

The Meaning and Content of Preaching

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Part One: The Nature of Preaching

‘Our Lord did not ask St Peter: “Are you learned or eloquent?”’, in order to say to him: ‘Feed my sheep’; but ‘Do you love me?’; it is enough to love well in order to speak well’. (Conclusion by St Francis de Sales to his treatise on preaching).

As with St Gregory in his Pastoral Rule, it therefore seems evident to St Francis de Sales that to feed – ‘feed my sheep’ – is to speak. What, then, is the nature of preaching, and how does it relate to the rest of the ministry? The Congregation for the Clergy, in its circular letter in preparation for the Jubilee, **The Priest, Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Guide of the Community towards the Third Christian Millennium**, stated that a good starting point was to ‘consider God’s Revelation in itself’. In this Revelation, the invisible God (cf. *Col* 1:15; *1 Tim* 1:17) addresses humanity in his boundless love, just as he does to friends (cf. *Ex* 33:11; *Jn* 15:14–15); he² converses with them (cf. *Bar* 3:38) to invite them and admit them to share in his own life’. In Scripture, the proclamation of the Kingdom not only speaks of God’s glory, but causes it to well up from the proclamation itself. The Gospel preached in the Church is not merely a message, but a divine and salvific act experienced by those who believe, who hear, who obey the message and who welcome it. Consequently, Revelation is not limited to instructing us on the nature of this God who dwells in unapproachable light, but it also informs us of what God does for us through grace. Made present and actualised ‘in’ and ‘through’ the Church, the revealed Word is an instrument through which Christ acts within us by his Spirit. It is both judgement and grace.”

Now, the Church makes the revealed Word present through the apostolic ministry; Saint Paul says: ‘*Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach*’ (*1 Cor* 1:17). This is also the view of the other Apostles: ‘*It is not right that we should neglect the word of God to serve at tables*’ (*Acts* 6:2). We can therefore understand the directive of the Council of

¹ Lecture delivered on the occasion of the seventh CIEL symposium, 8–10 November 2001, in Versailles. ² SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, no. 2.

Trent, in its decree on reforms: ‘It is the bishop’s principal duty to preach.’³

This statement was authentically reinterpreted by the Second Vatican Council: Trent had used the term ‘principal’ in an assertive rather than an exclusive sense, with the result that the same teaching is now restated as follows: ‘Among the principal duties of bishops, the preaching of the Gospel holds a pre-eminent (eminent) place’.⁴

The nuance is significant: preaching has its importance, its pre-eminence; but it is only one of the principal duties and cannot be understood without the others.⁵

Let us explain: the discourse on collegiality has been retained from the last Council. However, rather than a style of governance, collegiality is above all a consequence of the sacramentality of the episcopate, and consequently of an ontological conception of the foundation of the sacrament of Holy Orders: the heart of the Council’s teaching lies in this foundation, the *munera Christi*, in which ordained ministers share in an essentially different way from the laity, because bishops, priests and deacons are configured to Christ in a manner

new way, which enables them to act with authority, in the name of Christ and of the Church.⁶

Commentators have tended to emphasise the threefold division of the *munera* used by the Council. But this is a matter of language, not of the doctrine itself.

The language is legitimate; it is a way of deriving a logic from what God has revealed to us, and this threefold division is found, for example, as early as St John Chrysostom, when he comments on the three gifts brought by the Magi. The antiphons for the feast have carried this interpretative framework into the liturgy, but it is merely a matter of language; in the Middle Ages, as many as twenty ‘*munera Christi*’ were distinguished.

The lesson to be learnt runs deeper: the crux of the matter is that preaching, the Eucharist and governance are roles that can be logically distinguished, yet are united at their root. A conceptual distinction, not a real one. The

³ ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF TRENT, 5th session, ch. 2, n. 9, and 24th session, can. 4.

⁴ Modus 154 on *Lumen gentium* 25.

⁵ This nuance is surprising at first glance, for in the face of the spread of a religion centred on preaching, one might have thought that Trent would have emphasised sacramentality, and would have clarified the link between preaching and the Eucharist. In fact, it would take four centuries for the Church’s official teaching to incorporate preaching into this framework of sacramentality.

⁶ (cf. LG 10 and its modi; cf. also the Pope’s reinterpretation of this in **Pastores dabo vobis**, drawing on the recommendations of the 1990 Synod of Bishops).

The Council does indeed teach that the *munus* is unique in itself (“munus ministerii”, LG 28), that it is “threefold” (m 15, m 203, AA 2), and that it is conferred sacramentally.

It is the sacrament as such that enables one to share in the priesthood of Christ and in his threefold *munus*. For imprinted upon the sacrament is a character which configures the recipient to Christ the Head, and which thereby confers its essential unity upon the priesthood of the New Law. And what accounts for the diversity of the degrees of the sacrament is their specific manner of sharing in *the munera* of Christ.

This notion of the sacramentality of the episcopate is linked to a certain understanding of the relationship between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, that is to say, of the *Sacra Potestas* and the ways in which it is shared. The Council emphasises that the source of all authority is Christ. That his *potestas* is unique, that it is a service, and that it is manifested in every baptised person through participation in *the munera* of Christ—the duty to spread the faith and salvation. To this common duty, the sacrament of Holy Orders adds a special mandate by virtue of a new consecration. This power, these *munera*, are therefore referred to as ‘*Sacra Potestas*’, a category which conciliar terminology, like the Catechism of the Catholic Church, reserves for ministers. It is a power of order; its distinctive character lies in its public nature, because it is exercised in the name of Christ, to whom one is conformed. Priests thus possess an authority of their own, a participation in that of Christ. Even when they act ‘*nomine Ecclesiae*’, they do so not as ministers of the Church but of Christ. This action ‘*in nomine et potestate*’ extends to each of *the munera*.

These *munera* enable action ‘*in persona Christi*’; they ensure the presence of Christ. They are the key to the nature of priests’ relationship with Christ: if this relationship gives rise to such diverse rights and duties in relation to the ministry, it is because Christ’s presence through the exercise of each *munus* is not univocal, and therefore the minister’s agency and responsibility are not univocal either.

We can therefore identify a first source of typology for the ministry, based on the causality involved: the minister relates to Christ as a co-instrument in the administration of the sacraments, but not in the other acts of the ministry, notably in preaching and governance.

Furthermore, even though these three *munera* have the same object, regardless of the degree of the sacrament received, they are not received in the same way by bishops, priests and deacons;

hence a second source of specification when discussing the ministry, and preaching in particular.

Let us apply these principles: in these three *munera*, conferred ‘per modum unius’ in priestly ordination, the priest serves Christ. It is towards Him that he has a duty, not so much towards the community. It is from Him that he derives his own authority, which is not that of a mere vicar of the bishop. And he serves Christ by calling the community together and gathering it around the Eucharist. The priest is a ‘sacerdos’ in the full sense of the word, capable of uniting people directly to God despite his hierarchical subordination to the bishop. He participates first and foremost in the priesthood of Christ and in his universal mission; a specific mission is conferred upon him radically through Holy Orders. The Council Fathers reached agreement on this conclusion as early as 1963 with regard to LG.

As for the primary source of specification, there is a unity between the priesthood and the sacrifice,⁷ which means that the ‘munus sanctificandi’ takes precedence in the order of intention, and that all the other duties of the Church and of the priest are ultimately derived from it. In the administration of the sacraments, the priest is a co-instrument, hence a particular, specific responsibility and personal participation in *the munus* of the Mediator. This duty cannot be delegated.

The other *munera* take precedence in the order of execution; it is necessary to evangelise and guide the community in order to lead it to the Sacrifice. But in carrying them out, Christ makes use of his ministers no longer merely as instruments (cf. Dogmatic Constitution **Lumen gentium**, 21 and 28, which refers to Bishop Muldoon in **AS II**, II, 822, and to Bishop d’Almeida in *AS II*, II, 713), but by allowing them a causality of their own which is added to his own; this is a true fatherhood in the order of grace, and one which is entirely personal to them.

