

Ecumenical and Interreligious Sensitivity in Preaching

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The section entitled “Speaking with Respect and Reverence for Others” (pp. 40-41) in *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* summarizes succinctly fifty years of Catholic thinking on our relationships with others. In this presentation I will elaborate on this thinking a little.

These days about twenty-five per cent of Catholics are in interfaith marriages. Some regularly or occasionally bring their spouse, children or other family members to the Sunday Eucharist. Other Catholics may invite a friend to come with them to mass. My impression is that most preachers do not really take the presence of ecumenical or interreligious guests into account.

In my lifetime there has been a major change in the relationship of the churches. When I was a boy in Philadelphia both Catholics and Protestants did not want their members to enter one another’s churches. We knew each other from the neighborhood and played sports together but we never met in church.

As we know, all this changed with the Second Vatican Council. The *Decree on Ecumenism*, the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on our relationship with Non-Christian Religions and the *Declaration on Religious Liberty* changed the situation at its root. Subsequent documents, some of which are listed in the appendix which follows, elaborate these documents further. I would recommend Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* in particular for its breadth and depth on our relationships with all our fellow Christians.

The changes after the Council were significant and have been long lasting. We now enter our friends’ churches and places of worship from time to time. We try to treat each other with mutual respect and love. We try to build better communities together. We serve the common good by combining our resources to aid those in need such as the homeless.

¹ I want to thank Fr. Dennis McManus and Dr. Anthony Cirelli for their contributions to this presentation.

Among Christians, we no longer compare our best to their worst. We search together for the truth. For example the ecumenical directory of 1993 notes that “text books and other aids should be carefully chosen: they should expound with fidelity the teaching of other Christians in history, theology and spirituality so as to permit honest and objective comparisons and to stimulate a further deepening in Catholic doctrine.” [#80]

We Catholics no longer embrace a ‘theology of return.’ Rather we believe that as all of us seek a deeper conversion to Christ we are coming or will come closer to one another. We believe that we are already joined together in a profound way in Baptism.

The implications of these changes are clear and rather straightforward.

- We say positive things about one another. We cite the good example that others show. Thus, for example, we notice the dedication of many Muslims to their daily prayers and seek to be more faithful to ours.
- We cite instances of interreligious cooperation in our vicinity.
- We note the good example of our fellow Christians in their practice of hospitality in their churches and in their service to the needy.
- We note, as does Blessed John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint*, the example of the many recent martyrs from the Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches. Their example of shedding blood for Christian faith transcends our differences.
- We notice the Gospel values of our Christian colleagues.
- When we choose to speak about another Christian church or another faith, we do our homework. For example, we look to the websites of other churches to find out how they speak about themselves. We cite their reputable authorities—as we expect they will in speaking of us.
- We avoid relying on media accounts as they are often driven by an emphasis on conflict rather than building peace.

We bring particular sensitivity to our relationships with the Jewish people. This has been a troubled relationship historically. We are now in a new era. I should note

that some younger Jews and Christians are beginning to take this positive relationship for granted. It needs to be worked at.

Vatican II has altered what we say about Jews and Judaism.

1. All who preach in a Catholic setting must read and understand the four major points of Vatican Council II's document, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4:
 - A. Jews are not collectively responsible for the death of Jesus;
 - B. God's covenant with the Jewish people remains valid;
 - C. Jews are not to be spoken of as abandoned or forsaken by God;
 - D. Christianity has no place for anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism.

2. **Both the Holy See and the USCCB have issued guidelines on preaching about Jews and Judaism.** Three documents officially address Catholic preaching on Jews and Judaism—*Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* [Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, 1982]; *God's Mercy Endures Forever* [USCCB, 1986]; and *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* [The Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2002]

3. **When preaching, avoid using antiquated, biased or casual terms to describe Jews,** as these give offense as words with a troubled historical past whose meanings are often connected to the denigration of Jews.

4. **In each homily, try to recover something of the Jewish context of New Testament readings** so that your listeners can understand how Christ fulfills – but does not destroy -- Judaism in his role as Messiah.

