

CHAPTER ONE

THE BREAD AND BUTTER OF DISCIPLESHIP

A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. Some seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.” After saying this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear... The seed is the word of God...

—Luke 8:5-8, 11b

The Weight of Words

In his homily for the Sunday vigil Mass at World Youth Day 2011, Pope Benedict XVI spoke 1384 words as he addressed young people in seven languages.¹ A conversational Catholic homily contains about 1000-1200 words; an average Protestant sermon uses 1400-1800 words. Orations of old were longer: John Wesley’s 1747 sermon “Almost Christian” wound through 3458 words.² Preaching is a word-filled business.

Yet an iPod classic in the pocket of an American teenager can contain up to 1,200,000 words. In an ad for that product, more is touted as better:

Decisions, decisions. Who needs them? Why should you have to choose what to put on your iPod? With up to 160GB of storage, iPod classic lets you carry everything in your collection - up to 40,000 songs or up to 200 hours of video - everywhere you go.³

Adults, too, are constantly bombarded by words through advertising and email, from TV and computer. We live in an overcommunicated society. We learn how to tune out. We “tighten the

¹As translated into English at <http://www.lifeteen.com/blog/vigil-homily-by-pope-benedict-at-world-youth-day-2011> [accessed 9-10-11].

²<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-2-the-almost-christian/> [accessed 9-10-11].

³This number is based on the assumption that the average number of words per song is 30; therefore 40,000 songs results in 1,200,000 words. This product description is from the Google products catalog at: http://www.google.com/products/catalog?q=160gb+ipod&rls=com.microsoft:en-us:IE-SearchBox&oe=UTF-8&rlz=1I7GGIK_en&um=1&ie=UTF-8&tbm=shop&cid=18145243408964402428&sa=X&ei=eXxrTqDAGOrc0QHH8dyOBQ&ved=0CJcBEPMCMAI# [accessed 9-10-11].

intake valve” so that we are not overwhelmed by noise. This is an act of self-preservation. We are a culture that is learning to specialize in how not to listen.⁴ How then, can we hear the word of God that is sown, when so many other seeds are also applied so thickly? How can we get people’s attention?

Stories but not Studies

The question of being heard is one that the business world also asks. The world of marketing research spent 6.7 billion dollars in the United States in 2005 to determine whether or not the products or services that they provided were actually desired by their customers. Teenagers were projected to spend 208.7 billion dollars in 2011,⁵ an invaluable segment of the population to whom marketers sell. The marketing research lab at the University of Akron uses “contemporary psychological and cognitive research techniques, such as eye tracking, and brainwave and physiological analyses, that allow researchers to comprehensively understand the respondents’ real time feelings, impressions, and emotions toward marketing messages and products.”⁶ The continual process of determining how to reach the hearts and minds and pocketbooks of young Americans is big business. Yet the search for studies of that same population’s response to preaching comes up almost empty-handed. Questions essential to determining basic effectiveness in drawing our young people into an encounter with God such as: how is this experience of preaching for you? What is helping you to grow closer? What is not? What is happening within you as a result of that preaching? These are not being asked.

⁴ Al Ries and Jack Trout, *Positioning: The Battle for your Mind: How to be Seen and Heard in the Overcrowded Marketplace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 7.

⁵ Marketing Vox, “By 2011, Teen Market Shrinks, Spending Clout Soars to \$200B,” <http://www.marketingvox.com/by-2011-teen-market-shrinks-spending-clout-soars-to-200b-031001/> [accessed August 8, 2010].

⁶ The University of Akron, “The Benjamin and Nancy Suarez Applied Marketing Research Laboratories,” <http://www.uakron.edu/cba/cba-home/dept-cent-inst/suarez.dot> [accessed August 3, 2010].

Anecdotal evidence abounds. Parents hear responses to preaching from their teenagers regularly as families prepare for Mass. A friend who is a newly ordained deacon asked his sixteen-year-old son, “What can the Church do to reach you and your friends?” The boy’s response was immediate: “It’s the preaching, Dad!”

An eleventh-grader raved about her youth group and the youth Mass on Sunday nights. “The music is great! There’s SO much energy!”

I smiled and nodded and then inquired, “How’s the preaching?”

She pulled back and rocked on her heels. She said nothing. As she started to look away, I raised my eyebrows, encouraging an answer. “Well...,” she said, “We... uh, sorta ignore that part...”

Anecdotal evidence abounds, but studies do not. Adolescence is a pivotal age. According to the Pew Forum study “Faith in Flux,”⁷ four out of five Catholics who are now religiously unaffiliated became that way before they reached the age of twenty-four. Most of those who left before they were eighteen say that leaving was their own decision. Many factors were involved in why young people left their parents’ faith. Seventy-one percent of those surveyed who became Protestant cited “spiritual needs not met” as the number one reason for leaving Catholicism. Eighty-one percent of those raised Catholic who are now Protestant gave as the first reason for what they like about their *new* place of worship was “enjoy the religious services and style of worship.” What percentage of their enjoyment comes from preaching within the worship service? How much of their earlier frustration comes from the preaching? On that, the Pew study is silent. Stories abound. Studies do not.

The Catholic reader who hears those statistics may immediately formulate a mental

⁷The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.,” [http://pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux\(3\).aspx](http://pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux(3).aspx) [accessed May 5, 2010].

response in his or her head. These rejoinders are heard: “Oh, they just wanted to be entertained.” “Liturgy isn’t about enjoyment.” “They must not understand the value of the Eucharist if they leave so easily.” Statistics may be rationalized and thus brushed aside, but the experiences that they represent are genuine. If God has something to reveal to us through this, are we listening? If the purpose of sacramental preaching is to draw the community more deeply into the worship of God, then the Church must open the conversation and address the serious questions about what is being experienced in the encounter of the homily.

The hope of the church is sitting in our pews. The business of selling bases both its predictions for the future and its strategies to shape that future on an intensive analysis of the present. If we are to envisage the future of preaching and develop strategies by which to shape that future, we need stronger data.

Bread and Butter Preaching

Lori Carrell asked 479 church-goers what component of the church service has the most impact on their spiritual life. Both Protestants and Catholics, by a wide margin, said “the sermon.”⁸ *The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* similarly states:

The people of God is formed into one in the first place by the word of the living God, which is quite rightly expected from the mouth of priests. For since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all.⁹

Though preaching is a high priority for both Catholic people in the pew and for those who worked for renewal at the Second Vatican Council, the practice of preaching does not always live up to its potential. Some would say that the expectation for the Liturgy of the Word

⁸Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000), 95.

