

A TALK  
BY THE REVEREND RAY E. ATWOOD, ARCHDIOCESE OF DUBUQUE

11<sup>th</sup> ANNAUL PREACHING SEMINAR  
ARNOLD HALL  
PEMBROKE, MASSACHUSSETTS

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## **THE HISTORY OF SACRED PREACHING**

### INTRODUCTION

I want to begin by thanking Father Roger Landry for his kind invitation to speak to you today.

It's great to get together with brother priests around Easter and enjoy camaraderie.

As we begin, I ask the Holy Spirit to touch our minds and hearts so that each person here will take away something he needs for his personal or professional growth.

As you will see, I am very excited about this subject, but unfortunately not everyone shares my enthusiasm.

I was telling my sister and brother-in-law about this conference the other night over dinner.

When I offered to share some of my talk, beginning with my methodological presuppositions, they said, “Why don’t we wait until we get home and lay on the couch, then you can begin your talk!”

Their comments reminded me that we are all different, and different things fire us up.

## MY PERSONAL HISTORY

Before delving into the history of preaching, I want to share some of my own history, and how my books came to be written.

I was born and raised in Waterloo, Iowa, in the Midwest.

Raise your hands if you have ever been to Iowa . . . come visit, it’s a great state!

Iowa is called “A Field of Opportunities.”

It is known for its Cyclones, its corn, and its caucuses.

I know, by the way, the three things that Boston is known for: its Red Sox, Clam Chowder, and snow drifts!

Iowa is the birthplace of Herbert Hoover and John Wayne, a reflection of the contrast of the state.

I attended Drake University in Des Moines, where I received a bachelor’s in journalism and mass communication, something I hope you won’t hold against me.

The seeds of vocation were planted by a priest in Des Moines, who taught me how to preach; he learned how to preach from a Baptist minister.

I attended Josephinum Seminary in Ohio, where I received a master’s degree in Systematics.

My preaching courses at the Josephinum were taught by Protestant pastors.

I wondered back then why the only preaching textbooks were written by Protestants.

I was ordained in the spring of 1994 for the Archdiocese of Dubuque, and have served in a variety of assignments.

The seeds of my writing career were planted in 1996, two years after I was ordained.

I read Paul Scott Wilson's *A Concise History of Preaching*, and was impressed.

Wilson examined the lives of luminaries such as Paul, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Ligouri.

But he also included Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Edwards, and Fosdick in his treatment of the subject.

After reading the book, I was anxious to read a solid *Catholic* history of preaching, and so I began looking for one.

With the Dominicans and places like Catholic University and Notre Dame, there had to be a great text outlining the history of this important subject.

I became like the man in the parable of the hidden treasure (Mt. 13:44).

The man sells all he has and buys the field containing the treasure.

I too am a treasure seeker, searching the fields of history for the gems of our preaching tradition.

I spent ten years researching, and two years writing, my first book, *Masters of Preaching*.

The principal purpose of it was to describe the Church's official teachings on this subject.

Those teachings are found in magisterial documents, canon law, catechisms, papal pronouncements, and bishops' statements.

Of the sources I used, only one at the time (two now) dealt exclusively with preaching.

My research has been an exhilarating experience, and I must confess, has whetted my appetite to learn more.

I made some interesting discoveries.

For example, I discovered that Saint Dominic, the patron and founder of the Order of Preachers, left no manuscripts of his actual preaching.

The only documents we have are a couple letters he wrote.

I also discovered that of all the different papal documents on liturgy, Pope Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* (The Mediator of God), written in 1947, did not mention preaching.

Finally, I have discovered that Pope Francis and Pope Benedict have shown greater interest than most popes in the modern and contemporary times in the topic of preaching.

Their Apostolic Exhortations, *Verbum Domini* and *Evangelii Gaudium*, lay out the Church's norms, and reflect their personal concern for this topic.

Their own example underscores their commitment to quality preaching.

The second purpose of the book was to identify and discuss the lives, philosophies, and actual homiletics of thirty-one of the "masters of preaching."

From Moses in the Old Testament to John Paul II in contemporary times, I lay out the history and development of preaching.

There was so much material in the first book, which was published in 2012, that I decided to write a second book.

This book would complement the first book, with new homilists featured, a series of reflections on practical aspects of preaching, and two appendices.

The first appendix is a Patristic Appendix, the purpose of which is to identify patristic quotes for readings found in every Sunday and Feast Day in Volume I of the *Lectionary*.

I also include a contemporary illustration for some aspect of the readings.

The second appendix is a Mass Readings Index.

It lays out the Lectionary readings from the 1962 *Roman Missal* and the 1998 *Lectionary for Mass*.

The purpose is to enable preachers who are using older resources, such as *Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, which are based on the pre-conciliar calendar, to find the biblical texts for those old homilies in the current *Lectionary for Mass*.

If, for example, you like the insights from John Chrysostom on, “The Servant who owed ten-thousand talents and the sin of remembering past offences,” you can use my Index to identify which Sunday contains that Gospel, and incorporate his insights into your preaching.

The bishops are encouraging priests to do these things.

These are two great resources.

The bibliographies of both books contain a great wealth of material for preachers to continue their formation, and the books are available for a reasonable price.

My research has led me to two key conclusions:

The *first* is that Protestants do not have a corner on either the Bible or preaching.

They have researched and proclaimed the Gospel articulately, but they lack an appreciation of the entire Tradition handed on from the time of Christ and the Apostles.

This was illustrated to me at a youth event I attended last fall.

It was an ecumenical event in a football field.

The speakers told the story of their conversion and then listed their favorite Bible verses.

The gist of their message was, “I love this Bible verse because . . . (fill in the blank).”

That is all well and good, but I wonder what insights from the Fathers or other scholars can you bring to the table?

How has the Church interpreted this passage and how can the Church’s interpretation help me to become a better disciple of Jesus?

Having said that, I have found that Protestants are showing increased interest in the Church Fathers, recognizing the spiritual value of the messages they proclaimed.

The *second* conclusion is that the history of preaching remains a hidden treasure, waiting to be discovered and displayed to the world.

Saint John of the Cross once compared Christ to “a rich mine with many pockets containing treasures: however deep we dig we will never find their end or their limit. Indeed, in every pocket new seams of fresh riches are discovered on all sides.”

He goes on to point out that “the soul cannot enter into these treasures, nor attain them, unless it first crosses into and enters the thicket of suffering, enduring interior and exterior labors.”

For the life of me, I don’t know why the Lord is calling me to write books on this subject.

I was talking a friend in Dubuque last week about this subject, asking why someone from Notre Dame, Catholic University, the Dominicans, or Jesuits in Saint Louis is not writing the history of preaching.

