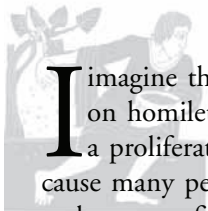


# Contemplative Homiletics<sup>1</sup>

Deacon James Keating, Ph.D.



Imagine that there are as many published opinions on homiletics as there are on prayer. Perhaps there is a proliferation of published works on homiletics because many people have been victims of poor preaching and want to find a way to stop the pain. Perhaps there are many works written on prayer because we think that our own prayer lives give us an expertise that warrants publication. These would be the subjective reasons for the abundance of literature on prayer and preaching. The objective reason for the existence of so many essays and books on prayer and homiletics is more compelling: *we exist to live in communion with God* (prayer) and we need to be fed by the Word in order to do so (homiletics). My reason for writing yet another essay on homiletics is to underscore that the signs of the times cry out for homilies that flow from prayer. We are rightfully fascinated with prayer and therefore in need of sources that assist our lives to *become prayer*. One of those sources is the homily.

Over the past decade of my diaconate I have experimented with various forms of preaching. I have discovered, however, only one form that truly impresses itself upon the consciences of the people and harmonizes with the nature of the Eucharistic mystery itself. I call it “contemplative homiletics.” Its public manifestation appears in this way: it is brief; it is not read from a manuscript; it is more akin to prayer than to teaching; it carries healing; and the people receive it eagerly. I believe such a way of preaching could actually allow us to better connect the people to the mystery of Christ’s love and His overwhelming desire to heal them and console them, as well as embolden them to evangelize. We all know, however, that preaching is as much gift as task. After working in the area of priestly formation for almost twenty years now, I am convinced that knowledge of communication techniques, public speaking, and theology do not *in themselves* create effective preachers in our clergy. I do believe, however, that expertise in these skills and studies, *once sublated into a contemplative life, will unleash a new power within Catholic preaching.*

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## Why We Need Contemplative Homiletics

After more than forty years of preaching that accommodates itself to modern times, attendance at worship has plummeted. It is a good time then to look at the purpose of the homily and how we might better engage the Word and the people from the ambo.<sup>2</sup>

## Preaching and Intimacy with Christ

To imagine preaching as an occasion of *intimacy with Christ for the preacher* and for the people may not be the first way that contemporary believers understand preaching. We have allowed the discursive educational model of public speaking to overshadow any contemplative nature of the homily. In fact, some homilies have more of a lecture feel to them than a call to vulnerable intimacy with the mystery of salvation. We might be able to attribute this lecture mode to the way clerics study scripture. Twenty-five years ago, at the height of the historical-critical method’s sway over biblical studies, it was not unusual to be in church and receive a lecture on the distinction between a Sadducee and a Pharisee, or to be taken up into great detail about the gospel author’s intention and the cultural accretions that found their way into the texts through early editors. The pedagogy of the enlightenment, science, hyper-objectivity, and historical consciousness had won the day, and its power showed its effects from the ambo.

The tools of scripture study are simply that—tools.

We are not to become fascinated with the tools but with what the tools are making. Here, in the Liturgy of the Word, the tools are making the Paschal Mystery clearer to the mind and heart. The Liturgy of the Word allows Christ to live His Mysteries over again in those who are open to receive such from the scriptures and the homilist's meditation. The homilist is invited to craft his words so that they are openings that allow Christ to share His prayer with believers. This occurs most concretely in Holy Communion. Intimacy with Christ's prayer is mediated through preaching as well. In contemplative preaching, hungry souls are met with images and concepts that speak to their deepest human longing. The contemplative preacher gives to his people places of rest, places to which they can return to be fed over and over again. What the reflective preacher gives is an occasion for each person to be vulnerable to the Spirit's movement within. The preacher opens a home for the believer. He invites his people to host interiority, and thereby host the Spirit, who will then define them and send them to serve others.

### Preparing for Contemplative Homiletics

First the Word is to be received so that transformation of the homilist's heart can occur. As Christians we do not think that God is unreachable, that His truth is unknowable. We are not Gnostics thinking that what *is final* is silence and not *the Word*.<sup>3</sup> What secures the receptivity of the Word in us, however, is the faith wrapped in silence, the word that emerges from silence and is protected by silence as a womb protects life. What is final is not silence, that is for sure; rather, silence promotes, protects, and facilitates what is final: personal intimacy with the saving Word. This faith wrapped in silence is secured by love, the love of God, the love of the preacher for God and for the people, and the love of the people toward God and the preacher. Homilies break down when faith, love, and a period of silence are missing after their conclusion.

