

The Reception of Preaching

How the Preaching Event Leads to the Advent of Unforeseen Meaning

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Today, the effectiveness of preaching can no longer be gauged solely by the eloquence or extent of preparation of the preacher. Every preacher must consider the crucial role the audience plays not only in the actual event of preaching but also in the composition of the homily.

In a way, both the preacher and the listener are recipients — the preacher, in the preparation and delivery of the homily; the listener, in the attempt to understand what was heard. To one familiar with scholastic philosophy and theology, this is but re-affirmation of the axiom: *quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*.

The act of composing a homily or a sermon is itself a reception that proceeds out of the horizon of questions from which the preacher intends to communicate meaningful answers. The listener, to whom preaching is directed, particularizes in his own situation what was presented by the preacher in a general way.

The retrieval of reception as a significant theological category helps us understand that it is not a mere passive acceptance, but the creative transformation, of what is received. Indeed, reception shapes, not only the way a preacher transmits the message, but also the *content* of preaching.

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During the 1992 General Chapter in Mexico, the late Fr. Damian Byrne, O.P. gave the brethren an interesting insight on preaching. He wrote:

I asked a brother who is a producer on a national TV network which of the Dominican students would he select for training in his field. He replied: 'Any one of them, as long as he is a good theologian. Anyone can learn the necessary techniques, but a religious who is not a good theologian has nothing to say.'¹

For Byrne, content is of utmost importance in the act of preaching. He then proposed to the brethren a model for preaching as he recalled the pioneering work of the Dominican missionaries of the New World:

*The story of the first missionaries in the New World underlines the need for scholarship, a collective approach, expert help, and witness. These four lessons can be taken from the consequences of the advent sermon of Antonio Montesino in 1511.*²

Byrne's allusion to Montesino was not arbitrary. The year 1992 marked the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America. Antonio Montesino³ figured prominently in its history of evangelization while Mexico served as the focal point of all missionary activities in the region. Byrne thought that Montesino was an excellent model of Dominican preaching because his sermon was derived from 1) prayer and assiduous study, 2) nurtured in community, 3) enriched by the insights and discoveries of other experts, and 4) reinforced or empowered by the witness of his life and his community. In the words of Byrne:

He was respected as a theologian and his words had an impact. When the Councillors of the King wanted to refute him we are told that they brought twenty times more Masters in Theology to the meeting in Burgos than the Dominicans could assemble. We must learn from them and not let rhetoric overcome serious analysis if we are to be truly evangelizers.

The brothers acted as a group. When complaints were made to the Superior, Pedro de Cordoba, about Montesino's sermon, he replied that the community had preached the sermon. One of our historians once told me that he believed the community restrained Montesino somewhat by approaching the matter as a group. There is added lesson here, too!

¹ Damian Byrne, OP, "Relatio de Statu Ordinis" in *Acta Capituli Generalis Electivi Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, (Rome, Curia Generalitia, 1992), 189. Henceforth, *Relatio*.

² Ibid.

³ Antonio Montesino, OP (1486-1530) was already in the Island of Hispaniola together with another Dominican, Pedro de Cordoba, even before the formal evangelization of Latin America had begun. There, he took up the cause of the natives by preaching against slavery. His Advent sermon was called *el primer grito* against the abuses of the Spanish colonizers. Recalled to Spain several times, he pleaded before the Spanish parliament for the just treatment of the natives.

They sought outside help. They realized that they did not have all the answers and had recourse to their Professors in Salamanca. Francisco de Vitoria's studies on the controversy led him to formulate the world's first Charter of Human Rights.⁴ There will be many occasions when we will need expert help, not only from our scholars but from other experts in economics and the social sciences.

They gave special importance to poverty in their lives. This allowed them the freedom to preach without fear of the consequences. They sought by their voluntary suffering to join themselves to the Passion of Christ and the suffering of the Indian people. They gave a living witness to those who thought only of finding more and more silver and gold.⁵

But lest we forget, the advent sermon of Montesino was directed *not to the indigenous people* of Latin America, but to his fellow Spaniards. He might have been quite effective in re-evangelizing his fellow Spaniards, but how did he fare in his preaching ministry to the natives? The *content* of Montesino's sermon might have been doctrinally sound and pastorally effective to his fellow Spaniards, but how was it *received* by the natives whom he and his fellow Dominicans had hoped to evangelize?

In his other communications to the Order, Byrne showed his sensitivity to the importance of reception in the task of preaching. The 1990 commemorative card issued by the Dominican Province of the Philippines in celebration of its 19th anniversary contains a passage taken from a letter of the Master. It goes:

Our preaching must spring from an attentiveness to the needs and experiences of those whom we address... This imposes on us the obligation of listening, an alertness to the movements which are taking place in our society."⁶

Though he did not explicitly mention the element of reception as one of his criteria for considering a model preacher, he was certainly aware that reception shapes not only the way preachers preach but also the content of preaching.

⁴ Francisco de Vitoria, OP (1483-1546) was a professor of Theology at Salamanca from 1526-1544. Like the famous *Apostle to the Indios*, Bartolome de las Casas (1474-1566), he wrote extensively on the humane treatment of natives in conquered territories. He also wrote treatises on international law as well as on the obligation of the non-Christians to embrace the Catholic faith. He argued that the Christian faith must be preached diligently and zealously to the natives with proper demonstration, reasonable arguments, and the witness of an upright life, in order to bind the natives to receive it under pain of mortal sin.

