



R. Wayne Kraft Memorial Lecture



This annual lecture, part of the university's *Heritage Week* celebration (previously "Patron's Day"), offers a current theological viewpoint related to or informed by the spiritual tradition of the university's patron -- **ST. FRANCIS DE SALES**. Speakers of national prominence are invited to present this lecture on campus. The text that follows is provided for personal enrichment and is not intended as a commercial or professional publication.

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Can you hear me now?

Preaching in the 21st Century

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Introduction

It is so good to return to DeSales University. I am grateful to Bishop Edward Cullen, Bishop of the Diocese of Allentown, for his gracious welcoming of me, as well as to Father Bernard O'Connor, President of DeSales University. A special thanks to Father Thomas Dailey for his invitation to this lecture and, of course, it is of special delight for me to renew my friendship with Mrs. Joan Kraft and the family of Deacon Wayne Kraft. What an honor it is for me to present this 10th lecture of the R. Wayne Kraft Memorial lecture series. My friendship with Deacon Wayne spanned over 20 years and I had the privilege to work closely with him in his final years before his death when I was pastor of St. Mary's Church in Catasauqua, where he had been assigned as deacon.

In October of '04 -- that is 1604! -- St Francis DeSales, the Bishop of Geneva, wrote a letter to a 31 year-old bishop by the name of Andre Fremyot in order to assist him in preaching. The letter became known as St. Francis DeSales' letter "*On the preacher and preaching*" and it is my privilege to reflect upon this letter that now spans four centuries. I take special encouragement from the words of Francis DeSales near the beginning of his letter: "A preacher's knowledge is always sufficient when he has no desire to appear to know more than he actually does." I am reminded of the state policeman about to write a ticket who hears from the car, "Be merciful. I am just a poor preacher," to which the policeman answers, "I know -- I heard you last Sunday."

The role of preaching as we all know has been detailed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council as the principal work of the bishop. What I did not know but discovered in reading this letter of Francis DeSales is that the Council of Trent also identified preaching as his principal work. So I invite you to join me in reflecting upon preaching in this 21st century. I will present for your consideration three topics: first, the question on whether the faithful really want to hear; secondly, how one goes about preparing well for preaching; and thirdly, what do the faithful most remember in preaching.

Do the faithful want to hear?

In March of 2004, Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, issued a paper entitled, *“Where is Your God? Responding to the challenge of unbelief and religious indifference today.”* In this paper he stated that, although the number of those who claim unbelief in God are not increasing, what are increasing are what he terms “practical atheists” -- that is, people who believe without belonging. I am halfway through Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, in which he does a sociological analysis to document the fact that people are not joining groups as they once did; hence the *Bowling Alone* title that describes a sport that four decades ago was the epitome of community involvement. How easy then for the preacher of today to conclude that no one wants to listen. There are some who have convinced themselves that even the people in the pew are just not listening. I am reminded of the story of the husband who feared that his wife had lost her hearing. He consulted with a specialist who suggested that he do a home remedy. The husband arrived home to find his wife with her back to him at the kitchen sink preparing dinner. From 25 feet away he said in a conversational tone, “Mary, what will we have for dinner?” to which he heard nothing. As the specialist had suggested the husband approached within 15 feet, did the same thing, and then within eight feet and asked the same question. All three times he received no response. Finally he stood in back of her only 2 feet away and asked her once again, “Mary, what will we have for dinner?” to which she answered, “For the fourth time, roast beef.” Just as that husband concluded that his wife’s hearing was just perfect, so also I suggest the ears of those in the pews are open and eager to hear.

The issue of whether people want to hear was taken up by Archbishop Sean O’Malley at last year’s Chrism Mass in Boston. Speaking on the importance of preaching, Archbishop O’Malley cited studies that showed that the homily is becoming an important indicator of attendance at Sunday’s Mass. Studies are showing where the homily appears to be good, so the crowd is great. Another study that he cites refers to those who are 30-years old and returning to the church. They list as their top two reasons for returning as a personal relationship with the priest and the quality of sermons. To add to this fact that people are indeed listening, I’d like to share two experiences from the Diocese of Knoxville. The first was the contact that I had with our Diocesan Pastoral Council a little over a year ago. I sought their advice concerning the best way to make public the results of the first national audit concerning the diocesan response to sexual misconduct as well as the findings of the John Jay Study. After I presented my proposal, the members of the council concluded that all this was good but as they said, “Even more importantly, we want to hear from our priests.” The second example is the experience that I’ve had with those engaged in the Rite of

Christian Initiation for Adults. Here is an example of adults who are on fire to belong to the church and hungry with a desire to receive the meat of our beliefs so well presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I have found these adults who are preparing for entrance into the church to have a great desire to hear and to be moved by preaching. They deeply want what has been the hallmark of St. Francis DeSales' advice to the preacher, when he spoke of the double duty of the preacher: to instruct and to move the hearts of those who hear.

