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When a Bishop Preaches

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Francis de Sales (1567 – 1622), Bishop of Geneva, was of the view that episcopal consecration conferred on bishops a specific grace that, regardless of how erudite or eloquent they were as priests, endowed their preaching as bishops with an added value or, to use a more graphic modern image, moved their sermons into a different league. The priesthood may have been conferred at the Last Supper, but Francis de Sales contended that the first bishops were consecrated on the day of Pentecost. As a result of the Spirit taking possession of their hearts, bishops drew their inspiration from the source itself, all others from the tributaries. The bishop's preaching had a distinct and specific quality related to and conferred by episcopal order. Francis de Sales, himself no mean preacher, epitomised the episcopal virtues cast in high relief by the Council of Trent (1545-63), which insisted that it was his preaching and his role as teacher which defined the Catholic bishop. When Vatican II proposed a richer and more full-bodied theology of the episcopate with its iconic triptych of identities as Priest, Prophet and King, the bishop was still cast by *Lumen Gentium* 25 primarily as preacher, teacher and *doctor fidei*. There was a decided indication, and this is the *leitmotif* of the present article, that what distinguishes the bishop's preaching is the magisterial stamp it bears. And yet, it is the author's conviction, there is more.

What is certainly very clear from *Pastores Gregis*, the apostolic exhortation published in 2003 by John Paul II following the synod devoted to the vocation of the bishop, is the spiritual fusion of identities between the teaching bishop and Christ the teacher. The bishop speaks to the Church with the *vox sponsae*, the voice of the spouse.

THE PREACHING OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

The Church Fathers of both East and West, most of whom were

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themselves bishops, all saw preaching as central to their episcopal ministry. It was in their preaching, even more than in their orders, that the link with the Apostles was established. Their contemporary and posthumous reputations were defined by their talent as preachers, by the lucidity of their thought and by the profundity of their teaching.

John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople (c.347-407) was so proficient as a preacher he was known as the 'golden tongue'. Ambrose of Milan (c.339-97) was admired by the young Augustine for the seductive charm of his eloquence before ever he was won over by the Bishop of Milan's doctrine. Later, when he himself became a bishop, the same Augustine (354-430) honed the techniques of ancient Roman oratory to hypnotic effect in expounding the word of God to the clergy and people of Hippo. Archbishop Boniface of Carthage recorded never having heard his neighbour Fulgentius, Bishop of Ruspe (c.463-527) preach without being reduced to a profusion of tears.

The patristic episcopal preachers in their own day formed minds, moved hearts and converted those who were in error back to the faith. Moreover, the Fathers endowed the Church for centuries afterwards with a legacy of doctrine, originally articulated in public sermons, of such richness that the reformed Roman Breviary is full of extracts from their writings and the dogmatic constitutions of Vatican II are bristling with footnotes referring to patristic sources.

THE SAINTLY BISHOP

Once official papal canonization of saints became a recognized legal process in the high Middle Ages, a large number of those raised to the altars and awarded feast days in the Roman calendar, were bishops. The first 'official' papal canonization was of a bishop, Ulrich of Augsburg (+ 973; cd. by Pope John XV, 993), and subsequently many of those whose sanctity won official recognition were also bishops. From medieval England alone eight bishops were canonized.

One of the most frequently recurring hagiographical *topoi* in the records of canonization inquiries was the holy bishop's dedication to preaching. One example will suffice. In the informative inquiry held *de vita et moribus* of Thomas de Cantilupe (Bishop of Hereford, 1275-82; cd. 1320 at Avignon by Pope John XXII), his successor as bishop in Hereford, Richard Swinfield, attested how his predecessor prayed, studied the scriptures methodically late into the night, and then turned to writing the sermons he thus composed in his own hand. Ralph de Hengham, one of the late bishop's clerks, affirmed that Cantilupe was a distinguished preacher and excellent

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theologian, and that he saw to it that a sermon was the high point of his visitation of parishes and religious communities in his rural diocese. Of many other medieval bishops, the same dedication to preaching and capacity for it were affirmed.