Silence is a constitutive element in the Liturgy of the Word. In the silence we let Jesus speak to us, to reach us with His particular word to us. All homilies are general. One homilist cannot read the hearts of eight hundred people. The Spirit, however, does "read their hearts" and ushers them to transformation in the light of their own particular needs—but only if the environment is conducive to such listening. Along with the symbols of the Eucharist and the art present in the church, the homily conspires to open the congregation to "hear" the Lord in the midst of an environment that

lets Christ "see" us through symbol and art.<sup>4</sup> We are immersed in Christ as He labors to reach us through all the senses influencing the opening of our heart to Him. Without silence, the homily appears to be merely the completion of a "segment" of the Liturgy that transmits to the people that they can now relax and wait for their next speaking part. With a reasonable length of silence (more than seconds) after the homily, the congregation, when instructed on how to welcome silence, allows the Spirit to stir their hearts with His truth, a truth that radiates light upon each person's own conversion needs.

Two other features must always be present in contemplative homiletics: brevity, and a deep reverence for the beauty of the Word that is being delivered. Faith, love, and beauty wrapped in silence and delivered concisely can grasp and rivet the attention of a listener and awaken the need to be defined by the Good News. The contemplative homily carries the presence of God insofar as it carries the truth of scripture and human anthropology. As de Lubac noted in another context, "It is God who offers Himself through [Scripture], and He awaits more than a response, [He awaits] a return movement."<sup>5</sup>

### Theology, Beauty, and Contemplation

What does it mean to form one's homily from within a contemplative context? Primarily it means that the homilist beholds the beauty of the living Christ within a mind that has become concentrated in the heart. This beholding is integrated and does not simply lead one to think about the scripture before him. Instead, this beholding ushers the homilist into a movement of the affect toward the truth of Christ. In other words, one allows the self to be taken by the beauty of Christ and gives permission to Christ to touch the self in the depth of one's heart, the place of decision, the place of encounter.<sup>6</sup> Contemplation is a loving knowledge of God, a knowledge given by faith and deepened by one's commitment to behold the beauty of God's own truth: the Paschal Mystery.

To *gaze* upon the text is to go beyond simply looking at and understanding words. To *behold* or *gaze* is to fix the heart upon the truth of who Christ is, of what God is revealing about His love for us in Christ, about what God is doing to one's mind and heart, what He is attracting the homilist to, what He is doing to the preacher's desires. To behold or gaze upon the text is to personally suffer the coming of its truth, a truth conveyed within the liturgy, guarded by the doctrines of the Church, and lived by the saints. To behold the

scripture is to see the beauty of salvation and weep—a weeping that becomes joy. “Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy. Those who go forth weeping, carrying sacks of seed, will return with cries of joy, carrying their bundled sheaves” (Psalm 126:5–6). These tears are tears of communion with the mystery of divine love. By its very nature, the mystery of divine love is eager to affect the homilist so that, in turn, his Spirit-filled words, born of tears, may affect the listening congregation.

**The goal of contemplative homiletics is to allow the truths of the text to silence and then purify the hearts of the listeners. In other words, preaching is to be the occasion for the Holy Spirit’s power of healing.**

### The Study of Theology

Ideally any approach to contemplative preaching should stem from a formation in contemplative theology: one that serves the purposes of a love-imbued truth.<sup>7</sup> This type of theology is founded not upon an individual’s quest for discursive information about God but upon an individual’s ecclesially-based desire for holiness, upon an integration of knowledge and love. Theology is knowledge that when left unobstructed by academic ideology races to completion in *contemplation*, knowledge that yields learning *and* savoring. It is a knowledge given as a response to Christ’s urgent longing to abide with us and us with Him (John 15). When we live in Him and He lives in us, He makes our thinking about His truth and beauty a holy activity. “We should dispose ourselves *to go into God so as to love Him with our whole mind*, heart, and our whole soul.... In this consists ... Christian wisdom.”<sup>8</sup>

With the desire for holiness comes the concomitant desire for ongoing repentance. For homilies to be occasions for prayer, we need to purify *vain thinking* in our preaching and in our preaching’s source, our theological musings. Here we enter the deep need to cry for the Holy Spirit, and the puzzling reality of preaching being *both* gift and task. If we immerse our-

selves in prayer, allowing it to purify us and set us on the road to loving the mystery of the Eucharist, then soon such a mystery will dwell in us. We will become *gifted* to preach within the parameters of how well we have *worked* at becoming vulnerable to the message of the Gospel. When this indwelling occurs, we then can speak, preach, and pray out of such abiding.

