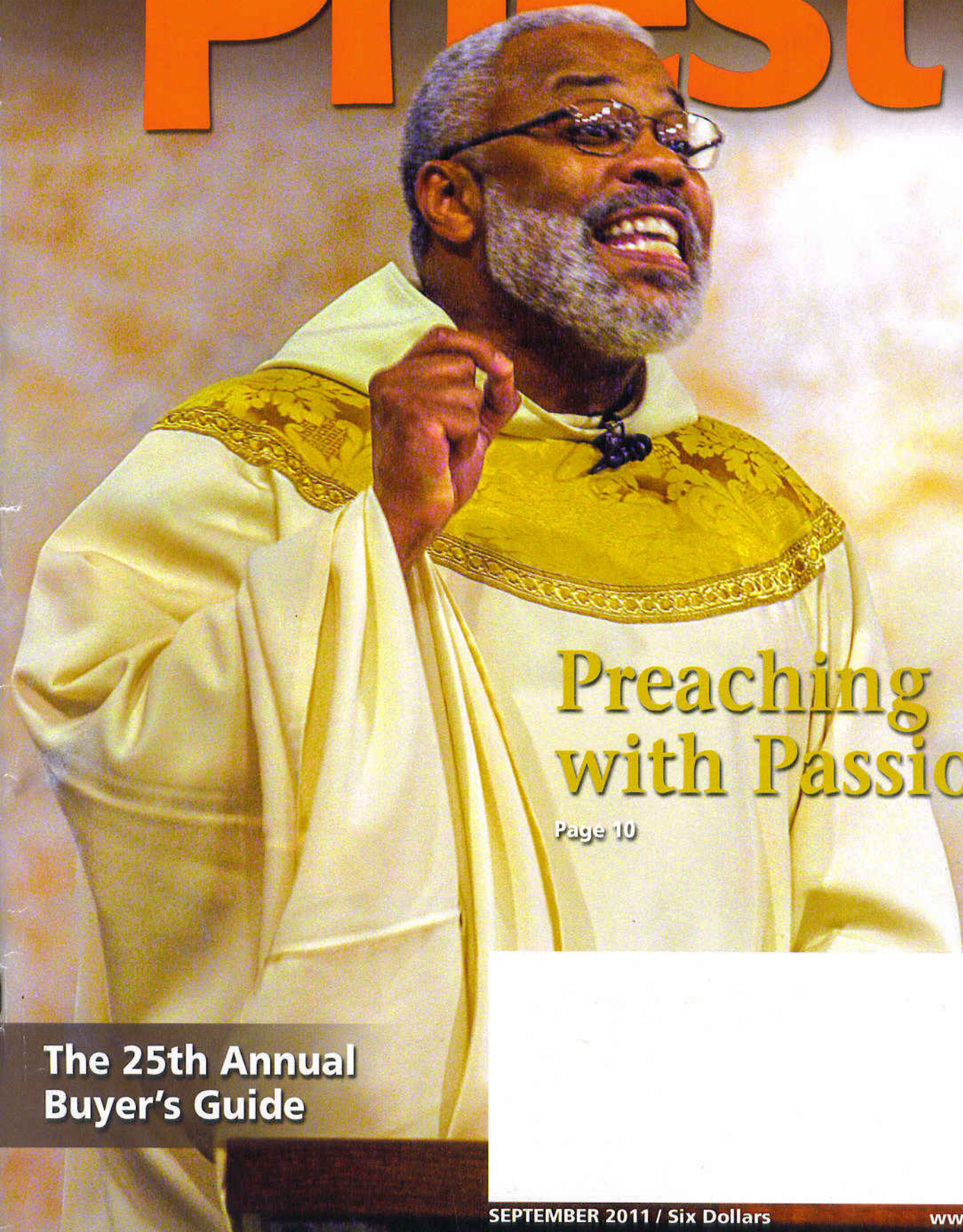


Our Sunday Visitor's

THE Priest



Preaching with Passion

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**The 25th Annual
Buyer's Guide**

Preaching With Passion

Our challenge is to become our true and best selves

By Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.

