



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - February 2015

Thoughts on preparing to proclaim the gospel in a liturgical homily – Spiritual preparation for the General Congress of the Union in July 2015

For a number of years now I have preached in dialect – that is, the Swiss dialect. When proclaiming the gospel I like to speak the language of the hearers, the language of the faithful in my parishes. Thus I am almost guaranteed to be understood. Only in my own mother tongue, that is, in dialect, can I be fully authentic and credible. The participants in the service experience that I am one of them. I allude to themes which are not necessarily themes of my personal daily life as a priest: problems in families, crises of married couples, difficulties with their sons and daughters going through puberty, fears about their livelihood etc. I also speak about personal experiences and concerns which weigh me down. I can speak about my emotions, things that make me feel sad, questions for which I, too, as a priest, have no answers, or things that I can't understand. Yes, I like to speak from the heart to the heart of others in a way that allows my enthusiasm for an event to be felt by them.

I often begin my homily with a pointed question or statement designed to somewhat disturb the hearers while stimulating them to listen carefully. This opening thought frequently develops into the central thought which I repeat in the middle of the sermon and certainly at the end– as if it were a word to take home. The last sentence must be full of hope and encouragement.

When I was ordained deacon almost 40 years ago, I received the following commission from the bishop: “Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.”

It is the good, the joyful news that I am commissioned to proclaim, and the thoughts and words spoken to people. at a wedding, for instance, should fill them with joy.

At the preparation of a funeral ceremony I try to put myself in the situation of the mourning relatives. I like to speak in images. Pictures are easy to imagine and keep in mind. Instead of the traditional biography of the deceased, I look at a photo album and contemplate important situations in the life of the deceased, such as the bridal couple in love, the christening of the first child or, describe the loving smile a grandchild for the grandfather. By looking at an album I can soothe mourning a little and give prominence to good memories.

I like to pray the following prayer of the Catholic Hymnal of Switzerland:

Lord, we ask you for our pastors: Let them be people full of compassion and understanding, full of hope and confidence in the future. Help them to understand the signs of the times and to share the joy and grief of others.

Jesus Christ, you have said: Whoever wants to be first among you, shall be last of all.

After all, you did not come to be served but to serve and to give your life for others. Fill them with your sentiments of humility and love.

Jesus Christ, we ask you for priests: Teach them to proclaim your good news in a way that our hunger for life and truth may be satisfied. Fill them with courage so that they may proclaim fearlessly what your Spirit teaches them. Be their support and refuge so that they may be able to sustain the faith of their brothers and sisters. Let their lives make visible that your message is love that sets us free. Strengthen them in gratitude that you have reconciled them to yourself and entrusted them with the ministry of reconciliation.

Make us thankful that we can celebrate with them the mystery of your death and resurrection in the Eucharist. Let there be in your Church no lack of people who care for the building-up and unity of communities, until you will come in glory. Amen.

(Katholisches Gesangbuch der Schweiz 658.1-3)

Thoughts regarding the preparation of the proclamation in the daily testimony of faith

Besides the official preaching in the homily on Sundays and public holidays, there is the more personal proclamation in the witness of faith of everyday life. There, too, I am asked to tell others what I have been given in my Christian faith and hope, as is said in the First Letter of Peter: “Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, with gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15).

The differences between proclaiming the Gospel in liturgy and in everyday conversation are obvious: The preacher speaks to a believing community. Normally people are listening to his words with religious

interest, desiring to experience a deeper relationship with God. This cannot be presumed in a spontaneous exchange in the street or at table, where a solemn atmosphere of faith is not a given. Rather, the climate is often determined by the hardships of life, by questions and doubts, perhaps even by fear and rejection.

The homily is prepared in silence; the preacher delves deeply into the theme and knows exactly what he wants to say. Such direct preparation for proclamation in daily life is not possible. Naturally I don't know in advance the concerns of those who approach me.

Nevertheless some preparation is possible. Even if not direct, there is still indirect preparation. Everything that helps me to believe in way that is lively and true to life is, in the broadest sense, a preparation to strengthen others in their faith.

First and foremost are the experiences of life mentioned, experiences of fulfilment and joy, of disappointment and sorrow. These experiences unite all people. We must help others to be true to their emotions.

I have already mentioned how much people appreciate when one talks about personal joys and sorrows during liturgy. This encourages the listeners to find a means of expressing their own emotions. And just as in the liturgy, so it is in the interpersonal sharing of faith; when talking with others I can only be truly helpful and strengthen their faith if I myself am close to what touches people deeply, to their experiences of life.

It is equally important that those to whom I am talking do not lose themselves in their emotions, that they do not get bogged down in grief and mourning, and so we to give particular care to their experiences of faith. These are not far from experiences of life, but are, rather, are experienced *in the midst of* them. Experience of faith includes all that truly comforts us, that gives us strength and encouragement – the quality and beauty of creation, human dignity, the Saviour's grace and, in all of this, God himself as the mystery of love.

Whenever I bear witness to my experiences of faith in talking to others, I make it possible for those who are entrusted to me not to forget their own experiences of faith, but to reconnect with them – and sometimes even to have further experiences of God and of faith.

In this way I allow my heart (with *all* its experiences) to speak to the hearts of others. This was already important in the first part on the homily;

it becomes even more important in this interpersonal proclaiming. Whenever others sense that I am not in touch with my own heart, I won't be able to touch their hearts either.

When our witness to faith is very close to life, life also draws closer and closer to faith. Detached evangelisation which is far from life does not reach the people of today. This does not mean that a more difficult train of thought should not sometimes be expressed. But it must always be rooted in a feeling for life with its ups and downs.

However, what is the deepest reason that talk about faith has to be very close to life as experienced and endured? The reason is to be found in the incarnation of God in his son Jesus Christ. Since God not only speaks to humans, but himself becomes human, then it is clear that I cannot find God beyond human life. God is to be met, to be found and to be loved in and through human life. Consequently, when I want to help those entrusted to me to find God, then I should not lead them away from life, but rather must help them to come very close to their own life in order to come close to God.

In Christ, God himself, God's Word became man. This is clearly shown in the way the Gospel speaks of Christ. It does not conceal the fact that Jesus' "sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground" (Lk 22:44). It emphasizes that even the Redeemer shed tears – for example, at the grave of his friend Lazarus (Jn 11:35) Moreover, it also shows us that in the midst of all his human fear and mourning, there remained a connection with God which nothing could destroy.

To sum up: There are many similarities between the liturgical homily and a simple daily witnessing. I have mentioned that the last sentence of a homily must be full of hope and encouragement. That is no less important at the end of a conversation about faith. The crucial point is that we release the other person into the presence of God. In God, I and the other remain united, even if we are separated in time or in space, even if we never again meet and talk together in this life.

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