As for the second source of specification, greater diversity is introduced between the bishop and the priest or deacon in those *munera* where the minister is the secondary cause: the deacon’s preaching, for example, is also carried out in the name of Christ and the Church, but on behalf of someone who is consecrated solely to assist the priest or bishop, and who cannot have charge of souls because he is not configured to Christ the Head. The priest, on the other hand, has received this configuration in the Sacrament. He will always represent Christ the Head before his Church, and he

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The wording is that of Bishop Beck, on behalf of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, at the 42nd General Congregation of the last Council: *Acta Synodalia* II, II, 268. As he lamented the vagueness of a definition of the priesthood based solely on the *munera*, the following sentence was inserted into the text of LG 28: ‘Suum vero munus sacrum maxime exercent in eucharistico cultu vel synaxi qua... unicum sacrificium Novi Testamenti ... in sacrificio Missae usque ad adventum Domini repraesentant et offerant’.

He will also have the power everywhere to bring the preached Gospel to life by consecrating the Eucharist.

But as he is ordained as a co-operator, he cannot exercise the *munus* received in

Ordination is linked only to a canonical mission;⁸ this does not affect the manner in which he consecrates, but rather everything that is shaped by its own causality; this is why the decree **Presbyterorum Ordinis** applies the statement of Trent to him with this new nuance: “The priests, as co-workers with the bishops, have as their primary duty to proclaim the Gospel of God to all people; thus (...) they bring forth and nurture the People of God”.⁹

Furthermore, if the bishop entrusts him with a share in the care of souls as a pastor in his own right, whether as a parish priest or chaplain, he is granted a fatherly role over those particular faithful. His word then takes on a new tone, that of the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep. St Alphonsus Liguori emphasised this particular responsibility of the pastor, stating¹⁰ the view of the commentators on the Council of Trent that a parish priest who neglects to preach personally for a full month running could not be excused from mortal sin.¹¹

All this is to say that, by its very nature, preaching is but one of the activities of the ‘cura animarum’. It ‘shares, in a certain sense, in the salvific character of the Word itself, not simply because the ordained ministers speak of Christ, but rather because they proclaim the Gospel to their listeners, with that power to challenge which stems from their participation in the consecration and mission of the Incarnate Word of God. These words of the Lord still ring in the ears of the ministers: ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me’ (*Lk* 10:16), and they can say with Saint Paul: ‘We have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may know the gifts of grace that God has bestowed upon us. And we speak of these things not with words taught by

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Since the capacity to preach is received at the moment of ordination, and is not the result of an additional mission from outside, the 1983 Code grants *a jure* the ‘faculty’ to exercise this *munus* anywhere on earth, subject only to the at least tacit consent of the rector of a church (cf. can. 764). This was previously virtually the privilege of cardinals.

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SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree **Presbyterorum ordinis**, no. 4. 10

Session 5, Chapter 2 of the Reform: The Council of Trent had required all parish priests and deans to preach in person every Sunday and on feast days. This duty was extended to all priests who celebrate *Mass* in the presence of the faithful, whether or not they have pastoral responsibility, by the Constitution **Sacrosanctum Concilium**, no. 57, of the last Council, and is set out verbatim in Canon 767, § 2, which allows exemption only for a grave reason.

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Letter of 1764 to the parish priests of his diocese, Vol. III of the Correspondence, p. 584.

human wisdom, but with those taught by the Spirit, expressing in spiritual terms spiritual realities” (*I Cor* 2:12–13).¹²

With this twofold teaching—that concerning the presence of Christ in the sacred minister, and that concerning the kind of causality that remains with the minister as a living instrument—the Council provides us with an extraordinary key to reinterpreting the earlier tradition on preaching, the most recent example of which is found in Benedict XV’s 1917 encyclical **Humani generis**. This will be the outline of our presentation: to examine the meaning of preaching as an act of authority, and to recall its content and method, as human dimensions entrusted to our responsible stewardship.

Part II: Authority as a consequence of Christ’s presence.

Both St Francis de Sales and Benedict XV begin their treatises on preaching by addressing the same question: that of authority or legitimate mission. The Bishop of Geneva does so by drawing on the words of the Pontifical during the presentation of the Gospel: ‘I note that bishops not only have the mission; they also possess its ministerial sources, whilst other preachers have only its streams. This is their first and greatest duty; they are told this at their consecration. To this end, they receive a special grace at their consecration, which they must bring to fruition... This consideration should give us courage; for God assists us especially in this task; and it is marvellous how the

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CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, Circular Letter *‘The Priest: Master of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and guide of the community with a view to the third Christian millennium*, 19 March 1999, II.1.

preaching by bishops has such great power compared with that of other preachers. For

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how abundant the streams may be, one prefers to drink from the spring.’

As for Benedict XV, he declares: ‘The first law is that no one may, of their own accord, assume the office of preaching; whoever desires it must have a legitimate commission, and only the bishop can grant it: “*How can they preach unless they are sent?*” (Rom 10:15)’

The meaning of preaching by laypeople

But who can be sent? Is a mandate from the authorities sufficient for this, or is it absolutely necessary to be conformed to Christ through the sacrament? This recurring debate will lead to a distinction being made between preaching and the homily.

A little history: in the controversy over the origin of jurisdictional authority, such authoritative figures as Cardinal Stickler found it easy to point out that there was probably an extra-sacramental authority within the Church, given that, over the centuries, the Popes had canonised systems authorising people who had not received the sacrament to preach. Innocent III, in his Constitution **Eius exemplo** of 18 December 1208, appears to depart from the prescription of Saint Leo of 453, which Gratian had

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His letter is addressed to the Bishop of Dijon; it is therefore natural that he should have taken an interest in the formula for the conferral of the Gospel during episcopal consecration. He might also have commented on the consecratory prayer for priests: its text has changed and now includes an explicit reference to the fruit of preaching. The 1990 Pontifical states, **at the moment of the promises:**

1. for the bishop:

- ‘Do you wish to preach the Gospel of Christ faithfully and unceasingly?’
- Do you wish to preserve the deposit of faith, as handed down from the Apostles and always and everywhere preserved in the Church, pure and intact?

2. for the priest:

- Do you wish to fulfil the ministry of the Word, in the preaching of the Gospel and the exposition of the Catholic faith, worthily and wisely?

3. for the deacons:

- Do you wish to exercise the ministry of the faith, as the Apostle says, with a clear conscience, and to preach this faith, in accordance with the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, in word and deed?

in the consecratory prayer:

2. for priests only:

- May they be worthy co-workers in our Order, so that the words of the Gospel, through their preaching, may bear fruit in people’s hearts by the grace of the Holy Spirit and reach to the ends of the earth.

then, **for the presentation of the Gospel:**

1. for the bishop, immediately after the anointing of the head, once the consecratory prayer has been recited whilst holding the Gospel book over his head: ‘Receive the Gospel and preach the word of God, with all patience and teaching’.

