at the dawn of creation,<sup>6</sup> to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, Moses and Miriam, the Prophets, the tender love and mercy of God’s Word spoken at Bethlehem, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, in the Incarnate One present with us.

We often think of dialogue as a “resolution” between two people, an “agreement” reached by parties in which there is a *via media* often agreeable to neither but adopted so that things can move forward. However, there is only one *via* in real dialogue—the *via trinitaria*. In the ancient tradition, God, the Living Three, is eternal dialogue of silent *perichoresis* filled with sonorous music (St. John of the Cross). It is important for us to attend in prayer and contemplation to the conversation if there is any hope of our true listening to the Holy Preaching.

The preaching Church in dialogue is a people whose action is integral part of the preaching event. The dialogue is Trinitarian by its very nature: the Triune God, the poor community, and the world God has created. The Living Three speaks the Word to the Church community; the Church community listens and participates by grace; and the community of the Holy Preaching acts on behalf of the poor and the world community. The dialogue implies a special openness on the part of the Church community—to the God who speaks the Word and listens in silence, to the Incarnate Word divinely spoken, to the poor seeking the justice of God’s reign, and to the world created by the God of love. Church community and ordained preacher are one community of the baptized in dialogue, one preaching Church; the goal of the Sunday preaching is animation of the preaching Church of the poor toward loving action in

5. I read this quote many years ago but have been unable to locate it. I believe it is from *Encounters with Silence*.

6. See *DBWE* 3:40–44 for Bonhoeffer’s exposition of the creating Word.

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the world. The *Sacra Praedicatio* in dialogue, part and parcel of the world beloved of God, listens and acts.