

Challenges Facing Preachers

Insights from recent synod and a convocation propose a number of questions that need to be considered

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

- Preachers as Catholic experts
- Proactive on national and international scene
- God's waiters
- Theology on one's knees
- The link between the Word and the Eucharist

Recently I attended a Coalition on Catholic Preaching conference in Louisville, Kentucky. This convo-

cation is held every two years and, from what I understand, it will be held at the same hotel in 2010. The hotel,

the Seelbach Hilton, is located across the street from where Thomas Merton came to his famous realization he



How can we educate people to live the Word of God?

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We have the responsibility to react to and clarify any storm that arises concerning the Church.

The Need to be Proactive

loved everyone. This inspiration helped him redefine his monastic activities and focus more on social justice issues.

I would like to share some of the insights from the convocation, as well as those gleaned from the Synod on the Word.

When preaching we need to remember that religion, according to John Allen, is not a regular news beat nor is it even taken seriously by some. He believes that the problem concerning the press is not the bias toward religion but rather neglect.

The press does not treat religion stories the same way they do politics or sports events. They easily forget what happened two or three years ago. But if it has to do with something sensational — such as Pope Benedict XVI coming to the United States or the sexual abuse crisis — these will definitely be covered. The *New York Times* covered the sexual abuse crisis for 41 days in a row when it broke.

The problem is that the whole story is not told or that generalizations are made, so we need to alert our assembly about what is left out or misinterpreted. We are a world Church, truly global, but represent only a small percentage. In *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, Thomas Friedman writes that the United Nations predicts that by 2053 there will be nine billion on the planet. How staggering is that?

In 1800 London was the largest city with one million people. By 1960, there were 111 cities with over a million; by 1995, 280, and today over 300 according to the UN Population Fund statistics. The growth will take place in

countries least able to sustain it like Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Yemen.

We need to be careful of the words that might not be understood by our listeners: pastoral, incarnational, paschal mystery, catechetics, soteriology and many others. John Allen gave us a list of words he heard during the conference that would not be understood by our assemblies. Some preachers quote Latin because that usually sounds profound. The text, however, as well as the context of the pope's words or a bishop's letter need to be explained properly. A good example is Pope John Paul II, who after viewing the film *Passion of Christ* said, "It is, as it was," which was interpreted as a full endorsement.

As preachers we need to think of ourselves as Catholic experts. We have the responsibility to react to and clarify any storm cloud that arises concerning the Church. Recall when Pope Benedict XVI made his statement about Islam? How many of us mentioned this in a homily when it was appropriate?

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone of Rome spoke out that the world's financial crisis was the result of the search for short-term profits as a goal in itself and an example of what happens when basic rights and the common good are ignored. He insisted that politics and the market are not everything, a means but not an end. He also assailed the search for short-term profit, virtually identified as a good in itself which ends up wiping out the profit.

We need to be proactive on the national and international scene. Make people aware that a Jewish rabbi spoke at the World Synod on the Word. That was a first. Also, that Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople was the first patriarch in history to address the Synod of Bishops. Events like these will make our homilies fresh, compelling, and relevant.

Even Voltaire was quoted at the Synod. He once described sacred eloquence as "long and flat, like Charlemagne's sword, compensating with length what it doesn't achieve with depth."

When John Allen attended World Youth Days, he described them in three circles: the inner circle were those fearlessly committed to their faith; the next circle were rather lukewarm, being there because of their friends; the outer circle were there because their parents paid their way and they were enjoying the pasta and pop. If we applied these three circles to our assemblies, where would they fit in?

Sister Barbara Reid, O.P., when considering the spirituality of a preacher, considers us as God's waiters serving a meal. The members of the assembly are the hearers feasting at the table with the various aromas that a good meal presents. It can be a three-course meal or involve three movements. The first is being amazed. We need to become more contemplative by having a love affair with all creation.

In preparing a homily we are in a

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Our society often shuns commitment, preferring, like Rome in decline, circuses to ward off the boredom.

position of viewing the Grand Canyon or a Niagara Falls where we are awed by how effective the Word can be.

