

Contemplative Homiletics: Being Carried into Reality¹

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For about seven years, I taught undergraduate Moral Theology incorrectly. For some reason, I kept putting the emphasis on the agency of the students while cloaking the agency of God in vague theological language about grace and “his help.” Then one day, a parishioner came to me to ask for prayers as she was about to begin a retreat. I assured her I would pray for her, and we even did so before she left my office. After the retreat, she sought me out to ask a moral question that arose in her conscience during her retreat: “Do I have to reverse my tubal ligation?” Now, this was not a retreat on theology of the body or any aspect of sexual ethics or marriage. It was simply a retreat on how to pray. I am concerned enough about the income and financial stability of my fellow moral theologians that I will not advocate the demise of our discipline; but certainly, I began to think, the mystical must precede the moral, as Henri de Lubac urged.² The approach I took to moral theology often elicited defensive postures on the part of students. This disposition left little room for them to receive the beauty of virtuous living as a motivating power to enter the good. Peter John Cameron, O.P., in his indispensable book on preaching, noted: “If the final concrete proposal of your preaching puts the initiative on the hearer rather than on God and grace, it is moralistic.”³

¹ 2018 Marten Lecture, University of Notre Dame.

² Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, *The Four Senses of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 31.

³ Peter John Cameron, O.P., *Why Preach?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 142. See also Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), §1: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event,

One might ask what is wrong with a moral theologian being moralistic. In light of my experience with this parishioner, I reimagined my approach to moral theology and began to qualify the emphasis I placed on human agency. Certainly the academic process of teaching the moral truths of the faith has its own ends and purposes, different from the ends and purposes of a retreat, but I began to see that the *encounter one has with Christ in prayer* can enflame persons to live the moral truths of Catholicism. A good argument about the truth of moral behavior convinces some to enter the Church, but what sustains that movement is a living relationship with the Holy Spirit. “Due to the work of the Holy Spirit it will always be possible for subsequent generations *to have the same experience of the Risen One* that was lived by the apostolic community at the origin of the church.”⁴ So I began to think that the teaching of theology should be structured in such a way that one might actually encounter Christ in its teaching, mostly by welcoming the truth of theology in periods of silence in the classroom. In this silence, we allow students to relate the content of truth and its effects upon them to Christ.⁵ I came to see the classroom as an extension of the Liturgy of the Word, similar to the way in which Eucharistic Adoration is an extension of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. As such, the teaching of theology encompasses what Pope Benedict XVI called a “more generous definition of human reason.”⁶ Such a definition is not reducible to a pedagogical method or the demands of hegemonic scientism. Rather our “studying is always with the Lord, before the Lord, and for Him.”⁷

This awakening in me overturned my data-driven classroom, which yielded to a more contemplative approach of inviting students to encounter the beauty of truth as it is communicated from within doctrine. Space was opened up, by intermittent silence, for God to initiate the integration of theological truth with the particulars of each individual student’s life. Here was a chance for faith to heal reason and for reason to more deeply

a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, quoted in Tracey Rowland, *Benedict XVI: Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 53.

⁵ James Keating, *Resting on the Heart of Christ: The Vocation and Spirituality of the Seminary Theologian* (Omaha, NE: IPF, 2009).

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Representatives of Science,” University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006 (w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html).

⁷ Benedict XVI, *A Reason Open To God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 150; Joseph Ratzinger, “The Church and Scientific Theology,” *Communio* 7 (1980): 339.

grasp the mystery of faith.

