



Jesus the Perfect Communicator

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Jesus is considered as the 'Perfect communicator,' the one who perfectly communicated the love of the Father to us. It was in prayer that Jesus entered into communion with his Father, receiving the very life and love he needed to transmit. Our Lord also made good use of multi-sensorial communication, not merely announcing with his lips, but with his whole life. He spoke the language of the people so that they could better receive his message and persevered in announcing the truth despite various oppositions. We see these aspects present in the lives of the Church Fathers: St Gregory of Nazianzus (prayer), St Augustine (the use of the five senses), St Gregory the Great (talking the language of the people) and St John Chrysostom (speaking the truth). The task of communicating the Good news has been entrusted to the whole Church. These aforementioned elements of good communication, namely prayer, being multi-sensorial, with adapted language and persevering in truth despite contradictions and challenges, can help in our mission of communicating the Gospel to the contemporary world of today.

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INTRODUCTION

“Communication let me down” is a line from a famous song by Spandau Ballet in the 1980s. Good communication is a vital concern for many areas of human work and life including the preaching of the gospel. Christ is the “Perfect Communicator”¹ who has entrusted his Church with the task of

¹ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, *Communio et Progressio*, Pastoral Instruction on the means of Social Communication written by order of the Second Vatican Council, Rome, 23 May 1971, 11. Henceforth ‘CP.’

communicating the good news “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1,7). The aim of this paper is thus to delineate some selected aspects of good communication which can help in the mission of sharing the Good news.

Our gentle meander begins by looking at the theme of communication in the life and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Following this we will turn our attention to some of the most renowned communicators amongst the Church Fathers. Our findings will be correlated and elaborated with the help of the Magisterium on Social communication, in particular the documents *Communio et Progressio*² and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*³ on evangelization in the modern world. We hope to thus formulate some basic principles for the preaching of the homily so that our communication does not let us, or our listeners, down.

1. JESUS, THE PERFECT COMMUNICATOR

1.1 Jesus the Revealer of the Father

“God is love” (1 Jn 4,8) and love desires to communicate itself, to be shared. This communication is firstly intra-Trinitarian, between the three divine persons who remain in permanent communion and permanent communication. Cardinal Martini wrote “the life of God is a continuous and inexhaustible process of communication between the three Divine persons.”⁴ This love between the divine persons is communicated to us in the Spirit through Christ. In his first encyclical Pope Benedict XVI wrote “this love of God has appeared in our midst. He has become visible in as much as he ‘has sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him’ (1 Jn 4,9).”⁵ The love of the Father becomes flesh in the incarnation of the Son. The Father, who is love, sends the Word, a Word which communicates his love and his very self. By divine revelation, through the Word, God does not simply communicate ideas, a message or an instruction, like an order. In *Dei Verbum* we read that “by divine Revelation God wished to manifest [...] himself.”⁶ As stated in the pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio*, “communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level it is the giving of self in love.”⁷

² See footnote 1.

³ PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Letter on Evangelization in the Modern World, Rome, 8 December 1975. Henceforth ‘EN’.

⁴ Franz-Josef EILERS, *Comunicare nella Comunità*, Elle di Ci, Torino 1997, 35. The original Italian text is “la vita di Dio è un continuo ed inesauribile processo di comunicazione tra le persone divine.”

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, on Christian love, Rome, 25 December 2005, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2006, 17.

⁶ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, on Divine Revelation, Rome, 18 November 1965, 6. Henceforth ‘DV’.

⁷ CP 11.

Thus the love of the Father becomes flesh in the incarnation and dwells among us (cf. Jn 1,14). This was a Father whom the people did not know. He had spoken in various ways and at various times in the past but in the fullness of time he sent his son to be his final word (cf. Heb 1,1-2). “God so loved the world that he sent his only Son” (cf. Jn 3,16). Jesus knew that he had been sent by the Father; “fully aware that [...] he had come from God” (Jn 13,2) with a specific mission - “to the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Lk 4,43). To speak only what the Father told him saying “I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and speak” (Jn 12,49), remaining in this permanent communion and communication with his Father - “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me” (Jn 11,41-42).

