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Who Are the “Strangers” Behind the Pulpit?

On any given Sunday, thousands of foreign-born priests are preaching from the pulpit for the American people. While an exact count is not possible, it is estimated that in 1999 about 7,600 foreign-born priests were serving in the United States (Hoge and Okure, 11). Each year there are approximately 380 to 400 new international priests who come to the United States to begin a new ministry. The number and presence of foreign-born priests in the United States is significant enough that the Bishops’ Committee on Migration began an investigation and published a book of recommendations in 1999 entitled, Guidelines for Receiving Pastoral Ministers in the United States.

Who are these “strangers” in our midst preaching Sunday after Sunday? The majority of these foreign-born priests come from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. According to one survey, only a small percentage of these new arrivals get adequate orientation (Hoge and Okure, 108). There are a few orientation programs around the country that help address the two most serious needs of the newly arrived priests, namely, problems with the English language and inadequate understanding of American culture. Often these orientation programs also cover practical and helpful topics, including bank accounts, shopping, telephones, social norms like tipping and table manners, gender rules, professional boundaries, and expectations of the laity in a parish setting. Noticeably, however, there is no program that focuses on preaching, which is an essential component of a priest’s role and ministry.

Preaching Across Cultures

Confronting the current situation of our local church and responding to the pastoral needs of the time, Catholic Theological Union (CTU) at Chicago has created a five-day intensive preaching program, entitled “Preaching Across Cultures.” The workshop is designed to help international clergy to improve their preaching sensitivities and skills for the American context. The basic thrust of this workshop focuses on four essential elements of good preaching: biblical, rhetorical, liturgical, and cultural. As such, four scholars are invited to provide two to three

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sessions of input from their respective expertise: vanThanh Nguyen (biblical); Britto Berchmans (rhetorical); Richard Fragomeni (liturgical); and Roger Schroeder (cultural).

I deal with the issues of advanced biblical exegesis for the purpose of preaching. For the Word of God to come alive in the hearts and minds of the American people, preachers must first learn the art of reading the biblical texts in their appropriate contexts. Only then can preachers re-contextualize the message for their audience today. Father Berchmans, who is a pastor in the Archdiocese of Chicago and also an expert in rhetoric, provides several key sessions dealing with the art of persuasion in communication. Father Richard Fragomeni, who is a professor of liturgy and preaching at CTU, deals with the issues of advanced liturgical preaching that takes three things into consideration: (1) to understand that the Lectionary is not the Bible; (2) to begin to appreciate alternative methods of interpreting Lectionary texts; and (3) to appreciate other sources of liturgical preaching, e.g. the prefaces, prayers, and specific aspects of feasts days. Finally, Father Schroeder, who is a Divine Word missionary and professor of intercultural studies and ministry at CTU, offers two sessions dealing with contextual and cultural analysis and how different styles of preaching translate across cultures. Professor Schroeder uses the image of “Entering Someone Else’s Garden” as an image of preaching within a new context. While knowing one’s own culture is definitely important, understanding the values, history, and worldview of the other is crucial for one’s cultural adjustment and for inculturating one’s preaching and ministry in general. Familiarity with the following issues is tremendously helpful when working in the U.S. context: gender roles and women in ministry, value of time, theology and ecclesiology, politics, ecumenism and interfaith relations, generational differences, just to name a few.

Realizing that storytelling is also an important element in good preaching, a professional storyteller assists the participants with how to use stories more effectively in preaching. There is also a session where participants are given an opportunity to watch short samples from a variety of preachers of different ethnic backgrounds who preached in different styles and contexts. After each sample, participants are encouraged to share and discuss their observations of the sample preaching through a series of guided questions.

Since this is a workshop on preaching, the program is designed in a way that would be practical and useful. Participants are asked to video-record one homily and have it evaluated by three parishioners before they arrive. In the first preaching practice session, participants are divided up into two groups of eight and are given an opportunity either to show their recorded videos or to preach it live. While some can preach their homilies live, others may choose to show their recorded homilies. After each homily, two faculty members, plus their peers, give helpful input and suggestions. Participants are given time to either revise their already preached homily or to prepare another homily (for example on the next Sunday’s readings) and then to preach it during the second preaching practice with another rotating faculty member present to give input and suggestions.

The preaching workshop also provides opportunities for spiritual enrichment and personal camaraderie. There are opportunities for everyone to come together to pray as a community every morning and evening and at Eucharistic celebrations, which are presided and preached by various faculty members.

An Orientation for “Strangers”

Since this is a “hands-on” workshop whereby participants must be actively in-
Recognizing the urgent needs of the U.S. church, CTU and especially the organizers of this project, are determined to respond to the needs of the time by offering this program again in the summer 2011. We hope to expand the program to include deacons and lay persons who might work in multicultural settings.

An Urgent Pastoral Need

I sincerely believe that “Preaching Across Cultures” is both timely and necessary. It is one appropriate response to an urgent pastoral need of our time. As the U.S. church increasingly becomes more a mission-receiving rather than mission-sending church, foreign-born priests will become an important part of the church scene, whether one likes it or not. The church as a whole needs to have a change of heart toward these “strangers” in our midst. While there are many challenges, for example the language barriers and different theologies, it is certainly an opportunity to embrace the extraordinary variety within our universal church. The U.S. church can be greatly enriched by these foreign priests if we welcome them and assist them with their cultural adjustment. This innovative preaching workshop therefore aptly serves as an essential dimension of cultural orientation for international priests, deacons, and those working in cross-cultural ministry as it helps them to become more effective preachers in the multicultural context of the United States.
References

