

**PROCLAIMING WITH POWER**  
A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5 IN THE LIGHT OF *INSTITUTIO ORATORIA*  
AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING

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## INTRODUCTION

In the decrees of the second Vatican council, *Ad gentes* and *Lumen gentium*, the Church stresses that proclaiming the Gospel is crucial to the mission<sup>1</sup> of the Church and is the chief means of evangelization.<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI affirms that this is the first service that Christians can render to every individual and to the entire human race.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary preaching<sup>4</sup>, however, is faced with considerable challenges. Thus, in countries like India where different religions coexist, preachers<sup>5</sup> are viewed as “Christian convertors” or disturbers of communal harmony. In addition, the predominantly Christian countries now face a “progressive dechristianization of society”.<sup>6</sup> With this extravagant secularization, Christianity is labelled “anti-progressive”, “anti-innovative” and “boringly antique”. Added to this is the confusion created by the crowd-pulling ‘new age preachers’ who present the Gospel as a hybrid of different philosophies.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the self-confidence of Christians is dissipated, causing apprehension or indifference to creep into preaching.

Confronted with such challenges, one may doubt whether preaching is possible at all in the modern world. If it is possible, what is the manner in which it should be carried out? What are the principles that should guide preaching in a multi-religious and over-secularized situation? What are the temptations that could cause

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Ad Gentes* 6, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Lumen Gentium* 17, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, “Address to the Participants in the International Conference on the 40th Anniversary of the Conciliar Decree “Ad gentes””, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060311\\_ad-gentes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060311_ad-gentes_en.html).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Preaching’ is an event in which God communicates with people, through an individual (a preacher). To be specific, the word preaching is used for proclaiming the Gospel.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Preacher’, in the religious sense, is a synonym for the Gospel preacher and different from the word ‘orator’ which refers to a secular speaker.

<sup>6</sup> J. MURPHY-O’CONNOR, *Paul on Preaching*, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1963, xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Declaration Dominus Iesus* 4, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

one to deviate from one's role as a genuine preacher? How can such temptations be avoided?

These and related questions are normally primary concerns of a student of the Word of God insofar as the Word of God is the subject matter of preaching. This paper will address these questions by having recourse to Paul.

## **1. PAUL, THE PREACHER**

Although Paul was neither the only preacher nor the pioneer in preaching, his importance as a preacher can hardly be exaggerated. The preacher Paul is “an exceptional and virtually inimitable yet stimulating figure”<sup>8</sup> whose thoughts fill a major part of the New Testament. The force of his words and personality continues to make the Pauline corpus a powerful inspiration for preaching. It is hoped that an examination of Paul will be helpful to respond to the challenges of contemporary preaching.

### **2. 1 COR 2:1-5**

Even though Paul did not write a systematic theology of preaching,<sup>9</sup> there are passages in his letters where Paul reflects on his own preaching.<sup>10</sup> A Pauline theology of preaching, therefore, can be deduced from such passages. As a thorough analysis of all the Pauline passages on preaching is not possible, given the limitations of a paper such as this, the study limits itself to 1 Cor 2:1-5. This passage is chosen primarily because it is one of the most significant passages in the whole Pauline corpus; significant because it contains Paul's own evaluation of his preaching ministry.<sup>11</sup> It is intended, therefore, that an analysis of this passage will help to throw some light on the preacher Paul and his theology of preaching.

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<sup>8</sup>BENEDICT XVI, *On St. Paul's World and Time Period*, <http://www.zenit.org/article-23091?l=english>.

<sup>9</sup> 'The theology of preaching' refers to the theological origin, nature and function of preaching.

<sup>10</sup> Passages in the Pauline Corpus that explicitly deal with Paul's preaching are 1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 2:17, 4:2-5, 5:11-12, 10:1-18, 11:6-7 and 1 Thess 1:4-5, 2:3-9.

<sup>11</sup> For Litfin, this is the most detailed account of Paul's preaching found in his writings; D. LITFIN, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 204. According to Bullmore, this is the only passage in Paul that has indications of both the theory and practice of Paul's preaching; M. A. BULLMORE, *St. Paul's Theology of Rhetorical Style: An Examination of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 in Light of First Century Greco-Roman Rhetorical Culture*, San Francisco, International Scholars, 1995, 4.

### 3. PROCLAIMING AND POWER

Even a casual look at 1 Cor 2:1-5 draws our attention to two terms: ‘proclaiming’ and ‘power’. The act of proclaiming and the concept of power are not something exclusive to Paul. However, in Paul, these words have a unique theological significance. It is my contention that from this passage one may construct a Pauline theology of preaching, with ‘proclaiming’ and ‘power’ as vital aspects.

