

# PART I: REDEEMING THE HEART OF THE PREACHER

But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart.

—Matthew 15:18

It begins with the heart, that innermost part of us. Good preaching begins there. Jesus pointed to the heart. Criticizing the elders and teachers of his day, he said it was the wickedness of the heart that was to blame. What comes from the mouth comes from the heart, Jesus said, “and they defile” (Mt 15:18). Evil thoughts, found first in the heart, next are spoken—evil words instead of good. This was the problem, Jesus said. It’s why the Pharisees, scribes, elders, and others were so caught up with externals, with rituals and rules—because it was a way to ignore the heart.

He was speaking, of course, the spiritual language of Judaism, but also of humanity. As the mysterious center of every person, the heart holds the emotions, reason, and will. In the heart, a person stands closest to God either in consolation or in judgment, before the God who

“knows the heart” (Acts 1:24; 15:8). The heart is the person, the inner beginning and end, the origin of either good or evil. It’s what finally explains a person after all other explanations have been given.

So, if it was true for the Pharisees and scribes, it’s also true for us, for preachers. As for them, so for us: “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Lk 6:45). Preaching today, we are often silenced by externals. Not just by rituals and rules but also by administration, the latest parish or diocesan appeal, the latest gimmick or slogan, or even by our own clunky, worn-out methods of preaching, we get lost and lose the point. Caught up with the methods and machinery of modern ministry, we lose touch with the heart.

All of this causes the preacher to suffer, and preaching even more so. Hollow, hackneyed, impersonal, shallow, and trite, it becomes the sort of preaching too often heard today: disembodied voices quoting ecclesiastical tracts, verbiage full of church-speak, which few know and even fewer care to know. James Mallon said the first question people often ask is whether the preacher is real.<sup>1</sup> Often the answer is no. Often it’s as if homilies are preached by those who’ve never lived, ignorant of a world outside the Church; they preach about their hobbies, vacations, and pets, never more personally invested in their preaching than that. Too many homilies today fail the first test of human speech, which, as Socrates said, is to move the soul.<sup>2</sup> And that’s because we’ve not put our own souls into it; our hearts are kept safe as we speak in borrowed clichés to people who see right through us.

A crisis of the heart, we preachers today should allow ourselves to be scolded by the Lord, seeing ourselves in some respects the Pharisees of our age. I’m not talking about hypocrisy or anything like that but about the heart, how we’ve allowed our preaching to become so stale and silly that we’re just not heard anymore.

As Yves Congar put it decades ago, our preaching often just isn’t “real.” Our homilies come across “prefabricated,” as we speak too often “like licensed dealers of orthodox formulas that sound impersonal and fixed.”<sup>3</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote of that fear sometimes found in priests, which hides behind misused authority—a fear of a genuine encounter with people, which is born from a “lack of love.”<sup>4</sup> It’s what

digs a chasm between preacher and people, making the homily a waste of time no matter how long or brief. Worrying about the length of homilies, talking about short attention spans, has nothing to do with it. It's about fear and the lack of charity in the heart of the preacher, the inhumanity of speech.

What's lacking is what Pope Francis called "synthesis." When as preachers we merely relay ideas or "detached values," and at the same time fail to "share" ourselves in the dialogue of preaching, we lack "synthesis." Preaching comes across cold, distant, and inhuman. The heart, Francis said, lacking fire and enlightenment, fails to join the hearts of listeners to the heart of God, all because the preacher's heart isn't in it. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 142–143).

This is what's primarily the matter. This is what's wrong. And this is where the renewal of Catholic preaching must begin: with the heart. Before we can say anything about the way of the preacher, we must say something about the heart, how it's shaped, and how it beats.