Awareness of the divine begins with awe leading to a greater respect. The derivation of respect comes from *re* and *spicere* which means to look again, look deeper and grasp the beauty around us.

That leads to a radical amazement uniting all of us into one body helping us to enter into the heart of God. God guides us from within, not from a perch up in the heavens. This results in a new universe story. Once we grasp what is happening, we respond in a radical gratitude instead of becoming a cushion for our lazy intellect.

Suffering and pain will be viewed differently. It helped transform Job even though he did not understand his pain and suffering. Notice how it takes 37 chapters before Job understands who God is. We can also be trans-

formed by our suffering provided we open ourselves to how God is working in our lives.

Letting Go

The second movement or course is letting go, something that is very challenging. How willing are we not to overeat, not to hoard, not to feed ourselves first, thinking or believing that there will not be enough to go around? Did not Jesus feed the 5,000 in the desert and weren't there still 12 baskets left over? God is a God of plenty. How open are we to different recipes, or not using knives and forks, but chopsticks instead?

After 9/11 many of us have become more fearful, even numb, shutting ourselves off from certain people, narrowing or restricting our world vision. We can even become very parish-minded, especially in the area of maintenance. Recently I gave a renewal or mission for two parishes. The parishioners of one were asked to come to the other parish. Some had never been inside the other parish, and the two were not far apart.

The third movement or course is resistance. What are the poisons afflicting our society? Certainly they include racism, sexism (women treated as second best), lack of health care for all, a living wage, immigration laws, death penalty, abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, and many more. A lack of forgiveness fuels violence. In time of desolation only a few crumbs are left on the table. The main dish becomes a side dish.

Father Hans Urs von Balthasar never tired of saying that theology should be done on one's knees. The same can be said of preaching. We certainly need to do our homework, praying before and after our preparation, as well as making the homilies timely (*Sitz im Leben*) and relevant. We have to mine the purest veins of the Scriptures — a daunting task.

Understandable Language

Another challenge we face is preaching to different ethnic groups in a language they can understand. Emergent groups such as Hispanics, Asian Pacific Islanders, migrant groups, refugees and African Americans make up the majority of the Catholic Church in America. We need to be experts in cultures if we are to effectively preach the word of God.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory considers it a redundancy to speak of a multicultural Church. He asks, "Is there any other kind?" The Church is growing mostly by means of immigration and we need to be attuned to the immigrants' dreams and problems. We have a variety of listeners, and this presents a daunting task.

Much trust and perseverance are needed for us to succeed. Do we produce a microwave homily put together shortly before preaching it, or a crockpot homily that has been stewing all week long?

How committed are we to having our homilies evaluated? Commitment to a marriage, an athletic or artistic career, demands much hard work and practice, sometimes boring practice. Our society often shuns commitment, preferring, like Rome in decline, circuses to ward off the boredom.

Still another challenge is how to bring people into our homily preparation because often they can offer useful and helpful insights. Spending more time with people might trigger some good material. Some people feel betrayed by the Church, the pope, their pastor. Betrayal is at the heart of the Crucifixion.

We need to tell them that it is OK to feel that way. If we have the time we might just sit with them, something that often becomes a healing experience. If we have not been in the marketplace, do we belong in the pulpit?

Another way to enhance the people's participation is to invite them to pray over us before we preach. This will impress on them how they are more involved in the event.

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Addressing various groups in the assembly can be effective. For example, saying, "Now this is meant for married people, single people, teenagers or young adults. Did you ever notice how people pay more attention to what we say at a children's liturgy when carrying on a dialogue homily with them?"

Ann Garrido, an associate professor of homiletics at Aquinas Institute of Theology, stated that preparing a homily can be like falling in love with God. We can remind our assembly that the Eucharist is a time when we fall back in love. How do spouses fall back in love?

