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In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son:

The Use of a Biblical Narrative in the Construction of the Religious Identity

On the 24th of March 1424, Bernardino da Siena, the most famous preacher of his time, began his sermon by saying that he wished to preach on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:19-32) and for that reason deviated from the Gospel reading of that day. It was not a matter of personal taste. He carefully explained why the story of the prodigal son was so important to change the calendar of readings proposed by the liturgy: «This parable is so full of meaning that if there had been nothing else in the Bible to bring the sinners to penitence, it would have been enough». In his perspective, the prodigal son presented in a perfect manner the core message of Lent, namely the conversion of the sinner. Even without addressing any other passages of the Gospel, this parable alone could reach the goal of moving the audience to penitence.

In his judgment on the exceptional value of this biblical narrative, Bernardino was far from isolated. A century before, in 1306, the Dominican Giordano da Pisa had been even more radical in singling out the value of the parable of the prodigal son. He not only stressed that this parable was «the most useful and necessary part of the Gospel for sinners, above all other Gospel texts», but that it was in some way of a different quality: «This parable is full of wisdom, for each of its words has a very deep meaning and one can acquire much wisdom from it; this is not the case with the other Gospel passages!». In coherence with his view, that day he focused completely on a single detail of the story of the prodigal son. Not surprisingly, he stated at the beginning of the sermon that «preaching for an entire Lent period on this parable alone would be good and necessary». What Giordano da Pisa suggested (probably in a hyperbolic way) eventually happened in 1494, when the Franciscan Johann Meder preached an entire Lenten cycle of fifty sermons on the prodigal son. Such a choice - an entire sermon collection on a single parable - is unique. Nevertheless, fifty years later, in a much changed historical context, that of the harsh confrontation between Lutheran and Catholic positions, another Franciscan, Johann Wild, preached again an entire Lent period on the prodigal son. In that case, he transformed the parable into the perfect framework for a thorough discussion of grace, sin, free will, and justification.

Covering a period of 250 years, these four prominent preachers expressed their predilection for the prodigal son as a key narrative to effectively convey a religious message to their audiences. They were just the tip of an iceberg of growing attention given to this parable in pastoral activities that involved not only the clergy but also the laity, as perfectly shown by three different religious plays on this parable written for and repeatedly staged by the Florentine youth

brotherhoods during the XV century. Why was this biblical story considered so important? How was it presented to the common people? What was the religious message conveyed through this text? Did this message change during late medieval and early modern period? And if so, in which ways?

Within the research project “Religious orders and religious identity formation in late medieval and early modern Europe”, led by Prof. Peter Raedts and Dr. Bert Roest, my research aims to investigate the formation of a lay religious identity through the pastoral activities that were promoted in particular by the main religious orders. My dissertation focuses on the techniques of «normative centring» (Hamm 2004) in catechistic texts and in conjunction with the emphasis on religious instruction within a homiletic context (Roest 2004, Hanska 2012). In order to manage such a vast research field, I have chosen the parable of the prodigal son not only as a case study, but rather as a catalyst that permits to closely analyse both the nuances of a multi-faceted religious message and the plurality of media that were adopted to shape and convey it. Three major strategic reasons underpin the choice of the prodigal son as focus of my research.

First, in late medieval pastoral mission, the prodigal son was used to convey not solely a set of doctrinal or moral ideas, but a complete religious identity. In fact, the people were asked to identify with the main character of the story. Therefore, this parable was considered - as we have seen - an invaluable instrument in shaping the religious identity, especially of the laity. This story, and its continuous re-elaborations, could in fact embody all the basic elements of the Christian life and was considered as a sort of narrative catechism, particularly in the penitential interpretation that dominated its late medieval exegesis and, even more, its presentation to the people. As Johann Wild put it, it was the perfect mirror in which one could see one’s own life depicted and that would help the audience to repent its sins and return to God. Indeed, it was presented as a narrative of self-understanding, the main message of which was: «You are the prodigal son». And yet, the profile of this prodigal son was not always the same. It rather shifted, depending on the priorities of those who adopted the story to convey their religious message.

