

ST. THOMAS ON PREACHING

In his Encyclical Letter on Preaching, Pope Benedict XV with precision and brevity lays bare the causes of poor preaching and the small results of such preaching. He says, "either preaching is undertaken by unfitting persons, or it is not performed with due care, or the necessary method is not observed." In those few words the gloriously reigning Pontiff has given us a perfect analysis of what we candidly admit is an abuse and a clear unmistakable way out of the difficulty.

The questions naturally arise, "who is a fitting person?" "what is due care?" and what can be considered a "necessary method?" In the following pages we shall try to have St. Thomas Aquinas answer these queries. It should be noticed that there is very intimate connection between the quotation of Benedict XV and the reference to St. Thomas. The present Pope, in conjunction with many of his predecessors, has relied on the Angelic Doctor as the Prince of Theologians and has told the world to follow him in philosophy as the best leader in the struggle being fought on the intellectual battle ground of our day. The Pope, too, has followed closely in the footsteps of the learned Leo XIII who went so far as to exhort pastors in Italy to employ the *modus praedicandi* of St. Thomas. And while he has not used words as strong as that the tenor of his entire Encyclical brings out the earnest desire that all should look to St. Thomas as to a model because he certainly was a fitting person and zealous, and that his method was good goes without saying when we witness his wonderful success.

Unhappily for us, however, the Angelic Doctor did not write anything *ex professo* on preaching. But as much as we lament the fact we cannot be surprised, for he was almost constantly travelling for the good of the Church and his Order, he was a lecturer who was in constant demand and head of the Papal school for five years. His time was thus taken up not to mention the labor entailed in the construction of that monumental testimony to his genius, the *Summa*. He taught preaching most eloquently and convincingly by his powerful example. It will be well to remember that what shall be said in the next few pages are not the dry and bare laws of a pedagogue but the fruits of practical experience that extended over years. It is one of the misfortunes of St. Thomas that the bright glory of his fame as a philosopher and

theologian has almost completely shut out the lustre of his reputation as a preacher, and men are apt to forget that the eminent Angel of the Schools has rivaled in zeal his Holy Father St. Dominic for spreading the glad tidings of the Gospel. Nevertheless, enough remains scattered about in his various works to enable us to form a clear idea of what St. Thomas considered a fitting person to preach, what a sermon should be, and what is a practical method. Hence this paper easily divides itself into brief considerations of the preacher, his purpose, his sermon and, finally his recompense.

No one realized better than the Holy Doctor that though ordination to the priesthood is the matter of a moment, the way to the sacerdotal dignity with all its strict requirements and obligations is long and wearisome. And if this be true of a man, considering him just as a priest, how much greater must be his proficiency in the added capacity of a preacher! More and greater demands are made upon a preacher once he has assumed that responsibility than if he never entered the pulpit. He must be fitted out with all the equipment of a good priest and he must have qualities that are peculiar to a successful ministry in teaching the word of God. St. Thomas requires that a man be grounded in virtue and adorned with sufficient learning before he assumes the office of preacher. "Preachers are the mouth of Christ" (Joan. xii, lect. 4), he says, and in his commentary on Isaias, "Holy preachers of the Church are those who guard and ennoble the Church with merits and doctrine" (Is. 61). Learning and personal sanctity embrace all that can be said of a fitting person spoken of by Benedict XV. Again in his commentary on St. Matthew the Angelic Doctor says, "If the teaching is good and the teacher is bad, occasion is given for blasphemy against God" (Matth. v). What avails erudition or intellectual brilliancy that would tax even a learned audience if the "ordinary man" can nullify all our scientific endeavors with the words, "others he could help, himself he cannot save?" Insisting upon the part, in truth the leading part, holiness must play in the priest's work of preaching the Saint repeats, "No one ought to assume the office of preaching unless one first is purified and perfect in virtue" (IIIa, Q. 41, art. 3. adlm).

St. Thomas even goes so far as to institute a comparison between prelates, who are in the state of perfection, and the ordinary preacher of the Gospel. "Since it is proper to prelates to

be perfect as the intermediaries between God and the people, receiving from God through contemplation and giving to the people by their actions, so ought they to be perfect in the moral virtues, and likewise preachers; otherwise one assumes unworthily the office of prelate or preacher" (3 Sent. Diss. 35. Q. 1, art. 3; Q. 3, 1).