Analogically, this is like the growth that happens in the early stages of marriage. In such a stage the husband may not yet wish to leave the safety of his “bachelor” identity, clinging to its comfort and wells of affirmation. He is not ready to die to self. The wife, however, calls out to him to allow *her* to define his place of living. She is insecure until the husband “pays attention” to her. Until he does so, she cannot internalize his presence and so clings to him in insecurity and not in freedom. When the husband finally dies to the “single” life and sees his wife, a seeing that opens his heart to be affected by her presence, both man and woman are set free to be who they said they wanted to be: spouses united in love. Since he is now one with his spouse, he thinks and speaks and acts like a husband. He doesn’t cling to some past “script” of his single life. No, his spouse lives in him and he in her; the language of knowing and loving simply flows freely out of each of them. And so it is with those who have been “obedient” to the Gospel, those who have listened deeply to the truth of Christ. The beauty of such truth lives in them, and they live in it. From such intimacy flow homilies that carry the grace of union with God for all in the congregation. And, powerfully, the preacher’s *own* intimacy with God deepens every time he preaches not from a place of stored data but from a place of intimate communion.

### The Goal of Contemplative Homiletics

The goal of contemplative homiletics is *to allow the truths of the text to silence and then purify the hearts of the listeners*. In other words, preaching is to be the *occasion* for the Holy Spirit’s power of healing; it is not about vainly thinking that the arranging and speaking of words *causes any* healing or conversion of life. That we could be the cause of such healing activity is, of course, impossible. We may think that the more we labor with words and study rhetoric, the more power to change minds will be released from the ambo. This commitment to labor and to study is necessary in the classroom, but at the ambo there is a call for measured and spiritually-substantive words presented succinctly. This economy of words flowing from a full heart of intimacy with God gives the Spirit a secure conveyance to pierce

the hearts of the people. “Intellect serves the spirit in prayer, but insights are not the essence of prayer. One who prays acquires ... light beyond ... the intellect.”<sup>9</sup> It is not simply insight that the homily aims to facilitate, but healing.

The contemplative homily also edifies. The homily should create an environment for contemplation by way of the homilist’s fascination with the Paschal Mystery and the receptivity of this mystery by the baptized. Only if truth is received with love will it bear fruit in the congregation’s life. Thus, the *more one prays homilies* out of loving reverence for the truth given in scripture and liturgy, the more God’s power will have an opportunity to affect the heart and will of the congregation. To paraphrase Balthasar, preaching is not simply an occasion for knowing about God; rather, *God is in the act of preaching*.<sup>10</sup> God uses the general words of the homilist to reach the particular heart of each worshipper. As Balthasar noted, “Jesus’ mission is primarily one of discernment.... He wants no mass movement that will envelop the individual in anonymity, but a personal decision that each individual must make for himself alone.”<sup>11</sup> The homily is not a discursive break from worship and prayer; it is worship’s intellectual and affective apex. The homily is prayer that is born in the preacher’s communion with Christ’s own self-revelation in the scripture. In contemplative homiletics “we abandon ourselves to the love that moves the preacher.” If the homilist’s love for Christ is not evident in his affections, demeanor, and persuasive language, it will be harder for the people to abandon themselves to God.<sup>12</sup>

When the homily carries conversion, it reaches the hearts of those listening.

The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant.<sup>13</sup>

The contemplative homily is ordered toward encounter. It is a meeting place between the worshipper and God’s search for this person. There is in this kind of affective experience not a mere eruption of emotion, but a meaningful, conscious relation to a person.<sup>14</sup> It is not simply a diffused attraction to good ideas or the

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preacher’s style of rhetoric. When the homilist moves the people to be vulnerable to the presence of Christ in the liturgy and their own hearts, there is no reductionism. Such affective movement can “never be too intense” as long as there is mature integrity between intellect, affect, and will within persons situated within the sober context of the Eucharist.<sup>15</sup> To preach at such depth would be akin to what happens in contemplative spiritual direction, where the director “leans to one side,” so to speak, allowing the directee to glimpse the eyes of God within the heart. The director simply facilitates this contemplative beholding, as if to say to the directee, “Here is the One who is looking for you, and you, Him.” In homilies this is also what we want: people beguiled by God’s love and assured of the grace necessary to deepen their participation in the Mysteries of Christ. What facilitates the Holy Spirit’s power to silence and purify the listener is the homilist’s *own suffering of the love of God and knowledge of Him*. This suffering leads the priest or deacon to speak out of love and not simply competence in discourse. Of course the congregation has to be on the road of discipleship as well, actively participating in an intimate relationship with Christ deep within their hearts, if such beauty is to be received.