He was aware of his mission - to reveal the face of the Father, to reveal to us his love. When Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus replied “have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14,9). The evangelist John was clear that Jesus was the sole revealer of the Father: “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him” (Jn 1,18). The Greek text of Aland & Black reads ‘**ειj ton kolpon**’ or ‘at the Father’s side.’⁸ The word **kolpon**, translated as “side” in the New American Bible, is variously translated as “heart”⁹ and “bosom.”¹⁰ The only Son, who is at the Father’s side / heart / bosom has revealed him. Jesus is the ‘Perfect Communicator’ because he reveals to us who sent him. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him” (Matt 11,27). Referring to this verse, *Dei Verbum* notes that Christ himself is both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.¹¹

When Jesus encounters the first disciples in the gospel of John (John 1,35-39), it is noteworthy that he invites them to “come and see,” not merely to come and listen. The communication in Christ was not simply to give an oral message. His whole being was the message. The Word has been made flesh in Christ. It is not only audible but visible. In the first letter of John we read - “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us - what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father

⁸ Kurt ALAND, Matthew BLACK et al., *The Greek New Testament*, Sociedades Bíblicas Unidas, 1975.

⁹ New Jerusalem Bible, Bibleworks for Windows, 2001.

¹⁰ New King James Version 1992, Bibleworks for Windows, 2001.

¹¹ DV 2.

and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1,1-3). The message became visible and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory (cf. John 1,14). Jesus thus revealed himself through words and deeds¹² such that he could invite others to see the message in His life and actions not only to hear it.

How was Jesus able to be the Perfect revealer of the Father? One dimension evident was the strong life of prayer led by Jesus. We see this clearly in Mark 1,35-38, where Jesus, after a very busy day curing and teaching, wakes up early the next morning to pray “Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed” (Mark 1, 35). Before many of the important decisions in his life such as the choosing of the disciples or before his passion we find Jesus in prayer. He taught his disciples to pray (Mt 6,9-15) and taught the people the importance of perseverance in prayer with various parables such as the widow and the unjust judge (Lk 18,2-8). In his prayer, Jesus was able to receive the love of his Father, to remain united to him and thus receive the strength for his mission to announce the Good News.

1.2 Characteristics of the communication of Jesus

Prayer was a vital element in the life of Jesus to enable him to be in a permanent communion with the Father. There are three other elements integral in the transmission and communication of the Good news in the life of Jesus – the use of the five senses (multi-sensorial), talking the language of the people and speaking the truth.

1.2.1 Multi-sensorial

Jesus communicated through the various senses. His spoken preaching made use of the hearing of his listeners. By his actions, such as the washing of the feet, he transmitted a message that his disciples could see. Obviously vision and hearing were the principal channels of communication but he also made much use of touch. Many times we see him touching the people, either embracing the children, reaching out to heal a leper or placing his hands on the eyes of the blind. He was also very sensitive to the touch of the woman who had suffered hemorrhages for 12 years. He was in the middle of a large crowd and yet he was able to perceive that someone had touched him much to the surprise of the disciples. “Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, ‘Who has touched my clothes?’ But his disciples said to him, ‘You see how the crowd is pressing upon you, and yet you ask, ‘Who touched me?’” And he looked

¹² *Ibidem.*

around to see who had done it. The woman, realizing what had happened to her, approached in fear and trembling. She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth” (Mark 5,30-33). Through touch, Jesus communicates his affection and shares his love with others. Again in 1 John 1,1-4, we see that the followers of Christ were able to hear, see and *touch* the Word of life.

Perhaps it is more challenging to see how Jesus made use of the two remaining senses of smell and taste. Whilst not directly invoked by Jesus, we note the sense of smell evoked in John’s Gospel, with the anointing of the feet of Jesus with precious nard (Jn 12,1-8). The smell of the fragrance filled the whole house. The fragrance of the nard has a symbolic value of love.¹³ Of interest though is the reference to the sense of taste in his preaching: “But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?” (Mt 5,13) and “I tell you, none of those men who were invited will taste my dinner” (Lk 14,24). Jesus also frequently chose to eat and drink with others in a kind of table-fellowship and made use of these moments to share with the fellow diners.

