

# Fulfilled In Your Hearing

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THE HOMILY IN  
THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY

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Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Washington, D.C.

In its 1979 planning document, as approved by the general membership of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) in November 1978, the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, through its Secretariat, was authorized to address the question of preaching with respect to the Sunday homily. A draft was reviewed by the Administrative Committee of the NCCB in March 1981. The following text has been approved by Bishop Justin A. Driscoll, chairman of the committee, and authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Monsignor Daniel F. Hoye  
General Secretary  
NCCB/USCC

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## Foreword

In 1979 the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry decided to address the question of preaching with respect to the Sunday homily for the following reasons:

- 1) the conclusions of numerous surveys indicating the questionable quality of preaching and homily preparation often experienced in Catholic churches;
- 2) to bring the attention of bishops and priests to the need for programs that emphasize homily preparation and delivery;
- 3) to provide useful information to bishops and priests in their efforts to improve the quality of their homilies;
- 4) to suggest to the NCCB certain recommendations regarding the improvement of the homily on national, diocesan and parish levels.

With the publication of *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, the Committee believes it has responded to these reasons. It now hopes that the information contained herein will serve not only to enhance the quality of preaching in the Sunday Assembly, but also to assist priests and bishops as they endeavor to fulfill their primary duty, namely, the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all.

At this time the Committee wishes to express its gratitude to Bishop William A. Hughes who served as Chairman of its Subcommittee on Spiritual Renewal and Continuing Education, which was responsible for this project. The Committee is especially grateful to the Rev. William Skudlarek, O.S.B., Ph.D., the principal writer, who prepared the document in its final form.

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Baumer, C.P.P.S., M.A., Gerard T. Broccolo, S.T.D., Rev. Mr. David Buttrick, B.D., Mr. William Graham, M.A., Revs. George T. Montague, S.M., S.T.D., James Notebaart, M.A., Robert Schwartz, S.T.L. and Msgr. Colin A. MacDonald, Executive Director of the Committee's Secretariat.

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Most Rev. Justin A. Driscoll, Chairman	Msgr. Colin A. MacDonald, Executive Director
Most Rev. Kenneth A. Angell	Msgr. John P. McCullagh
Most Rev. William A. Hughes	Rev. Thomas C. Brady
Most Rev. John E. McCarthy	Rev. Dennis J. Dease
Most Rev. P. Francis Murphy	Rev. Brian T. Joyce
Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy	Rev. John J. Malecki
Most Rev. Francis A. Quinn	Rev. Neil McCaulley
Most Rev. Richard J. Sklba	Rev. Frank J. McNulty
Most Rev. John J. Snyder	Rev. John J. O'Callaghan, S.J.
Most Rev. Arthur N. Tafoya	Rev. Ignatius M. Roppolo
	Rev. Lawrence J. Stuebben
	Rev. Benedict Swiderek

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
I. The Assembly .....	3
II. The Preacher .....	9
III. The Homily .....	17
IV. Homiletic Method .....	29
Epilogue: The Power of the Word .....	41
Appendix .....	43
Endnotes .....	45



## Introduction

“The primary duty of priests is the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all.” These clear, straightforward words of the Second Vatican Council (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, #4) may still come as something of a surprise to us. We might more spontaneously think that the primary duty of priests is the celebration of the Church’s sacraments, or the pastoral care of the People of God, or the leadership of a Christian community. Yet, the words of the document are clear: the proclamation of the Gospel is primary. The other duties of the priest are to be considered properly presbyteral to the degree that they support the proclamation of the Gospel.

“Proclamation” can cover a wide variety of activities in the church. A life of quiet faith and generous loving deeds is proclamation; the celebration of the Eucharist is the proclamation “of the death of the Lord until he comes.” But a key moment in the proclamation of the Gospel is preaching, preaching which is characterized by “proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, that is, the mystery of Christ, which is ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy” (*Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy*, #35,2).

