

A photograph of Pope Francis speaking at a golden podium. He is wearing white papal vestments and a white zucchetto. The podium features a circular emblem with a cross and the year 1929. The background is a dark, ornate interior.

# The Theology and Art of Sacred Preaching

Msgr. Roger J. Landry  
Clergy Days for the  
Diocese of Tulsa  
January 28, 2025

# The Revival of Sacred Preaching

- Many surveys have shown that among the reasons why only 1 of 6 Catholics in the US attends Mass each Sunday is because people are drifting away from practice or leaving the Church altogether due to preaching that's poor and unprepared, uninspiring and sometimes obsessed about “bad news” instead of Good. Many Catholics leave for Protestant Churches where nourishing preaching applying the Bible to life sets them on fire.
- Pope Francis has often decried the quality of Catholic homilies. “Please, the homilies: they are a disaster” (Jan 22, 2023).
- Pope Benedict: “Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies need to be improved” (SC 46).
- St. Bernardine of Siena’s 15<sup>th</sup> century contrafactual about the importance of preaching.





# The Theology of Preaching

- God is *logos*: conversation, speech. The Trinity seeks to bring us into his interior eternal dialogue.
- Sacred preaching is meant to be a cooperation with the Holy Spirit, with whom we give joint witness.
  - Tongues of Fire
  - Not worrying about what we are to say, because the Spirit of the Father will teach us what to say.
  - Preaching – “prophecy,” actualizing the word of God, together with “teaching” – is one of the charismatic gifts St. Paul describes.
- Jesus puts words on the first priests’ lips, to announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand, to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins, etc.
- And Jesus himself gives us a model of preaching.

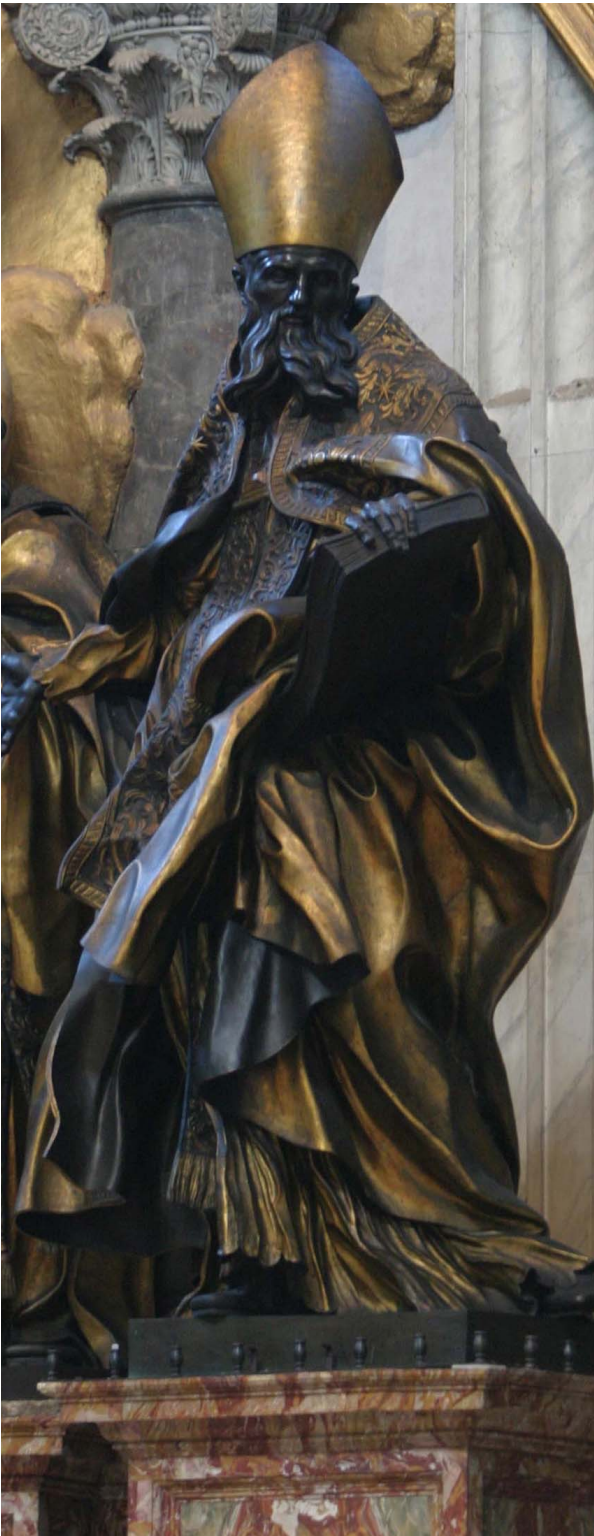


# The Structure of This Talk

- I'd like to consider the Theology of Preaching and Putting it into action by focusing on three figures:
  - The greatest preacher in the history at least of the West: Saint Augustine.
  - Today's hagiological honoree, Saint Thomas Aquinas, on what is being marked as his 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and the conclusion of the Thomistic Triennium marking the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his canonization (July 18, 1323), the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death and birth into eternal life (March 7, 1274) and the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth (1225).
  - Pope Francis, who has given us the clearest primer on preaching in the history of the magisterium, with insights certainly relevant to our situation.