1.2.2 Talking the language of the people

The message of Jesus was relevant for the people. He talked their language, both literally and figuratively speaking. “Through his incarnation, he utterly identified himself with those who were to receive his communication [...] He adjusted to his people’s way of talking and to their patterns of thought. And he spoke out of the predicament of their time.”¹⁴ When the crowds listened, they were attentive because “he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7,29). His teaching was interesting for the people because Jesus “always began from the experience of life of the people.”¹⁵ Jesus involved his audience with questions and answers, searching to make his communication a true dialogue. Pope Paul VI said of communicators that they are obliged to pay continual attention to and to carry on an uninterrupted observation of the external world: “You must continually stand at the window, open to the world; you are obliged to study the facts, the events, the opinions, the current interests, the thought of the surrounding environment.”¹⁶

Jesus read the signs of the times and challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees to do the same (Matt 16,3). Jesus was a man open to receive, a man in dialogue, ready to

¹³ J. LUZARAGGA, “El nardo y la Sulamita en la unción de Maryam (Jn 12:1-8),” in *Gregorianum* 83, 4 (2002), footnote 80, 691.

¹⁴ CP 11.

¹⁵ Cf. EILERS, *Communicare...*, 43. Original Italian text “comincia sempre dalle esperienze di vita della gente.”

¹⁶ Cf. *Communio et Progressio*, 75 (from Paul VI: Allocution given on January 24, 1969 to the Officers of the Catholic Association of Italian Journalists (U.C.S.I.) in *L’Osservatore Romano*, January 24, 1969)

listen, firstly to his Father, then to others. He ‘listened’ to the signs of the times, and tried to see the hand of his Father behind all things. Even looking at nature, he could see in the sun his Father’s goodness shining on all people, good and bad alike (cf. Mt 5,45) and in the flowers he saw the Father’s providence (cf. Mt 6,28-30). Jesus was profoundly in dialogue, in this attitude of prayer, with God, with others and with the world around him. He was open to receive and to give.

One particular characteristic of the preaching of Jesus was his use of parables. He chose examples from the world around him, giving foundation to the words of *Communio et Progressio*, n.131 “Every effort should be made to use the most appropriate technique and style in fitting a communication to its medium.”¹⁷ In the parables Jesus used many examples from daily life : i) from nature - the sun, light, wind, rain, stars ii) from work - fishing, farming, field of buried treasure, the seed, the sower, the vineyard, the fig tree. iii) from the home - lamp, bread, wine, yeast, a widow losing a coin and sweeping the house, the great supper iv) events of life - marriage, birth, death. All these would have been easily identifiable to the people, helping them to connect with the message of Jesus.

1.2.3 Speaking the truth

Jesus communicated in the truth. “What is truth?” asked Pilate and Jesus responded with silence (Jn 18,38). Jesus had already declared in John 14,6 “I am the Truth.” He was the Son who was “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1,14). Jesus was aware of the salvific will of his Father, namely that God “wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2,4). Jesus knew the value of the truth for the salvation of the person, saying “if you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8,31-32). Jesus spoke the word of truth, and by adhering to what he said, listening and putting into practice what he said, this would make a person free.

We see Jesus speaking very directly on many occasions, saying things that were hard for the people to listen to – “Then many of his disciples who were listening said, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” (Jn 6,60). The gospel message does not permit “either indifference, syncretism or accommodation.”¹⁸ Many times Jesus was severely criticized and rejected by the listeners. How was Jesus able to put up with such strong criticism? Telling the truth ultimately led to his death, but through his Paschal mystery. Jesus promised to send “the Spirit of Truth” which the world cannot accept (Jn 14,17), the Spirit of Truth that proceeds from the Father and testifies to Jesus (Jn 15,26), guiding the believers to “all truth” (Jn 16,13). This same Spirit

¹⁷ CP 131.

