

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Jos Moons

Encounter or
Proclamation?
*Roman-Catholic
preaching according
to Pope Francis
and the Homiletic
Directory*

November 2019

Encounter or Proclamation?

*Roman-Catholic preaching according to Pope Francis and the Homiletic Directory**

Jos Moons

In recent years, the Vatican published two documents on what Roman-Catholic preaching should be. Seven months after Pope Francis had spoken about preaching in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013),¹ the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a guidebook for preaching, the Homiletic Directory (2014).² In this article, I propose to take a closer look at these two documents and their significantly different views on preaching.³ In the second half of the article, I will evaluate the two conceptions of Roman-Catholic preaching in the light of homiletic theory and interpret them in the light of the Second Vatican Council.

A CONCERN FOR QUALITY

Historically speaking, the Directory has the oldest roots. It goes back to the synod on the Eucharist in the year 2005 and the Post-

1 See *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, signed November 24th, 2013.

2 Issued on June 29th, 2014.

3 This difference seems to have gone largely unnoticed. The American homiletic handbook edited by E. Foley does no more than briefly presenting the documents and making short references, see E. Foley (ed.), *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching, Developed under the Auspices of The Catholic Academy of Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 32-34. Both documents are almost absent in D. White, *The Liturgical Homily: Its Theological Development in Vatican II and Pope Francis*, in *The Australasian Catholic Record* 93 (2016), 173-179 and in the special issue entitled 'La joie de prêcher', *Lumen vitae. Revue internationale de catéchèse et de pastorale* (2014/2).

* This article is a reworked and shortened version of 'De preek: ontmoeting of kerygma? De visies op verkondiging van *Evangelii gaudium* en het Homiletisch Directorium', in *Collationes. Tijdschrift voor Theologie en Pastoraal* 47 (2017), 90-104. Republished with permission. Dr Eugene Duffy offered helpful advice; I would like to thank him for that.

Jos Moons has been teaching homiletics since 2012. Currently, he lectures at KU Leuven, where he also acts as University chaplain, and he works as a researcher at Tilburg University.

Synodal Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007). Amongst other things, the Synod Fathers and Pope Benedict XVI were concerned about the homily: “the quality of homilies needs to be improved” (no. 46). Three years later, in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict brought up the issue of preaching once more, this time asking “to prepare practical publications to assist ministers in carrying out their task as best they can: as for example a Directory on the homily, in which preachers can find useful assistance in preparing to exercise their ministry” (no. 60).

At the moment that this Directory saw the light, the Roman-Catholic Church was under new management. In 2013, the Argentine Jesuit, Jorge Bergoglio, had been elected Pope. In his first document *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope took great liberty in addressing the issues that in his opinion needed attention, such as the homily.⁴ For to his regret, “both the laity and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them” (EG 135).

QUALITY ACCORDING TO *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

Clearly, the Synod fathers, Pope Benedict, Pope Francis and the Congregation for Divine Worship all share a concern for quality, yet what exactly do they mean by quality? For Pope Francis quality has to do with *dialogue or encounter*. As the homily is part of the liturgy, and as liturgy is essentially dialogical, so too the homily: “It takes up once more the dialogue which the Lord has already established with his people” (EG 137). That statement comes with immediate practical consequences for the preacher, who “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” (EG 137).

This point is clearly important for Pope Francis, for in the articles that follows he further develops it with the help of the image of the Church as mother. Does a mother not know the concerns and needs of her child? Following that example, the Church should speak to us in our mother tongue; in her preaching we should be able to sense her “maternal and ecclesial spirit” (EG 139-141). Inculturation is important too, for it connects the tradition with the context of the people (EG 142-144). “The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people” (EG 143).

In the second part of the reflection, which focuses on the preparation of the homily (EG 145-159), the Pope developed the

4 Cf. EG 16-18 and 135, 145.

THE FURROW

fundamental notion of a dialogue between God and his people practically by discussing concrete aspects of preparing a homily. In addition to drawing inspiration from Scripture – by studying it (EG 146-148), living it (EG 149-151), praying with it (EG 152-153) – the preacher should also draw inspiration from his people (EG 154-155). According to Pope Francis, the people of God and Scripture equally deserve the sort of deeply reverent and deeply prayerful attention that we call contemplation. “A preacher has to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people” (EG 154).⁵ This is indispensable for knowing what a concrete community needs and for discerning what God has to say in a specific situation.