⁵ *Relatio*, 189-190.

⁶ Damian Byrne, "We are Preachers" in *19th Anniversary Commemorative Card*, (Quezon City, Dominican Province of the Philippines, 1990).

The Reception of Preaching

Today, preachers can no longer just rely on scholarship, however sound and extensive it may be, nor on their eloquence and quality of witnessing. Neither can the effectiveness of the preacher be gauged solely in terms of the authenticity of sources used, the relevance of the message and the medium, nor by the extent of preparation. Ample literature has been written about the crucial part the audience plays, not only in the actual event of preaching but also in its composition.

In a way, both the preacher and the listener are actively constructing a meaning: the preacher, in the preparation and delivery of the homily; the listener, in the attempt to understand what was heard. To one familiar with scholastic philosophy and theology, this is but a re-affirmation of the axiom: *quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*.

Preaching involves a participative *making*. The preacher is, first of all, a receiver. The act of composing a homily or a sermon is itself a reception that proceeds out of the horizon of questions from which the preacher intends to communicate meaningful answers. Horizons of questions vary from person to person and from culture to culture, so the preacher's original reception of God's word may not coincide with the listener's own reception of it. The listener, to whom preaching is directed, concretizes in a particular context what was only presented by the preacher in a general way. What was merely virtual in the homily becomes actual or concrete by the listener's appropriation of it.

The act of preaching becomes a dialogic point where the preacher's own reception of revelation is brought to expression, while the listener's reception of the homily is brought to bear on the listener's particular situation. This dialogical nature of the homily itself invites future interpretation and application of the homily not foreseen or anticipated by the preacher. Indeed, preaching as a hermeneutical *event* leads to the *advent* of unforeseen and unexpected meanings.

The retrieval of reception as a significant theological category gave impetus to a gradual evolution of the way it is understood: from mere passive acceptance to creative transformation of what is received. Indeed, reception shapes, not only the way a preacher transmits the message, but also the *content* of preaching and the preacher's own person.

A Background Theory: Yves Congar O.P.'s Idea of Reception

Yves Congar's idea of reception⁷ can serve as our background theory for

⁷ Cf. Yves Congar, OP, *Tradition and Traditions*, trans. Michael Naseby & Thomas Rainborough (London, Burns & Oates Ltd. and Mcmillan Co., 1966). Henceforth, *Traditions*.

highlighting its importance in the task of preaching. Although his seminal study of reception was done within the context of the transmission and preservation of Christian tradition, his insights and conclusions could apply *mutatis mutandis* to preaching. Congar's description of tradition as "not merely a transmission followed by a passive, mechanical reception but entails the making present in a human consciousness of a saving truth"⁸ aptly describes the preaching event as well.

Congar developed his idea of reception as a way of extending the previously very narrow understanding of it. He demonstrated the pervasiveness of the reception phenomenon within ecclesial life in general. He set out to present this category not in the limited sense of reception of doctrine as taught by a conciliar body, but as an ecclesiological reality.⁹ He rejects any approach that would restrict reception to a process of submitting one's will to authority's legitimate precepts.

Reception is not mere acceptance or obedience. He then searched for the areas of Church life where reception plays a role, namely: the councils, the formation of the canon, the exchange of synodal letters, the liturgical life of the church, and church discipline. After examining all these, he wrote:

*History offers an enormous array of actual receptions, and theories of reception within the Church.*¹⁰

Reception in the First Millennium of Christianity

For Congar, the degree of importance enjoyed by the category of reception depends on the ecclesiology operative in the Church. He observed that during the first millennium, the prevailing idea of the Church was that of *communion*, with the Holy Spirit binding all the faithful together in unity, and who resides in all churches as guide and guarantor of truth and fidelity to tradition. In this context, not only the preacher, but also the listener (whether as individual or as local community) played a major role towards the transmission of Christian faith, and established consensus and unanimity in the Church.

In an ecclesiological model pervaded by communion, the transmission of the Christian faith occurs in a dialogical way. Congar compared this to human conversation:

Every word or communication from one being to another needs to be received. A word is intended to make some impression; for the person

⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁹ Cf. Yves Congar, OP, "Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality" in *Concilium*, Vol. 77 (1977) 43-68. Henceforth *Reception*. This is a shortened version of *La Réception comme réalité ecclésiologique* published in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, Vol 56 (1972) 369-403. Henceforth *La Réception*.