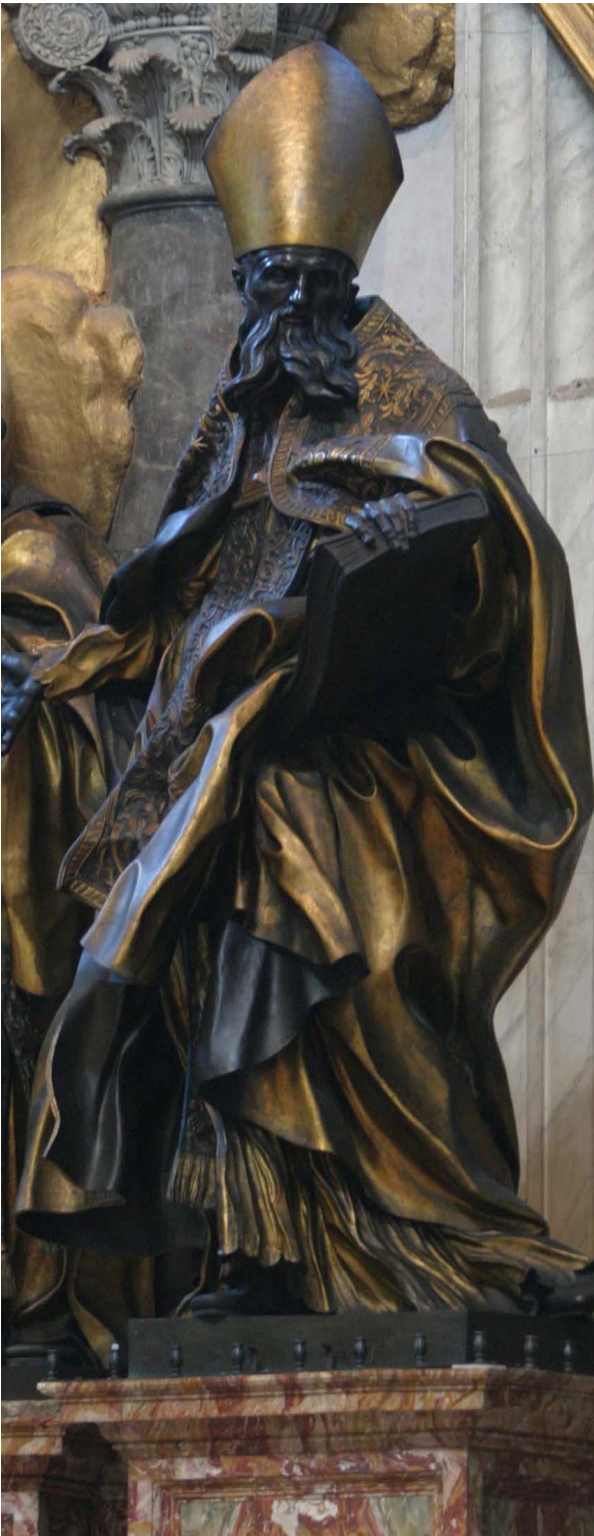
# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- Saint Augustine is generally considered the greatest preacher in the history of the Church in the West.
- He's one of the only Fathers to leave us a systematic treatise on Sacred Preaching, in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which he focused on the content (Books 1-3, written just after he became a bishop in 396-7) and method (Book 4, written 30 years later) of preaching.
- We can focus very briefly on some of what he he says in this must read for preachers today! We will focus mainly on what is happening when we preach, what the content of preaching is, and what eloquence involves.



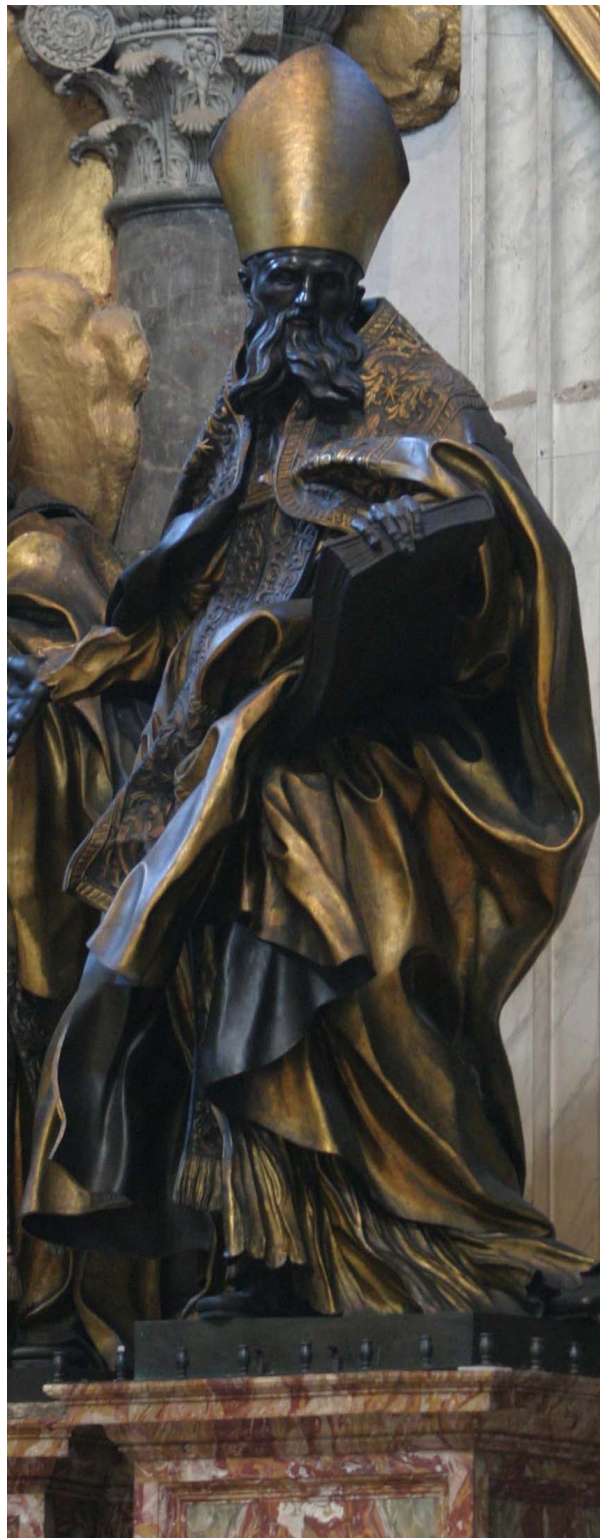
# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- In preaching, God acts in two ways: on the *outside (extrinsecus)* through the preacher communicating the truth of Sacred Scripture, and on the *inside (intus)* of the listener through grace so that the Word may be fruitfully received.
- Because the interior action is the key to fruitful preaching, the most important thing a preacher can do is pray for himself and those listening! “It is more the piety of prayer than the ready facility of orators that enables him to [preach efficaciously]; by praying then both for himself and for those he is about to address, let him be a pray-er before he is a speaker.”



