

# **Feast of St. Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr; Thomistic Institute Conference- “Becoming a Better Preacher”**

## **I. Introduction**

A. I am delighted to welcome all of you, Bishop Foley and my brother priests to the Archdiocese of Baltimore for this importance conference on being and becoming a better preacher. It is a perilous thing to be a homilist at a conference on better preaching but I trust you will profit from this homily, via positiva vel negativa! In any event, I trust that these days of prayer, study, and reflection will bear the lasting and abundant fruit of the Gospel in your priestly ministry.

B. With your kind permission, I would like to reflect on the subject of better preaching through the lens of St. Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr, whose feast day we today happily celebrate.

## **II. Poverty: Physical and Spiritual**

A. All of us rightly associate St. Lawrence with the Church's love for the poor & suffering an ecclesial love already reflected in the Acts of the Apostles. In the 3rd century, as persecutions against Christians were raging, the Deacon Lawrence, to whom care of Rome's poor was entrusted, witnessed the martyrdom of Pope Sixtus II and his fellow deacons. Lawrence was then given time to collect the Church's treasures to hand them over the Roman authorities. Instead, he distributed the Church's goods to the poor and when asked for the Church's treasures, Lawrence presented to the Roman authorities the poor and needy as the real treasures of the Church. Four days later he was roasted on a gridiron - a torment he cheerfully accepted.

B. We too have been entrusted with the care of the poor. As promised, the poor are always with us. Just blocks from here some of America's poorest neighborhoods can be found. When I used to pass through Baltimore on the train, coming to & from Connecticut, I would look at the blighted neighborhoods and pray for those who lived in them. God decided, I suppose, to test the sincerity of my compassion for my ministry here brings me face to face with a depth of poverty hard to imagine. On a day such as this, I must ask myself if, like St. Lawrence, I am sharing the Church's treasure with the poor and suffering and if I regard those who are in abject need as the Church's treasure. Does the witness of Deacon Lawrence affect my witness to the Gospel? It's a question we can all ask ourselves for the poor are always with us and always they have a claim on the conscience of both the preacher & his audience.

C. As abject as the poverty is in many parts of our country, there is an even deadlier form of poverty afoot in our land, clearly identified by the soon-to-be canonized Blessed Mother Teresa. "The poverty in the West," she said, "is a different kind of poverty— it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God." When we preach to those who suffer from that spiritual poverty so characteristic of our militantly secular culture - we must also open up the Church's treasury of doctrine, ethics, and spirituality, such that the image of Christ takes shape in the hearts of those who hear us.

### **III. Sowing Generously**

A. One of the hallmarks of St. Lawrence's witness to the Gospel is his cheerful generosity. He was generous to the poor and needy and he was equally generous and cheerful in laying down his life. In spite of the torments he experienced, he never lost his sense of humor. Purportedly, as we know, he told his executioners, who were roasting him alive, that he was "done to a turn" - as if he were a marshmallow!

B. So too, we must be cheerful and generous in our preaching. Generosity in preaching, of course, does not mean wearing out our welcome. Spending time prayerfully preparing a well-thought-out homily is true generosity. Cheerfulness is also a hallmark of preaching - thankfully it does not require that we be stand-up comics (most of us would fail); rather, it means that we bring a spirit of joy to the

task of preaching, heeding well the warning of St. Teresa of Avila, “God deliver us from gloomy saints!”

C. In his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of sowing bountifully in order to reap bountifully, Today we apply these words readily to St. Lawrence, who cheerfully and generously gave of the Church’s goods to the poor and so won for them and for himself the joys of God’s Kingdom. But these words also apply, I think, to preaching. How does a preacher sow bountifully in order to reap bountifully? I answer that we sow bountifully in three ways: The first way is in our day-to-day pastoral charity. When we spend our days cheerfully serving the people we are privileged to serve, that will lend credibility to our words and inevitably be reflected in what we say. The second way is in our study of God’s Word and our prayerful contemplation of it. Here the Dominican motto, “contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere” applies... ‘to contemplate and to share with others the fruits of our contemplation.’ When we contemplate the living Word of God so as to encounter the face of Christ, then is the seed of God’s Word planted in our hearts – and that is the God-given seed that we scatter when we preach. If every priest or deacon who preaches engaged in *lectio divina*, the quality of preaching would improve exponentially. The third way we sow bountifully is in our own spirit of humble repentance. Pope St. John Paul II said in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* that people can tell when a priest has ceased to frequent the Sacrament of Penance. I think they can tell by the homilist’s demeanor. Only a repentant priest whose heart is broken, humble, and contrite will joyfully reflect the tender mercies that have dawned upon us. Just as the seed that has died will bring forth new life, so too the homilist who has died to self will bring forth the fruit of the Gospel.

## **IV. Conclusion**

A. Years ago, as a very young priest, I was asked to preach on a special occasion. I pulled every book off my shelves to prepare for this homily which I took through seven or eight drafts and which I actually practiced before a mirror (which by rights should have cracked). And I delivered my homily on that occasion with my best youthful enthusiasm, or at least that’s what I thought I had done.

B. A wise and good priest congratulated me on my performance. He told me I had

obviously worked hard on the homily and that I had tried to do justice to the importance of the occasion. "It was good, but you didn't have any skin in the game" he devastatingly observed. He wasn't asking me to be autobiographical or inappropriately self-revelatory; rather, he was challenging me to indicate in some way or another that what I was saying had resonated spiritually in my mind and heart, that I was engaged in the struggle for holiness just as much as I wanted my hearers to be. In a word, he was urging me to be that grain of wheat that dies.

C. St. Lawrence certainly had "skin in the game" - for he preached the Gospel by his love for the poor, his courage under torture by fire, and his unswerving love for Christ. Through his example and intercession, may we indeed become better preachers for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls. May God bless us and keep us always in his love.