*The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* is especially clear in relating the ministry of preaching to that of the celebration of the sacraments. Since these sacraments are sacraments of faith, and since “faith is born of the Word and nourished by it,” the preaching of the Word is an essential part of the celebration of the sacraments. This is especially true in the celebration of the Eucharist, the document goes on to note, for “in this celebration the proclamation of the death and resurrection of the Lord is inseparably joined both to the response of the people who hear, and to the very offering whereby Christ ratified the New Testament in His blood.”

This intimate link between preaching and the celebration of the sacraments, especially of the Sunday Eucharist, is what we intend to address in this document on preaching. We recog-

nize that preaching is not limited to priests. Deacons are also ordained ministers of the Word. Indeed, the proclamation of the Word of God is the responsibility of the entire Christian community by virtue of the sacrament of baptism. Moreover, we recognize that preaching is not limited to the Eucharist, and we are pleased to support the ways in which more and more Catholics are celebrating the power of God's Word in evangelistic gatherings, in the catechumenate, and in groups devoted to the study of the Bible and to prayer. We also recognize that for the vast majority of Catholics the Sunday homily is the normal and frequently the formal way in which they hear the Word of God proclaimed. For these Catholics the Sunday homily may well be the most decisive factor in determining the depth of their faith and strengthening the level of their commitment to the church.

The focus of this document, therefore, will be the Sunday homily, and even more specifically, the homily preached by the bishop or priest who presides at the celebration of the Eucharist. Again, we recognize that there are occasions when the homily may be preached by someone other than the presider, by a deacon serving in the parish or a guest priest preacher, for example. Yet, in terms of common practice and of liturgical norm, the preaching of the homily belongs to the presiding minister. (See *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #42: "The homily should ordinarily be given by the celebrant.") The unity of Word and Sacrament is thus symbolized in the person of the presiding minister of the Eucharist.

While this document is addressed specifically to priests who have a pastoral ministry that involves regular Sunday preaching, we hope that all who are concerned with effective proclamation of the Gospel will find it helpful. This document may also prove useful in the preparation for and continuing formation of permanent deacons as ministers of the Word.

We propose that this document be used as a basis of discussion among priests and bishops, and by priests with members of their congregations. In such sharing of personal experiences, of expectations and frustrations, and by mutual support, we find hope for a renewal of preaching in the church today.

## I. The Assembly

Jesus came to Nazareth where he had been reared, and entering the synagogue on the sabbath as he was in the habit of doing, he stood up to do the reading. When the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed him, he unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me;  
therefore he has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,  
to proclaim liberty to captives,  
Recovery of sight to the blind  
and release to prisoners,  
To announce a year of favor from the Lord."

Rolling up the scroll he gave it back to the assistant and sat down. All in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him. Then he began by saying to them, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." All who were present spoke favorably of him; they marveled at the appealing discourse which came from his lips. (Lk 4:14–22a)

These verses from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke present us with a picture of Jesus as reader and homilist in the synagogue at Nazareth. He stands up to read the lesson from the prophet which was placed at the end of the service. He then draws on this passage to speak to the here-and-now situation. All who listened to him were favorably impressed.

The three major elements of liturgical preaching are all here: the preacher, the word drawn from the Scriptures, and the gathered community. Each element is essential and each must be considered carefully if we are to understand the challenge and the possibilities of liturgical preaching.

