

THE Priest

“Who do you say I am”?

— Mark 8:29

We Preach Christ Crucified

Salient points from a Notre Dame preaching conference

By Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.

In June I attended “We Preach Christ Crucified: A Conference on Catholic Preaching” at Notre Dame, Indiana, June 25-27, 2012. Since many of you were unable to attend this conference, I would like to share some of my notes. It will not be possible to cover all of the talks, and I beg pardon for not doing justice to the ones included here.

On the opening evening, Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, M.Sp.S., of San Antonio, gave the keynote address entitled “We Preach a Living Word.” He quoted John of the Cross: “The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son and this Word always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul” (*Maxims and Counsels*, No. 21).

The Word comes to us in deep silence so people can come to silence. Nothing is more important than our preaching as St. Paul points out. Fran-

cis of Assisi sent out his friars with the command to preach and, if necessary, use words. It is not always the words, but a life of integrity and love that accompany them.

We need to pray for the charism of preaching so our preaching will be dynamic and not boring, tiring and useless. Our words have to give spirit and life. The Spirit will enable us to preach with life and conviction like Peter and Paul. Can we set people on fire as we send them forth at the end of the Mass?

Pope Benedict XVI wrote that preachers are the first to receive the Word. St. Augustine maintained that preachers are barren who have not received the Word. So it is necessary to be in constant contact with the text. But we must also be aware of the cultural diversity of our assembly or hearers. Christ goes beyond cultures but we need to connect with them, realizing where people are, their fears,

concerns, worries, doubts and joys. We preach one Gospel but differently depending on our assemblies. We have a sacred privilege and responsibility, and we must keep in mind Paul’s words, “God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27).

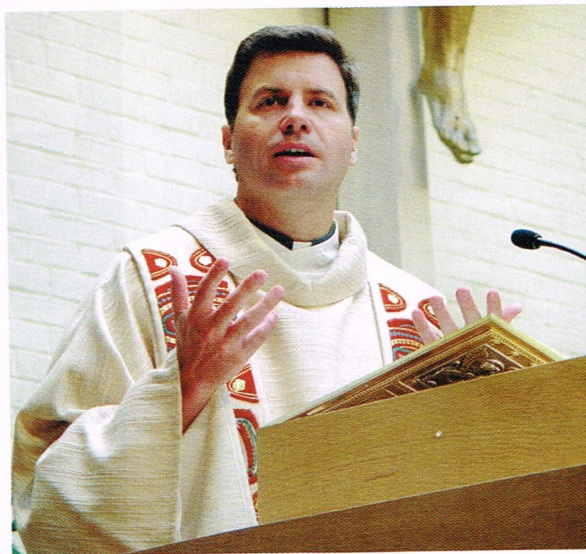
The following morning Sister Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P., spoke on “Feasting at the Table of the Word: From *Dei Verbum* to *Verbum Domini*.” She began with the banquet image, quoting from Proverbs 9 which deals with two banquets. The Bread of Life is offered from the one table. We are the waiters at the table. We also are beggars telling another beggar where the bread is.

She quoted Yves Congar who maintained that if the faithful were to hear only sermons preached and, in another country, were not to hear the Word preached but only experience the Eucharist, the people who heard the Word only would, after one year, be more faithful than those who had the Eucharist only. St. Paul states, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

How are we to understand God’s Word? We need to listen reverently to the Word. Revelation reaches us through experience. God is at work buoying us up by promising a redeemer. We recite at funeral Masses about those whose faith is known to God alone. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that God’s grace is not limited by our sacraments and our preaching. The prophets’ challenge was to articulate the concrete circumstances and events

IN BRIEF

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- Preaching as imaging a re-newed world
- Preaching among the poor
- The New Evangelization and the new media



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to people. Jesus not only proclaimed God's Word but embodied it. Jesus not only spoke the Word, but enfleshed it.

We are asked to hand on the Church's teaching, the mystery of Christ, not just in words but to embody it. The role of the Spirit is evident as we encounter Christ giving us a new impulse to preach. Our first task is to preach the Word in unison with the bishop. A hidden energy is encapsulated in the Good News. Our hearers listen more to witnesses than teachers.

Pope Benedict XVI insists that God wants to enter into dialogue with us. Hilker encouraged us to use the Psalms because they embody pain, stress, lament and joy, addressing the problems of the assembly. We need to not only hear the Word outwardly but also inwardly, otherwise it remains barren. What do these words say to me and to the community?

