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II. THE HOMILY

135. Let us now look at preaching within the liturgy, which calls for serious consideration by pastors. I will dwell in particular, and even somewhat meticulously, on the homily and its preparation, since so many concerns have been expressed about this important ministry and we cannot simply ignore them. The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor's closeness and ability to communicate to his people. We know that the faithful attach great importance to it, and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God's word, a constant source of renewal and growth.

136. Let us renew our confidence in preaching, based on the conviction that it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and that he displays his power through human words. Saint Paul speaks forcefully about the need to preach, since the Lord desires to reach other people by means of our word (cf. *Rom* 10:14-17). By his words our Lord won over the hearts of the people; they came to hear him from all parts (cf. *Mk* 1:45); they were amazed at his teachings (cf. *Mk* 6:2), and they sensed that he spoke to them as one with authority (cf. *Mk* 1:27). By their words the apostles, whom Christ established "to be with him and to be sent out to preach" (*Mk* 3:14), brought all nations to the bosom of the Church (cf. *Mt* 16:15.20).

The liturgical context

137. It is worthy remembering that "the liturgical proclamation of the word of God, especially in the eucharistic assembly, is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his people, a dialogue in which the great deeds of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the covenant are continually restated".^[112] The homily has special importance due to its eucharistic context: it surpasses all forms of catechesis as the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people which lead up to sacramental communion. The homily takes up once more the dialogue which the Lord has already established with his people. The preacher must know the heart of his community, in order to realize where its desire for God is alive and ardent, as well as where that dialogue, once loving, has been thwarted and is now barren.

138. The homily cannot be a form of entertainment like those presented by the media, yet it does need to give life and meaning to the celebration. It is a distinctive genre, since it is preaching which is situated within the framework of a *liturgical* celebration; hence it should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture. A preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of faith. If the homily goes on too long, it will affect two characteristic elements of the liturgical celebration: its balance and its rhythm. When preaching takes place within the context of the liturgy, it is part of the offering

made to the Father and a mediation of the grace which Christ pours out during the celebration. This context demands that preaching should guide the assembly, and the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist. This means that the words of the preacher must be measured, so that the Lord, more than his minister, will be the centre of attention.

A mother's conversation

139. We said that the people of God, by the constant inner working of the Holy Spirit, is constantly evangelizing itself. What are the implications of this principle for preachers? It reminds us that the Church is a mother, and that she preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child, knowing that the child trusts that what she is teaching is for his or her benefit, for children know that they are loved. Moreover, a good mother can recognize everything that God is bringing about in her children, she listens to their concerns and learns from them. The spirit of love which reigns in a family guides both mother and child in their conversations; therein they teach and learn, experience correction and grow in appreciation of what is good. Something similar happens in a homily. The same Spirit who inspired the Gospels and who acts in the Church also inspires the preacher to hear the faith of the God's people and to find the right way to preach at each Eucharist. Christian preaching thus finds in the heart of people and their culture a source of living water, which helps the preacher to know what must be said and how to say it. Just as all of us like to be spoken to in our mother tongue, so too in the faith we like to be spoken to in our "mother culture," our native language (cf. *2 Macc* 7:21, 27), and our heart is better disposed to listen. This language is a kind of music which inspires encouragement, strength and enthusiasm.

140. This setting, both maternal and ecclesial, in which the dialogue between the Lord and his people takes place, should be encouraged by the closeness of the preacher, the warmth of his tone of voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking, the joy of his gestures. Even if the homily at times may be somewhat tedious, if this maternal and ecclesial spirit is present, it will always bear fruit, just as the tedious counsels of a mother bear fruit, in due time, in the hearts of her children.

141. One cannot but admire the resources that the Lord used to dialogue with his people, to reveal his mystery to all and to attract ordinary people by his lofty teachings and demands. I believe that the secret lies in the way Jesus looked at people, seeing beyond their weaknesses and failings: "Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (*Lk* 12:32); Jesus preaches with that spirit. Full of joy in the Spirit, he blesses the Father who draws the little ones to him: "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (*Lk* 10:21). The Lord truly enjoys talking with his people; the preacher should strive to communicate that same enjoyment to his listeners.