2. For the deacon: ‘Receive the Gospel of Christ, of whom you have become a herald; and see to it that what you read, you believe; what you believe, you teach; and what you teach, you practise.’

yet echoes this; Innocent III merely asked the Waldensians loyal to the Church to accept a principle of authority regarding preaching, in addition to the profession of faith stating that only those ordained by a bishop could consecrate the Eucharist:

‘We believe that preaching is very necessary and worthy of praise; nevertheless, we believe that it must be exercised by virtue of the authority conferred by the sovereign’s authorisation or the permission of a prelate’.¹⁵ The Franciscan Rule of 1221, Article 9,

up new possibilities: ‘Let no brother dare to preach to the people unless he has first been examined and approved by the Minister General of this fraternity, and unless he has received from him the office of preaching’.¹⁶ Yet these brothers were often laypeople, in the sacramental sense of the word, as was the Minister General himself! Without claiming to resolve the disputed question of how this power was transmitted, we must note that the Church was therefore keen to ensure that this preaching, granted to ‘laypeople’, was subject to the episcopal magisterium; and this limitation is most clearly seen in the case of the Franciscans: their authority was linked to their religious profession, which placed them specifically in the service of the Church; and they took their sense of dependence on the authorities of divine right to great extremes, since the Rule, in canon 17, further stated:

‘no preacher shall regard the office of preaching as his own, but shall be prepared to relinquish his post without protest as soon as he is ordered to do so.’

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The 1917 Code of Canon Law stated as follows: “Can. 1342. § 1 The faculty to preach shall be granted solely to priests or deacons, not to other clerics, unless for a reasonable cause, at the discretion of the Ordinary and in exceptional cases.” The sole source for this paragraph was the Pontifical: Pontificale Rom., title ‘*De ordinatione diaconi*’; title ‘*De ordinatione presbyteri*’.

It did, however, prohibit any preaching in churches by the same laypeople: “§ 2. All laypeople, even religious, are forbidden to preach in church.” Sources: C. 19, C. XVI, q. 1: “*No monk other than the priests of the Lord should dare to preach*” (Pope Leo to Theodorus, ep. 120); c. 20, D IV, *de cons.: from the Fourth Council of Carthage*: ‘A woman, however learned and holy, must not presume to teach men in a congregation, nor to baptise anyone’; c. 12, 14, X, *de haereticis*, V, 7; c. 10, X, *de poenitentibus et remissionibus*, V 38; Martin V (at the Council of Constance), constitution “*Inter cunctas*”, 22 February 1418, art. 37, concerning the questioning of those suspected of the errors of Wycliffe and Hus: ‘item, whether he believes that it is lawful for laypeople of both sexes, that is to say men and women, to preach the Word of God freely’; Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, instruction (to the Apostolic Vicar of Sutchuen.), 29 April 1784.

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Dz 796; cf. also his letter to the inhabitants of Metz in 1199, concerning laypeople who preached to one another: (Dz 770) ‘Even though the desire to understand the divine Scriptures and the concern to exhort in accordance with them should not be blamed but, on the contrary, commended, these people nevertheless deserve to be criticised for holding their secret gatherings, for arrogating to themselves the role of preaching, for mocking the simplicity of the priests, and for disdaining the company of those who do not engage in such practices. God, indeed... hates the works of darkness so much that He commanded and said (to the apostles): ‘What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim from the housetops’, *Mt 10:27*; by this He makes it clear that the preaching of the Gospel must be carried out not in secret gatherings, as the heretics do, but publicly in the Church, in accordance with Catholic practice.’

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See A. Boni, **Gli Istituti religiosi e la loro potestà di governo**, Rome 1989, p. 356 ff.

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According to the principles of Pius XII, endorsed by the last Council, the lay faithful,¹⁷ although they do not shepherd the People of God,¹⁸ may be called upon to cooperate with the bishop and priests in the exercise of the ministry of the Word (can. 759); there is nothing new in this, and the cooperation in question is exercised essentially through catechesis, societies for Christian doctrine or forms of lay apostolate; but the legislation of canon 766 goes so far as to allow them to preach in churches in cases of necessity, repealing the contrary provision of the 1917 Code. This new wording appears to have been made necessary after the abolition of the minor orders restricted the distinction between clerics and laity to the sacramental dimension, so that this ‘charismatic’ style of preaching by non-clerical religious might continue to take place in churches; the drawback is that the charism of religious brothers who preach is now placed on an equal footing with that of any member of the faithful; to emphasise the exceptional nature of this, the Code nevertheless makes this permission subject to two conditions—necessity or utility—leaving the responsibility for discernment to the bishop, who must rely on the criteria laid down by the Bishops’ Conference. There is a continuity in these changes to the provisions, *non nova sed noviter*: the Commission for the Interpretation of Laws cites, in support of these two canons, the first of the addresses on the *triplex munus* of bishops, delivered by Pope Pius XII in the wake of the canonisation of St Pius X; this is the address on the apostolic magisterium, which is a reinterpretation of history providing the context for any preaching by the laity: bishops are indeed responsible for calling upon or admitting laypeople for the defence of the faith, provided that they remain under the authority and supervision of those whom God Himself has appointed as teachers: there has never been, there is not, and there will never be a magisterium

¹⁷ LG 33, 35; AA passim; AG 41.

¹⁸ m 1, 3 and 6 on CD 11

legitimate role of the laity in the Church that is not subject to the authority of God, to the guidance and to the

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vigilance of the sacred Magisterium.

Homily reserved for ordained ministers

On the other hand, under no circumstances may the non-ordained faithful deliver the homily, as defined by SC 35 and 52, DV 24 and PO 4, as part of the liturgy. The Commission for the Authentic Interpretation of the Code of Canon Law, in its reply of 20 June 1987, reiterated that the diocesan bishop may not grant a dispensation from the provision of this canon, which reserves the homily to a priest or deacon. The inter-dicasterial Instruction **Ecclesiae de mysterio**, ten years later, would explain the reason for this limitation on the power to grant dispensation:

‘This is not a purely disciplinary law, but a law concerning the closely interlinked functions of teaching and sanctification.’ To emphasise the dogmatic nature of this explanation, the Holy Father endorsed this instruction by specifically approving it, thereby conferring the highest possible degree of authority upon a decision of his vicarious bodies. The Instruction merely reiterates that canon 767 has repealed all norms that would have permitted non-ordained members of the faithful to deliver the homily during the celebration of Mass. This is because, in order to celebrate the Eucharist, the priest cannot be replaced, whilst ‘it is from the Eucharist that the homily derives its particular strength and vigour’ (EN 43).

However, following on from **Evangelii Nuntiandi** no. 43, **Catechesi Tradendae** 48 calls for genuine homilies to be offered to the faithful, even outside Mass: during the celebration of baptisms, penitential liturgies, weddings and funerals. All these occasions, in mission countries, may be led by laypeople, standing in for the priest or deacon. Strictly speaking, just as the Council’s terminology reserved the

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AAS 46 [1954] 316–317: ‘As regards the laity, it is not explicitly stated whether they should be called or admitted as be openly called or admitted as helpers and assistants. It suffices to recall the teaching of Christian doctrine, in which so many thousands of men and women are engaged, as well as other forms of the lay apostolate. All these are to be highly commended and may and must be promoted with every effort. However, all these lay people must be and remain subject to the authority, guidance and supervision of those who, by divine institution, have been appointed as teachers in the Church of Christ. For there is no teaching office in the Church, in matters pertaining to the salvation of souls, which is not subject to this authority and supervision. In recent times, however, *a form of theology*—which some call ‘lay theology’—has begun to emerge here and there and to spread widely. Its proponents point to history, which, from the very beginning of the Christian religion to the present day, records the names of many laypeople who taught the truth of Christ for the good of souls, both in writing and in person; yet they were not called to this by the Bishops, nor did they seek or accept the authority of the sacred Magisterium, but were driven by their own inner impulse and apostolic zeal. Nevertheless, the following must be held fast: for there has never been, nor is there now, nor will there ever be in the Church a legitimate lay magisterium which has been removed from the authority, guidance and oversight of the sacred Magisterium by God;”

