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Del Staigers

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# LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME TO ME: PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO CHILDREN

DEL STAIGERS

*Our Lady of Mercy Parish, Dayton, Ohio*

*Children's Masses and Children's Liturgy of the Word have become commonplace in many parishes. This article develops a theology of preaching to children based on a full understanding of revelation and grace. The author questions the content and style of preaching to children that has emerged since Vatican II and offers practical advice for preachers, teachers, catechists, and liturgical planners.*

It is First Friday in your typical Catholic parish with your typical Catholic school. Grades one through eight will be present at the regularly scheduled morning Mass. The fourth grade has planned the music and the Liturgy of the Word this week.

The guitar begins to play, the primary students begin to sing, the older students mouth the words, and the procession with every student who has any part in the Mass enters. At the Liturgy of the Word a well-prepared student rushes to the pulpit and, with an unexpected nervousness, reads the text with a task orientation to reach that final "The Word of the Lord."

After the Responsorial Psalm and Gospel Acclamation, the pastor moves to the center aisle to read a paraphrased version of the Gospel text out of a soft-covered booklet pressed into his hand just before Mass with the whispered directive, "We're using this today." He reads with great feeling the parable of the vineyard workers who are hired at different times of the day but all receive the same pay. At the end of the proclamation he reverently announces, "The Gospel of the Lord."

The pastor is a well-respected priest in the parish. He is pastorally sensitive and a good administrator and firmly believes that it is around the Eucharistic table that the church finds its life. The pastor visits the lunchroom of the school at least weekly and talks and eats with the children of this

school community. In short, he has good rapport with them, and they like him.

Because the fourth graders prepared the liturgy, the pastor invites them to sit on the steps of the sanctuary. And then, with a sort of lunchroom candor, he moves further down the aisle for the homily and begins asking the students questions. He asks about their lives; gives some good, solid references to their world; tells a story that makes them laugh; refers to the workers in the vineyard of the Gospel; and concludes by saying that even if we are picked last for the kickball team, Jesus thinks we're first string.

In less than four minutes he is finished, relieved that he kept their attention and satisfied that the teachers will not be upset with him back in the classroom for getting the kids "too worked up at Mass." Relieved, all continue on with the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the liturgy preparation seemingly successful.

## **LITURGICAL PREACHING: PREACHING GRACE AT ITS BEST**

The Church has been in a homiletical transition for a number of years. The Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of 1963 emphatically reminds us that the homily is a liturgical act and an integral part of the liturgy:

By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year. The homily, therefore, is part of the liturgy itself. (Flannery, 1987, #52)

In addition to a renewed appreciation that preaching is a liturgical act, there is also a rekindled emphasis on an articulation of our theologies of grace and revelation in the act of preaching. Particularly, preachers are working diligently to locate God's presence in the depths of human experience in order to articulate how God's taking on flesh in Jesus Christ affects God's relation with all of humanity. Both practitioners and technicians in preaching refer to this preaching task as "naming grace," following upon Mary Catherine Hilbert's (1997) book by the same title in which she states that, "preachers listen with attentiveness to human experience because they are convinced that revelation is located in human history" (p. 49).

With a renewed understanding of the importance of preaching, a clearer development of the role of preaching to children is necessary. This essay will detail the current problems of preaching to children and discuss a theology of preaching in the context of Word and Sacrament, including exegesis of the community and assembly.

The current dilemma of preaching to children does have an analogous quandary with our preaching to adults. What is preaching supposed to do? This question demands further analysis for both adults and children. However, the issue of preaching to children needs more attention because very often what we call preaching is not preaching at all, at least not in the liturgical sense. "The very meaning and function of the homily is determined by its relation to the liturgical action of which it is a part" (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1982, #42). For the purposes of this treatment, liturgical preaching may find its context in the celebration of the Eucharist and the celebration of God's Word.

