

How spiritual are our sermons?

Lectio Divina as a source for a spiritual homiletic

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Introduction

If we want to reflect on the practice of preaching in a contemporary and innovative manner, we would do well to take our starting point in what is known as spirituality. First, spirituality and preaching both deal with our living relationship with God. Second, the word spirituality represents one of the most important recent trends of the 21st century. In fact, this century has been called the century of spirituality. How is the church interacting with this trend? And how does this trend challenge a homiletic that wants to offer a contribution to biblical preaching that is relevant and contemporary and leads listeners to worshipping God?

In this opening lecture, I would like to outline some of the contours of what I would call a 'spiritual homiletic.' Such a homiletic would look to the reality of spirituality (that is increasingly being studied in a scientific manner) as its primary source of inspiration.¹ In addition, such a homiletic would focus on providing a practical-theological reflection of the homiletic practice that, in addition to being theologically justified, exegetically careful and pastorally moved, would also be spiritual. I hope to clarify what I mean in what follows.

The Dominican Order

I have chosen to take my starting point in the pre-Reformation tradition. This choice was also inspired by the desire the rector of this faculty expressed during a seminar on December 8, 2007 when he said, "It's time for Evangelicals and other Protestants to become 'Catholic-Evangelical.'"² Consequently, I am taking you back to the 13th century to dwell for a moment on the fact that in the year 1216, Dominic Guzman (c. 1170-1221) founded the monastic Dominican Order also known as the Order of Preachers. This order was especially established because of the great need in the area of preaching and pastoral care. The unique feature of this order was that it sought to connect the active and contemplative life (while most of the other orders focused exclusively on either one of these aspects). Special characteristics of this order were: a focus on thorough study,

¹ In a similar manner a narrative homiletic is fed by the insights of the reality of narrativity and a hermeneutical homiletic by the wisdom of the reality of hermeneutics.

² *Nederlands Dagblad*, December 10, 2007: "Gezocht: katholiek-evangelische christenen" (report of a seminar in Leuven on Saturday, December 8, 2007)

preaching and education flowing from this study, a great love for the truth, a Christ-centered spirituality, and a pastoral apostolate.

One of the most well known representatives of the Dominicans was Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). At a certain moment in his *Summa Theologica* (written from 1265-1274), he expresses his opinion on the question of what is better: an order that focuses on the active life (characterized by work such as visiting the sick and pastoral work) or an order that focuses on the contemplative life (characterized by prayer and liturgy). Thomas answers: Just as it is better to enlighten (*illuminare*) than simply to give light (*lucere*), so it is also better to give others the fruits of your contemplation than simply to contemplate.³ With this answer Thomas rises above the dilemma and establishes a connection that was so characteristic of the Order of Preachers. He connects the contemplative life that seeks the face of God through intensively and prayerfully busying oneself with the Scriptures and the active life that come to expression, for instance, in preaching and pastoral care. Thomas' answer inspired one of the mottos of the Dominican Order: *contemplata aliis tradere*.⁴ As such, this motto is a good summary of what preaching is about. It's about contemplation and giving others the fruit of your contemplation.

Contemplata aliis tradere

I would like to dwell on this Dominican motto for a moment because it can give us important insights for a spiritual homiletic.⁵ First, I will try to clarify what contemplation entails. Contemplation refers to our hidden life with the Lord that comes to expression in loving prayer, seeking God's face, speaking with God who is the truth Himself, and in worshipping our triune God. To use Thomas' terms, contemplation is an act of the intellect, but then an act of the intellect that has its origin in love. When a soul loves God, then this soul longs to be united with Him. Ultimately, this kind of contemplation is a gift of grace. Yet, it is also something you can desire and seek by reading the Scriptures and other spiritual books, listening to sermons, meditation and prayer.⁶ Contemplation itself is enjoying the presence of God as the ultimate truth, lovingly continuing to behold his face, and being overwhelmed by seeing his majesty so full of grace and truth.

According to this motto, contemplation ought to lead to giving others the fruits of your contemplation. Here we clearly see that contemplation in this context is not meant to be

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II q. 188 art. 6: "Sic ergo dicendum est quod opus vitae activae est duplex. Unum quidem quod ex plenitudine contemplationis derivatur, sicut doctrina et praedicatio. Unde et Gregorius dicit, in V Homil. super Ezech., quod *de perfectis viris post contemplationem suam redeuntibus dicitur, memoriam suavitatis tuae eructabunt*. Et hoc praefertur simplici contemplationi. Sicut enim maius est illuminare quam lucere solum, ita maius est contemplata aliis tradere quam solum contemplari."