Since the word ‘preside’ is reserved for the ordained minister—whilst catechists and other community leaders merely ‘guide’ the prayers of others—the words spoken on such occasions should never be termed a ‘homily’: without the sacrament of Holy Orders, it is not merely a consecrator that the community lacks; it also lacks a teacher of the Word, qualified to proclaim it not only with the – real – authority of a delegation on a piece of paper, but with the authority of the sacramental presence of Christ. If we lose the sense of the sacrament, if we confine the priest once again to the sacristy (if indeed

he has ever actually been confined there!), we are sabotaging ourselves when it comes to vocations, as demonstrated by the example of countries that have increased the number of professional pastoral assistants.²¹

The obligation to preach

Curiously, whilst it was necessary throughout the ages to restrain laypeople tempted to take the priest’s place in preaching, it was equally difficult to convince priests to fulfil their own role. The Council of Trent, *Session 5, Chapter 2 of the Reforms*, obliged all archpriests and parish priests to preach on all Sundays and solemn feasts. This did not take hold easily, as we see that at St Agatha of the Goths in 1762, St Alphonsus still needed to instil observance of this precept and to recall the Council’s letter (vol. III, letter 334). And in 1973, the Directorium for Bishops, **Ecclesiae imago** (no. 64), stated that the homily and other traditional forms of preaching were no longer considered sufficient in those days. It therefore reiterated that the bishop could draw up a general programme of preaching, focusing in particular on the structure of the homily, which must never be omitted at Sunday Masses, wedding Masses and other ritual Masses, ‘so that the Paschal Mystery of Christ, represented in the Eucharist, may be known to all and celebrated with faith’. No one could have imagined at the time that wedding and funeral Masses would become the exception, or that in certain dioceses priests would be forbidden from celebrating

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Since the office entrusted to laypeople entails no authority and bears no relation to the sacrament of Holy Orders, this is reflected in all their leadership duties: Latin does not use the word ‘praesident’ in reference to them, but ‘praesunt’ or, at a pinch, ‘praevent’; that is to say, these laypeople may be entrusted with accompanying communities, animating them, setting an example, even leading the way, directing them and guiding them. But they do not ‘preside’ over anything—neither baptisms, nor prayers, nor funerals, nor councils: presiding is the prerogative of the sacramental hierarchy.

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These countries experienced a strong resurgence in vocations following the Holy Year of 1975, **Evangelii Nuntiandi**, but, with the exception of the United States where vocations are on the rise, they are on a very steep downward trajectory that has taken them to an all-time low, and which appears to coincide with the introduction of their policy of increasing the number of ‘pastoral assistants’ after 1985.

funerals, and that, as a result, a large proportion of the Christian faithful would find themselves deprived of a homily twenty years later...

From a spiritual point of view, this compels us to consider who it is that speaks to us in the sermon: it is Christ himself. He acts through the character of a specific man, who is a secondary cause, whose preparation and natural gifts will yield more or less fruit, but it is his grace that is conveyed; it is he who touches hearts. The 'unction' so much in vogue in the eighteenth century is not a rhetorical technique: it is an additional gift that flows from the presence of Christ. And its absence, whilst an obstacle, is not an insurmountable one: Christ can continue to touch hearts through human details seemingly unrelated to the excellence of the Word of God: recall the artist's conversion: 'Let us move from the first point to the second'—that was the striking phrase that changed his life. Whilst the preacher's shortcomings are not an insurmountable obstacle from God's point of view, neither should they become one from the listener's perspective: we must adopt an attitude of faith even towards the most off-putting of preachers, provided we can recognise in him that fatherly care for our souls which comes from Christ. Even the most soporific of orators is charged with telling me something in the name of Christ and can nourish my soul.

These considerations are important because otherwise we risk falling into a Donatist attitude. We do not need the priest's holiness to receive grace. In this sense, perhaps not enough emphasis has been placed on the obligations of the faithful towards the preacher: good preachers bear fruit, but the faithful should be taught to

bear fruit themselves before the preacher becomes a good one. Here is what St.

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Gregory: 'Often the preachers' tongues are not loose enough because of their own faults; but often, too, it is through the fault of the faithful that the opportunity to preach is taken away from those who lead them (...) as the Lord declares to Ezekiel: "I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth, and you shall be silent. Thus you will no longer be one who rebukes them, for they are a brood of rebels' (Ezek 3:26). This amounts to saying: I am taking away from you the power to preach, because the people are unworthy of hearing the exhortation of the truth—this people who are rebellious against me in their actions. It is not always easy to know by

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(Hom. 17, 3. 14; PL 76, 1139–1140, 1146)

whose fault it is that the word is withheld from the preacher. But we know full well that whilst the pastor's silence may sometimes harm him, it always harms the faithful who are subject to him.'

St Augustine therefore urged his flock to meditate at home on the teaching they had received: "I hear many say: when we are in church, we rejoice in what is taught to us and, moved by repentance, we are drawn to the Word of God; but as soon as we leave, we change completely and the fire of our fervour is extinguished. Can such instability be remedied? ... Consider this: you ought not, as soon as you leave the church, to throw yourselves immediately into activities that contradict what you have just heard; as soon as you return home, you ought to take up your Gospel and, together with your wife and children, reread and meditate on what has been said to you before resuming your daily affairs. Usually, after having a bath, you take care not to rush straight into the street: how much more necessary is this precaution when you leave the Church!'

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The underlying issue behind the current call for lay preaching: the understanding of the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament.

Cardinal Pierre Eyt had put forward the hypothesis that certain desperate efforts suggested "the search, if not for a theology, then at least for an alternative practice of ministries within the Church". Indeed, when the theologian Giuseppe Colombo takes stock of forty years of sacramental theology, he is forced to acknowledge, despite all his admiration for K. Rahner, that whilst everyone has adopted Rahner's apologetic concern to ground the sacraments in the 'Grundsakrament' of the Church, the whole of theology has been reduced to this sacramental framework, which is itself interpreted with such divergence by his disciples that the sacramentality has become an ambiguous concept serving particular interests. The language therefore remains unchanged, but 'in this jungle' 'only outright nominalism is capable of synthesising Rahner's ontological position and ... the sacramentality of faith of which Louis-Marie Chauvet speaks'.

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De catechizandis rudibus 1, 15

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See Giuseppe Colombo, *Teologia sacramentaria*, Milan 1997; K. Rahner, *The Sacraments of the Church*, Paris 1985.

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Andrea Bozzolo, *Sacramental Theology after Rahner*, Rome 1999, p. 14. On the incompatibility with the Magisterium of Chauvet's thesis, which reduces the efficacy of the sacraments exclusively to the symbolic order (*Symbole et Sacrement*, Paris: Le Cerf 1987), cf. A. Miralles, *The Christian Sacraments*, Rome 1999

Father André Manaranche explains this popularity by the advantage of endowing the word
²⁶
 ‘sacrament’ with a certain flexibility. There is opposition to a theology in which ‘the sacrament is understood as an external intervention by God, limited in space and time’, and to a conception that ties grace to the sacraments. ‘Grace is everywhere, and it is most often felt without being recognised as such’. This allows
 ‘to open up’ ecclesial life, by defining it as the discovery of a universally present movement of grace to which one consents. Here we find Rahner’s two categories: the *transcendental* and the *categorical*, the former universal, the latter contingent. But in this way, God is so transcendental that He is no longer...; He no longer has the right to burst into the world with something truly new. Yet the Church Fathers, on the contrary, present preaching to us as an intervention by God in history, a sword sent to bring
 division upon the earth...

