

THE PREACHING OFFICE

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ON founding His Church, Christ invested it with all the power necessary for its sublime and extensive mission. As the Head of this same society He set an example, commanding that what He did, so also, the Church should do until the end of time. "Let us go into the neighboring towns and cities, that I may preach there also: for to this purpose am I come."¹ "Then calling together the twelve apostles, He gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases. And He sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick."² "All power is given to Me in heaven and in earth. Going therefore, teach ye all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."³ Again, from the final verses of St. Mark's narrative as also from the opening chapter of the Acts we glean the actual transmission of this power to the Church in the persons of the Apostles and their lawful successors. "And He said to them: Go ye into the whole world, and preach the gospel to every creature. . . . But they going forth preached everywhere: the Lord working withal, and confirming the word with signs that followed."⁴ "You shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you, and you shall be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth."⁵ Furthermore, this same official record of primitive times, the Acts, furnishes an authentic account of the exercise of the preaching office by St. Peter, the first bishop and chief of the Apostolic band, upon the occasion of his Pentecostal discourse delivered before a heterogeneous concourse at Jerusalem.

¹ St. Mark, i, 38.

² St. Luke, ix, 1-2.

³ St. Matthew, xxviii, 18-20.

⁴ St. Mark, xvi, 15-20.

⁵ Acts, i, 8.

It is therefore in fulfilment of a sacred trust, sealed with the credentials of the Inspired Word, and sanctified by the hallowed influence of Tradition that the Preaching Office of the Church has been established and perpetuated. Hence, above the din and confusion of rising and tottering empires, heedless of time, unchecked in its wave-length, the Voice of the Master with the persistency of the incoming tide must resound down through the ages. Centuries ago the Son of God spoke through the medium of His humanity to the multitudes assembled along the lake shore or on the mountainside; today, the same Infinite Wisdom addresses the world through the living organism of His Mystic Body, the Catholic Church.

St. Paul, the prince of preachers, in his incomparable epistle to the Hebrews vividly touches upon the origin of this divine commission: "God, who, at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days hath spoken to us by His Son, whom He hath appointed heir of all things, by Whom also He made the world."⁶ We are amazed at the extraordinary zeal with which this great Apostle of the Gentiles embraced his missionary career as well as at the extent and fruit of his preaching. Paul the Pharisee was relentless in his persecution of the early Church; in his conversion he lost nothing of his ardent and fiery nature. He was called to be a vessel of election; consequently in season and out of season, whether addressing an angry mob from the Temple steps, or in the realization of his cherished ambition to preach the gospel in imperial Rome—at all times and in all places he is the true herald of Jesus Crucified. "In the same breath he is dust and ashes, and then again he thunders and flashes truth after truth, warning after warning, appeal after appeal. His bosom is the channel of divinest thoughts and ardors, and at times he swoons away—the frail vessel of the flesh is all but consumed by these terrific fires. He stands an intermediary between the soul and God, like the very binding link of religion, and he is filled with the most solemn consciousness that on his vicarious tongue and action depends the fate of a world. . . . He has caught from the heart of Jesus Christ something of His undying enthusiasm of humanity."⁷ But this athlete of the Faith would have others even as himself. He would lead the

⁶ Hebrews, i, 1-2.

⁷ Shahan, *The Beginnings of Christianity* (New York, 1903), p. 71.

way and earnestly exhort others to follow. To his beloved Timothy, he wrote: "I charge thee, before God and Jesus Christ, who shall judge the living and the dead, by his coming, and his kingdom: preach the word: be instant in season, out of season: reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine."⁸ And having instructed Titus in the affairs of the pastoral office and the duties of Christian life, with characteristic Pauline vigor he adds: "These things speak, and exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee."⁹

Just as in the realm of nature there is always the gradual process of development, so too, in the preaching office we find this same unalterable principle exemplified. The sermons of Christ were not infrequently clothed in parable and allegory, while the keynote of the Apostolic discourses was the life of Our Lord and an exposition of the dogmas which constitute the nature and the laws of the Kingdom which He preached. Peter, John, Paul, and the rest, essentially delivered one message, but behind the words of each there is a style and a mode of expression peculiarly representative of the individual. From now on, step by step, even until time blends with eternity, the deposit of faith remains inviolate, but its unravelling and presentation to the body of the faithful will ever be in answer to the needs of the age and consonant with the progress of the exterior organization of the Church.