Preaching involves both the preacher and the hearer. The preacher collaborates with the divine plan and the hearer responds to it. His ‘proclaiming’ has the ‘power’ to convert the audience to belief in Christ. This leads the audience to salvation. In a word, ‘proclaiming’ manifests ‘power’.

Furthermore, preaching has elements of public speaking. An investigation into how oratory was used in the first century is necessary towards understanding what Paul says about his preaching in our pericope. In order to achieve this aim, a study of Quintilian is helpful. Marcus Fabius Quintilian was a famous orator of the Greco-Roman world, a teacher of rhetoric and a contemporary of Paul. He wrote *Institutio Oratoria*, a manual on the education of the perfect orator. He had a successful professional life as a lawyer, an orator and a teacher of rhetoric, both in Spain and in Rome.<sup>12</sup> *Institutio Oratoria* is the product of Quintilian’s vast experience as an orator and a teacher. It provides a system of training that forms an orator. It follows that Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* is helpful to understand the particular situation of oratory in Paul’s era as follows:

1. The implications of the concept of ‘proclaiming with power’.
2. The relative characteristics of the preacher and secular orators.

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<sup>12</sup> For a fuller biography of Quintilian, see G. A. KENNEDY, *Quintilian*, 11-30; J. F. LOPEZ, “Quintilian as Rhetorician and Teacher”, *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, W. DOMINIK & J. HALL (eds.), Maldon, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 308; J. J. MURPHY, *Quintilian: On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*, xiv-xvii; G. A. KENNEDY, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, 177-186; O. TELLEGEN-COUPERUS, “Introduction”, *Quintilian and the Law*, 17-19; J. ADAMIETZ, “Quintilians ‘Institutio Oratoria’”, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.32.4, H. TEMPORINI & W. HAASE (eds.), Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1980, 2230-2240; V. B. LEITCH (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2001, 155-157; M. F. QUINTILIAN, *Institutio Oratoria* (4 vols.), translated by H. E. BUTLER, London, William Heinemann, 1920-22, vii-ix. This English translation of *Institutio Oratoria* by H. E. Butler is hereby noted as *Inst. Ort.*, with respective Book, chapter and paragraph number.

#### 4. QUINTILIAN AND THE THEORY OF ORATORY

Paul's context was the Greco-Roman world of the first century.<sup>13</sup> In the Roman empire of Paul's time a great deal of attention was given to the training of public speakers.

According to Quintilian, 'the science of speaking well' is the best definition of rhetoric. Quintilian's concept of powerful oratory is primarily concerned with the theoretical and practical aspects of the Greco-Roman rhetorical system. For him, powerful oratory depends on the education and practice of the true rhetoric, which is a virtue and befits a good man. Quintilian's conception of an ideal orator was characterized by authenticity and constructive speaking.

Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* helps to understand the concept of oratory and its status in Roman society. Even though rhetorical theory governed public speaking, this era of Greco-Roman oratory placed inordinate importance to style. From a technical and moral point of view, the lack of good teachers and virtuous orators led to a decadence of oratory.

#### 5. THE CONTEXT OF 1 COR 2:1-5

A literary analysis of the passage<sup>14</sup> shows that verse 2:1 serves as the introduction, where Paul recalls his preaching experience in Corinth. He addresses the Corinthians as "brothers" (2:1a). His preaching of God's mystery (2:1c) was without lofty words and wisdom (2:1b). Verse 2:2, narrates his mode of presence among them (2:2a) and the content of his preaching (2:2b). Verses 2:3 and 2:4a explain verses 2:1 and 2:2 further with an emphasis on the preacher. Verse 2:4b identifies his preaching with "the demonstration of the Spirit and of power". Verse 2:5 concludes this section, highlighting the divine power behind the faith of the Corinthian community.

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<sup>13</sup> In Paul's writings in general and in 1 Corinthians in particular, the Greco-Roman world provides the context for the application Paul's thought and teaching; R. E. CIAMPA & B. S. ROSNER, *The First Letter to Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2010, 37.

<sup>14</sup> "The matters of *literary context* and the *continuity of the argument* are all important in understanding I Corinthians 2. Otherwise, much of the chapter reads like pure gnosticism, and Paul is made the advocate of a private religion reserved for the spiritual elite": C. B. COUSAR, "Expository Articles: I Corinthians 2:1-13", *Interpretation* 44/2 (1990), 169.

