

**MANUAL OF SACRED
RHETORIC; OR, HOW
TO PREPARE A SERMON**

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Manual of Sacred Rhetoric; Or, How to Prepare a Sermon by Rev. Bernard Feeney

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REV. BERNARD FEENEY

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How to Prepare a Sermon.

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Introduction.

Some hold that Preaching is not an art.

"All your rules of rhetoric, sacred and profane," they say, "are comprised in the good old American maxim: Fill yourself full of your subject, as though you were a barrel; take out the bung; and let nature caper."

It is hardly credible that such advice could be given or taken seriously. Yet men, unlikely to make a jest of sacred things, have been known to give it; and sermons heard occasionally in our pulpits prove that it is sometimes followed in practice. Nay, often the practice improves on the advice, and dispenses altogether with the "filling up" process.

There must be art in the doing of any work in which complex means have to be employed to do it well; for art is the skillful use of such means, whether the work be a kitchen table or an epic poem. Now,

Preaching relying on divine help, undertakes a very difficult and complicated work, namely, to move the will of another from a state of apathy or opposition to activity in a definite direction. To do this, several means have to be employed: obstacles and prepossessions have to be removed; interest has to be awakened; the intellect has to be enlightened by exposition and illustration; the feelings have to be aroused and enlisted; the will itself has to be brought under the direct influence of motives calculated to determine it to action. Each of these means has to be wisely regulated by laws taken from the highest achievements of oratory and based on the principles of human thought and conduct. Hence, the necessity of an art of Sacred Rhetoric, to acquire knowledge of those laws and skill in their application.

“Apostolic Preaching” is often spoken of as the ideal form of announcing the divine Word; and because the Apostles are not credited with a knowledge of rhetoric, their preaching is supposed to have been crude and unartistic. From this it is inferred that unstudied, unarranged discourse, when

prompted by zeal, is immensely superior to discourse that is well ordered and elaborated. To such reasoning it is enough to reply, that we are not the Apostles: we have not seen our Saviour in the flesh; we have not lived in daily intercourse with Him for years; we have not witnessed His miracles, His Resurrection; we have not the whole-souled earnestness of the Apostles, — their ardent zeal, their heroic sanctity. We cannot, therefore, presume to preach as they preached, unless, having seen what they saw, we live and labor as they lived and labored, and be ready to die as they died. The same may be said of the preaching of saints and saintly men. One must be a Curé of Ars to preach as the Curé of Ars.

The truth is, that the Church, from the beginning, under divine guidance, took the arts into her service; and, from being (ministers of sin, she made them agents of grace for its destruction.) Music, painting, sculpture, poetry have been so employed by her; and the glorious records of the Catholic pulpit, from Cyprian to Lacordaire, show conclusively that the art of oratory was enlisted with the others.

Preaching, then, being an art, must be studied as all art is studied, by learning its rules or methods, and by applying them. The knowledge of rhetorical rules is of no practical account without assiduous exercise in their application. Hence, to turn out efficient preachers, long and uninterrupted training in the composition and delivery of sermons is absolutely necessary. This training should begin in the preparatory seminary and be continued up to the time of ordination. In most seminaries, I believe, there is no provision made for the practice of English composition during the philosophy course; and, even in theology, the only exercises in it are the writing of a few sermons. The consequence is stiffness and gradual loss of skill in the literary expression of all thought, intellectual, emotional, or imaginative. And this consequence follows all the more surely, when Latin is the only language used in the principal classes; for (it is well known that the daily use of a foreign tongue makes it difficult to speak or write one's own fluently and idiomatically.) The official language of the Church must, indeed, be familiar to

every priest; but its influence on the use of the vernacular must be neutralized; and this can be done only by systematic exercise in it as frequently as possible.

I know that those charged with the training of our clergy give much anxious thought to the selection of such exercises and studies as are best adapted to the formation of an efficient priesthood. It is, then, with no purpose of censuring the present seminary curriculum, that I would suggest some such provisions as the following for the continuous training of our clerical students in composition and delivery.

First, in the preparatory seminary, I would recommend that subjects for essays be taken exclusively from Bible history, including the Life and Parables of our divine Lord, as well as the topography of the Holy Land and the manners, dress, domestic life and religious worship of the Jewish people. Themes taken from such subjects will surely be more conducive to the end of seminary training than those usually given in the rhetoric class. I would also confine elocutionary exercises to the practice of expressive reading and graceful gesture.

Secondly, one or two classes should be given every week to composition during the philosophy course. The aim in these classes should be ease and skill in the emotional and imaginative types of prose. In all literature, no better models of these types can be found than the Psalms and Prophecies of the Bible. These, then, ought to be read carefully and repeatedly, and afterwards reproduced or paraphrased. If the seminary cannot afford a teacher for this work, the young philosophers should be urged to do it by themselves; and some gentle pressure might be brought to bear on them to provide against their forgetting it.

The rules of Sacred Rhetoric ought to be mastered in the first year's theology and applied in the succeeding years. The best means of applying them, I should say, is not class or chapel sermons — although these, too, are necessary — but carefully written and memorized instructions delivered in parish churches, at first in the Sunday school and afterwards at the Masses. I know there may be serious obstacles to such parish work; but I am convinced there is none that cannot be overcome by tact and patience.