¹⁸ EN 5.

transformed the timid disciples, those who were too frightened to give testimony to Christ before his passion and death, into fearless announcers of the Good News, who spoke the Word of God with boldness (Acts 4, 29.31).

2. ELEMENTS OF THE COMMUNICATION OF CHRIST IN SELECTED CHURCH FATHERS

Four elements that were important in the communication of Jesus were prayer, using the five senses, talking the language of the people, and speaking the truth. We will now see these four elements reflected in four Fathers (and Doctors) of the Church – St Gregory Nazianzus (prayer), St Augustine (the five senses), St Gregory the Great (talking the language of the people) and St John Chrysostom (speaking the truth).

2.1 Prayer and St Gregory Nazianzus

St Gregory Nazianzus in Oration 27 writes about the intimacy needed with God before speaking about him. “Not to everyone, my beloved, does it fall the task of speaking of God [...] not to everybody, but to those who are trained and have made progress in contemplation.”¹⁹ This discourse was written against those who were theologizing at banquets and engaging in idle discourse. What was needed was an “ascetic path that is a journey of deep conversion and of purification.”²⁰ A life identified with the Master, such that “Whoever listens to you listens to me” (Lk 10,16) and “Whoever receives you receives me” (Mt 10,40).

For Gregory Nazianzus, this process of transformation occurs in the prayer. In Oration 3, he defends his time spent in prayer and solitude, for it is here according to him that the process of divinization took place “I love prayer more than all the things and for this I nourish a greater admiration for it than any other thing and put it in first place in my entire existence, because I see in prayer a help [...] and an instrument of divinization!”²¹ We see this divinization in the Sacred Scripture as the participation in the divine nature as referred to in the second letter of Peter, chapter 1, verse 4 where it says that “you may come to share in the divine nature.”

¹⁹ Gregorio NAZIANZENO, *Orazione 27*, in *Tutte le Orazioni*, a cura di Claudio Moreschini, Bompiani, Milano 2000. Italian text reads “Non a tutti, miei cari, compete parlare di Dio [...] non compete a tutti, ma a quelli che si sono esercitati e hanno fatto progressi nella contemplazione.”

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, Preface, LXXII. Italian text reads “cammino ascetico cioè un percorso di conversione profonda e di purificazione.”

²¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, Oration 3. Italian text reads “Io la amava più di tutte le cose e per essa nutrii un’ammirazione superiore a qualsiasi altra e la misi al primo posto nella mia intera esistenza, poiché vedevo in essa un aiuto [...] ed uno strumento di divinizzazione!”

2.2 Multi-sensorial communication and Saint Augustine

St Augustine notes the multi-sensorial communication of Christ, not only communicating a spoken word but also communicating through the other senses - “our Lord gave a sign through the smell of the ointment by which his feet were anointed [Jn 12,3-7], and that in the sacrament of his body and blood he signified his wish through the sense of taste, and that the healing of the woman who touched the border of his garment has its significance.”²²

In his *Confessions*, Augustine recounts his experience of God, a multi-sensorial experience involving the 5 senses - “You called, and cried aloud, and forced open my deafness. You gleamed and shine, and chase away my blindness. You exhaled odours, and I drew in my breath and do pant after You. I tasted, and do hunger and thirst. You touched me, and I burned for Your peace.”²³ Referring to this, the renowned Jesuit theologian Gerald O’Collins comments that the experience was an “involvement of the human senses, of the intellect, the feelings, the will, the memory and the other faculties.”²⁴

Thus St Augustine experienced the multi-sensorial communication of Christ. In his own experience Augustine realized the importance of words in communication and thus the aspect of hearing as most signs and especially verbal ones concern the ears but he also points out that often ideas are easier to accept when accompanied by an image.²⁵ Of note is the copious volume of written work of Augustine, who obviously recognized the power of the written word to transmit the experience of Christ.

