

I PUT MY  
WORDS IN  
YOUR MOUTH  
A Manual for Lay Preaching



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I PUT MY  
WORDS IN  
YOUR MOUTH  
Preacher's Manual

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Revised in 2016 - the 800th Anniversary of the founding  
of the Order of Preachers

## FORWARD

During the 1990's our Dominican Team, working in the Diocese of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, gave dozens of preaching workshops to hundreds of lay men and women who minister as Delegates of the Word of God. We also hosted an annual workshop for members of the Dominican Family from across the Americas. This rich ministry of preaching gave birth to the original booklet: *PONGO MIS PALABRAS EN TU BOCA*.

It is with great joy that we now have been able to translate the booklet into English, and share the fruits of our harvest with women and men hungering for God's Word "north of the border." A special thanks to Barbara Pegg, whose passion for preaching got this task underway. Thanks also to Dan Twomey, Donna Gundrum and all the participants in the 2002 "Training for Preaching the Word of God" course at Immaculate Conception Parish in Durham, N.C. May the fruits of the Holy Preaching give us a taste of the heavenly banquet.

Brian Pierce, O.P.  
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To the women delegates of the Word in Honduras and Latin America  
who are giving light to the New Church.

## Introduction

Why preach? This is a valid question. Moses asked this of Yahweh when he said, "I do not find words to express myself...Please Lord, why do you not send another?" (Exodus 4:10.14). Jeremiah tried as well to avoid God's mission for him, citing his age as an impediment for being a preacher: "Ah, Lord God! I know not how to speak; I am too young" (Jer 1:6). In response, God told him that he could put away his birth certificate for a later date and to go out and announce the Word of God. Similarly, when Amos heard that Yahweh had come to his village to recruit him to preach, he hid among his cows and sheep. God found him, of course, and we know the rest of the story.

This booklet is for all of us—men and women, preachers of God's word, simple innocent folks, discovered by God on the road of life and called when we least expected it. But why us and not somebody else? Good question. Perhaps God will answer it when His kingdom finally becomes a reality. In the meantime, God has put a word into our mouths, and we must do something with it. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" exclaimed St. Paul (1 Cor 9:16). If speaking the Word is tough, not speaking it is even worse. The torch is in our hands. Let us go forward.

Just what does it mean to preach? In common, ordinary terms, we might say that preaching is opening one's mouth and letting the Word of God come out. But we have only to turn on a radio to realize that there are a lot of people who are opening their mouths and speaking words, much of it horrendous, and worse yet they claim that it is the Word of God. Therefore, to prevent this type of disloyalty to God's Word, it is important to recognize that preaching is a gift from God, and at the same time, our responsibility. We can't just say anything and then later blame it on God, saying that we are just fulfilling the mission that was given to us. We have to be responsible, take this mission seriously, so that our simple words might become an instrument for the Word of God, rather than an obstacle. The act of preaching is an interpretation of human life from the perspective of the Bible, one in which the Christian community acknowledges the salvific presence of God, and is called upon to respond to that presence with concrete actions.

For words to be considered true preaching, the following elements must be present:

- human beings engaged with daily life
- the scriptures
- Christian community
- the presence of God
- a concrete response to the challenges at hand

The purpose of this book is to help us work on all these elements so that when God says, "Do not be afraid; today I put my words in your mouth," we may respond, "Here I am, Lord, ready to do your will."

The method used in this booklet, is simple. It comes from a grassroots effort of many years in Honduras among Delegates of the Word of God, Dominican friars, sisters and laity and others from throughout Latin America. Through the use of examples, simple explanations, and practical exercises we will try to go through the process of learning how to prepare a preaching one step at a time. Throughout the booklet there will be small exercises to help us practice what we are learning. This manual is both theoretical and practical, emphasizing the spirituality of preaching. Studying the booklet with other preachers will help you get the most out of the effort.

Being called to be a preacher is a marvelous gift from God. But, as we will see in the following pages this calling takes a lot of hard work. We're called to give our lives for our community, through the faithful following of the Word-made-flesh, Jesus of Nazareth. We are the ears, the hands, and the mouth of Jesus on earth today, and it is our duty to proclaim and to live the Kingdom which Jesus initiated. Let's go now. The banquet is ready.



## THE WORD BECOMES A PEOPLE

Many years ago, in the Mexican state of Tabasco, a young Dominican friar named Jorge was working for a few weeks in some peasant villages as a missionary. Every morning, Jorge had to walk from one house, where he slept to another house, where he ate his meals. On his way to breakfast each morning, Jorge walked past the humble hut of a very old man. After several mornings, Jorge decided to greet the elderly man. "Good morning, Señor." The old man, who always had a Bible on his lap as he sat in front of his house each morning, would return the greeting, "Good morning, dear Father." This exchange went on for several days.

One morning, Jorge decided to talk a bit with the old man, since up to this point he had only greeted him from a distance. "Good morning, sir, I am Brother Jorge," he said. "Good morning, dear Father; my name is Ramon. How may I help you?" came the man's reply. Jorge shook the old man's hand, asking, "Don Ramon, what are you reading in the Bible this morning? I see you read the Bible every morning." Don Ramon looked at Jorge and answered, "You see, Padre, I do not know how to read. But every morning I sit here and ask God to give me a Word that will guide me that day. And every morning, God teaches me something. God has never failed me."

*The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I may know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning God awakens my ear that I may hear. (Isaiah 50:4)*

Don Ramon of Mexico, like the prophet Isaiah, learned to live his daily life immersed in the Word of God. And what a curious thing: Don Ramon knew somehow that to eat the bread of the Word every day did not necessarily require that he know how to read and write. There are many people who know how to read, but do not know how to sit morning after morning and listen to God. To be a preacher is to be a disciple. (The word "disciple" is derived from the same root term as "discipline." A disciple is someone who follows Jesus with daily discipline.)

How do we live each day immersed in the Word of God? To do this, we must place ourselves constantly in the presence of the Living Word, the Good News of Salvation. Or, to quote the prophet, Ezekiel, one must learn to eat the Word of God each day:

*Just then, I saw a hand stretched out toward me, in which was a written scroll. He opened the scroll, and both sides of it were covered with writing,*

*and written on it were lamentations and wailing and grief. He said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you. Eat this scroll, then go and speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. "Feed your belly and fill your stomach with this scroll I am giving you." I ate the scroll and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. (Ezekiel 2:9-3:3)*

It is truly a delicious thing to eat God's word! But are we eating it every day, experiencing that it is as "sweet as honey" in our mouths? Preachers, the banquet of the Word is ready. Dig in!

The most wonderful thing of all is that for us Christians the Word of God is so easily accessible. In ancient times, for the Jewish people, God was the Almighty who lived way up in heaven. But with Jesus, things changed. The Word of God is no longer something which one hears only a hilltop with his or her face covered. The Word has become flesh; it has become a people with a human face. The Word comes to live in our neighborhoods and in our homes. It is there that we can contemplate it.

Jesus spoke the language of a person who was incarnated, hidden, inserted among the people. His grassroots stories, his parables, the way he called God Abba ("Father") all serve as examples of a Jesus who was close to us, the people. Jesus deliberately mixed in with the common people of his time – tax collectors, fishermen, women, children, religious folk, rebels, lepers, thieves, saints and sinners. He spoke with all of them. He shared his word with them, as he does with us.

The INCARNATION was (and still is) a clear option made by the God of Jesus and by Jesus himself. It was not just a coincidence. The Word became flesh 2,000 years ago among a people, and that is why we can say that "the Word becomes a people." Today we would use new words to talk about the incarnation, words like insertion, inculturation, solidarity, accompaniment, option for the poor, etc. The basic idea, though, is still the same: The Word of God is not up in the clouds. It is here, hidden in the daily lives of our people.

*What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have watched and our hands have touched concerns the Word which is life...What we have seen and heard we now proclaim to you. (1 John 1:1,3)*

If we do not see, listen, and touch the daily reality of our world, right there where the Word lives hidden, we will not have anything to proclaim. Thus John tells us that we must touch the Word in order to be able to pass it on to others.

Oscar Romero, martyred Archbishop of El Salvador, is an excellent example of an Incarnated preacher. He was able to blend in with the lives of his people, and by listening, seeing and touching their reality and their experience of God, he was able to preach the Good News of liberation. He continues to be for today a model of a preacher who daily eats the bread of the Word, a bread which is tortilla and sweat, tears and the faces of children, a bread which is cross and resurrection.

In order to live this "spirituality of the Word of God" as part of our daily journeys, we must look at how we can be more and more in contact with the Word made flesh in our world today. While we are constantly surrounded by the Word, we sometimes act like the Pharisees and the scribes in the time of Jesus who, though they were in the presence of the Messiah, did not recognize him.

The Word of God bubbles up like fountains of water, like natural springs, in thousands of different places. We are used to thinking of the Bible as the place where we can find the Word of God. It is certainly one of the places, one of the sources, but there are many more. We will pause here for a moment and take a look at some of these sources.

## THE SOURCES OF THE WORD

- 1) Nature: Changes of the seasons, the cycle of the sun and moon, leaves falling from a tree, the reflection of the setting sun on a lake, a mother bird feeding her babies, a butterfly being born from a caterpillar: all of these wonders of nature can be a Word of God.
- 2) The Human Being: The miracle of the birth of a child, our ability to see, to hear, the way our hands move, the human brain, imagination, the human capacity to love: these are also words of God.
- 3) The Poor: A poor woman who shares her last bit of rice with her neighbor, the solidarity among a group of peasants fighting for land, the small altar in the humble house of an old woman, parents sacrificing so that their children may study, a mother hauling firewood to cook for her family. God speaks to us through the poor.
- 4) The Bible: "Your Word is a lamp for my footsteps and a light for my path (Psalm 119:105)." In the gospel of Luke Jesus unrolls the scroll in the synagogue and reads, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor, and has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives... Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

(4:18-21). For the people of Israel the Ark of the Covenant was a source of great devotion (2 Sam 6:3-5). The Bible is an inexhaustible source of the Word of God.

5) Signs of the Times: (Lk 12:54-56) To know how to recognize God in our present day, in the events happening in our communities and in our world; the increasing poverty, the destruction of the rain forests, two warring countries who sign a peace treaty, a family takes in and cares for a person with AIDS. In all these events and signs of the times God speaks to us.

6) The Church: "When there are two or three gathered in my name..." Jesus has promised to keep speaking within our communities and in our church. The Word is born in the midst of the faith reflection of the Christian community, in the Base Christian Communities, in meetings, in documents of the popes and bishops. The Church is a source of the Word.

7) Prayer: In the daily dialogue with God, the Word is born. But in this dialogue we must listen. In personal and community prayer, we open ourselves to listen to God and to God's Word. The prayer of petition and silent contemplative prayer also reveal the Word to us.

8) The Martyrs: The example and self-sacrifice of the martyrs serve as a living Gospel for us. Latin American soil has been watered with the blood of bishops, priests, nuns, and committed lay people. The life of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. and his death as a martyr of racial justice, is another example. Their blood speaks to us of God's kingdom.

9) Mary, Mother of Jesus: Mary, the simple woman of Nazareth, was the first bearer of the Word made flesh. She carried it in her womb, and in this way she preached the Good News. Today, Mary reveals to us the Word which is Jesus.

All of these sources are springs that become rivers which finally flow in to the sea that is God. To be a Christian and a preacher is to drink of these wells of Living Water in order to be in the community with God.

### Characteristics of the Word

1) The Word of God is Creative: In Genesis 1, God speaks and Creation becomes a reality. We see this Creative Word in John 1:1-3 as well: "In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, and All things came to be through Him..." In Hebrew the word "dabar" means both word and action: what is said is also done.

2) The Word of God is Effective: "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there without having watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful... so shall my Word be that goes forth from my mouth..." (Is 55, 10-11). When God speaks the word is fulfilled.

3) The Word of God has Power: "It penetrates to the depths of soul and spirit, joints and marrow." (Hebrews 4:12) We see this also in the healing acts of Jesus, where his word has the power to heal. "Lord, only say the Word and my servant will be healed." (Mt 8:8)

4) The Word of God is Living: "It is alive, effective and sharper than any two edged sword" (Heb 4:12) The Word is not something historic that we remember simply as facts. It lives today, as Jesus said in the synagogue when proclaiming the prophecy of Isaiah, "Today this Word is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21)

5) The Word of God Reveals: "No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account" (Heb 4:13). John the Baptist began to preach about baptism because God had revealed His Word to him (Luke 3:2). The angel revealed God's will to Mary. And she responded: "May it be done to me according to your Word" (Luke 1:38).

