

THE SACRAMENTAL EFFICACY OF THE ACT OF PREACHING

I think it would be useful at the outset to establish a context for the contemporary revival of interest in a theology of preaching, insofar as this context shall help us to place the question at issue today, namely, the sacramental efficacy of the act of preaching. Many motives, movements, moods, circumstances conspire to make this interest both intelligible in itself and vital for the life of the Church in our time. The state of preaching itself is reason enough, though the general and particular law of every era plus papal, episcopal and synodal admonition seem to proclaim that every age is a poor age for preaching. Nevertheless we shall let it stand—the state of preaching is a cause among causes, as we see a baroque style and a baroque intent dying out, to be replaced—by what? By faded echoes of the baroque, by conversation, by pious advertising, by mere catechesis, by the stylistics of no-style, and by a generally diminished comprehension of the dignity of the preaching act.

More positive factors that account for an awakened interest in the theology of preaching are the recent developments in pastoral theology and in the allied art of catechetics. The liturgical revival also has excited interest in homiletic theory and practice insofar as the homily is centered in the liturgy, as the latter proclaims or speaks forth the saving event in the very act of celebrating it ritually and sacramentally. As with catechesis and liturgy, so with the new ecclesiology. The extensive development of a theology of the Church was bound to bring with it a renewed concern over the Church's magisterial destiny, thus calling attention to the ministry of the word, whether exercised by special mandate or by a more general sharing in the Church's prophetic mission. A study of the dynamics of entry and incorporation into the Church brought with it the notion of the *kerygma*, a notion introduced and explicated by contemporary biblical studies as to the intent and effect of the primitive proclamation of the word. And behind the *kerygma* stands the vast

biblical development, so fruitful for a theory of preaching, on the theme of the word of God, in its created and uncreated forms. As special context for the development of a theology of preaching we might mention developments in sacramental theology, particularly those which call attention to the "witness" character of these "sacraments of faith" and the need for a response in faith to the sacrament as sign. This development, moreover, has tended to focus attention again on the two ministries, the ministry of sacrament and the ministry of the word, as word and sacrament conjoin to testify, to signify, to effect the life of grace in souls.

On the practical side in addition to the aforementioned decline of form and vigor in preaching we may note the relatively sudden growth in our own country of a more educated Catholic laity. This has served to increase audience awareness and sensitivity as to what is happening or not happening in the pulpit, at the same time awakening the expected clerical counter-response, whether indignant or empathetic. For a more formidable, more historic, more theological critique we may point to the revival in theologians like Barth of the nagging claim that the Catholic Church eschews the personal, dynamic, faith-evoking ministry of the word out of preference for the static, automatic and even "magical" ministry of the sacrament, so that the Catholic Church, he says, may rightly be called a Church of the Sacrament and Protestantism a Church of the Living Word. The era of ecumenical theology, therefore, is bound to be an era which would re-examine the Catholic understanding of and commitment to the ministry of the word.

These are some of the reasons for the revival in our time of serious apostolic concern over the state of preaching and of serious theological concern over an authentic theory of preaching. The second point I should like to make in this paper has to do with a matter intimately associated with the aforesaid revival as well as being critically important with respect to a theory of the sacramental efficacy of preaching. I mean the special witness of Sacred Scripture as to the institution, act and effect of preaching. I have already mentioned the *kerygma* and its place in stimulating and illuminating a theory of preaching. I should like to suggest

that through the notion of the *kerygma* the entire biblical statement as to the character and effect of preaching has suddenly become more open to us. This biblical statement is found, of course, in the gospels, in the actual dynamics of the preaching of Jesus as well as in what He says about the work of the word; here is both preaching and theory of preaching. It is found in the epistles, most thoroughly and most eloquently in St. Paul. Looking back in time it is found in the Old Testament which through law and prophetic utterance was so much a dispensation of the word.