Following upon these developments, I looked at how I was approaching my preaching within the Eucharistic Liturgy and found I was perilously close to Father Cameron's definition of moralism there as well. After a period of prayer, I developed a different approach to preaching that I presented as "contemplative homiletics."⁸ The goal of contemplative homiletics was to allow the truth of the Scripture text to silence the worshippers in order to receive the healing of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Here, of course, I was furthering the movement of integrating truth and love. Such integration is essential to both theological instruction and liturgical preaching. Truth, when received contemplatively, becomes an occasion not only to "know" but to love and be loved. Theological instruction is not data, prayer, knowledge, or love. Rather, theology *is the suffering of the integration* of these realities by those who *love Him who is Truth*. Romanus Cessario has argued: "All learning is fundamentally contemplative. Study proceeds successfully within an establishment of real contact with God. . . . It is God who really does the teaching. . . . There is no theology without prayer. Prayer is the way we let God instruct us."¹⁰ I would like to expand and deepen my understanding of the contemplative homily by building on my approach to theology as truth giving birth to silence. This silence bears a divine presence allowing God to act within the hearer. Conversion is the end of receiving truth either in the contemplative silence of study or in the contemplative silence of worship. The goal has always been to connect the beauty of truth with the conversion of the whole person, whether as a result of study or as a result of worship. Encounter yields a body surrendered and eager to act.

I will look at this desire to act on what is heard within an appreciation of the Holy Spirit's own power in worship, a power mediating truth and healing. The Spirit takes the Gospel, which is Christ's, and carries it into our hearts, giving life by way of the gift of communion with the Trinity. To know and to receive truth in and from Love is to be in reality. There is no setting more enmeshed in reality than the Eucharistic Liturgy. We engage the depths of reality whenever its door is opened by a priest in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Here we begin to participate in the living Word as we progress through hearing to beholding, then

⁸ James Keating, "Contemplative Homiletics," *Seminary Journal* 16, no.2 (Fall 2010): 63–69.

⁹ Keating, "Contemplative Homiletics," 65.

¹⁰ Romanus Cessario, *Theology and Sanctity* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press 2014), 161–62.

to communion, and then ultimately to living the inevitable fruit of such progression: witness (martyrdom).

Pragmatically, the priest or deacon always has the same goal when preaching: to invite the people into communion with God and each other as they receive the Spirit, who is life and communion. In this way, the Church is readied *from within* by the Spirit to participate in Christ's Body as His Bride, a Bride bearing spiritual and moral witness to the culture.

In a sense, members of the Church represent humanity experiencing its deepest ache—an ache that is desire, a desire that is satisfied in God, and so fulfills both affective longing and intellectual seeking. In its explicit embrace of faith, the Church longs to have this ache relieved in Holy Communion with the living Word. In such communion, all that is human finds its rest.¹¹

The Homily Stirs the Holy Spirit in Worshippers

The Spirit is not the one who acts; He *is the act, the event*. He Himself is the prayer within us.¹² The homilist invites the Church to “be open” (Mark 7:34) and let the love of God be poured into each member (Rom 5:5). The homilist invites the Church to let this “act” (this “event”) have its way with them.¹³ Only in such *a surrender to the truth* enmeshed in the words of the preacher can the Church fully become itself in public. This surrender, however, is not simply a response to discursive truths, but rather, as Pope Benedict XVI was fond of repeating,¹⁴ it is a surrender to a Person. This Divine Person emerges from within the proclamation of Scripture. It is this Person who moves, encourages, and calls the Church to reveal the fruit of liturgical listening as public witness. In a mysterious way, each homily carries the potential to ignite a suffering within us, a suffering born of our engaged listening to the Word of God. Such engagement is like Jesus poking his finger into our ears and pleading with us: be open. We resist this poking and pleading because all homilies confront our idols, our hiding places, those actions and dispositions we love more than the Lord. But if we are courageous and enter the arena of salvation week after week, the homily can bear the grace of surrender to us. The result of such surrender,

¹¹ Paul O’Callaghan, *Children of God in the World* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 545.

¹² Wilfrid Stinissen, O.C.D., *The Holy Spirit, Fire of Divine Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 18.

¹³ Jeremiah 20:7–9 (in the sense of being enticed, beguiled).

