

PREACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUCHARIST

A Patristic Perspective

Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B.

The earliest testimony we have of preaching at the Eucharist is from the Acts of the Apostles, and the account reports considerable excitement. "On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and he kept on speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus who was sitting on the window sill was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. Once overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and when he was picked up, he was dead." The rest is known. Paul brings him back to life, and then we read, "Then he returned upstairs, broke the bread, and ate; after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, he departed" (Acts 20: 7-12). There are lessons about preaching in this—for example, going on and on can kill a man—but I cite it not for that reason but more as a primitive account of the same topic I am addressing in this study; namely, that the celebration of the community's Eucharist is both preceded and followed by talk. Here we will ask what kind of talk? What kind of preaching?

Classic is the account of Justin Martyr at least a hundred years later, where he describes the practice of the community's Sunday Eucharist.

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1. The first answer to this is given, together with its context in Acts 2: 42: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers."

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A THEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE FOUNDATIONS
OF PREACHING

Even though Christian preaching relied on rabbinical and hellenistic precedents, in its essence it was a new phenomenon in the ancient world. Its newness corresponds to the newness of the Christian message. In the same way that the Gospels are a new literary genre conformed to the need of professing faith by telling the story of Jesus, so Christian preaching became a new way of public speaking precisely because its message was altogether new: the incarnation of the Son of God, his death and his resurrection.³

Christian preaching derives from the Lord himself, more precisely, from his resurrection. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28: 19-20). Making disciples, teaching what comes from the Lord—this is the task of preaching. Theologically this is important. Preaching is not the initiative of the church but of the risen Lord, who said in this same context, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." In Mark's gospel we are told that this presence of the risen Lord confirms preaching: "They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs" (Mark 16:20).

This commission to preach, which the apostles received from the Lord, parallels the Lord's own receiving of his mission from the Father: "The risen Lord says to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20: 21). This "as" and "so" express a huge mystery; indeed, nothing less than an echo of the trinitarian mystery in which the Son comes forth from the Father. In that same way, from those same mysterious depths, the apostolic preacher comes forth from the risen Lord. Thus, the pattern according to which the Lord preached must become the pattern of every Christian preacher. Jesus expressed that pattern precisely: "My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me" (John 7: 16).

Even so, there is a difference in kind between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the apostles. Jesus, though bearing testimony to the Father, also bears testimony to himself.⁴ The apostles for their part bear testimony not to themselves but to Jesus. He indeed becomes the "Gospel as Literary Genre," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, eds. R. Latourelle and R. Fischella (New York 1994), pp. 368-71. The newness of Christian preaching is something that emerges again and again in the exhaustive study of patristic preaching by A. Olibar, *La predicación cristiana antigua* (Barcelona: Herder, 1991). To my knowledge this is the best single work on patristic preaching.

3. For the theological significance of the newness of the Gospel genre, see R. Latourelle, 4. Luke 4: 21; John 3: 11; 5: 31-47; 8: 14-18; 10: 25; 15: 26; 1 Tim 6: 13; 1 John 5: 7-8.

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what dense. But I am trying to offer here a theological understanding

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11. Rom 6: 10; Heb 7: 27; 9: 12. For further discussion of this, see E. Mazza, *The Celebration of the Eucharist. The Origin of the Rite and the Development of Its Interpretation*, tr. M. O'Connell (Collegeville: 1999), p. 120. Mazza is speaking of the Latin tradition as represented in Tertullian. For the same as unfolding in the Alexandrian tradition, see B. Studer, "Die doppelte Exegese bei Origenes" in *Mysterium Cantatis, Studien zur Exegese und zur Trinitätslehre in der Alten Kirche* (Rome: 1999), pp. 37-66. For useful summaries of Tertullian and Cyprian on these questions, see J. D. Lawrence, "Priest as Type of Christ, The Leader of the Eucharist in Salvation History according to Cyprian of Carthage" (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), pp. 63-72, 75-86.