We cannot offer words that have not touched us. We need to eat the scroll like Ezekiel (3:1). The Spirit can bring dead bones alive. An ancient practice involves invoking the Spirit before proclaiming the Word and after the homily. The wood of the Cross can be the wood of our desk as we prepare to proclaim the Good News.

Workshops were also offered. A panel from the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics talked briefly about "Issues on Preaching Today." Father Gregory Heille, O.P., emphasized how our preaching has to flow from the Gospel actualized in the community, Catholic social service, RCIA, the study of Scripture together and other activities. Father Joel Henson highlighted how important it is (especially

now with the influx of immigrants) to know our audience, their culture, customs, economic status and stories. Father

Tom Margevicius wondered how it is possible for a preacher to spend one hour in preparation for every minute of the homily, yet good preparation is needed. Dr. Susan McGurgan stressed the importance of hope as our message because hope is very evocative and also transformational.

Father James Wallace, C.Ss.R, offered his insights on "Preaching as Imaging a Re-Newed World." He quoted Einstein that imagination is more important than knowledge. We need to change the images, toy with them, and mediate them. We will be judged by our images. What images feed or heal us? The work of the preacher is one with an active imagination. He recommended Protestant pastor Walter Brueggemann's latest book, *The Prac-*

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tion of *Prophetic Imagination, Preaching an Emancipatory Word* (Fortress, 2012). God is more interested in adventure than keeping the status quo. We need to offer people different ways of seeing. He quoted Bishop Robert Morneau's three characteristics of people: mud-diness, leading to relativity, numbness because they are adrift.

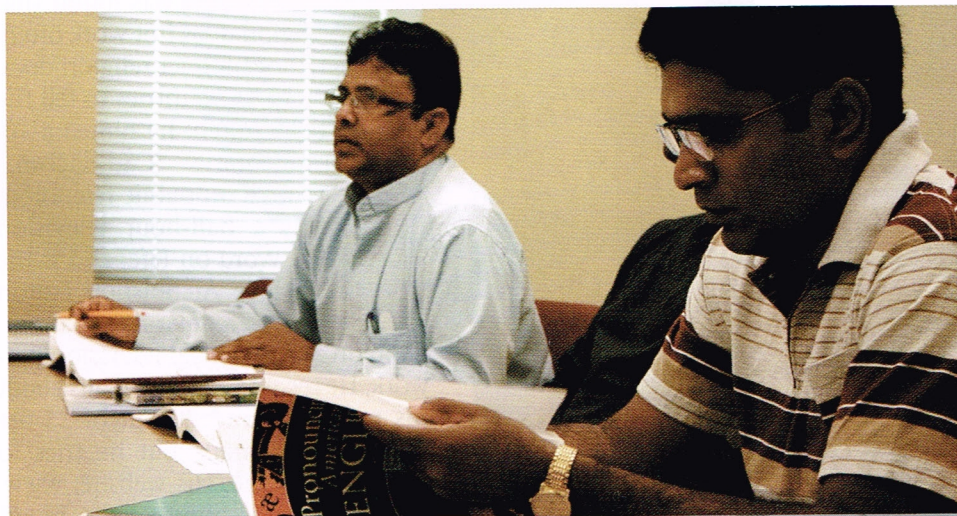
A panel of Holy Cross priests gave insights into "Preaching Among the Poor," how those experiences influenced their preaching. Father Joseph Corpora, C.S.C., spent a number of years ministering to Mexican and Mexican American people in Arizona and Oregon. Now, at Notre Dame, he works on the Catholic School Advantage Campaign, a project trying to get Latino families to enroll their children in Catholic schools. Father William Wack, C.S.C., now a pastor in Austin, Texas, was formerly director of André House, a hospitality house serving the homeless and poor of central Phoenix,

Ariz. Father Robert Loughery, C.S.C., now rector of Sorin Hall at Notre Dame, was for nine years the pastor of the Downtown Chapel (now St. André Bessette Church), a Portland, Oregon, parish devoted to urban poor. Father Ronald Patrick Raab, C.S.C., the associate pastor of St. André Bessette, ministers to the vulnerable and marginalized of society and the Church. He believes that we should never use the word "poor" in preaching but other words like homeless, mentally ill, etc. He also stated that if we use the word "poor" we should not talk about the Church for the poor, but rather the Church of the poor. We are all united in the body of Christ.