⁴ Other mottos used by the Dominicans are: '*Veritas*', '*Laudare-benedicere-praedicare*', '*Euntes evangelizate mundum*'.

⁵ Klaus Müller's homiletic, *Homiletik: Ein handbuch für kritische Zeiten*, Regensburg 1994 is completely built upon this phrase.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas' insights on contemplation can be found, e.g., in: *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 179, 180, 182, 188.

some sort of spiritual egoism between the soul and God. On the contrary, it's about making the love of God that has been received and experienced in contemplation (the core of the contemplative life) available to others (the core of the active life). The goal of contemplation is becoming a conduit that the wisdom, truth, love, and grace that has been received, flows from you to others through the ministry of preaching. In this way contemplation becomes the source of preaching. The point is obviously not that you give a personal testimony about your own contemplation, but that you pass on to others the contemplated wisdom you found in the Scriptures of the Lord in the same manner in which you receive it, namely, God's loving and real presence. In this way, the spiritual relationship the preacher has with the Word of God becomes an important source for a loving and faithful preaching that truly serves others.

Finally, the word *tradere* is important in the motto *contemplata aliis tradere*. Thomas could have used other words to articulate what he meant, such as, for instance, *praedicare* (preach), *docere* (teach), or *dare* (give). But Thomas must have deliberately chosen this word *tradere* because it was also used, for instance, in the liturgy of the Eucharist to point to the self-sacrifice of Christ. The Lord gave Himself in order to serve others. Thus, Thomas is saying to the preacher that he should be prepared to let go of himself and give himself, his life, and all that he has found in his contemplation to anyone who will listen to the preaching. In this way, preaching becomes an act of self-sacrifice in the footsteps of our crucified Lord.⁷ Thomas Aquinas' own life, which was so characterized by study, contemplation, preaching and teaching, is an impressive example of this kind of self-sacrifice.

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Lectio divina

So far Thomas Aquinas. Since, according to me, the word contemplation as such is too small to characterize the whole homiletical process, I am now going to place this concept in the context of the four phases that characterizes the so-called *lectio divina* also known as the divine or spiritual reading of the Scriptures. Even though here is a lot of renewed interest in this *lectio divina* today,⁸ the roots of this practice go back many centuries. Already in the 12th century, a Carthusian monk called Guigo II summed up the essence of *lectio divina* in his *Scala Claustralium* in which he speaks about *lectio, mediatio, oratio,*

⁷ Mary Ann Fatula, *Contemplata Aliis Tradere: Spirituality and Thomas Aquinas, The Peacher*, in: *Spirituality Today*, Spring 1991, Vol. 43 No. 1, pp. 19-35: "In the Corpus Christi liturgy attributed to Thomas, the verb used for Jesus' total surrender of himself to his disciples in the eucharist is 'tradere.' The Corpus Christi hymn 'Verbum Supernum.' sings out, 'About to be handed over by a disciple to those jealous of him, Jesus first handed himself over to his disciples on a tray of life.' The Matins hymn for Corpus Christi, 'Sacris solemnibus,' uses the same verb: 'He gave to the weak a tray holding his body; he gave to the sorrowing a drinking cup of his blood, saying, 'Take what I hand over ('trado') to you and drink from this cup.'" Accessed at: <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/91431fatula.html>.

⁸ See, e.g., Wim Reedijk, *Zuiver lezen. De Bijbel gelezen op de wijze van de vroegchristelijke woestijvaders* (Damon: Budel, 2006); Enzo Bianchi, *Praying the Word: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1998); Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori: Triumph Books, 1996).

and *contemplatio*. The *lectio* that comes first is the foundation. It's a careful and precise reading of the text. The *mediatatio* is penetrating more deeply with your mind into the hidden truths of the words of the text. The *oratio* is prayer. It's the longing of the pious heart that continues to focus on God in order to hear and answer his voice. Finally, the *contemplatio* is looking. It's seeing and beholding God and experiencing his loving and gracious presence so that you can learn to rest in it.⁹

There are many ways to describe these four steps or dimensions.¹⁰ For now I would just like to give a short development of the thought that for a homiletical practice in which the spiritual dimension comes to expression in a richer way than is often the case (because sermons often have a strong rational or a too practical character) the *lectio divina* with its four steps of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* offer exceptionally fruitful points of contact.

I do this by giving you a diagram in which I apply the four dimensions of *lectio divina* with a view to the sermon preparation and the preacher himself.