The Fathers were keen to strike a balance between identity and difference in their talk about these things. The mighty action of God in the concrete historical death of Christ is a unique reality which happened once and for all.¹¹ But in virtue of the resurrection, what happened once in one place is made available in every time and place through figures, sacraments, types. These correspond on the deepest ontological level to the central event; they are for that reason "communion" in that event (again, 1 Cor 10: 16). We have thus a middle term between ourselves and the events of the Paschal Mystery. We have a sacrament between ourselves and that. A sacrament is a sacrament of the Paschal Mystery. In preaching, explaining how events of the Old Testament also figures, Christ (or call them also figures, shadows, types) becomes the basis for explaining in preaching how bread and wine and the assembly that communes in these are also sacraments of Christ.¹²

that there was something hidden in the biblical text (called, for example, the mystery of the text), so too there was something hidden in the liturgy, in the bread and the wine and the actions around them. For the same reason, then, these too were called mysteries, or sacraments, or figures. Something very profound is expressed in this transfer of terminology. It is not simply a question of seeing that interpretive tools in one field will also work in another. Rather, some deep relation is intuited between the biblical events attested to in Scripture and the signs and actions of the liturgy. A theology is achieved in the biblical text as a whole when read with the eyes of Christian faith and in a typological key. From this whole biblical world there emerge also symbols and ritual actions which correspond to the same theological understanding. Every type—biblical or liturgical—points to Christ in his Paschal Mystery; and so every type—biblical or liturgical—precisely because it is a type, ontologically participates in the one event which encompasses them all.

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- 15. Sermon 5: 6.
- 16. Sermon 95:3.
- 17. Sermon 71: 8.
- 18. Sermon 34:3.

of Christ and the mystery of the Trinity which Christ reveals in his Paschal Mystery. I am not suggesting that preachers ought simply to stand up and talk more about these things. Rather, I am claiming that these doctrines are the deepest sense of the Scriptures and that this deepest sense was discovered precisely when the Scriptures were proclaimed in the liturgical assembly and when the Scriptures became sacrament in the eucharistic rite. The preacher who understands this dynamic will be in a position to expound the Scriptures and the liturgy in such a way that these doctrines sink more and more deeply into the consciousness of the worshipping assembly.

Let me offer examples of two different possible approaches to the more doctrinally aware kind of preaching that I am proposing here. Both focus on the Eucharist, but not because this is the only topic of preaching. The first approach could be described as explicitly applying the Scriptures of the day to the Eucharist about to be celebrated. Every Gospel passage of the liturgy is a special and unique door of entry into the eucharistic mystery. The preacher can bring the assembly to the Eucharist precisely in the terms provided by the Gospel text, and, of course, in terms of the other texts which are there as supports of the Gospel. If we hear in the Gospel of a centurion who says to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof" (Matt 8:8), it is surely not too difficult to see that the Eucharist is a figure of this same encounter, a sacrament of it, a type of it, and that we can just as well say in the course of the coming celebration, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof."

Peter Chrysologus was a master of this kind of preaching. The banquet given for the Prodigal Son's return is the Eucharist about to be celebrated.¹⁵ Jesus dining in the house of a Pharisee is occasion for Chrysologus to pass from that scene (the Jewish people) to the Gentiles, whom Christ feeds with his "heavenly flesh."¹⁶ In explaining Jesus' words, "Don't worry about what you are to eat or drink" (Matt 6: 31), Chrysologus launches into a summary of the whole of salvation history conceived as the preparation of the food and drink of the eucharistic table spread for the church every day.¹⁷ The woman who only wants to touch the hem of Christ's garment (Matt 9: 20) is an example of the reverence with which one ought to approach Christ in the Eucharist.¹⁸ In a very natural use of typology which knows how to connect one part of the Scripture with another and bring it all to the Paschal Mystery, Chrysologus comments on Jesus' words, "I am the bread that come done from heaven" (John 6: 51). He says, "He is the bread that

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Mystagogy in an extended sense would be continuing to explain these rites to those who have long been baptized. For our purposes, it would mean preaching on the meaning of the rites and words of the eucharistic celebration. It should first be noticed how scriptural is this kind of preaching. It is not a scholastic explanation of eucharistic doctrine, but rather a connecting of the rite to its biblical images and building up doctrine from that. Of course, scholastic doctrine can guide the preacher in this task, ensuring correct interpretation.