## Heart, Ethos, Personality

To speak in terms of classical rhetoric, I'm talking about what Isocrates called nature or, better, what Aristotle called *ethos* or character. Philosopher and lover of logic though he was, Aristotle understood that effective persuasion had as much to do with a speaker's character as with arguments, that it was *ethos* that made the speaker "worthy of credence."<sup>5</sup> Isocrates thought similarly that formal training helped those already endowed with a natural ability for speaking.<sup>6</sup> Both understood that a good speaker was not made by rhetorical training alone. Yet Aristotle's notion of character is richer, as it considers both human nature and the idea that human nature can be trained, educated, and habituated.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, it's helpful to think about preaching the way Aristotle thought about rhetoric—that is, in terms of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* and also *lexis*, *taxis*, and *hypokrisis*—all of which we will explore later in this book. Thinking about the character of the speaker, we can then consider the character of our congregations, what we're going to say, and how to say it. What Aristotle called *pisteis*, the means of persuasion, involve

careful consideration of all of this; and anything like real renewal in Catholic preaching should take account of it too. But it must begin with character, with what's innermost. Renewal must begin with the heart.

## From Within

The model, of course, is Jesus. He is the one who “reveals” the Father, doing what his Father does, speaking what his Father speaks (see Jn 1:18; 5:19; 8:28). And he is the one who sends us and who has given us his Spirit, even promising to inspire our speech (see Mk 13:11; Jn 20:21). But again, it all begins interiorly.

In John's gospel, there are words of Jesus at once textually ambiguous and theologically enlightening, which illustrate this point. In Jerusalem on the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, the great Jewish feast recalling the Hebrews' journey to the Promised Land as well as God's abundant provision in the wilderness, Jesus stood up and said, “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink” (Jn 7:37).

Jesus seemed to be likening himself to the provision Yahweh supplied his people in the desert. Like water from rock, now Jesus offers the water of his Spirit to those who believe. A few verses later, he called himself the “light of the world,” again like the pillar of fire that guided the people through the desert (Jn 8:12). But the ambiguous yet enlightening part is what he said next: “Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him’” (Jn 7:38).

Living water will flow from “within him.” But who's “him”? Many read “him” to mean Jesus, while others read it to mean the believer, but the text isn't clear. Does living water flow “from within” Jesus or “from within” those who believe in Jesus? That's the textual ambiguity.<sup>8</sup>

But it's also what's theologically enlightening. Because it reveals at once the interiority and the mystical union with Christ that is demanded of the preacher. As Christ is like the rock and the pillar of fire in the desert, feeding and guiding believers, so too are the preachers of Christ. From within both flow the living water of the Spirit. For both Christ and his preachers, it all begins “from within,” from the heart.

The renewal of preaching begins with the renewal of the heart, the renewal of the preacher's *ethos* or character. Preaching once to students in Paris, St. Bernard of Clairvaux began by saying, "Clearly, then, the conversion of souls is the working of the divine, not the human, voice." And he asked his listeners to "make an effort to hear God speaking within rather than man speaking without."<sup>9</sup> That's the final achievement of the preaching event: people hearing in our voices "God speaking within."

To say the renewal of preaching begins with the renewal of the heart isn't to say something sentimental and meaningless. To say it's a matter of *ethos* is to say it's a matter of education and habituation. It means that preachers must take up again, or for the first time, those formative habits that will make them better preachers, practices that cultivate the virtues of preaching and the character of the preacher.

It isn't magic. It takes work, work we preachers need no longer neglect. And that's the purpose of the first part of this book: to suggest what the redemption of the preacher's heart looks like in the contemporary Church.

It looks like this. Today the preacher must become a public intellectual, embracing unashamedly the intellectual responsibility that goes along with modern ministry. The homilist must also consciously belong to the communion of preachers, learning and speaking from within the broad company of all who've preached the Gospel. And the preacher must be unquestionably a person of the Church, obedient to the voice of Christ in the Church, rather than to one's own voice. Again, all of this is for the sake of what Jesus and great preachers such as Bernard spoke of: so that the water of the Spirit may flow from within, and so that the divine voice may speak through the human voice.

## Truth through Personality

Yet before anything else, right here at the start, let me share what I think is the most important lesson a preacher should learn. If unlearned, there is nothing any book or any class can offer, no tip or insight that will help. For me, it's the first practical truth of preaching.