¹⁴ Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Called to Holiness* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 34. Cameron, *Why Preach?* 87–88.

due to the pleading and poking of Jesus to be open, is clear: the proclamation is received (Mark 7:33). This proclamation bears healing with it, but it primarily carries to our hearts the man who “has done all things well” (Mark 7:37). The proclaimed Word can certainly cure and heal people, but our most common experience is to find in it a release of integrative energy yielding self-possession.¹⁵ Taken into communion with the Spirit by way of the proclaimed Word, we receive divine love and thus suffer the healing of lies, fractured emotions, and biased or ideological thinking, which heretofore may have defined our interiority. As worshippers’ silent receptivity is contextualized within the fullness of the Eucharist as salvific encounter,¹⁶ we can say that the homily is therapeutic.¹⁷

Therapeutic in this context means that Christianity counteracts humanity’s wound of sin, a wound that alienates us from God and makes it easier for us to entertain idols. Such ease invites us to open ourselves to artificial consolation. Alternately, the homily opens the ears of the heart with a stark contrast to that ease as it takes us into a true Word from the real God. In a sense, our preaching is the “spit” of Christ, carrying with it a healing power.¹⁸ For this power to reach both preacher and congregation, we need the *habitus* of prayer. With this virtue, we possess a *stable disposition of discerning* where the homily occasions us to *behold the True One in love; to be affected by He who emerges from the homily as beauty*.¹⁹

¹⁵ See Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), §62: “Through the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit accomplishes that ‘strengthening of the inner man’ spoken of in the Letter to the Ephesians [Eph 3:16]. Through the Eucharist, individuals and communities, by the action of the Paraclete-Counselor, learn to discover the divine sense of human life, as spoken of by the Council: that sense whereby Jesus Christ ‘fully reveals man to man himself,’ suggesting ‘a certain likeness between the union of the divine persons, and the union of God’s children in truth and charity’ [*Gaudium et Spes*, §24]. This union is expressed and made real especially through the Eucharist, in which man shares in the sacrifice of Christ which this celebration actualizes, and he also learns to ‘find himself . . . through a . . . gift of himself’ [*Gaudium et Spes*, §24], through communion with God and with others, his brothers and sisters.”

¹⁶ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1067–68.

¹⁷ “Healing is an essential dimension of the apostolic mission and of Christian faith in general. It can even be said that Christianity is a therapeutic religion. . . . When understood at a sufficiently deep level, this expresses the entire content of redemption” (Pope Benedict XVI as quoted in Mary Healy, *Healing* [Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015], 30).

¹⁸ See Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 147: “In the ancient world saliva was considered to have therapeutic qualities.”

¹⁹ See Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, §12: “This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. [John] 19:37), we can

The homilist and congregation, then, agree to enter a dialogue of prayer occasioned by the words spoken. This prayer is interior, born from the silent contemplation of the speaker, and received in the silent receptivity of the congregation. Neither the homilist nor the congregation relinquishes the drama of freedom being played out in the presence of God as they sift spoken words for hints of His voice, His call, a voice once heard that elicits both sacrifice and the communion that is “rest.” Once trust is given to God and rest received from Him, He summons with a call to action, a call as singular as is each vocation present in the congregation. This call to action is one of freedom unto sacrifice or a sacrifice bearing freedom. This paradoxical freedom that is sacrifice is attainable because it shares in the power of the One who is Love necessitating sacrifice.²⁰ Hence, to receive the living Word and the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ as one’s life commitment is to receive the power to choose love even if it kills you. It is to become, through the power of the Spirit, another Christ.²¹ To keep receiving the Word of God as proclaimed in each Eucharistic Liturgy is to regularly receive anew (deepening upon depth, and depth upon deepening) the mystical life as a personal appropriation of Him *Who is proclaimed* in the Church as the Living Word.²²

If Louis Bouyer is correct²³ that, in the Eucharist, *we are gathered to*

understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move.” Of course, every celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy is a contemplation of the pierced side of Christ. Hence the Eucharist *is* the definition of love.

²⁰ See Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, §6: “Love is indeed ‘ecstasy,’ not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God: ‘Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it’ (Lk 17:33), as Jesus says throughout the Gospels (cf. Mt 10:39; 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25). In these words, Jesus portrays his own path, which leads through the Cross to the Resurrection: the path of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and in this way bears much fruit. Starting from the depths of his own sacrifice and of the love that reaches fulfilment therein, he also portrays in these words the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.”