William Graham, a communications expert, insists that the greatest single obstacle to effective communication is a preacher's poor self-image. He suggests that each preacher is unique and that each should develop his own personal potential and personal style of communication. Because preachers are more precious for what they are than for what they have or possess, our challenge is to become our true and best selves.

An important ingredient in all preaching is to preach with enthusiasm, zeal, conviction and passion. Gideon considered himself the lowest man in the tribe and unworthy to lead the Israelites against the Midianites, but God promised to be with him. Jeremiah considered himself too young to be a prophet; Isaiah said he had unclean lips. God gave Jeremiah the ability to proclaim his message forcefully, and He cleansed Isaiah's lips. Noting that God spoke through Balaam's ass, one pastor said, "Why not through me?"

Preachers don't have to envision themselves as another Demosthenes, a thundering prophet or a Bishop Sheen. Passionate preaching is not yelling and screaming or fire and brimstone. If we devote ourselves to the task of preaching with love, it will be evident to our listeners. People will comment, "You like what you are doing, don't you?" If we are bored or lazy with this important task, our preaching will be boring, lifeless and stale. We can go through the motions without any pep or zeal for life. Maybe we need to be shaken up like a bottle of salad dressing!

We have to be crystal clear on the urgency of

our task. Preaching impregnated with love will energize our words and delivery, but lifeless preaching will only result in a lifeless community. The very nature of good preaching is prophetic and challenging. A passionate preacher will propose alternative visions and possibilities. Walter Brueggemann maintains that a prophet's role is to express people's deepest hopes and dreams and show them how to accomplish the unimaginable. Quite a contrast to the way Dennis O'Brien, president of the University of Rochester, characterized preaching: "Saturday Night Live, Sunday Morning Deadly."

Enthusiasm Needed

Preaching that imparts enthusiasm, power and joy will touch people's hearts and minds. The word "enthusiasm" comes from the Greek word for "divine inspiration." Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm." That is certainly true of animated preaching. Dull preaching is like Styrofoam — lots of substance but no taste. Too many hearers are left word-starved or spiritually anemic by listless preaching. Homilies are not meant to be sleeping pills; hence the challenge to find the right word or words. Mark Twain maintained that the difference between the wrong word and the right word is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning.

Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, formerly of Cincinnati, in addressing the priests of New Orleans and Mobile, Ala., said, "Like all good teachers, the priest also needs to be interested in and enthusiastic about what he teaches." He went on to say this calls

IN BRIEF

- **Enthusiasm needed**
- **Passionate preaching**
- **Efficacy of God's word**
- **Afraid of what God may ask**
- **Preaching from our hearts**
- **Need for prayer**



W.P. WITTMAN PHOTO

Preaching that imparts enthusiasm, conviction and joy will touch people's hearts and minds.

for "the deep seated conviction that what is being taught here is authentically important." That message certainly applies to enthusiastic preaching.

Jesus said, "I came to light a fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Lk 12:49). Jesus is the spark that sets our hearts on fire for God and for others. Every preacher needs to enkindle that fire within himself and then share the power with others. Sam Keen's book on how to be a man in contemporary society emphasizes that there must be fire in the belly! We have to let the Gospel message pulse through our whole being. If we are not aflame, we approach the pulpit with leg chains wrapped around our ankles. Jesus also said most forcefully, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). Jesus held people spellbound by His preaching. No one ever spoke the way He did because He spoke with authority and power. People followed Jesus around, glued to every word He said. Certainly a far cry from people who rush to get out of church or become impatient if the homily is a little longer than usual. Catherine de Hueck said: "The moment you start preaching like Jesus Christ preached, the world comes around

you and immediately keeps on following you."

Passionate Preaching

An urgent need exists today for passionate preaching, the kind exemplified by Jesus and also by Peter on Pentecost when 3,000 people converted. We preachers also need the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Unless we open ourselves up to the power of the Holy Spirit, our preaching will lack the force and energy needed today to touch people's lives. Jesus went into the synagogue, unrolled the scroll of Isaiah, and read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor..." (Lk 4:18). Others, including Gideon, Saul and David were anointed by the Spirit, but no one was anointed the way Jesus was.