Perhaps we can deduce that Augustine from his own experience of conversion, sought to transmit his experience of God through various ways. He did not merely speak about God but wrote about him too. In preaching, Augustine makes use of his speech and relies on the hearing of his audience. In writing he makes use of his vision and his sense of touch to hold the quill. His readers make use of their sense of vision too. Augustine realized that it was not enough to transmit a message that could be understood intellectually. In his book *On Christian Teaching* where he seeks to elucidate the principles of communication, he states “the Christian orator should not only teach his listeners so as to impart instruction, and delight them so as to hold their attention but also move them to conquer their minds.”²⁶ The oration must in a sense involve the whole person,

²² Saint AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Teaching*, Translated with introduction and notes by R.P.H. Green, Oxford University Press, New York 1999, Book II, 7.

²³ Saint AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Book 10, number 27.

²⁴ Cf. EILERS, *Communicare...*, 43. Italian text reads “coinvolgimento dei sensi umani, dell’intelletto, dei sentimenti, della volontà, della memoria e di altri poteri.”

²⁵ Saint AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Teaching*, Book II, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid*, Book IV, 79.

instructing them, delighting them, holding their attention, conquering their minds and, one could add, their hearts.

2.3 Talking the language of the people in St Gregory the Great

Gregory the Great in his book *Pastoral Care* shows the kind of diversity the preacher needs to have in his discourse and notes “the same exhortation does not suit all, inasmuch as neither are all bound together by similarity of character.”²⁷ When the congregation contains diverse members, St Gregory gives the following advice from his own experience:

Therefore according to the quality of the hearers ought the discourse of teachers to be fashioned, so as to suit all and each for their several needs, and yet never deviate from the art of common edification. For what are the intent minds of hearers but, so to speak, a kind of tight tensions of strings in a harp, which the skilful player, that he may produce a tune not at variance with itself, strikes variously? And for this reason the strings render back a consonant modulation, that they are struck indeed with one quill, but not with one kind of stroke. Whence every teacher also, that he may edify all in the one virtue of charity, ought to touch the hearts of his hearers out of one doctrine, but not with one and the same exhortation.²⁸

St Gregory holds that different types of preaching is needed for different people, in different states e.g. for men and women, the poor and the rich, servants and masters. In fact, in Book III of *Pastoral Rule*, he gives over 35 different antitheses such as rich and poor, joyful and sad, the impatient and patient, the married and single. But what can be hoped to be achieved in one discourse? He treats this theme in chapter 36 of Book III: “It is yet far more difficult to admonish innumerable hearers labouring under various passions at one and the same time with one common exhortation.”²⁹

Here the language of the people that Gregory speaks is one more akin to their spiritual state, rather than choosing precise words or phrases that the people would be familiar with. Judging by the rich use of metaphors, his vivid examples and sound knowledge of scripture coupled with the fact that he is writing from his experiences of sharing to so many different types of people we could assume that he adapted his language to the people. However to conclude this it would necessitate a more

²⁷ GREGORY THE GREAT, *St Gregory the Great Pastoral Care*, = Ancient Christian Writers, Translated and Annotated by Henry Davis, Editors Johannes Quasten and Book III, Prologue.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Book III, 37.

detailed studies of his works and in particular his homilies which is outside the scope of this work.

It does seem that St Gregory does not just place importance in the literary structure of the discourse but rather in talking to their different states he seems to place his hope and trust in the power of the Word of God - "why should not medicine for the soul, applied in one and the same preaching, be of power to meet moral diseases in diverse directions."³⁰ In the preface of the Pastoral rule, he is likened to a good doctor able to apply the medicine of the Word of God - "it is especially as a teacher, and a physician of souls, that he is spoken of throughout the treatise; as one whose peculiar duty it is to be conversant with all forms of spiritual disease, and so be able to suit his treatment to all cases, to preach the word, reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and doctrine."³¹

