

# Archdiocese of Cincinnati's Discussion on Race: Are All Welcome? Race in the Church Today

## Preaching on Social Justice

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### Background

“Over the past few months I have become increasingly discouraged with the preaching I hear going from parish to parish. Regardless of denomination, it has become banal and palliative in the worst sense of that word. God is screaming through the events of our times, and no one is hearing.” So begins the introduction of a text edited by Roger Alling and David Schlafer on *Preaching as Prophetic Calling*. The citation is from an email message exchanged with Deacon Ron Cebik of the Diocese of Connecticut. It is a terse and strongly worded indictment of the state and absence of prophetic preaching.

In their opening comments, Alling and Schlafer stress that prophetic preaching is “the ability to see and speak of ordinary events with extra-ordinary insight.” At first glance, that sounds simple enough and it is what we are expected to do every time we ascend to the pulpit. We are supposed to give voice to the range of emotions, feelings, questions, doubts, fears, and angers of the people in our pews and to do so with clarity. By preaching words that people are unable to speak for themselves, we are, in essence, validating everything that they are thinking and experiencing.

The challenge increases when we are dealing with complex issues, such as the range of issues that fall under the category of social justice. That list is extensive and includes racism, of course, but others such as chronic poverty, child abuse, capital punishment, AIDS, homosexuality, terrorism, along with a virtual score of other topics. These require bold and even courageous initiatives by homilists, and clear language and authentic conviction, alone, are inadequate. As preachers, we are expected to take positions on sensitive and controversial issues, or, “sooner or later, [our homilies] begin to sound like unhelpful platitudes and vague spiritualizing generalizations” (Alling and Schlafer, xi). People want something new, some brand new insights, not a rehash of what they’ve heard in the past. “It is only as the Church opens itself to fresh reminders of uncomfortable truths, and to unsettling insights into familiar texts, that it finds prophetic energy and direction for addressing needs and challenges.” (Alling and Schlafer, xiv). People want us to address the difficult moral and social issues so that they can be better informed to take action in better living their lives as Catholics. All of these attributes of preaching, including notably the character and authenticity of who we are as preachers, are essential to prophetic preaching.

In his book, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, J. Philip Wogaman indicates that to be prophetic is not necessarily to be adversarial or even controversial. He reminds his readers that the word in Greek form “refers to one who speaks in behalf of another.” He goes on to give a more extensive definition of prophetic preaching as “preaching [that] draws people into the reality of God in such a way that they cannot any longer be content with conventional wisdom and superficial existence” (Wogaman, 4). The words we preach must, at times, be unsettling and cause people to feel uncomfortable about the status quo. “The problem is all the more urgent in a climate of oppression and corruption, when a sharply challenging voice must be heard”

(Wogaman, 4). Jesus repeatedly reminded his followers that the first shall be last; that he came to bring the Good News to the poor; that things hidden from the wise and the learned will be revealed to infants, and that if anyone holds an advantage it is the outcast, the oppressed, the poor and the despised.

In a homily that he preached at the Chrism Mass on April 6, 2004, then Archbishop Sean O'Malley told the priests and deacons of the Archdiocese of Boston that, "The martyrdom that you and I are called to in our ordination—the special witness that we are privileged to give—takes place in the pulpit . . . We must learn to identify the good things as well as the bad in our society and read the signs of the times. We must let them hear the liberating news of the Gospel in such a way that it touches on public issues, social causes and the policies that effect the common good . . . Prophetic preaching is challenging because it requires for both preacher and hearers conversion."

Our homilies should issue calls to action. Repeatedly, people are asking for an action plan to follow as they leave Mass so that they can live their Catholic lives in some concrete and meaningful way. It is, in many respects, a homework assignment that we give to our congregations and people tell us that they even want to be held accountable for acting from Sunday-to-Sunday. This is what people are seeking in a Sunday homily. If our homilies are lacking in substance and particularity, they will be received silently and fall on deaf ears that have tuned out the Word of God as they listen to other noises and other distractions—"That silence is a thunderous testimony, not to the God of Incarnation, but to a God of infinite abstraction" (Alling and Schlafer, xi).