When we see a thesis by K. Rahner dating from 1956 being brought to the fore—according to
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 which pastoral workers would lose their lay status and enter into the clerical state by virtue of their stable exercise of an ecclesial function or office, which would already make them share in the sacramentality of the Church since their function would make them signs comparable to *the sacramentum tantum*—one begins to ask questions: this thesis seemed to have been rendered irrelevant by the teaching of the Council and the Catechism on the **munera** and **sacra potestas** as the ontological foundation of ministry; furthermore, it is based on a conception of the Church that is far more legalistic than communional, since the hierarchy is viewed as a state-like power competing with the good of the faithful, a power against which the faithful would have rights to claim; to meet adolescent-like expectations, it would suffice
 for the hierarchy to grant ‘permissions’, as if the Church were a stepmother from whom one
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 could obtain anything from through procedural or judicial means. What, then, might be the meaning of
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 this approach? The answer comes from the authors themselves: among the ‘openings’

²⁶
 See *Sacrum ministerium*, 2nd semester 2001.

²⁷
 See K. Rahner, ‘The Lay Apostolate’, NRT 78 (1956), pp. 3–32; **Über das Laienapostolat: Schriften zur Theologie II*, Einsiedeln, 1964, pp. 339–373.

²⁸
 See T. ANATRELLA, ‘Moral Theology, Spiritual Life and Psychoanalysis: An Outline’, in **Revue d’éthique et de théologie morale**, no. 200, p. 261.

²⁹
 See J. RIGAL, *The Ecclesiology of Communion*, Cerf 1997, p. 299; or the more journalistic work by B. SESBOUË, **Do Not Be Afraid – Perspectives on the Church and Ministries Today**, Desclée de Brouwer, 1996, pp. 127 and 149.

Of the various approaches explored, the one that appears by far the most significant is democracy within the Church, conceived as an end in itself. To achieve this, we must do away with the distinction between clergy and laity, and thus do away with the requirement of celibacy; and, for good measure, we must also do away with the theology of original sin and sacrifice, which inevitably leads to inequality and the setting apart of a clergy dedicated to Redemption. For those who wish to truly arrive at an alternative theology of ministries, we must start with the most easily acceptable: the ministries linked to the Word, and therefore preaching.

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Perhaps we must guard against a ‘conspiracy theory’ here too. In any case, there is a temptation here. Like any temptation, it presents itself under the guise of good, and we must not overlook the good that underlies it: there really is a continuity between the Word and the Sacrament. In his dogmatic theology, Rahner has a very fine chapter on the subject—not particularly illuminating, as the terms no longer carry the same meaning between the premise (the Word as the Church’s preaching) and the conclusion (the Word as God’s spiritual communication)—but fine nonetheless, full of brilliant insights that give you the impression of having become intelligent yourself. It is essential to make good use of all that is true in these insights, if we are to prevent these treasures from being misappropriated. For example, it is true that the Word and the Sacrament are the constitutive elements of the Church. That the Word spontaneously tends towards the Sacrament. That it is already a presence of Christ, and therefore effective, ‘like a double-edged sword’. And that the preacher is merely a servant of this Word. The problem is therefore as follows: this proclaimed Word is an effective sign of grace, whether or not the one who proclaims it is ordained. If what is most important for the Church—the very heart of its sacramentality—lies in this effectiveness, what need is there, then, to reserve the proclamation of the Word for someone who is ordained?

This objection cannot be treated lightly, nor can it be answered merely by an extrinsic, voluntaristic argument, such as that since Christ established a Church with Apostles, it is up to them and their successors to carry out the work. We must endeavour to understand the logic

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See Jean Noël Bezançon, **Dieu n'est pas bizarre** (God Is Not Strange), Bayard Editions 1996: ‘This very refusal to divide everything into

two will lead him to reflect on the status of the priest and on how it has evolved over the past 50 years... This book also tackles, without mincing words, the burning issues facing the Church: what the author calls, not without humour, the ‘false pairing’ of priesthood and laity. In fact, for the author, what is cracking within the Church, under the impact of new pastoral practices, are the old distinctions between the profane and the sacred, the temporal and the spiritual; whilst they claimed to justify the division between the priesthood and the laity, they merely split the Church in two’ (Eglise en Touraine, 25 July 1996).

Along the same lines, see the interview with Jacques Duquesne in **L'Actualité religieuse** of July 1994: ‘The immense and scandalous success of the notion of sacrifice’.

of Revelation. Faced with what they describe as the ‘dismantling’ of contemporary sacramental theology

, the Italian theologians cited paradoxically propose entrusting to

liturgists rediscovering God’s logic in the sacraments.

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Why not, if this

allowed us to start afresh from reality, but we would still need to find a key to understanding. That

proposed by Father Colman O’Neil, for example, was quite appealing:
the

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in his view,

problem for both liturgists and theologians was that they had staked everything on the first aspect

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of the sacrament, namely the sign, which was subsequently transformed into a symbol. From this perspective, the Word is

already a sign of grace, and there would be no reason to go any further. But he demonstrated how, for St

Thomas, between the sign and grace, it was the latter that mattered; yet the

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grace is already present in the second aspect of the sacrament: the ‘res et sacramentum’, the

‘enduring sacrament’: namely the character in the case of baptism, confirmation and

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Holy Orders, the bond in the case of marriage, and the sacramental effect of penance in the case of confession,

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the

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G. Colombo, in A. Bozzolo, cited above, pp. 5 and 7.

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P. Colman O’Neil, O.P., **Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments**, Wilmington 1983.

33

See K. Rahner, **Il libro dei sacramenti**, Brescia 1977, p. 14: “It remains clear that the original nature of the sacraments is their nature as signs, and that grace itself produces these signs by virtue of its deepest reality. This does not mean that the sacraments are not effective signs”.

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St Thomas, Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians: ‘In the sacraments, however, three things are to be considered. Firstly, the sacrament itself, such as baptism; secondly, that which is signified and contained, namely grace; thirdly, that which is signified but not contained, namely the glory of the Resurrection. Firstly, therefore, he deals with the sacraments themselves; secondly, with the graces themselves, Chapter XII: ‘As for spiritual things, I do not wish you...’, etc.; thirdly, with the glory of the Resurrection, as I shall explain to you below in Chapter XV.’

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And before St Thomas: Letter ‘Cum Marthae circa’ to Archbishop John of Lyon, 29 November 1202, on The Elements of the Eucharist, explaining why it is called the ‘mystery of faith’, even though this is not found in the Gospel. **Dz 783**: ‘It is, however, called the “mystery of faith” because something else is believed in it than what is seen, and something else is seen than what is believed. For one sees the species of bread and wine, and believes in the truth of the flesh and blood of Christ, as well as in the power of unity and charity. One must, however, carefully distinguish between three different elements in this sacrament, namely the visible form, the reality of the body, and the spiritual power. The form is that of bread and wine; the reality is that of the flesh and blood; the power is that of unity and charity. The first is ‘a sacrament and not reality’; the second is ‘a sacrament and reality’; the third is ‘reality and not a sacrament’. But the first is a sacrament of a double reality; the second is a sacrament of one and reality of the other; the third is the reality of a double sacrament. We therefore believe that the form of the words as found in the canon was received by the apostles from Christ, and by their successors from them...’

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III, 84, 1: ad 3. In penance, too, there is an element that is ‘merely a sign’: the acts performed externally, both by the penitent sinner and by the priest who grants absolution. What is ‘reality and sign’ is the sinner’s interior penance. What is ‘reality alone’ and not a sign is the remission of sin. The first element, taken in its entirety, is the cause of the

second. The first and second together are, in a certain sense, the cause of the third.

real presence in the case of the Eucharist, etc. (As for the third aspect of the sacrament, the ‘res tantum’, is not contained within this, since it is glory).