Speaking more explicitly of the knowledge a preacher must have St. Thomas remarks, "A preacher must have three qualities—the first, stability to keep him from erring from the truth; the second, clearness that he may not be obscure in his teaching; the third, utility by which he seeks God's glory and not his own" (Matth. v). Every one sees the truth of that at once. Experience shows that half truths, generalities or platitudes are fruitless and that sufficient science and a logical turn of mind are imperative if any lasting good is to be accomplished through the pulpit. In the *Prima Secundae* (Q. 3, art. 4) we find these words, "That one instruct another in sacred things three things are required: first, that a man be endowed with fullness of knowledge of sacred things that he may teach others; secondly, that he be able to confirm or prove what he says, otherwise his teaching will not be efficacious; thirdly, that the things he conceives he may put forth aptly to his audience." Philosophy and theology, therefore are conditions *sine qua non*, and a mere smattering of these will be more pernicious than beneficial for if a preacher, at least, cannot "give a reason for the faith that is in him" his doctrine will not be efficacious.

Speaking about the Holy Scriptures and quoting St Gregory he says, "It is eminently necessary that they who accept the office of preachers should not desist from sacred study" (Apol. Rel. Ord. p. 274). And on commenting on St. Paul's first Epistle to Timothy (IV, 3) he concludes, "It is evident from this that a knowledge of what they are to teach, is necessary for those who are to preach and exhort" (Ibid). And in yet another place he tells us that Scripture is an essential to a good preacher. In a word, according to St. Thomas, a preacher must be a man of sufficient learning and more especially one of high, genuine virtue. Or he has put it briefly, "A preacher honors his office in two ways, namely by good morals and works of supererogation" (Rom. 3, lect. 2).

The purpose of preaching was as clear to the author of the *Summa* as it should be to every one that is called to teach the faithful. It is primarily God's honor and glory and the spreading

of Christ's kingdom on earth. "Preaching is the noblest of all ecclesiastical functions," asserts St. Thomas and he proves it from the words of Our Saviour as given by St. Luke (IV, 43) sc. "For this was I sent." But as was said before, "preachers are the mouth of Christ." Therefore the preacher should be nothing but an instrument in furthering the designs of Him Who sent him. This is very beautifully put by the Angelic Doctor in his commentary on the Seventeenth Psalm, "All preaching should be directed toward two things: to the showing forth of God's greatness, by preaching the faith, and the demonstration of His goodness by elucidating the truth." The pulpit was never and never will be meant as a place for personal exploitation. The introduction of theatricals, the desire to parade ability in rhetoric or to exhibit the art of gesticulation or to twist and turn an occasion of doing good till it shall meet the requirements of Ciceronian classicism ought to be banned and condemned. A preacher as a minister of God, a representative of Jesus Christ is called upon and ordained to continue the propagation of what the Son of Man Himself called a doctrine. The preacher has a gospel to spread and not the diffusion of his own power or ability. No preacher is asked to lose himself in rhapsodies or to depict scenes superb with the fantastic trappings of poetry, as little as he is expected to astound his hearers with a tremendous outburst of eloquence or to revel in the debauches of a fervid imagination. There is such a thing as pulpit oratory and it is oratory of a superior grade. True eloquence has flourished, and will ever flourish, in spreading the Kingdom of Heaven and God has bestowed on some men marvelous powers in this line. Zeal for the salvation of souls is able to open the flood gates of noble passion that expresses itself in a manner almost divine. But these oratorical qualities, rightly named gifts of Heaven, can only serve their purpose when used as vehicles of the word of God. They are never an end in themselves. St. Thomas recognized this and we shall dwell on that point when he speaks of the actual delivery of the sermon. Always calm and sane to an eminent degree, St. Thomas says, "One is moved to preaching first, by the instinct of faith; secondly, by the stimulus of zeal; and thirdly, by the greatness of the reward" (Is. 46). First, the instinct of faith. He confirms this out of the 115th Psalm, "I have believed, therefore have I spoken." Secondly, the stimulus of zeal, "And the word of God was made as a fire in my heart" (Hier. 207). And finally the hope

of a reward that surpasses any of this world's, "But he that shall do and teach, he shall be called great in the kingdom of Heaven" (Matth. V). Far from the preacher should be the motives of ambition or sordid gain and dwelling on the words, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel," he tells us, "In another way feet may be understood as praiseworthy motives since the preacher announces the word of God not with the desire for praise or profit, but for the salvation of men and the glory of God" (Rom. 10 lect.) That all private aggrandizement should be the last motive for preaching the Angelic Doctor goes to some length in showing. "Even works of fraternal charity must give place to the exercise of preaching," he tells us, because personal benefit may come from such acts, but in preaching we should be absolutely indifferent to reward or praise. And in trying to show the freedom from all personal motives that should characterize a minister of God he declares, "a faithful preacher would wish, that were it possible, the lips of all mankind should proclaim the truth which he, alone, is incompetent to utter" (Apol. p. 140). In another place he points out the reasons why preaching should be an impersonal matter, "because preaching is like a trumpet; first, because it revivifies; secondly, because it calls to battle; thirdly, because it calls to council, and lastly, because it invites to the feast (Serm. et Opus. Con. XCL). Finally in a short sentence he gives true names to worthy and unworthy preachers, "He who preaches errors is a wolf, he who preaches for gain or display is a mercenary, but he who preaches for the glory of God is a shepherd" (2 Cor. 4 lect.)

