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Thoughts on Abp DiNoia's Red Mass Sermon

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Distinctly Catholic

NCR has already published the text of Archbishop J. Augustine DiNoia's homily at yesterday's Red Mass. I hope readers will consult it, especially preachers, because it is rare that we get such a specimen of fine preaching.

There were many fine passages. In speaking of the central dogma of our faith, the Trinity, the archbishop made clear, what is too often forgotten, that our Catholic faith makes a large claim: "Christ teaches and the Church proclaims that God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, desires to share the communion of trinitarian life with creaturely persons, that in the famous formulation of St. Irenaeus "God who is without need of anyone gives communion with himself to those who need him." It is easy to forget, when the Church is beset by self-induced scandals and in an age that treats religion as an artifact of an earlier and simpler time, that at the heart of our faith is an invitation to join the divine life.

As well, in making the point that morality is a thing discerned, not invented, and that a certain humane consensus informed the actual founding of the practice of law as a distinct profession, Archbishop DiNoia pointed out that invoking the Jewish and Islamic, as well as the Christian, influences on Western culture is no mere politically correct slogan, but a historical fact: "The legal profession is entrusted with the discernment and administration of justice and the rule of law according to an objective measure in effect, according to principles not of our own making. A consensus about these principles inspired the founders of modern democracies, and although it was profoundly influenced by Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (think of Averroes, Maimonides and Aquinas), this consensus was understood to transcend religious and cultural differences."

These are fine passages, in beautiful prose, but what makes this sermon so powerful as a whole? First, there is real meat, there is something to think about, the implications of the sermon are not all spelled out

within itself, but the congregation was given food for thought. Am I the only Catholic who wonders sometimes why a priest sits down after a particularly banal sermon, as if we need quiet time to think about what we have just heard when what we just heard was so pedestrian as to require little in the way of reflection? I suspect everyone left St. Matthew's yesterday chewing over parts of this homily.

Second, Archbishop DiNoia takes a beautiful text, the Golden Sequence, as a literary thread to unite his thoughts. He also employed the scripture readings of the day, but sometimes preachers are so tied to the scripture readings, that they neglect other aspects of the tradition that are well suited to different occasions as well as to an understanding of a given scriptural text. A preacher is not an exegete, and while there are some difficult passages that require exegesis, the point of a sermon cannot be to explain what a given text meant to the people of the author's time but to the people of our time. The sermon at Mass is above all a time for catechesis, the time when a priest has more members of his flock than at any other, and they should not be afraid to preach upon the Creed, the sacraments, and beautiful prayers like the Golden Sequence, to unearth the richness of our tradition.

Third, and related to the point above, Archbishop DiNoia took the time to ask the question too many preachers forget to ask: Why are we doing this? What does it mean when we say we are invoking the Holy Spirit? As the recent Pew survey indicated, many believers know precious little about their own faith and while intellectual knowledge of one's faith is not the only, or even the primary, way of making a creed one's own, an intelligent understanding of the faith is critical. Christ calls us to convert our minds as well as our hearts to Him. I think preachers neglect the need to explain the fundamentals of our faith and move on to discussions of morality or social justice or whatever. The New Evangelization is not only about employing new methods for preaching the Gospel, it is about reminding us what that Gospel is all about.

I confess that someday, and while Justice Antonin Scalia is still on the Court, I hope the Red Mass will be preached by someone with the homiletic naughtiness to point out that as Catholics, we do not believe the tradition is a dead letter, that the tradition involves not only the unchangeable Bible but the highly changeable us, that we do not engage in an idolatry of the text of the Scripture. There is no "originalism" within the Catholic faith. Let Scalia, and others who seem to think that originalism is the only suitable means for interpreting the Constitution, squirm a little bit about their penchant for investing the Constitution with greater authority than Catholics invest the Bible.

I invite readers to read the text and send in their comments. What do you think of Archbishop DiNoia's homily?

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