¹⁰ *La Réception*, 370.

to whom it is addressed it is a call, a challenge or stimulus, and it creates, virtually, an interpersonal relationship.¹¹

Congar also stressed that this conversation takes place, not in a vacuum but in human history. Human beings live *in history*; human beings *have a history*. Human beings not only live in a particular point of time, but move through time. They search to integrate into a meaningful whole their past, present, and future. In Congar's words:

Saving faith is received by minds which... must "receive" faith in an active way, in a manner which befits their nature. They are human minds, discursive intellects which perceive successively and only partially; hence also, minds fulfilling themselves only when in contact with other minds; lastly, minds living in a cosmic biological and temporal continuum. Historicity is an essential character of the human mind.¹²

Congar nostalgically looked back to the time when the original deposit of faith, carried through time in the memory of the church, found continual rejuvenation not only in its transmission, but in the various modes of its reception. His thought echoed that of St. Irenaeus' who wrote:

*The preaching of the Church presents in every respect an unshakeable stability, remains identical to itself and benefits, as we have shown, from the witness of the prophets, apostles, and all their disciples, a witness which embraces 'the beginning, the middle, and the end', in brief, the totality of the 'economy' of God and his operation infallibly ordained for the salvation of man and establishing our faith. From then on, this faith, which we have received from the Church, we preserve with care, for unceasingly, through the action of the Spirit of God, such a deposit of great price enclosed in an excellent vessel, rejuvenates and causes a rejuvenation of the very vessel which contains it.*¹³

St. Irenaeus' words remind us that preaching bears the evident mark of *catholicity*, i.e., it makes the saving Word of God understandable and appropriable in diverse times and places. But such *catholicity* belongs primarily to the nature of the Word, for the same Word demands that it be expressed not only in a single tradition but also in several traditions so that it can be the message of salvation for all.¹⁴

In summary, Congar's idea of reception demonstrated how, during the first millennium of the Church, reception was a dynamic of the inner life of a church, the transmission of doctrine, as well as a dynamic of oral or written communication between persons and communities. To be initiated as a Christian is to be received in

¹¹ *Traditions*, 253.

¹² *Traditions*, 256.

¹³ Quoted in J.M.R. Tillard, *Church of Churches. The Ecclesiology of Communion* (MN, Collegeville, 1991), 144.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

a communion. Reception helped maintain not only the continuity of the past to the present, but also its catholicity, by permitting it to expand in a new context.

Reception in the Second Millennium of Christianity

In the second millennium, an ecclesiology gradually developed which became more and more hierarchical, and the notion of the church as a communion as well as the idea of reception receded into the background. Congar wrote:

The notion of reception –but not its whole reality, since life is resistant to theories—is excluded (or even expressly rejected) when for all the foregoing [interrelated theologies] there is substituted a wholly pyramidal conception of the Church as a mass totally determined by its summit, in which ... there is hardly any mention of the Holy Spirit other than as the guarantor of an infallibility of hierarchical courts...¹⁵

Along with the shift from communion to hierarchy, was a parallel shift in the understanding of tradition, its transmission and preservation. During the first millennium, authority resided in the demonstration of fidelity to the original apostolic tradition. The whole church was understood to possess the grace and mission to exercise that authority.

In the second millennium the emphasis was placed more and more on fidelity to WHO IS transmitting rather than on fidelity to WHAT is being transmitted. Consequently, “there occurred a transition from a primacy of truthful content which it was the grace and mission of the whole Church to protect, to the primacy of authority.”¹⁶

A shift from discernment to obedience was consequent to this transition. For Congar, this was unfortunate because it further diminished the role of reception in the development and transmission of doctrine:

If an authority relative to the content of truth as such is attributed to the ministry, one argues upon the juridical level, and the only permissible connection is one of obedience. If the content of truth and of good is taken into account, the faithful, and, better, the ecclesia may be allowed a certain activity of discernment and reception.¹⁷

This shift became even more pronounced when the Church was confronted with the crises of discipline and orthodoxy occasioned by the Protestant movement and the expansionist tendencies in the West. The obsession for orthodoxy elevated the philosophico-theological articulation of doctrine to a surrogate of religion itself.

¹⁵ *Reception*, 60.

¹⁶ *Reception*, 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Christianity was viewed as a super religion that was all of a piece, absolutely coherent, did not contradict itself, left no loose ends, and could always cope with unexpected twists and turns. Many Church leaders and preachers substituted for Christian faith the *logical scheme* with which they, compelled by methodological and cultural stipulation, sought to define it.

It can also be added that the role of reception receded into the background when culture was viewed in a classicist perspective during the age of colonization. Western culture was regarded as the superior culture that transcended and, at the same time, must purify all other cultures. Preaching was thus a sort of a reducing agent, or a means to level off with other cultural expressions of faith, or at worst, a tool for the imperialism of a single interpretation of the Word that anathematized *ab initio* all other interpretations.

With this background theory on the study of reception as applied to preaching, we now ask: “How did the natives of the Philippines receive the preaching of the Spanish missionaries?” This is important because the quality of Christian life of the natives depended on their understanding and appropriation of the preaching of the missionaries. The way they received the Christian dogmas, doctrines, and moral norms shaped the way they lived Christianity and determined their mode of reception of the next generations of Filipinos.

Preaching to the Natives: *The Platicas*

Since the missionaries that came to the Philippines were either schooled in Spain or in Latin America, we can safely say that their preaching methods followed the norms and procedures established there.