SAINTLY IRISH BISHOPS AND THEIR PREACHING

There were two Irish bishops canonized saints in the medieval period: Malachy, Archbishop of Armagh (cd. 1199 by Pope Clement III) and Laurence O'Toole, Archbishop of Dublin (cd. 1225 by Pope Honorius III). Both had a reputation as not only eloquent preachers but as men who were singularly dedicated to preaching. It is important to note that one of the most celebrated preachers of the Middle Ages was Irish. Richard Fitzralph, Archbishop of Armagh (1346 - 60), preached sermons which made a deep impression on the papal court at Avignon on account of their erudition and the elegance of the scholar-bishop's Latin. Back at home in Ireland, Fitzralph, in addition to preaching against the mendicant friars, preached in Dundalk, Drogheda, Dublin and at various places in Meath on a range of social problems. He chastised the clergy for their indolence and merchants for wasteful extravagance and underhand trading. Fitzralph was greatly loved by the laity who sources tell us lapped up his sermons. A cult grew up around his tomb in the church of St. Nicholas in Dundalk, even if attempts to have him canonized were unsuccessful.

BISHOPS' SERMONS IN PRINT

The bishop's sermon continues to arouse interest even in our day. Anthologies of episcopal preaching, especially in the years since Vatican II, have a wide readership. The printed sermons of the late Cardinal Carlo Martini, Archbishop of Milan, run into a dozen volumes; the sermons of Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, spiritual father of the St. Egidio Community, cover all the Sunday readings of the three-year liturgical cycle; the sermons of the late Cardinal Basil Hume were transcribed or re-worked in a series of books; and the sermons of Joseph Cassidy, Archbishop of Tuam, again covering Sundays and feasts for Years A, B and C became a standard work of homiletic reference for the hard-working Irish secular priest over many years.

It could be argued that those known for their talent as preachers were more easily promoted to the episcopate. This was certainly the case in seventeenth century France where Bossuet, Fénelon, Fléchier and Massillon (the four commemorated together in an impressive monument in the Place St. Sulpice in Paris) were all made bishops and put in to run dioceses precisely because of their eloquence in the pulpit. And yet the question could also be asked

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as to whether, once they become bishops, there is something extra, some special quality in preaching *ex ore episcopi* that recommends bishops' sermons to a wider public than that which originally heard them or that suggests they be preserved for posterity? Do episcopal sermons carry more theological weight, do they command greater respect or elicit a greater degree of deference because they have been pronounced by bishops?

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE EPISCOPAL SERMON

In a society where social rank or a hierarchy of whatever kind prevails, the impact of the written or the spoken word will vary depending on the perceived authority of its author. This general principle applies *a fortiori* when it is a question of the Church. A reprimand from the headmaster makes a different impression on a schoolboy than the same words couched as a fraternal correction from a bosom friend. The paternal admonition of our father, the gentle reproof of our mother or the advice of a sibling will each affect us differently. The question might be asked as to whether the Ash Wednesday sermon of our local PP is deficient in qualities which the homily preached by the bishop in the cathedral of the diocese to open the season of Lent possesses, and if so what are those qualities of the latter.

The thinking of the Church on the qualities which distinguish a bishop's preaching were elaborated on by those Vatican II texts which dealt with the episcopate and thirty five years later, when Pope John Paul II carried his fellow bishops across the threshold of the new Millennium, he focused again on those characteristic features flagged up by the Council Fathers, but drawing particular attention to an ingredient originally signalled by his first predecessor (1 Peter 3,15) and which became the hallmark of his own ministry of witness: *hope*.

The bishop speaks about the truths of the Catholic faith with the authority of Christ, he expounds on them and explains them with the mind of the Church, and he shares his insights into God's word with his people in the knowledge that he is in fraternal communion with all other Catholic bishops who proclaim the same faith and understand it in the same way, and in particular preach in unison with the Bishop of Rome. The truth of what he preaches, the orthodoxy of what he transmits and the coherence between what he propounds and the life he lives are what confers its unique authority on the preaching of a Catholic bishop. Pope Francis took his cue from his predecessor-but-one in insisting that bishops in preaching instil hope in their flock. The authority of the bishop in the exercise of his teaching role and when he preaches, particularly in his cathedral church and to the flock committed to his pastoral

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care, reposes on his fidelity to the ordinary magisterium of the Church.