The passage reflects Pauline preaching in Corinth. It contains themes such as the content of Pauline preaching (2:1-2), the style of Pauline preaching (2:3-4) and the reason for both (2:5).<sup>15</sup> Verses 2:1 and 2:2 show the unity between the form and the content of preaching and verses 2:3-5 the unity between the preaching and the existence of the preacher.<sup>16</sup>

The themes in this passage are continuation of the argument in the previous sections. While recalling Paul's preaching in Corinth, 2:1-3 resemble 1:17a ("Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the Gospel"). The mode of preaching explained in 2:1 ("not in word or wisdom") and 2:4 ("plausible words of wisdom") is "a reprise of the cleverness-of-speech motif"<sup>17</sup> of 1:17b ("not with eloquent wisdom"). Verse 2:2 dealing with the content of preaching ("Jesus Christ and him crucified") repeats 1:23 ("Christ crucified") and 1:17c ("the cross of Christ"). The disposition of the preacher ("weakness") that comes in 2:3 reminds of 1:25b ("God's weakness is stronger than human strength"). The nature of Paul's preaching in 2:4b ("demonstration of the Spirit and of power") and its result described in 2:5b ("so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on the power of God") together connect to 1:17c ("so that cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power"), 1:18c ("it is power of God"), 1:24b, ("Christ the power of God"), 1:25b ("God's weakness is stronger than human strength") and 1:30-31 ("source of your life...boast in the Lord").<sup>18</sup>

The thematic analysis of the passage (2:1-5) shows that it concludes the argument of 1:18-2:5 on wisdom and the cross.<sup>19</sup> It is "an exposition of the nature of the Gospel as centred in the cross of Christ".<sup>20</sup> Paul establishes here that the power of God is manifested in human weakness. In this context, he draws a parallel between himself and the Corinthian community. In 1:26-31, he shows how the power of God

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. D. E. GARLAND, *1 Corinthians*, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. H. CONZELMANN, *1 Corinthians*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> R. F. COLLINS, *First Corinthians*, 118.

<sup>18</sup> See also G. D. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 89-90.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. A. C. THISELTON, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> A. C. THISELTON, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 107.

is manifested in the call of the Corinthians. In 2:1-4 he applies this to himself and his ministry.<sup>21</sup>

All these themes in this passage reflect Paul's theology and outlook. Paul saw himself as a missionary preacher and he was familiar with the use of rhetoric. It is clear that the passage reflects the existential situation in Corinth. Some among the Corinthian believers were attracted to rhetoric, wisdom and performance. The theme, which identifies the passage as a separate unit, is preaching. Therefore, this passage is a window into the principles that guided Paul's preaching.

## **6. IS PAUL AGAINST ORATORICAL SKILLS OR RHETORIC?**

The temptation to imitate inordinately the norms of the surrounding culture in preaching ministry is as old as the Corinthian Church. It seems that the Corinthian Church simply refused to accept preaching the crucified Christ. There are also indications that certain members of the Church considered the preaching of Paul inferior to that of other preachers because he did not show oratorical skills. It is clear that the Pauline Christology and the principles of Pauline preaching in 1 Cor 2:1-5 are not only a corrective to the faulty behaviour in the Corinthian Church but also offer a solution to the aberrations in preaching ministry.

In this passage, Paul gives the impression of being anti-rhetoric but many studies have revealed that he was familiar, possibly from his personal education, with the use of rhetoric. There is evidence of rhetoric in his writings, whatever be its source, which must be taken into account by the interpreter. Ironically, his very condemnation of rhetoric is itself rhetorical. It follows that what he says in the passage is not a condemnation of rhetoric as such but rather a polemic against the existential situation in Corinth. He wishes to show the importance of preaching Christ crucified and the role of the Holy Spirit in 'proclaiming with power'. Thus, Paul's attitude to rhetoric is basically neutral, as long as the use of rhetoric in preaching does not run counter to the concept of 'proclaiming with power'.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. A. FITZMYER, *First Corinthians*, 168-169; H. CONZELMANN, *1 Corinthians*, 53.

## **7. A BRIEF REFLECTION ON 1 COR 2:1-5**

By using ‘proclaiming’ and ‘power’ as hermeneutical keys, to study this passage, shows that Paul’s preaching is not merely the demonstration of mighty oratory or fascinating philosophy but rather the unleashing of God’s power.

Paul considered oratorical embellishment and wisdom speculations to be irrelevant when compared to the revelation in the crucified Christ (2:1-2, 4). He understood the importance of his bearing witness to the suffering of Christ. Though he considered himself a poor speaker (2:3), he was confident of the power of God working through his weakness (2:4). This thought freed him from fear of failure (2:5) that could otherwise negatively influence his preaching (2:2a). The Spirit empowered efficacy of his preaching led to the formation of the Corinthian Church (2:4-5). In summary, the theme that is explained in the passage is ‘proclaiming with power’.