At any rate wherever we turn in Scripture we are struck by the dominant motif of word-texts and preaching-texts, namely, the intrinsic virtuality of the word, its generative power, its mysterious efficacy. In Isaias' image the word is life-disposing, life-preparing rain and snow (Isaias 55/10,11), as in the words of Christ it is life-giving seed (Matt. 13/3-30), as in James it is "the ingrafted word" (James 1/21), the word of truth by which "he hath begotten us" (Ibid., 18), as in Peter it is the word which makes us "born again" of incorruptible seed (1 Pet. 1/23), as in Romans it is a word which has not miscarried but has brought forth children of God (Romans 9/6-9), as in Hebrews it is a living thing, both life-giving and death-dealing, Paul's piercing sword "living and effectual . . . and reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit" (Hebrews 4/12). Images of life and generation, images of living power—the latter a favorite with St. Paul. "And my speech and my preaching were not in the persuasive words of human wisdom but in the showing of the Spirit and of power; that your faith might not stand on the wisdom of men but on the power of God" (1 Corinth. 2/4,5). That this is a faith-effecting power we learn also from the great apostle of the word: "Because when you received of us the word of the hearing of God, you received it not as the word of men but (as it is indeed) the word of God, who worketh in you that have believed" (1 Thess. 2/13).

Let these texts stand as a representative sampling of the entire biblical statement with respect to the ministry of the word. They bring us back—and how forcibly!—to a theory of preaching that points always to the central datum, the intrinsic virtuality

of the word and, therefore, of the office and act of preaching. It is true, of course, that in these texts and in their numerous counterparts in the Old and New Testaments there may be found all the germinal elements for a theology of preaching: institution by Christ; the principality of the Holy Spirit; the instrumental character of the preacher; the rightful uses of human rhetoric yet the radical diversity of sacred preaching from human eloquence; the question of the mandate, i.e., of divine or canonical mission; the qualities of the preacher; the salvific ends of preaching. Yet the great preaching-texts tend to be dominated by the notion of the intrinsic virtuality of the word, so that the work of reason under faith which we call the work of theology most fittingly confronts this revealed datum and seeks to explicate it.

This might imply that the work of theology as to the specification of the preaching act and its effect would be chiefly a matter of biblical theology. Yet I would suggest, with many others, that granted the grounding of our investigation in the revealed word about the work of the word, our most fruitful advance will be through an analogy with that other supernatural reality instituted as efficacious means of communicating divine life. I mean, of course, the sacraments. Note, first, the resemblances between the ministry of the sacrament and the ministry of the word: 1) institution by Christ; 2) divine power moving transiently through the appointed instrument; 3) resemblances in the instrument itself: word-and-thing, word-and-action, word alone; 4) the grace-ful effect of the word or action or event; 5) the normal necessity in each ministry of ministerial status or mission; 6) the qualifications of the minister; 7) the modification of the effect by the condition of the recipient. In working out a theory of resemblances I would suggest the possibility of pursuing the analogy between the two ministries by borrowing the notion elaborated in sacramental theology of the *sacramentum tantum*, the *res et sacramentum* and the *res tantum*. What elements or phases in the work of preaching correspond to the dynamics of sign, thing-and-sign and ultimate thing in the sacramental action? Above all, what is the ultimate *res* intended and, please God, effected by the action of preaching?

At any rate resemblances there are, yet marked differences

too. In the sacramental instrument the composition is determined by divine and/or ecclesiastical law and the effect is guaranteed, granted no substantial impediment in the recipient. The verbal or preaching instrument, on the other hand, is newly composed here and now by the preacher and the effect is made to depend more radically upon the condition of the preacher and the condition of the hearer. Resemblances there are, sufficient to establish as Catholic, as thoroughly Catholic, a two-fold ministry in the Church, the ministry of the sacrament and the ministry of the word. Differences there are, sufficient to motivate and to guide the work of theology in this matter, for this work shall chiefly be a work of refining the differences between the sacramental ministry and the ministry of the word.