The highlight of the conference was Father Robert Barron's "The New Evangelization and the New Media." He suggested Brandon Vogt's *The Church and the New Media: Blogging Converts, Online Activists and Bishops who Tweet*. Vogt is a 26-year old Catholic blogger,

writer, speaker, and a former evangelist. To evangelize, according to Father Barron, we have to announce the good news that Christ is risen from the dead. Christ is the *lumen gentium*. He insisted that the Church does not have a mission but is a mission. The New Evangelization needs ardor. Yves Congar maintained that the Church has to turn outward not inward. Pope Benedict XVI urges us to move into the world with a mission. What is needed is an emphasis on our belief in the resurrection of Christ. This has to grasp us by our lapels.

The New Evangelization also involves new expressions. We need things to be said in a new way. A deep misinterpretation of God exists. Atheists are challenging us. God is a threat to human flourishing. Father Barron told us how Thomas Merton was impressed by Étienne Gilson's books, especially the *ipsum esse* of God. We need to sink into God, as Meister Eckhart



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states. Irenaeus wrote, "The glory of God is man fully alive." Good preaching speaks of God as the burning bush. The gods who come into our world are easily incinerated. He used the example of Elijah who killed 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah told these prophets to put a sliced-up bull on wood and instructed them that the God who answers with fire when called on is God. They agreed and called on their god, but nothing happened. Elijah taunted them to call louder, and still nothing happened. Then, when he called on God, the fire came and consumed everything (1 Kgs 18).

All of us are wired for God. Augustine expressed it well, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." We have attained great justice, but is it enough? John of the Cross reminds us that there are deep caverns within us: pleasure, money, power, wealth, honor.

We have too many secular billboards enticing us into traps of consumerism.

According to Karl Barth, the greatest sin of our world is sloth, self complacency. Relativism, subjectivism and indifference run rampant. We live in a culture where my will determines everything. My existence comes first. In his *Purgatorio*, Dante pictured the occupants of the sloth (*acedia*) section as people forced to run continuously at top speed. We live in a culture that doesn't go anywhere. We seek after what is merely subjectively satisfying. Father Barron used the example of the French language which doesn't care whether you know it. Also, the ground doesn't care if you make a bad shot in golf and start beating it with your club.

You are not hurting the golf course.

We don't live until we come to the good.

Laws are often an affront to us, but are necessary. As the psalmist says, "How I love your law, Lord. I study it all day long" (119:97). Iris Murdock states that we need a sovereignty of good. The good has to grab, seize, change us, and then we can proclaim it, inviting our assembly to do the same and then go forth.

Besides ardor and new expressions, new methods of conveying our message are necessary. Father Barron told a story about how Cardinal George on his *ad limina* visit was asked by the Pope what he was doing to evangelize the culture. He was at a loss what to say, so when he came back to Chicago he asked Father Barron to jump-start evangelization in the archdiocese. Barron told how he became involved in YouTube and twitter. He has found that straight religion does not work often, but implicit or indirect religion does. Journeying to 16 countries to tell the story of the Church, he filmed a 10-part documentary, "Catholicism," which has aired on public television. He presents a half-hour television show called Word on Fire, and is the first priest since Archbishop Fulton Sheen to have a regular national program on a commercial television network. He receives many e-mails about his programs, and 20 out of 25 are not complimentary, but he tries to answer each one. His website, www.wordonfire.org, offers daily blogs, articles, commentaries and over 10 years of weekly homily podcasts. His radio show Word on Fire is heard on Sunday nights at 7:00 p.m. on Relevant Radio (950 AM Chicago). **P**

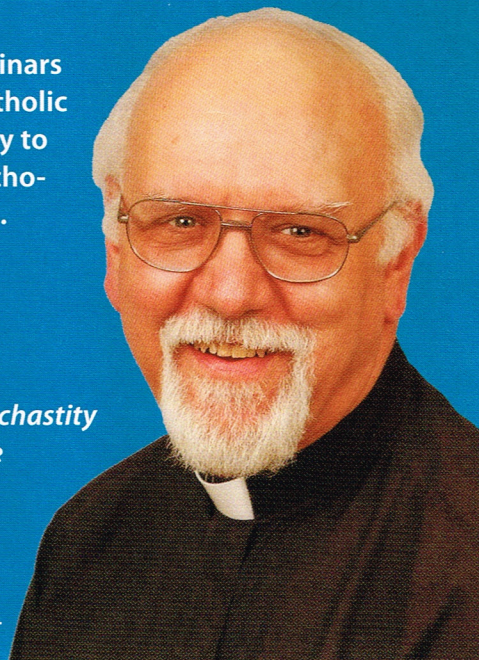
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