It can well be claimed that a parish priest or any ordained minister preaching at the ambo or in the pulpit of a Catholic church also has orthodoxy and ordinary magisterial teaching as the litmus test of his authenticity as a minister of the word. Indeed, in Vatican II's theology of the priestly ministry as a collaboration with the diocesan bishop in the exercise of *his* ministry, the authority of the priest as *derivative* of an authority held in its fullness and properly by the bishop, leaves the unique sacramental quality of the bishop as teacher undiluted – so the authority of the bishop is shared but not diminished.

It can also be argued that it is neither the quality of his preaching as eloquence, nor the consistency of what he propounds with the great tradition of the Church and his communion with other Catholic bishops, and the Successor of Peter in particular (orthodoxy), nor the magisterial tradition on which his understanding of faith and morals reposes that constitutes the singularity of the bishop's authority as teacher or his voice as preacher, but rather it is the roles he inhabits as bishop, the identities he has *ex officio* that make him unique as *doctor fidei*.

Consideration of those traditional episcopal roles and the ecclesial context in which they are exercised can help us understand more clearly what makes the bishop's sermon different from that of the local PP or of the Jesuit or Redemptorist preaching a parish mission. And the best way of illustrating that diversity of roles and the way they impact on the bishop as teacher/preacher is to analyse what happens at the Chrism Mass.

THE BISHOP'S SERMON AT THE CHRISM MASS

In some smaller dioceses the annual Chrism Mass continues to be celebrated on Holy/Maundy Thursday, but even in larger dioceses where it is celebrated at a convenient time in Holy Week the link of this unique liturgy with the Last Supper and the whole mystery of Maundy Thursday is essential to its identity.

The Chrism Mass deserves particular attention and reveals much about the unique character of the bishop's preaching because the liturgy casts him in all the essential roles of his office. It is the only liturgical celebration of the year where the diocesan family is gathered in the cathedral in its entirety, where the local church is hierarchically assembled, where the ecclesial role of all the participants is cast into ceremonial relief and where the triptych of identities inhabited by the bishop are on full, formal, public display. Considering the bishop's ministry as *doctor fidei* and his preaching on the occasion of the Chrism Mass brings us to the heart of his

identity as teacher and highlights why, all other things being equal, his status as preacher is unique and why his instructions on faith and morals demand a particular attention.

The *Ceremoniale Episcoporum* is quite specific in the instructions it gives the bishop for his celebration of the Chrism Mass. For his homily, he must be seated in his chair, have his mitre on his head and have his crozier to hand. He is to speak directly to his priests, remind them of their vocation of service, and invite them to re-commit themselves to their priestly calling by renewing the promises to their bishop and to the Church on the day of their ordination. So, the bishop is preaching *ex cathedra*, the mitre indicating the fullness of order and the crozier highlighting his role as shepherd to his entire flock of all the baptised (which includes his priests). Let us pick this iconic image of the bishop apart, it is pregnant with theological and ecclesial significance.

THE CHAIR

The Chrism Mass is celebrated in the cathedral, mother church of the diocese, the church which is home and place of gathering for all members of the local church family equally. It is the centre of diocesan life, it is the ecclesiastical building in which the local church, with all its constituent components/members, comes into its own. The bishop is seated in his chair: the dispensers of knowledge, of justice and of nurture habitually sit in a chair. In this chair or *cathedra*, no one else is entitled to sit, no visiting bishop or cardinal, the only exception being the Bishop of Rome. The chair is situated in or contiguous to the most sacred space in the cathedral, it is the appropriate place from which the bishop imparts sacred instruction. We say of a professor that he occupies '*the chair of philosophy/history/linguistics*' and the bishop's *cathedra* plays an analogous role, it locates him, it casts him and it identifies him as someone who *professes* the faith with a view to instructing the faithful. One could say more about the significance of the *cathedra*, but its importance in the liturgy of the Chrism Mass should already be clear.