⁹Paul VI, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* [Encyclical Letter, *The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 1965] (Northport NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), n.4.

is low,¹⁰ that the Church is not the healthy and vibrant Body that the Spirit would like it to be. It is like a deficiency or a gap in the nutrition of the People of God.¹¹ A scarcity of iron in the diet does not lead to immediate death, but a continual absence of that mineral leads to lethargy, a lack of energy and anemia. Many have found that a fortifying Sunday homily is an essential ingredient for a healthy spiritual diet. I have heard teenagers' stories. Some are satisfied. Many are hungry. The noise of the rumbling of a stomach is not loud unless those in the room are quietly listening.

I am not an unbiased observer on this subject. I am a woman of the pew, not a man of the cloth. I have heard much preaching. Some is inspiring. Some is not. From my theological context, I see preaching as connection: Spirit to spirit, heart to heart, life experience to life experience. Jesus preached the message of the gospel in the words of the people. Whatever it took to get his message across that is what he did.

To me, good liturgical preaching connects people to God; it sinks in like good butter melted on warm toast. A preacher is a local prophet who asks, "Is there a word from the Lord for *this* people *this* day?" Ideally, the aroma of communal prayer, the self-surrender of everyday life, and personal prayer has warmed the congregation to absorb and live into that message. The preacher is the agent of that slathering, the one who churns and spreads the butter of the Lord for an absorbent congregation.¹² They move into the mystery of God together.

Thomas Long also uses this analogy of nourishment:

¹⁰Richard John Neuhaus, who moved from the role of a Protestant minister to being a Catholic priest, says, "It is only human that low expectations and low execution go together; homiletically speaking, priests are under little pressure. Ten minutes of more-or-less impromptu "reflections" vaguely related to the Scripture lessons of the day, combined with a little story or personal anecdote, is "good enough." Richard John Neuhaus, "Low Expectations and Catholic Preaching," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, April 1, 2004.

¹¹Neuhaus diagnoses this same "nutrient deficiency" as banality. He quips, "As one priest friend half-jokingly remarked in defense of homiletical mediocrity, "We must be careful not to raise their expectations."

¹²... or the "mediator" between God and the assembly, as described in *FIYH*.

The church is blessed, of course, by the rare preacher of exceptional ability, but the church is sustained most of all by the kind of careful, responsible, and faithful preaching that falls within the range of most of us. In this regard, preaching is a little like cooking. There are, to be sure, a few five star chefs whose gourmet meals dazzle and delight. We can learn from them and be inspired by their gifts, but no one eats a steady diet of five-star meals. Instead, what truly sustains is daily bread – food lovingly, ably, and carefully prepared. So it is with preaching. God’s people are nourished most not by the five-star preachers but by those preachers who, week in and week out, lovingly, ably, and carefully prepare the “daily bread” of sermons, and the art and craft of this kind of preparation can indeed be learned.¹³

As an adolescent, I sat at the feet of a rare preacher of great ability. Dr. Ernie Campbell of the First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan was a minister who could craft a sermon. I mean, he could *really* preach. My teenage take-away was that the subject of “God” was weighty, substantial, of importance and worthy of my deepest consideration. Campbell told stories of everyday life—the discussion that he had with a man that he had met on the plane, what it was like to share a meal with a family, and how all of that pertained to the gospel. In his later years, he taught homiletics. My parents also watched Billy Graham on TV. When my husband and I joined the Catholic Church during college in Raleigh, N.C., Fr. Thomas P. Hadden’s preaching touched us deeply. These experiences gave me a feel for what toe-tingling preaching could be. In the intervening years, I have both seen and experienced frustration. As a convert to Catholicism, perhaps I expect more? As one who works with young people, I believe that we as a Church can do better.

As a theologically trained mother, I offer a perspective which is also not often academically heard. This problem does not just grab my interest—it fires me deeply. Why? Because I care; I care that the message of the gospel transforms us; I care that the grieving are comforted; I care that those in despair are filled with hope; I care that the light of Christ is effectively preached and brightly burning in a “whatever” age; I care that the people in the pew

¹³Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 14.

hear a word that gives them life. These are my people. These are the ones I live with. These are my children, my students, my friends. We are worth better preaching. How do we know what young people need, want or are able to hear? Ask them. Market researchers do. If the secular world is willing to invest so much into understanding them, as people of faith who care about their spiritual welfare, so should we.

The Call to Discipleship

The Sunday liturgy is the prime point of contact with the Church for most Catholic high school students. For those who are not involved in youth groups, service groups, or religious education classes, it is the only point of contact. How do we know this?

Dr. Christian Smith has done ground-breaking research on the religious life of American young people. In his 2005 *National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)*, he discovered, rather than rebelling against their elders, “that the vast majority of American teenagers are *exceedingly conventional* in their religious identity and practices.” Rather than embracing the “spiritual but not religious” mantra projected in the popular press, as a rule they view religion rather positively.¹⁴

In terms of life outcomes, Smith discovered that parents, youth groups, youth minister mentoring, and supportive congregational life have a strong influence on what youth believe and how they live their lives. The good news is that the building of young disciples is alive and well in America.¹⁵

The flip side of that generally good news is what is happening in the Church of Rome: Catholic youth consistently score much lower than average on all measures of religiosity. Smith focuses an entire chapter to Catholic youth, asking, “Why? Why do U.S. Catholic teenagers as a

¹⁴Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119-120.

¹⁵As of 2002-2003 when the data was collected.

whole seem so less religiously engaged than their teenage counterparts in other U.S. Christian traditions?” Why are the majority “religiously and spiritually indifferent, uninformed and disengaged?”¹⁶ Eighty-seven percent of Catholic youth do not attend a weekly youth group. Seventy-seven percent have never been on a religious mission team or service project and 59% never go to religious education classes or go only a few times per year.¹⁷ For those who are not involved in these outside activities, the Sunday liturgy is the prime point of contact for those who are still attending Mass. Yet only 37% of surveyed Catholic teens (ages 13–17) said that they had *ever* had an experience of spiritual worship that was very moving and powerful—the lowest of any Christian or Jewish denomination. Only the non-religious scored lower.¹⁸

What does this mean for a Church which has historically centered itself in its sacramental heritage over and against its homiletic acumen? The homily is one of the three variations in the rubric of a Catholic service.¹⁹ How much does that preaching form the young laity’s impression of the institutional Church? And if the majority of Catholic teens are only seen at Mass, can the Catholic homily carry the weight of this being their only source of faith growth?²⁰

If a parent struggles to get his teenage son to Mass each Sunday for the four years of high school, is there a word from the Lord for him? Whereas some Protestant churches have age-segregated worship experiences and Sunday school classes for children and teens, an average Catholic assembly does not: forty percent of the pew-sitters could be under the age of twenty on a particular Sunday.