6) The Word of God Sends: "Then the Lord extended His hand and touched my mouth saying, See, I put my words in your mouth" (Jer 1:9). God spoke to Moses: "Who gives one man speech and makes another deaf and dumb? Or who gives sight to one and makes another blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Go, then! It is I who will assist you in speaking and will teach you what you are say" (Ex 4:11-13). And from Paul's letter to the Romans: "How can people go out to preach without first having been sent?" (10:15).

#### Practical Exercise:

- How have we discovered the Word of God in one of the above mentioned sources?
- Has this Word ever transformed you? If so, how?

"The Word of God constantly shows us how God challenges those who believe in him "to go forth". Abraham received the call to set out for a new land (cf. Gen 12:1-3). Moses heard God's call: "Go, I send you" (Ex 3:10) and led the people towards the promised land (cf. Ex 3:17) ... Jesus' command to "go and make disciples" echoes in the ... challenges to the Church's mission ... Each Christian and every community must ... obey [this] call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium / E.G.*, #20).



## THE JOURNEY OF THE PREACHER

Preparing a homily is like climbing a mountain. If one wants to get to the other side, there is only one way: go up and then come down. Unfortunately, many preachers try to get to the other side (that is, get to the preaching) by taking an easier route. They say lots of words, sometimes very beautiful words, but it is not the Gospel; it is not Good News. There is no shortcut to proclaiming the Word of God.

There are two basic parts to the journey of preaching: 1) climbing the mountain; and 2) coming down. The process of climbing the mountain is what we call the first phase of the journey. In this first phase our main focus is to get fully into the Biblical text, into the context and into the reality of our present times (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5.) This is a time to look back at our journey and do theological reflection, asking ourselves: «Where have we seen the presence of God along the way?» We are not ready to start thinking about the preaching yet. That will come later. For now we study and discover the treasures hidden in the Word, guided, by the Holy Spirit.

On the summit of the mountain we rest and begin to put the fruits of our contemplation and study together in order to define the Central Theme of the preaching (see Ch.6). We can only arrive at the Central Theme if we have done our contemplative reflection and study along the Way. There are no helicopters to lift one to the summit. Walking is the only way to arrive. The Central Theme will provide us with the necessary elements for beginning the descent towards the preaching. One cannot get to the preaching without having spelled out precisely the Central Theme. (See Graphic "A")

Descending the mountain is easier, more fun, and more creative than the upward climb. The breeze caresses us as we walk. We hear the song of the birds and smell the flowers. Descending is the artistic and poetic part of the journey. Each step is carefully taken, each word and story delicately and joyfully chosen. This is the time that we begin to draw near to the people again, people who are thirsting to know what we have discovered along the journey, people who are hungry for the Word of God.

Reaching the bottom is a unique experience. We find ourselves once again among the people, and this affirms of our own humanity. People eagerly await to hear the details of our pilgrimage through the Scriptures. We speak of what we have seen, heard and touched with our hands (1 Jn 1).

Above all else, the people want to know if we have seen Jesus along the way. We can be quite certain that, if we have worked well throughout the journey, then the people will discover Jesus in our words. This is the highlight of the journey - the moment when our words become the Word. Along with our people, we are amazed at the mystery of the Incarnation.

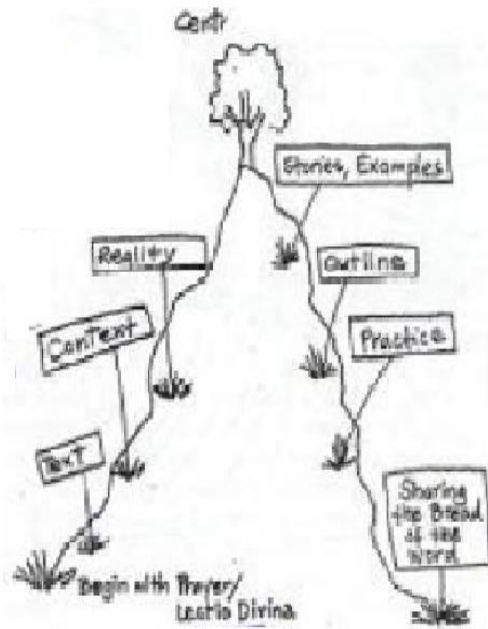
Are we ready to climb up and come back down? Are our ears and eyes and hands open to receive the message that God wants to give us along the journey? Are we ready to listen to other pilgrims along the way, so that they may share their reflections with us?

The experience of preparing a homily, a sermon, or a Biblical talk can be very rich, indeed. It is a journey of faith. If we never climb the mountain, we will never see the sunset with all its colors from that vantage point. Let us try hard to understand this preparation process. It may be that when we least expect it, when the beads of sweat begin to fall from our nose because of so much scriptural research, we will glimpse Jesus beside us, smiling and showing us the way, just as he did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

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"A missionary heart is aware of [its] limits and makes itself "weak with the weak... everything for everyone" (1 Cor 9:22). It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street" (Pope Francis, *E.G.*, #45).







3  
TAKE OFF YOUR SANDALS  
The Biblical Text

The Biblical text is our faithful companion along the way. It is more important than a canteen filled with water because it is the source of water. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light on my path (Psalm 119:105).

The biblical text is the gift that the church gives to us before we begin to climb the mountain. It is the same word of God that the prophets and our ancient martyrs proclaimed. The text which is assigned for us on any given day that we are to preach is our starting point. Without knowing where the text will take us, we do know where we are to begin. The text is like the burning bush that Moses found in the desert (Exodus 3). I am going to draw near and see this wonderful thing. We begin to climb the mountain of preaching, drawing near together with Moses to the burning bush of the word of God - this wonderful thing.

In order to draw near to the text we must first take off our sandals, our shoes. In other words we must assume an attitude of humility, an attentive listening to the word. Many times a preacher will think, "Oh, I already know this biblical text. I already know what I am going to say to the people". This know-it-all attitude is anything but humility. Is God not capable of giving us something new this time? The Word of God is always new and always renewing. So we draw near to the Biblical text like parents waiting for the birth of a child. We don't know what it will be. Will it be a boy or a girl? Dark skinned or light skinned? Will she look like papa or mama? The same happens with the Word of God. It is filled with surprises. We must be open, ready, confident. We can never control what the text will say to us.

The biblical text is the fruit of the relationship between God and God's people. It is not magic. It did not fall from heaven already written. It was written by persons who were inspired by God, people who had fallen in love with the project of the Reign of God. They remembered and noted down those things which most inspired them. The Bible is not a book that gives answers to all our problems, especially those of our own times. It is not a book of recipes. It is the memory of God's people, the memory of a relationship written down for future generations. The Bible is more like a series of letters written among friends, letters from God to God's people. The Bible is much more than a book of events recorded by a historian.

Each biblical text is born out of the reflection of a faith community reflecting on its own concrete reality. The bible is born in a faith community and for a faith community. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, St Paul writes about a very concrete reality in his community. Divisions have arisen among people and it is now being seen in the celebration of the Eucharist. Some of the rich members of the community come to the Eucharist well fed while the poor arrive hungry. St Paul continues in verse 27: Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. St Paul is not saying that we must go to confession before we receive communion. To interpret a text in this way is to impoverish the text. What Paul is saying is that we cannot fake the union within the Eucharist if we are not living this same union in real life. That is why, he continues, each person must examine his or her own conscience. This biblical text is born from a very concrete reality within a very concrete community.

No one is the owner of the Word of God. No one knows everything about the Word of God. We are all servants of the Word. We open ourselves before the text confident in the presence of the Spirit. Just as Jesus said, "I have spoken these things while I was with you. From now on the Holy Spirit, the advocate, whom the Father will send to you in my name. The Spirit will teach you all things and remind you of all of my words." (John 14:25-26)

As preachers we receive the Word and its message as a gratuitous gift. Instead of using the Bible to get some idea out of it for a talk, we should draw near to the Bible to receive from it the gift of life. We grow spiritually each time we allow ourselves to be surprised once again by all that is new in the Word of God.

To work with a biblical text demands that we continuously go deeper into its immense riches. After a whole night of frustration, having caught no fish, Jesus said to Simon and to his companions, "Take your boat out to the deeper waters and there throw out your nets to fish." (Luke 5:4)

To enter into the heart of a biblical text requires that we go out each time to deeper and deeper waters. If we only stay on the superficial level of the Word we will never discover its abundant riches.

#### Questions for the Biblical text:

1) What does the text say? Sometimes we try to manipulate a little bit the text so that it will say what we would like it to say. We must be faithful to what the text itself says and not add any of our ideas to it.

For example, in Galatians chapter 3, the text says that through baptism we are all equal. We cannot say that the text says that the non-baptized are *not* equal to the baptized in the eyes of God. The text does not say that. The text in fact makes no mention of the unbaptized, therefore we should not either.

Another example, in the beatitudes of Luke 6, Jesus says that the poor are blessed and happy. The text does not say that the poor are blessed because they are good people who have confessed their sins. They are blessed not because they are good, but because they are poor.

2) What does the text do? A text not only *says* something; it also *does* something. Some texts give praise, others bless. Some question or shake up our ways of thinking. Some texts remove heavy burdens from those who are tired. Other texts call us to conversion. It is important to pay attention to my natural reaction when I reflect on a biblical text. How does the text *feel*?

For example, the text of the young rich man (Mark 10) questions strongly those who are wealthy. To a poor person who has nothing, though, this text gives hope. He or she discovers that there are no barriers to becoming a disciple of Jesus. The same text does different things to different people.

3) Who appears in the text? The author of a biblical text mentions certain persons because the author wants to say something to us.

For example, why do Moses and Elijah appear conversing with Jesus in the text on the mountain of the transfiguration? Could it be that the author is trying to show us something about Jesus being the New Prophet? Who are people like Zacchaeus, Nicodemus the Pharisee, Lydia, the Good Samaritan? Who are these people? All of them have a very important role to play within the story and the message.

4) Who is absent in the text? In some texts, though not in all, there are some very noticeable absences.

For example, where are the apostles when Jesus is on the cross? Where is the adulterous man in John 8? Where are the religious leaders at the birth of Jesus? Sometimes noticing who is absent also says something about the biblical text.

5) What symbols appear in the text? We must remember that symbols are very important for the biblical writers. A number, a phrase, a gesture, a word repeated many times; these always have some significance.

For example, in John 19:34 water and blood are symbols of Baptism and Eucharist. In the story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel Jesus' words "take and eat" are symbols of the Eucharist. The fact that Nicodemus visits Jesus at night seems to symbolize that Jesus is the light to the Pharisees who live in darkness.

6) Where is the Good News? Every biblical text must necessarily lead us to recognize the action of God and God's good news with the people. There is no biblical text without good news. If we only read the bible to see how God is going to punish and condemn the people then we have totally lost the essential message of the Gospel. In each book and in each word of the Bible there is hidden a good news.

For example, even when Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Woe to you Pharisees", there is a hidden good news. Jesus is inviting them to change their lives to discover the freedom that comes from God and not from following strictly a law.

To move into the Biblical text is an adventure. Each question pushes us forward to other questions and calls us to delve deeply into biblical research. To climb the mountain means for us to sweat with all of our questions, But this is the only way that we will discover the wealth of the Gospel.

## **PRACTICAL EXERCISE**

Throughout this manual we will work together on one Biblical text, Luke 9:10-17. Each of the steps along the way we will work with this text in order to come to the final stage of a homily. In this way we will practice what we are learning. We begin by reading the text Luke 9:10-17.

What does the text say?

Jesus performs a miracle before his disciples and before the people. The multiplication of the loaves is possible because the apostles shared their own food; five loaves of bread and two fish. There is a clear reference to the responsibility that the disciples have with the people. Jesus does not perform a magical miracle.

He does not pull the loaves of bread out of nowhere. The miracle begins when the apostles share what they have (verse 13). Jesus does not perform

a massive miracle. The miracle happens in small groups of fifty persons. No one was left without food. Everyone eats. The text tells us that the multiplication of the loaves occurs during Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God.