You know what she said, “Well, Father, God can use anybody. After all, he used Balaam’s ass to speak (Num. 22:22-40), so why wouldn’t he use you?”

Friends keep us humble; thank God for them!

## THE HISTORY OF PREACHING

The preached Word has been announced throughout history.

John the Baptist was a voice in the wilderness (Mt. 3:3).

Peter understood that apostolic work was a prayer and ministry of the word (Acts 6:4).

Paul reminded his readers that he was called to preach (1 Cor. 1:17).

Time and effort will bring insights to the homilist who digs into the Tradition.

The work pays off, especially as you discover the beautiful images and insights from the masters of preaching.

I’m here today to share some of those insights.

## HISTORY

History is not a mere collection of dry data: names, dates, places, events, experiences, and the lessons they teach.

It is instead a story of people and events, and the impact they had on world events.

Church history is sacred history because Christ founded the Church, and promised to remain with her until the end of time (Mt. 28:20).

The history of preaching is the history of God’s Word as it has been proclaimed since the beginning.

From Moses in the Old Testament to Pope Francis in the Twenty-First Century, God’s holy Word has been announced, applied, and appropriated in the lives of countless millions.

The Word has enlightened minds, changed hearts, and transformed lives.

That Word has served the Kingdom and opened its gates for countless millions.

The Second Vatican Council noted that preaching lights the spark of faith in **nonbelievers** and feeds the hearts of **believers** (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 4).

The new *Homiletic Directory* tells us that the fundamental purpose of the homily is to proclaim Christ's Paschal Mystery, to open the Scriptures, and to lead the community to the Eucharistic sacrifice.

The Introduction to the *Lectioary for Mass* tells us that "through the course of the liturgical year, the homily sets forth the **mysteries of faith** and the **standards of the Christian life** on the basis of the sacred text" (Intro. no. 24).

Preaching is part of sacred worship.

It is a proclamation of God's wonderful works.

Its purpose is to explain the mysteries of faith and the Christian life based on the biblical readings heard at Mass.

You could call it a bridge between Word and Eucharist.

A **homily** is based on the Scriptures, as opposed to a **sermon**, which is a talk or an address given on a particular topic.

This topic may or may not be related to the *Lectioary* readings.

The homily, as it is properly called today, is delivered from a pulpit or presider's chair by a bishop, priest, or deacon who possesses Holy Orders and faculties.

While a lay person could deliver a well-prepared homily, that person would lack Holy Orders and therefore a special grace that touches hearts in a way that only a man with grace of office can.

Homilies have changed the course of history.



Peter's sermon on Pentecost Day, dealing with the resurrection of Our Lord and His messianic spirit, led to the baptism of three-thousand persons (Acts 2:41).

Preaching brought the Gospel to places like India, the Baltic States, and South America.

Pope Urban II's call to free the Holy Land from Muslims in 1095 was the spark that lit the Crusading Movement.

Pope John XXIII revealed his intention to call Vatican II in an address on the Conversion of Saint Paul, January 25, 1959.

Then-Cardinal Ratzinger's homily at the funeral of Pope Saint John Paul II touched many hearts, and was instrumental in his election as John Paul's successor.

Who can forget the ending of that homily, in which he asked his predecessor to bless everyone from his window in Heaven?

A similar thing happened when then-Cardinal Bergoglio from Argentina spoke at one of the pre-conclave meetings before his election.

His description of the Church as an evangelizing agent actively engaged in the world convinced many cardinals that he was the one to lead the Church in the years following Benedict's pontificate.

Words can affect the course of history.

History is an incredibly complex subject, and there are dozens of ways to look at it.

Toward the end of being as clear and understandable as possible, I would like to break it down in a particular way.

I want in this talk to look at (4) four periods in Church history, and discuss the role of preaching within them.

I have selected an individual or individuals whom I believe reflects the characteristics of the era and some lessons or takeaways for our consideration.

Before going into the history of preaching, I want to comment on the latest magisterial document on this topic, the newly released *Homiletic Directory*, approved last summer and promulgated last month.

It is a good document with some features I think will be helpful.

First, it provides specific guidance for preaching on certain feasts.

For example, on Palm Sunday it suggests preaching on Paul's Letter to the Philippians, which it calls "a beautiful hymn which admirably summarizes the whole Paschal Mystery."

On Epiphany, it highlights three themes in the three readings, which it calls "three genres of biblical interpretation": Isaiah's beautiful poetry, Paul's precise theological statement, and Matthew's dramatic narration of events, "every detail of which is filled with symbolic meaning."

The *Directory* explains the reasoning behind the ABC cycle, which follows the events of the life of Christ, from beginning to end.

At the end is a stable indication paragraphs in the *Catechism* that "resonate with the biblical readings on Sundays and holy days" (no. 160).

Unfortunately it does not have an index at the end, and it does not suggest themes for a homily series, but it is still quite useful.

Let's take a walk through the two-thousand years of Church history and see what gems we can produce.

I'm borrowing from Bishop Sheen here.

If you think of Church history as a square divided four ways, each way representing five hundred years of history, you get a sense of how history has developed.

## SQUARE ONE: THE FALL OF ROME/BARBARIAN INVASIONS

Let's begin with the Fall of Rome and the rise of the Barbarians.

This period runs from 1 to 500 AD.

In that time the Roman Empire crumbled and collapsed because of civil wars, moral corruption, infanticide, disease, famine, polytheistic worship, and abortion.

The empire was replaced by migrating barbarian tribes from the East.

Saint Jerome interpreted the Scripture while living in Bethlehem.

He thought the end of the world was near.

Augustine spent eighteen years writing *The City of God*, trying to explain how Rome had fallen after being master of the world.

The heresies of these centuries were Christological and Trinitarian.

They involved the nature, persons, intellect, and will of Christ.

All the Church's battles centered around the Person of Jesus Christ.

Preaching in this era dealt with Jewish-Christian relations, various heresies, and allegorical interpretations of Scripture.

The Alexandrian allegorist Origen used Saint Paul's division of the human body into a body, soul and spirit as a model for biblical interpretation.

He concluded that the Bible had a **body** or literal sense, a **soul** or moral sense, and a **spirit** or allegorical sense.

The spiritual was primary in his exegesis, as you can see from his homilies in the *Liturgy of the Hours* on the Book of Joshua, specifically the fall of Jerico, which was an allegory for salvation.

## PRE-CHRISTIAN PERIOD

I want to go back to the pre-Christian period, which lays the groundwork for this particular historical period.

We begin with the exilic prophet Jeremiah.

Before touching on the prophets, I want to note something that was written by the U.S. bishops, and which I think is quite profound.

In their document, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, the bishops write: “The ultimate foundation for the Church’s preaching ministry reaches to the opening chapters of Genesis, where we learn that God, before the beginning of time, reveals himself through his creative and powerful Word” (PMF, 7).

