

FIRE IN THE MARROW OF THE BONES: THE MYSTICISM OF THE HOMILETIC ENCOUNTER

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This past Sunday in our local Catholic parish, after communion, our young priest walked down the stairs to the front aisle and knelt on one knee, waiting. At that signal, the four year old girl in front of me popped her blond head up from her coloring page, hopped out of the pew and raced over to him. Like a swarming of bees from a hive, a dozen of the under-five-set burst forth in the same way. From behind us, three boys with curly black hair chased each other up the aisle to stop before Fr. Christian for his blessing. Bouncing up and down, the youngest of the brothers, almost two, stood still long enough for the priestly hand to rest on his head. Then he raced back to his mom beaming, doubly blessed, holding up a giant-sized marshmallow in his clenched right hand. We as the over-five-set watched. If the congregation had a “Joy Meter,” the needle would have swung far to the right.

Simple joy can come from marshmallows. Communal joy comes from sharing in the enthusiasm of little children. Joy arises from the closing song as we head together to the parish hall for doughnuts.

The Joy of the Gospel for a Forlorn World

At our small parish in rural southwest Michigan, joy is needed. Like many Midwestern rural towns, wealth has passed us by. The future, job possibilities, and community growth look bleak. The joy of the gospel can be hard to come by; in reading that “Joy Meter,” the needle struggles to move away from “Forlorn” (sin, sorrow, despair, hollowness, loneliness) on the left. The question of how to connect a scripturally faithful message with this rural contemporary assembly is an imperative one. How can we help them to find God?

In my prayer class with undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame, joy is also needed. By contrast to the rural parish over the state border where I worship, in the Indiana location where I teach, wealth has certainly not passed us by. The future and job possibilities look rosy. Yet anxiety, pressure, and personal stress make the joy of the gospel hard to come by. There is no quiet. There is no time for reflection. There is no peace. There is much noise in our over-communicated world, especially for those who are young. The question of how to connect a scripturally faithful message with this super-buzzed young audience is a vital one. How can we create spaces for God to find them?

Historically, the practice of preaching has had to adapt in eras when communication modes have shifted. Sociologists suggest that we are in one of those times.² As we look at emerging issues in the field of homiletics, we have many more questions at this juncture in history than we have definitive answers. This is especially true in how we are to conduct worship in order to impact the world in which we live. We could ask, in today’s liturgy, do we need to crank up the volume to be heard? Do we need superficial gimmicks, better pop culture references, cleverer homiletic performance, and more creative social media usage, to become

¹ Originally written for the Academy of Homiletics 2017 annual conference.

² Bellinger, Karla J., *Connecting Pulpit and Pew: Breaking Open the Conversation about Catholic Preaching* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), chapter 4, “Surrounded by the Greats of History.”

more relevant? As traditional religious structures are being questioned in our rapidly changing historical situation, where is access to God to be found? As in all eras when communicative modes shift, we walk as if in a dark night in a dense woods where the path is not at all clear. How and where will the world into which we are living, find God? We do not know.

Thus we pray for discernment and grasp for direction from the One who is illimitable Mystery. As we reach for that inspiration and at the same time dig into the context within which we preach, we can pare the broader connectivity question down to this central question: rather than becoming like “everyone else,” what do we have to offer as a Christian faith that is distinct, unique and unrepeatable? As we begin to articulate an answer to that query, we will be better equipped to bring the joy of the Gospel to this unsettled world. This paper explores that question, in the hopes of opening a rich ecumenical conversation. My own contribution comes from the Roman Catholic strain of Christianity within which I have spent most of my adult life.

A Hymnody to Help Homiletics

The documents of the Second Vatican Council are clear in their intent to revitalize the Sunday homily: it is required to be in the liturgy and is to be scripturally founded.³ In the years following the Second Vatican Council, lacking a homiletic of its own, the discipline of Catholic homiletics largely took its lead from mainline Protestant homileticians. To this day, many texts used in Catholic seminary classrooms are either mainline Protestant texts or Catholic tomes that rely heavily on mainline Protestant resources.