#### What does the text do?

It gives us hope that God is with us in moments of necessity. It questions our mentality that there is not enough food for everyone. It underlines the communal dimension, by making the people sit down in groups of fifty. It offers us an image of the abundant banquet of the Kingdom of God. It calls us to not be concerned only about ourselves but about others as well.

#### Who appears in the text?

In the beginning, Jesus and his apostles. Later the text calls the apostles, "The Twelve." Then there are the people and further on we are told that this is five thousand men or people. We also see the appearance of people who are sick and in need.

#### Who is absent in this text?

Perhaps we could say that there are no religious or civil leaders present in the text. In some texts this question is not very relevant.

What symbols are there in this text? The Twelve. The number twelve is a perfect number for the Hebrew people, referring to the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve apostles represent the new people of God. There are five loaves of bread and two fish. This is the common food of the people. Adding up these numbers five plus two we have the number seven. The symbol of perfection for God. The small groups of fifty seem to symbolize that the Christian life is lived out in small communities. The twelve baskets of bread left over symbolize that where God is present there is abundance for all the people of God (the Twelve Tribes). Jesus' gesture of taking the loaves and fishes, lifting his eyes to heaven, blessing and sharing the loaves and fishes is a symbol of the Eucharist. For Jesus, sharing bread with the poor and celebrating the Eucharist are not two completely different things.

#### Where is the Good News?

God is on the side of the poor, the hungry. Some of those who had some food took the risk to share it with others. God blesses and multiplies the sharing. When some let go of what they have others receive life. The Eucharist transforms our lives leading us to deeper solidarity. To share bread is to discover the presence of God. Living in small community strengthens our solidarity. We are able to experience within our own lives the abundance of the Kingdom of God.

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"The first step [in preaching], after calling upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, is to give our entire attention to the biblical text, which needs to be the basis of our preaching. Whenever we stop and attempt to understand the message of a particular text, we are practicing "reverence for the truth". This is the humility of heart which recognizes that the word is always beyond us, that "we are neither its masters or owners, but its guardians, heralds and servants". This attitude of humble and awe-filled veneration of the word is expressed by taking the time to study it with the greatest care and a holy fear lest we distort it ... We only devote periods of quiet time to the things or the people whom we love; and here we are speaking of the God whom we love, a God who wishes to speak to us. Because of this love, we can take as much time as we need, like every true disciple: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:9 – Pope Francis, *E.G.*, # 146).



## SEARCHING FOR THE PARTY The Biblical Context

Juan and Maria, a couple who live in our neighborhood, received the following note one day, "We invite you this Friday to a fiesta to celebrate our recent success." Upon realizing that there was a party and that they were invited to it, they were filled with joy. Juan began to get ready. He started to look for what he would wear to the party, and what they would need to take. But then it occurred to Maria to ask the following question, "Juan, who invited us to this party?"

Juan quickly went back to the letter to find out exactly what it said. What a great surprise he had when he realized no one had signed the letter. There was no return address. Juan didn't give up though and said, "Well if we don't know who invited us, at least we know the time and the date and the place. There should be no problem." But then he realized that those details were not in the invitation letter either. "It only says this Friday but it doesn't say which Friday. Who could invite us to a party and not give us this important necessary Information?"

Sometimes we, too, are asked to reflect on a biblical text that we don't understand very well. Sometimes just looking at the text we really do not understand why it is important to the Biblical writer. Sometimes it lacks information, dates, places, names— just like the invitation Juan and Maria received. It is only when we look beyond the text towards the wider context (everything that surrounds the text) can we begin to understand it better. The Biblical text is like a letter that comes to us, inviting us to a fiesta in the Kingdom of God. But in order to better understand the invitation we need to seek out more information, do research, ask our text some questions. Only by informing ourselves correctly will we be able to arrive to the party.

This next step on our climbing the mountain is the step we call context. This step requires serious research. We have to learn to read between the lines of our text. We have to dedicate time, and look not only at our Scriptural text but at surrounding scripture texts, footnotes and commentaries. Consulting these other sources will help clear up our doubts.

In the Bible itself we can find many of the answers to the questions that begin to appear when we are studying a text. The introduction to each biblical book for example is a source of very important information concerning that book, its author, the dates and the community for whom it was written. It is also important to refer to the texts that appear in the margins, the footnotes, or parallel texts that often appear at the beginning of a certain section of the Gospels. All these auxiliary texts and notes point out other places where we will find help to understand our text

They serve as commentaries on our texts. Sometimes they even offer an interpretation that will help to feed our own understanding of the text. We recommend the use of the Latin American Bible or the Biblia del Peregrino for Spanish speakers, and the NRSV, New American or Jerusalem Bible for English speakers.

### Some Questions for Biblical Context

1) Where in the biblical book is this particular text found? We cannot take a biblical text and pull it out of its context within the Bible. If we pull a fish out of water it simply dies. So it is with a biblical text taken out of context.

For example, Jesus' words "Love your enemies" (Luke 6:27) is not some isolated text. It forms part of Jesus' sermon on the mount. In this sermon Jesus is giving a new law, the law of the Kingdom where the poor and those who suffer are beloved of God. We must understand the love for our enemies within this context.

Another example: in Luke 4:4 Jesus quotes from the Hebrew scriptures "A person cannot live on bread alone." Someone could easily quote from this text to say that the Church should not be concerned about helping people find food to eat. But within the context of Jesus' temptation in the desert we understand that we are being called to not turn material things into idols.

2) What is the historical context of this biblical book? Every biblical text is born in a particular moment and has its own history. It was written for a certain reason by the biblical author. We cannot simply read a biblical text as if it had been written this afternoon. To study the historical context in which a text was written helps us to understand the text and its message.

For example, It is very important to know that the Gospels were written between thirty and sixty years after the death of Jesus. The Gospels are not stories coming from a newspaper, written the day after an event. They are reflections, sermons, written by communities that are trying to remember the important moments in the life of Jesus.

Another example: The phrase "and in this way the Scriptures are fulfilled" is a phrase very common in Matthew's Gospel because his public, (the people he preached to) were Jews who had become followers of Christ. Matthew knows that he must demonstrate that Christ is truly the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures; what we call the Old Testament. That is why he often says, "In this way the Scriptures are fulfilled."

Another example: The book of Revelation was written during a time of persecution. To understand this small piece of information helps us to understand the book itself along with its many symbols.

3) What is the literary context of the book? The Bible is full of different kinds of literature. The biblical authors have made use of different styles for writing and speaking of God. There are stories, myths, historical books, poetry, canticle, legal quotes, sermons, miracles, parables, lectures, etc. These literary styles are what we call Literary Genre. It is necessary to understand the form that the biblical author is writing in to better understand the message.

For example, Do we read a recipe in the same way that we read a love letter? Of course not. If someone writes poetry they might say that the sea reached out and helped me, saving me from the storm. Do we think that was exactly what happened? No, because we know that the person is writing in symbolic language.

Another example: We're not going to read St. Paul's letter to Philemon in the same way that we read the book of Genesis. Philemon is a letter written to a friend about a very concrete topic, namely granting freedom to a former slave. Genesis, on the other hand, is a parabolic, mythical story. It is the intent of the people of Israel to try to imagine what the beginning was like, what creation might have been like. Genesis is a poetic book, whereas Paul's letter to Philemon is a letter focusing on the trust between two friends.

Another example: When Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep no one thought to ask him, " Hey Jesus, did that sheep belong to Ishmael or to Matthew? Everyone knew that Jesus had just invented the parable but at the same time they knew that the parable and its message was true.

4) What is the theological context? Each biblical author writes the biblical book, Psalm or letter to demonstrate certain theological points. This is because the evangelist, the author, is writing for a particular community of people, and therefore the message must be directed distinctly to that group of people. We all know that a person doesn't speak to a group of elderly people in a nursing home in the same way that that person would speak to a group of youth on a Scout camping trip.

For example, According to St Matthew a group of three Magi arrived at the birth of Jesus. These were pagans who dedicated their lives to astrology. In Luke's Gospel on the other hand they were shepherds who arrived at the stable of Bethlehem to witness to the birth of Jesus.

Why the difference? Well, Matthew is trying to demonstrate to his Jewish community that the pagans are also called by the Messiah to salvation. (This was something quite scandalous in those times.) Luke is, on the other hand, more concerned with the question of the poor. That's why the shepherds are the first to arrive to see the Messiah in Luke's Gospel. These are theological realities for different communities. Both are valid, and both are correct.

5) How does this text form part of the whole biblical book or Gospel? We cannot pull a text out of the message of that particular book or Gospel. A person could pull out different texts and prove that God is in favor of killing our enemies but can we say truthfully that the Gospels as a whole say this? Of course not! We must study each biblical text as part of the whole good news of the Bible.

For example, In Colossians 3:18 St Paul says "Wives submit to your husbands." Therefore can we say that Paul is in favor of macho behavior? Men lording themselves over women? This very same Paul say in Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church." We must ask ourselves how did Christ love the Church? By giving his life for the Church. Is that machismo? In Galatians 3:28 Paul says, "There is no difference between Jew or Greek, slave and free. Between man and woman." It is clear then that Paul does not accept macho behavior or women submitting themselves as second class persons to men. We must see all that St Paul says in order to come to correct conclusions and not fall into a fundamentalist reading of the Bible.

6) Where is the action of God in this text? A very subtle error which occurs often in the preaching is to speak as if we, with all of our spiritual strength, could save ourselves. This is impossible because God is the one who saves us in Christ Jesus. Salvation is free. It is not something we earn. Each time that we working with a biblical text, we must ask ourselves the following question: Where is the saving action of God present in this text? What is God doing here to give life to the world?

For example, in Luke 18:22 Jesus says to the young rich man, "Sell all that you have, give away your money, come and follow me." If we preach saying that in order to save ourselves all we have to do is sell everything and give the money to the poor, it might look like we are giving a recipe for salvation. There are no recipes for salvation. Selling our goods is a way of liberating ourselves so that we can follow Jesus, but Jesus gives us the gift of salvation freely. We do not earn it.

We must never lose the perspective that it is God that is acting in the biblical text and not just human persons.

7) What kind of help can we get from the parallel texts or other texts that appear in the margins? How do the footnotes and introductions help us to understand our texts?

For example, Mark 9:1-10 is the story of the transfiguration. The parallel texts are Matthew 17:1-9 and Luke 9:28-36. There are also other texts cited that can help us, that can help to shed light on the text that we are working with. Footnotes and commentaries written about this text also help us to understand different aspects of the text by pointing out insights from the larger biblical context.

All of these notes and auxiliary texts are part of the Biblical context and they help to illuminate the text that we are working with. In this way they also help us to preach.

### PRACTICAL EXERCISE

(Let us return now to our text Luke 9:10-17)

What is the historical context of this particular book?

The Gospel of Luke was written around the year 70 by a missionary that accompanied St Paul in the preaching of the Gospel to places outside of the Jewish territory. Luke is a part of a Greek speaking culture and he wrote for Greeks who had converted to following Christ. (These Greeks were also called Hellenists. Though they were Jews they were not of the Jewish culture. Sometimes in fact they were even discriminated against by the Jews who lived around Jerusalem, considered at times as people who were of second class.)

Where is the text found within the biblical book? This particular text is located after the first sending of the apostles and before the sending of the seventy two (chapter 10). It seems as though the disciples and apostles are being called to carry out Jesus' mission without depending so much on the presence of Jesus. (Therefore the phrase, "give them something to eat yourselves.")

What is the literary context of this particular Biblical book? This text is one of the miracles that is found in the Gospel of Luke. It is important to remember that miracles were not magical acts but they were examples of how God entered into solidarity with the poor and those in need.

What is the theological context of this Biblical book? Certainly one of the important points in this story is to show us how God walks along side those who are oppressed. Jesus isn't looking for a way to show off his magical miracles, but instead he is teaching the disciples how to enter into solidarity, just as God comes to us in solidarity. This call to solidarity becomes apparent when Jesus asks the apostles to give of themselves, as well as the invitation to sit in groups of fifty.

The miracle is not so much a way of attracting attention to Jesus, but it is more or a way of showing how God's promise becomes a reality for the poor.

Let us review now some of the important points about "Biblical Context."