²¹ O’Callaghan, *Children of God in the World*, 276.

²² Francis Martin, “Spiritual Understanding of Scripture,” in *Verbum Domini and the Complementarity of Exegesis and Theology*, ed. Scott Carl (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 24–25.

²³ Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to the Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2013), 48–49.

hear the Word, and thus invited to sacrifice our lives in response to its proclamation, then surely homilies ought not to be “syllogisms”²⁴—which convert few if any. Nor should a homily merely be data. Facts and information already fill the work day of the laity to the point of numbness. Instead, the homily is “fire,” or rather, as Francis Martin says, *a Person* bearing fire.²⁵ The homily is the integration of mystery, God’s action,²⁶ with our dynamic response in what we call liturgy. There, *in the very midst of mystery*, the homilist longs to elicit a response from the worshippers. It is a response to the very aspect of mystery carried by the Word proclaimed in the midst of the Body and Blood being offered. In other words, the homily is mystical by definition.²⁷ For this to be so, the homilist hopes to reach a level of contemplative oratory that stirs the Bride (the Church) to see and hear the Lord and offer herself to the Bridegroom. “What is deepest in the Church . . . is the spouse like responsiveness of receptivity and obedience to Christ who, as the Church’s head, ever plunges anew into His own being those whom He sends out as His disciples.”²⁸

The *voice of the homilist* must reach what is deepest in the Church so that a real response may be elicited and desire for communion be born, heralding a vulnerability to mission. Of course, *mystical* does not mean the homilist conjures subjective states of religious emotion from the congregation. Instead the preacher endeavors *to leave the members in the Presence*, and if the Holy Spirit wishes to bring about such religious emotions within the members *in relation to His Presence*, that is His affair. As the homilist moves those vulnerable members into the Presence, he possesses only one earnest hope for the homily’s effect: to leave the people in *prayer*.²⁹ If the

²⁴ John Connolly, *John Henry Newman* (Lanham, MD: Sheed, 2005), 98.

²⁵ Connolly, *John Henry Newman*, 13. See also Louis Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery: From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism* (Petersham, MA: St Bede’s, 1990), 84: “At the outset, and fundamentally, [the Word] is not a word which gives information, like a professor. It is an active word, a personal intervention in the lives of those whom it addresses.”

²⁶ Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (New York: Herder, 1999), 40.

²⁷ Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery*, 181: “Whenever [Denis] produces a concrete definition of what he understands by mystical, it is always in the immediate context either of biblical interpretation or of liturgical exposition, and often both at the same time.”

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 8.

²⁹ Pope Francis has noted that “the first task in life is prayer . . . prayer of the heart: to look at the Lord, to listen to the Lord, to ask the Lord” (Daily Mass Homily, Casa Santa Marta, October 8, 2013). In this way we see that the fundamental mission of the homily, leaving persons in prayer, is a way to serve the “first task in life.”

homilist can move the congregation into the Presence, stilling their hearts enough to receive and to remain in communion with the Spirit, he has succeeded. For, to usher the people into prayer is to bring them into reality (i.e., *into being another Christ; into taking on the mind of Christ*). Since so many Catholics abide in fantasy throughout the week by the power of popular culture, such a goal is the contemporary and urgent affair of the homilist. The homily opens up reality and endeavors to engage the people in it. Here, as the homily is proclaimed and contemplated, the people's concrete lives, their fidelities and infidelities, are taken up into *reality itself* in a Holy Communion. The word preached is the antechamber for the word embraced, and the word embraced is the purification of all fantasy, as bondage gives way to the freedom of reality. The freedom of reality liberates the congregation to no longer be governed by fantasy and idiosyncratic obsessions; rather, they are invited to delight in knowing the freedom of being governed by Christ.³⁰ Reality for the one who worships in spirit and truth (John 4:23) is very simply understood: sharing in Christ's own life of sacrificial love, which becomes gift for all.³¹ The homily, of course, assists us to live a life of sacrifice become gift out of the *power* of the one who defines reality as such. The homily makes us vulnerable; it elicits desire within us to participate in the self donation of the Christ as He is missioned by the Father and sustained by the Spirit. Christ is the one who obeys and heals. Christ is always sent from the banquet on mission (Luke 14: 15–24). Hearing a homily and obeying it with our whole body prepares us for a Holy Communion, one that sends and does not sedate. This conspiracy between Word proclaimed and gifts received at the altar orders believers toward perfect freedom, an interior life³² congruent with God's indwelling love, a life lived in harmony with the prayer being uttered by the indwelling Spirit, a life of no longer saying prayers, but of becoming one.