It may sound harsh to state that our preaching leaves much to be desired, but the issue itself is too important to continue the practice of preaching to the young in such a way that is neither kerygmatic nor truly respectful of them as members of the assembly. We need to take children as seriously as Jesus did: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs" (Mk 10:15).

The case presented at the beginning of this essay is not an extreme case. In a general way it is filled with the attitudes and practices of well-meaning, faithful people. And, frankly, it works. I would like to press some of the attitudes present and ask, "Can we do more; can it work better?" I believe that the answer is a resounding yes.

## **PREACH DEEPLY, NOT SUPERFICIALLY**

Some of these well-meaning, faithful people may not be conscious of societal attitudes which clearly affect the endeavor of preaching. In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman (1984) cites a number of preaching types which have direct bearing on the Church's preaching as well as attitudes about preaching.

Citing television preacher "Reverend Terry," who has an energetic, folksy style of preaching modeled on early Milton Berle, Postman observes that when the audience is shown, it is almost always laughing, making this audience difficult to distinguish from one at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. The preacher's message relates how to get closer to Jesus and, at the same time, increase one's bank account. This makes Reverend Terry's followers extremely happy.

Postman (1984) cites another preacher in the "electric religion" who has the charm of a "cool-headed talk-show host" (p. 115). In short, these preachers have taken on the persona of entertainers. The gospel is often made too simple to hear and too effortless to live. "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether" (Postman, 1984, p. 121).

These observations challenge the entire endeavor of preaching. It would be hard to deny the power and importance of these electronic media today. Few people would argue about the need to get the message out through means of television and radio. However, the question of liturgists continues to demand reflection: Is it worship? Is it not true that we need an assembly gathered in order for the actions to be liturgical? Since the homily is part of worship (Flannery, 1987), would it not also be true that an assembly must be gathered in order for the preaching to be homiletic and liturgical?

Preaching is a time-bound activity that has a sacramental dimension. For example, we can read the sermons of St. Augustine or Archbishop Fulton Sheen and be profoundly moved. We might even assert that there is something sacramental about these writings. However, it is only when people have gathered to hear the Word preached in a given moment that the Word is sacramental. Gathering is integral to sacramentality. These are serious questions and elements that need our continued reflection.

Maybe the temptation to be less than serious is more pertinent in our preaching to children than with any other audience. For example, one certainly need not condemn humor in the homily. We all need to laugh. But we also need to examine our intention of including humor. Is wit used simply to keep the people entertained? Is it only to get the folks' attention? Does the preacher allow a Gospel of soul-surrendering confrontation to do its job without diluting the passage of its stamina?

We cannot minimize the prophetic role of the homily in our preaching to children. To be prophetic is to be more than entertaining; it is to preach the message that both comforts and confronts.

Is it any wonder then that American pulpits, trying to please, have turned to a safe therapeutic personalism or an equally safe Barthian biblicism? Sermons have not exactly been prophetic lately. As a result, Christology has been shaped in fear; we preach Jesus as a therapist or as an orthodoxy, neither of which adds up to Lord and Savior in the full biblical sense of those terms. (Buttrick, 1988, p. 14)

Not only must the homily for children be more than entertainment, it must be theological. In the preached Word this does not simply mean knowing a theology of God; it means knowing the God of theology (Burkhardt, 1987). Preaching, by its nature, reveals the saving power of Christ. There is one goal of preaching: conversion. The "final purpose of all liturgical and Eucharistic formation must be a greater and greater conformity to the Gospel in the daily life of children" (Sacred Congregation, 1991, #15).

In the initial scenario, we cannot unequivocally say that the preacher did not desire conversion for his young listeners. In reality, his hope was probably an earnest venture for people to know Christ better. The problem came in that he had numerous ancillary worries that detracted from the power of his message.