One day Johnny was walking through a heavily forested area. When he came upon a very interesting seed he picked it up and looked at it but couldn't identify which tree it had come from. There were so many trees in the forest. "I wonder where this seed came from?", he thought. He began to look at the different trees and to compare the seed he had in his hand with the fruits that were hanging on the different trees. He looked at a mango tree but he saw that his seed was rounder than the seed of the mango tree. It must come from another tree, he thought. Then he found a coconut tree but the seed on that tree was much bigger than his seed. He also found a guava tree but again the seeds were different. I wonder which one it is? Finally Johnny stopped beneath a large avocado tree. He looked up and he saw a delicious green avocado dangling above. He climbed the tree and took down the avocado and ate it. "Ahh," said Johnny, "I have found my answer. The seed in my hand is an avocado seed," and in this way he ended his research.

When we have a biblical text in our hand and we don't understand it very well, like Johnny did not understand what the seed was that he had in his hand, we must look around, look at other texts. We must read footnotes to compare our text with other texts so that we can come to a deeper understanding. We look at the entire forest, all the other trees. This is similar to the way that we study the biblical context. Researching that which surrounds our biblical text will help us understand better the text we have in our hands.





WITH A NEWSPAPER  
IN OUR HANDS  
Present Day Reality

To be a preacher of the good news of Jesus is to go through life with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. In other words, to proclaim the good news we need to know very well the social, political, economic, cultural and religious reality of the person to whom we are preaching.

To arrive to a community where thirty people have lost their job because of a factory closing and to preach about abortion is to be disconnected from the reality of that community. The word of God must be directed to a concrete reality and a concrete people.

Our preaching not only must be born from books and from research but also must have its roots in the very reality lived by our people. If we really want to preach the word of God we must pay attention, open our eyes ears and heart, to listen to what it is God is saying in the concrete reality of our people.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT PRESENT DAY REALITY

1). Social Reality. Is the preaching in a rural or urban community. What is the social class of these people. One teaches different to a group of wealthy women than to a union of workers. In what areas of work are the people I'm preaching to engaged in? What is their situation like, where they live, school, basic utilities? Is this a community where everyone lives more or less in the same reality? The same village for example. Or are there people from different social realities present? What is the situation of the women in this community. Are they treated with dignity, respect and equality in the community?

2. Political Reality. Are the civil authorities working on behalf of the local community? Are there any political or government authorities present during this celebration? What's the reality of human rights like in our community? Are people's constitutional rights being protected? Are there any situations that must be denounced prophetically? Are we in a time of preparation for elections? Are those who have been elected to public office fulfilling their duties for the well being of the community.

3. Economic Reality. What are the prices like for the basic necessities of working families? What is the level of unemployment in the country and in this local community? Do people here present receive the minimum wage? Is the government presently working to create new jobs for local working people? Are there families here present suffering from malnutrition or unable to buy basic medicines for someone sick in their family? Are there people present who are active members in a local workers union?

4. Cultural Reality. Do the people in this community know their basic cultural identity? For example, are there African descendants, indigenous, or Asian members in the community? Is the community made up of people of varied cultural backgrounds or do they share one culture in common? Are local celebrations, foods, dances, and cultural symbols remembered and respected in this community? Is there a healthy critique at the ways that television, music and fashion invade and change the local culture? Is there evidence of love and respect for the land, the environment and all that pertains to the image of God? What is the community's attitude toward persons from other cultures?

5. Religious Reality. What is the participation and activity of people in this community regarding religion and religious practice? How are festivities and celebrations encouraged and carried out in this community? Are their different liturgical seasons celebrated with dignity in the church? Are we presently in any particular liturgical season or local festivity or holy day that forms part of this celebration? Is there a need for some kind of symbol or celebration of reconciliation among the persons of this community? Is there some symbol or special gesture we might use during this celebration?

If we are deeply rooted in the reality of our people locally, the biblical reflection that we have done will be like seed falling into fertile ground. Our preachings will be simpler, more accessible and more helpful for people who long to practice their faith. Each preaching, each biblical talk or conference that we give must be born from our concrete reality. It must take us back to that very same reality. In this way the words of the Lord's prayer become real: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

#### PRACTICAL EXERCISE (Luke 9:10-17)

Using the same text from Luke 9, we will suppose that the place that we are to preach is in a poor urban neighborhood. The majority of the

people who live in this neighborhood and participate in the community are working people, many of them working women.

Most of the people have come to this neighborhood from other parts of the country, or from other countries looking for a better life, and they have found themselves here often times with jobs which pay poorly.

There is a lack of a strong communal sense among the people. Their main concern is how to earn enough to feed their children. The only organization in the neighborhood doesn't have much credibility and hasn't been able to solve the basic problems of water and electricity. The houses seem to be built one on top of another and there is a lack of basic hygiene and cleanliness in the community.

There is a delegate of the word and small base Christian community that meets on Sundays to celebrate the faith. Though they have worked diligently they have not been able to create much of a sense of community in the neighborhood. There is a group of young people wanting to form a theatrical group in order to energize the community more.

We suppose, then, that this is the community where we have been sent to preach the good news. We must take this concrete reality into account in the process of preparing our homily.





6  
THE VIEW FROM  
THE MOUNTAINTOP  
The Central Theme

In December 1511 on the small island of La Hispaniola, which is today the island of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, a group of Dominican Friars gathered in their humble house studying the biblical readings for the following Sunday. They had reflected much on the different aspects of the biblical texts and contexts, each one sharing his ideas. The homily was to be preached on the fourth Sunday of Advent based on the text of John the Baptist crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord".

The Dominican Friars had been just a little over a year on the island since they had arrived from Spain, and they were very conscious they had arrived from Spain, and they were very conscious of the suffering of the indigenous people at the hands of the Spanish conquerors. The concrete reality was terribly cruel for the poorest people on the island, those who had been conquered. The Dominican Friars took this into account in their preparation of the homily. Friar Pedro de Córdoba commented, "If John the Baptist were here today I think he would shout out "In the desert of this island the slavery of our native people is against the plan of God."

Antonio de Montesino, another one of the Friars, agreed and added, "If our Spanish compatriots want to really prepare the way of the Lord they are going to have to examine their dominating attitudes and give freedom to the indigenous people. These people are human beings just like us. Don't we have to love them just like we love ourselves? But at the same time something tells me that if we preach this way we are going to pay for it"

"Well so be it," responded Friar Pedro. "We are not here to make the Spaniards happy, but to preach the good news of Jesus, I hope they will hear in the cry of John the Baptist a call to conversion."

And so it was. They continued their work and their dialogue until they were able to agree upon a CENTRAL THEME of the homily. They chose Friar Antonio to preach that coming Sunday and had chosen as a Central Theme for the homily the following: "Jesus is coming to this island and we recognize him in the face of the Indians." With a Central Theme clear, the Friars began

to prepare the homily together so that Friar Antonio could preach on Sunday. In this way it would be a preaching born from the whole community.

It is on the mountaintop where we receive the enlightenment for choosing a CENTRAL THEME. It is a resting place. We have climbed the mountain studying and researching the Scriptures and the concrete reality. We have a good idea about what we want to say and so we summarize this idea in one central theme. This is a moment to contemplate the horizon, to breathe in fresh air, to look back at the path by which we have come up the mountain, and now to prepare ourselves for the second part of the process: going back down the mountain. It is in the return trip down the mountain that we will formulate the different parts of our preaching.

If we do not have the central theme clear we will not be able to prepare a clear preaching. This particular step along the way, that of the central theme, is one of the most important in the entire process of preparing a preaching or a talk. All of us have heard homilies that have been boring because there is no central theme, no central idea. The preacher of such a homily, one without a central theme sounds something like this:

So today we celebrate the feast of the Annunciation of Mary. Mary received the news from the angel Gabriel in the same way that we receive a letter or a telephone call. The last letter that I received from my brother arrived with the news that my aunt has cancer. It was a terrible blow to read his letter. My aunt has suffered so much in her life and now she will suffer more because she lives alone and has no one to care for her. When her husband, my uncle, was alive (may he rest in peace), I used to go to visit them quite frequently. But now I work in the city and I don't have time to go to their town anymore. It's incredible how the prices have gone up here in the city. Things just aren't the way they used to be when our families lived united. So therefore we should pray to the Virgin Mary today on her Feast so that we might live more united and that the prices will go down so that we can all eat, especially my aunt.

Not even God knows what the Central Theme of this preaching is, because the truth is there is no central theme. There are probably eight different themes. What is the preacher trying to say? We don't know. At first it seems as though the preacher is going to speak about what it means to receive news from God, but before we know it we are getting a medical report on the preacher's aunt and then we are told about the disintegration

of the family and the high prices. He says very interesting things but this is not a preaching.

All preaching must have ONE CENTRAL THEME. If the preaching has many themes the people will end up dizzy, not being able to remember anything that was said. Our goal is to help the people leave the celebration remembering the central topic of the preaching so that they can reflect on this topic throughout the week. It is better to give one good idea which is clear than many ideas which have nothing to do with another.

The Central Theme should be articulated as one complete sentence in which we can see clearly the action of God. "We must love one another" is not a Central Theme, because God is not acting in this theme. In order for it to be a central theme it must be something like this: "God loves us and makes it possible for us to love one another." Or another way to say the same idea: "Love of neighbor is born from the love of God."

Each biblical text has many, many central themes. There is not only one correct central theme. The preacher must choose a theme among many possibilities. The annunciation of Mary, for example, in Luke 1:26-38, opens up many possibilities, many distinct themes. One could be for example, "The salvation of God comes to us as a free gift." Another possibility might be, "Jesus is born each time we say 'Yes, Lord.'" The important thing is to choose one theme and to stay with it throughout the whole homily.

So we have come to the mountaintop and we have been able to rest a bit. The climb was difficult but at the same time a very rich experience in which we learned to enter deeply into the word of God. We now have our central theme written down clearly, and it is time to begin to go down the mountain. God's people wait at the bottom, hungering for the Word. Let us begin the downward trek, preparing a delicious meal for the people, a true bread from God.

### Practical Exercise (Luke 9:10-17)

We have studied the biblical text and context. We have reflected on the concrete local reality of the urban working neighborhood where we will preach, and we have now chosen a theme. The theme for our preaching, (among many possible themes), for this practice will be the following: JESUS BLESSES OUR SHARING WITH THE PEOPLE, MAKING OUR LIVES INTO ONE CONTINUOUS EUCHARIST.

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"Whoever wants to preach must be the first to let the word of God move him [or her] deeply and become incarnate in [this person's] daily life. In this way preaching will consist in that activity, so intense and fruitful, which is "communicating to others what one has contemplated" (Pope Francis, *E.G.*, # 150).



## A KNAPSACK FULL OF CREATIVITY Stories and Examples

To be a preacher is to be a beggar. That is, we become beggars always looking for something from daily life that can give life to our preaching. We are holy beggars, men and women who are crazy for the Gospel. We know that each human being, each community, is like a story-book. All stories begin with "Once upon a time".

Every community has unique people in it, people who are filled with stories and filled with God. People like old Mrs. Jones, the oldest lady in the community, always telling stories, always full of wisdom. Or Mr. Anthony who has spent his whole life as a catechist teaching children to love God and one another. And then there is Martha's son who was born with a deformed leg, but whose smile always radiates joy. And then there is Raymond, who struggles with alcoholism, and who is often seen crying because he never knew his own mother.

Our life is a long story and all of us in some way or another form part of the long story that God began to tell when the universe was created. In other words, God tells stories and we are one of them. The Bible itself is a series of stories, parables, anecdotes — all connected like wagons of a train.

We preachers have a great task before us: We must learn to observe the life of the people who surround us with eyes of faith, eyes of love. We must learn to see God hidden in these lives, and then our task is to proclaim what we have seen, to proclaim that we have seen the presence of God in the lives of the people.

To preach is to return to God's people what they already have - their own life and their own story. But to give it back to them in such a way that they recognize the beautiful presence of God in it. In other words, our preaching must in some way heal the blindness that at times does not allow people to see the presence of God in their own lives.

God's people are like an oyster, an oyster shell that seems very ordinary on the outside. It looks almost like a stone thrown into the sea. Sometimes people also seem very ordinary on the outside. Sometimes even ugly. Many people think their life is worthless, they are not important at all. But the oyster teaches us that there is something marvelous on the inside: A PEARL. Pearls are cultivated within the ugly shells of oysters. Our people, our world, each human being has within it the Pearl of God. Our job as preachers is to help people open themselves and discover the Pearl of God within. We must help them to discover that they have been created in the image and likeness of God.

