

that everything is coherently presented and related. Even if things "seem impossible," they are not, in practice, if this is what the Church teaches. God's grace is sufficient.

#### IV.

The Pope then asks the bishops to think how teaching and preaching this religious catechesis on various levels can be improved. They are to be innovators and entrepreneurs of the faith. They are to use the *General Catechism* and the *Compendium*, something also recommended by Archbishop Levada. Bishops must "insure" that priests and other teachers "use" these instruments. They should be explained in parishes and other opportune places.

"The clarity and beauty of the Catholic faith are such that they brighten human life even today! This is particularly true if it is presented by enthusiastic and convincing witnesses." The Pope again tells the bishops that they can do something. Many measures are needed, often ones that seem insignificant. A missionary spirit in dioceses is needed. The famous tradition of "Catholic Study Days" in Austria is encouraged. Ordinary acts of episcopal rule are often the best ones that will make a difference.

"Wise and correct decisions concerning personnel that permanently improve the situation," Benedict suggests, are key. Such decisions are obviously within the sphere of the bishops' competence. We assume that the pope himself intends to follow, in his own jurisdiction, his own principle that he sets down here for the Austrian bishops. The bishop's words should be heard—urging people to attend Mass, to seek penance, to love their neighbor. Mindful of his great book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Benedict recommends Eucharistic adoration and the saying of the Rosary. He even hopes for good collaboration with the state.

"The spark of Christian zeal can be rekindled. God is not satisfied by the fact that his people pay him lip service. God wants their hearts and gives us his grace if we do not drift away or cut ourselves from him." We can evidently do the latter, cut ourselves off from Him, and have done so. Lip service is not enough. Zeal can be rekindled.

After these forceful words, the Pope, in an obviously nostalgic mood at the end of his discourse, recommends the Marian shrine in Austria at Mariazell, "whose shine has become so dear to me." He has obviously been there, in this land just across the way from where in Germany he himself was born and spent his early years. The pope understood that he could talk frankly to the Austrian bishops about something that was close to the vocation of all of them. This subject was the condition of the faith in a given land, and, we might acknowledge, in all lands.

At the heart of what is immediately needed is a careful attention to the title of the congregation the pope formerly headed and which is now in the hands of Archbishop Levada, namely "the doctrine of the faith." This topic, I think, is the area that needs attention most. These suggested initiatives about the *General Catechism*, its *Compendium*, about preaching, about the links to liturgy and scripture, in the light of what it is the Church addresses to our intellects about Christ, are clearly uppermost in the mind of Benedict XVI. Or as Archbishop Levada put it about the things we need to hear, "the doctrinal aspect is what takes the most profound sense from Sacred Scripture.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Archbishop William Joseph Levada, "Program for Preachers," 11<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 26, 2005, 9.

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Pamphlet 359

## What a Homily Should Be: Doctrinal, Liturgical, and Spiritual

Fr. James V. Schall, S.J.

*"A certain artificial opposition between the homilies with a doctrinal characteristic and those with a liturgical one impeded the catechetical formation of the faithful in order to carry out their faith in the modern secularist world. This false dichotomy can be surpassed only by showing how the doctrinal aspect is what takes the most profound sense from the Sacred Scriptures, similarly to what the liturgy itself does: making us meet Christ the Redeemer." — Archbishop William Levada, Synod of Bishops [1]*

#### I.

When the *General Catechism* was originally published, but still only in French, I wrote an essay in the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, entitled, "The Church Explains Itself: The New Catechism" (June, 1993). In it, I suggested that one of the major problems in the Church was the basic ignorance of most Catholics about just what were the basic teachings of the Church and why they made sense. I can still ask a large class "who was the Good Samaritan?" or "who wrote the four Gospels?" or "what does the Incarnation mean?" only too often to receive back little but blank stares.

The *Catechism*, obviously, is a very basic text designed precisely to meet this doctrinal need. It is a basic guide and reference for Catholics, learned or unlearned, to know and understand the reasonableness of the faith. As a means to accomplish this purpose, I had suggested that bishops inaugurate a five-year program (my "five-year plan"! ). Each parish and religious jurisdiction should address itself in regular sermons to this end. The basic teachings of what Catholics actually held and taught—no more, no less—ought to be presented in a clear and forthright manner.

As far as I know, no one immediately leaped on this proposal as the greatest apostolic idea heard in years. Yet, clearly the *Catechism* has itself found its way into

many a sermon since its final publication in English. This topic of the doctrinal content of sermons was, in fact, the subject of the short intervention that William Levada, the current Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, gave at the recent Synod on the Eucharist. Archbishop Levada noted the possibility of a tension between sermons or homilies based on the Scriptural reading for the day and the orderly dogmatic understanding of Church teachings that originate in Scripture. This tension often produced an "artificial" dichotomy leading us to have two sorts of views of what the Church is about—one based on the historical sequence of Scriptural presentations, the other on a more systematic doctrinal presentation. The liturgy itself is based both on a Scriptural understanding of our encounter with Christ and a doctrinal understanding of what this encounter means.