As a good in itself, prayer needs no practical fruit. Nevertheless, history has shown that, when personal vulnerability meets divine presence, much fruit follows by way of discernment. Such is the case when a homily born of prayer is met by the vulnerable and prayer-soaked hearts of the people. Many a saint has given testimony that mission was unleashed within them

³⁰ Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 90.

³¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 55.

³² "Perfect liberty is neither license nor conformity to external law but what Congar called 'interiority'—the total coincidence of our own desire . . . with the love of God" (Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 99).

as the Word was proclaimed in the midst of salvation being offered at Mass (e.g., Francis of Assisi and Elizabeth Ann Seton). Such mission was perceived because one's vulnerability to God yielded a new or deepening relationship with Him. Such a relationship always defines one, and from such an identity a mission is given. If deepening the worshippers' prayer is the goal of the Word proclaimed and preached, then the homily must always be absorbed into the depths of communal silence. Silence naturally follows a grace-filled homily, unless artificially thwarted by functionalism. Silence is natural because, for the vulnerable, the speaker just ushered the listener into reality. Reality intrinsically hushes. Reality comes upon the listener as gift, health, or salvation, as a balm to ease the "useless anxiety" we bear.

Most especially, prayer *leaves us available*³³ to being affected by God. The homilist who listens to the Spirit attempts to ready the members' hearts to be loved by God right within worship. It is for this reason that the Church gathers: to receive such love and then give, or sacrifice, themselves in return for receiving such. Here is true mysticism and the true end of homiletics.³⁴ "In the Eucharist we are caught up . . . in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. . . . His self-giving is meant to become mine."³⁵ It is this mystery that the homilist is inviting the people to come into, and *once within it*, they can contemplate the beauty of its truth.³⁶ To lead the congregation into mystery is to lead them into reality, a fecund communion with God that wounds the conscience, giving birth to mission.³⁷ It is the Holy Spirit who is roused in preaching, and with our consent, He will penetrate our consciences even more deeply, for it is there that He dwells.³⁸ The Holy

³³ Wendy Wright, "Prayer in the Salesian Tradition," in *Prayer in the Catholic Tradition: A Handbook of Practical Approaches*, ed. Robert Wicks (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2016), 271.

³⁴ "It is implied that all true mysticism . . . is essentially the same in being rooted in the *consciousness of our reception of divine love*" (Bernard McGinn discussing the thought of Bernard Lonergan in *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 [New York: Crossroad, 1991], 284).

³⁵ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 57–58.

³⁶ Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 117. See also Aidan Nichols, *The Word has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 31: "Beauty is not light falling on the object but light breaking forth from the form's interior."

³⁷ "By real liturgy and preaching I mean those which are really capable of bearing fruit in the consciences of man What God wants in his worship is no ceremony, no offering, nothing outward, but man himself, . . . the gift of the heart of man" (Yves Congar, *A Gospel Priesthood* [New York: Herder, 1967], 140–41).