The Mass of Chrism, with all the priests of the diocese in the sanctuary gathered round their bishop, witnesses a corporate expression of priestly identity and makes visible the relationship between the priests and their bishop. When the bishop speaks to his priests in this context, it is a father speaking to his sons, it is a master addressing his disciples, and we could almost say it is a captain encouraging his team. What makes the bishop's sermon at the Chrism Mass so significant, unique in the Church's year, is that he speaks to his priests fully conscious that he is being overheard. He is talking to his priests about their ministry, on *his* behalf, to

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the flock of the baptised entrusted to their care in different parts of the diocese. The unity of the priesthood and the relationship between the priests and their bishop is highlighted in the homily and, as we have noted above, given corporate expression in the con-celebration of the Eucharist which follows.

THE CROSIER

The bishop, with his crosier to remind him, is shepherd and he speaks, over the shoulders of his co-workers, the priests, to those for whom the work is being done and who are being ministered to, the faithful, the flock. He can use the occasion, of course, to speak about the paschal mysteries soon to be celebrated in the Easter Triduum, he can discuss other questions of faith and morals, or one of the burning issues of Christian concern at the heart of contemporary society, e.g. migration. This theme could be elaborated upon, suffice it to say that the bishop, as good shepherd, is always attuned to the voice of his flock and he in turn addresses them in a voice they recognise. The bishop, as shepherd, strives to speak *to* his flock of the concerns that are *theirs*, to warn them against danger and to protect them against error. The human heart is always moved by words of love and concern, spoken by a voice that is familiar and immediately recognisable. That is the effect the zealous bishop hopes to achieve.

A final aspect of the Chrism Mass congregation and its relationship with the presiding diocesan bishop needs to be considered, not least because it too is constitutive of the response the bishop's words evoke. All the baptised in a diocesan family have an ecclesial *relationship* with the bishop, in the same way children in a family have a relationship with a parent. The clergy have solemn promises of obedience to their bishop, the lay faithful – because he is their duly designated father in God – are required to hear the bishop's words, when he speaks to them on matters of faith or gives counsel on moral/ethical issues, with a sacred deference and a submission of the will befitting the dynamic of a parental relationship. So, the bishop's sermon is listened to and its contents received with a docile disposition, rooted in the conviction that a father will always wish what is best for his children (Luke 11, 11-13).

In the Chrism Mass, the ecclesial context in which the diocesan bishop preaches and teaches, as doctor, pastor, father and shepherd, is cast in sharper relief and in almost perfect iconic symmetry, than in any other liturgy of the Church year. The uniqueness of the bishop's roles determine the unique status which his preaching enjoys. The Christological identity of him who is endowed with the fullness of order, his unique position as pastor of the diocese/local

church (which possesses all the qualities of the Church universal), and the relationships which his ordination as bishop spawn across the local church combine to make his preaching singularly attuned to articulating the bishop's triple calling as priest, king and – above all else – prophet. Francis de Sales might not have used this language, but his insight into what the grace of order conferred on him when he became a bishop on 8 December 1602 was uncannily perceptive.

A SPECIAL HEARING

There can be no denying that not all bishops are outstanding preachers, even if many of them are and have been, right back to patristic times. John of Avila, a secular priest, was certainly more effective in his preaching endeavours than any of the bishops in 16th century Andalusia. The late Father Leonard Sheil SJ, indefatigable parish missionary, was undeniably more self-assured and more eloquent in the pulpit than any bishop in 1950s Ireland, or Father C.C. Martindale SJ and Mgr. Ronald Knox than any English Catholic bishop of the inter-war period. But the bishop's preaching, when it is the diocesan bishop speaking as *doctor fidei* to his people, when the criteria highlighted in this present reflection on how his office conditions the wavelength on which his message is transmitted and received are met, and when as pastor he is acting in the fullness of order, deserves to command a respect and merit a consideration which is alone due to those who are graced with episcopal office.

Dissent. I hold no brief for any bishop or priest who uses the pulpit to preach dissent from the teaching of the Church. That is not the place for it. Speaking or writing in the public domain, where people have the right of reply, is the appropriate place for such expression. I also believe that attempts to suppress or paralyse expressions of doubt on questions relating to such teachings in the public domain, is not in the best interests of honesty or truth.

– WILLIE WALSH, *No Crusader* (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 84.