We believe that it is appropriate, indeed essential, to begin

this treatment of the Sunday homily with the assembly rather than with the preacher or the homily, and this for two principal reasons. First of all we can point to the great emphasis which communication theorists place on an accurate understanding of the audience if communication is to be effective. 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. To say this is by no means to imply that preachers are only to preach what their congregations want to hear. Only when preachers know what their congregations want to hear will they be able to communicate what a congregation needs to hear. Homilists may indeed preach on what they understand to be the real issues, but if they are not 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.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary ecclesiology provides a second and even more fundamental reason for beginning with the assembly rather than with the preacher or the homily. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* describes the church as the mystery of God's saving will, given concrete historical expression in the people with whom he has entered into a covenant. This church is the visible sacrament of the saving unity to which God calls all people. "Established by Christ as a fellowship of life, charity, and truth, the church is also used by Him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth" (#9). The church, therefore, is first and foremost a gathering of those whom the Lord has called into a covenant of peace with himself. In this gathering, as in every other, offices and ministries are necessary, but secondary. The primary reality is Christ in the assembly, the People of God.

This renewed understanding of the church is gradually becoming consciously present in the words and actions of the Catholic people. By means of their involvement in diocesan and parish organizations, their sharing in various forms of

ministry, and their active participation in the liturgy, they are beginning to experience what it means to say that the people are the church and the church are people.

Obviously the development we are speaking of is not uniform. But it is clear that the parish in which the priest acts in an arbitrary manner, in which virtually all active ministry—liturgical, educational, and social—is in the hands of the clergy and religious, and in which the laity do little more than attend Mass and receive the sacraments, is no longer the norm. Such a drastic change in the practices and self-consciousness of the Catholic congregation is bound to have significant consequences for the content and style of preaching that takes place in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly.

To preach in a way that sounds as if the preacher alone has access to the truth and knows what is best for everyone else, or that gives the impression that there are no unresolved problems or possibility for dialogue, is to preach in a way that may have been acceptable to those who viewed the church primarily in clerical terms. In a church that thinks and speaks of itself as a pilgrim people, gathered together for worship, witness, and work, such preaching will be heard only with great difficulty, if at all.

### **The Identity of the Assembly**

The Eucharistic assembly that gathers Sunday after Sunday is a rich and complex phenomenon. Even in parishes that are more or less uniform in ethnic, social, or economic background, there is great diversity: men and women, old and young, the successes and the failures, the joyful and the bereaved, the fervent and the halfhearted, the strong and the weak. Such diversity is a constant challenge to the preacher, for our words can all too easily be heard as excluding one or the other segment of the congregation. We may not mean to ignore the presence of women when we say "Jesus came to save all men," but if exclusion is heard, then exclusion is communicated, whether intended or not.

While the diversity of every assembly is a factor that needs to be taken seriously by the preacher, and all the more so when the diversity cuts across racial, ethnic, economic, and social

lines, this diversity should not blind us to another, even greater reality: the unity of the congregation. This assembly has come together because its members have been baptized into the one body of Christ and share a common faith. This faith, though rooted in a common baptismal identity, is expressed in ways that extend from the highest levels of personal appropriation and intellectual understanding to the most immature forms of ritualism and routine. And yet, to a greater or lesser degree, it is faith in Jesus Christ that is common to all the members of a community gathered for Eucharist.

To say that a community shares a common faith is to say that its members have a common way of interpreting the world around them. For the Christian community, the world is seen and interpreted as the creation of a loving God. Although this world turned away from God through sin, God reached out again and again to draw the world to himself, finally sending his own Son in human flesh. This Son expressed the fullness of the Father's love by accepting death on the cross. The Father in turn glorified his Son by raising him from the dead and making him the source of eternal life for all who believe. Believers witness to the presence and word of Jesus in the world and are a continuing sign of the Kingdom of God, which is present both in and through Jesus, and still to come to its fullness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In very broad outline this is the common faith that binds together the Christian community gathering for worship. No individual in the community would very likely express the faith in quite these words. Some might find it difficult to express their faith in any words at all. They do not possess the background of theology to enable them to do so. We might say, therefore, that one of the principal tasks of the preacher is to provide the congregation of the faithful with words to express their faith, and with words to express the human realities to which this faith responds. Through words drawn from the Scriptures, from the church's theological tradition, and from the personal appropriation of that tradition through study and prayer, the preacher joins himself and the congregation in a common vision. We can say, therefore, that the homily is a unifying moment in the celebration of the liturgy, deepening

and giving expression to the unity that is already present through the sacrament of baptism.