Words which set hearts on fire

142. Dialogue is much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue. A preaching which would be purely moralistic or doctrinaire, or one which turns into a lecture on biblical exegesis, detracts from this heart-to-heart communication which takes place in the homily and possesses a quasi-sacramental character: "Faith come from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (*Rom* 10:17). In the homily, truth goes hand in hand with beauty and goodness. Far from dealing with abstract truths or cold syllogisms, it communicates the beauty of the images used

by the Lord to encourage the practice of good. The memory of the faithful, like that of Mary, should overflow with the wondrous things done by God. Their hearts, growing in hope from the joyful and practical exercise of the love which they have received, will sense that each word of Scripture is a gift before it is a demand.

143. The challenge of an inculturated preaching consists in proclaiming a synthesis, not ideas or detached values. Where your synthesis is, there lies your heart. The difference between enlightening people with a synthesis and doing so with detached ideas is like the difference between boredom and heartfelt fervor. The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people. The dialogue between God and his people further strengthens the covenant between them and consolidates the bond of charity. In the course of the homily, the hearts of believers keep silence and allow God to speak. The Lord and his people speak to one another in a thousand ways directly, without intermediaries. But in the homily they want someone to serve as an instrument and to express their feelings in such a way that afterwards, each one may choose how he or she will continue the conversation. The word is essentially a mediator and requires not just the two who dialogue but also an intermediary who presents it for what it is, out of the conviction that “what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5).

144. To speak from the heart means that our hearts must not just be on fire, but also enlightened by the fullness of revelation and by the path travelled by God’s word in the heart of the Church and our faithful people throughout history. This Christian identity, as the baptismal embrace which the Father gave us when we were little ones, makes us desire, as prodigal children – and favorite children in Mary – yet another embrace, that of the merciful Father who awaits us in glory. Helping our people to feel that they live in the midst of these two embraces is the difficult but beautiful task of one who preaches the Gospel.

III. PREPARING TO PREACH

145. Preparation for preaching is so important a task that a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity should be devoted to it. With great affection I wish to stop for a moment and offer a method of preparing homilies. Some may find these suggestions self-evident, but I consider it helpful to offer them as a way of emphasizing the need to devote quality time to this precious ministry. Some pastors argue that such preparation is not possible given the vast number of tasks which they must perform; nonetheless, I presume to ask that each week a sufficient portion of personal and community time be dedicated to this task, even if less time has to be given to other important activities. Trust in the Holy Spirit who is at work during the homily is not merely passive but active and creative. It demands that we offer ourselves and all our abilities as instruments (cf. *Rom* 12:1) which God can use. A preacher who does not prepare is not “spiritual”; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received.

Reverence for truth

146. The first step, after calling upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, is to give our entire attention to the biblical text, which needs to be the basis of our preaching. Whenever we stop and attempt to understand the message of a particular text, we are practicing “reverence for the truth”.^[113] This is the humility of heart which recognizes that the word is always beyond us, that “we are neither its masters or owners, but its guardians, heralds and servants”.^[114] This attitude of humble and awe-filled veneration of the word is expressed by taking the time to study it with the greatest care and a holy fear lest we

distort it. To interpret a biblical text, we need to be patient, to put aside all other concerns, and to give it our time, interest and undivided attention. We must leave aside any other pressing concerns and create an environment of serene concentration. It is useless to attempt to read a biblical text if all we are looking for are quick, easy and immediate results. Preparation for preaching requires love. We only devote periods of quiet time to the things or the people whom we love; and here we are speaking of the God whom we love, a God who wishes to speak to us. Because of this love, we can take as much time as we need, like every true disciple: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:9).

147. First of all, we need to be sure that we understand the meaning of the *words* we read. I want to insist here on something which may seem obvious, but which is not always taken into account: the biblical text which we study is two or three thousand years old; its language is very different from that which we speak today. Even if we think we understand the words translated into our own language, this does not mean that we correctly understand what the sacred author wished to say. The different tools provided by literary analysis are well known: attention to words which are repeated or emphasized, recognition of the structure and specific movement of a text, consideration of the role played by the different characters, and so forth. But our own aim is not to understand every little detail of a text; our most important goal is to discover its principal message, the message which gives structure and unity to the text. If the preacher does not make this effort, his preaching will quite likely have neither unity nor order; what he has to say will be a mere accumulation of various disjointed ideas incapable of inspiring others. The central message is what the author primarily wanted to communicate; this calls for recognizing not only the author’s ideas but the effect which he wanted to produce. If a text was written to console, it should not be used to correct errors; if it was written as an exhortation, it should not be employed to teach doctrine; if it was written to teach something about God, it should not be used to expound various theological opinions; if it was written as a summons to praise or missionary outreach, let us not use it to talk about the latest news.