For example, Daniel is a young man who is deaf. He was left deaf after a terrible accident when he was eighteen years old. He thought that his life no longer had meaning, "Why should I live if I can no longer communicate?" Daniel thought. One day he was invited to participate in a workshop with other deaf people. There Daniel felt at home. He discovered a whole world of deaf people, brothers and sisters just like him. Now his life once again has meaning. He has discovered the pearl in the oyster shell of his life.

Another example: Our Lady of Guadalupe was a preacher *par excellence*. The Spanish conquerors and missionaries tried to evangelize the indigenous people of Mexico. In the sixteenth Century, but to do so they imposed upon the Indians their own theories and their own ideas brought from Europe. Indirectly they were communicating to the Indian people that in order to be a Christian they had to stop being who they were and become like the Spaniards, as if God loved Spaniards more than indigenous people. Maria de Guadalupe preached from the perspective of the indigenous poor. She was one of them and she helped them to recognize that God was already present in their lives. Through the hopeful words of our Lady of Guadalupe the indigenous people discovered the Pearl of their faith within the oyster shell of the conquest.

Our preaching must have the taste of story telling. Jesus did not teach theology to people nor did he give long talks about the doctrine of the church. JESUS TOLD STORIES, and within these stories of seeds and harvests, lost money, and banquets, birds and sheep, Jesus showed people the hidden face of GOD! The people who listen to our preachings or biblical talks don't want a lot of sophisticated words and extraterrestrial explanations. They want something simple that will shine a light on the path of their lives. They want a ray of light. A word of hope. An answer to their search.

Once upon time Mrs. Vega had a terrible pain in her back and she went to visit a doctor. The doctor heard all that the woman had to say, examined her thoroughly and then said, "Mrs. Vega, the tension in your spinal column is caused by an imbalance of calcium in the nervous system .This is aggravated by a bipolar reaction of your muscles due to a low atmospheric pressure. This causes a muscular restriction at this part of your spinal column which does not allow you to move freely. Yes, this is what is causing your pain. Thank you for your visit. You can pay at the reception desk on your way out and they will surely give you a date for another visit". That was it, nothing more. He didn't give her any medicine. He didn't even tell her how to get rid of the pain. Just big fancy words, but no answers.

Why did this visit to the doctor not help her at all? What was she looking for when she went to visit the doctor? Isn't it true that at times our preachings seem something like the words of this doctor? The doctor spoke beautifully, very sophisticatedly but the poor woman left the doctor's office as lost as she was when she arrived. Preaching is not about speaking fancy, beautiful and big words. Preaching means to speak a word of hope, a word of God.

How did Jesus preach? He didn't give a long talk about why we have to forgive one another, pointing an accusatory finger at people who were unwilling to forgive. Jesus simply told the story of a son who made a disaster of his life but decided to return home repentant, ready to be treated as a servant in his father's house. But then the father seeing him from a far...

Jesus didn't fight with the Pharisees, arguing with them about the Sabbath Day and how the Sabbath day was to serve human beings and not the other way around. He simply healed a man with a deformed hand before the whole assembly in the Synagogue on the Sabbath Day...

Jesus didn't try to explain to us why we must give thanks to God for all things. What he did was heal ten lepers. And then he allows us to see the face of the one Samaritan leper who was healed, and who returns to give thanks to Jesus...

Jesus didn't give a huge discourse about the equality of women. What he did was to place himself next to a woman who had been accused of adultery, and then with a preaching that was not even twenty words long he

told those who accused her that if they did not have sin to throw the first stone...

Jesus did not use figures from the international monetary fund to talk about God's special love for the poor. He told the story of a widow who put her last copper coins into the collection plate at the temple. Comparing her with others...

We can learn from this method of Jesus—his use of stories, parables, anecdotes. The preachings of Jesus were based on the use of simple stories, images, symbols: light, salt, water, wine, bread, yeast, sheep, seeds, houses built on sand and houses built on rock, lamps with oil in them and lamps without oil, banquets and washed feet. It is a simple method which we can easily use in our own preaching.

#### HOW WE LEARN TO PREACH LIKE JESUS?

1 OBSERVE. Observe everything around us: children, the changes of the seasons, people who are selling things in markets and stores, the way people prepare for a party, the love between boyfriend and girlfriend, the daily miracle of the multiplication of the bread that mothers and wives carry out in their kitchen. We are to observe old people, the relationship between a hen and her chicks, or to see how in rural areas what it means to live without electricity and water. To be a good observer means that we learn to recognize the presence of God in all things. Everything that goes on around us.

2 ASK QUESTIONS. What is God saying in all this? Where is God? A friend from Honduras once told the following story: "One day I went to the market and I asked the woman there to sell me two pounds of tomatoes. She weighed the tomatoes and put them into a bag. Exactly two pounds, And that very moment she smiled a big wonderful smile and added two extra tomatoes to the bag." What is God saying in this story? This is a story filled with the presence of God. It's a story that could be used in a preaching about the abundant love of God.

3. NOTE down in a journal or notebook the stories and parables of daily life, those gifts that we collect along the way as beggars. We store up these

parables in our beggar's knapsack so that the day in which we might need some kind of a story to help shed light on the words of Jesus we know where to go. We go to our journal, and there find the treasures we have collected along the way. For example if one day we are asked to give a talk or preach on Jesus' words "We are called to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven" we could perhaps tell a story, the story of a little girl who fell while walking with her mother. The little girl then said to her mother, "Mommy, I'm sorry that I always fall down." To which her mother responded, "Honey, I don't care how many times you fall. I will always love you." This story sheds light on the central theme of my preaching. Perhaps the theme of that particular preaching is "God forgives us without conditions, without limit." For this reason we include as part of the homily this story in the same way that Jesus used stories and examples in His preaching.

4. CHOOSE the appropriate story for this particular homily. We don't choose just any old story. The story or example that I use in this homily must communicate the same message as the central theme of my preaching.

#### THE USE OF SYMBOLS IN OUR PREACHING

Often times, depending on the culture or the local reality in which we are preaching there are certain symbols that can be used as examples in our preaching. We must learn to take advantage of these different symbols, because it is a way of not only preaching the Gospel but of promoting the local culture in which we live or in the place where we preach.

For example, suppose I am preaching on the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. I might use as an example how Christmas Tamales are multiplied and shared among visitors in different parts of Latin America. In this way the sharing of the tamale expresses the presence of the Christ child who comes to share the bread of life with us.

The gospel tells us that all people are equal. In some cultures, it is common to have cooks and servants. One could share the story of a wealthy family who invites the cook and the gardener to sit down with them at the table to share a meal with the rest of the family. In this way a symbol that is usually associated with power or money becomes now a symbol which speaks of the good news of Christ.

Take for example Jesus' carrying of the cross - In many poor countries it is common to see men, women and children carrying firewood that they have cut, taking it home for cooking. To speak of Jesus and the cross, one could tell the story of a woman walking along beside of a highway carrying firewood so that her children might eat and have life.

Or perhaps the text is about the passion and resurrection of Christ. On May 3, 1991 in the small village of Honduras, called el Astillero, Felipe Huete and other peasant companions were massacred. Before being felled by the bullet, Felipe asked the assassins if they could dialogue, talk about what was going on. He was shot and fell to his knees, making the sign of the cross. Easily we might connect this example, this story, this sign of the cross with Jesus' words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The first thing that we are to do then is to collect all this creativity, all of these stories, examples, parables of daily life in our journal or notebook. This requires being attentive. Even the ability to invent stories might help to shed light on the Gospel. We could try to tell stories with an element of surprise and suspense, even humor. There is no need to explain a story. When a story is told well, there is no need for explanation. The story speaks for itself. It's just like a young couple, a boyfriend and girlfriend who kiss for the first time. No one needs to explain what the kiss means. Stories used for homilies should be short and to the point. The preacher should look for the best place within the preaching or talk to tell the story or to share a parable of daily life. The preacher should practice telling the story several times before hand, perhaps even with someone listening to give feedback. We should never tell the story of another person as if it were our own. We should say, "a friend once told me" and then tell that person's story.

When we are preaching within a liturgical or paraliturgical situation it is often good to use some kind of central symbol. Perhaps this symbol can be placed in a central space near where the preacher or the speaker will be addressing the people. It is not necessary to explain the symbol. As long as the symbol is in a prominent place and it can be seen by all, that is enough. People will realize why the symbol is there.

For example, one might place a crystal bowl or basin filled with water in a prominent place when one is going to give a talk on baptism. A clay pot might be placed in a central area if one is going to speak on creation or how God is like the potter and we are the clay.

Some ears of corn or a few plants might serve as symbols when we are preaching about the sowing of seeds or the harvest of the kingdom of God. White cloths might be set in a prominent place when we are to speak on a theme related to the resurrection of Christ. Tamales, tortillas, or pita bread might be set in baskets in a central area when we are to speak on eucharistic themes. We also might use the Bible, candles or incense as symbols for our talk or preaching.

In a liturgical situation, during the presentation of gifts might be the right time to offer certain symbols. It is not necessary to explain the symbols. Rather we should allow the symbols to speak for themselves.

For example. Suppose we are in a celebration or a talk to children or on themes of children and young people, maybe at the end of a school year. Once people know why we are gathered the motive of the celebration, then perhaps there could be a presentation of books, notebooks, a soccer ball, a diploma, pencils and pens—all placed in a central space, without having to explain the details of each symbol.

What we need in our talks and preachings are less explanations, less words, and more symbols—allowing the symbols to speak for themselves. Combining silence and symbol together speak strongly about the presence of God. One need not say many things for people to see and appreciate symbols.

Creativity and the use of stories, examples, and anecdotes are part of our preaching our liturgical celebrations and talks. These make the word of God come alive. This is why it is a good idea to work as a team so that together we can plan how to enhance the preaching and environment. When we work as a team the ideas flow freely and creativity comes forth with more spontaneity. A homily or a talk that is worked on together and prepared by several people always comes out richer, dearer—much more so than a homily put together by one person. Let us therefore use the creativity that God has given to us. We must remember we are co-creators with God. The homily and the celebration, the environment in general, are places where we are given the opportunity to make our gifts as co-creators come alive.





## PUTTING THE HOUSE IN ORDER

Outlines for a Homily  
Introductions and Conclusion

Mrs. Jones is an old woman in our community and one day invited us to her house to tell us about her life. Several of us from the community wanted to see Mrs. Jones' house and so decided to visit her. Once we were inside, Mrs. Jones invited us to sit down "Wherever you can find a seat". Some of us sat down in chairs, others on the floor. Her house was quite large, though there was not much space to sit down, partly because the house was in such disarray

When Mrs. Jones began to tell her stories she wanted to show us pictures. She said, "I know they are somewhere." She began looking for them but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. All of us began to help her look for the pictures but we began to realize it was getting late. We had already spent a lot of time and it was now time for us to leave. It was a shame that we weren't able to hear more of Mrs. Jones' stories. We would have to wait until next time.

When we are about to preach or give a talk, one of the responsibilities that we have is to know how to present and put into order what we are going to say. Nothing is gained if, for lack of sufficient preparation, our preaching has neither head nor tail. Sometimes we end up with a homily like Mrs. Jones' house.

We are not able to get anywhere with our preaching because we don't even know where we are going.

We preachers must learn to have a plan so that our preaching might be heard well. This plan will help to situate ourselves within the preaching and to know how to help others follow the words we are to share. For this reason we will now look at two different outlines that will help us learn to order our preaching.

## POSSIBLE OUTLINES

### Outline A

1. Introduction: The Introduction should be something that catches the attention of the listeners. The Introduction should be short and attractive.
2. Touch on some central point of the Biblical Text: Remember, we do not have to touch on all of the points, just one. For example, using our text from Luke 9 we might say the following. Instead of telling the apostles that they didn't have to worry about anything because he himself was going to solve the problem of the lack of bread for so many people, Jesus turned to the apostles and said, "You, yourselves, give them something to eat".
3. Tell a story or give an example that might help to understand the CENTRAL THEME: This is the place for an example, a story, an anecdote, a parable from daily life that will help to shed light on the central message. (See the story which follows in chapter 7.)
4. Mention the Central Theme of the preaching: It is good for the central theme to be mentioned in some part of the homily so that those who are hearing the preaching will be assured to have heard clearly the main message.
5. Apply the THEME and the TEXT to our concrete daily life. Every homily, every talk, must in some way lead us to a practice of our faith and our Christian commitment in daily life. There should always be some part of the preaching towards the end usually, when we say something like this, Today we live this Gospel message each time that we..."
6. The Conclusion: (The conclusion should be clear, simple, and in some way summarize the central message of the homily.)