To remedy this situation, Levada proposed the publication of a pastoral programme—"not to be imposed!"—that would "link the proclamation of the doctrine of faith to biblical texts in which such truths are well-rooted." For this purpose, both the *General Catechism* and its more recent *Compendium* would be the standard reference points. Now while I think this might be a more difficult task than may at first glance appear, still, it is certainly one of the fundamental needs of the Church in its active life in parishes, schools, universities, and religious communities. We are in, I would say, desperate need of a much more attentive realization of the meaning or intellectual nature of Catholicism and the grounds on which it is based. At the extreme is the pastor I heard of recently who managed to draw out a teaching on birth control from every scriptural reading of every Sunday in the year, over against a parish that has not heard anything preached but the opposite of "tough love" for the past quarter century.

## II.

The principal coordinator or director of the original project to write and publish the *General Catechism* was the Dominican scholar, Christoph Cardinal von Schönborn, who is currently the Archbishop of Vienna. On November 5, 2005, with Cardinal von Schönborn present, the Bishops of Austria held their *ad limina* visit with the Holy Father in his Private Library in the Vatican. Benedict XVI's address, which touched on this very topic of doctrinal teaching in the local church, was

rather straight-forward, even blunt at times (*L'Osservatore Romano*, November 16, 2005).

Pope Benedict XVI, after referring to the Austrian presence at the World Youth Day in Cologne, was concerned to "analyze calmly and confidently the situation of the Austrian Dioceses in order to identify the key points that require our particular attention for the salvation and good of the flock." The first step in righting something is to know that it is upside down. The spirit the Pope wanted called for the bishops to "look courageously into the eyes of reality without letting optimism, which always attracts us, become an obstacle to calling things by their proper name with full objectivity and without embellishment." For not having the reputation of being a practicing Thomist, this "full objectivity" indicates an outlook worthy of the method of the Angelic Doctor. And of course it is very Augustinian, something closer to the Pope's habitual way of seeing things—calling them by their proper names, with no embellishment.

"Grievous events are occurring." What are these? The first mentioned is not something peculiar to the Austrian scene alone. "The secularization process (is) constantly gaining momentum in Europe at this time." Recalling Austria's history and its special relation to the faith, Benedict frankly adds that "it has not been halted at the gates of Catholic Austria." Many people no longer identify themselves with the faith. The consequence of this erosion is that "the certainty of the faith and reverential awe for God's law are lacking." The bishops are "aware" of these and other internal problems in Austria, the Pope acknowledges, or, we might add, at least if they weren't before, they are now!

The next issue is what to do about it? Benedict insists that "God has prepared a remedy for the Church in our time." What is this remedy? The first thing we need "is clear, courageous and enthusiastic profession of faith in Jesus Christ, who is also alive here and now in the Church and to whom, true to its essence, the human soul oriented to God can find happiness." Here it is affirmed exactly the source of human happiness, where it is found, and how it is to be principally achieved. The bishops themselves clearly must be the first to exhibit this very profession.

A change of "course" is needed. What is done currently is not adequate. Numerous small and large new initiatives are required. The bishops are again reminded that "the profession of faith is one of the Bishop's most important duties." No sense in asking others to believe if the bishops themselves lack faith and the enthusiasm for it. What about prudence, about doing something that might not work or might cause harm? No one wants the bishops to come across as "fanatics." Prudence is always basic, the Pope admits, but it is not an excuse for inaction. "The Word of God" is to be presented even when people are "less willing to hear or that never fail to arouse protests and derision." We can imagine what this "Word of God in its full clarity" that the Pope has in mind is like.

## III.

The Pope becomes very frank. He tells the Austrian bishops "you are well aware that there are topics concerning the truth of faith and especially moral doctrine that are not being adequately presented in catechesis and preaching in your Dioceses and that at times, for example, in youth ministry, in parishes or associations, are not being confronted at all or are not being clearly addressed as the Church wishes." We can assume that Pope Ratzinger, from his previous position in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and his time as Archbishop of Munich, has long files on this failure of teaching and preaching, not merely in Austria. The Pope, moreover, is speaking to bishops of a continent—even in its Catholic areas—sometimes especially in Catholic areas, with declining populations, fewer families, and little attention to its own physical future. Basic things simply are not being taught or preached. No wonder people do not know or practice them, even granted that people can choose not to listen.

Things are not so bad elsewhere. Some hold, however, that people will leave the Church if bishops stress what the Church teaches. But the Pope does not buy this excuse. He thinks that the opposite is the truth. "Be under no illusion. An incomplete Catholic teaching is a contradiction in itself and cannot be fruitful in the long run." We cannot pick and choose what we will hold in an attempt to keep up numbers. The teaching of the Church is a whole so that an effort must be made to see