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BOOK REVIEW

Joseph Lionel, *Homiletics: History and Theology of the Ministry of Preaching in the Church with Contemporary Communication Skills*

[Foreword by His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay], Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014. Pages: xviii + 130. ISBN: 978-88-209-9262-0

In recent years much has been said about homilies and most often the remarks are negative. Studies undertaken in various countries and in India have painted a dismal picture of the way this ministry has been carried out in the Catholic Church. This book is not about cursing the darkness but it lights a candle, bright and clear about this primary ministry of the Church.

The very title of the book is simple and clear, just "Homiletics", nothing less and nothing more. In keeping with the title, the book delves straight into the heart of the matter. Many books deal with the practicals of preaching homilies, offering tips, suggesting skills and offering a practical know-how. This book begins with the know-why of homiletics. 104 pages cover a historical perspective on homiletics and then the last chapter of 25 pages touches on the more practical aspects of homiletics. This is how it appears at a first glance when we look at the table of contents of the book. But on closer scrutiny of the book, you discover the practical aspects wonderfully woven into the historical dimension of the ministry of homiletics.

The historical build up begins by establishing the close link between the mission of Jesus Christ and the preaching ministry of the Church. The Church's mission flows from the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Homiletics is initially seen as a ministry that has the task of interpreting Scripture, more precisely the OT is seen in the light of the NT. This responds to the need of the Early Christians with their Jewish background. The ministry then evolves into the task of explaining the sacramental life of the Church in a form of mystagogical style. Homilies were intimately linked with liturgical

celebrations. When heresies grew more rampant in the Church, homiletics responded by emphasizing a more doctrinal style of preaching. Arianism and Donatism were addressed in homilies that enlightened the faithful. Similarly when missionary movements sprouted in the Church, the missionary slant took precedence. Then at a certain stage with the growth of devotional practices, during the Middle Ages, preaching centred on Marian themes and the saints. What comes through very clearly in this historical treatment of the subject is that the Church constantly tailors its style and its content of preaching according to the pastoral needs of the situation. All through the 'history of homiletics' as we may call it, we see the Church, consciously or unconsciously reading the 'signs of the times' and responding to it appropriately. This itself establishes a primary practical principle for homiletics: there is not just one form and content for preaching but varied forms that are suited to the needs of the times.

What are some of the practical suggestions for homiletics that are established while elucidating a historical treatment of the subject? Right from the outset it is evident that Jesus Christ must form the central message of homilies. In describing the trend of preaching in Pauline letters, the liturgical character of homiletics is established: "Preaching is not an auxiliary activity to worship, but all kinds of preaching, missionary, catechetical and penitential preaching prepare the congregation for worship and it is part of worship" (P. 23). This principle will recur again and again down the ages and finally be re-emphasized in the teachings of Vatican II and in the two recent documents, *Verbum Domini* and *Evangelii Gaudium*. Paul is presented as a good example for our contemporary proclamation in the way he preaches in Areopagus, adapting his language and message to a Greek culture. The media world of today poses a similar challenge to our preaching. From the Patristic period we pick up valuable tips on how Scripture should be interpreted in homilies. By his own example, the great preacher, St Augustine invites preachers to study their audience before preaching. In his own analysis of the congregation, he established three types of people: the 'hostile audience', the 'catechized audience' and the 'engaged audience'. St Gregory the Great calls our attention to the attitude of the preacher, insisting on the need to be a 'pastor' and not a mere 'orator'. In a similar line we could pick up very practical tips for good homiletics from the treatment of the historical development of preaching in the tradition of the Church.

Finally the last Chapter directly addresses the practical aspects of preaching based on the teachings of Vatican II in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the Exhortations of Benedict XVI, in *Verbum Domini* and of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Being trained in Communication, the author finally uses his expertise to build up seven practical steps for public speaking and preaching.

This book could become a 'must-read' not only for Bishops and Pastors but also for the laity who are engaged in any form of ministry of the Word which would include catechists, prayer group leaders, Small Christian Community leaders and in fact all parents who are the first teachers of the faith in homes. This book could even serve as a valuable 'text-book' for preachers and all those who are involved in the ministry of the Word.

In a small book of just 133 pages the author has packed a vast amount of material beginning with the historical perspective and then moving on to more practical guidelines on homiletics. You obviously will not have an exhaustive treatment of the historical aspects but the matter is sufficient to arouse your interest to do a further in-depth study on one or the other aspect. The theme of the book is systematically elaborated with lucid clarity in expression.

After reading this book, will you become the best preacher? Certainly not! It is the same as reading a music note book. You will learn the right principles which must then be exercised and practiced before preaching.

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