Fifty years later, I would ask this: could the field of homiletics benefit from going the other way? For our experientially-centered, over-busy culture, are there strains and refrains within Catholicism that could strengthen and enrich both the mainline Protestant and the Catholic homiletic? Is there a hymnody that could fortify the homiletic conversation, especially the conversation about worship? Could a long-running sacramental tradition offer an iconic way forward when the window into the future looks dark? If so, those questions take us back to that essential question: what do we have to offer as a Christian faith that is distinct, unique and unrepeatable?

Unlike in other Christian denominations, in the Catholic tradition, the purpose of liturgy and the homily as integral to that liturgy, are not (so much) up for grabs. From church documents, the overarching purpose of liturgy is to evoke an encounter with the living God.⁴ Upon that belief about liturgy builds an overarching theology of preaching: the purpose of the liturgical homily is to bring the faithful into an encounter with the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The fruit of that encounter (both individual and communal) is an ongoing divine-human relationship that leads to a life of discipleship and service. How, then, could a focus on encounter further the way that we as Christians of many faiths connect with the age in which we

³ Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, 20. For a rich history of the development of the homily in the Second Vatican Council, see Stephen DeLeers excellent analysis in *Written Text Becomes Living Word: The Vision and Practice of Sunday Preaching* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), chapter one, “Repairing the ‘Accidents of History’: Roman Catholic Restoration and Embrace of the Sunday Homily.”

⁴ The theme of John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, is the encounter with the living Christ. He says that this presence should be a theme of constant preaching by the Church (#12). His thought is carefully summarized in the letter of the Liturgical Commission found at http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01031997_p-32_en.html.

live? To unpack that question, we turn to one who has been one of the most successful “connectors” in the world of faith in the 21st century.

The Core of Encounter

Pope Francis is unswerving in his constant response to the spiritual hungers of our time. In 2013, he said to a group of children being confirmed, “The most important thing that can happen to a person is to encounter Jesus, who loves us, who has saved us, and who gave his life for us.”⁵ The sentiment “meet Jesus” may seem simplistic. “Come to Jesus” sounds unsophisticated, naïve amidst a plethora of more clever messages. Yet Pope Francis suggests that joy foundationally arises from an encounter with Jesus Christ. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he says,

The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept this offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is consistently born anew.⁶

If we are looking for the joy of the Gospel founded upon an encounter with Jesus Christ, what does “encounter” mean? Rather than dictionary-ily defining the word as “bumping into,” “a chance meeting,” and “stumble upon,”⁷ let us take a few moments to savor and unpack the rich tradition out of which Pope Francis uses that word.

To be clear, coming from an ancient liturgical and sacramental tradition, Pope Francis is not talking about “encounter” as a Billy-Graham-esque movement of the will toward a decision-for-Christ-making altar call. Theologically, that movement of the will toward decision is animated by the underlying bubbling of the Holy Spirit.⁸ “Something” happens within us that inspires transformation. As a result of that graced inner experience, there is a rousing in the mind, as in “I get it!” There is an “aha!” in the imagination, as in “I can see it!” There is a fire stirring in our hearts, as in “We can feel it!” Then there is a movement of the communal will as in “Yes! We want it!” The grace of God does “it.” We do the responding.

How do we know what “it” is?

The experience of the graced moment of encounter, that whisper of God, defies conceptualization. When we try to describe that transcendence, it can tie our tongues in knots. Ramshaw says that “Human speech is always straining to say new things, to speak of realities that escape our current labels and reach beyond purely personal expression.”⁹ Where do we find words for this mysterious movement of God? In spite of the difficulty to say what we burn to say, all through the centuries, those who have “seen” and “felt” and “known” God have bent and molded language to try to describe that enlivening moment. As we search for words to speak

⁵ Pope Francis, “Homily for the First Sunday of Advent,” December 1, 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20131201_parrocchia-san-cirillo-alessandrino.html

⁶ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (Evangelii Gaudium)*, 24 November 2014, #1, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

⁷ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encounter>

⁸ Karla Bellinger, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds: The Holy Spirit and Christian Preaching” (paper presented for the Word and Worship Seminar, North American Academy of Liturgy (NAAL), Houston, TX, January, 2016). The central premise of the paper is how the graced agency of the Holy Spirit is often overlooked in homiletic discourse.

