



Along the backroads of a homilist's mind

By Father Robert Sherry
NC News Service

The late-night TV news concludes; the names roll by of the director, the producers, the writers, camerapersons, editors, reporters, researchers, makeup persons. Some 18 well-heeled sponsors paid for this production of mostly bad news.

A tired viewer wonders to himself: How can he compete next Sunday morning, proclaiming the good news from his worn pulpit with its static-filled public address system?

He recalls the wisdom of the Second Vatican Council: The primary role of the priest is to preach the Gospel. And he reaches for a missalette in order to take an early first glance at next Sunday's scripture readings. But it is already 48 hours past the point in the week at which, only a month ago, he had resolved to take this early first glance.

"This week I'll really take time to prepare," he vows, even while remembering what a colleague told him recently. It concerned a well-known writer of homilies who took 60 to 80 hours to prepare a single homily. "Impossible," the priest mutters, "unless that's all he had to do."

The priest's musing continued. "How do I distinguish between what my parishioners need and what they want?" he wonders.

"What if some think Christianity should be an electric blanket rather than the cross it is?"

"How can I be concrete without becoming embarrassingly specific? How do I sound really involved without sounding fanatical?"

"And what about me personally? I was trained in cold and abstract philosophical terms, while the new preaching methods tell me to preach in imaginative images and poetic phrases. I was trained to offer answers and solutions; now I must preach without being preachy."

"What is my basic approach? Should every homily say that God is love or that he is not yet discouraged with his people? I want people to share my vision, to feel what I feel."

"But who is God? For some, God is the distant supreme being. For others he is the very personal and intimate Jesus. Others see God as tender love. How do I lead such diverse people in a unified prayer?"

As the priest mulled things over, the voice of one of his professors came back to him. "To conclude a scripture passage by saying, 'This is the word of the Lord,' is only half true," the professor had protested.

"The other half of the truth," said the professor, "is in the lives of the people — in their needs

and traditions. If the word is not linked with their concerns it is only half the word. Because the word was made flesh — our flesh."

"And I, the homilist, am challenged to make that obvious," the priest thought to himself. "And I must do it without ignoring the mystery. I can't explain the Trinity — even to the people of this scientific age."

"If I say what mystery means to me, will it marrow or will it broaden the thinking of other people? If they see what I really believe, will they search their souls for what is really relevant for them?"

The priest pledged again to dream dreams and share visions; to renew his faith and his life so that he would not be embarrassed to preach what he practiced and to practice what he preached.

"Give me time and energy to mull over your word in my daily life, to find the core of your word that strikes me like the fire of your spirit," he prayed. "Do not let me rest until I have to tell it as you tell it to me."

Amen.

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Getting inside t

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Late in the fourth century A.D., citizens in the Middle East city of Antioch, already burdened by their taxes, heard the news that yet another tax was being levied on them. Outraged, the people rioted. They ran through the city streets and pulled down the statues of the royal family in the central square.

To a priest of Antioch fell the thankless task of quieting the people and preventing worse actions, which might bring down around all their heads the wrath of the powerful emperor.

St. John Chrysostom was equal to the task. In a series of homilies, he found a way to calm his people and console them in their misery. Eventually in his Easter homily, he was able to give them the happy news that the emperor was willing to grant them clemency.

St. John, whose surname "Chrysostom" means "golden-mouthed," has come down in history as the patron of those who preach. The stories about him indicate that this doctor of the church had a gift for establishing rapport with his congregation. A man of passionate feelings, he related Scripture to the lives of his people in order to

Telling it like it

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Words are cheap. Or are they?

The story of a time when tension developed among two groups of people in the early church helps to illustrate how important words were considered then.

However, in the case I refer to it wasn't just words, but God's word that became the question. This word is "sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart" (Hebrews 4).

The story involved some Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking members of the Jerusalem community of Christians. It seems that some Greek-speaking members felt that when the church's funds for the needy were distributed, their widows were short-changed.

The group complained to the Twelve about this problem. It was then that seven men were named to help serve the needy. For the Twelve said: "It is not right for us