2.4 Speaking the Truth and its consequences in St John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom in his work regarding the priesthood writes "How great is the skill required for the teacher in contending earnestly for the truth."³² He relates how when the preacher seeks to expound the truth of scriptures the public "rigorously criticize their simplest actions, taking note of the tone of their voice, the cast of their countenance, and the degree of their laughter... in a large assembly, if he does not turn his eyes in every direction when he is conversing, the majority declare that his conduct is insulting."³³ In the face of criticism the preacher must search to be indifferent to praise, slander and envy and continue to preach well - "If any one be too quick to be dejected by these accidents, he will not be able at any time to produce anything noble and admirable. For despondency and constant cares are mighty for destroying the powers of the mind, and for reducing it to extreme weakness."³⁴ Chrysostom acknowledges that this indifference is very hard to acquire;

But this is hard, my good friend; and perhaps, methinks, even impossible. For I know not whether any man ever succeeded in the effort not to be pleased when he is praised, and the man who is pleased at this is likely also to desire to enjoy it, and the man who

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ Philipp SCHAFF, *Preface to Pastoral Rule*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.iii.iv.i.html>. Accessed on 8th October 2010.

³² John CHRYSOSTOM, *Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* Vol XI, Translated with Introduction and Notes by Rev W. R. W. Stephens, edited by Philip Schaff, Wm. B. Eerdmans Printing Company, Michigan 1983, Book V, 1.

³³ *Ibid*, Book III, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Book V, 4.

desires to enjoy it will, of necessity, be altogether vexed and beside himself whenever he misses it... they who long for applause, not only when they are blamed without a cause, but when they are not constantly being praised, become, as by some famine, wasted in soul, particularly when they happen themselves to have been used to praise, or if they hear others being praised.³⁵

He compares public fame to a fierce, wild beast with many heads, difficult to contain - "He who has not freed himself from this monster, involves his soul in struggles of various kinds, and perpetual agitation, and the burden both of despondency and of other passions."³⁶

3. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FOR OUR PREACHING?

The communication of Jesus did not begin only when he opened his lips to pronounce his discourse. He actually was the message in person of the Father. He incarnated it in himself. Communication is not simply a matter of speaking words, but involves the whole life of the preacher. The fact that the preacher is consecrated to God, as a missionary, or as a priest or deacon or even as a Religious sister is itself a sign, a message to the listener. The option for the consecrated life, to not marry and have a family, to live in poverty, chastity and obedience is a message for the world of today. Of course, this testimony of life helps very much but we are also called to "always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (1 Pet 3,15).

3.1 The importance of prayer

The message to transmit is not simply one that contains words. We see in the life of Jesus that the message consists essentially of one word; Love. He is the love of God incarnated. The preacher's message must bear this mark too, his words, his life, his very being. God is love and we have been created in that image and likeness. The love poured into our hearts (c.f Rom 5,5) cannot just remain there. God so loves the world of today that he continues to send His only Son, in and through the life of the preacher. An apostle is one who is sent, sent out of himself or herself to encounter others, to share the love of God with them. There are many ways to love others. One specific way is through the preaching of the Word of God. We see the importance of this task. Jesus did not spend his short time on earth, in the mission doing humanitarian works only. He did not heal all the sick, he did not open the eyes

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Book V, 8.

of all the blind, or cure all the lame. He did not dedicate only to feeding the hungry or righting all injustices. But he did experience the urgency to announce the Good News - "To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent" (Lk 4,43).

Jesus maintained this living relationship with his Father through prayer. The preacher is called to nourish this friendship and relationship with God too. As Jesus insisted "Remain united to me" (cf. Jn 15,1-8). To remain in his love, his word because without him we can do nothing. The preacher needs to live in this constant attitude of prayer and contemplation, to be able to read the signs of the times, the events in his life, both internal events and movements of the spirit and external events, in the surroundings, in the apostolate, in the world. The evangelizer himself needs to find time to listen to the gospel so that he will have good news to announce - "The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself."³⁷ Being rooted in the Word of God, especially the word that he must announce, giving suitable time to reflect on the readings to be preached.