People indeed do want to hear. Obviously, the problem might also be that the preacher, like the husband in that humorous story, may have convinced himself that people do not. Psychology calls this "self-fulfilling prophecy." In other words, if I expect no one will listen, they won't, and if I expect that they will, they likely will. I'm often reminded of the priest who humorously described the size of his church by saying "It sleeps 700!" Though humorous, this statement can uncover a disposition of the preacher not to expect the faithful reading of the 21st century would be well to be convinced of the truth of studies; namely, that the faithful do want to hear.

How does the preacher prepare?

Father Walter Burghardt, who delivered the first R. Wayne Kraft lecture in 1995, was fond of saying, "God rarely gives the gift of powerful preaching to the lazy." So I take up the importance of good preparation for preaching in the 21st century. The Protestant theologian Karl Barth had a formula that captures the imagination. Simply stated he spoke of the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. The bible according to St. Francis DeSales must be not only in our hand but in our hearts. Archbishop O'Malley in his Chrism Mass homily speaks of the image of the pelican who chews her food before serving it to her young. Taking time to draw in God's Word will be essential for the good preacher. The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes St. Gregory of Nazianzus as a very young priest saying: "We must begin by purifying ourselves before purifying others; We must be instructed to be able to instruct, become light to illuminate, draw close to God to bring him close to others, be sanctified to sanctify, lead by the hand and counsel prudently. The Priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus." (1589) So too St. Bernard of Clairveaux's advice to the priests is just as telling "If you are wise, you will be reservoirs, not channels." In the Diocese of Knoxville we have a wonderful tradition that began last year at the Cathedral Rectory. On Tuesdays before the evening meal all the priests gather in order to reflect upon the readings for the coming week. Although I have not been able to be there every Tuesday, I have personally found such a gathering very enriching. How important it is to be creative as we seek to allow God's word to dwell in our hearts.

Secondly, it is the newspaper that must also be part of our preparation. As we know revelation is both Scripture and Tradition with a capital "T". Likewise tradition with a small "t" is the continued application of God's word to concrete situations. The famous Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et spes (The Church in the modern world)* begins with the phrase "...the joy and hope, the grief and anguish" of the people. So the preacher needs to be able to understand those to whom he explains God's word. One way is by our faithful reading of the newspaper. Last year I read an article in *Crisis Magazine*, which discussed proper strategies to promote the pro-life movement. In the article a man from Washington D.C. by the name of Pat Fagan was quoted as

saying, “If you are conservative then read the *Post* with an open mind and the *Times* with a critical eye.” Good advice for all of us. While always bringing Orthodoxy to our preparation for homilies, preachers today need to be mindful of the various facets of life in our culture.

As important as the written media is, however, I believe that the most meaningful newspaper is often the “live newspaper”; namely, hearing from the mouths of the people we serve. Shortly after I was ordained, I was assigned to Ss. Simon and Jude Church in Bethlehem to a wonderful pastor by the name of Monsignor Frederick Melley. Although Monsignor Melley was very shy, he had a habit that I found extremely attractive and greatly fruitful in preparation for homilies. Every Sunday I would find him standing in front of the church speaking to people as they came and went to Mass. While this is a valuable practice for someone who is a celebrant or homilist, it is even more valuable for the priest who is not preaching that Mass. So often in conversations as brief as 20 seconds and as great as 10 minutes, the preacher can capture “...the joy and hope, the grief and anguish” of the people. When I was pastor of Notre Dame of Bethlehem Church, this is one practice which I strongly urged those priests which whom I served to begin.

Of course it is in prayer that God’s will and the circumstances of the people come together. One of the practices that has brought this together for me is the bringing of the parish pictorial directory in prayer along with the readings for the coming Sunday. By simply thumbing through the book, the photographs raise to my consciousness the experiences of those with whom I live and serve. I am reminded of the process that Mother Theresa, so powerful in speaking, told of her capacity to move from being self-conscious, through being content-conscious, through being audience-conscious, and finally becoming God-conscious. That’s our preparation. With the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other and on our knees in prayer, the preacher becomes God-conscious as he seeks to preach faithfully.

What in a homily is most remembered?

When all is said and done what is it that we remember most about the preaching that we hear? I will restrict myself to three suggestions and present them in ascending order of importance. First of all obviously the words of the sermon, if chosen well, are remembered. St. Francis DeSales spoke of instructing and moving the hearts: instructing the mind, but moving the hearts of the listeners. He gave some very specific suggestions. I will limit myself to just a few. First of all, he strongly urged that the preacher be brief. Bishop Thompson, the retired bishop of Charleston who was also a trustee of DeSales University, has always been fond of the seven-minute homily. Often he has said that preaching a homily was like drilling for oil. If after seven minutes of drilling you do not strike oil, stop boring. Francis DeSales gave the same advice to the young bishop but he did add, “Of course you should preach at least a half an hour!” Secondly, Francis DeSales said that the words should be imaginative and vivid. Last summer at a convocation of the priests of the Dioceses of Nashville and of Knoxville, a group presented the topic of “Preaching the Just Word.” Perhaps the most powerful advice was that our preaching be imaginative. Drawing on the experience of commercials that sell products in our own culture through imaginative insights, preachers were encouraged to choose vivid language. St. Francis DeSales not only urged this but even gave examples in his letter, “*On the preacher and preaching.*”

Speaking of the Old Testament figure of Elias and the juniper tree and Christ on the cross, the saint urged that the preacher not state blandly, “just as Elias signifies the Christ, so the juniper signifies the cross.” Rather he suggested the imaginative and vivid: “just as Elias slept under the juniper tree so are we to take repose under our Lord’s cross in the sleep of Holy meditation.”