Considered by historians as representative of the method, style and content of preaching used by missionaries in the 16th century and onwards is the compilation of sermons preached to the natives of Mexico, the *Platicas*. Compiled by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and discovered only in 1924, these sermons were used for pre-baptismal instruction, the celebration of the Eucharist, and other liturgical rites. Originally in Spanish, these sermons were collected by Sahagún and translated into *Nahuatl*, the native language of the Aztecs, at his direction.¹⁸

¹⁸ The *Platicas* are discussed in R. Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, (California, University of California Press, 1966), 85-88; 286-88. Henceforth, *Ricard*. He writes that since the missionaries methodically pooled their resources and procedures in the work of evangelization, theologians of the Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans periodically met to assure uniformity in preaching and catechesis. Bernardino de Sahagún (1512-1590) was among the pioneer Franciscan missionaries. He came to Mexico in 1529 and devoted himself mainly to the most methodical and detailed ethnographic study of the natives. Most of his works were lost. A glimpse of his labors can be found in

The *Platicas* consisted of two books: the first book has thirty chapters containing sermons and discourses that were delivered up to the moment when the natives “very insistently demanded baptism.”¹⁹ The second book contained a catechism of Christian doctrine.

As an aside, there are extant collections of sermons (*sermonarios*) and catechisms (*doctrinas*) patterned after the *platicas* and published by the missionaries in Latin America and in the Philippines during the Spanish regime. But like the *platicas*, these were NOT for distribution to the natives. The high cost of printing and the use of fragile rice paper ruled out the feasibility of instruction by means of written materials. The transmission of doctrine, therefore, was mainly oral (*through preaching and teaching*). The catechisms (like the *Doctrina Cristiana*, the first book printed in the Philippines) were printed FOR the Spanish missionaries who needed uniform translations of complex doctrinal concepts that theologians had taken centuries to define.

Structure and Content of the Platicas

The *Platicas* are extremely interesting. These showed the apologetic schemes and rhetorical structures and preaching common in Spain at that time. These sermons were often developed in a threefold movement corresponding to the Ciceronian requirements of the orator – *ut probet, ut delectet, ut flectat*.²⁰

Accordingly the sermons aimed first, to arrest attention by the appeal to novelty, erudition, or intellectual superiority; second, to delight both senses and intellect with imaginative illustrations, lucid arguments, and elegance of diction; and third, to engage the emotions of the congregation in order to move them to embrace the doctrine or way of life that was preached. The words were carefully chosen, not only for rhetorical effect but also in compliance to Francisco de Vitoria’s injunction that the Christian message had to be preached in a way that the hearers are placed under the moral obligation to accept it.

The first sermon in the *Platicas*, addressed to the Lords of Mexico began with an introduction of who the missionaries were.

B. de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. The 4th edition of this work was published in Mexico in 1979.

¹⁹ Ricard, 286.

²⁰ For a typology of sermons during this time, see Hilary Dansey Smith, *Preaching in the Spanish Golden Age*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978). Smith discusses in this book the words by which preaching was commonly known during the 16th and 17th centuries, like, *discursos predicables*, *sermón*, *homilía*, *paradoxon*, *panegyrico*, and *consideración*. Preaching composed for priests either as a model for preaching or as a spiritual talk during retreats was called *platicás*. He also classifies preaching into several types, like *exemplum*, *concepto predicable*, and *comparación*.

“Fear not, we are men as you are. We are only messengers sent to you by a great Lord called the Holy Father (the Pope), who is the spiritual head of the world, and who is filled with pain and sadness by the state of your souls. These are the souls he has charged us to search out and save.”²¹

Immediately one sees an indication of what Congar referred to earlier as an ecclesiology focused on hierarchy and authority. Also, “salvation of souls” was the overriding interest of the sermon. This reflected the missionary principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*²² prevailing at the time. The discovery of the New World shattered the medieval assumption that the world as they knew it was co-extensive with Christianity. The theologians faced the problem of reconciling God’s universal salvific will with the immense number of people in newly-discovered lands, who, without their fault, could not have had an explicit desire to be saved and to belong to the Catholic Church. Preaching and baptism were thus seen as the most potent instruments to bring those *extra ecclesiam* within the Catholic fold. This is the reason why in many parish archives today, the only documents preserved are the *libros de bautismos* (if they have not yet been destroyed by the elements or official neglect), because these were the measure of the success of evangelization.

The millennialist spirituality in the Pláticas

The current of spirituality sweeping Europe during the age of colonization added a sense of urgency to the task of converting non-Christians. Missionaries were influenced by the 12th century millennialist thinker, Gioacchino de Fiore²³ who dreamt of a forthcoming Golden Age, the historical realization of the messianic reign of God. Since the end of the world was believed to be imminent, it was necessary to act in a hurry and baptize as many people as possible, to guarantee their eternal salvation. The fact that the Gospel had reached the ends of the earth was itself considered a sign of the imminent *parousia*. Spain was the new Israel, and it was God who sent the missionaries to pagan lands. The time of fulfillment had finally come.

²¹ Ricard, 86.

²² “Outside the Church there is no salvation” was formulated by St. Cyprian in his *De Lapsis* addressed to Christians who have lapsed to heresy. This formula was found in the profession of faith imposed on the Waldensians by Innocent III but its clearest statement was in the bull *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII. Although this formula was later applied to non-Christians Vatican I clarified this by declaring: “For someone to obtain eternal salvation, it is not always required that he is in fact incorporated into the Church as a member, but he is required to be united to it by desire.” (Denz. 3870). Today, this axiom is understood as a way of expressing the ecclesiological principle that the Church is the sacrament of salvation. Cf. Karl Rahner (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Theology. A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*. (London, Burns and Oates, 1977) 230-231.

