

PREACHING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE*

In his book on the priesthood, St. Alphonsus says that if all preachers and confessors fulfilled the obligations of their office, the whole world would be sanctified. The purpose of this article is to help preachers to fulfill the obligations of their office today.

In looking into these obligations, we turn for direction to the canonical and Vatican II mandate:

"In sacred sermons should be explained above all else the things which the faithful must believe (kerygma) and do (respond) to be saved. Not only the circumstances of the times, but the circumstances of the hearers (common feeling) have much to do with determining the subject matter of preaching." (CIC, 1337, parentheses mine).

"No doubt priestly preaching is often very difficult in the circumstances of the modern world. If it is to influence the mind of the listener more fruitfully, such preaching must not present God's word in a general and abstract fashion only, but it must apply the perennial truth of the gospel to the concrete circumstances of life" (Presbyterorum Ordinis, 5).

Following these directives, we find three essential elements in preaching: 1) the content, i.e., moral living should flow from the kerygma, the proclamation of the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ; 2) the so-called "common-feeling" approach, which strikes at the heart of moral living and relates the message to the response; 3) the moral response that the message evokes in the listeners.

To begin, it is good to establish what is meant by preaching. It is defined by D. Grasso as "the proclamation of the mystery of salvation made by God himself through his legitimate representative, with the goals in view being those of faith and conversion and the deepening of the Christian life" (Proclaiming God's message, p. 108).

In this definition we find the two elements that are basic for effective moral preaching today: the motive, which is faith

* The Priest, Sept. 1972.

and conversion; and the moral aspect, which is the deepening of the Christian life. Living in response to the kerygma, the Christian witnesses Christ.

If morality is preached in the framework of the kerygma, people's lives can be affected. Their conduct will take on Christian values. The kerygma is the motivation; the morality is the response.

"Christ came into the world to teach men what they must know to be saved. His message is contained in the gospel. What is contained in the gospel, then, is what men must know to be saved. It is up to the preacher then to preach the gospel." (*Rock, Unless they be Sent, p. 62*).

Hence, proclaiming the mystery of salvation is the key feature of moral preaching. But this preaching must challenge a person's moral living. "The preaching of God's word is the genuine cause of man's fashioning his life anew and making of it a Christian life" (*Semmelroth, The Preaching Word, p. 198*).

In his moral life one cannot ask what he ought to do until he has acknowledged what has been done for him and for the world in Jesus Christ. Preaching proclaims the Good News that he is redeemed and is a new creature. Preaching evokes his response: actualize, live this reality. His moral life should be in conformity to this reality. He should bear witness in his actions to what Christ has done for him (cf. *Gustafson, Christ and the Moral Life, pp. 12-13*).

Preaching kerygmatic morality, then, is the essential ingredient in the process of total, Christian living. "The moral dimension consists of a new behavior, a new style of life which conforms to the total change which has taken place in man" (*Grasso, op. cit. p. 108*). The truths preached give the impetus for living out the moral directives which flow from the gospel.

Kenneth Clark, a respected English historian, stated in his recently televised series on civilization: "The Church's greatness lay in her ability to harmonize, humanize and civilize the deepest impulses of the common man." In the area of preaching the Church has a unique opportunity to exercise her historical genius: to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to touch the ordinary man in his innermost being. This is what I refer to as the "common-feeling" approach.

Our basic purpose is to preach God's word in such a way that it touches the person so deeply as to lead him to respond. To accomplish this, we must know what is involved in the process of communication between the preacher's message and the listener's response. The "common-feeling" provides the link between the two. "Communication is eliciting a response, and effective communication is eliciting a desired response through verbal symbols" (F. Dance in *Preaching*, III, No. 4, pp. 33-34).

When we preach, we use verbal symbols (words) to explain the kerygma in order to bring about the desired response, which is active conversion to a moral life. But how does the preacher make his message touch the inner being of the listener, to bring about this conversion? "Insight into human responses brings about the desired response we want" (Jackson, *The Psychology of Preaching*, p. 18).

Now we are in the vital of the common-feeling. "The kind of preaching that sees people, that makes them feel they are loved because they are understood, invites an active, personal response on the part of the listener" (*ibid.*, p. 137).