This leads us to the second aspect, the dynamic of continuity and change in interpreting and using this parable. The late medieval interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son, like many other passages of the Gospel, was shaped by a long reception history, influenced by both its exegetical readings and pastoral uses. The comparison with this exegetical and pastoral tradition is methodologically strategic, because it gives us a solid basis for understanding what was new during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and, on the contrary, what continued to be repeated as part of a dynamic heritage.

The third reason for choosing the prodigal son derives from the previous one and pertains to the lively debate on this parable during the sixteenth century. Although the significant differences

in late medieval interpretations of the parable have to be carefully evaluated, all such interpretations largely privileged its penitential reading. Within this «late medieval consensus», the parable was an ideal framework for presenting the penitential process. In sermons on the prodigal son, the balance between human efforts and the grace of God was continually mentioned, yet the focus was not on theological discussions, but rather on the exhortation to do penitence in its codified sequence of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. This message became controversial during the Reformation period, as the Lutheran Johann Brentz perfectly summarized in his commentary on this parable: «Haec est praecipua controversia nostri temporis de religione [...] quomodo agenda fit poenitentia». It is not a coincidence that, in 1519, in his dispute with Luther, the catholic theologian Johann Eck started the discussion about the penitential process by using as his first argument the traditional reading of the conversion of the prodigal son as a process shaped by fear and love of God. Eck was defending not only a theological position, but also a pastoral tradition. In their discussion of the prodigal son, Luther and Eck were indeed discussing the true identity of the perfect believer. In fact, the only point on which they agreed was that «the prodigal son embodies the model penitent proposed by Christ», as Eck said. From that moment onwards, each side tried to include the prodigal son in its own religious discourses, breaking the previous unanimous reading. The study of this parable therefore permits to face central issues discussed in the sixteenth century and, most importantly, to tackle in which ways these ideas were disseminated to common people, especially through sermons and dramas.

An additional reason for investigating the prodigal son is that, in the centuries considered in my research, this biblical story was proposed to the people through different media of religious instruction: preaching, religious literature, dramas, and images. The result was an articulated system of communication that aimed to shape and enhance a clear-cut religious identity. This system of religious persuasion that adopted a multiplicity of media has been cleverly studied for the sixteenth century (Pettegree 2005). However, it was by no means a complete novelty, as I have verified through a thorough study of the late medieval pastoral and political uses of another parable, that of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Delcorno 2014).

In my analysis of this complex system of communication, preaching will have a central space. Scholars have repeatedly underlined the central role of model sermon collections as a prominent medium of religious instruction that, through «the voice of the common mendicant preacher» who repeated stereotyped material year after year, formed a system of mass communication, based on a «drip-drip method of inculcating beliefs» (D'Avray 1994). Moreover, following the diffusion of printing, and for a long time thereafter, preaching remained the most

effective medium of dissemination of religious ideas (Thayer 2000; Pettegree 2005; Frymire 2010).

While the study of the patristic and scholastic commentaries discloses the hard core of the exegetical interpretations of the prodigal son (Wailes 1987), preaching incessantly actualized the Gospel to the shimmering medieval society. Lay people, of course, were not passive receptors of this message, rather they both influenced preaching and elaborated other forms of religious instruction. An outstanding example of this concerns the already mentioned three Florentine dramas on the prodigal son, which were written by a layman, a lay woman, and a secular priest. These texts provide therefore an insight into the appropriation of this parable by the laity and the clergy, by men and women. This opens venues for studying a peculiar display of their interaction in elaborating a pastoral and theological discourse that actively involved the participation of the lay people in its construction. Whereas other forms of religious instruction, such as preaching, maintain a distinction between the authoritative voice of the preacher and the receptive ear of the audience, these theatre performances display a strong cooperation between lay people and religious people, a rich network of relationships that permitted cultural and religious exchanges (Corbellini 2013). This positive interaction between different media is perfectly summarised in a sermon on the prodigal son of Georg Witzel, a successful sixteenth-century preacher, who says: «It is very nice that this extraordinary parable is so often staged as a play and represented by painters and weavers. Thus, it is clearly shown to everybody, old and young, how the mercy of God is overwhelming».

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