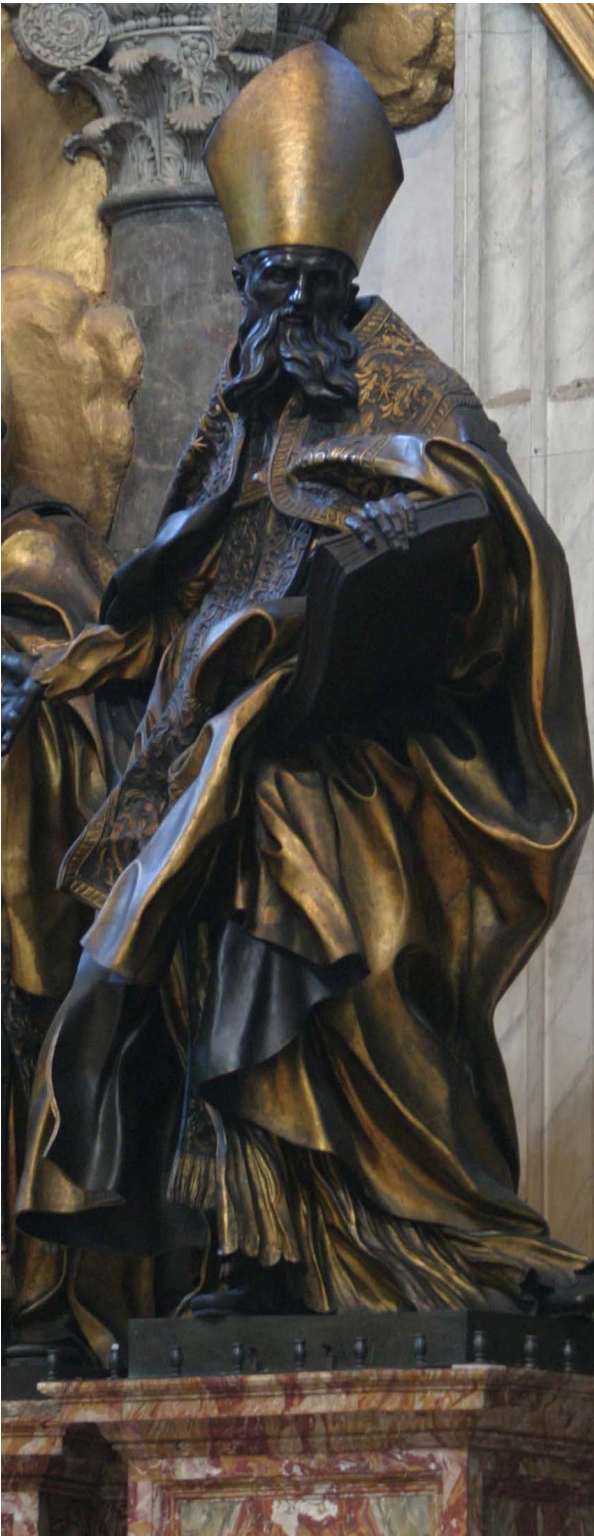
# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- The ultimate goal of preaching, he says, is two-fold: for matters requiring the assent of faith, the preacher must convince the listeners of the truth of what he is saying; for matters that deal with a change of moral behavior, he must convince them more than just about moral truth but move them to change their behavior. That moral metamorphosis can only happen by the power of God; therefore, the need for prayer and Sacred Scripture.
- “It is the duty of the interpreter and teacher of the Holy Scriptures” – that is who a preacher is for him – “... both to teach what is good and to unteach what is bad, and in this task of speaking, to conciliate the hostile, rouse the careless, and tell the ignorant both what should be done and what they should expect.”



# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

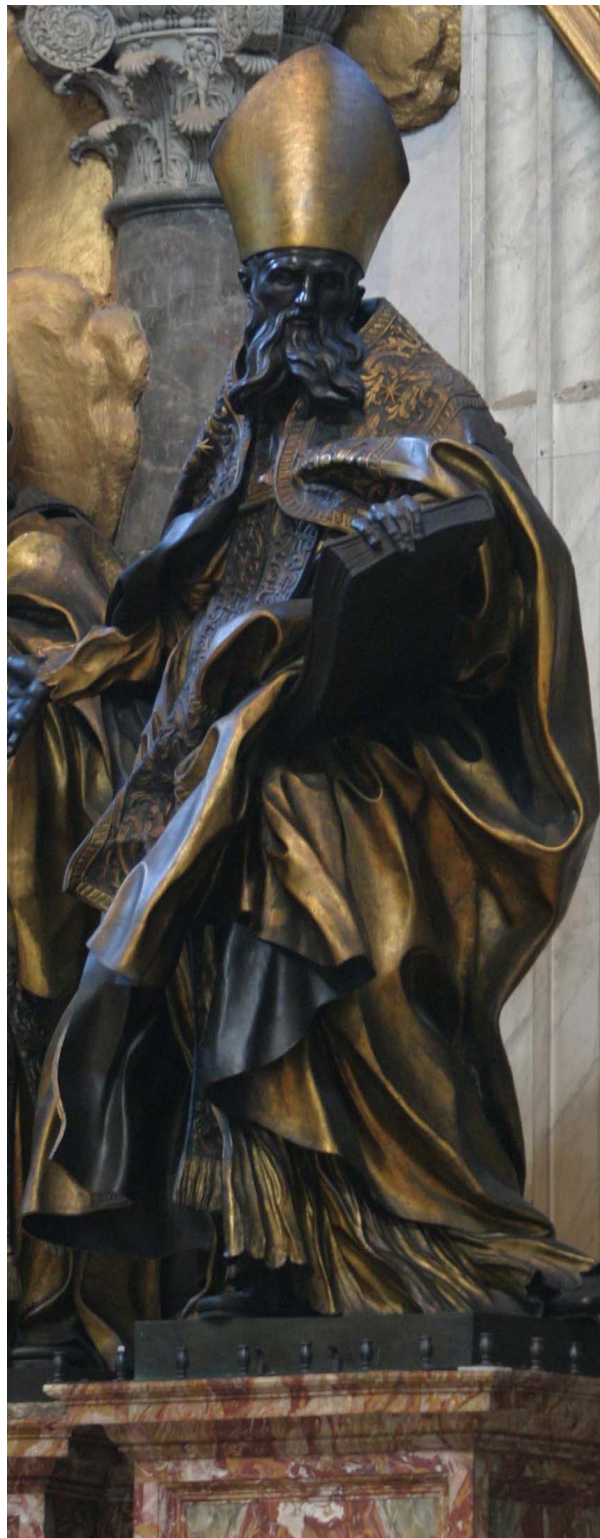
- “If the hearers need to be taught (*docere*), it is to be done in the narrative style, if, that is, the matter at hand is unknown. ... If, however, the hearers need to be moved (*movere*) rather than taught, so that they may not be sluggish in doing what they already know, and so that they give assent to things that they profess to be true, greater powers of speaking are needed. Here there is need for entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and words that restrain, and whatever other things that avail for moving minds and souls.”
- To do this, the preacher must have assimilated what he’s trying to communicate. It’s not fundamentally a question of rhetorical skill but of knowing Christ.