‘Proclaiming’ and ‘Power’ represent two dimensions of the profile of the preacher. Christ is manifested in preaching, and by proclaiming the preacher demonstrates the saving power of Christ.

## **8. PROCLAIMING WITH POWER**

‘Proclaiming with Power’ is a key element of Paul’s theology of preaching especially in the passage and the theme has vital implications for contemporary preaching.

‘Proclaiming with Power’ can serve to address in a significant way the difficulties in preaching in a multi-religious and over-secularized context.

There are three aspects of ‘proclaiming with power’: the content, the principles and the implications.

The unchangeable content of ‘proclaiming with power’ is Jesus Christ who is the mystery and power of God.

The principles that guide ‘proclaiming with power’ are Christological and Pneumatological. The Christological dimension of ‘proclaiming with power’ underlies the preacher’s fidelity to proclaiming Christ (2:2). At the Pneumatological level, ‘proclaiming with power’ presupposes that the preacher should be open to the



Spirit (2:1,4). Therefore, ‘Proclaiming with Power’ means a Christocentric and Spirit empowered preaching of the Gospel.

The goal of ‘proclaiming with power’ is faith in Jesus Christ (2:2). The formation of a believing community is the proof of ‘proclaiming with power’ (2:5).

The condition of ‘proclaiming with power’ is the collaboration of the preacher with the Spirit and the conformity of the preacher with the message (2:2,4).

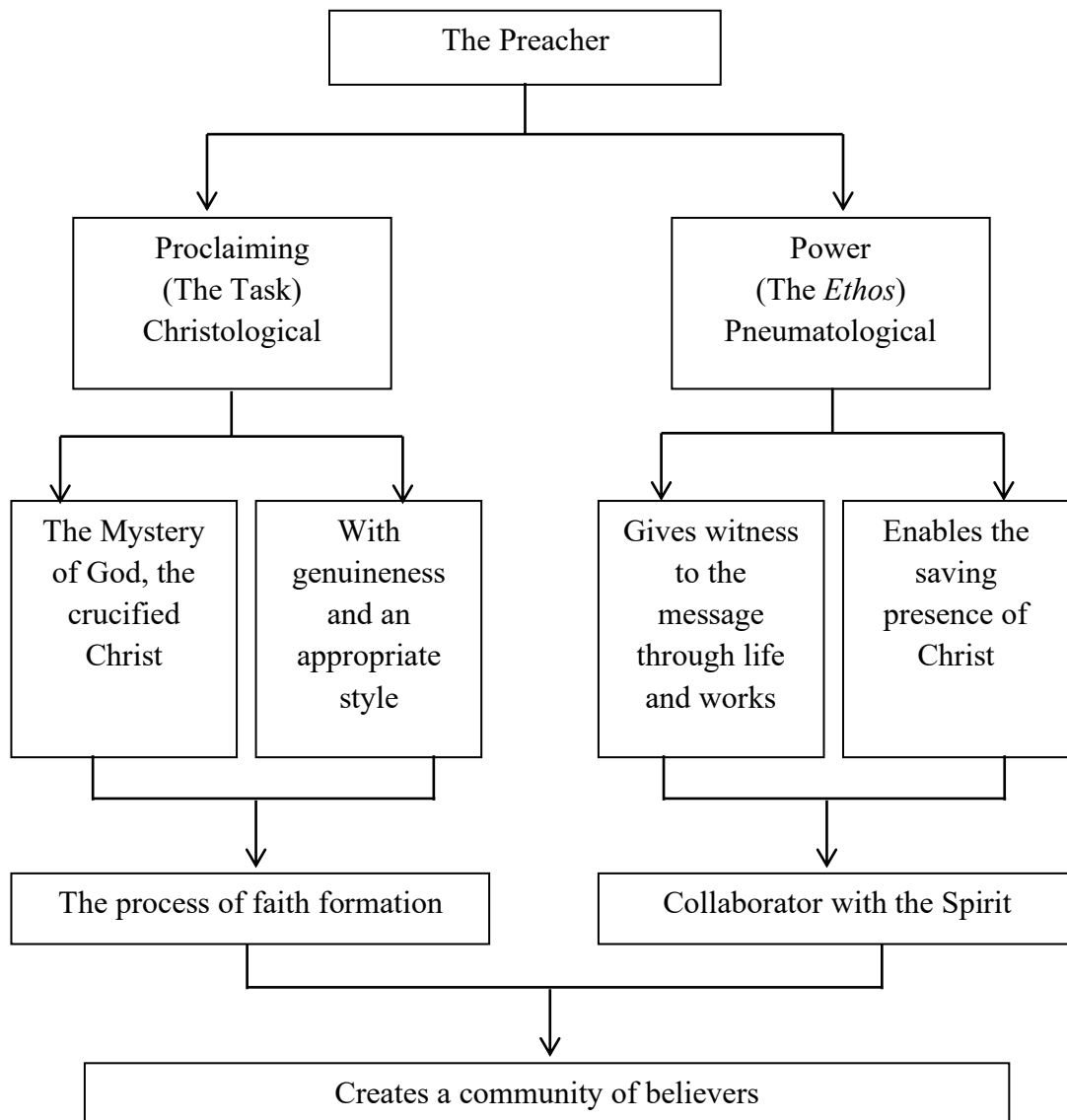
In summary, ‘proclaiming with power’ means the authentic proclamation of Christ, where the preacher witnesses the saving power of Christ.

