

BARE BONES

VINCENT REILLY, O.P.



WHEN A MAN catches the mind of the American public, people wonder how he does it. Bishop Sheen has done just that on his television program. As a consequence of his phenomenal success, he has been interviewed numerous times in recent months regarding the manner of his preaching. The thing that amazes people is the fact that he speaks neither from a script, nor from memory; he confronts his audience of millions with nothing but a skeleton outline in mind.

There are authorities who say this is not the best way to proceed. It is far from our intention to take sides in the question and try to decide whether extempore preaching is better than preaching from memory. We do find it interesting, however, that many of the greatest pulpit orators in the history of the Church preached in the extemporaneous way. The patron of ecclesiastical orators, St. John Chrysostom, preached this way. We do not know how our own St. Dominic planned his sermons, but we can say, with great probability, that St. Thomas Aquinas preached extemporaneously. St. Vincent Ferrer did so, too, as we shall see. Just prior to our own day, the great English Dominican preacher, Father Bede Jarrett, was opposed to set written compositions. He felt they killed spontaneity of expression. Here is the outline of a sermon preached on February 24, 1907:

Transfiguration.

1. Description.
2. Notice same three who witnessed agony in garden. Why? To prepare them for His Passion. To help their faith in Him, that His death was not all, for He was God.
3. So Church for us in Lent. Holy Week not end but beginning. Via Dolorosa leads to Calvary, to tomb, to resurrection.
4. So also in our life—and especially in life of Church. "I am with you all days even to consummation of world."

There can be no doubt about Father Jarrett's method, but a question may arise as to how we know the procedure St. Thomas used in preaching. As a matter of fact, we do not know with certainty. But, according to Father Augustine Rock, O.P., an authority on the subject, there is an indirect indication that he never fully wrote out his

sermons: "Unfortunately, none of the sermons of St. Thomas exist today as they were spoken. That is easily explained by the fact that St. Thomas almost certainly confined his written preparation to a mere plan or skeleton of what he intended to say."

SAINT VINCENT FERRER

A study of these sermon plans of St. Thomas shows that they are done very much in the manner of his great preaching brother in religion, St. Vincent Ferrer. As to St. Vincent, we have no doubt that he preached without first committing the matter to writing. He said so himself: "After I had passed seven continuous years in traveling through various provinces of our Order, preaching daily and writing nothing, at the end of the seventh year, the year of grace 1407, I began to write in a brief way what follows." This preface is dated "The Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity." There follow sermon outlines for the liturgical year 1407-1408, beginning in 1407 with the Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity, and ending with the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity in 1408. The gospel for his first Sunday had to do with the rendering an account in the Last Judgment. The same was true of his last Sunday. Because of his preoccupation with Judgment Day the Angel of the Apocalypse so arranged his book.

The savant might raise the objection: "What of the manuscript of Valentia. Did he not write that? It is claimed to be an autograph of certain of his sermons." Father Fages, the Dominican authority on St. Vincent, thinks not. He believes it is a transcript of certain sermons dictated to a companion on one of the Saint's journeys. His opinion is based upon the fact that there is written in the manuscript, in the same hand that wrote the whole, this explanation for an omission: "Wednesday is blank on account of the sickness of the Master." The Master himself could hardly have written these words. Hence it seems clear that he did not write the rest. Apparently, St. Vincent sometimes dictated his sermons to a secretary before preaching them. Since he preached daily, and since his schedule allowed him only one hour of the day for the preparation of his sermon, it would seem that this dictation would be his only rehearsal for the next day's preaching.

THE SKELETON

The most authentic autographic source for St. Vincent's sermons is found to be mere outlines. What were they like? What sort of outline did he have in mind as he preached? Here is a plan for a sermon on St. Clement:

"Who then is the faithful and prudent servant?"
(Matt. 24:45; the Gospel of the feast)

This question expresses wonder at the greatness of the reward of glory attained by St. Clement because of the remarkable merit of his life. It is taken to mean: What must be the glory now of this saint, who, while in the world, was a faithful and prudent servant of Christ?

He is commended for three things:

For sincere fidelity.

For perfect humility.

For prudent sagacity.

Sincere fidelity, for which a man is commended as faithful, requires two things: namely, belief in the intellect and obedience in the affections. Understanding it mystically, see John 20: "Put in thy finger hither," etc. The finger seeing the divinity and humanity is the belief of the intellect, the hand put into Christ's side is the effect of obedience; and by these two a man is made not incredulous but believing.—Note, with regard to St. Clement, how diligently he sought to know about the other life by means of philosophy and how, by means of theology, he found the truth in adhering first to Barnabas and later to Peter.

The perfection of someone's humility is judged according to his greater eminence, this in accord with Matt. 20: "Whoever will be the greater among you," etc.—Note the eminent wisdom and sanctity of this saint, as well as his power to work miracles; and yet he chose to be the servant of all rather than the supreme pontiff.

Prudence, according to the Philosopher (VI Eth.), consists in the convenient ordering of things to a fitting end. Thus it is said to those ordering things to themselves: (Isa. 5), "Woe to you that are wise," etc.—Note here how this saint ordered his life, doctrine and, at length, his death, to the glory of God.

THE PARTS OF THE SKELETON

There you have the bare bones. It takes on beauty only when clothed with flesh and blood, the flesh and blood of St. Vincent's development of the various parts of the skeleton. However, after the fashion of biology students, we shall do well to study the function of each of these parts of the skeleton to understand more completely how the beauty of the whole was attained.