Contactus sacramenti, contactus fidei: two modes of union with God through Christ, both God-appointed modes, each attached to a specially instituted medium in the Church, that of sacrament, that of the word. We know, of course, that the *contactus fidei* is a broad and most inclusive notion for it may be caused or occasioned by a multitude of external graces of word, including the continual communication of the word by the faithful to each other *ex instinctu fidei*. Yet there does exist in the Church, and by divine institution reflected in the notion of canonical mission, a special medium for the *contactus fidei*, namely, the work of preaching. Not distinct from, indeed an integral part of, the broader magisterial office and action of the Church, it is, nevertheless, endowed within the magisterium with a unique power to move souls to conversion or deeper communion. By common theological tradition the act proceeding from this office is designated as an external actual grace effecting an internal actual grace of knowledge or of faith in the hearer, the practical knowledge of assent and commitment. I see no reason for going outside this traditional view of the matter and hazarding some venturesome *ex opere operato* theory which might appear to satisfy the demands of intrinsic efficacy or virtuality while actually doing violence to the unique dynamism of the ministry of the word. This ministry is, so to speak, a "free" one in which the actual dispositions and options of preacher and hearer substantially modify the instrumentality of the word. In the Scrip-

tural image the word is a seed but the seed is made fruitful by the knowledge and virtue of the preacher, by the docility of the hearer. If the common note in the two ministries is that of sacred and efficacious sign of the sacred, the efficacy in preaching derives from the mandated utterance itself as this is modified by the dispositions of the preacher who fashions the word of God and of the hearer who receives it by hearing.

I confess that there still exists in my mind a doubt as to the character of the graced act whereby the preacher preaches. I mean a doubt as to whether it is normally an act operating under the charismatic grace of words in the Pauline sense or whether it is simply a grace of office given to the mandated preacher whereby he shall speak, speak well, speak efficaciously for the building up of the Church of God. At this point I am inclined to the latter view if only by reason of the fact that when the Holy See speaks or legislates on the act of preaching, it does so customarily in terms of the mandate and the ordinary qualifications of the preacher, knowledge and virtue, not in terms of charismatic utterance. This we know—and to me it is enough—that there is available to the preacher, remotely, the deepening of faith and the dilation of charity needed for the minister of the word who out of love for souls feeds them on the bread of truth, while there is available to him, proximately, the grace whereby he fittingly chooses, orders, composes, delivers a useful and fruitful sacred discourse.

What is its particular and expected fruit? The grace of an efficacious grasping by the mind of the divine truth preached and an efficacious movement of the will toward this same truth as a good for the soul. In the words of Benedict XV in his *Humani Generis* the preacher preaches "to spread the light of truth revealed by God and to stir up and nourish the supernatural life in his listeners." More than a mere sacramental, more than an isolated occasion of grace, less than the consummated surety of sacrament, the graced act of the preacher mediates an influx of actual grace which is in the act of preaching as in the established instrument of just such a *virtus* and in the disposed hearer as an interior movement of mind and heart toward the saving word and thus toward the saving acts

which are its purposed fruit. Further distinctions and refinements of this graced act and its effect there may be as abler theologians than myself turn their attention to working out a truly adequate theology of preaching. Bolder affirmations there may be as to the charism of utterance in the Church and the sacramental efficacy of the act of utterance. My own view is that *the act of the preacher* is a grace of office or ministry freely though characteristically given to the mandated preacher and modified by his own learning and holiness while *the effect of preaching* is an interior actual grace of practical knowledge freely though characteristically given as the immediate fruit of the ministry of the word, this grace of knowledge being further ordered through its resonance in the disposed hearer to sanctifying grace and charity.

It is the very force of the modifications worked in the instrumentality of the word by preacher and hearer alike that give great sense and purpose to the continual entreaties, admonitions, warnings and precepts given to bishops and their delegated preachers as to the qualifications of an apt minister of the word. Over the dispositions of the hearer there is on the part of the Church less possibility of control and on the part of the hearer varying degrees of responsibility. But the mandated preacher is bound to be a man of sacred learning, diligence and holiness of life, as he is bound also to acquire as best he can the rhetorical skills to embody his grant of learning and holiness. He is so bound juridically under pain of loss of his faculty to preach; he is bound morally and spiritually under pain of the loss of souls who may simply not receive the graces he ought to have mediated by his skilled and ardent preaching. For in the end this "free" ministry depends enormously upon the freedom of the preacher and his loving accommodation to the demands of the ministry of the word.

THOMAS D. ROVER, O.P.
487 Michigan Ave. N.E.
Washington, D.C.