³⁸ James Keating, "Evangelizing Conscience," *Pro Ecclesia* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1999):

Spirit frees us to obey the homily in its truth, not out of compulsion, but out of love. Over time and with the proper disposition, the homily can free people from illusory loves, disordered affections, and idiosyncratic judgments. In listening to the homily within sacramental worship, we can come to suffer our own birth as true agents who abide in communion with God.³⁹ All the members of the whole Church are being invited by the Spirit to abide in truth and worship, and thus to progressively become holy.⁴⁰ This invitation is given, and holiness effected, by those who respond to the Spirit at worship in freedom and with desire.

Some instruction before or after Mass is necessary to facilitate this level of receiving love, as many people do not know how to listen for God moving within their hearts. Primarily, however, the instruction is given to ready their hearts to be transported into prayer by the homily. Once within this silence-enshrouded communion, they can be ushered to the awesome sacrifice at the altar.

The faithful are invited to listen to the homily in such a way that the subject of the homilist's fascination, God, is internalized in the heart. To listen in this way is the very definition of intimacy, and intimacy is the occasion for conversion. Such listening is possible within a homily because it is the occasion for God to speak with a "degree of sacramentality," as noted by Yves Congar.⁴¹ To welcome God carried and hidden within the words preached, to respond to this Presence with *our own presence* (that is, to be engaged in receiving truth and sharing our own thoughts, feelings, and desires), is the adhesive of faith itself. In the homily, one cannot guarantee an encounter with God, so it is all the more necessary to surround the preacher with a skilled and discerning assembly, each working to hear what God is saying from within the relationship He has with him or her.

If this is to happen, the preacher must give real food,⁴² and not simply images, ideas, stories, or data. Paradoxically, he is to preach as one waiting

475–87, at 479.

³⁹ Dennis Billy and James Keating, *Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 69–84.

⁴⁰ Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 339.

⁴¹ Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1986), 25.

⁴² Yves Congar, *A Gospel Priesthood*, 147; Acts 6:2; Acts 8:31. See also Peter Williamson on *diakonia* and the play on words that is found in Acts 6 in relation to the Word of God being food and service (*diakonia*) being the Word of God's communication to others ("Preparing Seminarians for ministry of the Word in light of *Verbum Domini*," in *Verbum Domini and the Complementarity of Exegesis and Theology*, ed. Fr. Scott Carl [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015], 88n4).

on tables, always attentive to the real hunger of people and delivering to them what is truly needed. The preacher rushes to the Ethiopian eunuch because he senses his exasperation: “I want to be fed but cannot open the cupboard.”

The heart must be encouraged to receive the soul’s food during the homily itself, in the substantial silence afforded by the presider after it, and in the experiences and interior movements of the heart after the person leaves the church. Most crucial to all this is increasing people’s devotion to the Holy Spirit, as He is the one who makes sure the Word of God is heard in the words of the homilist.⁴³

The Spirit as Life and Communion, thus the One Who Heals

“Just as the word of God comes to us in the body of Christ, in his Eucharistic body and in the body of the Scriptures, through the working of the Holy Spirit, so too it can only be truly received and understood through that same Spirit.”⁴⁴

It is God who speaks first. In a pale way, the homilist occasions this “speaking” for the congregation by extending the proclamation, aiding them to receive and creatively integrate it within the context of their own lives. In this integration, the homily becomes personal. The liturgy is the action of God in the midst of a gathering of believers who want to be affected by divine love offered as salvation. The liturgy is not devotional prayer, but each person must welcome the movement of God toward the Church in mercy as his or her own. Hence, the corporate worship is held together by the cellular movement of each person taking seriously the Word God uttered as gift. Personal devotion⁴⁵ in the Eucharistic Liturgy (a perennial tension) is not the purpose as such, but without personal appropriation within its structures, worship becomes the occasion for an institution to order words and gestures while failing as persons to be affected by God. Thus, the Holy Spirit assists throughout the whole process of praying the homily. Most powerfully, He assists with the interior listening of people and energizes the integration noted above. The believer, in essence, conspires with the Spirit through knowledge and love to give permission to that same Spirit to “make things happen” in his or

⁴³ Yves Congar, *The Word and Spirit*, trans. David Smith (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 34.