The famous nineteenth-century Protestant preacher Phillips Brooks described it best. He defined preaching as “the bringing of truth through personality.” For him, that’s what separated preachers: either the absence or the presence of personality:

Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him. I think that, granting equal intelligence and study, here is the great difference which we feel between two preachers of the Word. The Gospel has come *over* one of them and reaches us tinged and flavored with his superficial characteristics, belittled with his littleness. The Gospel has come *through* the other, and we receive it impressed and winged with all the earnestness and strength there is in him. In the first case, the man has been but a printing machine or a trumpet. In the other case, he has been a true man and a real messenger of God.<sup>10</sup>

This, really, is the heart of the matter, talking as we are about the heart of the preacher. To renew the heart of the homilist is to enliven it, so that what is offered may truly be *felt* by the people, the Gospel pulsing through the words and even the body of the preacher.

More than charisma, preaching from the heart with personality is about preaching in personal immediacy to the people, and even sometimes with personal vulnerability. That’s what moves people, what draws them to the Gospel: truth through personality. It’s what leads people to what Aristotle called *pathos*—that is, to the right emotion, enabling them to listen well.<sup>11</sup> It’s what Phillips Brooks meant when he said, “Let a man be a true preacher, really uttering the truth through his own personality, and it is strange how men will gather to listen to him.”<sup>12</sup>

Too much preaching, in tone and gesture, simply lacks personality. Whether due to fear, poor training, or inexperience, so much preaching today rings hollow. Clunky, formulaic, cut and pasted, impersonal, it

just doesn't touch listeners. And that's because listeners have nothing to touch in return—no person, no heart, just a voice, just words.

What's missing is what Karla Bellinger called “connection.” Today more than ever, what we need to recover is what she called the “homiletical human bond.”<sup>13</sup> Fred Craddock called it “passion,” preaching like it personally matters. “To preach as though nothing were at stake is an immense contradiction,”<sup>14</sup> he said. The preacher, in the preaching event, can be—and sometimes ought to be—the “center of meaning” in a homily. That is, in preaching, just as in many other forms of public speaking, personality is as persuasive as words. The preacher should be a “mediator of meaning”<sup>15</sup> in whom the people recognize not only the word of God but also themselves, which demands the preacher be recognizably human, but without offering homiletic “useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message” (*Verbum Domini*, 59).

But often this is precisely what frightens us, and it's why we don't always resist the “temptation to be ineffective.”<sup>16</sup> Often we don't want to preach that Gospel, the Gospel that comes from the heart, because it would mean we'd have to let it change *us*. The Gospel that we want to cut the hearts of our people, we don't want to let cut our own. Often we resist this sort of preaching because it would mean that we'd have to undergo conversion too, when all along we thought ordination would be enough.

If Catholic preaching is to be renewed, it must begin with the heart, *ethos*, personality, and passion of each preacher. George Whitfield, the great revivalist preacher, said, “We can preach the Gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our hearts.”<sup>17</sup> True of evangelicals, it's true of Catholics as well. It's the heart that must be prepared to catch divine fire if that fire is to catch our people. To renew preaching, we must prepare ourselves for a new Pentecost and make ourselves kindling ready for the Spirit. But first, before fire, the heart.

# 1.

## THE PREACHER AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

For a priest's lips preserve knowledge, and instruction is to be sought from his mouth, because he is the messenger of the LORD.

—Malachi 2:7

Every person has a right to an opinion, but not every opinion is valuable. That's just true, however harsh it sounds. And it's also true for preachers, however impious it seems.

Cicero taught that speaking well is a matter of eloquence and wisdom, that wisdom without eloquence is of little use and that eloquence without wisdom is dangerous.<sup>1</sup> And Augustine agreed, adding that it is wisdom that comes first.<sup>2</sup> Again, this is true for all public speaking, preachers included.