Knowing who is a fitting preacher and what should be his purpose we may consider briefly the working material and the use of it by the preacher or, in other words, the sermon as to its matter and form.

"The matter of preaching is twofold. They preach those things which are useful (*utilia*) for this present life, either as regards God, or the neighbor or themselves. They preach also those things which we hope to have in the next life" (Rom. X, lect. 2). A rapid glance at that one short sentence shows how in his usual succinct and clear manner the Angelic Doctor has embraced the entire scope of theology, and it is theology and nothing but theology he would have taught from the pulpit. These words hold out to a preacher the material that must make him a success if he has the other necessary condition of piety, because

they contain the sum of dogmatic and moral theology. These are his working materials and they are the spiritual food after which the conscientious laity is hungering. The word "utilia" as used by St. Thomas is most comprehensive. It throws open every avenue of endeavor to a preacher in his endless quest for souls, and invites all preachers to use every legitimate means to further the purpose of their ministry. The quotation just given is not the barren utterance of a teacher, it is the dictum of a saint who in his lifetime, as we have said, crowded the experience of a lecturer, counsellor and, let it not be forgotten a preacher who in his lifetime saw not many who were his peers. That a preacher be practical is of prime importance. "The preacher ought to speak out those things which pertain to those to whom he is preaching and not the things that pertain to others" (Rom. cap. 2, lect. 2). The audience, in other words, before a preacher is the one that should arrest his attention, God's glory through their salvation should be his motive and if that purpose is present generalities will cease and inanities go by untouched.

How does St. Thomas feel towards the preachers who have too frequent recourse to their audience's sense of humor by using the most outlandish examples and exaggerations? He does everything but applaud and speaking about the vain and idle things that could be just as well left unsaid, he remarks, "the preacher of truth should not tell stories or fables" (Opus 7). And again, "I do not think these frivolous things should be preached where there is such an abundance of preaching matter that is most certainly true" (Ibid.) Catholic theology and Catholic tradition and Catholic history contain enough material to supply a priest all his life without resorting to matters that are at least irrelevant if not positively irreverent. Enlarging on the words, "the voice of one crying in the desert," St. Thomas expatiates a little on the subject matter of the sermon saying, "A preacher likewise should cry out three things: first, the crimes of men; secondly, the misery of human frailty; third, that the way be prepared for the Lord" (Joan. 1, 23).

Proceeding then to the disposition of this matter that it may be beneficial he continues, "Two things are necessary for preachers that they may lead men to Christ. The first is an orderly discourse; the second is the virtue of good works" (Joan. 12, lect. 4). Wealth of material in a sermon is unintelligible or at least fruitless in its results if it is not proposed in an orderly, log-

ical manner. A gifted listener might follow a brilliant but disorderly discourse to the end but it is probable that even to such a one the exercise would prove more of an intellectual calisthenic than of an appeal to his moral being. And if such a sermon means so little to a learned auditor what will it profit the simple ones of Christ? But perhaps the best thing St. Thomas has written about a logical proceeding is contained in whatever he undertook. His *Summa* is a masterpiece of logical thinking and the sermons he has left us bear the same impress of that wonderfully trained mind. Cardinal Vaughan when speaking of the sermon drafts of St. Thomas (Vol. I, p. 446), says that he "divides the meaning of his text into three or four grand divisions; and each of these he subdivides into three or four portions. These divisions are expressed with exceeding brevity, and yet with so good a choice of words that the whole becomes evident at a glance. To each division is attached a text to the point from Holy Scripture, with the proper reference. The skeleton is so well organized that when once fixed in the mind there is no difficulty in diversifying each portion into one very clear and consecutive discourse." In fact any one that has ever attempted a sermon realizes at once that he owes it to his auditors, if not to himself, that he have clear ideas and that these be expressed in logical sequence. Perhaps at this juncture some may think that all the planning into grand divisions and subordinate portions with subdivisions ad nauseam is good enough for a scholastic and scholastic audiences, but as Newman has said, "you cannot convert people with a smart syllogism" and that furthermore the killing formalism of mathematical divisions would be the death of all commendable eloquence. As far as the first part of the objection is concerned no thorough-going scholastic and much less the Prince of Theologians ever asked a preacher to hedge himself about with a plan out of which nothing but a dry-as-dust, didactic discourse could evolve, but they do ask that a man proceed so that he will be intelligible to himself and to others who are hungering and thirsting after the food of eternal life.