### **The Preacher as Mediator of Meaning**

The person who preaches in the context of the liturgical assembly is thus a mediator, representing both the community and the Lord. The assembly gathers for liturgy as a community of faith, believing that God has acted in human history and more particularly, in their own history. The community gathers to respond to this living and active God. They may also gather to question how or whether the God who once acted in human history is still present and acting today. They may wonder how this God, whom the Scriptures present as so powerful and so loving, can be experienced in lives today that seem so broken and meaningless. How can parents believe in a God who raises the dead to life when their daughter has just been killed in a car accident? How can a family hope in a God who leads his people out of slavery into freedom when they are trapped in an inflationary spiral in which costs increase and the buying power of their salaries diminishes? How can young people join with the angels and saints in praise of the glory of God when they are struggling with the challenges of establishing their own identities and their relationship to family and friends?

The preacher represents this community by voicing its concerns, by naming its demons, and thus enabling it to gain some understanding and control of the evil which afflicts it. He represents the Lord by offering the community another word, a word of healing and pardon, of acceptance and love. Like humans everywhere, the people who make up the liturgical assembly are people hungry, sometimes desperately so, for meaning in their lives. For a time they may find meaning in their jobs, their families and friends, their political or social causes. All these concerns, good and valid as they are, fall short of providing ultimate meaning. Without ultimate meaning, we are ultimately unsatisfied. If we are able to hear a word which gives our lives another level of meaning, which interprets them in relation to God, then our response is to turn to this source of meaning in an attitude of praise and thanksgiving.



The community that gathers Sunday after Sunday comes together to offer God praise and thanksgiving, or at least to await a word that will give a meaning to their lives and enable them to celebrate Eucharist. What the preacher can do best of all at this time and in this place is to enable this community to celebrate by offering them a word in which they can recognize their own concerns and God's concern for them.

The preacher acts as a mediator, making connections between the real lives of people who believe in Jesus Christ but are not always sure what difference faith can make in their lives, and the God who calls us into ever deeper communion with himself and with one another. Especially in the Eucharistic celebration, *the* sign of God's saving presence among his people, the preacher is called to point to the signs of God's presence in the lives of his people so that, in joyous recognition of that presence, they may join the angels and saints to proclaim God's glory and sing with them their unending hymn of praise.

## II. The Preacher

We began our treatment of the Sunday homily by looking first to the assembly that gathers to celebrate the liturgy of the Eucharist. Such a beginning could be interpreted to mean that the importance of the ordained priesthood is not what it used to be. Nothing could be further from the truth. The priesthood of the faithful and the ordained ministerial priesthood although distinct are not opposed to one another. In fact, they stand or fall together. To the degree that we give full weight to the priesthood of all the baptized, to that degree do we see the full importance and significance of the ordained priesthood. To the degree that we downplay the importance of the priesthood of the faithful, to that degree is the ordained priesthood diminished.

The community gathered to worship is a priestly people, men and women called to offer God worship. If this community is conscious of its dignity, then those it calls to service in positions of leadership will be able to recognize their dignity as well. We think of the priest as the representative of Christ. This way of thinking is true, as long as we remember that one represents Christ by representing the church, for the church is the fundamental sacrament of Christ. Moreover, it is the church, through its bishops, that calls individuals to presbyteral ministry in the church.

### **Pastoral Role of the Preacher**

Preachers who are conscious of their representative role strive to preach in a way that indicates they know and identify with the people to whom they are speaking. Their preaching is pastoral, displaying a sensitive and concerned knowledge of the struggles, doubts, concerns, and joys of the members of a local community.