If the goal of rhetoric is to persuade, as both the pagan philosopher and Doctor of the Church agree—that is, if the function of rhetoric is to *teach* for the sake of understanding, to *delight* for the sake of enjoyment, and to *sway* for the sake of obedience—then the preacher needs to be, without embarrassment or folksy false humility, a student, a reader, and even a theologian.<sup>3</sup> The preacher must be unashamedly intellectual, however pretentious that sounds. For the heart of the preacher, for *ethos*, the mind matters. To put it bluntly, to preach well today, preachers

need to get smarter and to keep getting smarter. And they need to do the work it takes to get smarter, developing the habits of intelligence demanded by the times.

The wisdom required of the preacher does not issue automatically from the grace of ordination, like some magical gift inherent in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. There is, of course, the gift of wisdom from the Holy Spirit, but that's different from the wisdom necessary for preaching. The preacher should always remember that the *gift* of wisdom goes before the work of wisdom. The early Dominican Humbert of Romans put it this way: "Though a grace of preaching is strictly had by God's gift, a sensible preacher still ought to do what he can to ensure that his preaching is commendable, by carefully studying what he has to preach."<sup>4</sup> Ordination and the gifts of the Spirit enable deeper intellectual life; they don't credential it. The gift of wisdom inaugurates the virtues of learning and docility, beginning the life of wonder and study, not ending it (*CCC*, 1831).

In the Rite of Ordination, the bishop asks the man soon to be ordained a priest if he is "*resolved* to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely."<sup>5</sup> That is, the bishop asks him to commit to the work of study and reflection, to all it takes to preach eloquently as well as wisely. At ordination, the bishop no longer cares what a seminarian accomplished in the past, but only about what he will do in the future. The bishop asks him to take up the work of wisdom, because such wisdom is not presumed in the laying on of hands. It's work each preacher must deliberately embrace.

Although, as the Second Vatican Council taught, the Church is "by the will of Christ the teacher of truth" (*Dignitatis Pope Hamanae*, 14), and although in her voice is also the "voice of Jesus Christ," as St. John Paul II put it, a great many people, including many Catholics, just don't believe it (*Veritatis Splendor*, 64, 117). The world has changed. As Hannah Arendt said once, it's no longer possible to ask what authority is, only what *was* authority.<sup>6</sup> The Church today, like other bearers of traditions, has lost much of the power of her voice, and even intelligible use of many of her words. The Christian story, the teachings of Jesus,

the claims of the Church: all of them are either explicitly belittled or politely ignored.

Of course, we can easily blame this aversion to the voice of the Church on our primeval enemies—that is, the world, the flesh, the devil, and the undemanding glamor of error. However, for us to refuse some of the blame for this would be to refuse the full truth. We can indeed point to the general decline of belief in the Western world, the rise of secularism, shallow trendy atheism, materialism, relativism, and any other evil “-ism” you can think of, for rising disinterest in the faith. But to refuse to look at ourselves, the quality and character of our witness, is to refuse exactly what we need to understand so that we may do the work necessary to be better evangelists for the faith. Looking only outward and not inward is exactly what we preachers should avoid.

We must candidly admit, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did in his day, that often the Church’s “preaching of Jesus Christ has been feeble and her public worship has been lifeless.”<sup>7</sup> Too much preaching today is simply unprepared, trite, sentimental, conventional, or given lazily off the cuff, the meager offering of “irresponsible or indolent improvisation.”<sup>8</sup> Too often it’s painfully clear that the preacher isn’t a reader of any real measure but is instead unreflective—that the homilist hasn’t employed any noticeable mental energy that would warrant taking up another person’s time.

This is why we preachers need to take up again the work of wisdom that eloquence and effective evangelization requires. We must stand in the pulpit while conscientiously standing within the wisdom of the Church, the wisdom of the great preachers who’ve gone before us, standing even within the wisdom of the world. We preachers must, as John Paul II said, be able to hold our own in the new “Aeropagus” of modernity (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37–38). Homilists must let go of plainly false humility, the charade of folksy simplicity, which serves only to tell the congregation that they don’t need to think very much about the faith either, because, of course, the preacher hasn’t.

Now this doesn’t mean the preacher should become a snob, offering his people erudite, condescending lectures week after week. If the only alternative to folksy false humility is patronizing arrogance, we should