## **Liberation Theology**

There is a great deal written about liberation theology. In preparing this essay, I have extensively used three particular resources:

- Alling, Roger and David J. Schlafer editors. *Preaching as Prophetic Calling*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2004.
- Burghardt, Walter J., S.J. *Preaching the Just Word*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Gonzalez, Justo L. and Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez. *Liberation Preaching, The Pulpit and the Oppressed*. Abingdon: Abingdon Preacher's Library, 1980.
- Wogaman, J. Philip. *Speaking the Truth in Love*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

- In their book, *Liberation Preaching*, Justo and Catherine Gonzalez define liberation theology as a "theology approached from the perspective of those who are powerless as they experience the empowerment of the Gospel. This experience of empowerment is not only in an inner sense, but also in the sense that it compels and enables them to strive for justice" (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 13).
- In a very real sense, liberation theologians reject the traditional interpretation of the Christian message refusing to leave the Gospel in the hands of those with power, and insist that a proper interpretation of Scripture is freeing rather than oppressive.
- Justo and Catherine Gonzalez indicate that those who bring a traditional and oppressive interpretation of Scripture do not do so out of any deliberate malicious intent. Rather, the process of interpretation is an unconscious one "through which the values, goals, and interests of those in power are read into Scripture."

- The liberation theologians propose that if the Bible is written by those who are the powerless and oppressed, and if it is *their* perspective concerning the activity of God that is presented in Scripture, then “a more accurate interpretation of Scripture can be gained by those who currently stand in a parallel place in our own societies than by those who are powerful” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 16). The Hebrew people began their documented life and journey in the Bible as runaway slaves leaving the enslavement and oppression of Egypt. “Almost perversely, God chose a people weak and small in number in preference to the mighty nations of the earth . . . that Israel could then be clear that the power is God’s power, and not Israel’s own strength” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 16).
- The Hebrew slaves who were set free from their oppression in Egypt surely had an altogether different perspective on God’s action and character than did the Egyptians who had enslaved them.
- “There is a recurring pattern in portions of the Old Testament where powerful nations are overthrown by small Israel, as long as Israel is obedient. The powerful within Israel are rebuked by the seemingly powerless prophets” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 17).

### Preaching as a Liberation Theologian

The starting point for the homilist who strives to bring a liberation theological perspective to the task of preaching is to attempt to wipe the slate clean of “any undue burden of tradition.” In other words, we are to begin with a completely different and fresh perspective as hermeneuts.

- “Liberation theology is grounded on a basic suspicion; an ideological suspicion. A black man involved in that struggle against racism has come up against so many instances of hidden racism that he must regard every statement coming out of a predominately white culture as implicitly racist. From the point of view of those who have not gone through the same painful experiences . . . such a man may seem unduly belligerent and negative. But the truth of the matter is that the experience of going through the hermeneutic of suspicion is so overwhelming that those who have gone through it cannot but refer everything to that experience” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 33).
- The authors of *Liberation Preaching* cite two examples to underscore the importance of assuming the hermeneutic of suspicion:
  - From the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12)—“But these *fisherfolk* in Managua do not react in the same way (they do not read the Bible as a religious document). They realize that what is going on is a big party. One of them comments, after being told how much water Jesus turned into wine: ‘Six hundred quarts. They really got plastered’” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 63).
  - From the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-36)—“And at the end of the conversation a certain Alejandro shows a profound understanding of the relationship between obedience, love and risk: ‘It seems to me that here we should admire above all her [Mary’s] obedience. And so we should be ready to obey too. This obedience is revolutionary, because it’s obedience to love. Obedience to love is very revolutionary, because it commands us to disobey everything else’” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 62).
- The homilist who is to preach to a congregation of individuals who have experienced racism in various forms first-hand; who see themselves as even occasional *victims* of racism, has to approach the Scriptures assuming that same lens of suspicion and delve into the Sacred texts with *that* perspective. “Once we learn to read such interpretation

*with suspicion*, we gain new love and respect, first for the Bible, and then for a tradition of which we too are a part, and which we are helping to shape.” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 46).