²³ For more information about this visionary and his influence, see F.E. Manuel & F.P. Manuel, *Utopian Thoughts in the Western World*, (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979) 56-58.

So, in their sermons, the missionaries took pains to explain why the natives must immediately convert to Christianity and why they must belong to a Church headed by the Pope to whom kings and emperors pledge obedience. The Pope was introduced to the natives as the source of the missionaries' power to receive into the Church those who desire to belong to it and are ready to renounce the cult of the false gods. They then pictured in vivid color the stark difference between the Christian God and the gods of the Aztecs, unwittingly reducing the latter into demons:

You have a god, you say, whose worship has been taught to you by your ancestors and your kings. Not so! You have a multitude of gods, each with his function. And you yourselves recognize that they deceive you... what they demand of you in sacrifice is your blood, your heart. Their images are loathsome. On the other hand, the true and universal God, our Lord and Creator and Dispenser of being and life, as we are telling you in our sermons, has a character different from that of your gods. He does not deceive; he lies not, He hates no one, despises no one; there is nothing evil in Him. He regards all wickedness with the greatest horror, forbids and interdicts it, for he is perfectly good. He is the deep well of all good things. He is the essence of love, compassion, and mercy. And He showed His infinite mercy when he made Himself Man here on earth like us; humble and poor, like us. He died for us and spilled his precious blood to redeem us and free us from the power of evil spirits. This true God is called Jesus Christ, true God and true man, dispenser of being and life, redeemer and savior of the world. Being God, he has no beginning; He is eternal. He created heaven and earth and hell. He created us, all the men in the world and he also created the devils whom you hold to be gods, and whom you call gods. This true God is everywhere. He sees all, knows all. He is altogether admirable. As man, He is in the His royal palace, and here below on earth he has his Kingdom, which He began with the beginning of the world. He would have you enter it now, and for this you should consider yourselves blessed.²⁴

The same tone and content can be found in the *platica* delivered to the natives of the Philippines:

God made the sky, the earth, the sea and everything else, and that He had commanded us to honor our fathers and mothers, and that whoever did otherwise was condemned to eternal fire; that we are all descended from Adam and Eve, our first parents; that we have an immortal spirit; and many other things pertaining to the faith.²⁵

²⁴ Ricard, 86.

²⁵ Antonio Pigafetta, *First Voyage Around the World*, (Manila, 1969), 35. It may come as a surprise that the *platica* was delivered by Ferdinand Magellan, the leader of the expedition to the Philippines and not the missionary who was with him, Fr. Pedro Valderrama, an Augustinian friar. In his booklet *Pre-baptismal Instruction and the Administration of Baptism in the Philippines during the Sixteenth*

The Tabula Rasa Approach of the Platicas

The vehemently apologetic style of the *Platicas* and the other sermons patterned after it, followed the *tabula rasa approach*.²⁶ The missionaries generally saw in the native religions nothing that was worth salvaging. This is understandable. The missionaries came from a nation that has always been extremely hostile to heterodoxy and in which the Inquisition had gone farther than elsewhere. King Philip II, who came to the throne at the onset of the spiritual conquest of Latin America and the Philippines, thought of himself as the champion of the true faith in the world.²⁷

Also, the Christianization of Latin America and the Philippines somehow coincided with the Counter Reformation. It is easy to see why the phobia for heresy that raged in Spain was exaggerated in Latin America and the Philippines among the missionaries who saw first hand the non-Christian civilization. Far from considering native practices and rituals as heavy with hope and promise, the missionaries regarded these as demoniacal parodies from which they recoiled in horror. They avoided any accommodation, in ritual or dogma, and stubbornly prohibited practices and beliefs that are perceived as pagan in nature. They also caused the disappearance of a great number of native monuments, sacred places, and antiquities. The first Bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga wrote on June 12, 1531 that he had destroyed more than five hundred temples and twenty thousand idols.²⁸ Similar claims were made by other ecclesiastics and religious in Latin America and the Philippines.

The missionaries insisted on presenting Christianity, not as perfecting or fulfilling the native religions, but as something entirely new, which meant an absolute and complete rupture with the whole past. The *tabula rasa* approach aimed precisely at achieving this.

It is interesting to know that one of the ways by which the missionaries applied this strategy was through what is now known as *evangelization by children*.²⁹

Century, [reprinted from *THE AMERICAS*, XII, I, (Washington, D.C.), 4)] John Leddy Phelan adds that Magellan's *platica* was delivered through a slave-interpreter who knew the native language. Henceforth *Phelan*.

²⁶ Ricard, 286.

²⁷ For ample discussion on the role of the Spanish monarchs in the task of evangelization, see W. E. Shiels, SJ, *King and Church*, (Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1961).

²⁸ Ricard, 37-38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 286. See also R. Trexler, "From the Mouth of Babes: Christianization by Children in the 16th Century New Spain" in *Church and Community 1200-1600: Studies in the History of Florence and New Spain*, *Storia e Letteratura*, Vol. 168 (1987): 549-573. Henceforth, *Trexler*. Trexler traced this phenomenon to the radical juvenile experiment in Florence by Savonarola from 1496-1498.