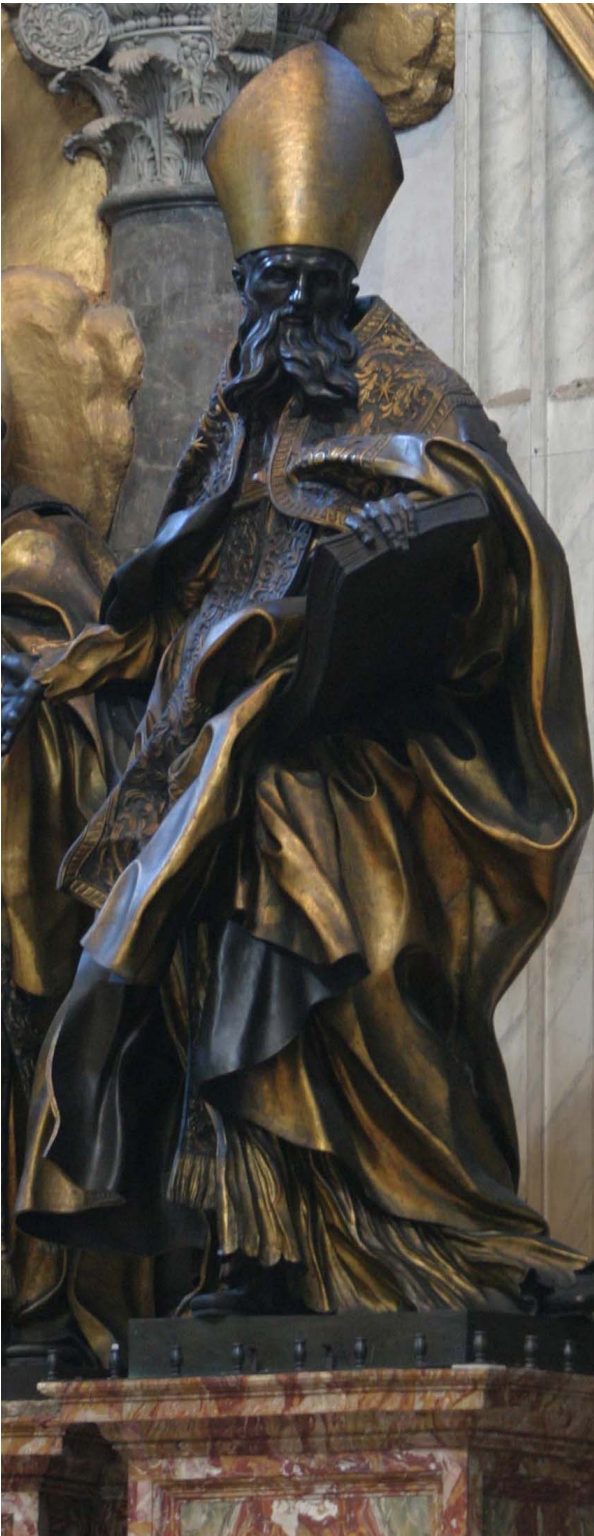
# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- The content of Sacred Preaching is “wisdom,” and the style is “eloquence,” which means by convincing and moving.
- Cicero had taught, “Wisdom without eloquence is of little use to society, while eloquence without wisdom is frequently extremely prejudicial to it, never of any use.”
- For Augustine, there needs to be both, and wisdom means Christ incarnate Wisdom himself. After Christ’s ascension, wisdom is conveyed through the Scriptures. So wisdom means personal knowledge and worship of Christ and knowledge of Sacred Scripture. Only this two-fold wisdom will allow the preacher to preach well.