John the Baptist, a great preacher, received the power of the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb. If we are open and willing to accept this grace, that same Spirit can touch us also as it did Simeon, Anna, Nicodemus and others. St. Paul wrote to the people in Corinth, "My message and my proclamation were not with persuasive (words of) wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so

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that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor 4-5). Listeners can tell when

we are preaching in the power of the Spirit. One of the main reasons so much preaching is ineffective is the lack of the power of the Spirit. In the final analysis, the Gospel is the gift of the Spirit.

Karl Rahner stated that preaching is not about new information or clarity of doctrine, but rather to awaken hearers to the wonder of life and mystery as well as the presence and power of the Spirit in their lives. Walter Burghardt insists: "If our homilies are to inspire as well as inform, our preachers must be set aflame." Passionate preaching is contagious. Hearts are challenged and changed, and apathy in the congregation simply wilts away.

The burning question for preach-

ers is: am I preaching to say something, or do I have something to say? The passionate preacher has something to say. Preachers need to commit themselves to energize others to hear the Good News, because this could be the only good news they might hear. If listeners are not more enthusiastic after hearing our preaching, we have failed.

Efficacy of God's Word

Some homilies are as lifeless as reading an engineering encyclopedia or a telephone directory. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that a preacher's "sermon should be rammed with life. The true preacher can always be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life — life passed

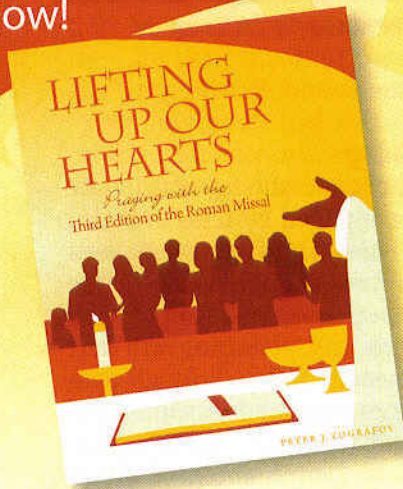
through the fire of thought."

We hear at times about the sagging pulpit. The reason for a

sagging pulpit is sagging preachers who don't believe in the efficacy of God's word. Before preachers can change others, they might have to change themselves. If the power of God's word has not gripped them, it won't grip their hearers. Preaching without emotional involvement in God's Word is usually dead. We have to ask why growing churches are often those that find their energy in the preaching event?

The Scriptures have to come alive for preachers if they are to preach well. Before the Gospel can become Good News for others it has to become Good News for the preacher, almost like hot bread coming out of an oven, or hot bubbling pizza. Preachers need to get excited about the mes-

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The Holy Spirit depends on us to preach the Good News with unction so we can strengthen people's faith.

sage before they can excite others. Excitement is contagious! Horace said, "If you want me to weep, you must weep yourself."

The Word itself is imbued with power. When God reveals to us the meaning of the text and its relevance, that should ignite our passion. Good preachers can enhance the efficacy of the Word by a lively proclamation. But something has to happen to preachers before they can proclaim the message forcefully.

Jeremiah had to endure an interior crisis of being duped, mocked and made an object of derision before he could exclaim, "If I say to myself I will not mention Him or speak in His name any more, then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it" (20:9). Many of us can identify with Jeremiah. Preachers need to be seared in a comparable way and "feel fiercely," as Rabbi Heschel states, and then proclaim the Good News.

Afraid

Some preachers are afraid of what God might ask of them. The more they immerse themselves in God's Word, the more they realize the real challenge to live God's Word before they can effectively proclaim it. Strong affections for God rooted in truth become the bone and marrow of our message. Often the greatest challenge in preaching is to live what we proclaim. Like Paul there is a conversion necessary, followed by an inversion of one's life and attitudes, and then a further immersion into the power of God's word.

The Holy Spirit depends on us to preach the Good News with fervor so we can strengthen people's faith. St. Paul writes, "Thus faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). The key phrase is that it must be "the word of Christ," not some smooth-sounding message that tickles the ears of hearers. Demosthenes

once said of his archrival, Aeschines, "When you orate, they say, 'How well he speaks.' When I orate, they say, 'Let us march against Philip.'"

Good preachers speak from their hearts as well as their heads with the result they preach with more compassion and animation. The objection often heard is, "I don't want to be emotional." The answer is: Try it, see if anyone notices. Or, try it, you might like it. There is too much laid-back preaching because of a fear of being too theatrical, artificial, dramatic or emotional. It is much easier to tone down emotion or enthusiasm than vice versa.