148. Certainly, to understand properly the meaning of the central message of a text we need to relate it to the teaching of the entire Bible as handed on by the Church. This is an important principle of biblical interpretation which recognizes that the Holy Spirit has inspired not just a part of the Bible, but the Bible as a whole, and that in some areas people have grown in their understanding of God’s will on the basis of their personal experience. It also prevents erroneous or partial interpretations which would contradict other teachings of the same Scriptures. But it does not mean that we can weaken the distinct and specific emphasis of a text which we are called to preach. One of the defects of a tedious and ineffectual preaching is precisely its inability to transmit the intrinsic power of the text which has been proclaimed.

Personalizing the word

149. The preacher “ought first of all to develop a great personal familiarity with the word of God. Knowledge of its linguistic or exegetical aspects, though certainly necessary, is not enough. He needs to approach the word with a docile and prayerful heart so that it may deeply penetrate his thoughts and feelings and bring about a new outlook in him”.^[115] It is good for us to renew our fervor each day and every Sunday as we prepare the homily, examining ourselves to see if we have grown in love for the word which we preach. Nor should we forget that “the greater or lesser degree of the holiness of the minister has a real effect on the proclamation of the word”.^[116] As Saint Paul says, “we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts” (1 Th 2:4). If we have a lively desire to be the first to hear the word which we must preach, this will surely be communicated to God’s faithful people, for

“out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). The Sunday readings will resonate in all their brilliance in the hearts of the faithful if they have first done so in the heart of their pastor.

150. Jesus was angered by those supposed teachers who demanded much of others, teaching God’s word but without being enlightened by it: “They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves will not lift a finger to move them” (Mt 23:4). The apostle James exhorted: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1). Whoever wants to preach must be the first to let the word of God move him deeply and become incarnate in his daily life. In this way preaching will consist in that activity, so intense and fruitful, which is “communicating to others what one has contemplated”.^[117] For all these reasons, before preparing what we will actually say when preaching, we need to let ourselves be penetrated by that word which will also penetrate others, for it is a living and active word, like a sword “which pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). This has great pastoral importance. Today too, people prefer to listen to witnesses: they “thirst for authenticity” and “call for evangelizers to speak of a God whom they themselves know and are familiar with, as if they were seeing him”.^[118]

151. We are not asked to be flawless, but to keep growing and wanting to grow as we advance along the path of the Gospel; our arms must never grow slack. What is essential is that the preacher be certain that God loves him, that Jesus Christ has saved him and that his love has always the last word. Encountering such beauty, he will often feel that his life does not glorify God as it should, and he will sincerely desire to respond more fully to so great a love. Yet if he does not take time to hear God’s word with an open heart, if he does not allow it to touch his life, to challenge him, to impel him, and if he does not devote time to pray with that word, then he will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow impostor. But by acknowledging his poverty and desiring to grow in his commitment, he will always be able to abandon himself to Christ, saying in the words of Peter: “I have no silver and gold, but what I have I give you” (Acts 3:6). The Lord wants to make use of us as living, free and creative beings who let his word enter their own hearts before then passing it on to others. Christ’s message must truly penetrate and possess the preacher, not just intellectually but in his entire being. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the word, “today, just as at the beginning of the Church, acts in every evangelizer who allows himself to be possessed and led by him. The Holy Spirit places on his lips the words which he could not find by himself”.^[119]

Spiritual reading

152. There is one particular way of listening to what the Lord wishes to tell us in his word and of letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit. It is what we call *lectio divina*. It consists of reading God’s word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us. This prayerful reading of the Bible is not something separate from the study undertaken by the preacher to ascertain the central message of the text; on the contrary, it should begin with that study and then go on to discern how that same message speaks to his own life. The spiritual reading of a text must start with its literal sense. Otherwise we can easily make the text say what we think is convenient, useful for confirming us in our previous decisions, suited to our own patterns of thought. Ultimately this would be tantamount to using something sacred for our own benefit and then passing on this confusion to God’s people. We must never forget that sometimes “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14).

153. In the presence of God, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask, for example: “Lord, what does this text say *to me*? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What

troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this? Or perhaps: What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?" When we make an effort to listen to the Lord, temptations usually arise. One of them is simply to feel troubled or burdened, and to turn away. Another common temptation is to think about what the text means for other people, and so avoid applying it to our own life. It can also happen that we look for excuses to water down the clear meaning of the text. Or we can wonder if God is demanding too much of us, asking for a decision which we are not yet prepared to make. This leads many people to stop taking pleasure in the encounter with God's word; but this would mean forgetting that no one is more patient than God our Father, that no one is more understanding and willing to wait. He always invites us to take a step forward, but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready. He simply asks that we sincerely look at our life and present ourselves honestly before him, and that we be willing to continue to grow, asking from him what we ourselves cannot as yet achieve.