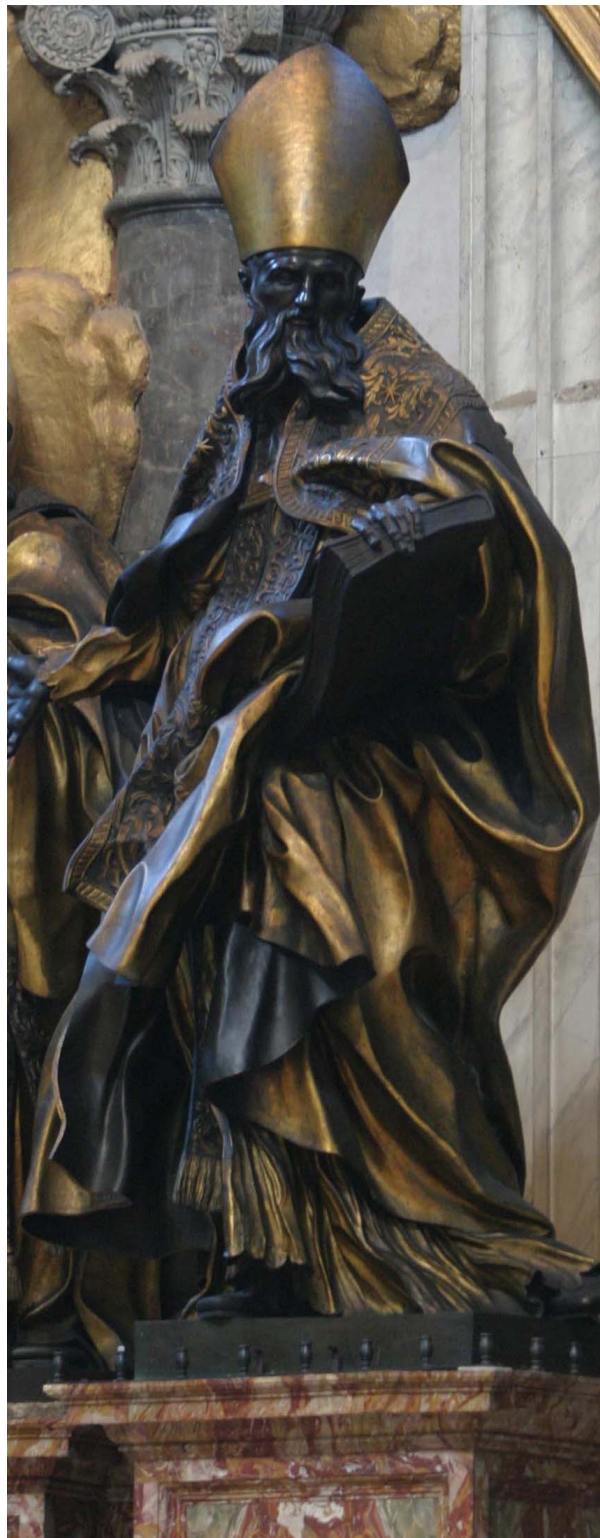
# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- Augustine says that the primary condition for preaching is wisdom, not eloquence. “For a man who has the duty of saying wisely even what he cannot say eloquently, it is supremely important that he should have the words of Scripture at his fingertips.” If one doesn’t know Sacred Scripture, he says, eloquence is useless and can be harmful.
- The source of what we have to say in our preaching is Sacred Scripture, about the person and the work of Christ. It’s not about other things, or even about our “what a passage means to me,” but the content of Scripture itself. It’s to look at the whole world through the lens of Scripture, revealing or unveiling the day-to-day by God’s wisdom, perceiving his action, and receiving his life.



# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- In a positive way, the preacher is meant to teach Scriptural revelation and unteach what is inconsistent with it.
- Augustine could have used all of pagan literature in making his points, but he emphasized Sacred Scripture. It has not just apposite images and stories, but divine power to change people!
- “Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, and that from infancy you have known [the] sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:14-16).



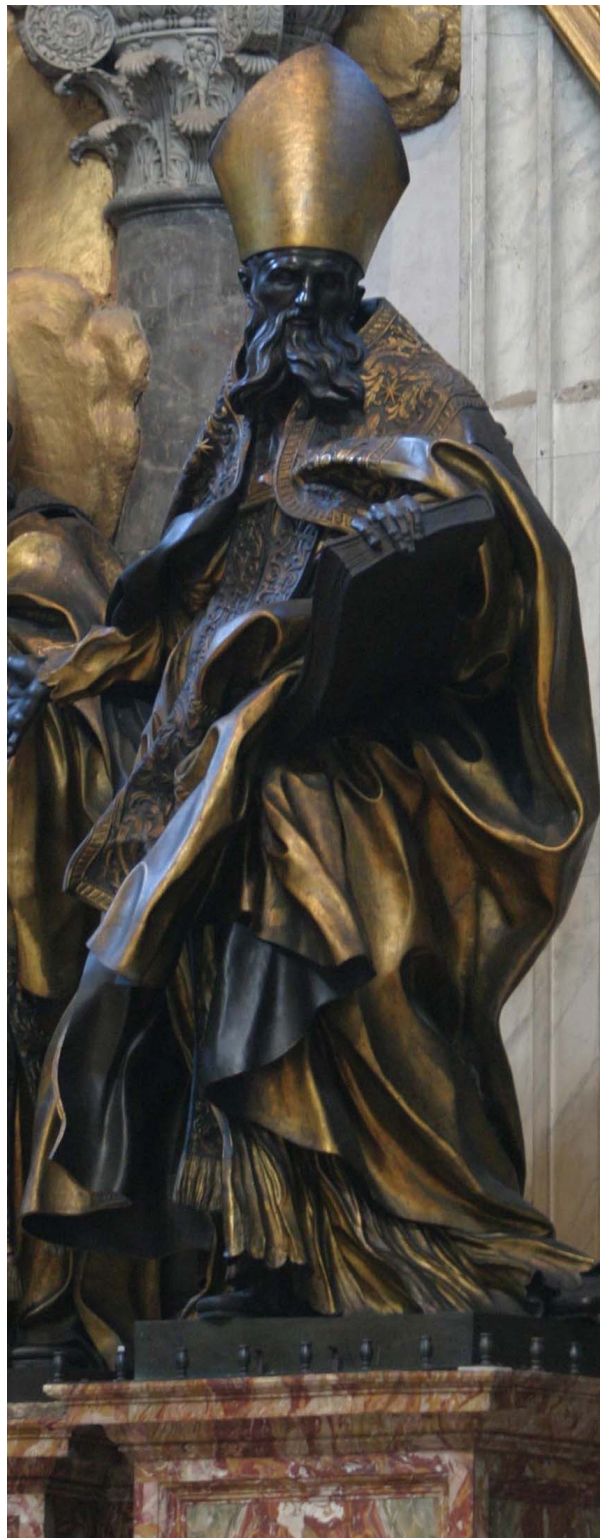
# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- The preaching of Augustine and the Fathers on Sacred Scripture led to a truly Christian, Biblically-based culture. People were formed in a Biblical worldview and capable of understanding everything in its light.
- Even though less important than wisdom, eloquence is still very useful.
- “Would anyone dare to maintain that truth should stand there without any weapons in the hands of its defenders against falsehood; that those speakers who are trying to convince their hearers of what is untrue, should know how to get them on their side, to gain their attention and have them eating out of their hands by their opening remarks, while those who are defending the truth should not? That those should state their lies briefly, clearly, plausibly, and then we should state our truths in a manner too boring to listen to, too obscure to understand and finally too repellant to believe?”