In a treatment of preaching Christian doctrine, William Carl (1984) discusses the catechetical use of creeds in making faith understandable. Carl believes that there are basically three audiences in the Church today. The first is adults in the Church who are still children in the faith. The second is teenagers who are about ready to join the Church. And the third group are children of kindergarten and early elementary school age “who are occasionally or weekly subjected to the children’s sermon. Some are mercifully spared from this experience” (Carl, 1984, p. 84). In regard to the preacher, Carl maintains, “There is nothing more ridiculous than seeing a robed figure squatting on a stool, trying to be cute and clever on Sunday morning” (p. 85).

## **CHILDREN: NOT THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH, MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH**

Because of the Catholic understanding of Word and Sacrament’s intimate connection, some pertinent liturgical notes must be addressed. Eucharistic liturgical preparation must be formative for those involved. First, the attitude that children only really participate in the Liturgy of the Word does not give an apt presentation for what we do when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. Further, to teach, even in an implicit manner, that children only participate when it is their singular voice that can be heard, or solitary action that can be seen, divorces the unity of Word and Sacrament. Just as Word and Sacrament form a unity, so do all members of the gathered community. “All the forms of participation reach their high point in the Eucharistic communion” (Sacred Congregation, 1991, #22).

Often children are included in the entrance procession if they have a part in the liturgy. This practice may be challenged when we define what is meant by this part or role. But if we involve children in this manner we need to ask a foundational question: Have we emphasized the reality that the primary liturgical ministry is the assembly, and out of that come the particular ministries? This may challenge our practice of separating children from the assembly for their own Word service, especially if that service is less-than-liturgical.

In the *Directory for Masses with Children* (Sacred Congregation, 1991) it is presumed that the norm of children’s worship is with their parents and other family members. However, “the second paragraph of article 17 does permit separate Word liturgies for children—but only sometimes and not as a routine or weekly event” (Brooks-Leonard, 1992, p. 4).

Sometimes, moreover, if the place itself and the nature of the community permit, it will be appropriate to celebrate the liturgy of the Word, including a homily, with the children in a separate, but not too distant room. (Sacred Congregation, 1991, #22)

It may be surprising that the norm of worshiping and hearing the Word for children is within the adult assembly, but the *Directory for Masses with Children* consistently sees the value of integrating the children into a single assembly. "Motivation for religious participation will shift through the childhood years. It begins with the desire to be a valued part of the whole. To that is added gradually deeper spontaneous intellectual motivation" (Philibert, 1989, p. 178). With that stated, there are times when preaching specifically to children is wholly appropriate, as in the opening scenario. We do not diminish the importance of preaching to children solely on the basis that this preaching has been less than prophetic. Again, citing Carl:

But we cannot argue against children's sermons because some are bad. "God is dog spelled backwards, and both are faithful"; "Jesus is like a jumper cable—he charges you up" or because they only present little morals like "Be good to your sister"—mere cultural pabulum. By that line of reasoning, we would have to dispense with preaching as well, for not all Christian preaching is responsible or great. (1984, p. 84)

Carl also notes that the problem with children's sermons is that they say to children implicitly, "You don't really belong here, so we are going to set aside this special time for you, and then you can leave" (p. 85).

There is a clear, consistent value maintained in the children's participation with adults. This learning by immersion in the worship of the Church should always "be directed to the child's active, conscious, and authentic preparation" (Sacred Congregation, 1991, #12).

Further, children's liturgy celebrated on days other than Sunday should always prepare and lead children to celebrate with the entire community on Sunday. "These Eucharistic celebrations must lead children toward the celebration of Mass with adults, especially the Masses at which the Christian community must come together on Sundays" (Sacred Congregation, 1991, #21).

## FROM CATECHESIS TO MYSTAGOGY

There is a tendency to view liturgy as a primarily didactic tool for children's formation in the faith. Catherine Dooley (1992), in her citation of Gilbert Ostdiek, says that there are two forms of liturgical catechesis: catechesis through liturgy and catechesis for liturgy. Catechesis through liturgy allows the liturgical rites and symbols to speak for themselves in a multitude of ways. Catechesis for the liturgy forms people in preparation to celebrate. "The liturgical gathering is not primarily an educational assembly (but) have gathered to be formed for Christian witness in the world" (National Conference, 1982, #43).