So we are told that the first word was God’s creation of the world, expressed in the words, “*Let there be . . .*”

The first actual message was spoken to Adam and Eve, when God instructed them on their obligation to refrain from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Their disobedience was the first indication that man is free to accept the Word, or to reject it.

Nations, like individuals, received God’s holy Word, and they too have accepted and rejected it.

## PRE-NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

The prophets were concerned with proclaiming God’s Word as it was revealed directly to them.

Prophets never claimed to be men of profound human wisdom, reservoirs of historical knowledge, or movers of culture.

Instead, they were convinced that God spoke to them and called them to communicate His message to the people.

They were not mere prognosticators of the future, but critiquers of the present.

The Word they spoke was an authoritative word, a creative word, a word of judgment, justice, and redemption.

The power of their message came from the God who called, inspired, and sustained them.

Their goal was twofold: to denounce injustice and infidelity, and to uplift or inspire God's people to embrace their commitment to the covenant.

Jeremiah was called *"to root up and to tear down; to destroy and to demolish; to build and to plant"* (1:10).

Jeremiah was born around 650 BC, in the village of Anathoth, near Jerusalem.

He came from a priestly family.

He was called to his prophetic ministry in the 13<sup>th</sup> year of Josiah, son of Amon, King of Judah (628).

*"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,"* the Lord said (Jer. 1:4).

*"Before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you"* (v. 5).

Josiah's whose reform started optimistically, but ended tragically with his death at the Battle of Meggido in 609, while attempting to halt the march of the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco.

The prophet sided with the holy Josiah, whose reforms began around 629.

The replacement of Assyria by Babylon as a major regional power in 612 was a decisive moment in both Israel's history and Jeremiah's prophetic ministry.

The old ways of idolatry and infidelity returned after Josiah died.

Faced with the choice of accepting or challenging idol worship, Jeremiah chose to resist.

He denounced Israel's infidelity in the strongest language:

*"Long ago you broke your yoke,  
you tore off your bonds.  
'I will not serve,' you said.  
On every high hill, under every green  
tree,  
You have yourself to harlotry" (2:20).*

After Nineveh's fall, King Jehoakim led Israel back into idolatry.

Jeremiah denounced this fall from grace.

Under the new king, Zedekiah, Judah continued to side with Egypt against Babylon, rejecting the prophet's warnings.

Jeremiah counseled both submission to Babylon and trust in the Lord.

His message was ignored, Babylon attacked Jerusalem in 596 BC, and again ten years later.

During the siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was imprisoned and thrown into a pit.

He was later taken to Egypt, where he continued to reproach his countrymen for their idolatry.

The prophet's sufferings, caused by the ingratitude and misunderstanding of his people, his prophesy of the destruction of Jerusalem, and his weeping over the doomed city, have traditionally been interpreted as foreshadowings of the life of Christ.

*"As he drew near, [Jesus] saw the city and wept over it" (Lk. 19:41).*

The preaching of Jeremiah must be understood in the context of his prophetic mission to a people who had fallen away from worship of the one, true God.

This was a continual pattern since the time of Moses.

Israel was saved by God, and then fell into the temptation of idolatry, which led to prophetic warnings and denunciations.

These warnings were often ignored, and Israel suffered the consequences.

But God came to the rescue of His Chosen People over and over again.

Centuries before Jesus uttered the words, "*Forgive seventy-times seven,*" God was forgiving His people seventy-times seven (Mt. 18:22).

Jeremiah's sermons were often sealed with a sign.

In chapter nineteen, God tells Jeremiah to use **a potter's flask** as a sign that God will "break" His people for their disobedience.

In chapter twenty-seven, Jeremiah enters the temple with **a yoke** around his neck, and delivered a message about the breaking of the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar.

In chapter thirty-two, God tells Jeremiah that his relatives will offer to sell him **a field** that was part of the family estate, a sign of restoration.

In his famous Temple Sermon, the prophet points out the false expectations, false behavior, and false worship of God's people, and urges them to reform their ways.

The people refused to listen, and an old tradition claims that he was assassinated.

But Jeremiah continued to influence his people after his death, when the exiles read and meditated on the lessons he taught, and Ezekiel, Isaiah, and others repeated his message of warning and restoration.

*The takeaway from the prophetic tradition is our obligation to look and comment critically on the idolatry of contemporary life, and to call individuals and communities to return to Christian principles and practices.*

*Like Jeremiah, we are to challenge and correct, as well as comfort and console God's people.*

## NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

Prophecy pointed beyond itself to a future time when shadow would become reality, and words would take flesh.

Saint Matthew, throughout his Gospel, reminds us that the words and works of Jesus Christ were a fulfillment of ancient prophecy.

For example, the birth of Jesus was a fulfillment of the words of Isaiah: *"Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel"* (Mt. 1:23).

The massacre of the innocents was a fulfillment of the words of Jeremiah: *"A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation"* (Mt. 2:18).

John the Baptizer's appearance in the desert was a fulfillment of the words of Malachi: *"Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you"* (Mt. 11:10).

The Coming of the Son of Man was a fulfillment of the words of Ezekiel: *"The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken"* (Mt. 24:29).

Jesus was the fulfillment of Law and Prophecy, and instituted a preaching tradition *second to none*.

The Person of Jesus is the focus and inspiration of preaching ministry.

One cannot understand how to preach without a clear grasp of Our Lord's preaching ministry.

He is the Word-Made-Flesh, the Incarnate Son of God, who lived, suffered, died, rose, and ascended for our salvation.



Our Lord preached in many settings: in a synagogue at Nazareth, by the Sea of Galilee, on the Mount of the Beatitudes, from the Cross of Calvary, on the road to Emmaus.

What did He preach?

Quite simply, He preached the Kingdom of Heaven, and Himself as the fulfillment of Israel's longings and expectations, and the Paschal Mystery.

He was keen observer of nature and events, and He knew how to take advantage of teachable moments in the life of His followers.

He compared the Kingdom of Heaven to weeds sown among wheat, a mustard seed sown in a field, yeast mixed with wheat, a treasure in a field, a pearl of great price, and workers in a vineyard.

He compared His Word to seed sown in different types of soil.

He compared sinners to lost sheep, lost coins, and lost sons.

The parable of the unforgiving servant teaches the importance of continual forgiveness.

The parable of the two sons teaches the importance of conversion.

The parable of the ten virgins teaches the importance of watchfulness and continual charity.

The parable of the sheep and the goats underscores the importance of practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Through parables, Jesus underscored the fact that the Kingdom is already here and not yet fulfilled.