⁹ Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language* (OSL Publications Akron, OH, 2000), xi.

about encounter, we turn to the vocabulary of the mystics. For encounter, in the Christian sense, is a mystical term.

Encounter and the Scriptures

There have been mystical elements impassioning Judaism and Christianity since their inception. All through the Bible, though we only handle the printed words and stories that are redacted from earlier oral traditions, the experience of divine encounter is foundational to our recorded scriptures. What God does and how the people respond to his initiative give us traces of the divine-human interplay: The radiance that shines on Moses' face,¹⁰ Jeremiah who thunders about the fire in his bone marrow,¹¹ Elijah who looks for God in the fire and the windstorm and hears him in the blowing, the whisper, the still small voice,¹² the child Samuel who hearkens to someone who calls his name.¹³ We know little about the ancients' experience, but for centuries, the faithful have read these accounts and been touched by God.

Jesus speaks and fishermen drop their nets. The Carpenter from Nazareth gazes with love upon a tax-collector and Matthew's life path changes. Two disciples headed to Emmaus find their hearts burning within them. We read and hear of the results, the reverberations of an encounter. What internally happened at the precise moment of encounter in those transformative experiences? That we do not see.

How does mysticism flow through Scripture? In the sacramentality of biblical history, the agency of God is seen through the events of the Israelites' lives. That mystic moment, that heightened inner awareness, that stirring that undergirds the recorded response, remains enigmatic, yet its presence is a consistent thread in the Bible. With our analytical minds, we could easily overlook those experiences and remain at a distance in the safety of historical-critical exegesis. Yet the very essence of immanence is expressed in Psalm 139: "You know when I sit and when I rise." Our orientation to boundless mystery is sung in Psalm 148: Let all praise the name of the Lord, for his name is high above all others, and his majesty above earth and heaven" (NEB).

The Scriptural tradition is vital to Christian mysticism. Countless generations have experienced a mystical encounter, an immediate consciousness of the presence of God, through praying with and reflecting on Scripture. This immediacy, this here-and-now, is central to the pathway upon which we as a faith have historically accessed God:¹⁴

Christian modes of preparing for the direct experience of the presence of God were tied to particular ascetical practices, sacramental rituals, and forms of prayer; but they also were based on the spiritual values, patterns of life, and paradigmatic figures revealed in the scripture and explained by the fathers. The incorporated experience and inherited language that guided the believer toward the divine encounter were fundamentally scriptural – it was through the assimilation of the word of God within the worshipping community that the mystical life was made possible... The early Christian mystics of East and West did not normally use their personal experience of God as the subject for their

¹⁰ Exodus 34:29-35

¹¹ Jeremiah 20:7.

¹² 1 Kings 19:11-13.

¹³ 1 Samuel 3

¹⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1991),

teaching, the way Teresa of Avila and others later would, but sought to penetrate the mystical depths of the Bible to find the place where the meeting between God and humanity is realized.¹⁵

As a complement to (and decidedly not in opposition to) the scripturally exegetical focus of modern homiletics, an understanding of the mystics and the great spiritual writers of two millennia has the potential to advance a contemplative homiletic within contemporary worship. For that to happen, we look to mystical theology.

Interdependence of religious experience and theological understanding

Until the present age, mysticism has always arisen out of a faith community.¹⁶ To view mysticism in its context, the experience of God arose out of a particular belief system and through the mediation of others. Even the fathers and mothers of the desert in fourth century monasticism dwelt within a theological community, albeit sometimes at great distances in time and geography.

Why does this matter? In the last hundred years, scholars have written of mysticism as an experience that stands by itself. The theology of mysticism has been belittled as only secondary analysis, an intellectual speculation that follows the experience in time, as “though a shell or covering that can be peeled off to reveal the ‘real’ thing.”¹⁷ But McGinn suggests for the first nineteen hundred years of Christianity that a mystic was a Christian first and a mystic second. Mystical theology¹⁸ and mystical experience are highly interdependent. They weave together both as a theology and as a religious experience that arises out of a belief system. The understanding that the God of the Universe can be known, loved, and accessed impacts how the Divine is experienced. It is the belief system which prepares for that peak unitive encounter, as well as the mode through which the fruits of that encounter are communicated. “Human consciousness in its total activity is always mediated both by the subject’s previous history and by the mediations necessarily found in all thought and speech.”¹⁹ Thus mysticism is a way of life that flows from theological belief to God-experience and back again.