¹⁶Ibid., 194-196.

¹⁷Ibid., 53.

¹⁸Ibid., 45. This data has provoked much soul-searching in Catholic youth ministry since it was published. The National Initiative for Adolescent Catechesis at <http://adolescentcatechesis.org/> is a multi-organizational group which is developing desired outcomes and programs for families and parishes. Ironically, though the prime point of contact for teens, there is no mention of the role of liturgical preaching in the faith growth of adolescents.

¹⁹The others are the lectionary-based Scripture readings and the music.

²⁰In interviews with Catholic clergy, one average, those in the pulpit weigh the homily more lightly than do those in the pew.

Because of this demographic difference, mainline Protestant homiletic style does not transfer to a Catholic context. It does not fit.²¹ The silent gray-haired congregation who quietly listens to a manuscript preacher at my father's church²² does not look anything like the toddler-child-teenager squirm of some American Catholic Masses. Though with the aging of the priesthood, the preacher may look more like the Presbyterians, his congregation does not.

The Blind Spot in Church Documents

What has been written in official Church teaching about the relationship between preaching and the discipling of our youth? Do we have the vision of inviting them to enter with us into the mystery of God? Church documents do not specifically connect the faith lives of young people with liturgical preaching. *FIYH* highlights the significance of the homily in Catholics' lives and the need to know the assembly before preaching. This broadly applies:

Unless a preacher knows what a congregation needs, wants or is able to hear, there is every possibility that the message offered in the homily will not meet the needs of the people who hear it... Homilists may indeed preach on what they understand to be the real issues, but if they are out in touch with what the people think are the real issues, they will very likely be misunderstood or not heard at all. What is communicated is not what is said, but it is what is heard, and what is heard is determined in large measure by what the hearer needs or wants to hear.²³

The document makes the point that knowing one's congregation matters.²⁴ *FIYH* defines preaching as "a scriptural interpretation of human existence."²⁵ The preacher is to make use of Scripture as a lens on the community, naming its grace and its pain.

²¹Until the last decade, homiletic training in Catholic seminaries used Protestant texts such as Long, Craddock, and Buttrick. Catholic tomes by DeLeers, Harris, Wallace, deBona and Hilkert have now broadened that education.

²²Denominations vary widely in their numbers of young people. See the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life U.S., Religious Landscape Survey at <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-chapter-3.pdf> [accessed August 16, 2011]. For example, the demographic of Presbyterians has aged, while the Mormon and the Muslim populations are, in 2011, decidedly young.

²³*FIYH*, 3.

²⁴In the Protestant tradition, knowing one's congregation has been emphasized by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) and James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

²⁵*FIYH*, 29.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* similarly highlights the homily as an ongoing *adult* educational experience:

The ministry of the word is at the service of this process of full conversion. The first proclamation of the Gospel is characterized by the call to faith; catechesis by giving a foundation to conversion and providing Christian life with a basic structure; while ongoing education in the faith, in which *the place of the homily must be underlined, is characterized by being the necessary nourishment of which every baptized adult has need in order to live.*²⁶

Explicit mention of youth is absent in these two documents. This lacuna reveals a blind spot, a perception that the kids are not present in the liturgical assembly. A comment that frequently arose in the current study is reflected by this suggestion from a fourteen year old boy: “I would tell them [preachers] to use examples that we can relate to, as most homilies are geared towards older adults.”

What about documents that are written about young people? Do they highlight the role of preaching in the lives of teens? The ground-breaking document on ministry to youth, *Renewing the Vision*, describes its first goal in the 1997 document:

The challenge of discipleship—of following Jesus—is at the heart of the Church’s mission. *All ministry with adolescents must be directed toward presenting young people with the Good News of Jesus Christ and inviting and challenging them to become his disciples.*²⁷

Discipleship built within community is the goal. This U.S. Catholic bishops’ document urges solidarity with youth: “In youth-friendly parishes, young people should feel a sense of belonging and acceptance as full-fledged members of the community.”²⁸ Yet preaching is mentioned only *once* in those sixty pages, in the third section on the themes and components for a comprehensive

²⁶Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*. n.57 found at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_en.html (Italics mine.).

²⁷*National Council of Catholic Bishops, Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997), 9. (Italics in the original.)

²⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

ministry with adolescents, buried toward the back in a subsection about prayer and worship:

Specifically, the ministry of prayer and worship ...promotes effective preaching of the word. (Parishes and schools can invite young people to reflect on the seasonal readings and to offer suggestions to the homilist for connections to young peoples' lives, provide regular opportunities for adolescents to study the Scriptures, encourage those who preach to use current examples and storytelling techniques, and investigate the developments within culture for their impact on the "vernacular.")²⁹

When once asked, "What is in this homily for the young people in your assembly?" a clergyman responded, "Oh, they stopped listening a long time ago." Might our youth have absorbed that which is reflected in the documents, the perspective that they are not there?³⁰

Attuned to this situation as a result of the comments of the young people in my study, I sat at the back of a church a few weeks ago and listened to a homily that talked about "the youth" and "the children." As I looked in front of me, almost every other person was young. In some of the pews, one adult sat with three or four "youth." I watched the interaction. The preacher talked about "how much we love the children," speaking of them at arm's length as though they were an "other." He looked satisfied with his talk and unaware that he was marginalizing half of his listeners. The grandmother in front of me appeared to melt with gratitude for the focus on loving children. The kids themselves seemed embarrassed. The middle-school students acted self-conscious, as though they were trying not to eavesdrop on an adult conversation that was obviously not for them. The older ones simply tuned out.

Humus and Humility

When *FIYH* was written in 1982, the Catholic assembly was presumed to be composed of Christian believers.³¹ This assumption also runs through other contemporary preaching

²⁹Ibid., 46.

³⁰Maria Montessori, in studying children, suggests that they absorb attitudes as much or more than they hear content. See *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1967). Though Montessori observed younger children, many who are experienced with teens describe the same phenomenon.