# Saint Augustine on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- Augustine says that eloquence should be learned by the young who are quick learners. The best way to learn is not by pouring over the rules of eloquence but by listening to eloquent preachers. No one can become eloquent without listening to good speakers at work, just as those growing up in a home that use good grammar learn good grammar.
- The most powerful form of eloquence — source of persuasion — is the moral character or “manner of life” of the preacher.
- While the content of divine wisdom does not change, the means by which it is delivered must be adapted to the audience. It must be listener-centered, rather than method-centered. Effective teaching is that the audience learn, and so it adapts so that they learn. Sometimes this means letting go of polish — a “diligent negligence” — to ensure people get the point.





# Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- Saint Thomas was a popular preacher not just to academic audiences but to ordinary people.
- He didn't leave us a treatise on preaching, but an impressive body of sermons.
- He, Bonaventure and his contemporaries preached in a style called the *sermo modernus*, which developed an opening Biblical verse (*thema*) as a trunk of a tree from which would spring various branches (*divisiones*) that he then developed (*dilationes*).
- Classical orators had five classic canons for putting together effective speech: find an appropriate topic (*inventio*); arrange the parts persuasively (*dispositio*); perfect the presentation (*elocutio*); memorize the speech (*memoria*); and deliver it (*actio*). For the *sermo modernus*, the *thema* was the *inventio* and the *divisiones* were the *dispositio*.

# Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- In this style of preaching, St. Thomas showed, like Augustine, the importance of Scripture. It's not a Bible study focused fundamentally on what Scripture says but a moral and existential encounter that forces people to ask, "What and in Whom do I believe?" "How should I live?" "Where am I going?"
- St. Thomas didn't use contemporary stories, which for the most part he considered "frivolities."
- Dante put into the lips of Beatrice in *Paradiso*:  
"Christ did not say to his first company: 'Go and preach idle stories to the world,' but he gave them the teaching that is truth, and truth alone was sounded when they spoke. ... But now men go to preach with jest and jeers, and just as long as they can raise a laugh, the cowl puffs up and nothing more is asked."



# Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- St. Thomas said that preachers are “the mouth of Christ,” that “preaching is the noblest of all ecclesiastical functions” (Christ came to preach) and urged that they be grounded in virtue and adorned with sufficient learning before they assume the office of preacher.
- “No one ought to assume the office of preacher unless one is first purified and perfect in virtue” (IIIa, 41, 3)
- “If the teaching is good but the teacher is bad, occasion is given for blasphemy against God” (Matt. V).
- A preacher must have knowledge of sacred things, the capacity to prove what he says, and faith to give reason for the hope within him. He must be a person of study, especially of Sacred Scripture. He needs virtue, scholarship, clarity, eloquence, and a desire to glorify God not himself.





# Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- Aquinas teaches that the purpose of preaching is primarily God's honor and glory and the spreading of his kingdom on earth.
- The preacher should be nothing but an instrument to further the plans of the One who sent him. "All preaching should be directed toward two things: showing forth God's greatness by preaching the faith, and the demonstration of His goodness by elucidating the truth."
- He has a Gospel to spread! The purpose is not entertainment. He must have zeal for God and for the salvation of others. "He who preaches errors is a wolf. He who preaches for gain is a mercenary. But he who preaches for the glory of God is a shepherd."
- "Even the works of fraternal charity must give place to the exercise of preaching."



# Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Theology and Art of Preaching

- The matter of preaching, he says, is what's useful in the present life in view of our hope in the next life. It should be useful to the audience listening rather than in general.
- To persuade, he says, the discourse must be orderly and given by someone of virtue and good works.
- Eloquence is important but can never become an end in itself. Secular eloquence is, on the one hand, commendable, but on the other potentially reprehensible when someone uses it for display or as an end in itself.





# The Church Today on the Purpose of Sacred Preaching

- Vatican II: Priests have the “primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all.” The purpose of a homily is “to exhort all men” to “conversion and holiness” (PO 4).
- Pope Benedict XVI: “The homily is ‘part of the liturgical action’ and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful” (VD 59).
- Pope Francis: A liturgical homily promotes a heart-to-heart dialogue between God and his people, proclaiming the deeds of salvation and restating the demands of the Covenant. It is part of the offering made to the Father and a mediation of the grace that Christ pours out during the celebration (EG 137-138).



# The Church Today on the Purpose of Sacred Preaching

- Archbishop Sheen: There are two types of preachers: those who have something to say and those who have to say something.
- US Bishops' *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* (2012): “One of the most important teachings of Vatican II in regard to preaching is the insistence that the homily is an integral part of the Eucharist itself. ... The homily is meant to set hearts on fire with praise and thanksgiving. It is to be a feature of the intense and privileged encounter with Jesus Christ that takes place in the liturgy. ... The homilist connects the two parts of the Eucharistic liturgy as he looks back at the Scripture readings and looks forward to the sacrificial meal. This is why it is preferable for the celebrant of the Eucharistic liturgy also to be the homilist.”



# Pope Francis on The Preacher of the Word of God

- Pope Francis says that people today thirst for authenticity, for credible witnesses, for preachers who speak of a God they know.
- He says that the preacher should be close, approachable, welcoming, warm, joyful, unpretentious, ready for dialogue, and patient.
- He says that the preacher should enjoy passing on the faith to others, looking beyond people's weaknesses and failures to see what Jesus sees and loves in them.
- He must strive to know those whom he addresses, the heart of the community, where God is alive and ardent and where the loving dialogue has become barren.
- He should be striving for holiness: "The greater or lesser holiness of the minister does impact the proclamation."