Catechesis, in the best sense of the term, is "based on scripture, tradition,

liturgy, and on the teaching authority and life of the church" (Dooley, 1989, p. 61). From this description it is evident that catechesis will take place, not only for children but for all assembled, whenever the worship of the church is celebrated. The distinction that needs to be made here is whether preaching, which is bound to have catechetical implications, is through the liturgy or for the liturgy.

The articulation of this same principle is found in *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*: "The homily is not so much on the Scriptures as from and through them" (National Conference, 1982, #50). Catechetics for the liturgy will leave us with information, while through the liturgy will open us to mystery.

We have a proclivity to do any number of things to assure that children understand the liturgy, rather than allowing them to experience the liturgy. There is an obvious neglect of using the symbols of the liturgy with children. When is the last time you saw incense used at a liturgy with children present? As a result, children are confused by its use. How often do we bless and use water with children? Or oil? Or talk about posture and gesture?

We are moved—perhaps only subliminally—by the images that impinge on our vision. While children experience prelogical cognition, powerful images are able to exert lasting influence on the contours of numinosity in their religious life. Without having the capacity to be self-reflective about such matters, small children nonetheless can be powerfully moved by sacred space, ritual actions, religious icons, statues and vessels. (Philibert, 1989, p. 172)

Discussing these options raises the awareness from a liturgical standpoint and acknowledges that there is also a relationship to our preaching. Catechesis through the liturgy will use these actions, symbols, and texts as a foundation for solid mystagogical preaching. Thus, "the liturgy itself always exerts its own inherent power to instruct" (Philibert, 1989, p. 172.) To further make the point, "when theology is divorced from the kerygma, when teaching and learning doctrine becomes an end in itself, the catechetical task is perverted and the very mission of the church is threatened" (Marthaler, 1989, p. 68).

Though the scope of this article is not to deal with child psychology in any great depth, it is important to recognize the clear call in the *Directory for Masses with Children* to make adaptations in the liturgy. A basic understanding of child development is necessary to make these adaptations. Only then can one understand principles for liturgical adaptation, which is far more involved than "keeping the children's attention."

In his study of children, David Elkind has traced this development in faith by showing that children under the age of 11 are not able to understand abstract religious expressions. A five-year-old has a nebulous understanding of prayer, though by age seven prayers are usually petitions for concrete things. By age nine, prayer is understood by the child as a private conversa-



tion with God and is clearly connected with a particular belief system (Gorman, 1993).

These basic understandings of how children comprehend religious experience are crucial in knowing how to make liturgical adaptations, but also in knowing what symbolic language to use without making the liturgy a religious education classroom.

A second area that presents a challenge to us is that of worship for and with children. The publication of the Roman *Directory for Masses with Children* in 1973 provided for the adaptation of the rites and texts of the missal so that children might be able to enter more deeply into the celebration of the Eucharist. Unfortunately, we have not always given the direction and assistance needed by those who plan and lead liturgies with children. One often gets the impression that religious educators have taken over children's liturgies and are using them for catechetical purposes. Certainly there is nothing wrong with formation through the liturgy. However, the Mass is never to be reduced simply to a catechetical opportunity; it is worship. (Gregory, 1991)

This understanding will challenge our assumptions about what preaching and liturgy are supposed to do. Again, our worship and liturgy ought to be an experience. This will make moot the argument that the more senses we use in liturgy, the better a child will learn. This argument for an explicitly didactic liturgy has often been used to support handing out printed texts of readings, prayers, and reflections so that the children can understand. But this type of understanding is not what liturgy is about because it is divorced from the experience of praying together, which has levels deeper than cognitive understanding.

Instead, we need to give children credit for having the ability to understand, albeit on a different level than adults. In fact, in many ways, they are able to understand more than adults because they are more open to engagement. When children are fully engaged in play they lose all self-consciousness and are totally given over to the game in which they are engrossed. Our liturgical prayer can have that same potential for children. "I claim that children take away from ritual more than they are able to say" (Philibert, 1989, p. 173).