Thus if we are looking for encounter in our Christian worship and our preaching within that worship, then we also have to examine our theology of encounter, both expressed and unexpressed. A heightened awareness of the Divine rarely occurs in a vacuum.

If the theology and articulation of the experiential elements of Christianity are quashed out of trepidation about pietism and an overemphasis on personal piety, then theologically, those experiential elements may fade from both communal worship and personal life. A denominational identity may state about religious experience, “that’s just not *us*...” Intellectual arrogance may justify that mindset. That may lead to a shying away from or refusal to mention

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ McGinn, xvi. The encounter with Christ is mediated through the preaching of the gospel message, as well as personal prayer, the liturgical/ worship life of the church, the bonds of the friendship of the community, and the sacramentality of creation.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁸ Vladimir Lossky uses the term “mystical theology” to describe “the apophatic way” whose object is the absolutely incomprehensible God. See *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1976), p. 28. For the sake of this paper, we are using McGinn’s broader sense of the term, as theology in the understanding of the mystical experience as well as the belief system undergirding and arising from, mystical experience.

¹⁹ McGinn, xx.

mystical encounter with God and attentiveness to Presence. If, in church culture, the overarching metanarrative of the agency of God acting in history and in individual life moves from an explanation point to a silent question mark, then a solely intellectual understanding of faith can creep in. The head predominates. The heart grows stiff. Where there is little expectation that the Holy Spirit will show up, where fervor is unwelcome, where religious zeal is deemed dangerous, where the Supernatural is to stay within human-imposed guidelines, there worship and prayer can also grow stiff. Founded on a theology that distances or remains aloof from sacramentality and encounter, attentiveness to the experience of God's interaction fades into the air like the early morning mist off of a river. When mystical theology evaporates, mystical experience may as well.

On the other hand, if the theology of the experience of God is a belief system in which divine encounter is treasured and named, both the head and the heart proceed with an expectation of divine Presence and interaction. As a result of graced inner experience, there is a stirring of the mind, a realignment of the heart, and a sense of the Holy Spirit moving within the community. Does this encounter still happen in our day and age? Pope Francis describes one such moment on the eve of his acceptance of the papacy:

When Scalfari asked the Holy Father if he had ever had a mystical experience, Pope Francis replied that he “rarely” has. However, he shared that one such experience did take place during the conclave, shortly before he accepted his election as pope.

“Before the acceptance, I asked to be able to retire for some minutes in the room next to that with the balcony on the square,” he said. “My head was completely empty, and a great anxiety invaded me.”

“To make it pass and to relax, I closed my eyes and every thought disappeared, also that of refusing to accept the charge, as, after all, the liturgical procedure consents,” he said.

Pope Francis shared that, once he closed his eyes, he did not feel any more “anxiety or emotion,” but that, at “a certain point, a great light invaded me; it lasted for a second, but it seemed really long.”

“Then the light dissipated, and I stood straight up and headed to the room where the cardinals were waiting for me and the table on which rested the act of acceptance,” he said. “I signed it ... and then on the balcony came the ‘*Habemus Papam!*’”²⁰

Does this encounter still happen in our day and age? Our personal answer to that question influences our own mystical theology. What we believe about mystical experience oozes (sometimes implicitly and sometimes not) and leaks into our preaching. That which we do *not* say over the course of many years forms a congregation (and a denomination) as fully as what we *do* say. The images and stories and applications that we select for (and against) affect

²⁰ National Catholic Reporter, “Pope Reveals Mystical Experience,” <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-reveals-mystical-experience-in-major-new-interview>, October 1, 2013. In the writings of the mystics, there is continual caution about equating the heightened awareness of God in knowing and loving that arises with mystical experience, with the dramatic and spectacular in visions, locutions, and other external manifestations of the supernatural. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila are emphatic in their denunciation of a pursuit of ostentation—that is *not* what mysticism is all about.

whether our preaching fires a transformational fervor.²¹ When there is no “Who” of the Paschal Mystery explicitly expressed: no Agent expected to bring us from darkness to light, no One awaited to lead us from despair to hope, and no Comforter anticipated who transforms our sorrow to joy, then we are theologically left trying to make that leap on our own. If we can do it on our own, who needs grace? Who needs Jesus Christ? What good is Christianity?

