
**A Dialogue Between God and His People:
*Forming Seminarians for Preaching and Proclamation***

“...the liturgical proclamation of the word of God, especially in the Eucharistic assembly is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his people.” EG 137

**A White Paper on Preaching Formation in Seminaries
Submitted by the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics (CATH)**

President, Dr. Susan Fleming McGurgan/Vice-President, Msgr. Michael Becker

Writing Team:

Dr. Susan Fleming McGurgan, M.A., D.Min. in Preaching

President, Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology
Director, Lay Pastoral Ministry
The Athenaeum of Ohio/Mount St. Mary's Seminary of the West, Cincinnati, OH

Rev. Edward J. Griswold, S.T.L., M. Ed., D. Min. in Preaching

Past President, Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics
Vice Rector and Director of Pastoral Program
Henry and Marion Knott Professor of Homiletics
St. Mary's Seminary & University, Baltimore, MD

Rev. Gueric DeBona, M.A., M.Div., Ph.D

Past President, Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics
Subprior and Novice/Junior Master
Professor of Homiletics
Saint Meinrad Seminary & School of Theology, Saint Meinrad, IN

Rev. Michael E. Connors, C.S.C., M.Div., Th.D.

Past President, Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics
Associate Professional Specialist in Theology
Director of the John S. Marten Program in Homiletics
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN

Contributions from Members of CATH

Introduction

“...it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all.”
Presbyterorum Ordinis, 4

Preaching the Gospel occurs in myriad ways: through words, actions, attitudes and outreach. Preaching in the Sunday assembly is a preeminent form of proclamation as well as a complex theological and pastoral act. The homily links together Catholic teaching and tradition, Sacred Scripture, liturgy, sacraments, mission, contemporary issues and the lived experience of both preacher and listener. As *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* notes, “Preaching is nothing less than a participation in the dynamic power of the apostolic witness to the very Word that created the world, the Word that was given to the prophets and teachers of Israel, and the Word that became flesh.”¹

Preaching formation is, therefore, an integrative discipline. It invites seminarians and teachers to make connections; to synthesize; to publically articulate knowledge and belief with passion and clarity; to engage in what Pope Francis calls, “a holy dialogue.”² Preaching formation is not simply the acquisition of technique or the mastery of an academic discipline. It is intimately bound up with human and spiritual formation. Preaching is an invitation into a life-changing encounter with the living God and extending this invitation requires wisdom, maturity and emotional health. Thus, the task of forming preachers is, in itself, relational, complex and labor intensive for all concerned. It requires careful planning across theological and pastoral disciplines, major investments in time and resources, and a deep respect on the part of faculty and the students for the vital role of preaching in the life of the Church.

New Developments in the American Church and Culture

Since the publication of the last edition of the PPF, there have been significant cultural shifts in American society and in the Church. These shifts include an increasingly diverse population: culturally, linguistically, ethnically and spiritually. The Pew Research Center estimates that 34% of Catholics in America identify as Hispanic, 27% were born outside of the country, and 15% have at least one foreign born parent. American Catholics, with a median age of 49, are significantly older than people who are unaffiliated (36) or members of non-Christian faiths (40). Only 17% of Catholics are under the age of 30, compared with 22% of the general population and 35% of the unchurched. There is a marked rise in the number of people who self-identify as “unchurched” and “never churched” together with erosion in the number of initiated Catholics who attend Mass regularly. While the drop in affiliation and attendance is particularly pronounced among young adults, the diminishment is occurring among Americans of all ages.³ Moreover, Pope Francis notes that proclaiming the Gospel to different cultures also involves proclaiming it in scientific and academic circles and finding new ways to foster a fruitful dialogue of faith and reason.⁴ Experiences that build cross-cultural awareness and skills in evangelization and outreach are essential, not optional, priorities for pastors. Yet, today, pastors are frequently called upon to lead more than one parish or take on additional responsibilities,

¹ *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 1. See also *Dei Verbum*, 8.

² EG, 137.

³ Pew Research Religious Landscape Study, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/14/a-closer-look-at-catholic-america/> accessed 2/27/17; The CARA Report, 2015.

⁴ EG, 132.

leaving even less time for engagement with parishioners, continuing education, *lectio* and homily preparation.

New methods of communication through technology and social media are changing the ways people interact, access information, visualize, learn and listen. Americans are increasingly polarized across political, religious and racial/ethnic lines and many people regularly engage in, or hear, rhetoric that is confrontational or exclusionary and language designed to rupture, not reconcile. These dynamics are “re-wiring” both the faithful and the preacher himself in ways we cannot yet define, offering both challenges and opportunities for preaching. More than ever, we must form preachers who know how to listen, observe, interact with diverse populations, and respond to the “signs of the times” with the Gospel message. We need preachers who understand and use the power of language and image effectively; who can offer words that evoke new possibilities of redemption, purpose and hope. Pope Francis speaks of a “church that goes forth;” “a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets.”⁵ We must respond by forming preachers who embrace this challenge of missionary discipleship with joy.

Common Lacunae in Homiletics Formation⁶

- Faculty with inadequate training and credentials in homiletics.
- Minimal credit hours for homiletics curricula.
- Insufficient emphasis on preaching as an incarnational encounter, a holy dialogue, and a source of renewal and growth for the community and the preacher.
- Minimal training in homiletic methods and approaches rooted in *FIYH*, *PMF*, and *EG*.
- Little dialogue supporting the “culture of encounter,” analysis of the social location of preacher and community and inculturated preaching in diverse contexts.
- Limited time and opportunity for critical feedback from faculty, peers and laity; and for the discipline and practice of self-assessment.
- Minimal time and resources allocated to parish *practica* including: homily prep and feedback groups, connecting theory with concrete community life, listening and responding to needs of the hearers.
- Insufficient emphasis on preaching formation as an ongoing process continuing past ordination.