When children are immersed in the liturgy, their understanding goes beyond words. It is for this reason that the words used in worship must create the medium through which the imagination can encounter mystery. For example, preaching should use all of the human senses. Through word we create a world. The sounds in the Temple. The smell of the stable. What Golgotha looked like from a distance—and up close. The cry, "Jesus, have pity on me," and "Zacchaeus, come down!" The texture of the garment's hem between thumb and forefinger. Imaginative language is the key that unlocks a world that transforms.

## IMAGINATION, OUR DEEPEST KNOWING

For Karl Rahner, the heart is reached not through reason, but through imagination. This does not mean that faith is not reasonable, but rather, that reason does not always proceed from logical argument. Rahner (1967) explicated this point in his article "Priest and Poet."

This understanding of the imagination is important in our preaching, including the proclamation to children. Rahner states, "The highest possibilities are as yet but promises" (1967, p. 294). If this were not true, he says, our longings would already be fulfilled. "But because the end of all things is, according to the words of Scripture, already come upon us, our highest possibilities are not merely empty postulates and abstract ideals" (Rahner, 1967, p. 294).

To be able to communicate these ideals, Rahner proposes that the language of poetry be employed. He does not necessarily mean poetry in the sense of rhymed meter but rather religious poetry.

A homily always presents a theology, a christology, a pneumatology, an ecclesiology, a sacramentology, an anthropology and the litany continues. Merely because the form is different from that of academic presentation, it is nonetheless theology assertion through and through. (Melloh, 1991, p. 17)

The one who proclaims this metaphor is the preacher, and to this poet is entrusted the word that re-creates.

This word, because it is creative, is no lifeless word. It is not a piece of information that is sentimentally dug out as a thought of past deeds. No, "our word is more than a thought: it is thought become incarnate" (Rahner, 1967, p. 295). Liturgical preaching is not a static handbook recitation but, rather, a dynamic activity. It is a live, creative venture in which the Word brings about the life it proclaims. Preaching not only speaks of a relationship, preaching also evokes a relationship. In liturgical preaching, this is the relationship of the entire assembly, not a select few or a group that is "corralled" out of the entire assembly.

## CHILDREN'S MASS?

A word must be added here about the misunderstood articulation of "overhearing the Gospel." The *Directory for Masses with Children* clearly distinguishes between "masses with adults in which children also participate," and "masses with children in which only a few adults participate" (Sacred Congregation, 1991). The directory itself makes a clear case for doing congregational exegesis.

In fact, preaching ought to have a distinct character at a liturgy in which children are primarily present, such as at a school Mass. It must also be reit-

erated that even in this setting, the goal is to draw children toward the Sunday assembly, which will have its own unique preaching character.

Is it possible that the poetic word can bridge the span between these liturgical settings? I propose this precisely because of the misunderstanding about overhearing the gospel. Take the now-popular Christmas Eve Children's Liturgy, for example. I will not debate the liturgical question here about whether or not we should even celebrate such liturgies, but I will make observations about the preaching that takes place when these liturgies occur.

Fred Craddock's method of inductive preaching teaches us valuable lessons about the importance of making our hearers participants in the preaching act. Craddock has developed the idea of overhearing the Gospel as a way of engaging listeners to enter into a preaching message from various points of view (Craddock, 1978, 1979). Craddock's point is that the message takes on new power for the hearer when it is directed to one group but heard by another. So, when preaching to children is done effectively, the adult hearers are allowed to overhear the Gospel directed to children, but are included as hearers in the process. This type of preaching can never be gimmick-ridden or superficial, if it is to be effective.

Because of a misunderstanding about overhearing the Gospel we see a tendency to call the children up into the sanctuary, very often after acting out the Gospel Birth Narrative, and then the preacher proceeds to direct the entire message to the children. Parenthetically, with the new *Lectionary for Children* available for use, we realize our hope for more accurate Scripture readings and a book more substantial than what we see for bedtime stories. There is often a dialogue of questions, which is permissible when preaching to children (Sacred Congregation, 1991), but rarely a message that challenges the adults in the assembly.