These are precisely the questions of our age. Many “nones” believe in God. They have less use for institutional religion.²² Who needs the Christian religion when we can be “spiritual” without belief and without community?

How do we reverse that trend? How do we prepare for an encounter with the living God within the Christian tradition? For the field of homiletics, what does it mean to “preach for encounter?”²³

Preaching for Encounter

My own field of study has been in the connection of the Sunday homily with young people. From studying high school youth and working with young adults, there is a common thread: they ask for preaching to take them deeper.²⁴ In the face of that call, we turn inward and ask, “What is it that I/we consistently serve up in my/our preaching?” If we are offering a blessing to preschoolers, they may light up with joy when we offer them marshmallows. But to feed the hungers of our age, we need the fire of the Spirit. In liturgy that “goes deeper,” “fluffy” fails. “Superficial” does not satisfy. Christian worship, and the sermon/homily as integral to that worship, is to be a meeting place with God where the Spirit is ignited in the marrow of our bones:

Christian worship is, therefore, a “doorway” to the sacred, the “link” between God and humanity. In other words, Christian worship is “sacramental”. It mediates encounter between the baptized and their God through the risen One, Jesus the Lord.... Every act of worship, every element of the worship act [including the preaching act], is sacramental, symbolic of and mediating God’s favor and our response.²⁵

As we turn to the mystics for insight into “going deeper,” for a spark to kindle encounter, we look at both the apophatic and the kataphatic mystical traditions. We look both at the sense of the silence/beyondness of God and the revelation/immanence of God as fuel for homiletic pondering.

The Dark Night

In our preaching practice, we may assert with glib confidence the Good News that we know about God: God loves us; God saves us; God wants to be together with us in heaven, etc. Yet for those in the culture in which we live, where life rumbles with uncertainty and authority is questioned, pat answers do not taste like depth and may not smell of intellectual honesty. They may ask of us, “Who says?” and “How do *you* know?”

²¹ Lori Carrell, *Preaching that Matters: Reflective Practices for Transforming Sermons* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2013), chapter 3, says that very, very few sermons are transformational rather than informational, p. 51.

²² Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise” <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

²³ In the Marten Program in Homiletics and Liturgics, Fr. Michael Connors and I have been creating a one year curriculum for the ongoing formation of Catholic clergy entitled “Preaching for Encounter,” thus this question has evoked many conversations.

²⁴ Bellinger, *Connecting Pulpit and Pew*, 90-91.

²⁵ Quinn, Frank C. O.P., *In the Company of Preachers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 9.

In Christian theology, the God of the universe is more unknown than known. If we do not acknowledge this underlying agnosticism, we are being dishonest. With carefully chosen vocabulary, we can articulate the unknown dimensions of the Mystery whom we call God:

On a dark night, Kindled in love with yearnings – oh, happy chance! –

I went forth without being observed, My house being now at rest.

In darkness and secure, By secret ladder, disguised- oh, happy chance!-

In darkness and in concealment, My house being now at rest.²⁶

For those who are frenzied, frazzled and confused, the apophatic Christian mystical tradition may be a resting place that can offer the experience of silence, blessed darkness and the nameless Presence whom we call God. As preachers, if a heightened awareness of God arises from our own dwelling within Scripture, allowing ourselves to sink into the incomprehensibility of the Incomprehensible and the tenderness of the Most Tender, then this mystical encounter may spur us to alter our style of delivery and modify our content: to slow down, to foster an understanding of how to use silence, to model quiet through voice and body language, and to exude peace as a preacher. Building from the apophatic tradition, we can prepare our people for the open spaces within which the Holy Spirit can move. God is thus revealed through that which is not said: in the silence, in the darkness, in the unknowing, as Pope Francis preaches:

“To enter into the mystery” means the ability to wonder, to contemplate; the ability to listen to the silence and to hear the tiny whisper amid great silence by which God speaks to us.”²⁷

Among the young people whom I teach to pray, when carefully introduced, they hunger to get quieter. They yearn to go deeper. They ache for room for reflection. For most, this is totally alien to their everyday experience. Even so, they are willing to be overcome, quietly and tenderly, but with unspeakable rapture, by an awareness of God’s grace taking hold of them.²⁸

What does this mean for a contemplative homiletic in today’s worship? Perhaps for the time-pressed and harried, our homiletic could move in a liturgical direction that looks more like retreat preaching. To be washed in the Dark Night, to enter into the Cloud of Unknowing, and to be filled with the unspeakable silence at the foot of the Cross, is to bring our people into Mystery. That encounter fires us with joy beyond words.

Plunging into the Mystery

Based on the earlier premise that mystical theology both precedes and follows mystical experience, an encounter with God does not arise in a vacuum, nor does it remain in isolation. What is unique to Christian faith is the expectation and the belief that the Holy Spirit, God with us, is actively at work in our lives and in our world. Even though God is Absolute Mystery, if that Mystery is at the same time Self-Communicator,²⁹ then we as preachers, in turn,

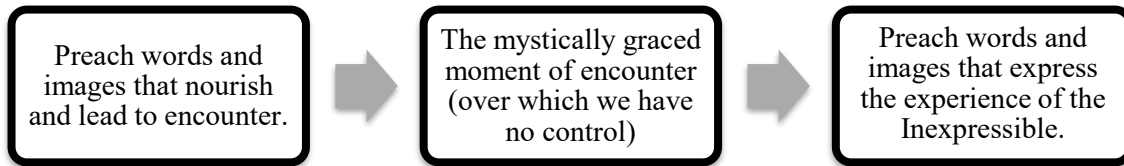
²⁶ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), 1.

²⁷ Pope Francis, “Homily for the Easter Vigil,” April 4, 2015, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/04/04/pope_at_easter_vigil_entering_the_mystery/1134633

²⁸ One of the most powerful and mystical experiences that has moved thousands of Catholic young people over the past twenty years has been to spend an hour on their knees in silence in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Why does this “work?” That is not clear. No matter how one feels about the theology of such a movement, the fruit that the experience has born in the lives of high school students is described by *them* as profound.

²⁹ Karl Rahner, S.J. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, Crossroad: NY, 1999, section IV, “Man as the Event of God’s Free and Forgiving Self-Communication,” can help the reader to dig more deeply into that thought.

communicate in words that enflame that mystically graced moment of encounter which precedes transformation. Then we also express the “aha!” experience of the Inexpressible after it happens.³⁰ Here’s a graphic of that process of kataphatic preaching:



Many of those who work with preaching students and clergy find a consistent difficulty in how to craft the language of the Good News, to express the experience of the Inexpressible. Definitive designations can definitely describe the dastardliness of our days. The warmth of God, the rescue of the Savior, the encircling of the Spirit—these too often come in re-warmed platitudes and tame cliché. Looking at the writings of the mystics, their masterpieces are often poetic in the ways by which they concentrate and shape language to express the movement of the Divine.

From the kataphatic tradition of mysticism, how do we prepare our people to receive the living God? We can give them words to articulate what they have already experienced, for the Holy Spirit is and has been at work in their lives. We can preach the Presence who moves deeply within. We can speak of heightened awareness. We can use the language of touch and inspiration and delight. Rather than dancing on the edge of Mystery, we cannot be afraid to name the Mystery, even when we hesitate to do so.

The prophet Jeremiah expresses that compunction to put words to the Mystery. Though he feels duped, he bemoans, “I will not mention him; I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in; I cannot endure it.”³¹ We can sanitize that seduction of God and name it “call”; we can tame the seizing of the Almighty and call our answer “response.” We can flatten hyperbole and tone down the boldness of the gospel, perhaps out of fear of the mockery that breeds mediocrity, yet as it was for Jeremiah, so it is for us. The Good News of Jesus Christ becomes like a fire burning in the marrow of our bones. You and I, those coals are to be ours. I may not personally have the indelible mark on Catholic ordination on my soul, but I can feel the burn marks on my heart, wounds of the loving God. How can we not become pyromaniacs for God? The fire in our heart—the fire within—the fire in our bones—how can we hold it in? How can we hold it in?