³¹*FIYH*, 17.

literature. Can we hypothesize that we are preaching to Christian believers in this second decade of the twenty-first century? Smith's *NSYR* study has found that American high-school students, across the board, mirror their parents in a belief which he characterizes as "moralistic therapeutic deism." They believe in a God who wants people to be nice, good, and fair, a divine butler who will come running when you need him; the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself; that nice people all go to heaven. According to Smith, there is little common understanding among both youth and their parents of the basic Christian teachings of sin, redemption, or the paschal mystery.³²

Biblical literacy also cannot be presumed. In 2010, the Pew Research Center studied religious knowledge in the United States. Not quite 75% of Americans knew that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that Moses was the biblical figure who led the Israelites out of Egypt. On other questions, "religious people" did not do any better than those who were not: "White mainline Protestants and white Catholics each closely resemble the public overall, getting about half of the 32 religious knowledge questions right on average."³³ Atheists and agnostics actually did better in these religious questions. This study evaluated only adult responses. Yet, if as Smith found, that teenagers mirror their parents in religious understanding, this data may also reflect a similar lack of biblical literacy among our young people. In Smith's chapter on Catholic teens,³⁴ he summarizes his sociological findings about the youth of our Church: "Evidence suggests that more than a few of today's Catholic youth may be falling through the organizational cracks without much notice." He found that: 1) Catholic youngsters have a low level of what he

³²Smith, 162-171.

³³Pew Forum, "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey," <http://pewforum.org/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey-Who-Knows-What-About-Religion.aspx> [accessed 9-10-11].

³⁴Smith, chapter 6.

measures as “religiosity” when compared to teens of other Christian denominations; 2) that Catholic parents are less likely than others to say that their church has been supportive or helpful to them in trying to raise their high school students; and 3) that the Catholic Church is relatively weak when it comes to devoting attention and resources to its youth and their parents.³⁵ He concludes that “contemporary U.S. Catholic teens are faring rather badly.”³⁶ If the challenge of following Jesus is at the heart of the Church’s mission in all its ministries with young people, then the recognition of the pivotal ministry of Sunday liturgical preaching has passed us by unseen. It is as though we fling the seed in the vague hope that it will somehow take root.

Listening to Listeners as Cultivating the Soil

In the parable of the sower which opened this chapter, the soil was a given in the equation—where the seed landed, it landed. Nowadays, genetically modified seed is too valuable to be arbitrarily tossed. Soil preparation has become central to healthy crop growth. One of the advances in agriculture in the past fifty years has been this attention to the dirt. For an organic gardener, if the soil is rocky, organic matter is added to create humus. If the birds are a problem, a thin sheet of netting is laid down to keep them away until after germination. If weeds threaten to overtake the tender plants, mulch is carefully spread like a blanket. In the biblical telling of the parable, the hearers of the word are the soil upon whom the seed is dispersed. In a modern understanding, the soil has to be carefully nurtured since the seed as the word of God is more than expensive: it is priceless.

This “nurturing of the soil” is at the heart of the turn toward the listener in recent homiletic years. In love, we humbly and honestly dig around to find out: What is the soil like? What do we begin with? What soil amendments do we need? What is the current pH—is the soil

³⁵Ibid., 211.

³⁶Ibid., 216.

imbalanced as too acidic or too basic? Where are the microenvironments of receptiveness and how can we duplicate those characteristics elsewhere? The emergence of the study of soil as essential to crop production parallels the surfacing of the study of listeners as integral to preaching.

The ground for the voice of the pew has been broken. What has been found in the diggings about listeners and their relationship with preaching that can inform this current study of young listeners?

The name most associated with the turn toward the listener in the last half century is Dr. Fred Craddock of the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.³⁷ In his 1971 book *As One Without Authority*, Craddock attributes to Werner Jetter, professor of preaching at Tübingen, the origin of the paradigm shift toward the listener in this quote: "... the preacher must treat his [or her] hearers as mature men [and women] and learn to hear his [or her] own words with their ears."³⁸ In his 1985 textbook, *Preaching*, Craddock devotes his fifth chapter to a listener exercise in homiletic preparation.³⁹ Imagining the life of the listener impacts what is preached:

The preacher who responds to the question, "What's it like to be fourteen years old?" will not likely preach one of those "The Trouble with Young People Today" broadsides which have the net effect of emptying the sanctuary of its last few teenagers. The loss is too tragic to be redeemed by a compliment from the shrew who is pleased that someone finally put the young people in their place.⁴⁰

Thomas Troeger penned his 1982 book *Creating Fresh Images for Preaching* around an imaginative conversation with various elders of his Presbyterian church. In talking of images that

³⁷ For an historical account of the "turn toward the listeners" as it has developed in the Protestant homiletic world, see Beverly Zink-Sawyer's, "The Word Purely Preached and Heard: The Listeners and the Homiletical Endeavor," *Interpretation* 51 (1997): 342-357. Zink-Sawyers asserts (p. 354) that attending to the listener is not a "new discovery but a recovery of an ever-present concern." Also see Allen's "The Turn to the Listener: A Selective Review of a Recent Trend in Preaching," *Encounter*, 64 no. 2 (Spring, 2003), 167-196.

³⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Revised and with New Sermons* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 159, endnote 1 to Chapter 3, paraphrasing Jetter from page 46 of *Wem predigen wir?* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1964).

³⁹ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 84-98.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

resonate with his listeners, he says, “People say and hear and see what is inside of their heads, and everyone is hearing and seeing something different... They are there taking your words and supplying the meaning from their own lives.”⁴¹

The image of sermon preparation had been the man in his study with his Bible and his books and his God. Then the listener joined in the preacher’s imagination. (Also about that time, in some traditions, the picture began to include “her” study, Bible, and God...) Preaching preparation further broadened: rather than presuming the experience of the listener, some preachers began to listen to the listeners themselves. Starting in 1975, Bishop Ken Untener of the Saginaw, Michigan diocese kept a notebook in his pocket and talked to lay people every chance that he could—strangers, at parties, on airplanes:

I bought a pocket notebook and began to ask people (Colombo style) what they liked and didn’t like about homilies. I asked only “the people in the pew,” that is... (those who) had no particular axe to grind... They talked; I wrote. Surprising how willing people were (and are) to talk about this. Others who overheard chimed in.”⁴²

Untener went after his feedback by asking listeners, “How’s the preaching?” Other feedback can come in without asking. As preachers (hopefully) know, the voluntary feedback that comes to them may be skewed by the fact that respondents have the candor or the passion to volunteer it. Untener said that the immediate post-worship response of “Good homily, Father!” or “Great sermon, Pastor!” is “usually not helpful and should not be taken too seriously.”⁴³ Yet he admits that good feedback is hard to get. Listeners tend to keep their responses to themselves.