The theme, the opening scriptural text, was for St. Vincent the principle from which the whole sermon flowed. *Theme* is a word taken from the Greek and means *matter*. Thus the theme is the matter of the sermon. There should be nothing in the sermon which is not virtually contained in the theme. How familiar that sounds! How often the Dominican student of our own day, in learning the manner of sermon construction proposed by the late Father Walter Farrell, has heard similar words from the persevering homiletics professor.

Following Father Farrell's methodology, the professor insists: "There should be nothing in the sermon that is not in the proposition." This proposition is the whole sermon in a single declarative sentence, expressed in one's own words. St. Vincent's proposition was the theme, expressed not in his own words, but in the words of Holy Scripture.

After announcing the theme, St. Vincent tells the congregation quite plainly what he intends to discuss. For instance, in the sermon delivered from the outline on St. Clement, St. Vincent tells the people that he will talk about St. Clement because it is his feast day. Then he adds: "We shall have many good speculative doctrines for the enlightening of the intellect, and moral doctrines for the correction of vices and the formation of virtues. However, let us first salute the Virgin Mary." There follows the Hail Mary without which St. Vincent never began a sermon.

Next St. Vincent explains the text he has chosen. This sometimes involved first an exposition of the literal sense of the texts of Sacred Scripture, and then an explanation of the sense in which the Saint wished the text to be understood in this sermon. In the sermon on St. Clement, he introduces the theme by stating that God rewards a man according to the good he does in the world. He hastens to add, however, that God is not bound to reward any of us, and he makes this clear by illustrating the matter. He says: "If a lord has captives, who serve him, is the lord obliged to give a salary to the captives for their service, or obliged to give them his heritage?" The answer is: certainly not. The Saint then shows that we are the captives of Christ, bought with a great price." God, therefore, is free in the matter, but He does reward the good we do, and hence we can expect that St. Clement has received a great reward. Thus, in wonder at the greatness of the reward, we say: "Who then is the faithful and prudent servant?" The reply: St. Clement, who was a faithful servant and a prudent one.

Once he has introduced the theme, the Angel of the Apocalypse shows, as in the outline, that it touches upon three great virtues in the saintly Clement; sincere fidelity, perfect humility, and prudent sagacity—these three virtues represented by corresponding words of the theme. Thus we have *sincere fidelity* because "faithful;" *perfect humility* because "servant;" and *prudent sagacity* because "prudent."

Each of these three points is treated in turn, and so the whole sermon is completed. Each point has a biblical text repeating the particular word of the theme under consideration. In the sermon on St. Clement, the theme was: "Who then is the faithful and prudent

servant?" For *faithful* St. Vincent used the text: "Put in thy finger hither, and see my hands, and bring hither thy hand and put it into my side; and be not *faithless* but believing." (John 20: 27) For the word *servant* he used the text: "Whosoever will be the greater among you, let him be your minister. And he that shall be first among you will be your *servant*." (Matt. 20: 26) Finally, for *prudent* the vigorous Valencian used the text: "Woe to you that are wise in your own eyes, and *prudent* in your own conceits." (Isa. 5: 21)

Was this system of sermon construction just an ornate affectation of the time? Was St. Vincent merely conforming to the usage of his age? It is true that he was conforming to contemporary modes of preaching, but he conformed because he saw the utility of conformity in this instance. Hear him. "Preaching is like a net in which one string is connected with another so that, when one string is hauled in, the whole net follows. It is imperative that the parts of a sermon be constructed so as to interconnect: example with example, authority with authority; so that, if the sermon be properly arranged, even an uneducated person can deduce the whole sermon from the theme." There is the philosophy behind the system. The Saint was aiming at the retention of his ideas in the minds of his hearers.

THE LIVING SERMON

You have seen the bony framework. You are, perhaps, unimpressed. Would you be impressed if, at a Bishop Sheen telecast, you saw nothing but the points of his talk scribbled on the blackboard? These points might well be logically arranged; but if that were all the Bishop had, Milton Berle would have no competition. It is the same with St. Vincent. If all he had were the system we have outlined, his sermons might have been intolerably soporific. They were not so. Within the bony framework they pulsed with life. Note this passage from a sermon in which he compares preaching to a net. "In the sea are found different kinds of fishes. When a rich man is converted: 'Oh boy, I've caught a big fish, a dolphin!' If a noblewoman comes to her senses and puts aside vain things: 'Oh boy, an eel or a tuna!' On the other hand, if your sermon converts some poor farmer: 'Oh well, a gudgeon is in the net. Shucks, I've only caught a sardine!' What nonsense! Isn't that little fish just as pleasing to your eyes, my Lord and my God?"

See how concrete all that is. The Saint used images of everyday life. He was a poet, a story-teller, a creator of dialogue, a maker of parables. When he told a story, his characters spoke their lines directly. To make a point more striking, he would sometimes interject

an objection, putting the objection in the mouth of the audience. It might run like this: "You people will say, 'How can anyone possibly know that, Brother?' They can know it because it is written in the Bible."

The Greeks had a word for this sort of thing. They called it *dialektikon*. Judging from his sermons, St. Vincent knew all about such things. Whether he used the rules of rhetoric or not, he certainly followed them—a thing not at all impossible, for St. Augustine tells us: "Men discovered that these rules existed, rather than ordained that they should exist." It is no wonder that St. Vincent's sermons were the classic models used in seminaries as late as the seventeenth century.

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