Father Richard Hart wrote: "One way to talk about mystery is to use imagery well, as Jesus did. Shakespeare often used metaphors such as describing life as a walking shadow, a poor player, or a tale told by an idiot. The famous preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once compared preaching to a person standing on top of a

ten-story building with an eye dropper trying to hit someone's diseased eye in the seas of upturned faces in the crowd below. The creative preacher has a better chance of hitting someone's diseased eye and of bringing healing to many who need it today" (Creative Preaching in *The Homily*, 94-95).

His most famous homily is the Beatitudes.

Those eight blessings, which form the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, are eight pathways to holiness and salvation.

More than one Church Father compared them to a ladder, which begins at the bottom with "*blessed are the poor in spirit*" and ends at the top with "*blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.*"

At the Synagogue of Nazareth, Our Lord revealed Himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, words which were met with anger and rejection.

The last seven words from the cross form a homily unequalled in quality or power.

Bishop Sheen once wrote: "Three elements conspire in making a great message: a pulpit, an audience, and a truth. These three were present in the life of Our Blessed Savior . . . the pulpit was the Cross, the audience [was] comprised of scribes and Pharisees who blasphemed, Temple priests who ridiculed, Roman soldiers who gambled, timid disciples who feared, Magdalen who wept, John who loved, and Mary who grieved as only a mother can grieve—penitence, priesthood, and innocence—three types of souls to be found forever beneath the cross of Christ" (*The Seven Last Words*, ix-x).

The words Jesus uttered could be the basis of a lifetime of preaching.

*Father, **forgive** them, for they know not what they do.*

*This day you will be with me in **Paradise**.*

***Woman**, behold your son.*

*My God, my God! Why have you **forsaken** me?*

*I **thirst**.*

*It is **finished**.*

*Father, into your hands I **commend** my spirit.*

These words remind us that less can be more in preaching.

The final preaching moment we could point to is Emmaus.

The story is familiar: Luke records that two disciples travel to village seven miles northwest of Jerusalem on Easter Sunday.

They encounter Jesus who, like Mary Magdalene at the tomb, did not at first recognize Jesus.

As they walk, Our Lord breaks open the Scriptures and sets their hearts aflame with the fire of love.

They only recognize Him when he blesses, breaks, and shares bread.

The bishops see this incident as a pattern for our great Sacrament.

As they write: “ Looking at this fundamental pattern of preaching in the Emmaus narrative illustrates the essential connection [among] Scripture, the homily, and the Eucharist . . . This is why virtually every homily preached during the liturgy should make some connection between the **Scriptures** just heard and the **Eucharist** to be celebrated” (PMF, 20).

In addition, the bishops remind us: “The homilist should rely on the presence of the Risen Lord within him as he preaches, a presence guaranteed by the outpouring of the Spirit that he received in ordination” (PMF, 19).

*The takeaway from the New Testament Period is the necessity to make Jesus Christ crucified and risen the central point of any homily.*

*In addition, Our Lord’s keen insight and powers of observation of the world around Him, which enabled Him to create clear and simple illustrations of His message, is the model we follow.*

## THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD

Our Lord knew that He would leave this earth, and leave His work to others.

Those included fishermen, publicans, and a tentmaker.

Moving into the Apostolic Period, let's focus on the latter.

The Apostle Paul was one of the great preachers of the early Christian Church.

Born around 9 AD, in Tarsus, he was instructed in the Jewish law by Gamaliel.

He has been called "the perennial example *par excellence* for Christian preachers and evangelizers of all ages."

Paul's preaching focused on the One he called "*Christ crucified*" (1 Cor. 1:23) and Paul announced "*the narrative of the cross*" (1 Cor. 1:18).

He was well aware of the fact that God himself "*chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong*" (1 Cor. 1:27).

His writings indicate that he also aware of three other things.

First, Paul was called to be an apostle, to take the Gospel to the Gentile communities of the world.

In Galatians, he explains that he has seen the risen Lord, and that his commission comes from Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead (1:1).

In Paul's eyes, this divine commission puts him in league with the original Twelve Apostles (1:17).

While he recognized himself as "*least of the apostles,*" he also put his faith in God's grace, which has not been ineffective (1 Cor. 15:9-10).

Second, Paul argues to the Christian community at Corinth that his principal role is not baptism, but preaching.

Paul insists that he is called “*to preach the Gospel.*”

The thirteen Letters, or Epistles, of Paul sum up his understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul did not leave us a narrative/discourse of the life and teachings of Jesus, as in the Gospels, but instead his own interpretation of the significance of Our Lord’s life, death, and resurrection.

Third, Paul was aware that he was called to preach the Gospel of Christ, who was crucified, died, buried, and rose, as a means of eliciting faith in people.

He was to preach Christ crucified, “*a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those called, whether Jew or Greek, the power of God and the wisdom of God*” (1 Cor. 1:23-26).

Paul was to preach “*the gospel of God,*” which is the good news about the Lord Jesus and the salvation He won for us by His death and resurrection (Gal. 1:7).

He was also commissioned to preach the faith “*he once tried to destroy*” (Gal. 1:23).

For Paul, the Gospel was the work of evangelization.

His Gospel was *revelatory*, unveiling God’s way of bringing salvation to humanity.

His Gospel was *dynamic*, unleashing a new salvific force into human history.

His gospel was *kerygmatic*, proclaiming salvation through the Lord’s death and resurrection.

His Gospel was *normative*, a solid guide for Christian moral conduct.

His Gospel was *fulfilling*, bringing to fulfillment the promises God made long ago through the patriarchs, prophets, and psalms of old (cf. Rom. 1:2).

The root of Paul’s faith is the Word of Jesus Christ.

The Christian response was twofold: assent of the **lips** and the **heart** to the message of Jesus crucified and risen from the dead.

The response was not mere lip service.

A person's behavior had to reflect his faith.

Paul instructs the Philippian Christians: *“Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear news of you, that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together for the faith of the Gospel”* ( Phil. 1:27).

Christian faith bore fruit in Christian conduct.

Separation of faith and life would be foreign to Paul.

The three-year Sunday *Lectionary* contains selections from most of the Pauline letters.

*The takeaway from the Apostolic Period would include the following: preachers need to comment on or interpret the Pauline texts, as Paul himself interpreted the Gospels.*

*This means studying the Pauline letters in the Lectionary and immersing yourself in the message of the entire letter.*

*You could call it being attentive to the three Cs: content, or the message Paul was conveying in his letter; context, or the chapter in which the Pauline passage is found; and congregation, or those who are listening to you today, as well as their needs, aspirations, hopes, dreams, and fears.*

*If a homilist remembers these three Cs, then preaching on Paul will be effective and fruitful for him and his listeners.*

## THE PATRISTIC PERIOD

Author Boniface Ramsey wrote a wonderful treatment of the Fathers of the Church in 1985 called *Beginning to Read the Fathers*.