## Pope Francis on the Content of Sacred Preaching

- Quoting John Paul II, Pope Francis says that the message is the “joyful, patient, progressive preaching” of the incarnation, birth, life, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Preaching, he says, must begin and emphasize above all the kerygma: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (EG 164).
- To preach the kerygma, the preacher must believe it. He must know God loves him, that Jesus has saved him, and that love has the last word.
- The Gospel is a gift before a task!



## Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching

- Pope Francis says that good preaching is not just about knowing what to say but how to say it (EG 156). Method is a profoundly spiritual concern.
- He says it's an expression of love of neighbor to refuse to offer a product of poor quality.
- What are the elements of a good homily? He gives 13 characteristics:
  - **Well prepared** – a preacher who doesn't prepare is not "spiritual" but dishonest and irresponsible.
  - **Prayerful** – calling on the Holy Spirit in prayer.
  - **Scriptural** – based on the Word of God with which the preacher is intimately familiar, not just intellectually but existentially.



# Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching

- Elements of a good homily (continued)
  - **On fire** – They should be words that set hearts on fire.
  - **Humble** – Christ's message must penetrate his entire being so that the Holy Spirit can really work in him.
  - **Simple** – Everyone should be able to understand the language used.
  - **Clear** – Our language can be simple but not clear. There's a need for thematic unity so that people can grasp the point.
  - **Practical** – It should use familiar, practical, every day images, so that people can understand and savor the message and know what they're being asked.



# Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching

- Elements of a good homily (continued)
  - **Positive** – Each word of Scripture is a gift before a demand. He should point out not what shouldn't be done, but rather what we can do better. He should be a joyful messenger of challenging proposals, showing the attractiveness of a life of wisdom, rather than experts in dire predictions and dour judges.
  - **Beautiful** – Preachers should help people recognize what Christ is teaching is not just true but beautiful, capable of filling life with joy even in difficulties. Preaching is more than communicating abstract truths. We can only love what is beautiful.
  - **Eschatological** – The preacher should help people grasp they live in between the baptismal and eternal embrace.



# Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching

- Elements of a good homily (continued)
  - **Maternal** – The Church preaches like a mother evangelizing her family, loving her children, listening to them, teaching them what is for their benefit, counting on their trust. A spirit of love guides conversations and corrections. Preaching is better understood in the “mother tongue.”
  - **Brief** – The homily must not become more important than the celebration of faith or violate its balance or rhythm. He normally says that Sunday homilies should be 8-10 minutes.



# Lessons from the Parable of the Sower and the Seed

- To learn how to proclaim the gift of the Eucharist effectively, we can examine what Jesus teaches in the Parable of the Sower and the Seed.
- The Seed – The Eucharistic Jesus and the Church's Eucharistic knowledge, faith, amazement, love, and life.
- The Soil
  - Hardened soil by the path, stubborn, resistant, either because of opposition or entrenched habit.
  - Superficial rocky soil, initially responsive but gets torched whenever the heat and spotlight gets turned up and suffering ensues.
  - Thorny soil, in which worldly cares and anxieties, the lure of riches and pleasure choke the growth of the seed.
  - Good soil, which bears 30, 60 or 100-fold fruit.



# Lessons from the Parable of the Sower and the Seed

- As we look out at the field today and take a soil sample, we learn:
  - Secularism, living as if God doesn't exist, which can lead to stubbornness.
  - Emotivism, which focuses almost exclusively on how things make us feel, making us superficial.
  - Lots of thorns, other priorities or concerns that get in the way.
- We must be aware of these as we seek to sow generously the word of God and use the skills at our disposal, and the power of God, to try to address them as we preach.
- We will have a chance to examine how in the next talk about preaching the Gospel of Life and the Gospel of the Family.





## Welcome!

I warmly welcome you to this website, put together at the insistence and with the assistance of friends.

During my diaconal ordination, Cardinal Edmund Szoka gave me the following instruction from the Ordination Rite as together we gripped the Book of the Gospels:

*"Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are.  
Believe what you read.  
Teach what you believe.  
Practice what you teach."*

Those words have never lost their resonance.

Since that day -- October 8, 1998 -- I have tried to live up to that commission to be a "herald of the Gospel," by striving to teach what the Church believes, to practice what I preach to others, and to spread with joy and enthusiasm the truth Christ has entrusted to His church -- in and out of season, in and out of the pulpit.

This website is a chronicle of those attempts. You may also follow postings of articles, homilies and teachings on Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

You can also subscribe to the podcast of daily homilies, lectures and talks through Apple Podcasts and Google Podcasts.

It constitutes the "five loaves and two fish" (or even less!) that I have placed into the hands of the Lord as an attempt to feed a hungry crowd, confident that, if He wishes, He can multiply and supplement that meager offering to nourish many more (Jn 6:1-14).

In Christ,  
Fr. Roger J. Landry



### Most Recent Homilies

God's Comfort and the Conversion Required to Receive It, Second Sunday of Advent (B), December 6, 2020

Accepting, Following and Announcing Jesus without Offense, Second Sunday of Advent (EF), December 6, 2020

Walking the Way of the Kingdom Jesus Indicates, First Saturday of Advent, December 5, 2020

Running to Meet Our Light, Strength and Salvation, First Friday of Advent, December 4, 2020

Listening to and Acting on the Long Awaited One's Words, First Thursday of Advent, December 3, 2020

Going Hungry to Meet Christ in a Three-Fold Banquet, First Wednesday of Advent, December 2, 2020

Childlike Eyes to See, First Tuesday of Advent, December 1, 2020

Singing the Song of the Lamb, 34th Wednesday (II), November 25, 2020

Turning to the Lord Who Comes to Judge the Earth, 34th Tuesday (II), November 24, 2020

Following the King and Lamb Wherever He Goes, 34th Monday (II), November 23, 2020

