

Believing and Praying: The Power of Homilies

By Ralph Martin

It's often been said that by reflecting on what we have received in the tradition of liturgical prayer, we can discover what we believe; prayer as a source of doctrine. The reverse is also true. What we believe determines what we pray – or what we don't pray. Two recent liturgical experiences have brought this home to me in a vivid way. I travel a lot in my work and have the opportunity to participate in liturgies all over the world. The first involved a special mass for babies who died without baptism, either through miscarriage or abortion. The second involved a funeral mass for a teenager who had committed suicide.

The first mass was conducted as a memorial service for babies who had died through miscarriage or abortion. The assumption was that all these babies were in heaven and so celebration was the main note sounded. The homily was used to give comfort to grieving parents and to celebrate their "saints" now interceding for us in heaven. Everyone seemed to like the service very much but I found myself troubled by the lack of advertence to the truth of original sin, which at least poses a theological question about the fate of unbaptized babies. While the concept of limbo (a state of natural happiness lacking the beatific vision) remains a theological speculation it is an attempt to deal with a real issue about the problem of original sin. I turned to the catechism to see how the Church deals with this question today.

The truth of original sin, and the necessity of baptism, is, of course, affirmed.

"Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth." (1250)

The catechism then deals with all the special cases and elaborates the sound theology of baptism by blood, and by explicit and implicit desire. (1257-1260) Then it considers the special case of children who die without baptism.

"As regards *children who have died without Baptism*, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God...allows us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism." (1261)

There is no treatment of the concept of limbo in the catechism but the index refers us to #1261 when consulting the entry of "limbo." Is there anything besides hoping that we can do to help such infants? Yes, the catechism tells us we should pray for their salvation.

“With respect to children who have died without Baptism, the liturgy of the Church invites us to trust in God’s mercy and to pray for their salvation.” (1283)

What we don’t know and can’t say with certainty is sometimes as important as what we do know and can say with certainty. The bottom-line is that in the case of infants who die without baptism, we don’t know with certainty what happens. Because of God’s great mercy, we can hope for their salvation. But hope is much different than presuming. And because we hope – but don’t know certainly – the Church urges us to respond with a particular action; to pray for the salvation of infants who have died without baptism.

At this particular liturgy, because the salvation of unbaptized infants was presumed, there was no prayer for their salvation. Because the homily stated the salvation of unbaptized infants as a certainty, there was probably little or no prayer for these infants in subsequent weeks or months as well.

In an effort to be compassionate, these infants were deprived of the prayers of the believing community. In this case, false compassion, led to in fact, uncompassionate results.

Even though this may appear to some as a minor “bending” of the truth, for the sake of compassion, every bending of the truth has implications for life – for prayer, for actions.

I am concerned that this homiletic presumption of salvation for unbaptized infants also could be interpreted as confirming a view that is all too commonly held today: “sometimes it is better for the baby to be aborted and go to a better life than to be born into terrible circumstances.” When there is only one possible destination – heaven – death is increasingly seen as a solution to life’s problems. I have heard on more than one occasion women speak of sending their babies to heaven, to become “angels”, rather than having them born into inconvenient or even truly difficult circumstances.

Truth, even in what appear to be minor details, leads to right action, including, right praying. Falsehood, even when motivated by compassion, even in small matters, leads to wrong action, including wrong – or non-existent – praying.

The second Mass was a funeral for a teenager who had taken their own life. As the Mass proceeded I found myself grateful that the Church now allowed such Masses and held out the hope of mercy and salvation even in such instances. There were many young people at the Mass and much grief at such a tragedy. As the Mass proceeded it became clear that it was becoming a celebration of the dead teenager’s entry into heaven. In the homily and at other points during the Mass it was affirmed over and over that the dead teenager was now in heaven, in a “better place” and was now an “angel” an intercessor for us. We hope, we pray. But no, we didn’t hope or pray. We presumed and celebrated. Troubled again I checked the catechism.

We read that suicide is gravely wrong, contrary to love of self, love of neighbor and family and love of God. (2280-2281)

We also read that “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.” (2282)

And the response of the Christian community when faced with such tragedy?

“We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.” (2283)

Unfortunately there was not much praying, in hope, for the salvation of the dead teenager. Primarily there was homiletic and other affirmation that the young person who had taken their life was now in a much better place. We hope, but we don’t know. And so we pray, or at least ought to.

Here again, a bending of the truth, this time, a more significant bending, has led to an absence of the only helpful action in this case; intercessory prayer for the salvation of the one who died by taking their own life. But perhaps an even graver damage has taken place.

What of the many living young people who were at this funeral Mass? What message did they get? Were they, inadvertently, given permission to travel the same road of suicide? Is it unreasonable to think that some of them might be struggling with depression or hopelessness or despair and be tempted to suicide? When there’s only one possible destination on the other side of death – heaven – doesn’t death become more and more an attractive solution to the problems and pressures of life?

The responsibility of speaking the truth in love is very serious indeed. Life and death, heaven and hell, truly hang in the balance. The power of the homily can be very great indeed.

(Originally published in *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, December 2003)