As a pew-sitter for all of my life, I have heard much discussion in the parking lot, over a picnic lunch, in the car on the way home, in the schoolroom, etc. Comments from Protestants and

⁴¹Thomas H. Troeger, *Creating Fresh Images for Preaching: New Rungs for Jacob’s Ladder* (Valley Forge: Judson Press), 22.

⁴²Ken Untener, *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 1.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 99.

Catholics range from: “Do you think she needs a new wardrobe?” and “I don’t know what he said... he rambled all over the place” to “That story really touched me” and “Hey, wanna hear a good joke?” I recently ate lunch with a voice teacher who had taught for vocal performance for decades. She described in detail the throatiness of a young former ministry intern and how she could so easily help him to fix it. “Did you ever tell him?” I asked. “Oh, no,” she shook her head. What has surprised me, as I have moved from swaying babies in the pew to sharing homiletical method with the theologically educated, is how much that preachers *do not* hear these comments. I had always presumed that they hear what I have heard. Children as young as five share in Sunday dinner discussions about preaching, especially if they have heard something that connected with them. Those in the pew informally discuss preaching and preachers all the time.

In the listener study entitled *The Great American Sermon Survey*, Lori Carrell conducted a paper survey in which she asked ten open-ended questions of self-selected listeners who picked up a questionnaire at the door of their place of worship.⁴⁴ In compiling responses to preaching from both clergy and congregants, she found two cultures that moved in parallel:

When it comes to perceptions about the sermon, preachers have much more in common with each other than they do with their listeners. Preachers read the same books, experience the same preparation challenges, have the same occupational stresses, and may talk to each other about preaching from a “sender” approach. Listeners share the experience of listening to sermons week after week. Listeners talk to listeners about sermons. Our perceptions are therefore reinforced by our own “co-cultures.”⁴⁵

Carrell surveyed both Protestant and Catholic preachers. If feedback and honest dialogue about preaching are as negligible as Carrell’s statistics suggest, both pulpit and pew interpret the behaviors of the other according to preconceived notions—both positively and negatively generalizing or stereotyping rather than getting to know one another.

⁴⁴Lori Carrell. *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000).

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 133. Often, feedback from one vocal listener can impact the direction that the preacher takes even when it may not represent the norm, 137.

Richard Stern listened to lay people assess homilies of seminarians. From their comments and from observations by faculty members, this “co-culture” was also present in his seminary setting: “There was still work to do in the area of adaptation to a parish-based hearer, however. Illustrations were not parish-oriented. Respondents desired more of a connection to their daily experience.”⁴⁶ Preaching styles that had been modeled by academic faculty in the school chapel tended to be dry. The laity liked more energy. From their feedback, Stern suggests that the teaching of seminarians may need to adapt in order to create effective preachers for a parish setting.

How are we to connect two cultures that run in parallel like two rails of a railroad track? How are we to find the points where the two intersect and can talk to each other? Carrell suggests that dialogue between the two cultures promotes understanding.⁴⁷ John McClure, in *The Roundtable Pulpit*, has laid out a process of discussing the experiences of listeners during sermon preparation so that it is in conversation with their concrete needs.⁴⁸

Feedback from the Catholic pew is freshly available. The initiative “To Preach the Good Word Well” has resulted in several recent studies of the interactions of listeners with preaching. The National Catholic Educational Association Seminary Department’s 2009 study “Effective Preaching: What Catholics Want” did an online survey of 434 active Catholics about which characteristics are important to them. Both clergy and lay people agreed: homilies that are “clear, compelling, pertinent to life and memorable.”⁴⁹ Funded by the same initiative, David Shea assessed unmet needs in Catholic preaching in his Cincinnati diocese. He found that both adults

⁴⁶Richard Stern, unpublished essay attached in an email message to the author, 7/26/10.

⁴⁷Carrell, 131.

⁴⁸John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 59-72.

⁴⁹Katherine Schmitt, “Effective Preaching: What Catholics Want—A Project of the NCEA Seminary Department,” *Seminary Journal* 16, no.2, Fall 2010. (Published in September 2011.)

and teens care deeply about the Sunday homily (100% of those recruited for the focus groups showed up, some at personal expense) and that their expectations were higher than he (and by implication, most other Catholic preachers) had previously thought. High levels of distraction in the encounter with God in the homily came from the preacher's oratorical skills and the relevance of the homily: "More than half cite homily content issues including not being relevant to daily life/today's world, unfocused/not on a single topic, not connecting to the day's readings, and simply being too boring or repetitious."⁵⁰ All of them provide these criteria for the Sunday homily: quality delivery, clarity of message, and authenticity of the preacher.

Donald McCrabb summarized the purpose of the various projects of the "To Preach the Good Word Well" initiative as "to improve the quality of preaching." He suggested that building a culture of feedback would create a culture of "co-responsibility" with the preacher for the Sunday homily.⁵¹ The antidote for Carrell's "co-culture" findings is found in McCrabb's call for "co-responsibility" in parish homiletical communication.

One of the insights about people who listen to preaching is, "If you ask, they will talk."⁵² The *Channels of Listening* study, spearheaded by Ronald J. Allen and Mary Alice Mulligan, interviewed 263 middle-western church-going adults from 28 Protestant denominations. Initially their plan was to produce one book of their findings, yet the wealth of material that was produced by these face to face and group interviews was so rich that four volumes have been produced. These people who heard sermons had much to say. Preaching matters to them.⁵³ As co-author

⁵⁰David J. Shea, "Unmet Needs in Catholic Preaching: A Project of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati," *Seminary Journal* 16, no.2, Fall 2010, 33-42.

⁵¹Donald R. McCrabb, "Improving Preaching through Feedback," *Seminary Journal* 16, no.2, Fall 2010, 5-6.

⁵²John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, and G. Lee Ramsey Jr., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004).

⁵³Ronald J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship/ Content/ Feeling* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004).

Mulligan states, though preachers usually look to books, conferences and written resources for preaching help, "... an often untapped resource for assistance is the local congregation, made up of people who listen week after week to the minister's preaching. People in the pews are easily overlooked as resources to help identify what makes for better preaching."⁵⁴ The focus of this study was to discover from listeners how they process preaching in order to help ministers become more effective. Like the sonar signal of bats, the team of homiletics professors looked to find pockets of resonance to determine what type of signals would draw in the listener. Working within the Aristotelian categories of ethos, logos and pathos, these "senders" of messages evaluated how listeners heard sermons.