### Most Recent Articles

Our Duty and Salvation, The Anchor, November 27, 2020

Living the Reality of the Kingdom of Christ, National Catholic Register, November 19, 2020

The Knights Our Age Needs, The Anchor, November 13, 2020

Remembering Andrew Walther, November 7, 2020

Just a Parish Priest, The Anchor, October 30, 2020

Coming to Know the Original Three-Dimensional Carlo Acutis, The Anchor, October 16, 2020

A Good Shepherd Full of Christian and Priestly Virtues, The Pilot, October 5, 2020

Returning to the Sacrament of Divine Love, The Anchor, September 18, 2020

The Pastoral Malpractice of Liturgical Abuse, The Anchor, September 4, 2020

The Chosen, The Anchor, August 21, 2020

### Most Recent Talks

Receiving the Lord Jesus as Mary and Joseph, Advent Day of Recollection for the Leonine Forum, December 5, 2020

Novena in Preparation for the Immaculate Conception, Leonine Forum, November 28 to December 8, 2020

Blessed Michael McGivney and the Call to Holiness, McGivney Festival Young Adult Prayer Vigil, October 31, 2020

Apprenticeship in the Art of Living, Duc in Altum Virtual Schools Summit, October 28-30, 2020

Preaching on Marital Love and Accompanying Couples toward the Full Embrace of the Church's Teaching, Diocese of Gary Clergy Convocation, October 20, 2020

The Divorced and Remarried, Challenges and Triumphs in Pastoral Care, Diocese of Gary Clergy Convocation, October 20, 2020

The Heart of the New Evangelization: Meeting, Knowing and Loving Jesus Back, New Zealand Evangelion's In his Name Virtual Conference, October 10-11, 2020

Christian Anthropology: The Human Person in the Modern World, Leonine Forum Opening Lecture, October 8, 2020

Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching, UNSRC Catholic Club, August 27, 2020

Making Better Confessions, Catholic Information Conference, July 24, 2020

# For the Slides of this Talk

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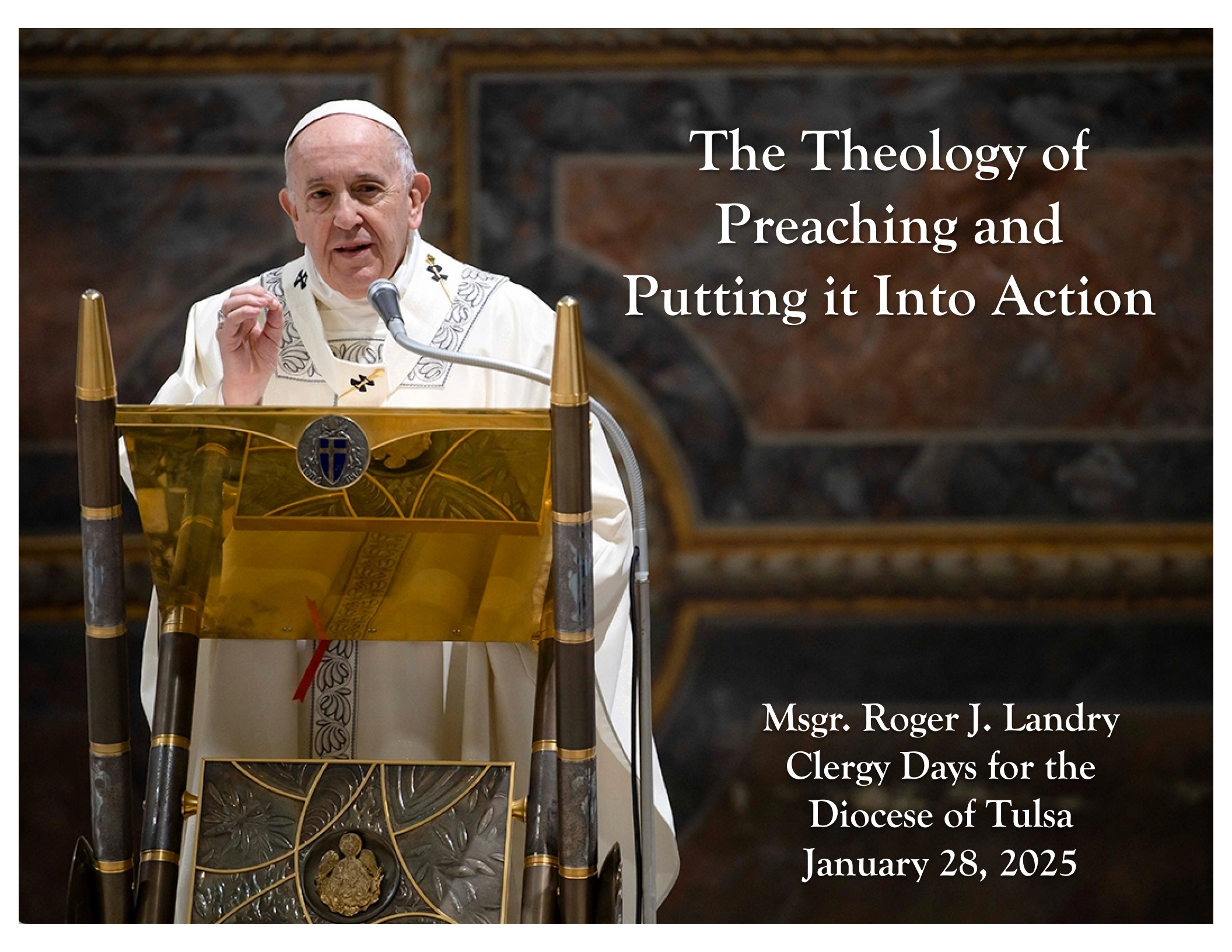
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A photograph of Pope Francis speaking at a golden podium. He is wearing white papal vestments and a white zucchetto. The podium features a circular emblem with a cross and the year 1929. The background is a dark, ornate interior.

# The Theology of Preaching and Putting it Into Action

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