## **9. A PROFILE OF THE PREACHER**

It emerges from the passage that all preachers are orators but not all orators can be preachers. The preacher, though appearing to be no different from other orators, is in fact substantially different from them. This means that, in addition to his *ethos*<sup>22</sup> as a speaker, there is the special *ethos* of the preacher which is established by his existence and his works as the representative of Christ. In a word, ‘proclaiming with power’ is the basic quality of the preacher.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ethos* is a word used by Quintilian for the disposition of the character in an orator (personality) that persuades and induces goodwill. It convinces the audience of the sincerity of the orator and therefore of the credibility of his speech. The *ethos* of the speaker is reflected in his good character and culture and in the virtues that make his public speaking convincing. In a word, the *ethos* of a speaker is manifested in the level of his authority, credibility and virtue as perceived by his audience.



## 10. IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING

This passage suggests the following guidelines for contemporary preaching.

1. A preacher is successful when his preaching leads his hearers to faith. The efficacy of preaching does not depend merely on the oratorical skills and the attractive personality of the preacher. It is the manifestation of the Spirit in preaching that leads to the conversion of the audience. This shows that, in preaching, the preacher should respond to the call of God rather than to the expectations of his listeners.
2. A preacher who gives importance to worldly standards and relies only on the techniques of oratory fails to proclaim with power. He fails to recognize the

- saving aspect of Gospel preaching. His preaching unleashes the power not of God but of his personal gifts and techniques. Therefore, preaching must not be reduced to a display of wisdom or logical arguments.
3. Every preacher should recognize that the content of preaching is not his own; this is something that cannot be altered. He should remember that the key to preaching is the fidelity of the messenger to the message.
  4. The authority of the preacher is not from himself but from God. A preacher, who is not faithful to his call, transmits human words instead of the Gospel. He will eventually produce a 'faith' that is based on human wisdom.
  5. The preacher should ensure that he accommodates the socio-cultural standards of his listeners not in the content of his preaching but in the external presentation of the material. In this process, the preacher should distinguish the central from the peripheral, and the essential from the accidental.
  6. Proficiency in preaching depends on both the preacher and the Holy Spirit. No preacher is capable of fulfilling the awesome task of Gospel proclamation by himself. It is only the divine assistance which will help him to overcome his limits. Therefore, preaching ministry must be open to the power of God.
  7. The challenge today is to effectively impart the Gospel to a world that is not interested in religious preaching. The task of the preacher is to communicate the crucified Christ with clarity.
  8. The Gospel message impresses itself upon the hearer with its own power. In the contemporary situation, the vocation of a preacher is to be a witness to the salvific efficacy of Gospel proclamation.
  9. Effective preaching does not exclude the fact that a preacher makes every effort to prepare himself to the best of his potential or the fact that he uses human skills and modern techniques in preaching ministry. A preacher keeps a balance between the divine and human elements. In other words, diligent preparation and personal involvement have an important place, whereas lazy preaching and self-sufficiency do not have any place in the life of a preacher.

10. Though the preacher is actively involved in the act of preaching, he should not think that human ingenuity is all that is needed for the effective proclamation of the Gospel. This implies that authentic preaching is something over and above the performance of the preacher.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that proclamation and power represent two dimensions of the preacher and ‘proclaiming with power’ is part of the profile of a preacher. Therefore, as Pope Francis says: “Let us renew our confidence in preaching, based on the conviction that it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and that he displays his power through human words.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium* 136, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html#II.%E2%80%82The\\_homily](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#II.%E2%80%82The_homily)