The “Preaching Children” phenomenon

From the very start, the missionaries devoted themselves to the formation of native children not only because these represented the temporal and spiritual future of Latin America, but also because they saw in these youths their surest and most active auxiliaries in the task of spreading God’s word.³⁰³⁰

In the Philippines, the same strategy was employed. As one Franciscan missionary wrote:

The religious missionaries bring up in their conventos boys from eight years old to twenty, making use of them for the duties of the sacristy, the altar, and of the convent, in their company these boys learn reading, writing, and Christian doctrine, and learn how to keep with great earnestness the law of God. With these good beginnings, when they afterwards get married, they live in the love and fear of our Lord.³¹

During feast days and solemnities, a Jesuit missionary described the children as imbued with

great cleverness and indication of ability, and (they recite the prayers and sacred doctrine) to the satisfaction and pleasure of the hearers . . . Some of these children are of extraordinary virtue, and our Lord shows them many favors. Every day they go to hear Mass, or in case there is no one to deliberate it, to commend themselves to our Lord in the church. They go out in order, reciting the Christian doctrine aloud, and upon reaching the church, they conclude it on their knees.³²

Another Jesuit missionary in the Philippines wrote to his General:

Each of the pupils have become teachers in their paternal homes of all who live there, and by the good example of their lives, they bring to others to accept the true doctrine. One boy, a cantor in church, being solicited by a Spaniard to perpetrate a foul deed, answered: ‘Sir, I know well by what remedy you should drive away that temptation of yours. Let us recite together a rosary in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and instantly all these wicked thoughts will vanish in smoke. . .’³³

Many missionaries did not hesitate to attribute to these native children a great role in the missionary enterprise. Without these child preachers, the religious

³⁰ Ricard, 224.

³¹ “Marcelo de Ribadeneira, OFM, *Historia de las islas del Archipiélago Filipino y reinos de la Gran China, Tartaria, Cochinchina, malaca, Siam, Cambodge y Japón*, quoted in John N. Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History*, (Quezon City, 1979). Henceforth, *Schumacher*, 49.

³² Pedro Chirino, SJ, *Relación de la Islas Filipinas y de lo que en ellas han trabajado los Padres de la Compañía de Jesús*, quoted in *Schumacher*, 48.

³³ Annual Letter from the Philippine Province: Fr. Francisco Vaez, SJ to Fr. General Claudius Aquaviva, SJ, June 10, 1601, quoted in *Schumacher*, 50.

admitted they would have been as helpless as molting falcons. Mendieta went so far as to entitle one of his chapters “*How the conversion of the Indios was done through the preaching of children.*”³⁴

The missionaries wrote that some of these children even taught the catechism to adults³⁵ and they revealed to the religious the secret superstitions of their relatives.³⁶ They also acted as interpreters when the need arose, repeating the missionaries sermons “with the most profound convictions and persuasive warmth.”³⁷ In 1531 the Audiencia of Mexico acknowledged the use of child preachers and this practice received in 1558 the implicit approval of the Viceroy Luis de Velasco.³⁸

The training of these children mirrored the *tabula rasa* approach. First of all, they were interned in the convents or *seminarios* for many years. One obvious outcome of this obligatory detention was the children’s attachment to the missionaries whom they, for want of a paternal image, began to regard as surrogate fathers. By capitalizing on the inter-generational conflicts within the native society itself, the missionaries created a socio-cultural break that would sever the connection between the old and new generation of natives.

The child preacher was, indeed, the veritable *tabula rasa* receptive of any imprint the missionaries might leave there. However, the hoped-for native Christian society, totally free of any vestiges of an idolatrous past, did not materialize, however. The phenomenon of preaching children did not create the necessary break from the old to the new. Neither did this group develop into the future native clergy who would lead a truly indigenous church.³⁹

In the Philippines, the internment of children in the religious convents resulted, not in the early establishment of the native clergy, but the strengthening of the elite class of Filipinos whose culture and values were decidedly Spanish and whose sense of power derived from their wealth, color, education, and Spanish tutelage and support. Phelan writes:

The friars realized that the future lay with the children. Primary schools attached to the monasteries eventually enabled the missionaries eventually to train a native elite which did provide leadership in the new Christian communities.⁴⁰

³⁴ G. Mendieta, *Historia ecclesiastica Indiana*, (Mexico, 1971), 222. Quoted in Trexler, 557.

³⁵ Ricard, 99.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁸ Letter of Luis de Velasco to Philip II, September 30, 1558” in *Archivo General de Indias, Audiencia de México*, 58, 3-8. Quoted in Ricard, 100.

³⁹ Ricard, 224.

⁴⁰ Phelan, 15.

The Reception of the *Platicas*

As narrated in the summary of the *Platicas*, when the missionaries preached to the natives, their chiefs were at first stupefied, they found no argument to counter the missionaries' claims so they consulted their own priests. The priests deliberated among themselves and expressed great fear of the revenge of the gods should they prove faithless. They replied:

What we know about our gods came to us from our forefathers. Our ways of worship were shaped by our tradition. Our gods have always served us in the past. Only disaster can come from our abandonment of the gods; their wrath will surely fall upon us. It is not salvation but death that you bring us. Oh what can we do who are mortals and dejected? Let us die if we have to die. If we are to perish, let us perish, because truly our gods have died.⁴¹

Such eloquence must have been evoked by a great sense of loss. For the natives, the acceptance of the Christian God in exchange for their deities threatened not only the end of their tribal organization but also their traditional *credenda* and *agenda*. It was like the death of their way of life as they had known it.