From the very beginning preaching has been considered primarily an episcopal prerogative. St. Paul says explicitly: "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel."¹⁰ And prior even to the precise teaching of the Council of Trent upon this subject, which we shall have occasion to mention later in the course of this paper, the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas of Aquin, in his *Summa Theologica* emphasizes the point: "To teach, i. e., to expound the gospel, is the proper office of a bishop, whose action is to perfect, as Dionysius teaches (Eccl. Hier. v.); and to perfect is the same as to teach."¹¹ "Christ committed to them (the Apostles and their successors, the bishops) the duty of teaching, that they might exercise it themselves as being the most important duty of all: 'It is not reason that we should

⁸ II Tim. iv, 1-2.

⁹ Titus, ii, 15.

¹⁰ I Cor. i, 17.

¹¹ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa q. 67 a. 1 ad 1um.

leave the word of God and serve tables' ”¹² A modern authority declares that while the episcopacy was becoming solidly established, it was at all times thoroughly conscious of its ancestry; and that the voice of early Christian writers, St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, and Tertullian of Carthage invariably attribute the authority of the bishop to his inheritance of the Apostolic mission. Then, and ever since, the duty of preaching the Christian faith to Christian people has been regarded as the special trust of bishops. They represent the Apostles to their own generation, and derive their right of teaching from them.¹³ However, practically from the dawn of Christianity arose the custom of simple priests discharging this office, a privilege which, owing to many causes, especially those of expediency, has become universal with the advance of the centuries. Nevertheless, now as always episcopal sanction is required.

In the midst of a galaxy of notable preachers: Pope Leo the Great, Pope Gregory the Great, Sts. Basil, Ambrose, Cyprian, Hilary, Gregory Nazianzen, and others, we may consider St. John Chrysostom in the East and St. Augustine in the West as the two great luminaries of the Patristic era. The former, often styled “golden mouthed” because of his marvellous eloquence, is proclaimed by some the greatest preacher ever heard in a Christian temple of worship. His model was the convert Apostle whose sublime thoughts he interpreted and recast with all the skill and technique of a master rhetorician. His mind is said to have so closely resembled that of his exemplar that he was believed to write and speak with special assistance from St. Paul. Far to the fore among the Latins is the celebrated Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine. Philosopher, controversialist, scripturalist, and theologian, he brought to his task the massed erudition of one of the most comprehensive intellects that the world has ever known. Besides a number of scriptural homilies, some three hundred and sixty of his sermons have been collected and duly authenticated. These, though for the most part brief, sufficiently reveal the irresistible logic, boldness of comparison, and wealth of solid Christian doctrine which he imparted to his auditory. He was an orator ever faithful to his sacred trust, continually availing himself of every gift of nature and the niceties of art

¹² *Ibid.* q. 6 a. 2 ad lum.

¹³ W. B. O'Dowd, *Preaching* (New York, 1919), pp. 3-4.

in order to lead men from error and establish them in the fullness of truth.

The period of the Fathers including the works of St. Bernard of Clairvaux represents the golden age of the homilies. The word *homily* is of Grecian origin and literally means to talk or hold communion with a person. In early Christian use, it was a colloquial and familiar discourse in exposition of Scripture. It is distinct from mere exegesis in so far as the latter is addressed principally to the understanding, while the homily is meant to affect the heart. It is the oldest form of preaching. In a certain sense, Christ may be said to have used this style. It was the popular mode of discourse with the Fathers and was well favored during the Middle Ages. Even at the present time the homily is much in vogue, since it is highly adaptable to ordinary congregations of the faithful. Numerous compilations called *homiliaria* were made of the older homilies and these served as preaching models during many centuries.