I was first introduced to it while attending the Josephinum.

He identifies the four principal criteria for determining who is and who is not a Church Father: Antiquity, Holiness of Life, Orthodox teaching, and ecclesiastical approval.

The Fathers, who lived from the first through the eighth centuries, wrote on every topic imaginable, including Scripture and Tradition, Christ and the Trinity, sin and the human condition, the Church and ministry, martyrdom and virginity, monasticism and charity, prayer and contemplation, wealth and poverty, death and resurrection.

They were masters of mystagogy, allegory, and typology.

They showed us the many dimensions of Scripture and how to mine its depths.

Some fascinating examples of Patristic insight could include the following:

Saint Augustine compared the Ten Commandments to the ten plagues in Egypt (Violators of the Second Commandment, “You shall not take the name of the Lord in Vain” were like the frogs who “bring disgust to the ears but no food to minds”).

Saint Caesarius of Arles, in talking about the parable of the ten virgins, compares the lamps to souls, the oil to good consciences, and the foolish virgins who are chaste in body and yet filled with a desire for human praise .

He compared the widow in the story of Elijah who collected sticks and fed the prophet to the Church, her son to the Christian people, the two sticks to the wood of the Cross, and Elijah to Christ.

While there are dozens of Fathers who we could highlight, I want to focus on Ambrose of Milan, the so-called “Man of Ten Talents,” a phrase inspired by Luke’s Gospel.

Ambrose was born in Trier of noble parents around 340.

Classically educated, he was only a catechumen when he chosen by popular demand to be bishop of Milan, and ordained in December 374.

He was a defender of orthodox teaching against the Arian heresy, an author of several liturgical hymns, instructor and baptizer of Saint Augustine, and a compelling preacher.

He died on Holy Saturday, 397.

Although he had a soft voice, Ambrose was regarded as an outstanding patristic preacher.

Augustine credited his own conversion to the bishop of Milan's preaching.

It is said that listeners "hung keenly on his lips" because of the content and style of his oratory.

Cassiodorus characterizes him as "a distiller of milky speech, weighty yet acute, most sweet in his power of gentle persuasion, whose teaching was not inferior to his life" (cited in Dudden, *The Life and Times of Saint Ambrose*, 455).

The contemporary reader may feel let down by the sermons of Ambrose because they lack a conversational style, linguistic precision, original ideas, and a dramatic presence.

But we should remember that we have inherited citations, illusions, and remembrances of note takers, to whom we are indebted, but at the same time, limited.

Ambrose was a man of power and persuasion because he believed in what he taught and was willing to die for it.

He was a man of faith, conviction, authority, and grace, four qualities of any effective preacher.

For him Scripture is natural, mystical and moral.

He identifies three types of sermons that bring about a moral transformation of people—the sweet, the stinging, and the milk.



*Sweet sermons* are flowing, lucid and clear, so that by appropriate argument sweetness is poured like honey into the ears of the listeners and the grace of the preacher's words convinces them to follow his lead.

*Stinging sermons* are aimed at stubborn, rebellious, or guilty people.

It stings them with a guilty conscience.

*Milky sermons* are designed for those who cannot eat strong food but grow from infancy by drinking natural milk.

Regardless of the type, all sermons should be full of meaning and content.

Ambrose believed that the chief task of the homilist was to secure himself so tightly to the yoke of the Word that in the process of proclaiming it, he becomes united with the Word, and it dwells in him richly.

In addition to study, the preacher must be a man of prayer and a man who knows God, the Church, and his congregation well.

In a homily on Pentecost, Ambrose reflected on the Spirit as light, as fire, as life, and as a great river.

"The voice that came from [the burning bush]," writes Ambrose, "enveloped the bush yet the flames did not hurt it. The bush was on fire, yet it was not burnt; that the Lord might show us by this mystery that He would come to cast light on the thorns of our body, that He would not consume the afflicted but would listen to our afflictions, that He would baptize in the Holy Spirit and in fire; that he would give us grace and destroy our sins. And so, the plan of God is laid bare to us under the figure of fire."

*The takeaway from the Patristic period could include an examination of conscience of a sort.*

*What percentage of my homilies are sweet, stinging, and milky?*

*Is there balance in my preaching and does my character reflect the Word I preach?*

## SQUARE TWO: THE EASTERN SCHISM/MUSLIM INVASIONS

The Middle Ages were a time of growth and change, of renewal and reformation of the Church.

This period was roughly 500 to 1000 AD.

In this historical period, the prophet Mohammed (d. 632) arose in the sixth and seventh centuries.

It was the time of the Muslim invasions, which swept across the Holy Land, North Africa, and Southern Europe until it was stopped by Charles Martel at Poitiers.

There were at one time six-hundred bishops in North Africa.

Today there are five.

In addition, the East and West parts of the Church split in 1055.

The heresies in these centuries dealt with the pope as head of the Church.

In the history of preaching covered in this and the next section, we could identify three events which had a huge impact on sacred oratory.

*The first was the monastic movement.*

While Anthony of the Desert is the “Patriarch of the Monks” in the fourth century and Benedict is the founder of Western Monasticism in the sixth century.

Monastic life took on new forms in the Middle Ages.

Monks gathered and lived in community.

Sworn to vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they became powerhouses of prayer and liturgical reform.

They also served Western civilization by preserving ancient writings and classical texts.

Venerable Bede was born in the neighborhood of the Wearmouth-Jarrow Monastery in 673.

He was trained by Saint Benedict Biscop and later entered the monastery.

Ordained to the priesthood, he spent his ministry teaching, reading, study, and writing.

He was not an original thinker, but he was an excellent collector of manuscripts and other texts, which he used to great effect in preaching.

Bede wrote theological and historical works in the patristic tradition (Jerome, Augustine, Isidore of Seville) and explained Sacred Scripture.

In a homily on the Visitation, he spoke of the *Magnificat's* placement in the twilight hours of the day:

“It is an excellent and fruit custom of holy Church that we should sing Mary’s hymn at the time of evening prayer. By meditating upon the incarnation, our devotion is kindled, and by remembering the example of God’s Mother, we are encouraged to lead a life of virtue. Such virtues are best achieved in the evening. We are weary after the day’s work and worn out by our distractions. The time for rest is near, and our minds are ready for contemplation” (Office, Visitation Feast, 1847).

I wonder if he knew anything about the circadian rhythm, which regulates human energy throughout the day.

He died in 735.

*One takeaway from this period is the value of prayerful contemplation on the texts we present.*

## SQUARE THREE: THE RELIGIOUS REVOLUTIONS

The High Middle Ages were the Age of Synthesis.

But they were also a time of corruption and scandal, ignorance and folly.