Lastly, the interest in and care for the faithful means also taking care of presentation. Instead of complaining that people do not listen, preachers should look into the mirror: “perhaps they have never taken the trouble to find the proper way of presenting their message” (EG 156). Paying attention to presentation includes limiting the length of a homily, using appealing images and accessible language, structuring one’s message and adopting a positive instead of denouncing and lamenting the ills of the moment (156-159).

QUALITY ACCORDING TO THE HOMILETIC DIRECTORY

The Directory grew out of a similar concern for quality, yet for the authors of the Directory, quality has to do mainly with *theological content*. Initially that is not too clear. The relatively short first part discusses preaching more broadly, addressing the liturgical setting of a homily (HD 4-15), a correct interpretation of Scripture (HD 16-25) and the value of spiritual preparation (HD 26-36). Yet in the long second part of the Directory on the *Ars Praedicandi* (HD 37-156), the focus on content becomes apparent. The title is somewhat misleading, as these words do not have their usual meaning, namely, the art of attractive and inspiring preaching. Rather, the Directory’s authors wished to “provide concrete examples and suggestions to help the homilist put into practice the principles presented in this document” (HD 37). In fact, they demonstrate how to arrive at a faith message on the basis of the hermeneutical interplay of liturgy, Scripture, Catechism. Indeed, with ample reference to these sources, the Directory gives examples of possible themes for the Easter Triduum (39-50), Easter Sunday (HD 51-56), the Sundays of Lent (HD 57-77) and Advent (HD 78-109), the Christmas Season (HD 110-139).

5 The Spanish text of the Exhortation links the two contentions more softly, without ‘but’: “Un predicador es un contemplativo de la Palabra y también un contemplativo del pueblo”.

The Directory concludes with two appendices or supplements. The first one consists of an extensive list of the relevant Catechism articles for the three liturgical years, per Sunday, after which a shorter second appendix gives an overview of the relevant “post-conciliar ecclesial sources”. Possibly the strongest proof of the Directory’s content-focused understanding of quality is found in the introduction to the first appendix, where the homiletic need is specified to be a need for *doctrine*: “A concern that has been voiced often in the years since the Second Vatican Council, notably in Synods of Bishops, has been the need for more doctrine in preaching. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a truly useful resource for the homilist in this regard” (HD 157).

TWO TYPES OF QUALITY

The Directory’s understanding of quality differs substantially from that of Pope Francis. Both *Evangelii Gaudium* and the Directory stress the liturgical setting, proper exegesis and the role of prayer.⁶ Yet for Pope Francis, preaching means dialogue and encounter. It requires contemplation of *both* the Scriptures and the faithful, with particular attention for content as well as presentation. By contrast, the Congregation for Divine Worship focuses on content, promoting not so much the encounter with the people of God but rather the interaction between Scripture, liturgy and theology, especially the Catechism.

The Directory’s focus on content clarifies several questions that the text raises, such as the question why the part dedicated to the *ars praedicandi* is not about eloquence and rhetoric, as the title suggests, but on hermeneutics. Another such question has to do with the place of the people in the Homiletic Directory. Occasionally it mentions the needs of the community, often with references to Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*. For example, it emphasized “that the homily should be tailored to the needs of the particular community, and indeed draw inspiration from it” (HD 8), a statement that it supported with a substantial quote from *Evangelii Gaudium*.⁷ Yet in fact, that is no more than lip service, as this aspect never materializes into an integral element

6 The Directory suggests that in giving prayer pride of place, it follows *Evangelii Gaudium*. In fact, it does not, as *Evangelii Gaudium* mentions three elements, without prioritizing prayer, namely: study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity. See HD 26 and EG 145

7 For other examples, see HD 2, where the authors specified a sensitivity to the congregation as one of the “four important themes of perennial importance described briefly in the conciliar documents”. Yet while the other three themes are elaborated in Part I – which consists indeed of three chapters – not so for the congregation. See also the inclusion of the community in the presentation of *Lectio Divina* (HD 27-36, no. 33).

THE FURROW

of the reflection. Indeed, in its demonstration in Part II how “the principles presented in this document” work in practice (HD 37), the Directory *left out* the community and focused instead on the encounter between Scripture, liturgy and theology or Catechism. One cannot but conclude that the Directory’s image of the homily is a far cry from Pope Francis’ call for a double contemplation.