It is interesting to note that this tripartite structure is that of the antiphon ‘O
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sacrum convivium’, which was incorporated into the text of the Council’s Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (no. 47). In this structure, the Word is incorporated into the sacrament as a memorial. But the sacrament is not limited to the memorial. There is both a continuity and an essential difference between the Word and the Sacrament: the Sacrament, in its central aspect as ‘reality and sign’, contains grace, whereas the Word merely prepares for it. ‘The sacrament is prepared *by the Word of God and by faith*, which is assent to that Word’ (CCC no. 1122). Therefore, preaching must not be content merely to expound; it must lead people to adhere—not merely to an abstract truth, but to Jesus Christ, whose sacraments
³⁹
are the very form of the Christian life. Preaching thus brings about spiritual communion with the Christ, before allowing actual communion. And yet a distinction must be made between long-term preparation and immediate preparation, whereby the Word, united with the sign, constitutes the Sacrament: long-term preparation may be entrusted to lay faithful, just as there is no one better suited than a mother to prepare her child’s heart to unite with Christ in communion. In this sense, we can encourage lay people to preach on conversion and preparation. But at the decisive moment, it is not the mother’s words that will

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III, 73, 1: ad 3. A sacrament is that which contains something sacred. And a thing can be sacred in two ways: in itself, absolutely, or in relation to something else. Now there is this difference between the Eucharist and the other sacraments, which have sensible matter: the Eucharist contains something sacred in itself, absolutely, namely Christ himself; whereas the water of Baptism contains something sacred in relation to something else, that is to say, it contains a power capable of sanctifying the soul; and the same applies to chrism and similar elements. This is why the sacrament of the Eucharist is fully realised in the very consecration of the matter, whilst the other sacraments are fully realised only in the application of the matter to the person to be sanctified. From this follows another difference: in the sacrament of the Eucharist, that which is both reality and sign resides in the matter itself, but that which is reality alone—that is to say, the grace conferred—resides in the person receiving the Eucharist. In Baptism, on the other hand, both reside in the subject of the sacrament: the character, which is both reality and sign, and the grace of the remission of sins, which is reality alone. The same structure is found in the other sacraments.

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- recolitur memoria passionis eius
- may our minds be filled with grace
- futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur.

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See the **Ordo lectionum missae**, republished in 1986: according to its **Praenotanda**, when the Church proclaims the Word, it is always with the aim of leading to the sacrifice. The conception of the Word of God expressed in these *Praenotanda* seems to restore a balance to Rahner’s position on the effective Word, and demonstrates a continuity between the Word and the Sacrament: it affirms that Christ is always present in his Word, but that the ‘dispensation’ of salvation that the Word conveys only attains its full meaning in the liturgical action. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that always makes the Word alive and effective.

To make present this Christ with whom we commune: this is the priest's Word. We can therefore understand the power of the homily: it is not reserved for the ordained minister solely by virtue of its chronological proximity to the celebration of the sacrament. It is reserved for him because the power that is at work within it is characteristic of the One who stands at the door and knocks, and who is about to celebrate the sacrament.

With this in mind, I would like to move on to the third point: the characteristic power of preaching, from a human perspective.

Part III: Consequences of intrinsic causality: concerning content and method

Cardinal Darío Castrillón, at Fontgombault, emphasised that the effectiveness of the preaching depends on a causality specific to the minister, that of a living instrument. In other words, one preaches first and foremost through who one is; one must therefore take the plunge, with the conviction, as St Francis de Sales said, that 'The sooner you begin, the sooner you will succeed; and preach often, for that is the only way to become a master'; the rule of preaching from which St Gregory the Great drew inspiration to draft his Pastoral Rule—which divides the faithful into thirty-six different categories (from the cheerful to the melancholic, including those who do not amend the sins they lament whilst others do not lament the sins they abstain from, etc.), he took it from St Gregory of Nazianzus, who rightly asserted that there are no rules other than to adapt to the audience. The Council of Trent would take up this principle, politely stating that one should preach in accordance with the capacities of the audience, but also according to one's own! For, as St Paul tells us after the failure of his attempt at 'inculturated' preaching in Athens and Corinth, 'I came to you in weakness, in fear and much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (1 Cor 2:4).

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Cf. **Sedes sapientiae**, no. 77, p. 4.

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Archpriests, parish priests and all those who have charge of souls, whether directly or through others, if legitimately prevented, shall, at least on Sundays and solemn feasts, nourish the flock entrusted to them with words of salvation, according to their own and the flock's capacity. (Sess. 5, c. 2, de Reform).

The gift of power

How can we make room for this power, if every preacher has a different character, and if there is no uniformity amongst the listeners? This is the question to which the various treatises on preaching bequeathed to us by Tradition will provide an answer. We have five particularly characteristic examples: the Pastoral Letter of St Gregory the Great from around 596, the letter on preaching by St Francis de Sales in 1604, a lengthy Tuesday lecture by St Vincent de Paul in 1655, St Alphonsus Liguori's 'Admonition to Preachers' from 1761, and Benedict XV's encyclical **Humani generis** on preaching from 1917. Incidentally, these works, which stem from very diverse cultural contexts, manage to provide us with a universally valid description of the workings of human nature, which is truly admirable.

Despite the diversity of preachers, a minimum of natural gifts is required so as not to tempt God, as well as the appropriate knowledge and virtue.

1. 'As for doctrine, it need only be sufficient; it is not required to be excellent. St Francis was not learned, and yet he was a great and good preacher; and, in our own time, Blessed Cardinal Borromeo possessed only a very mediocre knowledge, yet he worked wonders.' (St Francis de Sales) This in no way detracts from the duty of study: it is striking to see the Curé d'Ars buying 258 books as soon as he had his first personal earnings, and force himself to study for half an hour every night: he maintained 'sufficient learning'.⁴² As for St Catherine of Siena, what she reproaches cohabiting priests for is having children out of put their books away!⁴³ 'Ignorance is therefore the mother of all errors', according to the Fourth Lateran Council; one might say, backed up by statistics, that the decline in the intellectual standard of the clergy is at the root of all the crises in the Church. But beware of ambiguity: sufficient knowledge 'does not refer to every kind of knowledge: it refers here to that which the priest must possess as his own. If this knowledge is lacking, knowledge of other things breeds pride and is of no use' (*Humani generis*). By 'his own', the Pope was referring to knowledge of oneself, of God and of one's duties. But a little further on, he also spoke of the obligation not to 'overlook the Holy Scriptures, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and the arguments of sacred theology'. Perhaps today we should emphasise the reappropriation of this heritage, namely that of the Church Fathers:

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See Philippe de Peyronnet, **Inventory of the Library of Saint Jean-Marie Vianney, Curé of Ars**, Paris 1991.

⁴³

Dialogues, ch. XXI (430).

‘What else is the doctrine of the Church Fathers but the Gospel explained, the Holy Scriptures expounded? The relationship between the Holy Scriptures and the doctrine of the Fathers is like that between a whole almond and a broken almond, the kernel of which can be eaten by anyone’ (St Francis). It was through Migne that, from 1840 onwards, the French clergy regained confidence in the value of what they were entrusted with, and resumed their missionary work.

2. ‘As for the good life, it is necessary in the way St Paul speaks of the bishop, and no more; so that we need not be better as preachers than as bishops. That, then, is already a great deal achieved...’ (St Francis de Sales)

‘If the priest cannot have both, so that his life is resplendent and filled with the richness of his doctrine, then life is undoubtedly preferable to doctrine.’ (St Peter Damian, quoted in **Humani generis**)

Right intention

Beyond this minimum requirement, the first human-divine rule that these works convey to us is that we must respect the proper purpose of preaching: to bear fruit. This is the quintessence of the rule of the Council of Trent: preaching must be entrusted only to those who carry it out to the benefit of souls. “ Indeed, Christ, our Lord and Master, as He was preparing to ascend into heaven, did not at all tell the Apostles to go off, at that very moment and each on his own, to begin preaching: ‘*Stay in the city,*’ He told them, ‘*until you are clothed with power from on high*’ (Lk 24:49) ‘If, therefore, anyone is clothed with power from on high, this will show that he is called to this office’.” (*Humani generis*).