How does this *Channels of Listening* study impact the current study? The fourth book⁵⁵ advises preachers about what lay people want in good preaching. These dozen chapters are consistent with the findings of Carrell and Schmitt. Commonalities arise from these listener studies: 1) preaching matters to the people in the pew and 2) attending to effective sermons can be transformative, gradually deepening the spiritual life of the disciple. An urban Caucasian woman describes this second effect: "I don't expect big things from any one sermon. I'm always kind of surprised if it happens. Just steady growth..." In his accompanying commentary, Ramsey says, "The sermon plants ideas for this listener that are like seeds that slowly grow and one day surprisingly push her toward change."⁵⁶ It is this "daily bread" that effects change.

The results of these listener studies suggest that tailoring a gospel message to the needs of the hearer is not a form of "selling out." In his straightforward way, Craddock feels no compunction about this turn to the listeners:

⁵⁴Mulligan, Mary Alice, et al, *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), pg. vi.

⁵⁵Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005).

⁵⁶McClure et al, 2004, 41.

One should not feel guilt or compromise with the world if a parishioner expresses genuine interest in a sermon. The most penetrating analysis of the human condition with the clearest call to repentance can be interesting. Why? Because most of the people are not interested in ornamentation nor entertainment. They know where to go for that. They are interested in the removal of ornamentation and affectation in order to be intersected where they live. The old patter about those who dress up on Sunday to sit in church and play the hypocrite is out of date. The reverse is more true. It is the world that six days a week demands pretension and hypocrisy that has become a burden. These people come on Sunday hopeful of that which is becoming increasingly interesting these days: the truth, shared in a context where the push to impress and be impressed is absent. The fact that they chose to come to the sanctuary rather than elsewhere is clue enough for the preacher that these whose steady diet is cake still have an appetite for bread.⁵⁷

The current study has been developed through consultation with each of the previous listener studies, hoping to build on the shoulders of these giants. It seeks to describe Craddock's young people's "appetite for bread," that "daily bread" experience of preaching as an encounter with God. To further the discipline, then, what questions need to be asked? How do we find out how to "connect"?

Operationalizing "Connection"

Preaching is an applied field. The initial thrust of this study is to seek to understand the concept of "connection" in Sunday liturgical preaching. The inquiry cannot remain in the abstract. The research question that guides this study is: How can preachers more effectively connect with young people in Catholic Sunday preaching?

The first step to operationalize the concept of "connection" was three open-ended inter-parish focus groups to ascertain what young people heard in Catholic Sunday preaching. This was a purposeful sample of active, engaged Catholic youth—those who have weekly knowledge of Sunday preaching and are committed to their faith. Since they were intimately involved in retreat planning and the development of "connection" with their peers in that context, it was hoped that they would be articulate in describing "connection" in the encounter with God and

⁵⁷Craddock, 2001, 56-57.

what that meant to them. The purpose of this free-form discussion was to listen to what they had to say about preaching in their parishes. The conversations were recorded, transcribed and then categorized. These questions guided the conversations:

- 1) Fill in the blank: Sunday preaching in your parish is_____. (Tell me more about that.) Think of an image or metaphor that describes that preaching.⁵⁸
- 2) Tell me about a time when preaching really “connected” for you.⁵⁹
- 3) Can you tell me about a preacher who helps you to grow? What are some of the things that he does or says that makes that happen?
- 4) If you could tell your preacher one thing that he could do in his preaching to help you grow in your faith, what would that be?

The next step was an exploratory cross-sectional descriptive quantitative and qualitative paper survey to describe a preliminary portrait of “How are we doing in the sacramental encounter with God through Catholic preaching?” The objective of the survey was to evaluate the current state of connection, delineate characteristics which stood out in determining the connectedness of that experience, and to give direction for further study.⁶⁰

The survey instrument was designed through literature review and discussion with market researchers and homiletic researchers. It went through numerous drafts through consultation. Demographic information provided a basis from which to compare and contrast regional differences, ages of respondent, ages of preachers, and personal religiosity variations, as well as eligibility for inclusion in the main section of the survey (the baseline being at least monthly Mass attendance). Those who were Catholic and did not attend Mass at least monthly, as well as those who were not Catholic filled out a second section of the paper survey. This alternate

⁵⁸Marketing Profs, “How to Evolve Your B2B Customer Experience Using Images,” Marketing Profs, <http://www.marketingprofs.com/articles/2011/5435/how-to-evolve-your-B2B-customer-experience-using-images#ixzz1S6MG7xn5> [accessed 9-10-11], suggests that the use of images and metaphors evoke rich descriptions of experience.

⁵⁹Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass), 98. For questions two and three: “Ideal position questions reveal the positives ...of a program.”

⁶⁰For a copy of the original paper survey, see Figure A.3 in Appendix A.

section provided a description of the experience of young people who attended a Catholic school but were not practicing Catholics; it has been instructive about faith life perspectives among marginal Catholics; it will also be useful for publication beyond the current thesis.

Seeking Heroes

The quantitative section of the *Are You Talking to Me?* paper survey is broken into four main parts. Following the demographic questions, the first major bank of questions, “The Person of the Preacher,” comes from consistent findings that the person of the preacher deeply impacts the reception of the message of the homily. Anecdotally, this witness of the preacher—the sharing of “this is God in my life” —is significant. Young people hunger for authenticity, implicitly asking the preacher, “Are you for real? Do I matter enough to you that you will let me share your life? Do you care that my life is changed by this encounter? Am I wanted here? Am I loved? Are you talking to *me*?”

According to *Hearing the Sermon*, the relationship that listeners have with the preacher is the primary area of processing a message for about 40% of Allen’s surveyed listeners.⁶¹ The first thing that they ask themselves is this: can they connect with the preacher as a person and as a leader? That credibility and relatability of the preacher undergirds whether or not they hear and how they hear what they hear. Allen categorizes these hearers with the ancient rhetorical label of hearing within an “ethos” setting. This relationality setting is exemplified by the following listener’s comment:

I like them (her preachers) because they’re approachable. They are down to earth. They speak clearly, to the point, but yet make it inspiring and enjoyable. I don’t know how to explain it anymore than that. Just that they seem to make it more like a family situation for the whole community, the whole church.⁶²

⁶¹Ronald J. Allen, “Listening to the Listeners Five Years Later.” *Homiletic* 32.2 (2009), <http://homiletic.net/viewissue.php?id=4#Articles> [accessed July 27, 2010].