With the close of the fourth century there are unmistakable evidences of a decline in the preaching office. "Even intellectually prominent men, such as Boniface, Bede, Rhabanus Maurus, lack originality and betray a surprisingly slavish dependence by drawing long and literal excerpts, even entire tracts from the homilies of the Fathers."¹⁴ Various factors contributed to this spirit of decadence. In the East, heretics were challenging the dogmas of the Church, while at the same time an influx of barbarous hordes all but shattered the ancient systems of culture in the West. Southern Europe became the melting pot of the nations from which finally emerged new ideas, new customs, and a new language. In fact, these discordant elements slowly but surely gained a certain equilibrium, so that with the dawn of the Middle Ages and the rise of the Schoolmen we may begin a new page in our study of the preaching office.

A novel though lasting impetus was given to this work through the papal approval of two recently organized groups of mendicants, the Franciscans and the Dominicans—religious orders founded chiefly for apostolic labors. "Our Order is known to have been instituted especially for preaching and for the salvation of souls" is written into the very first chapter of the Dominican Constitutions. It was these friars who blazed the trail

¹⁴ Anscar Zawart, O. M. Cap., *The History of Franciscan Preaching and of Franciscan Preachers* (New York, 1928), p. 243.

in organized preaching, and through the faithfulness of more than seven hundred years the sons of St. Francis and the sons of St. Dominic have given a veritable army of illustrious pulpit orators to the Church. During the past three or four centuries they have been ably assisted in this work by new congregations and societies of religious men. Among the Dominicans few have equalled and none has surpassed St. Vincent Ferrer, "The Angel of the Last Judgment." His preaching aroused the religious enthusiasm of half a continent. His audiences embraced various tribes and classes of people and he was understood by all, though his speech was that of his native tongue.¹⁵ Converts including those from Judaism numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and miracles and prophecy substantiated his words to a marked degree. It was St. Vincent Ferrer who foretold the future greatness of the "Franciscan Prince of Orators," St. Bernardine of Sienna. God is indeed wonderful in His saints. The characteristic note of St. Bernardine's sermons was cheerfulness, *pax et bonum*, and to this virtue supernaturalized we must attribute the magnetic influence which he exercised over the minds and hearts of men.

It is not without reason that this era of Scholasticism is considered the high-water mark of Christian intellectual progress. It was an age of faith, the age of the great *Summae*, an age of true culture. During these years everything was synthesized and systematized. Consequently, in the discharge of the preaching office we are not surprised to find ecclesiastics engaged in specific work, such as: preaching the crusades, preaching indulgences, preaching Peter's Pence, preaching to the heretics, preaching to the Jews, together with papal preachers, university preachers, court preachers, and the like. Many of the discourses also are subject to a natural process of classification. There is the homily, the strictly scholastic sermon, the emblematic sermon, the mystical sermon, the pericope, the sermon for special occasions, the sermon on the Sacred Passion, sermons for Advent and Lent, as well as courses covering all the Sundays and feasts of the ecclesiastical year.

In addition, this period exhibits a wealth of homiletic literature, aids and treatises, pertaining to the preaching office in one

¹⁵ It is not our purpose to determine whether or not St. Vincent Ferrer enjoyed the gift of tongues. Recognizing the existence of a more or less universal language, still, it is scarcely possible to explain some of his remarkable conversions unassisted by this miraculous prerogative.