This gift of strength is a grace, and one experiences it with wonder after ordination; but grace must be nurtured by constantly purifying our intention: ‘What preachers must set themselves as their aim when receiving their office is precisely what Christ intended when he bestowed it upon them; (...) ‘*I have come into this world to bear witness to the truth*’ (Jn 18:37) and *to give life* (Jn 10:10) to mankind. Preachers must therefore aim at this twofold objective: to spread the light of truth, and to stir up and develop the supernatural life in their listeners”’ (*Humani generis*)

St Alphonsus is even more explicit: ‘Above all, if the preacher wishes his sermons to bear abundant fruit, he must set his mind on the end, that is to say, to wish to

preach not for glory or for any other temporal interest, but solely to win souls for God. Whilst engaged in this great office as God's ambassador, he ought to pray fervently to Him to inflame us with His holy love, for it is in this way that sermons are of great benefit. St John of Avila, when asked what was most useful for preaching well, replied: *'To love Jesus Christ immensely.'* It has often been observed that preachers who loved Jesus Christ deeply sometimes bore more fruit with a single sermon than others did with many. ... St Francis de Sales writes that 'The tongue speaks to the ear, the heart speaks to the heart': that is to say, if feelings do not spring from the preacher's heart, it is difficult for them to draw the hearts of others towards divine love' (...) St Bernard puts it another way: "If you have any taste for it, show that you are like the basin and not like the channel of a fountain." Which means: Be filled with what you say, and do not be content merely to pass it on to others. "Truly," adds the same Doctor, 'we have many channels in the Church today, but very few
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fountains''.

In his correspondence, St Alphonsus often returns to this subject; it seems that all the faults he criticises in the preaching of his parish priests or fellow priests can be traced back to this: a lack of purity of intention, which means that God does not accept
⁴⁵
contribute to the preaching. In St Catherine of Siena and St John of the Cross, we find entire chapters devoted to this vice, a catastrophe for the Church because the Word of God is held back in its power: both preachers and listeners must direct the joy of their will towards God because 'although it is true that the Word of God is, in itself, effective, (...) nevertheless, fire, which also has the power to burn, does not burn when there is no
⁴⁶
disposition in the subject.'

In this respect too, the preaching of ordained ministers is qualitatively different from that of the lay faithful: they are no better mystics than others, but their prayer has a special basis; following in the footsteps of the Apostles, they have been chosen by Christ to 'be with

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In Cant., sermo XVIII, PL 183, 1321; cited by both St Alphonsus and **Humani generis**.

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Dialogue on Divine Providence: 'Their sermons are intended more to please men and charm their ears than to honour Me. They apply themselves not to living well, but to speaking well. They do not sow the good seed of My Truth, nor do they labour to uproot vices and revive virtues. Since they have not uprooted the thorns from their own garden, they do not seek to remove those from the gardens of others.'

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The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book III, Chapter 47, 5.

‘him’ before being sent out to preach (LG 19); this implies having given up everything... After which, he calls them ‘his friends’, grants them free access to his innermost being, and empowers them to speak with complete frankness to people about the faults that affect them most deeply. One therefore has the right to volunteer for the office of preaching, as St Gregory the Great acknowledges with regard to Isaiah’s vocation, but one must accept being purified by a burning coal, as is stated more explicitly in the prayer by which the priest prepares to read the Gospel in the Missal of St Pius V.

‘There is therefore an *essential connection between personal prayer and preaching* (...) “*sit orator, antequam ditor*’ (35).”⁴⁷ “One must never preach without having celebrated Mass, or intending to celebrate it. It is incredible,” says St Chrysostom, “how the mouth that has received the Holy Sacrament is abhorrent to the demons. And it is true; it seems one might say, following St Paul: ‘Do you wish to experience the power of Jesus Christ, who speaks through my mouth?’ (2 Cor 13:3). One has far greater confidence, zeal and enlightenment. But at the very least, one must have gone to confession’ (St Francis de Sales).

Organisation of the sermon

It then remains to organise the material in a human manner: St Gregory emphasises the duty St Paul imposes on us to preach first ‘appropriately’, and only then ‘in an *unwelcome manner*’. In the ‘*welcome*’ *approach*, he requires us to deliver a logical and well-structured discourse. In this respect too, the Tradition of the Church holds treasures waiting to be rediscovered. Sometimes, we are tempted to take courses in communication. And certainly, there is work to be done in this area; as the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* reminds us, it would be a first step towards coherence to be as well-prepared as lay communicators. St John of the Cross: ‘It is not the Apostle’s intention, nor mine, to condemn here good style, rhetoric and fine language; for, on the contrary, these are of great importance to the preacher, just as in all other matters: since fine language and good style enhance and

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Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest as Master of the Word*... no. 47: ‘From meditation on the Word of God in personal prayer, ‘the primacy given to the witness of life, which reveals the power of God’s love and makes his word persuasive’ (33) must also flow spontaneously Preaching which is also the fruit of personal prayer becomes incisive not only by virtue of its speculative coherence, but because it springs from a sincere and prayerful heart, aware that the minister’s task is to ‘teach, not their own wisdom, but the Word of God, and to urge all people towards conversion and holiness’.

(34) The preaching of Christ’s ministers therefore requires, in order to be effective, that it be firmly rooted in their spirit of filial prayer.”

even set right what has fallen into ruin and been spoiled, just as a poor turn of phrase spoils and causes one to lose

the good ones...'⁴⁸

But not every method of communication is compatible with the dignity of the Word of God. Our authors are highly critical of theatrical gestures, declamatory tones, and sermons that go on forever (the most generous among them allows half an hour at the very most...), that is to say, all attitudes that focus attention on the preacher rather than on Jesus Christ. Like John the Baptist, the preacher is merely the voice; he

is not the Word. Hence a fundamental requirement, enshrined by the Council of Trent, taken up by St Alphonsus and enforced by St Vincent de Paul: the 'little method of preaching', the essence of which is simple speech. 'Simplicity converts everyone'.⁴⁹

In his Tuesday lectures, St Vincent de Paul sets out his requirements in no uncertain terms. He states that he founded the 'Society of the Mission' to evangelise in the manner of Christ, and that consequently those who refuse to preach 'in an evangelical manner' must be excluded from the Society. What does he mean by this? He explains how Jesus in the Gospel always employed the same method, and that it would therefore be reckless not to adhere to it. The method in question is a virtue that consists in maintaining a certain disposition and an accommodating style suited to the understanding and greatest benefit of our listeners. As a virtue, it is also a set of guidelines: it involves choosing a tenet of our religion; firstly, setting out all the reasons for embracing it; secondly, explaining more clearly what it consists of; and thirdly, suggesting some practical ways of upholding it. All this whilst speaking 'in the missionary style'.

Content

The first point of the 'little method' brings us back to the question of choosing the content. St Francis de Sales moved from one to the other: 'the preacher must do two things: teach and move; teach virtues and vices; virtues, in order to make them

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Ibid.

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Following numerous other provincial councils, such as that of Tours (813): 'After deliberation, it was unanimously decided that all bishops must deliver homilies designed to instruct their flocks, according to their capacity for understanding, concerning the Catholic faith, the reward promised to the righteous and the eternal damnation reserved for the wicked, the future resurrection and the Last Judgement, as well as the works that lead to beatitude or to perdition. Efforts shall also be made to translate these homilies into the common language, whether Romance or Germanic, so that everyone may understand what is said therein'.

to love, cherish and practise; and vices, so that they may be detested, fought against and shunned: this is, in short, to shed light on the understanding and warmth on the will.’

Saint Jerome gives no other purpose for preaching when commenting on the rebuke in Matthew 11:16: ‘You have despised every kind of preaching, both that which exhorted you to virtue and that which called you to do penance for your sins.’