Theologians specifically trained in homiletics, preferably with a terminal degree in preaching, should be recruited for seminary formation. There is a trend toward hiring adjunct practitioners for homiletics, and while life experience is helpful, it cannot substitute for appropriate and intentional preparation. Aquinas Institute, St. Louis, offers a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching with online components designed for working teachers and ministers. Guilds such as CATH and the Academy of Homiletics provide professional development, continuing education and opportunities to network with experienced homiletics teachers.

⁵ *EG*, 24; 49.

⁶ These points emerged as a consensus from consultation with teachers of homiletics.

Homiletics Curriculum

CATH encourages a robust preaching program, engaging seminarians early in their studies. Major texts and documents such as *FIYH*, *PMF* and *EG* should shape content and approaches, emphasizing the vital position of the hearer as a companion in dialogue with the preacher and the texts. The curriculum should include theology, methodology and praxis, such as *lectio divina*, hermeneutical exercises, community analysis, practice in proclamation and preaching, along with extensive feedback from faculty, peers and listeners of diverse cultures and backgrounds. It should explore the Biblical, theological and pastoral dynamics of preaching, develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for preaching in diverse contexts and foster the spirituality of the preacher as shepherd, evangelist, teacher and believer on the road to Emmaus. Preaching labs equipped with recording equipment are crucial for analysis, feedback and self-assessment. Close collaboration with Biblical scholars and those in pastoral formation, such as field education and pastoral counseling, is strongly recommended.

Recommended Areas of Study⁷

- **Proclamation and Oral Interpretation:** practical skills in voice, delivery, proclamation and embodied speech; interpreting and reciting texts; communication theory; proclamation as a living encounter with Christ.
- **Introduction to Preaching/Homiletic Method:** introduction to key documents and resources; history and theology of Catholic preaching; preaching methodologies and forms; homily preparation rooted in listening and reflecting on community/text/doctrine/culture; practice preaching and feedback.
- **Biblical Hermeneutics for Preaching:** Catholic approach to scripture interpretation including appropriate use of Hebrew scriptures; approaches to the text including historical, literary and contemporary reader response; interpreting scripture vis-à-vis people's experience; exploring the meaning of a text for Christian life today.
- **Preaching at the Rites:** theory and practice of preaching at baptisms, weddings, funerals and rites of initiation including the RCIA; mystagogical preaching; preaching as an encounter with Christ in the sacraments.
- **Preaching in the Sunday Assembly:** ideally in conjunction with a parish *practica*; preaching the Paschal Mystery; preaching and Eucharist; analyzing the needs of the community; receiving and acting on feedback; forming the identity and spirituality of priest as preacher; the role of preaching in parish life; preaching and evangelization.

Key Resources and Documents

- ***Fulfilled in Your Hearing*:** This remains a vital resource for discussions of the listener, communication theory, homily preparation, the role and spirituality of the preacher, and the place of preaching in the life of the community.
- ***Preaching the Mystery of Faith*:** Particularly the imagery of the Emmaus journey as a paradigm for preaching; interpreting scripture in the light of faith; the interplay of liturgy, formation, catechesis and preaching.

⁷ These areas of study should be addressed in the curriculum with three or more three credit classes as the minimum.

- ***The Homiletic Directory***: Particularly the Introduction and as a resource for preaching.
- ***Verbum Domini***: Particularly #11, the Word of God as event-person; #52, the Word in liturgy; #59, the importance of the homily; #82, seminarians called to profound personal relationship with the Word, especially in *lectio divina*; # 123, proclamation of the Word creating communion and joy.
- ***Dei Verbum and The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church***: Both are foundational.

Pope Francis and Preaching

- ***Evangelii Gaudium***: *In toto*, and especially Chapter 3, which should be required reading. Particularly the themes of hope and joy; the image of the shepherd smelling of the sheep; the centrality of evangelization and mission; reverencing truth and personalizing the Word; the preacher with “an ear to the people” and knowing the heart of his community; the importance of *lectio*, scripture study and sufficient time for homily preparation; the homily as holy dialogue, as a “mother’s conversation” and surpassing all forms of catechesis; inculturated preaching as a synthesis; the importance of kerygmatic and mystagogical catechesis; the need for clarity and simplicity; accompaniment and the art of listening; the homily as a spiritual concern, positive and hope filled.
- ***Laudato Si***: Particularly #65-75; #89-92; #233-237.
- ***Misericordiae Vultus***: Particularly #9; #16; #25.

Conclusion

Sunday after Sunday the faithful gather, longing for evidence that Christ is present in their lives, sustaining them. When Jesus spoke, people experienced God’s salvific love and responded with professions of faith that healed bodies, minds and spirits. His example teaches us that preaching should be transformative. It should point to this life-giving presence and bring people into deeper relationship with God. Preaching is integral to our experience of faith, especially in the liturgy as “the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people”⁸ and it is vital in the formation of missionary disciples. Pope Francis calls the homily, “the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people.”⁹

Too often, though, preaching falls short--due to insufficient preparation, poor communication, the inability to connect with listeners, a lack of cultural awareness, superficial or overly academic approaches, or an impoverished view of the role of preaching in the community. We pay a terrible price for this shortfall. Poor preaching is often listed as a reason people leave the Church and it can contribute to inadequate formation and catechesis and to a lack of engagement and missionary zeal on the part of the faithful. If we agree that the first task of priests is to preach the Gospel to all, then we must commit the time and resources needed to form effective preachers in the seminary and support them after ordination. As our Holy Father invites, “Let us renew our confidence in preaching, based on the conviction that it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and that he displays his power through human words.”¹⁰

⁸ EG, 137.

⁹ EG, 135.

¹⁰ EG, 136.