way or other. But after the Holy Bible itself, perhaps no other work has rendered greater assistance to the pulpit in late medieval and modern times than the thirteenth-century *Summa Theologica* of the Angel of the Schools. In this regard, perhaps the following extract will prove interesting: "The studious preacher finds, help in the preparation of every kind of sermon in the *Summa Theologica*, a considerable recommendation when one considers the variety of addresses a Catholic priest is called on to deliver today. The dogmatic or doctrinal sermon can draw much from the first and third parts of the *Summa Theologica* wherein the mysteries of faith are analyzed logically and without elaboration. Moral sermons when taken from the *Prima-Secundae* lose nothing in practical application and assume a reasoning tone that saves them from reprehensible and common scolding. The *ordinary* Sunday sermon, as it is called even though it is of *extraordinary* importance both to Church and State, will pack an enormous amount of practical information about the Sunday Epistle or Gospel when it has been drawn from the *Summa Theologica*. Occasional sermons also, such as the priest may be called on to deliver on the feast of some saint, at the dedication of a church, the profession of a nun or the jubilee of a priest, are not such bugbears to the preacher who is familiar with his *Summa Theologica* and who knows how to adapt its solid doctrine to the needs of the occasion. . . . A familiarity with the *Summa Theologica* will help the preacher to build up correct habits of thought: it will save him from mistakes that make many sermons poor. Sermons will never suffer from doctrinal emaciation or anemia if the preacher has consulted and used the *Summa*."¹⁶

Approaching closer to our own day, the achievement of the great French triumvirate of the seventeenth century, Bossuet, Bourdaloue, and Massillon, cast a fresh ray of glory upon the roll of sacred orators in the Church. These three were largely instrumental in elevating the Christian pulpit to a zenith of combined instruction, eloquence, and moving power. Bossuet and the illustrious Jesuit, Bourdaloue, were friends and contemporaries, yet the fame of each was attained along different paths. "Bossuet was distinguished for the sublimity and vast

¹⁶ Ignatius Smith, O. P., "Saint Thomas and the Preacher," in *The Ecclesiastical Review* LXXIX (Nov. 1928) No. 5, pp. 452 and 456.

sweep of his conceptions, the marvellous conciseness, splendor, and grandeur of his language, as well as the magisterial and almost royal manner in which he grasped his subject and dominated his hearers. He often spoke with scant preparation, so that very few of his wonderful discourses were put on paper before being delivered. Bourdaloue, on the contrary, was essentially a preacher. He wrote his discourses with extreme care, and although they are numerous enough to form editions of twelve and sixteen volumes, there is only one sermon that is incomplete."¹⁷ Massillon addressed the human heart and in gracefulness, ease, elegance of diction and power of pathos ranked supreme even in an age accustomed to the best in refinement and culture.

Finally, noting the progress of the past generation or more, a very high standard of excellence in the discharge of the preaching office is evidenced in the sermons of such distinguished churchmen as Cardinal Newman in England, the Jesuit Père de Ravignan and the Dominicans Lacordaire and Monsabré in the pulpit of Notre Dame, together with Bishop John England and the Irish Dominican, Thomas Burke, in Ireland and the United States. A study of Newman reveals the calm, cultured, serene, academic preacher. He possessed a richness of subject matter so closely interwoven with his own spirituality and personality that it could not fail to attract vast audiences. His sermons are justly ranked among the classics of the English language.

Thoroughly conscious of the divine origin of her apostolic mission to teach all nations and to preach Christ and Him crucified, it is little wonder that the Church speaking through her Supreme Pontiff or her Councils should from time to time enact legislation and issue salutary admonitions in favor of those engaged in this holy work. Errors pertaining to the preaching office have always been unhesitatingly condemned. The Fathers of the Council of Trent declared that preaching was the chief duty of bishops, who, if legitimately excused in particular cases, were nevertheless held to commission others to fulfil this sacred obligation.¹⁸ And from the Catechism of the same Council: "But as faith cometh by hearing it is clear how necessary at all times for the attainment of eternal salvation has been the labor

¹⁷ *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1913), Vol. II, p. 717.