⁴⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), §16

⁴⁵ Joyce Ann Zimmerman, “Liturgical Prayer,” in Wicks, *Prayer in the Catholic Tradition*, 521 and 529.

her life.⁴⁶ We *contemplate the mysteries* unfolding before us in the homily and around and within us at the Eucharistic altar *only so that action* may be born in us (so “things will happen”). When believers receive the homily in their bodies,⁴⁷ martyrs are given to the culture. As a result of ingesting the Word and sacrament, no longer do the mysteries reside in the rites, but now they reside in the citizen Catholic. Such sacred witnessing is the public humiliation of the Catholic and, as such, is resisted by the culture as a contrast to the “passing age” (Rom 12) to which it clings. The homily tutors us in being Catholic, unleashing hunger for the Spirit’s influence in our bodies with *each present moment*, and not simply within the celebration of the sacraments.⁴⁸

Obviously, the homily can leave a congregation unmoved as well, remaining lodged within the culture of distraction. In fact, it may seem that this is the norm, as we are living in a time of waning interest in and draining desire for the supernatural.⁴⁹ Can the homily within the Eucharistic Liturgy stir desire for God, or has our desire to “rest” from our labors (by going out of existence instead of into heaven) claimed a growing part of the “none” generation? Even this generation hungers within for intimacy, for some connection and communion with another. Hence, the homily may become a way to awaken a desire for intimacy with God that can be satisfied over time in the Eucharistic Lord.

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:17–18). In a certain sense, the disciples become “drawn into intimacy with God by being immersed in the word of God”: “God’s word is, so to speak, the purifying bath, the creative power which changes them and makes them belong to God.”⁵⁰ The Word itself—proclaimed, expounded, and received—is the “change” agent and the occasion for an intimacy that may send others to bring the Gospel to the culture.

The homilist centers and recenters the congregation, week-to-week and month-to-month, in the Paschal Mystery. In so doing, the homilist conspires to unleash an imaginative center within the Church born of intimacy with Christ. It is not the preacher’s imagination alone that matters,

⁴⁶ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Exploration in Theology*, vol. 3, *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 242.

⁴⁷ Balthasar, *Explorations*, 3:177.

⁴⁸ Balthasar, *Explorations*, 3:181.

⁴⁹ “America’s Changing Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

⁵⁰ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §80.

but the thinking unleashed within the congregation as the preacher brings the people to the depths of mystery week after week. From such depths, imaginations might be inflamed and the Church reformed.⁵¹

But again we are cautioned by “realism,” as some might sense a drift toward the ideal in what I am saying. And yet what other gathering, except the Eucharist, is appropriate to call all into mystery to be affected by God, especially those who have lost the taste for God?

“An appetite is any tendency of a thing toward the good that fulfills it. . . . Man does not live by bread alone. . . . We also have souls whose appetite is for fellowship with God. . . . [Original sin] spoiled our appetite for God, . . . and if our appetite for God would be restored, it must be trained in a new diet, a Eucharistic diet. Christ was hungry for God and God alone, and when we eat his body, he gives us his appetite.”⁵²

Luke 14:23 thunders that God wants His house full. Inviting all into the Word of God by conversion in the Church, by prayerfully reading the Word and listening to its explanation in catechesis and its power in the homily, prepares those on the highways and in the hedgerows to regain or correctly name the purpose of the appetite that moves within them. This is Eucharistic Hospitality to be sure, but not in the sense of an open buffet. Rather, only as one correctly discerns the gift before him according to its substance and according to one’s readiness, is he or she able to receive the weight of such a sacred banquet.

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⁵¹ “The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives. It should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer and the Eucharistic liturgy. . . . The faithful should be able to perceive clearly that the preacher has a compelling desire to present Christ, who must stand at the center of every homily. For this reason preachers need to be in close and constant contact with the sacred text; they should prepare for the homily by meditation and prayer, so as to preach with conviction and passion” (Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §59).

⁵² David Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology* (Kettering, OH: Angelico, 2016), 101.