It may not challenge the children because it is simply a reiteration of knowledge that they already possess, rather than an opening to mystery. If we insist on bringing children up front on a regular basis, we will eventually bring up the entire assembly in small group sessions in order to give each group a bit of knowledge, rather than opening the entire assembly to mystery. Carl (1984) concludes his thoughts of preaching to children by reiterating the thought of Horace Bushnell: "Bring them up so they do not know themselves to be anything but Christians" (p. 85).

Because liturgical preaching finds its dynamism in an assembly, overhearing the Gospel must involve the entire assembly. No person or persons are to be passive in the encounter with the Word of God.

A Christian community is not a passive place where individual believers assemble. Our gatherings are crucibles of faith and doubt, of courage and complacency. The mood and spirit of these groups encourage, or inhibit, the continual conversion required of those who follow Jesus. Christian communities support us on this journey of faith by linking our lives in a shared

response to God's blessings. The biblical blessing—God's ambition for a world transformed by justice and love—has traditionally been expressed in the metaphor of the kingdom of God. (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1992, p. 75)

Though the homily may have an orientation toward a specific group, the message must nonetheless be prophetic to the entire group. "The prophetic insight comes from the religious tradition that everyone holds in common, and the societal circumstances that are critiqued is the life setting of all" (Bergant, 1993, p. 783).

Further, "when we understand small groups primarily as sanctuaries from the difficulties of public life, we distort the goal of community and underestimate its power" (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1992, p. 56). Overhearing the Gospel neglects no one in the assembly, but is a weaving of the message on many levels. Obviously, this takes significant preparation to tackle the task of preaching when children are present in any liturgical situation. Preaching so that the Gospel can be overheard can lead the preacher, at least subconsciously, to believe this task to be easy, and so loses the potential power of conversion by a shallow understanding of overhearing the gospel.

## WORDS THAT CONNECT

So we are brought back to the question, does the poetic word have the potential to speak to all? Rahner (1967) would say yes. These words are what he calls primordial words (*Urworte*). "We are not speaking here of worn-out words which are preserved, impaled like dead butterflies, in the showcases of dictionaries" (p. 296). Rather, Rahner means living words that cannot be defined. However, these words can be experienced. These living, poetic, primordial words "always whisper something about everything" (p. 296).

Our tendency in preaching to children is to make words completely understandable to them, to reduce words to "even if we are picked last for the kickball team, Jesus thinks we're first string." In the end, we have not preached on a child's level; we have simply made the Gospel childish.

In Rahner's (1967) understanding of primordial words, words must have an obscurity so that they might be grasped. Whenever a truly primordial word is spoken, there is no choice except for the word to be effective: God does what God says. For Rahner, *obscurity* is not synonymous with *abstract*. Rather, as with any good preaching, concrete images, examples, and words are used in powerful concentration to engage the imagination so that the interpretive act of conversion can take place at a multitude of levels.

In short, this recognizes the entire assembly as hearers of the word, capable of taking in whatever is revealed at each individual's own ability. In particular, this attitude explicitly gives children credit for being people of faith. That is the art of preaching, the craft of being a poet. The poetic preacher can be described by viewing the contrast of being a person who uses the didactic

words of a historical account of the Bible as compared with the person who uses the poetic language of the Biblical prophets.

Rahner's understanding of the primordial word is important for understanding the use of imagination in preaching. Primordial words are given to us; we do not construct them. Primordial words are the bearers of mystery. Rahner's homily entitled "Love Sees the World as a Parable," based on Luke 5:1-11, uses primordial words that bear mystery on a multitude of levels:

Something like this will have to happen in us too and in our lives, which will have to find their unity in love. The unity of a love that endures pettiness and remains open to greatness, a love that sees the world as a great parable, not a parable that is separate and apart, but a parable that is itself drawn into the great reality it represents. Our daily round of work is full of holy significance, a preparation for greatness. And it is in the midst of this daily round that what is holy happens.