The writings of the mystics twist and turn language to describe the encounter with God. Oral communication, on the other hand, relies as much upon the spirituality embodied by the preacher as on the words that he or she crafts. The authenticity of the spirituality of the preacher matters for the effectiveness with which we engage our culture. If we do not first experience this Mystery at the center of our own lives, we risk becoming a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Our own holiness as preachers leaks into body posture, vocal cadence and tone, and choice of homiletical topic. Pope Francis alludes to this quality in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 149: “The Sunday readings will resonate in all their brilliance in the hearts of the faithful if they have first done so in the heart of their pastor.”

³⁰ Mystagogical preaching unpacks the experience of the Divine, most especially experience in sacramental and liturgical settings.

³¹ Jeremiah 20:7-9

The Spirit is at work within us as preachers, at work within our faith communities, and at work even in the messiness of the culture and the world in which we live. This experience of Christian faith, which has the potential to respond to the experience questions of our age, often does not. In the midst of the denuminization of the secular culture, there is a corresponding forgetfulness of the action of the Holy Spirit in sacred culture and thus in Christian preaching. I would like to suggest, to modify one of Rahner's most famous adages, that the preacher of the future will be a mystic, or he or she will not exist at all.³²

Invoking the Mystery

So where do we go with this? In discussions of Christian liturgy and worship, we can grow preoccupied with what we do to create a God-event, asking "What works?" and "What doesn't work?" This can create a closed circle of sterile self-questioning (and self-doubt) as though God is present only as an onlooker. If we perform the act of worship and at the same time we are preoccupied with the mechanics of performing it, that turning inward can stultify the delight in the God who is Nearness. In homiletics, we can lose the mystery dimension of what we are doing. We can get ensnared in the modes and means of preaching and lose our zeal for the One for whom and through whom we preach. "We must invoke the mystery of God, ponder it, live with it, learn to love it, so that, even though it remains a mystery, it becomes a reality in our life."³³

What does "preaching for encounter" look like? At this point I have more questions than answers. I am not looking for us in discussion to give ourselves a self-congratulatory pat on the back of "oh, sure, we already do this." Perhaps we do. Perhaps we only think that we do. I am not looking for outward finger pointing that says, "Oh, but the world in which we live is so hard on the gospel." Thank God for that—the world has always been hard on the Gospel—it means that we cannot give ourselves a "pass" but must turn that outward-pointing finger around to ask, "What are we *not* doing to connect the presence of God with this world in which we live?" (If we are already so good, why isn't the whole world converted?) Now is the time to go deeper. Quinn says, "The moment of preaching and celebration is always 'now.' 'Now' the mystery of God in Christ unfolds before us."³⁴ How do we preach that mystery "*now*?"

Coming back to the beginning: what is unique about the Christian faith? We have concerns about an overuse of the personal piety of "meet Jesus." But has veering away from an encounter with God served us well? Is our "worship" actually worship? The response to that question will manifest itself differently according to organization, but is there a common thread of the actualizing of the immediacy of God? Are we, with intentionality, preparing for that encounter? Are we communicating in our homiletics the expectation of that encounter? Are we giving our people words, vocabulary, and images with which to express the encounter which they may have already experienced?

From my own study of youth and how to connect with them in faith, they did not ask for more Facebook, more Twitter, and more "coolness" from the adults in their lives. They asked for

³² Bellinger, NAAL paper 2016, p. 7, with an adaptation of the saying of Karl Rahner, S.J.: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all," from *Theological Investigations* XX, 149. Rahner defines mysticism as a genuine experience of God emerging "from the very heart of our existence."

³³ Karl Rahner, S.J., *The Content of Faith*, "One Must Name the Mystery" (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 509.

³⁴ Quinn, 17.

depth. To help them to make it through adult life, they need more than the joy of marshmallows. The joy of the gospel arises from an encounter with Jesus Christ. To meet the spiritual needs of the current age, let us not sell them short.