We're talking about the years 1000 to 1500.

The heresies in these centuries concerned the Mystical Body of Christ, and the Eucharist in particular.

The Lateran Councils tried to reform the Church, instituting such practices as Friday abstinence, annual Confession and the Easter Communion, defined Transubstantiation, and preaching in Cathedral churches.

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries saw the rise of the Mendicant Religious Orders, who desired to take the Gospel from the monastic enclosure to the streets of cities and roads of villages across Europe.

Francis of Assisi and Dominic Guzman of Spain represented the Franciscan and Dominican wings of this new mendicant movement.

Their goal was to preach Christ-crucified, fight Albigensianism and other heresies, and renew a decadent society.

Gregory the Great, who was a monk, became a pope and a master homilist.

Augustine of Canterbury was snatched from Mount Caelius in Rome and sent with forty-one monks to Roman Britain, where he baptized Ethelbert of Kent and brought the Gospel to this corner of the empire.

Boniface was taken from a British monastery and sent to the Germanic forests.

Patrick of Ireland was seized as a slave from Roman Britain and eventually returned as the bishop of Ireland.

He is responsible for giving the shamrock, symbol of the Trinity.

*The universities were also born in these centuries.*

Centers of education, scholarship and the systematic acquisition of knowledge, these places turned out scholars and gave rise to Scholastic Method, embraced and practiced by the master synthesist, Thomas Aquinas.

Law was studied at Bologna, medicine in Florence, theology at Paris and Rome.

This improved preaching by providing a wealth of material for homilists.

I call the universities the cradles of renewed medieval preaching.

*The final event of the Middle Ages is the Crusading Movement.*

Begun by Pope Urban in 1095, this was a stimulant for conversion and missionary activity to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims.

A new missionary impulse flowed from this movement, and it gave preaching a new expression.

In Italy a great preacher is Anthony of Padua.

Anthony was born in 1195, and died in 1231 at age thirty-six.

He has been called “the Wonder Worker,” “The Holy Matchmaker,” “The Ark of the Testament,” and my favorite, “The Hammer of Heretics.”

It was originally an Augustinian monk from Lisbon.

The shocking deaths of five Franciscan brothers led him to travel to Italy, where he met Francis and was called to preach to the brothers.

This launched a highly successful preaching apostolate.

Known as the Evangelical Doctor, he was a gifted orator and preacher.

Anthony’s sermons were a collection of reflections that followed the framework of the liturgical year.

They were preached and intended as a source for other preachers.

Anthony compared his sermons and biblical interpretation to a four-wheeled chariot, called a *quadriga*, similar to the fiery chariot that Elijah rode to Heaven (2 Kgs. 2:11).

The four wheels represent the Sunday Gospel, the Old Testament readings taken from Matins, the Introit of the Mass, and the Epistle of the Day.

Each sermon places these four elements together in order to display the internal unity that Anthony saw present in them.

First, Anthony proposed a theme, such as “In the beginning God created.”

Then he lays out the theme in a prologue.

He divides the theme into parts, such as five points highlighted in a particular Gospel.

He then breaks open the theme.

He continues with an epilogue or prayer and a summary of the points he has made.

For example, an outline of the first Sunday after Easter might look like this:

1. Introduction on the preacher and to whom he should preach.
2. The coming together of the disciples.
3. On the threefold gift of peace: temporal peace, peace of heart, and eternal peace.
4. On the power of the absolution given to the Apostles.
5. On the doubt of Thomas.
6. On Thomas’ confession of faith and the confirming of our faith.

He concludes as follows: “Let us ask, therefore, dearest brothers, and humbly entreat the mercy of Jesus Christ, so that he might come and stand in our midst. May he grant us peace, absolve us of our sins, and take away all doubt from our hearts. And may he imprint in our minds faith in his passion and resurrection, so that with the apostle and the faithful of the Church we might merit to receive eternal life. May he grant this, he who is blessed, laudable and glorious through all ages. Let every faithful say: Amen. Alleluia.”

*The takeaway from the Middle Ages: all homilies should have a clear outline, structure, focus, and direction, and be grounded in solid theology and scholarship.*

## SQUARE FOUR: THE REFORMATION AND MODERN PERIOD

The years from 1500 to present were times of Reformation, Revolution, and Renewal.

The heresies of these centuries dealt with the world.

The world and the Church developed in different ways in these centuries, and the two went from hostility to profound respect, even to the point of crossing each other's lines at times, to the detriment of both.

The Reformation Period is characterized by two things: first, the Protestant Reformation led by ex-Augustinian monk Martin Luther of Germany, and the Counter-Reformation, led by Fathers of the Council of Trent, and carried out by Pope Pius V, pastors and other leaders in the decades and centuries that followed.

Ron Knox called those years "Europe's apostasy."

Of all the figures, I think the Jesuit Champion of the Counter-Reformation, Robert Bellarmine is the most significant.

Bellarmino was born in 1542 and died in 1621.

He was a brilliant Jesuit scholar from Tuscany.

Born in the hill town of Montepulciano, south of Florence, this great scholar and prince of the Church was "mined from the rock ribs of Italy," says Hughes Old.

He was a writer, an apologist of the Counter-Reformation, an author of a catechism, a cardinal archbishop and a famous preacher.

At a time when the Church was reacting sharply to the Protestant revolt, Ballarmine developed an effective antithesis to Protestant teachings, and recovered and displayed some of the Church's spiritual treasure in the process.

He studied and taught Greek, focusing on important Greek orators such as Demosthenes and Isocrates.

He earned a reputation as a great preacher early in his ministry.

Educated in Rome, he joined the Jesuits.

He later studied at Louvain, center of Counter-Reformation at age 20.

He moved up in Church circles thanks to his uncle, Pope Marcellus.

He spent seven years at Louvain, and became the first Jesuit appointed chair of theology.

His sermons became famous, and people from across Europe came to hear him speak, including hundreds of Protestants who crossed the English Channel to hear the famous orator.

He wrote a “Summa of the Chair of the Counter-Reformation theology” between 1586 and 1593.

He emphasized preaching the Word as an essential function of the priestly office.

Hughes Old has written, “If Bellarmine’s preaching exemplifies anything, it is the power of clear thinking in the pulpit.”

He called the word the **seed** by which we are born again, the **bread** with which we are nourished, and the **sword** by which we are defended.

He saw preaching as a source of conversion and renewal in the Church.

He deeply appreciated the power of the Word to touch hearts and win souls for Christ.

For Bellarmine, the Word was a two-edged sword: the threats of God’s punishment were on one side, and the promises of God’s consolation were on the other.

God is both just and merciful.



He employed examples, illustrations, and anecdotes that were widely used in the Middle Ages.