One of the especially effective features of mystagogical preaching is that it deals directly with the tension between the visible and invisible in the ritual celebration. Something is seen, but it points to an invisible working of the divine Spirit. This is the most common use of the word *mysterium* for the sacraments. The *mysterium* of the Eucharist is what the bread and wine and eucharology and action of the assembly all point to. Bread and wine and an assembly are seen, but the *mysterium* is that all these figures, all these "sacraments," effect a "communion" of the assembly in the death and resurrection of the Lord. "Let us proclaim the Mystery of Faith," that is, "When we eat this bread and drink this cup [visible actions], we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes [the invisible mystery]."

In their mystagogical preaching on the Eucharist both Ambrose and Theodore of Mopsuestia give us examples of dealing directly with the question of eucharistic consecration. "How is it," they ask and answer, "that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ?"²⁴ These are fair questions. No one can celebrate the Eucharist without eventually wondering about this. The assembly has the right and the need to hear preaching on these kinds of questions. There is not time here to follow the arguments of Ambrose and Theodore in this regard; and in any case, though what they say is certainly a contribution to the question, they are not entirely satisfying.²⁵ My point is simply that the question needs to be taken on directly in preaching and that there is precedent for it.

Explanation of the Eucharist in preaching should certainly not be limited to clarification of the consecration. This is a Western tendency, traced able to the influence of Ambrose. Cyril of Jerusalem shows another method.²⁶ In his second mystagogy on the Eucharist he moves step by

The mystery of the Eucharist is what the bread and wine and eucharology and action of the assembly all point to. Bread and wine are seen, but the mystery is that all these figures, all these "sacraments," effect a "communion" of the assembly in the death and resurrection of the Lord.

24. See Ambrose, *On the Sacraments*, IV, 13-14, 21-24. Theodore, *Homily 16*, 12.
 25. Ambrose concentrates everything on the power of the words of Christ spoken by the priest. This has been too restrictive in the West, as if in itself it explained all that needs explaining. Theodore at least explains the work of the Holy Spirit in the consecration. This certainly needs more emphasis in our own preaching. Theodore parallels the Spirit raising Christ from the dead and the Spirit transforming bread and wine. This is a tremendous theological reality that should be opened up for the Christian people. Augustine, in his sermons to the newly baptized, also attempts to explain how bread can be the body of Christ and wine his blood. See especially Sermons 229 and 272.
 26. For our purposes here there is no need to solve the controversy over the disputed authorship of "Cyril's" mystagogical homilies. For a recent discussion summarizing the *status questions*, see, K.J. Burreson, "The Anaphora of the Mystagogical Catecheses

of Cyril of Jerusalem (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1969).
 27. E. Mazza, *The Eucharist: A Study of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1974).
 28. For a study of the *Prayers of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1974).
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34. Augustine, *Sermons III/6* (184-229Z), p. 255.
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concrete ways of receiving the Eucharist with reverence and awe—
surely, Catholics would grow to understand the Eucharist "correctly" in
our generation if these were more often the subject of preaching.