- Justo and Catherine Gonzalez suggest that “even lectionaries are a selection [of Scripture passages] which reflects the prevailing tradition of the church, and . . . they must be seen with the necessary ‘ideological suspicion’” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 40).
- As preachers, the task of preparing a homily on the subject of racism employs the same discipline of preparing a homily on any other central idea for any other congregation. The exercise of congregation analysis is foremost and vital. We bring the members of our congregations, with their issues, educations, ethnicities, families of origins, along with a host of other variables, with us as we journey into the Scriptures and we strive to see the Scriptures through the lens of their lives and their experiences.

## Preparing a Homily

- Preaching on social justice issues requires that homilists approach the Scriptures with an ideological and hermeneutical suspicion. That is the critical starting point in order to discover dimensions in the Scriptures that we have previously missed. “If it is true that liberation theology is that which develops out of the experience of the powerless as they are being empowered by God, *the political question is the first one that we must ask as we approach any biblical passage* . . . By political we mean rather the interplay of power, the question of who is expected to have authority over whom, or of who is an ‘insider’ and who is not. But political means above all . . . the manner in which God intervenes in such relations, and how God responds to the power or powerlessness of various individuals or groups of people” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 69).
- The Old Testament Exodus experience is often used as an example to emphasize the questions of who holds power and who is subverted by power. It is an eminently political event. “It is an event in which, to use the words of Mary much later, God ‘has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in their imagination of hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree’ . . . And it is a political dimension in which . . . God works in a definite direction, against the might of Pharaoh and for the oppressed children of Israel” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 73).
- Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, again in *Liberation Preaching*, stress that Jesus’ story, if anything, is a political story—“God’s choice to be born in a stable, to a carpenter’s family, rather than in the home of a king or priest, manifests God’s politics” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 73).
- The hermeneutical challenge for the homilist who strives to meaningfully preach a message on social justice is to place himself in the story in the perspective of the victim or victims in the story. This task is sometimes referred to as *reassigning the cast of characters* as we would do when working with the parables of Jesus and employing a First Person Narrative Form by assuming the role of one of the characters in the Gospel—“Many of them are directed against the blindness of the religious leaders of the time, who could not see the inbreaking of the kingdom in the teachings and actions of Jesus . . . Jesus’ parables are not directed against the sins of the irreligious, but rather against the sins of the religious . . . When we realize this and *reassign the cast of characters*, particularly if we do it on the basis of the questions of power and powerlessness, the parables may take on a very different meaning, which may be closer to the original” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 75).

## The Character of the Preacher as a Medium

- As preachers, our characters represent powerful mediums and the identities we bring to the pulpit exert a powerful influence on the messages we preach and how those messages are received by our congregations. Those mediums, by definition, include our social, political and economic identities.
- At the same time, in receiving our homilies, and interpreting and applying them to their lives, the social, political, and economic identity of every individual in our congregations influences and shapes the messages of our homilies. “In the act of preaching, the social and political situation of the preacher and hearer are part of the context that gives meaning to the words that are spoken” Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 95).
- Justo and Catherine Gonzalez make what should be an obvious point, but perhaps one to which we give little consideration. Our parishes and churches are likely composed of one dominant or exclusive race and ethnic group. Nevertheless, they underscore the reality that our congregations are composed of men and women and that the factor of power between the sexes is common to all of them. While the roles of men and women, and their corresponding professions and incomes, have significantly changed in recent decades, and the gap between men and women has narrowed, the reality is that there are still marked differences in the way that women are viewed and treated by many segments of our society and the issue of power between the sexes is still a very real issue. In our experience, we have come to realize and appreciate how women can hear and interpret a given Scripture text differently than men.
- In the opening chapter of his book, *Preaching the Just Word*, Walter Burghardt, S.J., cites the writing of the great scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann in his essay, “The Preacher, the Text, and the People”—“How is a pastor to give voice to this scandal (the problem in the preaching of social, political, and economic issues) in a society that is hostile to it, in a church that is often unwilling to host the scandal, and when we ourselves as teachers and pastors of the church are somewhat queasy about the scandal as it touches our own lives? How can the radical dimensions of the Bible as they touch public reality be heard in the church?” Perhaps this is the vital litmus test for us who are being challenged to preach on the issues of social justice. Where do we stand personally as far as these social issues are concerned and to what extent are we “set aflame” with these issues? Without passion oozing from our lives and our behaviors, our homiletic words will do little to the people who occupy our pews from Sunday-to-Sunday.

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