3.2 Using the senses in communication

The fact that Jesus communicated through the 5 senses makes us reflect on the totality of his communication. His whole being was a message. For the preacher of the homily, the main channel of communication is obviously oral corresponding to the hearing of the listener. Here, it is important that the preacher speaks clearly. Often a good homily is ruined by poor acoustics from a defective microphone or poor acoustics in the church. The sense of vision is also important; the facial expressions of the preacher, his gestures (as up to two-thirds of all communication is non-verbal), his physical appearance, his clothes, his liturgical garments if in a mass. The sense of vision may be used in particular situations to enhance the message of the homily, through the use of props such as a priest giving a homily in the first communion of children who shows a slice of bread to show how the Eucharist nourishes us and is the "bread of life." These props, if used creatively and within liturgical bounds, may help reinforce a particular message. Also included are the physical environment in which the person finds himself, the aesthetic structure of the church, the altar, the lighting. All these factors are involved and contribute to what the person in the congregation will see.

The preacher may also make use of his sense of vision, not only to read the liturgical readings or his notes, but to read the reaction of the people. To see if they are following the discourse, to see their reactions. It is not always easy to read the body language of the audience. In the ancient church, it was perhaps easier as the

³⁷ EN 15.

audience interacted more freely with the preacher, expressing joy, laughing, clapping, or expressing pains of remorse even beating their breasts or crying. Today, the congregation seems much more reserved and often serious.

The sense of smell may play a role where during a liturgical ceremony such as an ordination incense may have been used. The incense often adds a pleasing scent of sacrality to the proceedings. The sense of touch is not usually invoked during a preaching, although taken broadly here to include thermo-reception, the temperature of the environment may influence the receptivity of the listener – too hot may make the person sleepy and too cold may also be a distraction. Thus we see that in communicating a message we must not merely consider the transmission from a mere acoustic aspect alone.

3.3 Speaking the language of the people

It is important in the preaching to speak the language of the people. This has various facets such as to speak the same native tongue and to speak a style of language that the people can relate to. This is often a challenge to integrate the readings of a homily, with theology and a practical application. Gregory the Great stresses the importance of knowing the people, to be able to give a specific word adapted to one who is poor, rich, single, married. However the preacher does not always know his audience. In our world of today there is so much geographic mobility that people no longer spend all their life in one parish or even city. In many congregations nowadays there are people who have not been in the area long. Also more marked in contemporary society is the percentage of other nationalities in the congregation. This needs to be born in mind when choosing examples. What may help one culture may be misunderstood by another. Of course a healthy dose of trust is needed in the Holy Spirit, knowing that the Spirit is the one who will enter into the hearts of the believers. That the Word of the Spirit “is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb 4,12). As stated in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* “The word remains ever relevant, especially when it is the bearer of the power of God.”³⁸

The personal experience of the preacher is a valuable way to connect with the people, and in a way to talk their language. The personal experience of the Word of God, the experiences of life, and not only the positive ones. To show the people that the preacher is also human, has his weaknesses and is walking with the people of God in their journey. As Henry Nouwen stated: “A preacher who does not want to make of his faith and his doubts, of his anxiety and of his fears, of his joys and hopes

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

a source of recognition and confrontation for the others, can never expect to remove the many obstacles which prevent the Word of God from bearing its fruits.”³⁹

3.4 Speaking the Truth

In the preaching we must seek to announce the truth and *Communio et progressio* reminds us that “every communication must comply with certain essential requirements and these are sincerity, honesty and truthfulness.”⁴⁰ Not an abstract truth but a truth that is also being lived in our lives. People today are searching for the truth, often in the wrong places. “It is often said nowadays that the present century thirsts for authenticity. Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty.”⁴¹

Every evangelizer is expected to have a reverence for truth, especially since the truth that he studies and communicates is none other than revealed truth and hence, more than any other, a sharing in the first truth which is God himself. The preacher of the Gospel will therefore be a person who even at the price of personal renunciation and suffering always seeks the truth that he must transmit to others. He never betrays or hides truth out of a desire to please men, in order to astonish or to shock, nor for the sake of originality or a desire to make an impression. He does not refuse truth. He does not obscure revealed truth by being too idle to search for it, or for the sake of his own comfort, or out of fear. He does not neglect to study it. He serves it generously, without making it serve him.⁴²