It seems to me that in this small incident in the life of Jesus, a few verses, we can read the secrets of our hearts and come to understand that all the love of the heart of Christ is found in one event: we are called, we follow, and in our failure we are blessed. (Rahner, 1994, p. 247)

In primordial words theology rises out of anthropology, the parable of our existence in Christ. The Word is the bodiliness of [God's] grace (Rahner, 1967). So preaching can very well take the turn to point out God's presence in the profound depths of human experience. "Because there is preaching, for that reason there is theology: not vice versa" (Rahner, 1967, p. 304). Preaching is theological by its nature. In seeing the world as a parable, we use sound theology.

In our preaching we state our human finitude of knowing and loving. This awareness of finitude reveals the human person's dependence upon God (O'Donnell, 1989). In this sense, every human being longs to be redeemed, every human being yearns to face the ultimate questions of life with hope. Children have the right to that longing.

## **AUDIBLE SACRAMENT, VISIBLE WORD**

It is at this juncture that Word and Sacrament meet. Grace seeks visibility in our human response. "This follows at once from the fact that not only the grace of divinization, but even the acceptance of this gift must according to all theological sources be characterized as grace" (Rahner, 1982, p. 257). A person's most human acts point to the mysterious presence of God. From an ecclesiological point of view, human beings are most fully the Church when they are gathered in worship. It might also be stated that we are most the Church when we act in a way that is most consistently human, when we respond to God's self-communication.

It is this self-communication of God that Christians celebrate every time we gather. And so, in the opening case scenario, when all are relieved that the Liturgy of the Word has been successfully completed, there is a serious misunderstanding about its connection to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In either case, the celebration must be liturgical.

In the Catholic tradition, "The Eucharist is 'Word': because here the incarnate Logos of God is himself present in substance" (Rahner, 1982, p. 281). And again, "the Word reaches its supreme degree of actualization in the sacrament" (p. 280). So, even in those cases when it is deemed more appropriate to celebrate a Word Service with children, the fullest expression of the Word is celebrated in the context of the Eucharist.

This point ought to raise a question about dismissing children from Eucharistic assembly on Sundays who have reached catechetical age and have been Eucharistized. This clearly creates a disjunction in theological practice between Word and Sacrament because both open to an understanding of the other.

Some would argue that when the preacher is one different from presider, there is the same effect of disjunction. The *Directory for Masses with Children* makes clear that an adult may speak to the children after the Gospel, "especially if the priest finds it difficult to adapt himself to the mentality of the children" (Sacred Congregation, 1991, #24). The pastoral issue here is that the Word be heard by the children. Maybe we need to see the Word itself as having a more preeminent unifying effect than the presider of the liturgy, thus alleviating a strong concern about whether or not the presider need necessarily be the preacher. The Word must be heard. That is the primary principle of the unity between Word and Sacrament.

Rahner consistently points out in his writing that the human being must question in order to be human. The art of preaching is to ask the right questions. This is particularly true in our preaching to children because they are so open to the ultimate questions. They are so open to mystery.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREACHING TO CHILDREN

- Presume that you are preaching to people of faith.
- The goal of preaching is enchantment, not entertainment.
- Do not speak in a condescending, patronizing manner.
- Theological imagination always wins out over didactic, tedious presentation.
- Form preachers, both ordained and nonordained, who can connect the Scriptures with the lives of the children.
- Preach in a way that leads hearers to the Sunday assembly.
- Preaching, in every setting, should engage worshipers into a single assembly.
- Read *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* and *Directory for Masses With Children*.
- Preach grace!

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*Father Del Staigers is pastor of Our Lady of Mercy parish, Dayton. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rev. Del Staigers, Our Lady of Mercy Church, 220 W. Siebenthaler Ave., Dayton, OH 45405-2240.*

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