5. **Whenever preaching about Judaism, present it as a vibrant, diversely expressive religion** that holds great meaning today for its nearly 15 million followers worldwide.
6. **Avoid presenting a “supercessionist” view of Judaism;** viz., that Christianity has now become God’s favored religion, thereby leaving Judaism without any value.
7. **Promote an appreciation for what Judaism and Christianity hold in common:** the Old Testament, a spiritual heritage as children of Abraham, and a commitment to living out the two great commandments of love of God and neighbor.
8. **Be aware of and avoid any expression either of “anti-Semitism” –** which is the racist belief that Jews are ethnically inferior to others – **or “anti-Judaism”** -- which is the notion that Judaism is a religion without any value in comparison to Christianity.
9. **Preach about Judaism and its members mindful of the fact that Jesus was born, lived and died a Jew,** who brought forward in himself all that God promised from Abraham’s day.
10. **Homilies should avoid equating Israeli politics with the Jewish religion;** the two are quite distinct – the first coming from a largely secular government, the second from a very diversified religious community.

Some Virtues of the Preacher

In our preaching God calls us to practice the classic Christian virtues. We are to be **humble** like Jesus who humbled himself for our salvation. In humility we realize that we have a lot to learn about Christian living from our fellow Christians and about our common humanity from the members of other religions.

In our preaching we need **wisdom**. We need wisdom to know our own faith well. And we need wisdom in learning about the faith of others. We may need to attend some lectures, do some reading or even take a course about another faith tradition. Perhaps a parish could have occasional lectures given by neighboring ministers, rabbis and imams about their faith. [“When speaking of other Churches and ecclesial Communities, it is important to present their teaching correctly and honestly. Among those elements by which the Church itself is built up and given life, some — even many and very valuable ones — are to be found outside the visible limits of the Catholic Church.” *Ecumenical Directory*, #60]

We will never be able to preach with sensitivity about Christian communities or other religions without some personal experience. We have to get to know people. This requires the **patience** to invest some time in getting to know them. We get to know others by reaching out to them, listening to them, and thus building a relationship with them. When we get to know people we can come to understand their faith more deeply.

Knowledge is necessary and comes from study. Wisdom involves having some personal experience with the other.

Charity is the central virtue. We express charity toward others in our preaching. People are looking for charity lived out. The example of Pope Francis is affecting thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people. The preacher whose life embodies the love of neighbor is the effective preacher.

Conclusion

The professor or instructor in preaching must try, of course, to live out these virtues. Good example is the first requirement. We should seek, as much as possible, to live out the virtues we recommend to the students of preaching. The life of love for God and others is central as always.

Web Resources

Visit the **USCCB**'s resources at www.usccb.org and search for “*ecumenical and interreligious affairs.*” For each dialogue between the USCCB and our partners we have posted the resulting documents including several agreed statements. Sign up for our SEIA E- Monthly Newsletter at www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/seia-newsletter.cfm or bookmark our frequently updated *video page*: www.usccb.org/about/ecumenical-and-interreligious-affairs/videos.cfm

Important **Vatican documents** include:

- “*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism.*” (Pontifical Council on Christian Unity, 1993.) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/general-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19930325_directory_en.html
- “*Unitatis Redintegratio: Decree on Ecumenism*” (Second Vatican Council, 1964.) http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html
- “*Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.*” (Second Vatican Council, 1964.) http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

Both the **Holy See** and the **USCCB** have issued guidelines on preaching about Jews and Judaism. Three documents officially address this topic:

- “*Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1982.) www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html
- “*God’s Mercy Endures Forever*” (USCCB, 1986) <http://old.usccb.org/liturgy/godsmercy.shtml>
- “*The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*” (The Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2002.) www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html

CADEIO, or the Catholic Association of Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers, offers training and resources to pastors, deacons and lay people who are active in ecumenical or interreligious work in their diocese. Check out their website: www.cadeio.org