Vibrant and alive preachers are aware that there are 88 keys on a piano, and they try to blend them well in proclaiming the Good News. Just as there are many software products, so there are many ways to convey the Good News. We need wisdom to know when to be more passionate, especially when conviction is needed. Alexander Hamilton stated that if we stand for nothing, we fall for anything.

Good Reading

Charles Laughton once wrote, "good reading is reading something you love to someone you love." Good preaching might be characterized as preaching Christ, whom preachers love, to someone they love. Good preachers don't bludgeon the hearers, but nudge them, help them feel closer to God and know who Jesus is. They afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Preachers don't need the persuasive logic of a lawyer, the cogent reasoning of a scientist, or the finest Cartesian clarity, but we do need more heart-to-heart preaching like Jesus did. Recall the influence that Jesus had on the disciples who said on their way to Emmaus, "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and

opened the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32). Do our listeners say that of us after we have preached?

Need For Prayer

For preachers to passionately proclaim the Good News, prayer and contemplation are absolutely necessary.

Jesus often withdrew from the crowds to be alone in prayer with the Father. In Mark's Gospel, we see Jesus encouraging His Apostles to do this too: "'Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.' People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place" (Mk 6:31-32). Many of us can identify with that experience because, at times, we are overtaxed in our ministry.

One preacher maintained that what helped him proclaim the Gospel forcefully was to forget himself and concentrate on God in the text. He also found that immersing himself more in prayer and being more passionate about God enabled him to preach with more conviction. Preachers need to set aside prime time to pray and contemplate God's word. The congregation of a preacher intimately in tune with God will reap rich benefits. One pastor said that if we are not praying, we are straying. The more we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, praying over them, the more the Holy Spirit will inspire us and also the people who hear the Good News proclaimed.

There is a joke about how one backwoods Southern Baptist preacher prepares to preach: "First I read myself full. Then I think myself clear. Then I pray myself hot. Then I let myself go!" Many experts agree that hearers are influenced more by the manner of our presentation than by our arguments or examples. Walter Burghardt wrote, "Our people should sense from our words and our faces, from our gestures and our whole posture, that we love the crucified com-

munities with a crucifying passion; that we agonized over the hardness of our hearts, our ability to 'eat, drink and be merry' while a billion humans go to bed hungry; that the heavy-burdened can look to us not so much for answers as for empathy, for compassion." We need to show that our bodies are in tune with our hearts and are feeling what we are expressing. Passionate preachers ordinarily possess expressive faces. A joyful, expressive countenance will convey more passion than an immobile or stone face.

Few of us, if any, will be called upon to preach the way Archbishop Oscar Romero did. He told his people, "This holy Mass, this Eucharist is clearly an act of faith. The body broken and the blood shed for human beings encourage us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain, as Christ did — not for self, but to bring justice and peace to people. Let us be intimately united in faith and hope at this moment." Shortly after having spoken these moving words, Archbishop Romero was shot to death. His homilies undoubtedly sealed his fate. Some considered it fitting that he died after proclaiming these prophetic words.

Good feedback from our listeners is beneficial for most preachers. People telling us how much they appreciated our preaching is incentive for us to commit ourselves more intensely to passionately communicate the Good News. We, like John the Baptist, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths" (Lk 3:4). Like Jesus, we proclaim, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). Canon William Barcus, while preaching on AIDS, stated that AIDS victims are saying, "Help us. Please help us. Be the Gospel alive!" Maybe the only Gospel some people will ever read is the one we proclaim passionately. **P**

FATHER HART, O.F.M. Cap., is director of preaching for the St. Joseph Province of the Capuchins. He has written articles for Pastoral Life, Human Development, and Teacher's Journal.

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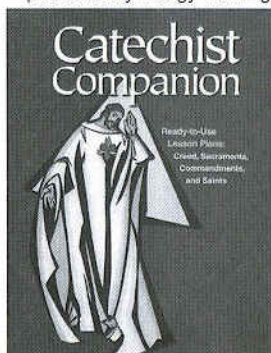
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