Bellarmino set a good example, in part out of concern that too many preachers “cooked up delicacies of eloquences and learning,” wanting to appear to be theologians, philosophers, or historians. The true bread of life, as Bellarmine sees it, “is the knowledge of salvation which teaches humility, patience and charity.”

A few examples of his preaching illustrate his eloquence:

He explained the triple birth of Christ in these words:

“For Sacred Scriptures, Apostolic tradition and the prediction of the prophets testify to its being remarkably varied and manifold. . . .

There was first of all, the birth of Christ in Heaven WITHOUT FATHER OR MOTHER, then on earth WITHOUT A FATHER, and finally in the hearts of men WITHOUT A FATHER OR A MOTHER.”

These three dimensions of the birth of Christ are reflected in the three Masses.

In the fifth century, three Masses, which were originally offered in Jerusalem to honor the Christ-Child, were offered in Rome.

At midnight, the people celebrated Mass at the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, where the reputed relics of the wooden crib were brought during the seventh century.

Then later in the day a procession was made to Saint Peter’s where the pope offered Mass again.

In the middle of these two celebrations came a third Mass in the imperial church of Saint Anastasia.

By the mid-twelfth century, the third Mass was offered at Saint Mary Major.

He explained what he called “the mystical significance of the three Masses of Christmas.”

The first Mass at midnight “recounts the story of Christ’s temporal birth in the world,” the so-called “human nativity.”

The second Mass at dawn “recalls the spiritual birth of Christ in our minds and hearts” the so-called “spiritual nativity.”

The third Mass during the day commemorates “that ineffable, everlasting birth by which the Word of God and True Light is generated for all eternity from the Father of lights,” the so-called “divine nativity.”

Zeal, wisdom, and eloquence were three essential qualities of any effective preacher, images he borrowed from the Pentecost narrative.

He compared heat of Pentecost to *zeal*, the splendor of the holy fire to *wisdom*, and the form of tongues to *eloquence*.

The first thing to do is to figure out the scope of the sermon and how the different parts fit together.

Having decided this, he would arrange the reasons, applications and examples to achieve his purpose.

His fame spread beyond the boundaries of Catholicism.

The Reformation and Post-Reformation Periods were followed by the Baroque and the Enlightenment, which denied anything outside the scope of human reason.

In these centuries, tradition was ejected and replaced in the culture by cold, rational thinking.

The Holy Spirit responded to the cold logic of rationalism with devotions such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus, promoted by Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

The French Revolution swept away the twin pillars of French society, namely the Church and the monarchy, the effects of which we are still dealing with today.

*The takeaway from these centuries is to ask if we have zeal, wisdom, and eloquence in our preaching.*

*A second takeaway is to incorporate regularly moral teachings on the issues of our day.*

## THE MODERN PERIOD

I define the modern period as the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

It was the era of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, Marx and Engels writing the *Communist Manifesto*, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the Gilded Age, various revolutions around the world, the definition of the Immaculate Conception, and the apparitions of the Blessed Mother to a little girl at Lourdes, France.

The steamboat, cotton gin, telegraph, and telephone were invented in this century.

Sheen described the nineteenth century this way: "The end of the nineteenth century marked the great upward climb of man divorced from God. Every one of the sacred truths taught by the Church since the first Easter Day was presumed to have been dissolved by the acids of modernity. God was reduced to a mental symbol and explained away psychologically; man was reduced to an animal and then explained away biologically; life was reduced to chemicals and then explained away mechanically. The supernatural was made synonymous with the superstitious; the mystical identified with the mystified; Christ was a mere social reformer like Buddha and Confucius; the Church was a sect; and man was on the way to being God" (*The Eternal Galilean*, 235).

The liturgical movement started in the mid-1800s and led to a spiritual revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Pope Pius X contributed his part by lowering the Communion age to seven, encouraging Chant, and Pope Pius XII reformed the Holy Week services and the sacrament of Baptism.

In France, a young man who survived the Revolution decided to devote himself to the service of God, and changed the course of the Church in that country.

His name was John Mary Baptist Vianney, and he is the patron of parish priests and pastors.

John Vianney lived from 1786 to 1859.

He was pastor of Saint Sixtus' Parish in Ars, France, in the Lyons Diocese for forty-one years.

As a boy, he hid in the haystacks of his community from zealous French revolutionaries.

He was befriended by a priest, who taught him Latin and the rudiments of theology.

One day, this priest was attempting to teach a Latin lesson, when Vianney failed to answer a question.

The priest struck him and called him "stupid."

Vianney then knelt down and asked forgiveness for his stupidity.

The priest, recognizing his error, begged forgiveness in turn, and the two became friends.

This priest maintained his friendship with the humble seminarian, who later became a priest, and when the former teacher became a bishop, he would stop in Ars on his way to Rome for his *ad limina* visits.

The bishop was Matthias Loras, the first bishop of the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

At the time of his death in August 1859, more than 100-thousand people a year visited the village of Ars, northwest of Lyons, and its beloved Cure.

When he arrived in Ars, he asked a young shepherd boy to show him the way to the village.

When the boy pointed to the village, Father Vianney put his hand on his shoulder and said, “You have shown me the way to Ars. I will show you the way to Heaven.”

A statue marks the occasion.

John Vianney understood the powerful words of the Apostle Paul: “*Rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in faith*” (Titus 1:13).

While his 18-hour confessional schedule is one of the most famous dimensions of his ministry, preaching was another area in which he excelled.

The Curé began to preach and to catechize in order to awaken the people from their ignorance and apathy.

The Curé’s study was his sacristy, his desk was the vestment case, and his inspiration was the tabernacle a few feet away.

There in the church he studied his books and wrote his sermons, ten or twenty pages long and an hour in length.

His library, found in his rectory, included *The Lives of the Saints*, *the Catechism of the Council of Trent*, *the Dictionary of Theology*, and the spiritual works of Rodriguez, and writings of the Church Fathers.

He often quoted from the Fathers, such as Chrysostom and Augustine.

He read book and knelt before the altar in order to compose his thoughts.

He strove to be simple because his people were simple.

Next he stood at the vestment case, and wrote without paragraphs.

The night was spent in prayer and writing.

He would recite and practice his sermons in order to deliver them without appearing to read a talk.

He had, in his early years, to endure the yawns of the few men who attended Sunday Mass and the slow, steady creaking of wheels of carts taking his parishioners out into nearby wheat fields to work all day, so they could drink all night.

Eventually this would all change.

His message was forceful when necessary.

He, for example, lashed out at the four innkeepers who encouraged drinking and debauchery until early hours of the morning.

“The innkeepers steal the bread of a poor woman and her children by selling wine to drunkards who spend on Sunday what they have earned during the week. If he wishes to escape eternal damnation, a priest may not and cannot absolve innkeepers who, either at night or during church hours, serve those drunk with wine. Ah the innkeepers! the devil does not trouble them much; on the contrary, he despise them and spits upon them.”