### Outline B

1. Share a story, give an example. This takes the place of the introduction. It should be a story that catches people's attention and in some way is related to the central theme of the homily.
2. Connect the story just told with the biblical text. For example, someone might say, 'Mary is like the poor widow in today's Gospel because...' We in some way have to help people make these connections between the story that they have just heard and the biblical text that they listened to earlier. We should not assume that people make those connections automatically.
3. Mention in some way the CENTRAL THEME of the homily.
4. Apply the THEME and the BIBLICAL TEXT to our daily lives, our reality here and now. For example we might say something like, "The resurrection of Jesus is lived out today each time we..."
5. Conclusion: Clear, simple, a summary of the homily. Sometimes it's a

good idea to make reference to the story or example that was told at the beginning. For example we might say, "Mary invites us today by way of her example to also..." The conclusion always sums up or reviews the important points of the homily.

These two outlines might serve as a small help. Each preacher eventually comes up with his or her own outlines. The important thing to remember is that without an outline we are like sailors sailing through the sea without a map. Or like a bird flying through the air not knowing where it is going. The people to whom we preach or speak will never see our outline. The outline is for us. But those who listen to us speak will know very well if we have guided them along a sure path or if we have left them behind in some alley, lost in the darkness of the homily.

When we prepare our outline, we should be very clear about where we want to begin and how we want to end. Often times the secret for a good preaching or a good talk is in the introduction and in the conclusion. If we know how to motivate people from the beginning they will surely follow the line of thought to the very end. Our outline should serve as our map or guide along the way.

So let us remember that a good preaching must be well prepared, and the outline is one of the last steps in that preparation. To have a clear outline does not mean that we cannot be spontaneous during our preaching or talk. Spontaneity is not an enemy of good preparation. One preacher said once that the best spontaneous preaching was the one which he prepared for more than five days.

## THE INTRODUCTION

If we compare the homily with a house, the introduction of the homily is like the front door, the entrance into the home. The preacher wants to create a certain air of anticipation and interest without showing everything that will be found within the homily - just like the owner of a house places flowers and creates an environment of welcome in the front door of his or her home. In the same way should a preacher create this environment. It is important to begin with something familiar, something which catches the listener's attention, something interesting. We want to invite people to come in. To listen to what we have to say.

Humor - especially at the beginning - is appropriate in a homily, but just

telling jokes does not have a place in preaching of the Gospel. One thing is to use humor so that people can see that the word of God is joyful and not something always serious. But it is something altogether different to just tell jokes as a way of distracting or just passing the time, if we use humor in our homily we should be sure that the story or the humorous anecdote has something to do with the message that we are trying to convey.

We must be careful not to begin a preaching with something too emotional. We have to first create a relationship of trust between the preacher and the listeners. Once this trust is built up we can then share something that evokes more of an emotional reaction.

A person can ruin a whole homily or talk if he or she begins with phrases such as the following:

- Brothers and sisters, as you know I don't know how to preach, but since it's my turn today I have a few things to say.
- Really, you know, I don't have anything to say others have already said it all and much better than I.
- I don't have any time this week to prepare what I wanted to say to you but a few things have come to my mind.
- I know that all of you have a lot better things to be doing, but allow me to take away a little bit of your time.

## THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion, unfortunately, is usually the least prepared part of a talk or homily. Rarely are we concerned with how we will end well. And our preachings almost always end with us running or leaving people hanging with no clarity.

The conclusion requires much preparation and practice. The words, gestures and tone of voice that we use at the end of our preaching will effect the whole message that the listeners will carry with them. We must ask ourselves, "Does this conclusion go with the rest of the preaching? Or am I just saying any old thing to get it over with?" Phrases such as "now to end" or "my last point" are not really necessary. The only thing that is necessary is to end with something clear and something that summarizes the central points of the preaching.

We must come up with a variety of different conclusions. We should not use the same style in each homily. Let us remember that each homily has a CENTRAL THEME and therefore the end of each homily should in some way connect with the CENTRAL THEME.

One might end with a story, an anecdote, an example so that the people will see the central message more clearly. A question at the end can also be used. This some-times leaves within the minds of the people something that they can continue to work on.

For example, that we have just preached on the Gospel of the adulterous women. In John 8, we want to end our homily with a question, to invite the people to reflect further. We might end this way: "What do we do with the stones that we have in our hands to stone those whom we consider to be sinners?"

And finally, since a parable usually ends with some kind of a surprise ending, when preaching on a parable we might also end with an element of surprise.



## A CRY FROM THE ROOFTOP

## Preaching as Oral Art

Preaching is an oral art, a spoken art, and for this reason it does not use the same dynamic or the same style as a written communication. Its style is more like the radio than the newspaper or television.

Preaching is not about reading something; it is to announce something with one's whole voice, using one's whole body to announce the GOOD NEWS of JESUS. We do not read the word of God, we proclaim it. The word proclaim comes from two words, Pro + claim which means "to shout for."

We must *shout the word of God for the world*. The use of a written manuscript during preaching can help the preacher stay within the boundaries of that which he or she has prepared. At the same time, though, it can also be an obstacle if the preacher begins to read the preaching as if reading a book. This is not preaching. This is public reading. Preaching is a proclamation with strength and life, with passion and enthusiasm. It is important to practice the proclamation several times before actually doing it. Where do we practice? We can practice at home with the family. We can practice out in a cornfield in the company of my pet dog or with a friend.

The important thing is to come to the actual proclamation well prepared. In order to proclaim and preach with true strength it is important for the preacher to believe in what he or she is going to say. The preacher's facial expressions and voice will show if the message is really believed. This, though, isn't the same thing as saying that a preacher has to be living perfectly everything that is being preached. Sometimes we have to preach something that we have not quite yet been able to practice in our own lives. The important thing is to recognize this fact and to want to be converted by the very word which we preach. Do we really believe what we are preaching?

The preacher is like the conductor of a symphony orchestra or of a band. The preacher tries to direct all of the musicians to a point of communion, each musician fine tuning his or her own rhythm and music with the others. A communication that has been well expressed will take us to a point of communion- both among ourselves and with God.

## SOME PRACTICAL POINTS

1. The voice. A person must speak with strength, slowly and with clarity. As has already been said, one must practice often in order to speak well in public.

2. The Eyes. When we preach or speak in public we should look at the people to whom we are speaking, have eye contact with them. By way of our visual contact we are inviting those to whom we are speaking to enter deeply and listen to the preaching. If we do not look at the people, they likely will believe that what we are saying is of no importance.

3. The Use of Gestures. Hand gestures, the movement of arms and of our bodies help to communicate the good news. If we look like a dead tree standing there, who is going to want to listen to us? Gestures should be chosen appropriately and done with much energy, but without exaggeration.

4. Avoid Nervous Habits. All of us feel somewhat nervous when we must speak in public. That's fine. But at the same time we must try to avoid those nervous movements which serve as an obstacle to our preaching: Walking back and forth nervously, playing with our glasses, grabbing on to the pulpit, putting our hands in and out of our pockets, etc. These really are distractions for those who are listening.

5. Reverence for the Bible. The Bible should have a special place within the celebration. When we proclaim a Scriptural text we should do so from the Bible and not from some piece of paper or a small booklet. We should never close or toss the Bible around as if it were just any old thing

6. The Altar. The altar or table or sacred space where we celebrate is not to look like a car repair shop or a warehouse. It is a sacred place We shouldn't leave it scattered with a bunch of books, pens and pencils, dried flowers, the car keys, tools of any kind. All that is needed is a candle or two, a flower, the Bible and, if it is an Eucharistic celebration, the paten and chalice. These are enough.



7. The Public. Too often our chapels and churches look more like schools than houses of communal prayer. When possible we should try to create an environment conducive to community. It is helpful to place pews and chairs in a circle or semi-circle. In this way people can see one another and feel like brothers and sisters, and not students simply listening to a lecture.

8. The Use of Simple Questions. It is helpful if there is some kind of dialog in a homily or talk. With practice, we learn to ask questions that encourage participation without creating chaos, a free-for-all. Chaos occurs when everyone wants to speak each on a different theme or topic. It is important that the person know how to direct and to channel questions and answers in a certain direction, in accordance with the central theme of the preaching.

For example, We don't ask "What is the theological mentality of St Paul regarding human weakness?" (This question is too complicated). But we could say, "Have we ever experienced within our own human weakness God's strength acting in us?"

Another example: We shouldn't ask, "What is the meaning of the birth of Jesus? (This type of question is open to too lengthy an answer). Perhaps we might ask the question this way: "Jesus born in a feeding trough in a poor stable. What might that mean for us? (This kind of question leads people into an active engagement with the text).

If after asking the question, no one seems to be answering then try to ask the question in a different way.

For example: The first question might be, "Peter wanted to build three huts on the mountain of the Transfiguration. Why?" Perhaps this question can be followed up with a second question "Was Peter getting attached to this beautiful moment, fearing the return to daily life in the real world?"

The use of simple questions is a way of inviting participation from the people. The important thing isn't necessarily that the people give the correct answer, but instead we are trying to generate participation within the celebration or gathering. Active participation in the celebration or in a talk is a way of leading people into an active participation within their daily Christian life.

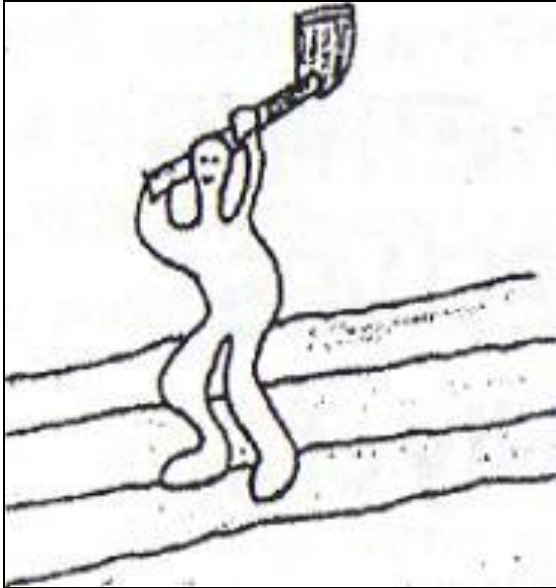


10  
GIVE THEM SOMETHING  
TO EAT YOURSELVES  
The Spirituality of  
The Preacher

To be a preacher is not just working to prepare preachings. It is a spiritual path. What we hope to do within this chapter is to give some ideas as to how a preacher might structure his or her spiritual life around the Word of God. How do we make our lives an ongoing encounter with the Word-made-flesh? How do we incorporate the process of preparing a homily or a talk into our daily life and faith journey with God?

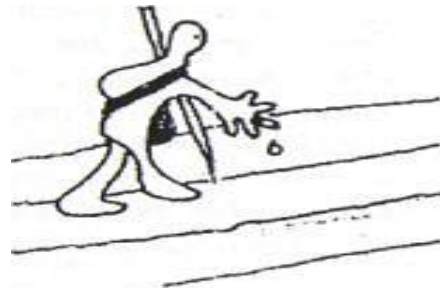
If preaching ends up being simply a job or a task, an obligation that we have to fulfill, like mopping the floor or working in the garden, then something is missing. Without a certain spirit, our faith can turn into simply fulfilling obligations. It loses its taste. How can we find a way of making the preaching vocation a spiritual path, so that God's grace may come to those who hear our preaching as well as to those of us who preach?

## THE TWELVE STEPS OF THE PREACHER

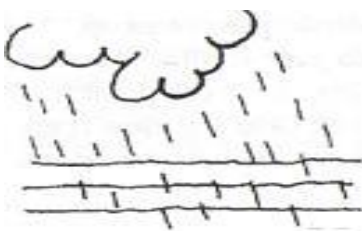


1) The preacher and the community are always in a process of spiritual preparation. We don't understand preparation only as the work that we are doing to prepare a talk or homily. There must be an ongoing tilling of the earth so that the seed of God's word will fall in good fertile soil. This requires that we live a communal life with the intent of serving others. We are agents of reconciliation and celebration of faith, both through personal and liturgical prayer. Every day we are preparing the preaching of our very lives.