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|---------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>lectio</i> | the text | I read the text precisely and carefully |
| <i>meditatio</i> | the reality of the Word | I intensively reflect on the reality the text points me to |
| <i>oratio</i> | the voice | I listen to the voice that speaks to me and I answer |
| <i>contemplatio</i> | the face | I behold the holy and loving face of the Lord who is looking at me with his blessing eyes |

There is a certain ascension in these four steps. While the sermon preparation begins with a text that demands precise analysis and a careful exegesis using the available exegetical tools, it can now be clear that this precise and careful exegesis is not an end in itself. The end is beholding the face of the Lord.¹¹ The goal is that in the sermon preparation the preacher reaches the point that he says: Now I see you, now I experience that you yourself are addressing me and looking at me, now I notice the light of your face shining

⁹ Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, trans. John Vriend (Leuven: Peters, 2002), 725-726. See also Jos Douma, *Veni Creator Spiritus: De meditatie en het preekproces* (Kampen: Kok, 2000), 235-240.

¹⁰ *Lectio Divina* can also be seen as an expression of contemplative spirituality that is strongly characterized by Eastern influences. It will be clear that I do not want to go into that direction. For further reflection on what contemplation is about one would do well to consult in addition to the Roman Catholic tradition also the Puritan tradition. Because of time restraints, I am focusing only on the Roman Catholic tradition in this opening lecture. For a further development of this idea, one could also consult the Puritan John Owen's *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/owen/glory.html>.

¹¹ Moreover, it is also important to subsequently pay attention to how this contemplation changes the way the preacher puts his faith into practice. Thus, it is also possible to add another step: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*, *actio*.

on me. Each time this experience will be colored by the biblical passage that forms the point of departure for the journey.

Thus, in the whole sermon preparation process as *lectio divina*, the more analytical, exegetical side of the sermon preparation (that is neglected way too much nowadays) and the more spiritual, contemplative dimension of preaching are joined together. That happens especially through the two phases of *meditatio* and *oratio*. In the *meditatio* the preacher is not busying himself so much with the text as text but focuses on the reality that is opened up by the words of the text, namely the reality of God, the reality of this world and the reality of one's own life. He intensively considers which image of this reality becomes visible and tangible. In the *oratio* the longing of the soul increasingly is aroused to be addressed by the Lord and to respond. A dialogue arises in which the voice of the Lord and the voice of the preacher alternate. This continues until there is a space beyond the words in which there is surrender, reciprocal love, loving wisdom—a space where the secret of the glorious presence of the Lord is almost tangible, where new passion, new love, new wisdom begin to flow in the preacher who says: 'Now I have seen you with my own eyes' (Job 42:5).

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The face of the Lord

It is in this contemplation in the context of a spiritual homiletic that we are put on the road of seeing the face of the Lord. After all, doesn't preaching have as its ultimate goal that the face of the Lord becomes visible?¹² Shouldn't we, in addition to a spirituality of the Word, also develop a spirituality of the Face with a view to preaching that wants to initiate listeners into the world of God's mysterious glory? Isn't 2 Corinthians 4:6 a word full of homiletical wisdom: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ"?

I believe that a spiritual homiletic that is fed by *lectio divina* as I have just briefly outlined can, in the power of the Spirit, lead to a preaching in which the glory of the invisible God becomes visible as that reflects from the face of Christ.

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Spiritual-homiletical suggestions

How spiritual are our sermons? How can we focus on preaching that spiritually increasingly becomes richer? I end with three suggestions that have a wider scope than just a spiritual homiletic. A further elaboration will follow later.¹³

¹² C. Trimp has a fascinating quotation in this regard: "For preaching is *the face of Christ* (italics mine, JRD) in the congregation and the presence of the Holy Spirit among believers today." See C. Trimp, *Woord, water en wijn. Gedachten over prediking, doop en avondmaal* (Kampen: Kok, 1985), 29.

¹³ Go to: www.josdouma.nl/etfhomiletiek.

1. A spiritual homiletic challenges the church in the 21st century not only to understand itself as a new, loving community, but as a **place where one can find spirituality** (possibly: a spiritual center). This means that the Christian church ought to intentionally depict itself as having its own unique spirituality among all the other spiritualities available on the spirituality market.

2. The existence of an Order of Preachers within the Catholic Church raises the question if there is not a need to establish such a **contemporary order within the Protestant-Evangelical tradition**. Within this order preachers could connect with each other in order to collectively grow in spiritual discipline and in their calling to preach the Word of Christ.

3. A theological education that wants to serve the preaching of God's Word in the local congregations cannot do without a **retreat center** where students as well as ministers receive the room to learn to practice *lectio divina*. In order to learn to practice this discipline, one needs time and silence, room and rest.

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It is my desire that in the wake of a spiritual homiletical reflection on and inspiration of preaching in the church what David says in Psalm 63 may increasingly become an experiential reality:

*I have seen you in the sanctuary
And beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
My lips will glorify you.*