⁶²Mulligan, et al, 83.

Carrell says of listeners, “It’s not just what is said but who says it that makes a difference.”⁶³ Carrell is not a preacher but a communications educator. From this context, she draws from research on teacher communication effectiveness in order to inform the study of preaching. Her seventh chapter, “The Preach as a Teach,” is particularly intriguing in her description of what education communication research labels “teacher immediacy.” Consistent findings indicate that strong teacher immediacy enhances learning in the students.⁶⁴ Immediacy behaviors have been operationalized into verbal and non-verbal clues. Some of the verbal responses that connect teachers with students are humor, verbal affirmation, willingness to converse outside of class, and statements of approachability. Non-verbal responses that enhance a sense of closeness are eye contact, warm vocal expression, relaxed posture, and receptivity in body movement. Though the teaching role is only part of preaching connection, this delineation of characteristics of “ethos” gives the current study a parallel context from which to study the personal aspects of connection. Hence, individual survey questions were developed from Gorham’s measures of teacher connection in educational communication in her “Immediacy Assessment Instrument”⁶⁵ as well as from Allen’s appraisal of elements of the ethos setting in listeners’ response to preachers.⁶⁶ The strength of the relationship through the perception of the preacher can then be correlated to the personal response to the homily and to the subsequent faith growth of a young person. Will it be possible to pin down that elusive trait called the heroism, role modeling, or sainthood of the holy preacher which then triggers imitation?

⁶³Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000), 64, 169-172.

⁶⁴ Gorham, Joan, “The Relationship between Verbal Teacher Immediacy Behaviors and Student Learning” in *Communication Education*, January 1988. Carrell quotes from Gorham’s *Immediacy Assessment Instrument* on page 171. In Carrell’s study of preachers, many of them self- identified as teachers. The field of education has a strong body of research on effectiveness. How much of this might be transferable to assessing relationship in preaching?

⁶⁵Gorham, 40-53.

⁶⁶Allen, 18-41.

The Experience of the Homily

The second bank of questions, “The Sunday Homily,” began with the NCEA project’s summary of characteristics that Catholic laypeople look for in one particular homily.⁶⁷ The survey questions were then apportioned to line up with categories identified by the study of consumer behavior: they evaluate cognitive (mental), connative (behavioral) and affective (emotional) responses to the homily.⁶⁸ (These categories overlap somewhat with the logos and pathos settings from the *Channels of Listening* findings.)⁶⁹

There was one further significant change to the bank of survey questions about the homily. Most homily assessment tools have traditionally focused on the particular homily just heard as short-term feedback. What Untener found in interviewing parishioners for twenty-five years was that an immediate response to a homily tended to show: 1) politeness—“Good homily, Father” means that people want to be friendly; though meant kindly, it was not careful critique; 2) affection or liking of the person—they were affirming the preacher’s whole ministry; 3) enjoyment—they were grateful that the homily was interesting or entertaining or contained a good joke. Some preachers would add: 4) they did not know what else to say. The former bishop of Saginaw suggested that there are two ultimate criteria for a good homily: that the people remember the encounter and that memory furthers their relationship with God.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Kathy Schmitt’s email message to the author, June 14, 2010, included an attachment of the NCEA “Survey on a Good Homily- A.” This survey is now to be found in the *Seminary Journal*, vol. 16, no. 2, fall 2010, p. 30. The characteristics which lay people found to be most important were used with the initial focus group to ascertain their applicability to high school students. The NCEA survey itself found no difference between older (over 40) and younger raters (under 40) as the dividing line between old and young, 28.

⁶⁸Wayne D. Hoyer and Deborah J. MacInnis, *Consumer Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 130-131. In a doctoral independent study with William Baker of the University of Akron, correlations between consumer behavior and consumer psychology with listener characteristics inform the final thesis project as to how to effectively connect a message with a young listener.

⁶⁹Allen, 42-95.

⁷⁰Untener, 99-100.

This study postulates that delayed feedback may give a more accurate assessment of how homilies affect people's lives, since their reflection on it can continue for days or weeks or months. The Heath brothers in their book *Made to Stick* tested what students remembered from speeches and found no correlation between "speaking talent" and the ability to make ideas stick.⁷¹ Therefore the different questions about the homily reflect these various influences—they deal with factors of "takeaway" from the homiletic engagement. This is an original attempt to assess not "how did the respondent like this homily?" but "what sticks with the listener *as a result* of the homily?" This hopes to more closely describe the long-term "theologia prima" of the experience of the homily as an encounter with God.

Self-Evaluation of the Listener

The third bank of questions ("Your Way of Seeing the World") builds a picture of the respondent's personal faith life as adapted from Smith's values of "religiosity."⁷² The fourth bank ("The Person of the Listener") gives the respondent a chance to appraise his or her life as to what is important. Why is this included? Smith found a significant correlation between teens' level of extra-curricular activity, the quality of their relationship with their parents, an active social life, and positive peer influence, with their perspective on and involvement in religion.⁷³ These two banks of questions will provide input into listeners' energy levels for processing a message, which in turn can generate ideas for influencing response by altering the style and content of liturgical preaching.⁷⁴ They will also provide for correlation between religiosity factors of the listener and the responses given to the preaching that he or she hears. Personal characteristics of the listener in relation to the perception of the homily have not been examined

⁷¹Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 2008), 242-244.

⁷²Smith, 108-113, especially table 32 on 109.

⁷³Ibid., 106.

⁷⁴Hoyer and MacInnis, chapters 6 and 7.

in previous listener studies.

Open-ended questions are interspersed throughout the survey to provide a thick description of what “connection” means to this group of high school students. They will have the opportunity to describe the experience of what it is like to grow in faith through preaching. If they have not experienced a growth in faith within the past year, they will describe what it is like to sit in a pew week after week and not be helped in their faith.

The last question is: “If you could tell the preachers in your parish *anything* about their preaching and how to make it more effective in connecting with you and other people of your age, what would you tell them?” At the end, young listeners have an opportunity to nominate a preacher who connects well with young people. This information can be used for post-doctoral research to observe characteristics of “connecting” preachers.

From the *National Study of Youth and Religion*, to the documents of Vatican II, to listener studies series, to the heart of a mother, to the final words of young people, come these two conclusions: 1) preaching matters; and 2) the faith of our young people matters. Yet so many words bombard young disciples in this overcommunicated world. How can we invite our youth to an encounter with God through the Sunday homily when it is so hard to be heard?