An ear to the people

154. The preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people. In this way he learns "of the aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering," while paying attention "to actual people, to using their language, their signs and symbols, to answering the questions they ask".^[120] He needs to be able to link the message of a biblical text to a human situation, to an experience which cries out for the light of God's word. This interest has nothing to do with shrewdness or calculation; it is profoundly religious and pastoral. Fundamentally it is a "spiritual sensitivity for reading God's message in events",^[121] and this is much more than simply finding something interesting to say. What we are looking for is "what the Lord has to say in this or that particular circumstance".^[122] Preparation for preaching thus becomes an exercise in evangelical discernment, wherein we strive to recognize – in the light of the Spirit – "a call which God causes to resound in the historical situation itself. In this situation, and also through it, God calls the believer."^[123]

155. In this effort we may need but think of some ordinary human experience such as a joyful reunion, a moment of disappointment, the fear of being alone, compassion at the sufferings of others, uncertainty about the future, concern for a loved one, and so forth. But we need to develop a broad and profound sensitivity to what really affects other people's lives. Let us also keep in mind that we should never respond to questions that nobody asks. Nor is it fitting to talk about the latest news in order to awaken people's interest; we have television programs for that. It is possible, however, to start with some fact or story so that God's word can forcefully resound in its call to conversion, worship, commitment to fraternity and service, and so forth. Yet there will always be some who readily listen to a preacher's commentaries on current affairs, while not letting themselves be challenged.

Homiletic resources

156. Some people think they can be good preachers because they know what ought to be said, but they pay no attention to *how* it should be said, that is, the concrete way of constructing a sermon. They complain when people do not listen to or appreciate them, but perhaps they have never taken the trouble to find the proper way of presenting their message. Let us remember that "the obvious importance of the content of evangelization must not overshadow the importance of its ways and means".^[124] Concern for the way we preach is likewise a profoundly spiritual concern. It entails responding to the love of God by putting all our talents and creativity at the service of the mission which

he has given us; at the same time, it shows a fine, active love of neighbor by refusing to offer others a product of poor quality. In the Bible, for example, we can find advice on how to prepare a homily so as to best to reach people: “Speak concisely, say much in few words” (*Sir* 32:8).

157. Simply using a few examples, let us recall some practical resources which can enrich our preaching and make it more attractive. One of the most important things is to learn how to use images in preaching, how to appeal to imagery. Sometimes examples are used to clarify a certain point, but these examples usually appeal only to the mind; images, on the other hand, help people better to appreciate and accept the message we wish to communicate. An attractive image makes the message seem familiar, close to home, practical and related to everyday life. A successful image can make people savor the message, awaken a desire and move the will towards the Gospel. A good homily, an old teacher once told me, should have “an idea, a sentiment, an image.”

158. Paul VI said that “the faithful... expect much from preaching, and will greatly benefit from it, provided that it is simple, clear, direct, well-adapted” .^[125] Simplicity has to do with the language we use. It must be one that people understand, lest we risk speaking to a void. Preachers often use words learned during their studies and in specialized settings which are not part of the ordinary language of their hearers. These are words that are suitable in theology or catechesis, but whose meaning is incomprehensible to the majority of Christians. The greatest risk for a preacher is that he becomes so accustomed to his own language that he thinks that everyone else naturally understands and uses it. If we wish to adapt to people’s language and to reach them with God’s word, we need to share in their lives and pay loving attention to them. Simplicity and clarity are two different things. Our language may be simple but our preaching not very clear. It can end up being incomprehensible because it is disorganized, lacks logical progression or tries to deal with too many things at one time. We need to ensure, then, that the homily has thematic unity, clear order and correlation between sentences, so that people can follow the preacher easily and grasp his line of argument.

159. Another feature of a good homily is that it is positive. It is not so much concerned with pointing out what shouldn’t be done, but with suggesting what we can do better. In any case, if it does draw attention to something negative, it will also attempt to point to a positive and attractive value, lest it remain mired in complaints, laments, criticisms and reproaches. Positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity. How good it is when priests, deacons and the laity gather periodically to discover resources which can make preaching more attractive!