Yves Congar once noted, “What God seeks in worship is neither ceremonies nor offerings of gifts—nothing extrinsic to the person who offers, nothing other than the opening up, the conversion and the gift of the hearts of believers themselves.”<sup>16</sup> Congar wanted to emphasize that “real” worship carries with it a spiritual effect, a reception of grace that changes the affectively-imbued intellect. These changes can be, and normally will be, developmental—a person will slowly receive the intimacy afforded by vulnerability to the Mysteries of Christ. The Mysteries will be welcomed into the worshipper’s heart as drops of water are absorbed on a



sponge.<sup>17</sup> The wisdom received by the congregation from the ambo will be as light at dawn: gentle, welcomed, and thoroughly recognizable as a reality bearing real change to a current situation.

What the contemplative homily aims to accomplish is an awakening of the spiritual intellect. One does not simply entertain with stories or progress through the homily alluding to abstract doctrinal truths. For a homily to facilitate such awakening it has to flow from the preacher's docility to the animating spirit, the *eros*. This *eros* is the attractive pull of divine glory (beauty) that opens one to prepare for the homily in true theological and not simply human inquiry.<sup>18</sup> What catches the homilist's attention is the glory of Christ himself, the love offered to humanity in His obedience to the Cross, to give Himself—and all that such giving means for healing and salvation—to His beloved ones. When approaching the text, the affectively-imbued mind searches for what is *more* and *beyond* the tools of historical criticism and exegesis. Disciplined by these tools, the mind is free to encounter the beauty of Christ Himself, the living One who is Revelation.<sup>19</sup> The mind connects with Christ not by knowing the mechanics of how the scripture came to be but by noticing how all but the word of God leaves us thirsty; we encounter Christ when we recognize that drinking deeply of culture's myths (e.g., happiness is in food, fame, money, sex, physical beauty, etc.) leaves us parched, dehydrated.<sup>20</sup> Here the dignity of the vocation of the homilist is sharpened. After finding rest in the Word of God himself, he can become a genuine guide to the geography of interiority, pointing out where thirst is truly quenched and where it is simply slaked for the moment.

### How Might One Prepare a Contemplative Homily?

1. Receive the rationale for such a method: During the week, parishioners are being filled with intellectual content in the form of information, data, and distracting ideologies. To some extent they may be shutting down intellectually during Mass. We do not want to give them another round of data in the midst of the Mysteries. We do want to *refresh them* with the Word, conspiring with the Spirit to *heal them* and offer them *rest in the truth*, which they encounter in the Eucharist. This rest is received by their eager vulnerability to the truth proclaimed in the Gospel and in the sac-

rifice of Christ within which they are all now immersed. We also want to build on the work of the Spirit toward conversion—the Spirit has been communicating to them from within the very fabric of their lives during the week, subtle but sure.

2. As you prepare your homily, sit with the text and behold the beauty of love that emerges. Let the Spirit raise up the beauty; do not search for it as a task. As de Lubac taught, the letter should give way to the spirit.<sup>21</sup> The letter is vital but not ultimate. What is ultimate is the reception of grace that flows from the letter, the words.
3. Allow the love that is stirred in your soul over this beauty to be felt and appropriated. Let this love take you; receive this love, and abide with Christ in and with and over the text. Enter whatever level of prayer He wants to gift you with.
4. Ask Christ to deliver to you the image or word or affection<sup>22</sup> He wants you to ponder in the text, the one that bears beauty. *This* is what you share with the congregation. This should be a simple message, not one of great theological complexity or dense discourse. Simplicity in message and brevity in length guarantees that at least some of the words spoken will be held in the hearts of the congregation as agents of healing and purification.
 

There is sometimes a necessity for longer meditations bearing more fulsome doctrinal content. For these occasions one can offer the traditional adult faith formation evening or a forum after the Eucharist has concluded. Another option would be to designate the last Sunday of the month as a catechetical Sunday, at which time the Masses would include a longer catechetical sermon.
5. Become attuned to time in your preaching. When the energy dissipates and drains out of your message, *this is the time to stop*. It is not the time to rev the engines again and go off in another direction. Do not be afraid of brief homilies that are based upon your contemplation of the beauty of Christ. As you are speaking, discern *with Him* when the power is draining out. You will know when continuing a little longer would be good, also—you will notice your words and affect connecting

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with a silent eagerness on the congregation's faces. This connection will be different from the energy you feel when you tell a good joke and it feels like people want more jokes; rather, this connecting is the result of one's heart and mind searching for the activity of the Spirit. The Spirit comes in silence and power to heal. *Is healing going on? Then go on.*