There is therefore a content of faith that is always linked to morality: ‘The method requires that from the beginning to the middle of the sermon the listener be instructed, and from the middle to the end he be moved.’

And if it comes to speaking of vices and virtues, there is no need to be ashamed of a moral sermon. Provided that it is never separated from the image of Jesus crucified:

‘To ensure that people come to know Jesus Christ ever more deeply, and that through this they may know not only what they ought to believe, but also how they ought to live—this is what Saint Paul strove for with all the fervour of his apostolic heart. That is why he expounded the doctrines of Christ and all the precepts, even the most stringent ones, and he showed neither reluctance nor leniency when speaking of humility, self-denial, chastity, contempt for worldly things, obedience, forgiveness of enemies and other such matters. He felt no hesitation in declaring that one must choose between God and Belial as to whom one wishes to obey, and that it is not possible to have both as masters; that a dreadful judgement awaits those who are to pass from life to death; that it is not permissible to compromise with God; that one must hope for eternal life if one fulfils the whole law, and that eternal fire awaits those who fail in their duties by indulging their lusts. Indeed, it never occurred to the Preacher of the truth to refrain from addressing such subjects on the pretext that, given the corruption of the age, such considerations would have seemed too harsh to those to whom he was speaking.’
(*Humani generis*)

The content is therefore vast; it may, if necessary, be organised through a general diocesan plan for preaching. The Catechism for Parish Priests, published by order of the Council of Trent, recommended that they should always structure their preaching around one of these four fundamental parts: faith, morals, the sacraments and prayer, which have remained the foundations of the current Roman Catechism. It is indeed important to adopt a systematic approach. St Francis de Sales, in his treatise ‘On the Homily, or How the Gospel Should Be Explained’, warned against the temptation to try to say everything. On the contrary, he recommended ‘looking at the passages

which one wishes to dwell, to see which virtues they deal with, and to speak of them succinctly in accordance with what I have said about a single sentence, whilst skimming over the others and paraphrasing them. (Whereas) the practice of skimming over an entire Gospel passage full of aphorisms is less fruitful; all the more so because the preacher, being able to dwell only very briefly on each sentence, cannot unpack them properly, nor instil in the listener what he wishes to convey.’

Kindness and practical conclusions

If one must speak even of what causes offence, one must not do so haphazardly. It is a common fault amongst young preachers, who are not yet fully established, to make the language—not the content—harsh. Perhaps it is therefore appropriate to comment briefly on the second and third points of the ‘short method’:

Firstly, the precept of kindness: ‘One should employ a kind, positive style that does not hurt people, whilst “wounding” their consciences... without being afraid to call a spade a spade (C. for the Clergy).’ The Curé d’Ars used to say in the early days that if his parishioners did not feel like stoning him when he stepped down from the pulpit, it was because he had preached badly. His successor did indeed find him rather severe in his early days, but considered that he had improved considerably over the years (the influence of Saint Alphonsus?), drawing people ever closer to the mercy of the Good Lord. And indeed, *‘The Church lives an authentic life,’* says the Holy Father, *‘when she professes and proclaims mercy, the most admirable attribute of the*

Creator and the Redeemer, and when she leads people to the sources of mercy

of the Saviour, of which she is the custodian and dispenser’. Only the meaning of this

mercy enables us to avoid both fear and indifference in our relationship with God. And gentleness in preaching is itself a sign that we are no longer in the time of the prophets, but that in Jesus the definitive gift has been given to humanity: ‘Jesus’ first discourse contains no reproach, no threat, such as those of Saint John when he

spoke to them of the axe, the felled tree and suchlike; Jesus offers nothing

gentle truths; he proclaims and promises his kingdom.’

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John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, n. 13

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See Congregation for the Clergy, document for the Day of the Sanctification of Priests 2001, *‘Priest, you are a mystery of mercy* (ed. Pierre Téqui), no. 15

⁵² St Chrysostom, *Homily 14 on St Matthew*

Ultimately, gentleness is one of the forms of priestly fatherhood: ‘He who takes on the ministry of preaching must cause no harm, but must bear the harm that others seek to inflict upon him. It is through this gentleness that he will soothe the fury of those who rage against him, and that, feeling himself the repercussions of others’ afflictions, he will be able to heal the wounds of sinners. If at times the zeal for justice requires him to take stern action against those subject to him, love—not harshness—must be the driving force behind his anger; and whilst upholding the rights of the discipline that has been violated, he must love with a fatherly love those whom he is obliged to chastise outwardly. On the contrary, there are many who, no sooner have they assumed the authority of command, than they show themselves eager to torment their subordinates, seek to instil the terror of power, and appear domineering; they forget everything that they are fathers.”⁵³

There are deviations in the way one seeks to please; our teachers do indeed warn against them, since it is the truth to be conveyed that must be made appealing, nothing else, and not at any price. There are ways of flattering one’s audience, or of seeking consensus, which bear no fruit for souls, if they are not actually harmful. One must

‘avoid pleasing in a worldly manner’, ‘leave that to the courtiers who preach themselves instead of preaching Jesus Christ crucified’. ‘We do not delight in the charms of rhetoricians, but we cling to the truths of sinners’. And yet, we must please:

St Francis de Sales speaks of conveying the delight found in the love of God; for him, this is merely one aspect of the content—of teaching and moving the soul—but this delight is real. Truth is lovable; there is an objective good for humankind that brings happiness.

‘When one wishes to persuade a man to take up a job, to hold a position, or to marry, what does one do, if not set before him the pleasure, the profit and the honour that come from all this, the great advantages to be found therein?’ (St Vincent).

Finally, the principle regarding the means to be provided: we need concrete action. Once we have made something clear to the intellect, and have made it sufficiently appealing to move the will towards some virtue, we must provide the means to acquire that virtue. ‘If you leave [a man] there without providing him with any means to practise what you have taught him, I believe, for my part, that you have made little progress; it is a mockery; nothing has been achieved if you stop there; it is a mockery. And you can see better than I, gentlemen, how

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St Gregory, *Homily 17 on the Gospel*, cf. Matt 10:16–18.

how can you expect me to do something, even though I know I greatly need to do it, and even though I want to do it, if I have no means of doing so? How can you expect me to do it? That is a mockery; it is impossible. But give this man the means to do so—which constitute the third point of the method—give him the means to put this virtue into practice, oh! there he is, satisfied.’ (St Vincent).

In this regard, the Bishop of Geneva simply recommends using the analytical tables contained in the ‘authors’ to find a number of examples and practical advice concerning each virtue to be imparted. He cites Saint Thomas, Saint Antoninus, Saint Gregory, Saint Chrysostom and Saint Bernard, not to mention numerous contemporaries unknown to us. The idea remains valid: we can make use of whatever resources are available, but there are collections of material, and when one does not know where to begin, the simplest thing is to draw upon the best sources.

Conclusion

As early as 1917, Benedict XV was alarmed to observe the paganisation of the West, and he attributed this to a failure in preaching. The precept of Sunday preaching has finally become part of the culture, and yet few conversions have followed.

The solution is not to be found in streamlining the Church’s communication, nor in the relentless repetition of set phrases, but in rediscovering its meaning. Its meaning is, above all, that of a presence: it is Jesus Christ, who is alive today and has risen from the dead, who speaks to the world through his Word. It is only in Christian Revelation that God intervenes in this way in history and places himself face to face with humankind.

He calls upon humanity with authority through his ‘ambassadors’, yet both the ambassadors and their listeners retain their full personality and responsibility; our world needs to bear this dual aspect in mind: may we rediscover the mystery of Christ’s presence in the one who speaks, adopt an attitude of gratitude towards this gift rather than substituting it with imitations; and may we be passionate about the human dimension of this responsibility, and respond to this call with our whole being.

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