GENRES: HOMILETIC AND KERYGMATIC PREACHING

Another way to bring out the specific characteristics of both visions is to dwell for a moment on homiletic genres. These include the homily as testimony, where the proclamation of the gospel builds on the faith journey of the ‘I’ in a way that resembles what Augustine did in his Confessions, the didactical homily and the narrative homily. For our current reflection, two other genres are important: encounter or *homilia* and proclamation or *kerygma*.

What Pope Francis proposed in *Evangelii Gaudium* corresponds to the *homilia* genre which typically mediates between experience and faith. Therefore, the preacher needs to be at home in both. Acting like a mediator, he connects daily life and liturgy with faith and the Scriptures, so that God may deepen and enlighten the ordinary. The Directory’s view of the homily corresponds to the *kerygmatic* genre. The kerygmatic preacher may be compared to a town crier. He comes into town and instantaneously brings his message, whether people are interested or not. Surely that is the task of the preacher: to proclaim God’s salvation in all its splendor, so that God’s healing power may touch people.

Although these are both accepted forms of preaching, modern homiletics favors *Evangelii Gaudium*’s vision, especially in the light of the post-conciliar so-called “turn toward the assembly”.⁸ This turn reflects both the renewed ecclesiological imagination of the Church as God’s people on pilgrimage, in which the laity have full membership, and the liturgical renewal of active participation. Other, more secular influences contributing to the “Copernican revolution” that consider the Scripture and hearer as equals include philosophy, psychology, sociology, and the communication science.⁹ More recent developments also confirm that context *and*

8 See e.g. G. DeBona, “Preaching after Vatican II”, in *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, 95-102. Cf. G. DeBona, *Fulfilled in Our Hearing. History and Method of Christian Preaching*, New York, 2005, especially the chapter “The New Homiletic”, 28-77. However, Gueric DeBona convincingly argues that a sensitivity for the hearer was not entirely absent prior to the council, referring amongst others to the so-called Crusade for Fruitful Preaching in the 1930s and the book *How to Make Us Want Your Sermon* from 1942, see G. DeBona, “Preaching before Vatican II”, in *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, 84-94.

9 See the previous footnote and E. Henau, *Inleiding tot de praktische homiletiek* (Averbode: Werkgroep voor levensverdieping, 1976), especially 9-25.

ENCOUNTER OR PROCLAMATION?

hearers matter, such as the growing consciousness of the limited patriarchal, Western perspective and the digital culture in which hearers have great power to decide what they listen to, or not.¹⁰

By contrast, modern homiletics implies two types of criticism of the Homiletic Directory. The first critique relates to the Directory's agenda "to assimilate the insights of the past fifty years, review them critically, help preachers appreciate the purpose of the homily, and offer them assistance in fulfilling a mission which is vital to the life of the Church" (HD 3). That sounds wonderful but is scarcely credible in the light of the absence of one of the most prominent insights of that period, *the turn to the hearers*. That leads directly to the second critique, namely that the preacher who sticks with the Directory's guidelines seriously risks talking over his audience's heads.¹¹ He may preach the gospel in its fullness, yet he will do so *in abstracto* rather than for people here and now.¹²

VATICAN II: RESSOURCEMENT OR AGGIORNAMENTO?

My presupposition so far has been that both documents have made a homiletic choice. In fact, however, other factors may have played a role as well, especially the *interpretation* of the Second Vatican Council. There are good reasons for looking at the Council, as both documents owe their origin to the Council. The conciliar vision of Scripture and liturgy, which is rooted in the preconciliar liturgical and biblical renewal, stimulated homiletics. It seems that *Evangelii Gaudium* and the Homiletic Directory represent two different schools of Council interpretation.

Essential for the Council's dynamic were two ideals: *ressourcement* (going back to the sources) and *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date).¹³ To make the treasure of the gospel shine and to restore faith as a radiant source of life, as John XXIII had wished, the Council fathers did essentially two things: they went back to old sources such as Scripture, liturgy and the Church

10 Cf. "Quand l'Afrique me réapprend à prêcher", in *Lumen vitae. Revue internationale de catéchèse et de pastorale* (2014/2), 213-220 and the contribution "Contextual Preaching" in *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, 233-243.