“How to Make Us Want your Sermon”

We turn for further insight to the earliest of listener studies. O’Brien Atkinson, a writer of secular advertising, was more than seventy years old when he urged a turn toward the Catholic listener in 1942. *How to Make Us Want your Sermon: by a Listener* was a one-of-a-kind primer on preaching for Roman Catholic priests.⁷⁵ This member of the Catholic Evidence Guild taught public speaking for twenty-five years and preached as a lay evangelist on the street and on the

⁷⁵O’Brien Atkinson, *How to Make Us Want Your Sermon: By a Listener* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., 1942).

radio for six years.⁷⁶ In the early years of advertising, this Catholic layman answered that listener survey question of “What would you tell your preachers?” in great detail. From his secular training, he had a unique vision for preaching as tailored to the needs of the listener. He was well ahead of his time. Was he heard? No. Do we wish that he had been? Yes.

Rather than writing about preaching from a “sender” perspective, he wrote as a lifelong “receiver.” He opened his preface: “This text is a plea for better understanding. It tries to bring to you the story of what happens to the words of your sermon after they leave your lips; a story that no one else is so well fitted to tell as the layman.”⁷⁷ The advertising man was focused on getting results. Buying and selling was his world. From his marketing framework, Atkinson provided what he saw as a clear example of why defining one’s market and understanding the “customer” should matter to the “product” of preaching:

A secular speaker asks himself, what should I say to this particular audience? An advertising man realizes that the woman who buys a fur coat and the farmer who buys paint for his cowshed have very different views, tastes, and motives. A \$5000 advertisement might be wasted by appealing to such a woman in a way that would bring orders from thousands of farmers. Yet the clergyman often seems to take his audience for granted. He delivers a sermon that is not what the people need, but what he would like to say. Why?⁷⁸

The accountability of a “seller” relied on discerning what his customer wanted so that he got the sale. If the customer refused the “company’s” product, the seller was not effective.

Atkinson offered a parallel of this interaction:

You are to preach. You may be a curate or a cardinal. We are to listen. We may be a small town congregation or a vast multitude attending a Eucharistic world congress. In either case, and in every case, we have one advantage. Whoever you are, wherever you preach, however lowly or lofty the occasion, the prosperity of your sermon will rest with us. If we say it was over our heads, or hard to follow, or dull and wearisome, there will be no appeal from that verdict. You may think us stupid,

⁷⁶The Catholic Evidence Guild was an early-twentieth century organization of lay evangelists who preached on the streets primarily of England (founded in 1918) and New York (in 1928).

⁷⁷Atkinson, v.

⁷⁸Ibid., ix.

and we may be stupid, but our verdict will be final.⁷⁹

But the truth is that we want to listen. We are hopeful that your talk will interest us and hold us. And if you go about it the right way, you can interest us, and greatly help us...for we want to understand you...whenever your sermon speaks our language, deals with our spiritual troubles, raises our hopes, inspires us to carry on – we are truly grateful.⁸⁰

The turn toward the customer had greatly increased the effectiveness of advertising in the early twentieth century. Public relations departments were the hot and new item for big corporations. Bethlehem Steel had opened a public relations department in 1930; General Motors followed suit in 1931 and U.S. Steel in 1936.⁸¹ Atkinson's vision was that if the method worked in advertising, it should work in preaching. If it did not work in advertising, it would not work in preaching: "You can't sell heating plants in the South Sea Islands, no matter how ingenious the sales talk."⁸²

Yet the persuasive skill of the salesman did not stand alone. The Holy Spirit moved within the hearer as well as in the church. As a faithful Catholic, someone had stirred the flame of Atkinson's love for God or he would not have taken the time to write as he did. Some preaching somewhere had "sold" him. He had bought it as "theologia prima," an experience of fire in the heart to be kept blazing. He wanted that same encounter for others:

How well will you preach? You have three courses open to you: You may set preaching down as a bothersome task, to be done in the usual manner; to be done as others do it; to be done with the least outlay of time and effort; to be done in a way that will not be challenged. Or, you may view it as the road to distinction. You may labor untiringly to become a preacher of wide repute, respected for your learning, for the brilliance of your thought, for your command of expression, for the power of your argument, for your great usefulness to the Church. Or you may think of it as the priceless opportunity to step into the minds of the common people, the poor and untaught, and there to clear up and straighten out their thinking. You may view it as

⁷⁹Ibid., x.

⁸⁰Ibid., 5.

⁸¹Trivia Library, "A History of Advertising in America in the 1930's and 1940's," <http://www.trivia-library.com/a/history-of-advertising-in-america-in-the-1930s-and-1940s.htm> [accessed 5/2/2010].

⁸²Atkinson, 143.

the priceless opportunity to find a place in their hearts where you can tend the fire of their love for God and keep it in high flame.”⁸³

To “find a place in their hearts” in effective preaching was this salesman’s ultimate “priceless opportunity.”

To tend the fire of the love of God is a high calling. Craddock said that people do not come into the sanctuary for cake; the secular world sells plenty of “cake.” It is the nourishment of the daily bread and butter of discipleship that we hope to “sell.” Atkinson the listener closed with a prayer for the preacher who can nourish:

We don’t know much. But we do know what it means to struggle – to marry with a good job, and suddenly be laid off; to get a fine young woman to share life’s venture with and then be taken desperately ill; to bring into the world five or six fine boys and girls, who are sure that Dad will never fail them, and then have the future turn black... Such trials come to most of us—men and women, young and old—in one way or another; and they bear down hard on the effort to get to heaven... Then it is that your simple, homely talks will delight our minds and make our hearts grow; then it is that silent prayers of thanksgiving will go up to a good God who has brought into our troubled lives a priest who knows how to preach.⁸⁴

In the seventy years since Atkinson wrote his little book on preaching, the turn toward the customer has made great gains in understanding how listeners process and buy into messages. The discipline of consumer behavior has found that incorporating the voice of the customer into the creation of the product is at the heart of good marketing. In particular, customer surveys study satisfaction. Yet a vague satisfaction does not suffice. The quest is to strengthen commitment and build loyalty toward a brand or a product so that those who are deeply committed will create “buzz” in the marketplace. (A premier example of this buzz is the early Christian experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.) The field of homiletical listener studies can be enriched by learning the agreed-upon listening fundamentals that have been uncovered by

⁸³Ibid., 171-172.

⁸⁴Ibid., 173.

consumer psychology and customer behavior research. In the next chapter, we investigate what is going on within those minds and hearts that preachers hope to delight and grow.