2) We listen and meditate on God's Word each day, especially when we are preparing a preaching. It is helpful sometimes to read the Word of God over and over out loud so that we might hear it as something new. We want the seed of the word to fall continuously, blessing the earth of our lives.



3) We sow the seed, but God is the one who makes it fruitful with the gentle dew of the Spirit. The rain reminds us that the germination process of the word in ourselves is truly God's work. We must abandon ourselves to the process and to God's timing. We must learn to open ourselves to all that is new, to the unexpected, to all that comes from the gratuitous love of our Creator.

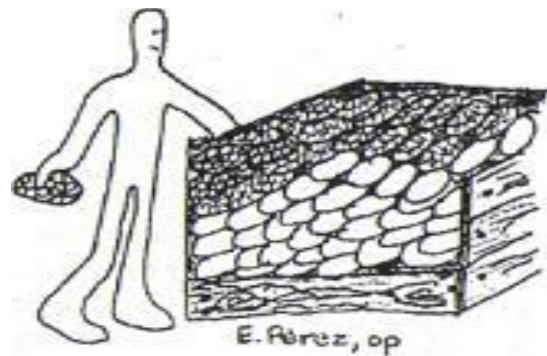


4) To be a preacher is to learn to live each day with God's Word. The Word becomes our companion, our friend along the way. Like any friendship or relationship, our love for the Word takes time to develop. We must know how to wait. Just like a person waits for a garden or a cornfield to grow and arrive at its point of fruitfulness so too we must learn to confide and trust in the Holy Scriptures: asking questions when we don't understand something, laughing with the scriptures and crying with them. We could perhaps carry along a small New Testament or a copy of Sunday's Gospel with us wherever we go so that together we grow, bathed in the Sun of justice, Jesus Christ.



5) Just as a cornfield and the ears of corn ripen over time, so too does the Word of God ripen deep within us. This happens when we take time for Bible study, time to form ourselves in its riches. We learn to speak with other people about the scriptures, noting down ideas and insights that we pick up during our study of the Bible. We can read booklets and pamphlets and books on the Gospels and Holy Scriptures. We can attend Bible formation classes and spiritual retreats. These are all ways to deepen our understanding of the Word of God.

6) Our living with the word must also lead us to very concrete actions. Just as the preparation of a preaching leads us to a central theme, so it is also with our spiritual life. We must know how to keep our two feet on the ground, making our spirituality something concrete in daily life. There are people who spend their whole lives searching, but who never find anything concrete to commit their lives to. They are like preachers who talk a lot without saying anything. Preaching is born out of arduous study and prayer. The farmer knows that the seed bears fruit because of God's grace, but God needs the hands and heart of the farmer to help the seed make its way into the ground of God.



E. Pérez, op

7) In preparing a sermon or a talk, once we concretize the central theme, then it is time to begin a brainstorming of possible ideas, ways that I will present this preaching. What examples might come to mind? Is there some story or personal experience that might help to shine gospel light on the central theme? What does this text offer us so that we can make our Christian commitment concrete and real?

8) When we prepare a preaching there has to be a time in which we let all of the ideas cook together. This can be a difficult process, because all of our ideas must pass through a purifying fire. But a very complicated preaching that's full of unnecessary ideas does not help to prepare the way of the Lord. This is true in our own lives. No one likes a purifying fire, but we know it is necessary. Prayer, fasting sharing our lives with the poor, are ways that we are purified, and this creates in our hearts a spaciousness for the word of God



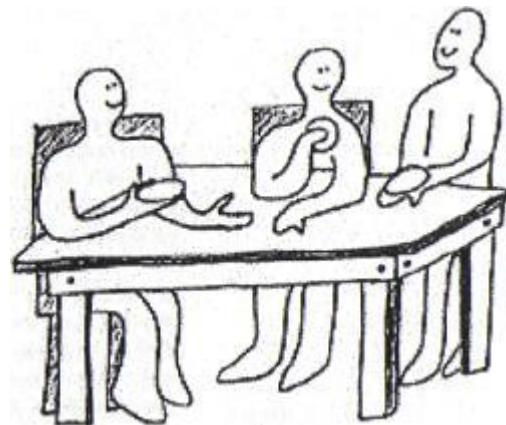
9) Life is like the dough with which we make bread or tortillas. The dough has to be kneaded, worked over, making it softer by way of practice. If a person wants to be a good guitarist but never picks up a guitar this person isn't participating in the learning process. God can't help that person much. So it is with preaching. Life is lived by living it. Do we want to be good Christians? Good Preachers? Then we must take risks. We have to practice living life, discovering life, enjoying life. And when we have done all of this, what is left is to give our lives away.

10) There comes a moment when a person has to take the dough into his or her hands and make the bread or tortillas. The preparation process has ended. A homily or talk that never enters into that process of going from our mind to our hands, that is, into daily life, just ends up being pretty ideas. This is true also with our lives as disciples of Jesus. We have to get our hands dirty. We have to stick our hands into the dough of life and discover God acting in our world and in our lives.



11) The tortilla has to be put onto the fire. We must now let go of our control. The fire and the hot *comal* do their work now. There are times when we must let go and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. The preacher who doesn't know how to give his or her preaching to God cannot break bread with God's people. It is the Spirit who transforms the dough of our small words into the bread of the Word of God.

12) It is important to preach with joy. All our study and prayer lead us to this moment of sharing the Bread of the Word with others. "Give them something to eat yourselves," Jesus told the apostles (Lk 9:13). To see people enjoy the simple bread that we have made, the bread of our preaching, gives us hope to continue preaching and giving thanks to God for the Word and the Bread of Life that we have received.





A spirituality of preaching must necessarily be communitarian. The entire process of preparation of a homily or a talk must be carried out within a context of a team where there's DIALOG AND SHARING IN COMMON. This common sharing opens us up to new horizons within the word, horizons that we are unable to discover doing the process by ourselves. We see more clearly the richness of Jesus and his word within the diversity of a community. Together we discover the word becoming a people.



## CONCLUSION

Yahweh said to Moses, "Who gives one person speech and makes another deaf and dumb? Or who gives sight to one and makes another blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Go, then! It is I who will assist you in speaking and will teach you what you are to say" (Ex. 4:11-12).

Almost two thousand years ago, in a small village of Galilee, an angel arrived to preach a brief sermon to a young woman named Mary. We can suppose that the angel had prepared well the preaching because it had a great impact in the life of this woman from Nazareth. All preachings well prepared and well proclaimed bear fruit by God's grace."Thus it is with the Word, it will not return to me without having carried out its mission." These words were spoken by God to Isaiah, the prophet (Is. 55:14).

Soon after listening to the angel's preaching, Mary left with great haste to the town of Judea. Why? To preach, of course. She went to preach the good news to her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Elizabeth heard dearly the central theme of Mary's homily. We know this because the child in her womb leapt for joy. That same child was born three months later, and they called him John. He also became a great preacher.

And this chain of events has been happening now for two thousand years. The Gospel has been shared from preacher to preacher. In Honduras, a small corner of Central America, thirty years ago, 1966, a group of peasants in a southern part of the country were concerned about how they could make the Word of God available to their friends, their brothers and sisters. The great problem was that there were very few priests or nuns among them. "What can we do? they asked themselves. So they began to journey through the Bible and became aware of the history of God's people, a history filled with preachers who also were peasants, fishers, home-makers, tax collectors, even ex-prostitutes. These peasants went quickly to the Bishop, a man of God who himself was very open and who knew how to read the signs of the times. They told him about the discovery: «All of us can be preachers!» It was a moment of great revelation for them and for the whole church of Latin America.

This was the way that the Celebration of the Word of God was born in Honduras, in a small village, a village not so unlike Nazareth. What a beautiful event. After thousands of years God continues to call men and women to carry the word of God, to be prophets. God continues to place the word in our wombs, in our mouths, sending us to speak to others. This is a tremendous blessing.

In this small book we have journeyed a long way. It has been a profound encounter with God's word and with our own people. It is important to remember, now that we are finishing, that we preachers are, above all else, instruments of God. Yahweh is the one who speaks through us. We are the mouth of God. God is the word.

We are like Moses and Mary, Like Jeremiah and John the Baptist. We are like Antonio de Montesino and Mary Magdalene - common folks who have been transformed by God's word. None of us has done anything great to receive such a vocation, Nor are we better than others who have received other gifts from God. We simply are what we are: preachers.

At the same time, as we have seen in these pages, to be a preacher is a serious responsibility. Each time we open our mouth people are waiting to receive a word filled with a breath of encouragement, light, and hope. As with the angel Gabriel, God sends us to fulfill a very important mission. What mission will it be? Are we ready to leave everything behind and go wherever God sends us? Do we have our wings ready to fly and carry the Good News to the humble and the poor? What happens if we are rejected or, even worse, killed for speaking the truth?

Archbishop Oscar Romero said once that, "The preaching of Christ is a preaching which illuminates, just like when someone turns on a light and wakes up and bothers a person who is asleep. Naturally such preaching will meet with conflict. Such a preaching has to bother, has to be persecuted." It is for this reason that at the beginning of this book it was said that preaching is a paschal way of life. Through preaching we are called to give our lives for others. Working hard and preparing well, putting forth our best effort in the preaching, is a way of giving away our lives. Are we ready to accept this commitment?

To accept this invitation is to unite ourselves with the long tradition of preachers and prophets. We find ourselves on an ancient path with people like Moses and Jeremiah, with all of their weaknesses and fears. We see Mary along the way and Elizabeth, filled with the joy of the words that they received. Matthew also walks with us, he who left behind his god of money in order to preach Christ. We see people like St. Francis and St. Dominic, preachers of the truth among God's poor. St. Catherine of Siena and St. Martin de Porres and St. Rose of Lima encourage us to continue forward uniting our preaching with contemplation. We see Pope St. John XXIII and Pope Francis, prophets of Vatican II, prophets of the renewal of our church. And we are here, as well, journeying with God's Word with all these saintly people of our history.

A great mountain stands before us and on its peak we are offered a view of God's reign. God's people are waiting for us on the other side, their arms open, their hearts attentive.

And I heard the voice of the Lord say, "Who will I send?, Who will go for us?' And I responded, "Here I am, send me." (Isaiah 6:8)

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"What is essential is that the preacher be certain that God loves him/her, that Jesus Christ has saved him/her and that God's love has always the last word ... If one does not take time to hear God's word with an open heart ... does not allow it to touch his/her life ... does not devote time to pray with that word, then [this person] will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud ... But by acknowledging [one's] poverty and desiring to grow in his commitment, he/she will always be able to abandon him or herself to Christ, saying in the words of Peter: "I have no silver and gold, but what I have I give you" (Acts 3:6). The Lord wants to make use of us as living, free and creative beings who let God's word enter their own hearts before passing it on to others. Christ's message must truly penetrate and possess the preacher, not just intellectually but in one's entire being..." (Pope Francis, *E.G.*, # 151).



## APPENDIX 1 THE FINAL HOMILY

Text Luke 9:10-17

Central Theme: "Jesus blesses our sharing with the people, making our life into one continuous Eucharist"

A few months ago I was sitting on the steps of the Cathedral in San Pedro Sula Honduras with some friends. It was about 6pm and night was beginning to fall. On one corner there was a group of street children wiping down the windows of cars that sat waiting at a stop light. And on the other corner were some women selling *baleadas* (a tortilla filled with beans), and coffee.

I was watching the people pass by, somewhat lost in my thoughts when I heard one of the street children begging one of the women for a *baleada*. "Please, Señora, please give me a baleada, please I'm hungry." Each time that he asked the woman, she got madder. "Get out of here you bum!" she said "Get on the other side, life is too expensive to be giving things away."

And this is how they continued for a good while. The little boy bothering the lady, and she getting madder and madder every moment. I almost started to laugh as I watched them fighting like cat and dog. But finally the little boy's persistence won the battle. The poor woman, tired of being bothered, grabbed the tortilla threw a little bit of beans in it and give it to the kid. 'There! Get out of here, you worthless bum.

The boy jumped with joy, grabbed the tortilla in his dirty hands, and ran across the street. The woman herself began to laugh along with some of her friends. I guess it wasn't the first time that they had played the game.