¹⁸ *Coun. Trid.*, Sess. v, De ref. c. ii; Sess. xxiv, De Ref. c. iv.

and faithful ministry of an authorized teacher; for it is written, how shall they hear, without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they be sent? . . . Furthermore, the Son gave some to be apostles, and others pastors and teachers, to announce the word of life; that we might not be carried about like children tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine, but holding fast to the firm foundation of the faith, we might be built together into an habitation of God in the Spirit. . . . Lest any should receive the Word of God from the ministers of the Church, not as the word of Christ, which it really is, but as the word of man, the same Saviour has ordained that their ministry should be invested with so great authority that He says to them: 'He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you despiseth Me.' These words He spoke not only of those to whom His words were addressed, but likewise of all who, by legitimate succession, should discharge the ministry of the word, promising to be with them all days even to the consummation of the world."¹⁹

In very modern times a letter on *Sacred Preaching* was issued at the command of Pope Leo XIII by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, addressed to the Bishops of Italy and to the Superiors of Religious Orders and Congregations. Herein the prescriptions of the Council of Trent and the injunctions of the venerable Pius IX are emphasized, together with the urgent necessity of entrusting so sacred a duty to none save the most competent ministers. The preaching of the present day is carefully analyzed and false notions, purely secular subjects, and questionable motives are rigorously censured.

On April 15, 1905, the encyclical, *Acerbo Nimis*, of Pope Pius X was issued. This Apostolic document strongly recommends the faithful exercise of a special phase of the preaching office—catechetical instruction. The mind of the Sovereign Pontiff in this matter is finally reduced to six precepts to be observed in every diocese. For our purpose it will be sufficient to quote from the last: "Since in these days, not only the young, but adults also stand in need of religious instruction, all parish priests and others having care of souls shall, in addition to the usual homily on the Gospel delivered at the parochial Mass on all Festivals of obligation, explain the Catechism for the faithful,

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (New York, 1923), p. 2.

in a simple fashion, suited to the understanding of their hearers, at an hour convenient for their people."

Authoritative and classical is the encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XV on *Preaching of the Word of God*.²⁰ The following ideas are worthy of special notice. At the present time good preaching is needed in the world because, "there is to be observed among the common people a daily increasing contempt and forgetfulness of the supernatural; the standard of Christian virtue is lowered, and life is gradually sinking to pagan levels." And as preachers have in some instances grown careless, the Holy Father wishes to invigorate these powerful influences by elevating them "to the standard set by Our Divine Lord, and the decrees of the Church."

During a period of almost fifty years the prudent admonitions of the Fathers of the Second and Third Plenary Councils of Baltimore have been a veritable lodestar to those charged with the preaching office in the United States. These learned and saintly prelates reiterated the decrees of the Council of Trent, judiciously applying these sacred canons to the particular needs and conditions of the country. Those concerned with the apostolic ministry are assured that humanly speaking the fruit of such labor must depend upon thoroughness of preparation, and that he who desires to sow the seed of the Word of God in the minds and hearts of the faithful should fit himself for this task by careful study of Holy Scripture, theology, and church history, together with pious meditation upon the eternal truths.

Since those charged with the apostolic ministry are truly Ambassadors of Christ and the chosen heralds of His spouse, the Church, perhaps this brief paper may be fittingly concluded in no better fashion than by stating the present positive law, the final norm of the preaching office; a law which bears the seal and sanction of the Common Teacher and Preacher of mankind, the Visible Head of the Church, Christ's Vicar upon earth: "The office of preaching the Catholic faith is committed especially to the Roman Pontiff for the Universal Church, and to the bishops for their dioceses. In virtue of their office, the bishops are bound to preach the Gospel in person, unless they have a legitimate excuse; in addition, they must employ, besides the pastors, the help of other qualified persons for the salutary fulfillment of their office of preaching. Nobody is allowed to exercise the ministry of preaching, unless he has received a commission from

the legitimate superior, either by special faculty or by appointment to an office to which the duty of preaching is attached by the sacred Canons."²¹

²⁰ Issued on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 15, 1917.

²¹ *Codex Juris Canonici*, Canons 1327-1328.

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LAUDATE DOMINUM

BRO. NICHOLAS WALSH, O. P.

Praise ye the Lord, all peoples praise,
 All tongues of tribe and race;
 Bless ye His Name, His wondrous ways,
 This golden year of grace.

Praise ye His mercy all benign,
 For loosed are Peter's chains;
 Pius is king by right divine—
 The truth of God remains.