

COMMUNICATION THEOLOGY

- Topic: Preaching as Communication Theology
Convener: Bernard R. Bonnot, Unda-USA
Moderator: Frances Ford Plude, Notre Dame College
Presenter: Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P., University of Notre Dame
Respondents: Paul Duffy, S.J., Centre for Study of Communication & Culture,
St. Louis U.
Joan Bernet, Archdiocese of Minneapolis-St. Paul
Thomas O'Meara, O.P., University of Notre Dame

In *Naming Grace*, Hilkert develops a theology of preaching in terms of an immanent, sacramental imagination, contrasting it with a transcendent, dialectical theology of preaching, typically Protestant. The latter articulates a collision of the divine and the human, the former a correlation of the divine and the human. Dialectical theology imagines God breaking into the human situation through preaching; sacramental imagination conceives preaching as interpreting or *naming* the presence of God already there.

Hilkert emphasizes the depths of human experience where one encounters the mystery of God. Often today such experience is of suffering. Preaching interprets such experience through Scripture, liturgy, and doctrine. The community not only receives and responds to the preaching, but prepares it. The effective preacher takes account of the community's diverse experiences. Ultimately, what is preached is what the community hears.

Duffy applauded the title of Hilkert's book and judged her approach long overdue, then explored preaching in a multimedia world. The media form both preacher and community. They emphasize entertainment, surrounding us with secular symbols and rituals woven into engaging narratives. Believers must be prophetic, contemplative and remembering people to discern and preach the mystery of God within this culture.

Bernet reflected on Hilkert's affirmation of community as central to the preaching event. She encouraged surveys of parishioner expectations as a way of listening to the community and making it an active part of preaching. Effective preachers have a deep and energetic faith, clarity of purpose and point, and are themselves alive in the word. They appreciate that God is alive in the people and do not speak down to them. They help people name their experience. Such preachers need to be extended through the media.

Doctrine has a role in preaching but not in the mode of doctrine. Doctrinal preaching must be mystagogical, connected with scripture and liturgy. O'Meara responded that *doctrine* seems cold, fearful, and authoritarian. Actually the word simply means *teaching*. Good preaching brings doctrine out of abstraction by connecting it with people's lives, naming the grace there. Accordingly effective preachers use stories and metaphors from the "thought forms" used by the people to whom they preach.

Discussion explored Hilker's conviction that preaching names grace resident in the community before the preaching. Many hearers of the word consider the deeply human where grace is found to be purely secular. Preaching must surprise such hearers, evoking from them an "Aha!" Since much preaching today takes place outside liturgy, the structures of preaching are changing. Today's media, with their imaginative creativity and audience appeal, are important thought forms for preachers. "Naming grace" also articulates well what is going on in spiritual direction, which enables people to name their own grace and thus to preach to themselves.

If Lonergan is correct that theology without communication is in vain, preaching is a primary instance of communication theology.

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