Obstacles to Adequate Reception

Inaccurate Translation

Many missionaries say that the chiefs and the native priests, after listening to the sermons, eventually asked to be baptized. They saw in this a manifestation of God's grace, the effectiveness of their preaching, and the natives' acceptance of it. A modern reader would, however, wonder whether the natives' desire to be baptized was a proof of efficacious reception of the *Platicas*, or simply practical capitulation to a foreign power.

In the first place, most of the concepts in the sermons of the missionaries had no surrogates in the natives' system of thought. Even when the missionaries showed sincere efforts at translating their sermons into the native language, much of this was done by forcibly inserting European words (either in Latin or in the language of the missionary) into the native texts. From the point of view of orthodoxy, this was deemed safe. Besides, there was repeated warning from the Crown against the use of any term⁴² that might cause confusion in the minds of the natives, that is why religious texts in native languages are sprinkled with many Spanish and Latin words, such as *Dios*, *Apostoles*, *Yglesia*, *Misa*, *Sanctus Spiritus*, *Santisima Trinidad*, and so on.

⁴¹ Ricard., 266-267.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 287.

Lack of understanding translated concepts

But even granting that Christian terms were accurately translated and the natives wanted to appropriate the missionaries' *credenda* and *agenda*, their understanding of the nuances and subtleties of very Western and scholastic concepts would have been insufficient.

For instance, the missionaries praised the readiness with which the new converts streamed to confession after the former had preached the necessity of this sacrament. But the natives' reaction could also be construed as a desperate need for religious guidance as a result of the disappearance of their native priestly class. The unaccustomed freedom from the dreaded power of the offended idols was translated into eagerness to confess one's sins as an act of propitiation. The inadequate understanding of the sacrament explains the later observation of the missionaries that the natives slipped readily into a completely external view of the moral life and came to depend on the missionaries as the absolute arbiter of their conduct.

The reception of the missionaries' preaching could have been greatly enhanced by the preaching children whom the missionaries trained as effective auxiliaries. Sad to say, they served more as the backbone of the new paternalism ushered in by coming of the Europeans, a paternalism that had nothing in common with the former patriarchal structure of the ancient indigenous society. It was a paternalism that, in spite of its good will, had one main flaw: it refused the children the right to grow up. It was a paternalism that regarded them as perennial children.⁴³

This partially explains why, despite the almost unanimous judgment of the missionaries that the native children were effective preachers and teachers of the faith, the latter never developed into a full-fledged native clergy. In the first place, the religious generally did not teach the Spanish language to the natives. Ignorance of Castilian had the immediate advantage of shielding the natives from the dangerous contact with the European, but it also created a gulf that rendered difficult and even impossible the adequate reception of Christian doctrine. The evolution of this corps of preaching children into a full-fledged native clergy was also not supported by the Spanish Crown. It was regarded as running counter to the system of tutelage.

Preaching was inseparable with colonization

In the summary of the *Platicas*, the superiority of the Christian God was presented to the natives through many arguments. But the decisive argument given to the natives why they should embrace the Catholic religion was that the natives had not been supported in the slightest by their gods, while the Christian God, in

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 291.

proving his omnipotence, had allowed his faithful servants, the Spaniards to conquer the natives.⁴⁴

In the Philippines, even those who initially resisted the Spanish conquest capitulated because of what they perceived as the awesome power of the God preached by the missionaries.

*After the towns of Taytay and Cainta were pacified, certain Moros (indigenous Filipinos who are Muslims) of the nearby towns . . . told the Spanish missionaries that without doubt the God of the Spaniards must be very powerful. When the missionaries asked them why they said this, they replied that more than seven hundred native men had gone out from their towns to help those in Cainta (to fight the Spaniards), and fifty of these died in the battle and the rest died from sickness . . . From this consideration they believe that the God of the Spaniards must be very powerful.*⁴⁵

This argument indicates clearly that the evangelization of Latin America and the Philippines was inescapably tied to conquest. Evangelization involved not only the adoption of the creed as preached, but also submission to a foreign power. For the missionaries, conquest was instrumental to evangelization. Conversely, for the colonists and not a few priests, evangelization was instrumental to conquest and stability of Spanish rule. These conflicting motives produced disintegrative consequences for the colonized population, especially as regards the quality of their reception of missionary preaching and teaching.

As a native, one remained within the traditional world of the indigenous culture, whose practices – linguistic, religious, familial, vocational – affirmed the form and content of one's personal identity. At the same time, as a colonial subject one was connected into an administrative system, including guidelines, norms, expectations, rewards and punishment that amounted to a second nature.