Thus effective preaching of morality means meeting the people where they are, leading them to face themselves as they are and to see their relationship to God and to each other. Applying the power of the kerygma to their needs should lead them to make a genuine Christian moral response. "The purpose of the sermon is to come to grips with the real problems of real people. . . . Insight into the real problems of his listeners, clairvoyance into their needs, sensitivity to their hurts, capacity to feel with them and for them — this is the basic requirement of a true preacher. . . . It is the secret of the preacher's art to know by clairvoyant intuition what they *are* thinking and feeding back" (Henry Emerson Fosdick in *Preface to Op. cit.*).

This is the approach that our Lord used and the approach that he commanded his preachers after him to follow. "Again and again our Master revealed the importance of sensitivity to the soul. He saw the invisible. He heard the inaudible. He saw the multitude in all its complexity and individuality before he opened his mouth to preach. He indicated that his disciples were custodians of a privilege to help others 'to see those things that you see. . . and to hear those things that you hear'" (*ibid.*, p. 67).

Like the apostolic preachers, the contemporary moral preacher is called to apply the kerygma to people's lives in such a way that they will see that the kerygma fulfills their needs and will want to respond to what has been preached.

We have designated effective communication as that which elicits a desired response. Now the kerygma is by its very nature a call to a decision which leads to salvation or damnation. "The kerygma does not seek to be merely valid, but of its very nature to bring about a real decision in man in favor of the salvation which is contained in its proclamation, and thus to be faithful. . . The kerygma has. . . the character of a call to decision" (Rahner and Lehmann, *Kerygma and Dogma*, pp. 22-23).

Leads the person to respond to the gospel message

The decisiveness of the kerygma is the moral aspect of preaching. The person is challenged to make a decision in response to the preaching he hears, a decision which determines the moral quality of his life. It is the preacher's duty, then, to evoke a response in the listener to what he is preaching.

This "challenge-response" character of the kerygma constitutes the moral guideline for contemporary preaching. In the face of kerygmatic moral preaching, the listener cannot remain indifferent. "Preaching possesses the virtue and the energy to force those who listen to emerge from their indifference and take a stand, whether positive or negative, with regard to the person of Christ, who, through the word of the preacher, offers them life. Therefore, preaching proclaims decisive facts for the destiny of man, facts in the face of which nobody can be indifferent. In view of these facts, man must make a decision to accept or reject them" (Grasso, *Op. Cit.* p. 143).

If the preacher does not evoke this decisive response in the listener, his preaching is lacking in effectiveness as moral preaching. If the listener is going to live a moral life, he will form much of his living according to what he hears preached. The quality of one's moral life will be greatly fashioned by the quality of the preaching he hears.

In order to evoke this response, the preacher must convey a sense of urgency, showing that one determines one's destiny by the way he lives his moral life. An example would be: "Now is salvation come. Action is under the judgment-seat of God. I live daily under the scrutiny of the Risen Christ" (Thomson,

The Theology of the Kerygma, p. 28). Within this framework apply your specific moral point.

The moral point of preaching is: you better respond now to Jesus as he preaches to you through the kerygma. Such is the point of Jesus' own preaching. Kummel shows us from Jesus' preaching how one's decision now determines one's destiny: "Man will be judged then according to the attitude a man makes toward Jesus now. . . . A man's attitude toward Jesus now is decisive toward the sentence he will receive at the final judgment" (*Promise and Fulfillment*, pp. 39, 45).

The preacher must awaken in the person the understanding that the way one lives here and now is the way one will live then and there. Respond now, because the present makes the things that will be, the things that must be.

Yet while "preaching saves those who accept it and condemns those who refuse it" (Grasso, p. 251), the preacher should not be harsh and resort to fear tactics. Rather, let the preacher lead the listener to see that "Jesus sought to release the power of God's kingdom within his hearers. It was life, and it was power, and it was maturity." (Jackson, p. 171).

To conclude, we look back to St. Alphonsus, who succinctly capsulizes the whole point of preaching. He says that *the whole study of the preacher should be to make the audience understand all he says, and to move (kerygma) his hearers most effectually (common-feeling) to do (respond) what he exhorts them to practise. The kerygmatic preacher points out the motive for morality, the gospel message. He then applies the message to the moral demands of the listener's life. In so doing, he leads the person to respond to the gospel message in the concrete moral actions of his everyday life.*

• DOUGLAS FATER, C.S.S.R.

"Within modern culture, in which spiritual values are to a great extent obscured, the celibate priest indicates the presence of the Absolute God, who invites us to be renewed in His image."

Synodal Document on the Ministerial Priesthood