One marriage expert maintains that when a couple tell their story of how they first met and get excited, it is clear that they can fall back in love. Good preaching is a tapestry, but we do not look at the reverse side that reveals the sweat, tears and anguish that go into developing it. Rather we look at the front side and see the beautiful pattern that results from our efforts.

We don't, however, put ourselves, but rather the Word of God to the forefront, in preparing and giving the homily. The language we craft becomes a sacramental experience. We need to ask, how much of the preparation is me, and how much the Spirit? Above all, we need to preach on what side God is on, especially that of the poor and vulnerable.

The Right Word

John Updike, author of some 50 books, states that frequently he cannot think of the right word while writing. He knows there is one in the jigsaw puzzle of the English language. But it has to be found on the misty rim of our consciousness. Eventually, often with the help of a thesaurus, he does find it. How much time do we spend trying to find the right word?

How willing are we to preach about touchy or sensitive issues? Because of the thorny issue he was about to preach, one pastor told his congregation, "You are going to leave here angry."

He challenged them to step back, think, and make a choice. It is much better than when people tell us, "That

was a good homily," or "I enjoyed your homily," but don't elaborate. Don't you often wonder what they found good or enjoyable?

Wringing the Sap

Dr. Walter Bruggemann, a professor emeritus of the Old Testament, maintains that we need to attack the present day's evils of big money, big business and the other American idols by quoting more often the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. He believes that more straightforward preaching rather than that softened by New Testament texts or phrasing will enhance our effectiveness.

We need to wring the sap from these inspiring writings. The search and hard work involved will be well worth the candle. Then we must proclaim the Word with enthusiasm. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago suggested that the Synod tackle challenges to "proclaim the Word of God with deep conviction."

Not moralizing during a homily can be challenging. Father John Jay Hughes, a former Episcopalian priest who converted to Catholicism and published many of his homilies, states how he shuns moralism.

Even when preaching the moral law he tries to emphasize the blessings and love God has bestowed on us. Because of his conversion his father banned him from his family home. Even though they correspond, they have not seen each other.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, archbishop of Quebec, said at the Synod on the Word that the dissatisfaction with preaching has turned many Catholics to other groups and religions. He insisted that homilies must cultivate a deeper calling to a decision of faith and avoid the tendency toward moralism.

Sister Barbara Reid, O.P., maintains that moralistic preaching can lead to fire and brimstone homilies that are not the most effective way to turn the hearts of people to God. We do need, however, to help people from becoming too complacent or compromising in living their Gospel values.

Are we a lighthouse or a lifeboat?

Why can't we be both? That, according to Pope Benedict XVI, is the Church's genius, having a passion for both-and, rather than an either-or.

Bishop Louis Tagle of Imes, Philippines, was a lighthouse at the Synod on the Word, striking a chord with the participants when he spoke about how God listens to us, especially the poorest and the most fragile.

He believes that the Church needs to form hearers of the Word because listening is a serious matter. Isn't that one of our responsibilities as preachers? We need to listen in faith by opening our hearts to God's Word and allowing it to penetrate and transform our lives.

Bishop Tagle maintains that many people are trapped in monologues,

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PREACHERS (from page 49)

noise, inattentiveness and self-absorption. The Church needs to offer dialogue, respect and transcendence. The Church also must learn to listen to the way God listens to us, especially the widows, the orphans, the persecuted and those who have no voice.

The Synod on The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church has proposed a number of challenging questions that we need to consider and pray over. Here are a few:

What can be done to help the faithful better understand that the Word of God is Christ? How can we educate peo-

ple to actively hear the Word of God, in the Church, for all people and every cultural level? How can we help people better understand the intrinsic link between the Word and the Eucharist? How can knowledge of the Word of God be fostered through means other than the biblical text – art, poetry, and the Internet? Is there a need for a compendium to help those preaching homilies to better proclaim the Word of God? **P**

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SPIRITUALITY (from page 31)

honest with themselves:

My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.¹

¹ Lincoln Barnett, *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, p.106 (William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, 1957). **P**