What we should be concerned about in the eucharistic understanding
of the Catholic people cuts in different directions. I am troubled, for
example, by often strident opposition from some quarters to any talk

or emphasis about the importance of the eucharistic assembly. It is as if
any emphasis on the assembly would necessarily be had to the detri-
ment of our reverence for Christ present in the eucharistic species. Of
course, that is an unacceptable outcome, and there should be preach-
ing which prevents such an outcome. On the other hand, not to speak
of what happens to the assembly through the eucharistic celebration—
namely, that it is transformed itself into the body of Christ—would be

to foreshorten a full Catholic understanding of the Eucharist.³⁰ Indeed,
I would suggest that insufficient understanding of this dimension is
one of the saddest deficiencies in current Catholic understanding of
the Eucharist. The way in which St. Augustine speaks of this theme can
give us the measure of what we have lost, as well as indicate a way of
recovery: "So, if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to
the apostle telling the faithful, *You, though, are the body of Christ and its*

members (1 Cor 12:27). So if it's you that are the body of Christ and its
members, it's the mystery meaning you that has been placed on the
Lord's table; what you receive is the mystery that means you."³¹ Or,
"So receive the sacrament in such a way that you think about your-
selves, that you retain unity in your hearts, that you always fix your
hearts up above."³² Or, "This sacrament, after all, doesn't present you
with the body of Christ in such a way as to divide you from it. This, as

the apostle reminds us, was foretold in holy scripture: *they shall be two*
Christ and in the Church (Eph 5:31-32). And in another place he says
about this Eucharist itself, *We, though many, are one loaf, one body* (1 Cor
10:17). So you are beginning to receive what you have also begun to
be, provided you do not receive unworthily..."³³ "What you receive is
what you yourselves are, thanks to the grace by which you have been

29. I did not speak of this last point above, but this is also traditionally done in mysta-
gogical preaching. See Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis V*, pp. 21-22.
30. Helpful for understanding the process of a shift in language and so of theological
perception on this question is the classic study by H. de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*,
Teucharistie et l'Église au moyen âge (Paris: Aubier, 1949).

31. Augustine, *Sermon 272*, PL 38, 1247. English translation from *The Works of Saint*
Augustine, Sermons III/7 (230-272B) on the Liturgical Seasons, translations and notes, Edmund
Hill, O.P. (New Rochelle: New City Press, 1993), p. 300.
32. Augustine, *Sermon 227*, PL 38, 1100. English, E. Hill, *Sermons III/6* (184-229Z), p. 255.
33. Augustine, *Sermon 228 B*, MA [=Miscellanea Agostiniana] 1, 18-20. English, E. Hill,
Sermons III/6 (184-229Z), p. 262.

Origen felt his own weakness keenly and preached first to own sins before his listeners. He confesses his and for himself; searched and struggled in a prayerful way for the meaning of the Word in the presence of his hearers, just as he did in his studies.³⁸ Augustine is another model of a way of giving oneself to the congregation. Among the things that make him such an effective preacher is his complete familiarity over years with his congregation, his being totally at ease with them and they with him—not the ease of a friendly chat about nothing, but the ease of exchange for the sake of love on matters that bear on salvation and eternal life.³⁹

Origen, who learned so much from Paul and extended in detail what Paul had begun both exegetically and spiritually,³⁶ felt his own weakness keenly and preached first to and for himself. He confesses his own sins before his listeners.³⁷ Origen is so spiritual in tone because he searched and struggled in a prayerful way for the meaning of the Word in the presence of his hearers, just as he did in his studies.³⁸ Augustine is another model of a way of giving oneself to the congregation. Among the things that make him such an effective preacher is his complete familiarity over years with his congregation, his being totally at ease with them and they with him—not the ease of a friendly chat about nothing, but the ease of exchange for the sake of love on matters that bear on salvation and eternal life.³⁹