Eventually Ars was rid of all taverns.

Vianney spoke on a huge array of topics, including anger, indulgences, the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, Our Lady, and the Commandments.

He used quotes from the Fathers, “Alas, miserable pride, you dare to judge your brother on the slightest pretext, and you do not know if whether he has not already repented of his fault, and belongs to the number of God’s friends. Take care he does not take your place, which you are greatly in danger of losing by your pride” (Sermons, 225-6).

He tells the story of Voltaire, who at a banquet which he gave to his friends the unbelievers, rejoiced over the fact that of all those present, none believed in God. And yet he believed in it as was proven at the hour of his death. On that day he eagerly called for a priest to help him reconcile with God. But it was too late. The good Lord whom he had reviled with such zeal delivered him over to the rage of the demons (Sermons, 11).

There were a reported six-thousand mourners at his funeral.

John Vianney's homily was one dimension of an incredibly effective priestly ministry.

He is a terrific model for pastors and parish priests.

*The takeaway: advanced education or natural abilities need not keep us from becoming effective preachers.*

*Study and prayer, love for God and zeal for His people are equally valuable.*

*Preachers are never too busy to prepare.*

## THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

The final period includes the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

These centuries have seen incredible advances in medicine, biology, geology, theology, biblical studies, and other sciences.

Technological advances include television, radio, the Internet, the cell phone, Instagram, Facebook, iPhones, iPads, the atomic bomb, and jet aircraft.

Communication and transportation have changed our culture and habits.

The means of communication were recognized by the Fathers of Vatican II as means of evangelization.

Fulton Sheen recognized the power of media long before the bishops did, and used it effectively to evangelize Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

He was born in El Paso, Illinois in 1895.

He served as an altar boy at Saint Mary's Cathedral in Peoria, and attended Saint Viator's College in Illinois (now closed).

He was ordained and spent his live in evangelization at home and overseas.

His radio program, *The Catholic Hour*, aired in the 30s, and his *Life is Worth Living* television show lasted from 1951 to 1957 and was the high point of his media career.

Millions watched his show, which earned him many awards.

He did not speak on religious topics *per se* in his television program, using such topics as Science, relativity, and the atom bomb, how mothers are made, knowing and loving, fears and anxieties, teenagers, Communism and Russia, the death of Stalin, tolerance, fatigue, pain and suffering, and the psychology of the Irish.

He was aiming at educating a secular audience and did not want to turn them off by explicit Catholic evangelization.

Nevertheless, he promoted the Catholic world view in every talk.

People looked forward to his sense of humor, wisdom, eloquence, and his farewell: "Goodbye, and God love you."

He traveled across the country and world bringing a message of hope and peace in his sixty-year priesthood.

He wrote ninety-six books and delivered thousands of addresses and talks on every subject imaginable, in addition to hundreds of columns.

He described his sermon preparation in his autobiography *Treasure in Clay*.

He prepared them in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

"As recreation is most pleasant and profitable in the sun, so homiletic activity is best nourished before the Eucharist," he wrote (p. 75).

He formulated a general plan or outline, then talked his thoughts with the Lord, almost whispering his ideas.

He described three different formats for a lecture or sermon: what is written, what is delivered, and what you wish you had said.



After gathering material and formulating points, he followed with either a meditation or a quiet vocalization without ever referring to notes.

“The material of the sermon is not wholly that which comes from the paper to the brain, but which proceeds from a creative mind to the lips,” he continued.

He said that one of the weaknesses of the modern pulpit and lecture platform is the “neglect of continuing education.”

He called books “great friends.”

They always have something worthwhile to say and they never complain about how busy they are to feed the mind, he said.

“When the intellectual larder is empty, it is difficult to prepare a homiletic meal.”

The higher the building, the more materials have to go into it.

Sheen recommended William F. Barclay’s eighteen-volume series on the New Testament.

He spent hours studying Aquinas, Bonaventure, Suarez, and Billot.

He saw the Church thrive and grow in the forties and fifties, and struggle and suffer in the sixties and seventies.

He usually chose a topic on Sunday rather than preach from the biblical texts.

He last recorded sermon was delivered at Saint Patrick’s in New York on Good Friday, 1979.

Fulton Sheen more than once expressed his wish to die on the feast of Our Lady and a Saturday.

He passed away on the Feast of Saint Juan Diego, Saturday, December 9, 1979, the day after the Immaculate Conception, and days before the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

He is truly a Mass Media or Electronic Preacher.

Sheen reminded his audiences repeatedly that while the economic, political, and social system called Christendom was long dead, that Christianity is alive.

We can only speculate about the future course of ecclesial and world events in light of the changes that have taken place in the last half century.

*The takeaway from this century: use the new means of social communication with a keen appreciation of its value to evangelize and spread truth.*

*Whether it's a Facebook post, a Tweet, or a mass email or a web site insert, spread the Gospel creatively and energetically.*

*This is especially important and urgent, considering the integration of technology into the lives of young people, even including toddlers!*

*And never neglect prayer and study in homily preparation.*

## CONCLUSION

So what can we conclude from this overview of homiletic history?

Why should we study this history?

First, because it's rich.

We have only scratched the surface in these reflections.

History is full of examples of the mechanics of preparing and delivering homilies.

I would recommend studying the masters of preaching in order to see how they carried out their craft.

On the other hand, I would not recommend attempting to imitate them *verbatim*.

John Henry Newman's sermons, while profound and learned, last almost an hour, which was fine for 19<sup>th</sup> century England, but hardly fitting for twenty first century attention spans.

Second, because it's needed.

I read recently that 25 percent fewer people are confirmed than receive First Communion each year.

We need to do better.

Personal experience is good, but your experience is not mine and the shared experience of two-thousand years is greater than all of us, and can have a huge impact on the future of preaching.

If you love history, or even if you don't, study it.

It's a great teacher.

A fitting conclusion to these reflections can be found at the end of *Mediator Dei*, written sixty-eight years ago:

“Never be discouraged by the difficulties that arise, and never let your pastoral zeal grow cold. ‘Blow the trumpet in Zion . . . call an assembly, gather together the people, sanctify the Church, assembled the ancients, gather together the little ones and them that suck at the breasts’ [Mt. 18:24–25], and use every help to get the faithful everywhere to fill the Churches and crowd around the altars so that they may be restored by the graces of the Sacraments and joined as living members to their Divine Head, and with Him and through Him celebrate together the august Sacrifice that gives due tribute of praise to the Eternal Father” (*Mediator Dei*, no. 204).

Mary, Mother of the Word Incarnate, pray for us.

Thank you.