It is impossible to superimpose consistently these two images of oneself without damage to one's sense of identity and religiosity. The native thus became vulnerable to the existential crises that remained unresolved through the centuries. Many contemporary Third World authors now write about these as split-level morality, tendency towards syncretism, re-appearance of folk-religiosity as superstitious practices and beliefs.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴⁵ Gaspar de San Agustín, *Conquistas de las islas Philipinas* (Madrid, 1698, 459-60. 55.), quoted in Schumacher, 55.

⁴⁶ See for instance R. Baglow, *The Crisis of Self in the Age of Information*, (London, Routledge, 1994), 139-141. In these pages, he dealt with the logic of colonial organization and how it had affected the native psyche.

What aggravated this self-estrangement were the inconsistent policies and ambiguous or unattainable objectives presented by both the colonizers and evangelizers. It is a mistake to attribute too much clarity, unit, or consistency to the structures that promoted colonization and evangelization. A colonial regime typically resembles less a closed and smoothly contoured hegemonic edifice than an unstable assembly of partial discourses and practices. Its prime concern was the molding of the new colonial society in the image of the mother country's own traditions. When the missionary and the colonizer clashed over the ways in which this enterprise could best be fulfilled, the loser was generally the native over whom they quarreled, and the Christian message whose effective reception is hampered by such conflicts.

Conclusion

The preaching of the early Spanish missionaries, undoubtedly exceptional and dedicated men, was a sincere attempt to convert the natives and bring them to the catholic fold. In their preaching, they also took pains to remind their fellow Europeans that the native was a human person with inherent rights and not a natural slave. This attitude was greatly manifest in the missionaries who came to the Philippines.

But many contemporary historians contend that the evangelization of Latin America and the Philippines was not fully accomplished and gave way, instead, to a *mestizo* religion and culture that is replete with contradictions like the co-existence of rampant corruption and intense religiosity, extreme poverty of the masses and the wealth of the Catholic Church, fear of God and moral anesthesia, enlightened faith and superstitions, etc. This must be because the preaching methods of the missionaries hardly took into account the manner of reception by the natives.

Present-day missionaries and theologians must learn from the past. While sincerely trying to update their preaching methods, they are overly focused on the theological, canonical, psychological, sociological, linguistic, and communication theories that must mould their preaching, the politically correct ways of expressing the content of preaching, the dialogical methods to be used to effect understanding on the part of the non-believers, etc.

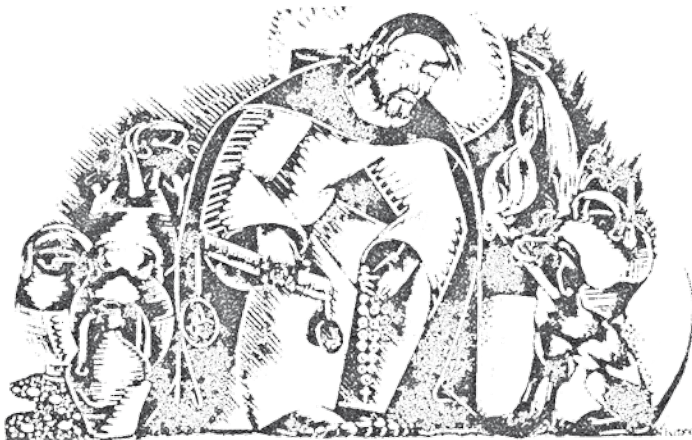
A study of the history of reception of preaching can complement these efforts. As mentioned earlier, reception refers not only to the way a listener listens, but how the listener shapes the content of the preacher's message. A study of the history of reception need not immerse the message in the relativism of its various receptions, but affirms the rich potential of the message to effect new meanings through the audience's active reception of it. Interest on the historicity of preaching can help modern preachers realistically gauge the conditioning factors of a homily's

original production and reception, how these factors shape and are shaped by the history of its later receptions, and the consequent effects on the various receivers.

A study of the history of reception, furthermore, would highlight the reality of the *sensus fidelium*, which in turn affirms the presence of the Holy Spirit who works in all and through all, towards universal salvation. As Congar has so beautifully written about, and history has proven, when the Church acknowledges that it is the Spirit that moves the heart to listen, preaching ceases to be a monologue, a tool to advance one's causes or ideologies, but an instrument for understanding and conversion.

Finally, history has shown that the preachers must rely more on the power of example, rather than just on preaching itself. As is evident in the Philippines, the rapid conversion of the natives is to be attributed to the missionaries' ascetic and exemplary lives rather than to their preaching. As one contemporary historian writes:

Historical notes written during that time was replete with hundreds of examples like those of natives in Pangasinan who would approach the Dominican religious there confessing that they had, indeed, observed closely the austere lives which the religious led in that province, and had been convinced of the truthfulness of their doctrines, not so much from hearing them speak, as from the exemplary perfection of their individual lives, and the fact that the welfare of the natives was clearly the purpose of all their labors. Those Dominicans did not confine themselves only to the direct preaching of the Gospel to the natives. They founded hospitals, schools, built roads, bridges, churches, and other public edifices. They studied over fifty native languages used in the different regions, and the formation of grammars and dictionaries which, in many instances, remain the first studies made of these tongues.⁴⁷ ■



⁴⁷ Jesus Diaz, OP, *Christianization of the Philippines*, in *Philippiniana Sacra*, Volume I, No. 2., 1966 (University of Santo Tomas Press, Manila), 210-211.