If there is a spiritual work that the preacher must undertake and dare to reflect in his preaching, there is also a spiritual work to be done among the listeners; and, indeed, the preacher must call them to it. Listen to Augustine do this so effectively: "Behold, brothers and sisters, a great mystery: the sound of my words hits your ears, but the teacher is within! Don't think that you can learn something from a mere mortal. I can exhort you with the sound of my voice, but if there be not one within who teaches, all my noise achieves nothing. Do you need a proof of this? Well, you've all heard this sermon, haven't you? But how many will go out of here having learned nothing? I've done my part; I've spoken to you all. But those in whom the interior anointing has not spoken, those whom the Holy Spirit has not instructed internally, they will go out of here having learned nothing. The exterior teaching is a certain kind of help; it acts as a spur. But the one who teaches hearts has his pulpit in heaven. This is why he himself said, 'Call no one on earth teacher; one only is your teacher: Christ.' (Matt 23: 10)"⁴⁰

36. On Origen and Paul, see H. de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit, l'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), pp. 69-77. See also F. Cocchini, *Il Paolo di Origene* (Rome: Edizioni Studium, 1992).

37. P. Nautin in SCH 232, pp. 152-57 collects many examples of Origen reflecting on his own preaching.

38. For good summary accounts of Origen as a preacher, see A. Olivar, *La predicación cristiana antigua*, pp. 62-69; P. Nautin, SCH 232, pp. 101-91; D. Sheerin, "The Role of Prayer in Origen's Homilies" in *Origen of Alexandria, His World and His Legacy*, eds. C. Kannengieser and W.L. Petersen (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 200-14; T.K. Carroll, *Preaching the Word, Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmingon: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 42-47.

39. See F. van der Meer, "Augustine the Preacher" in *Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*, pp. 412-52.

40. Augustine, *Tractates on the First Epistle of John* 3: 13, SCH 75, 210. Translation mine.

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L. Ann Jervis, Ph
Toronto, Ontario
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We should not shy from preaching doctrine. This should not be conceived as preaching something other than Scripture. Doctrine is Scripture's deepest sense in a way that exactly parallels the liturgy it- self as Scripture's deepest sense. I have not entered into detail here about doctrinal questions, but I hope to have shown that the liturgical celebration itself is the context in which doctrine first emerges and the foundation on which it rests. Consequently, it is here that it can be expounded and continually refreshed. The center is clear: in the Eu- charist we have communion in the death and resurrection of Jesus, true God and true man, in whom God is revealed as Trinity.

Finally, as has been often suggested in recent decades, we should work to promote again a well developed eucharistic preaching during the season of Easter. Everything in the season cries out for this and is in place for it: the lectionary, both for weekdays and Sundays, is full of passages that without much effort can be expounded in the ways I have been suggesting here.⁴¹ But more: of this whole season, it can be said with theological precision, "This is the day that the Lord has made."⁴² This means that the Lord himself through his Spirit is very much at work in the church during this time. The church that celebrates Eucha- rist during the Easter season knows itself to be in communion with the Apostles, who described themselves as those "who ate and drank with Jesus after he rose from the dead." (Acts 2: 10: 41) This is the Lord who still will open our minds to the understanding of the Scriptures,⁴³ show- ing from Moses and the prophets and the psalms what refers to him, showing that the Messiah had to suffer so to enter into glory; that is, showing the mystery of the text as converging on his death and resur- rection. And this is the Lord whom we will recognize precisely in the breaking of the bread, whereupon he vanishes from our sight. Visible sacraments, invisible Mystery! □

41. In the context of the Lectionary, mention should be made of the opportunity for a special series of preaching on the Eucharist provided from the 17th to the 21st Sundays of the Year in cycle B, where the Gospels are taken from the Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel of John with Old Testament and apostolic readings which support their sense.
 42. See Augustine's delightful Easter homily on this Psalm verse which was repeated again and again throughout the Easter season. The sermon is a fine example of the Fathers' capacity to unite many scriptural texts around just one key word, in this case, the theme of *day*. "So what is this day which the Lord has made? Live good lives, and you will be this day yourselves." Augustine, *Sermon 229 B*, MA 1, 464-466 or PLS 2, 556-558. English, E. Hill, *Sermons III/6 (184-229Z)*, p. 273.
 43. For the phrasing of what follows, see Lk 24: 25-47.