As for the second part of the objection that rigid adhesion to a plan would be a death knell of eloquence, we may answer that instead it would be the trumpet call to a new and better life of pulpit oratory. St. Thomas says over and over again that a preacher must be eloquent to draw men to God, but it is evident that sustained eloquence can never rest on a body that is forever

flying off at a tangent from the matter under consideration. "In regard to Sacred Scripture a man should take care to speak with eloquence and finish, so that the discourse may be a greater profit to the hearers" (Opus XVI, c. 12). Again, "It becomes plain that he who has to preach or to expound the Scriptures, must make use both of eloquence and of secular learning" (Apol. Ch. 12, p. 283). Here, however, as elsewhere, the Angelic Doctor warns us not to get away from the primary purpose of the pulpit which is God's glory. Eloquence is excellent in itself but it must never be made an end for itself. "It must be remembered, therefore," he says, "that the use of secular eloquence in Sacred Scripture is in one way commendable and in another reprehensible. It is reprehensible when a man uses it for display and when he aims mainly at eloquence. He who strives principally after eloquence does not intend that men should admire what he says, but he strives rather to gain their admiration for himself. Eloquence, however, is commendable when the speaker has no desire to display himself but wishes only to benefit his listeners; the same is true also when he makes use of it only as a means and out of reverence for Holy Scripture" (Op. 16, CXII). Spontaneous eloquence and the controlled vehemence that springs from a desire to unite all men to Christ in charity can never be condemned; but the eloquence that is born of a base ambition, and that while feeding on the anticipation of applause to come decks itself out in the artificiality of pompous rhetoric cannot be too severely criticised. In conclusion St. Thomas adds, "but it is praiseworthy to make use in preaching of a harmonious and learned style, provided this be done not from ostentatious motives but in order to instruct our hearers, and to convince our opponents" (Apol. Chap. 12, p. 384).

Now that we have considered the preacher and have pointed out some things relative to his sermon and its delivery what should be the reward? The reward is both temporal and eternal, material and spiritual. In the "Apology for Religious Orders" St. Thomas devotes almost an entire chapter to the question of alms and honoraria. What he says there is meant explicitly for Religious but it is true of all engaged in the work of preaching the Gospel. He concurs with the Bible that "the workman is worthy of his meat." To the question whether a priest may preach for money he replies as follows: "Preaching for money may be understood in two ways. Money may be given as the price of a sermon which is absolutely unlawful. The sermon may

be preached in order that contributions of money may be made, and thus a man may preach for money as he would for any other meritorious work inasmuch as he who gives gains merit and the need of the preacher is relieved. Thus the Apostle preached to collect money. The money, however, is not to become the end of preaching. Stipends are due to preachers for their support so that they will not be forced to abandon the word of God and occupy themselves in procuring the necessities of life; but they have no right to money as a price for preaching" (4 Sent. D. 25, Q. 3, art. 2; Q. 2, 4, 5). The Holy Doctor recognized the claim the preacher has to be given a sufficient sum to sustain him and that he be not compelled to busy himself too much about temporal in prejudice to spiritual affairs. Nevertheless he sends out a warning not to make money the end of preaching. "To have one's eye fixed on earthly things may happen in two ways. First, he may consider worldly goods as a price. The preacher may not do this because it would render the Gospel venal. But on the other hand, he may have a regard for worldly goods as a sustenance in times of need" (Quodlib. 2, 12, 0).

Then at last is the eternal reward of the dutiful priest and preacher of whom St. Thomas says while commenting on the words, "Where I am there also will my minister be" (Joan. 12, 26), "God promised glory, clarity, joy and eternal dignity." Eternal glory and dignity as a reward for the zealous Ambassador of Christ who in this life spoke faithfully, consistently and eloquently in behalf of His King and God!

Finally, to sum up. A preacher, according to St. Thomas, is one that is endowed with learning in proportion to his responsibilities as a teacher and with genuine sanctity as is befitting one placed as a medium between God and man. His sole purpose is the glory of God through the salvation of souls that will be in a great measure accomplished through instructive, logical, eloquent sermons. And for his reward he will receive benefits in this world and in that to come. The Angelic Doctor has given only the barest principles for our direction but they will be found sufficient for any reflecting student or scholar. Besides this he has left us a perfect example, for it should be recalled again, that though St. Thomas is known chiefly as the author of the Summa and as the Angel of the Schools he ranks high among the preachers in the Order of Preachers.

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