Once the boy reached the other side of the street he whistled for one of his friends, who was also dirty and barefoot, gesturing to him to come over and join him. His friend was there in about eight seconds. And when he arrived, the one who had battled for the *baleada* divided it in two, giving half of it to his friend. The two boys ate their baleadas with great smiles across their faces, as if they were seated at a banquet for kings. There I sat, watching from the steps in front of the Cathedral. It was marvelous – two poor street kids celebrating their version of the Eucharist as a sign of thanksgiving for the Bread of Life.

Is this not what Jesus did in the last Supper? He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it away.

I sat there in awe in front of this Cathedral, where hundreds of masses are celebrated each year, and yet there I had witnessed an Eucharistic celebration right in the main plaza. And what was even more, it was celebrated by a street kid.

Today in the Gospel of St Luke we see what is popularly known as the multiplication of the loaves. Unfortunately, many of us have in our minds a false image of what really happened in this miracle. We might imagine Jesus saying some magic words and then "Bingo!" five thousand loaves of bread falling from heaven.

But if we look closely at this Gospel we see something different. Jesus doesn't do some magical trick. When the twelve complained that there was not food enough for the people Jesus didn't say, "Oh, don't worry, I'll take care of the problem." What Jesus said was very different: "Give them something to eat yourselves."

In other words, the miracle begins when the apostles give of their own food so that others might eat. The loaves of bread and fish didn't fall from heaven. They were taken from shoulder bags and knapsacks that the apostles had with them.

What I saw that afternoon in front of the Cathedral was also a miraculous multiplication of the loaves. The woman gave of her very own poverty to the boy, and then he shared what little he had with a friend. The bread, like the love, was multiplied.

The true miracle of the Gospel and of the street scene that I saw was a miracle of sharing. When we share the little we have with others we receive the miraculous blessing of Jesus.

Jesus didn't perform a magic trick to make loaves of bread appear out of nowhere. He took the loaves of the apostles. He blessed God and then he broke the loaves and shared them. In other words, Eucharist begins when Jesus' disciples share their bread with the hungry. That is why that I can say that I saw this street kid celebrating the Eucharist with his friend, because I know that Jesus blesses those who share their bread with the poor.

But let us be careful, the miracle is not about giving from our abundance,



but giving everything. The apostles had to let go of everything, without knowing if there would be anything left over for them. The street kid didn't think about himself. This boy who spends his life hungry thought first about this friend. That is true love.

And in the last supper, Jesus didn't keep anything for himself, he gave everything. "This is my body. This is my blood. Eat and drink." The true multiplication of the loaves begins when we sacrifice ourselves to feed another.

Our world would be a very different place if we learned to share with the freedom with which this young boy from the streets shared. If businesses, land owners, powerful nations shared with that kind of freedom we would be witnesses each day of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. All people would eat in abundance. Imagine, this miracle can begin today, here and now in our own neighborhood. "Give them something to eat yourselves." And in this way, filled with the blessing of Jesus, the one who became bread for the world, our whole life would be transformed into one continuous Eucharist.



## Appendix II INCULTURATED PREACHING

- 1) A truly inculturated preaching should be carried out within a context and an environment of dialog in order to make certain that all have a chance to add their part into the preaching respecting the plurality of culture.
- 2) This kind of preaching is characterized by openness, sensitivity, and respect for the culture of the other.
- 3) The preacher must constantly seek, know, and identify the social, political, economic, cultural and religious reality of the people to whom the preacher is preaching.
- 4) One must recognize the Holy Spirit as a manifestation of the presence of God in our lives.
- 5) An inculturated preaching requires that the preacher accompany the people, gathering the faith experience of the community. The preacher must learn to systematize this experience, reflecting on it theologically and returning it to the people as a liberating word.
- 6) Such a preacher adapts to the changes of the culture, adding dynamism to the communities within the context of an appropriate critique. The preacher allows for active participation among the members, in accordance with the signs of the times, so that the cultural values may grow to their full.
- 7) An inculturated preaching begins with a communal sharing of life, using language, customs, traditions, and ways of speech, as concrete channels for communication.
- 8) The preacher values and promotes the participation of women from a Gospel perspective, noting that women were the first to evangelize.
- 9) The preacher values and accepts culture shock as a paschal moment which makes possible his or her moving into a new level of cultural integration.
- 10) The preacher should strengthen the cultural identity of the community without provoking ethnocentric attitudes which might become barriers to solidarity with other cultures.

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"We incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others. Let us listen to what God's word teaches us about mercy, and allow that word to resound in the life of the Church. The Gospel tells us: "Blessed are the merciful, because they shall obtain mercy..." (Mt 5:7 – Pope Francis, *E.G.*, # 193).

"For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. God shows the poor "his first mercy". This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have "this mind... which was in Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:5). Inspired by this, the Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness" (Pope Francis, *E.G.*, # 198).

Appendix III  
ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO AND PREACHING

Archbishop Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated minutes after preaching on the 24th of March 1980. Because of his commitment to preaching Archbishop Romero became the voice of those who have no voice. Listed below are some quotations from this great preacher of our times and our own continent. We offer them asking that the Holy Spirit use the example and the strength of Archbishop Romero to help us as we journey along the way of the Word-become-people.

"Each one of you has to be a microphone of God. Each one of you has to be a messenger, a prophet" July 8, 1979

"We cannot cut off the word of God from the historical reality, because it would no longer be the word of God. It would be history, a pious book, a Bible that is just one more book in our library. But it becomes the word of God because it encourages, illuminates, contrasts, repudiates and praises that which is happening today in society." November 27, 1977

"We do not have to bring the literal Gospel of twenty centuries ago to our times, but the Gospel which the Church, beginning with the Gospel of Christ, applies to the circumstances of each age." October 23, 1977

"The one who preaches does nothing more than to take the eternal Word, with it, illuminate the reality of our pilgrim journey through history. Each Sunday we find realities that are begging for the light of the word of the Lord." February 19, 1978

"To live the Gospel within the framework of our existence is difficult. It creates conflicts, but it is also what makes an authentic preaching of the Gospel and an authentic Christian life." February 19, 1978

"A preaching which does not denounce sin is not a preaching of the Gospel." January 22, 1978

The preacher cannot lose sight of the present circumstances unless the preacher wants to preach a Gospel that says nothing to the people of our day." December 4, 1977

"This is the fundamental thought of my own preaching: nothing is more important to me than human life." March 16, 1980

"The true preacher of Christ is the church of the poor which discovers within the poverty and the misery, within the hope of the one who prays from a cardboard shack and within the pain of not being listened to, a God who hears." November 5 1978

"It may often seem that preaching touches on very dangerous topics and that it might be easier to say nothing. But in this way the Gospel word would not fulfill its mission of shining the light of the mystery of Christ into the reality of our people." July 1, 1979

"These homilies want to be the voice of this people They want to be the voice of those who have no voice." July 29, 1979

"The church preaches from the context of the poor and we will never be ashamed to say: The church of the poor." December 24, 1978

## Appendix IV

### THE CREED OF THE PREACHER

I believe in God, who is Father and Mother,  
who is transparent in my brothers and sisters.

I believe in Jesus, his feet covered with dust and dirt,  
and I believe in His invitation to follow Him along that same path.

I believe in the Spirit, incarnate within the community, within its struggles  
and hopes, within its joys and sadness.

I believe in the Word which transforms, liberates and gives life.

I believe in St Dominic, man of the Gospel, a living example of preaching  
and compassion.

I believe in a preaching which gives birth to the Word of God in every race,  
language and culture. This Word-made-flesh is the image and likeness of  
the God whose heart encompasses both heaven and earth.

I believe in the Good News of Jesus, inculturated and enfleshed in the  
humble preacher of Galilee – Jesus – the Word of life, the Liberator of the  
poor.

## THE PRAYER OF THE PREACHER

God, our Mother and Father,  
We praise you as Creator and giver of all life.

We bless you, our communal God,  
Because you become present  
In all peoples as Savior.

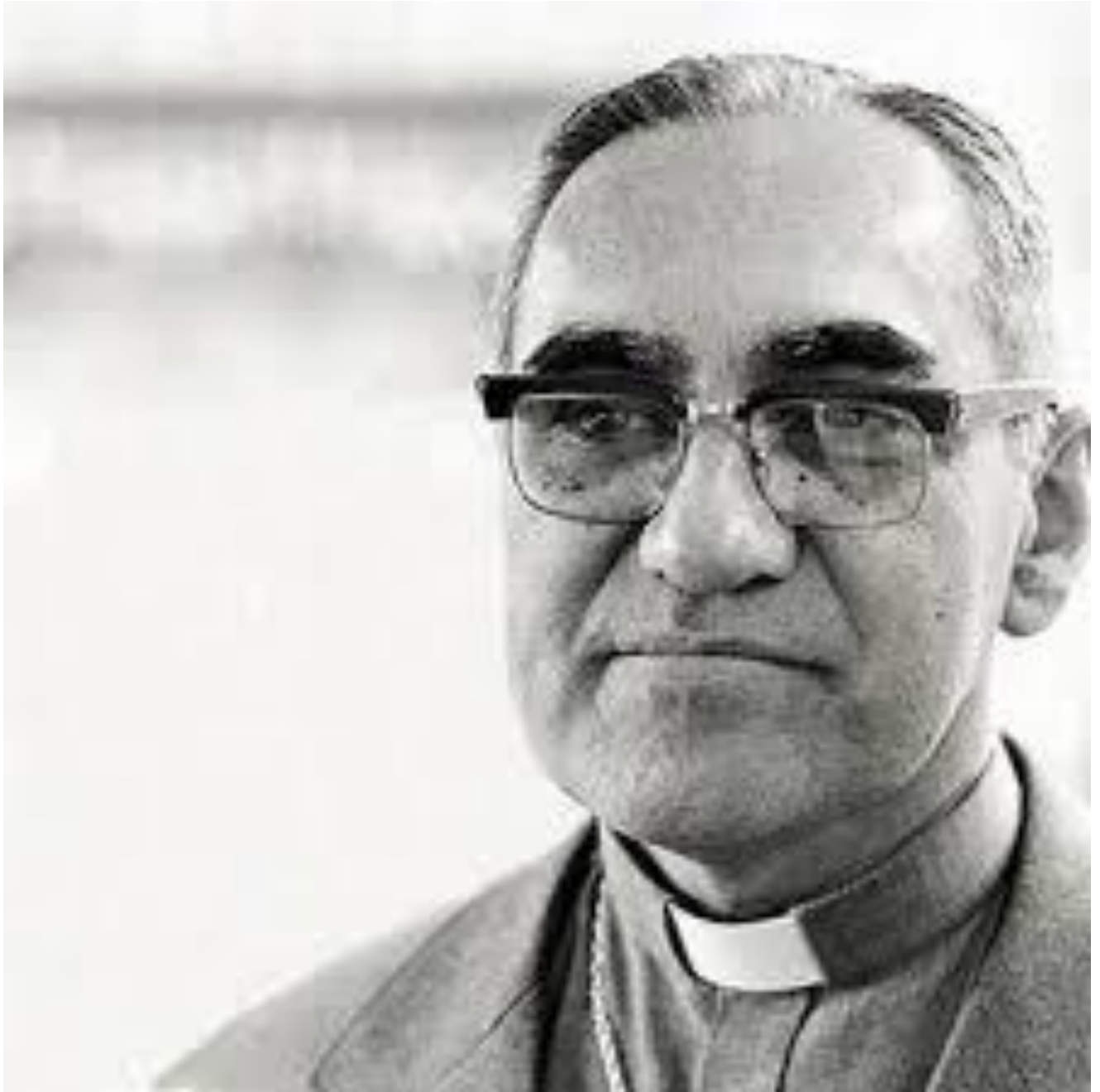
We give you thanks  
For calling us to proclaim, announce, preach,  
And en flesh the Word  
Who comes to reconcile and liberate our world.

Give us the grace to live with joy and hope,  
To be your healing presence  
among all poor and marginalized peoples.

Help us to be creative and faithful  
So that we might be prepared  
To welcome and share the Good News of the Reign of God,  
Enfleshed in our midst through our brother, Jesus.

Amen





“The one who preaches does nothing more than to take the eternal Word, and with it, illuminate the reality of our pilgrim journey through history.”

Mons Oscar Romero, 1978