Speaking the truth in love as St Paul would exhort us means that a certain delicacy is needed in treating some sensitive topics of contemporary life. It is not easy in a homily of ten minutes to deal with complicated themes such as In-Vitro Fertilization or topics that can provoke strong reactions such as abortion or end of life issues. It takes a well prepared preacher to be able to treat these topics well in the short time available, presenting the argument clearly and precisely. Despite the challenges the preacher should seek to transmit the truth regarding these areas because so often in the world of today the listener is bombarded with half-truths and lies from the mass media, such that many Catholics today believe more these sources than the Magisterium. Often because they have never had the Magisterium

³⁹ Henry NOUWEN in *Comunicare nella Comunità* by EILERS (my own translation from Italian text), 47.

⁴⁰ CP 17.

⁴¹ EN 76.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 78.

announced or shared to them. The preacher can be encouraged to share in opportune moments such as presented by the Liturgy e.g. the Feast of the Holy Innocents presents a moment to mention the fate of many unborn lives today.

A preacher searching to announce the truth must also pray for the grace to resist the criticism which may come. St John Chrysostom's advice from the 4th century A.D. remains still for us today. He advises that the preacher be his best own critic and to ignore the opinion of outside world, seeking only to please God. For the preacher it is "especially necessary to be trained to be indifferent to all kinds of praise."⁴³ If praised to accept it humbly, but if praise is not offered not to seek it and not to be grieved that it did not come. It is also interesting to consider also how the preacher should act after giving his homily. St Gregory the Great dedicates the final part of his Pastoral Rule to this, and warns of falling into pride over the preaching. He advises the preacher to return to himself, not to be puffed up but to gently consider one's shortcomings before God, the "author of humility."⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Jesus is the 'Perfect Communicator', who perfectly communicates to us the love of the Father. Vital elements in this communication involve prayer, the use of the five senses, talking the language of the people and speaking the truth. These various facets of communication were present in the lives and preaching of the Church Fathers themselves with relevance for today's preaching. It is hoped that these simple considerations may help to make the preaching in general more effective and specifically the homily, which is "an important and very adaptable instrument of evangelization."⁴⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states that "the faithful [...] expect much from this preaching, and will greatly benefit from it provided that it is simple, clear, direct, well-adapted, profoundly dependent on Gospel teaching and faithful to the Magisterium."⁴⁶

May we become more and more like Christ, the Perfect Communicator himself, following in his footsteps, taking seriously his call to become 'perfect' too (cf. Mt 5,48) thus becoming preachers whose lives "glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world."⁴⁷ Learning from Jesus and fully aware that "the preaching of the living Word of God puts the

⁴³ JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Christian Priesthood*, Book V, 8.

⁴⁴ GREGORY THE GREAT, *Pastoral Care*, Part IV.

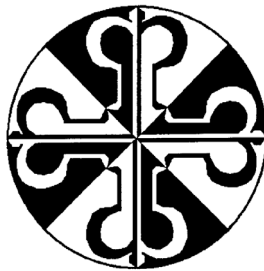
⁴⁵ EN 43.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ EN 80.

person in contact with Christ”⁴⁸ we can hope that the good news will continue to spread (cf. Acts 13,49) and that “all men can come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved” (1 Tim 2,4).

We hope that by taking into account these simple aforementioned considerations, our message can touch the hearts, minds and lives of the people, that we can announce a message that talks to the person in their own language, a message that we ourselves are seeking to incarnate “in Spirit and truth” (cf. Jn 4,23) and even if our homily is still only ten minutes long we hope that in these ten minutes the people may even actually enjoy the preaching and come to know more the love of Christ, who loved us and gave his life for us (cf. Gal 2,20).



⁴⁸ Rev. Fr. Jaime BONET, Constitutions of the *Fraternidad Misionera Verbum Dei*, 10.