11 It is telling that the authors, while acknowledging that "the art of oratory or public speaking, including the appropriate use of the voice and even of gesture, is an ingredient of a successful homily", added that other things are "essential, however", namely to live the gospel, to know the people, to know the times, and to invite the Holy Spirit (HD 3).

12 E. Henau too criticized the Directory for failing to take into account "the results of the practical-theological reflection on the phenomenon of preaching during the past fifty years", see Henau, "Homiletisch Directorium", 161-162.

13 For some background, see the much-translated reflection by the Dutch Dominican Ted Schoof *Breakthrough. Beginnings of the New Catholic Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), originally published in 1968, and J. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2008).

fathers, and they opened up to the signs of the times. Ideally, these two ideals correct and enrich one another. In fact, theologians had and have their preferences. For example, Karl Rahner, a Jesuit theologian with great influence during the Council, represented mainly *aggiornamento*, where the much younger yet equally influential Joseph Ratzinger tended more towards *ressourcement*. As Thomas Rausch stated in his introduction to Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's thinking: "his instinctive tendency is much more towards *ressourcement* than towards *aggiornamento*. ... he is well read in contemporary theology ... Yet his particular gift is to expound the tradition with a remarkable clarity rather than to reinterpret it creatively for new situations and problems".¹⁴

After the Council, the two ideals suggested divergent solutions to the various crisis that emerged. For example, although the use of the vernacular and the greater liturgical clarity were beneficial for active participation, knowledge of faith and Church participation went downhill. This crisis has been and still is being perceived differently, with some people concluding that we need to get back in touch with our sources and others proposing rather to demonstrate the relevance of faith for modern times.

While at this point one may immediately think of the New Translation of the missal as a case in point,¹⁵ the same variety of perspectives can also be seen in homiletics, for example in two documents on preaching by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In their 1982 document on preaching *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, they highlighted the *importance of the hearer* on the basis of the conciliar ecclesiology.¹⁶ In 2012, they revised this document and replaced it with *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*.¹⁷ In the Introduction of the latter document, they spoke of the increased secularization and the need of a re-evangelization: "We believe that the current circumstances of our world and the call for a fresh spirit of evangelization provide a connection between *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* and the present document". Although they Bishops used the Emmaus story as a metaphor for preaching, the document in fact highlighted the *content of the faith*, not encounter. In terms that the Homiletic Directory could have used, they explained

14 T. Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to His Theological Vision* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 62. Cf. the fascinating article by O. Putz, "«I Did Not Change; They Did!» Joseph Ratzinger, Karl Rahner and the Second Vatican Council", in *New Wineskins* 2 (2007), 11-30.

15 For a brief, critical introduction, see G. O'Collins and J. Wilkins, *Lost in Translation. The English Language and the Catholic Mass* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017).

16 USCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*, see 4-5. Available online at http://www.usccb.org/cs_upload/8090_1.pdf.

17 USCCB, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith. The Sunday Homily*. Available online at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-life-and-ministry/upload/usccb-preaching-document.pdf>.

that “the homilist of today must realize that he is addressing a congregation that is more culturally diverse than previously, one that is profoundly affected by the surrounding secular agenda and, in many instances, inadequately catechized. The Church’s rich theological, doctrinal, and catechetical tradition must therefore properly inform the preaching task in its liturgical setting”.¹⁸

Clearly, this speaks of *ressourcement* rather than *aggiornamento*. For while *Evangelii Gaudium* also appreciated sources, both theologically and spiritually,¹⁹ it stretched this to *include* the people: “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” (EG 139). Pope Francis problematized the preaching of “detached ideas”, explaining that preaching is about “joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people” (EG 143). All this recalls the double dialogue that we mentioned earlier and demonstrates that *Evangelii Gaudium* advocates openness to the times and to the gospel rather than a pure *ressourcement*.

How to improve the quality of preaching? Should preachers raise the theological content of their homilies or focus rather on encounter? While theological quality evidently matters, in the light of modern homiletics, what deserves most attention is the interplay between faith, the hearer and form. Therefore, *Evangelii Gaudium* offers more convincing, complete and useful guidelines than the Homiletic Directory. Or do the two documents represent two ways of receiving the Council? In that case, one’s preference for any of the documents depends on what one perceives as the more urgent need: *aggiornamento* or *ressourcement*.

18 *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 5.

19 As EG 11 stated: “Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world”, cf. EG 3, “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unflinchingly each day”.