6. Before you begin to preach contemplatively on a regular basis, prepare the congregation to receive such. Invite them into longer silences at Mass after the homily and after the reception of Holy Communion. This is vital, because longer silences at Mass will necessarily accompany contemplative homilies. Teach them what to do with and in the silence. Instruct them on how to receive the healing that comes from preaching, or instruct them to deepen an already mature love of the Paschal Mystery.
7. Five-minute homilies spoken from the intimacy the preacher shares with the Trinity, and ordered by a life of "thinking with the Church," will be most effective. Try to release yourself from *reading* homilies—the sooner, the better. The prolonged habit of reading homilies simply delays a preacher's familiarity with interiority and slows his capacity to trust the Spirit during the prayerful preparation period. Also, people listen and receive homilies more readily when spoken from a place of interior intimacy.
8. The homily should then be followed by two-to-three minutes of silence. The homily sets up the healing that flows through the silence that follows. The silence is the time of *healing*. Silence is not elective; silence produces effective homilies, once the congregation has been instructed on what to do in the silence. As you

complete your homily give the people a point for further prayer, or raise up a theme for their intentional appropriation that will help them be open to the fruit-bearing work of the Holy Spirit.

9. To preach from a contemplative fount is to speak from the communion you have with Christ. He uses each one of our personalities in His effort to reach parishioners. The contemplative homiletic way endeavors to integrate with your own style and personality; it is not to be a source of artificiality giving rise to anxiety or worry.

In the end, contemplative homiletics will move the congregation to receive a healing of the affect and an elevation of the intellect in its capacity to marvel over the Mystery of Christ's own love. From such a result will flow a parish that believes more deeply that Christ *is alive* and not simply that our memory and our knowledge *about Him* keeps Him so.



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#### Endnotes

1. By contemplation I mean a way of approaching the scripture as prayer; more will be explained as the essay proceeds. In short the title of the essay is affirming what St. Peter Eymard noted: "Preaching is praying out loud" (Andre Guitton, *Peter Julian Eymard* (1996), 328.
2. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (<http://religions.pewforum.org/portraits>, accessed August 2010), noted that only thirty-three percent of Catholics in the U.S. attend Mass at least once a week. While scripture studies and preaching do not bear the entire weight of such a slide, the loss of the transcendent in the culture and in the church has exacerbated the secularized mindset of Catholics.
3. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 338.
4. John Navone, *Enjoying God's Beauty* (Minn: Liturgical Press, 1999), 43ff.
5. Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 346-7.
6. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1992), no. 2563.

7. "A progressively scholastic approach to theology ... slowly eroded the patristic, medieval sense of the interconnectedness of theology, wisdom and love.... This growing sense of distance between *what knowledge can achieve* and *what is achieved by love* ... drives a wedge between the psalmist's 'taste' and his 'see', between what is tasted (*sapida*) and what is known (*scientia*)" David Ford, *Christian Wisdom* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 269. See also, James Keating, *Resting on the Heart of Christ: The Vocation and Spirituality of the Seminary Theologian* (Omaha: IPF Publications, 2009).
8. St. Bonaventure, *Soul's Journey Into God*, (NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 1.4.
9. Joseph Conwell, SJ, *Walking in the Spirit* (St. Louis: The Institute for Jesuit Sources, 2003), 52-3.
10. In Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Theology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128.
11. See Edward Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* (NY: Continuum, 1994), 265.
12. Peter John Cameron, OP, *Why Preach: Encounter Christ is God's Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009), 113
13. CCC, no. 2563.
14. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Heart* (Indiana: St Augustine's Press, 2007).
15. Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 138 and 54, respectively.
16. Paul Philibert, ed., *At The Heart of Christian Worship* (Minn: Liturgical Press, 2010), 4. See also Romans 12:1 where St. Paul speaks of "your spiritual worship," the offering of the self.
17. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 335. There are many translations of the *Exercises*, but for one version see David Fleming, *Draw Me Into Your Friendship* (St. Louis: Institute for Jesuit Sources, 1996), 264.
18. Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 14.
19. "The uniqueness of the Christian faith consists, first, of the fact that it is related to historical events.... These historical events are significant for the faith only because faith is certain that God himself has acted in them in a specific way and that the events carry within them a surplus meaning that is beyond mere historical facticity.... The surplus cannot be separated from the facts.... [Meaning] is itself present in the event, even though it transcends mere facticity." In other words, biblical exegesis does not exhaust the meaning of the mystery of Revelation. See Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis* (Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 155, n. 16.
20. Raymond Studzinski, OSB, *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Minn: Liturgical Press, 2009), 157.
21. Boersma, 160.
22. By affection I mean those feelings that arise as a result of the mind *being united to the objective truth of doctrine* and scripture, not a free-floating emotion unmoored from salvific truth.