If the first quality of what is memorable is the well chosen word, the second quality comes from a story about President Abraham Lincoln. During his presidency Abraham Lincoln regularly attended worship services with the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. One evening an aide asked President Lincoln about the sermon he had just heard. The president replied in fragmented phrases: “The content was excellent...he delivered it with eloquence...he had put work into the message.” Then the aide asked, “You thought it was a great sermon?” “No,” replied the president. “The preacher forgot the most important ingredient. He forgot to ask us to do something great!” The second important aspect of a memorable sermon is the capacity of the preacher to ask the hearer to do something great, to provide a challenge. Certainly our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has been so endearing to the youth of our world largely because he does not fear giving a challenge.

Challenges do not come simply from great speakers like our Holy Father. They also can come in very humbling ways. I once heard a story of a very fumbling seminarian who had visited a hospital on his apostolate. He had entered a hospital room and made a complete failure of the visit by bumping the bed of the woman he was visiting, by stumbling through a conversation, and finally by leaving without remembering whether he had inquired about her health. The next week he revisited the hospital and the nurse on duty said that Mrs. so and so wanted to see him. The nurse added, “after your visit she showed a great amount of improvement.” The seminarian all of a sudden swelled with pride and went to visit the woman. Indeed the woman was cheerful and very grateful to see the seminarian again. Finally the future priest confessed to the woman that he had thought that he had been a complete failure in his visit. Quickly she retorted, “You were! But after you left I felt so sorry for you and it dawned on me that for the first time in months I had finally thought of someone other than myself and my illness. It challenged me to do better.”

If vivid and imaginative words and the capacity to challenge are two qualities of a memorable sermon, clearly the third is the most important. Stated simply it is that the person who preaches lives the words he preaches. St. Francis of Assisi is now famous in instructing his disciples as they went out into the world to “preach always and when necessary use words.” Certainly of all the many sermons that Pope John Paul II has given, I believe his most powerful sermon is a picture now twenty years old that I saw recently. It shows the man who attempted to assassinate him being visited by the Pope in his prison cell: “a sermon of forgiveness.” Our Holy Father in his recent encyclical on the life and ministry of the bishop, *Pastores Gregis*, says that the authority of office needs to be joined to the authoritativeness of the person. Certainly lived experiences become the powerful occasion for the greatest homilies.

Almost two months ago in the Diocese of Knoxville a statue in front of our Chancery was severely marred in the early hours of a Sunday morning. The statue depicted our Blessed Mother showing forth Jesus to the world and had been installed about fifteen months before on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the founding of the diocese. The damage was very gruesome.

The head of our Lord was severed as well as his arms. Red paint was splashed in places to indicate blood. An upside down cross was painted on the front of our Blessed Mother. The scene brought horror to all that looked upon it and indeed it received front-page coverage in our local newspaper. I am grateful that God's grace was alive in calling me and the Moderator of the Curia who assisted me to announce that statues can be replaced but we are first interested in helping the person who did the damage. Of all the many homilies that could be preached on the importance of people over things, this gruesome occasion became a platform for preaching that would capture the imagination of the people. So too is the example of Blessed John XXIII. If I were truthful, I would have to admit that I can hardly remember a word that he preached. Yet how powerful was the preaching he did with his life! Recently I've been reading a small book, which is a collection of some of his quotes. One of them is especially graphic: "There are various kinds of poetry, but the supreme poetry of this life is found in a joyful soul." The book is entitled *A Joyful Soul*. Likewise Mother Theresa of Calcutta in her presentations often spoke what most of us would consider common sense, but it was her capacity to speak what she lived that captured the attention of the world. Dom Chautard in a classic *The Soul of the Apostolate* speaks of the life of the priest. The words indeed could capture the effects of any preacher: "If the priest is a saint, the people will be fervent; if the priest is pious, the people will at least be decent. But if the priest is only decent, the people will be godless. The spiritual generation is always one degree less intense in its life than those who beget it in Christ."

Thus I present to you three most memorable aspects of a homily in ascending order of importance: the vivid and imaginative quality of the words, the challenge within the message and the reality that what is preached is lived.

Conclusion

This evening we have reflected on the capacity and the eagerness of those who come to church to hear the sermon; on the simple steps that are required for good preparation and on what will be remembered. As I began this talk with the words from St. Francis DeSales' "*On the preacher and preaching*", so also I conclude with his own Post Script to that 400-year old document: "I feel ashamed as I reread this letter and if it were shorter I would do it over again. However, I have so much confidence in your solid good will that here it is, sir, such as it is. Out of love for God, keep me always in your love, and consider me as completely your servant as any living man, for such I am."

With that same confidence in your solid good will and filled with love to serve faithfully as a bishop, I stand with the saint for whom this blessed university is named and I thank you for your attention and your love.