To be in touch with the cares and concerns, needs and good fortunes of the assembly does not mean that the preacher has to answer questions or solve problems in every homily. There

will be occasions when nothing we can say will do anything to change a situation. We cannot raise a dead daughter to life; our words will not stop inflation or lower unemployment. What our words can do is help people make connections between the realities of their lives and the realities of the Gospel. We can help them see how God in Jesus Christ has entered and identified himself with the human realities of pain and of happiness.

### **Listening and Praying**

In order to make such connections between the lives of the people and the Gospel, the preacher will have to be a listener before he is a speaker. Listening is not an isolated moment. It is a way of life. It means openness to the Lord's voice not only in the Scriptures but in the events of our daily lives and in the experience of our brothers and sisters. It is not just *my* listening but *our* listening together for the Lord's word to the community. We listen to the Scriptures, we listen to the people, and we ask, "What are they saying to one another? What are they asking of one another?" And out of that dialogue between the Word of God in the Scriptures and the Word of God in the lives of his people, the Word of God in preaching begins to take shape.

Attentive listening to the Scriptures and to the people is, in essence, a form of prayer, perhaps the form of prayer most appropriate to the spirituality of the priest and preacher. There is nothing more essential than prayerful listening for effective preaching, a praying over the texts which seeks the light and fire of the Holy Spirit to kindle the *now* meaning in our hearts. A week of daily meditation on the readings of the following Sunday is not too much time to spend in preparation for the preaching we are called to do on the Lord's Day. Such regular preparation will allow us not only to savor the word in prayer but also to incorporate the experiences of a full week into our preparation.

Such extended, prayerful preparation is so important for preaching because it helps us reach the moment of inspiration, an inspiration that has affinities to poetic inspiration but is more. We ask for and expect the real movement of the Holy

Spirit in us and in the assembly. If the words of Scripture are divinely inspired, as we believe them to be, then divine inspiration must be at work when those words are made alive and contemporary to the believing community in and through our ministry.

The preacher is thus called, above all, to be prayerful. The prayer we speak of is not prayer alongside of preparation for preaching, or over and above this preparation, but the very heart and center of the preparation itself. Unless the Word of God in the Scriptures is interiorized through prayerful study and reflection, it cannot possibly sustain the life-giving, love-generating words that preachers want to offer their people. Preachers then are called to a prayerful dwelling with their people and to a prayerful dwelling with the texts of Scripture knowing them and allowing themselves to be known by them.

This dwelling with the Scriptures and with the people which is the necessary prelude to effective preaching points to the necessity for certain pastoral skills and academic knowledge, both of which the modern seminary offers its candidates for priesthood, but which need continual updating and refining. We speak here of the skills of understanding and communicating with people, and of the knowledge required for the accurate and relevant interpretation of Scriptural texts.

### **Interpreting the Scriptures**

Let us begin with the second requirement first, since that is somewhat easier to describe. The interpretation of texts is the science of hermeneutics, and in order to accomplish its end, hermeneutics relies first of all on exegesis. For exegesis to be done at the highest professional level, the exegete must have knowledge of the original languages, access to the tools of textual criticism, extensive historical and archeological background, a comprehensive knowledge of the development of biblical faith, and a familiarity with the history of the theological interpretation of texts in both the synagogue and the Christian churches. Obviously few preachers have the training or access to the resources for exegesis of this kind.

Exegesis for preaching need not always be done at the highest professional level. Our seminary training and our continu-

ing education provide us with tools and resources to tap the best of contemporary exegesis in a fruitful way. Even a smattering of Hebrew and Greek is helpful in capturing the flavor or nuances of certain words. An acquaintance with the methods of scriptural scholarship enables us to understand, for example, why the sayings of Jesus can appear in such different contexts, and therefore with such different meanings, in the Gospels. Or again, knowing how the biblical author used a particular passage as a building block in a larger literary context can help us appreciate how the church of succeeding ages found it important to set the passage in contemporary contexts, a task which is ours in the liturgical celebration today.

It is hard to imagine that a person who has as his primary duty the proclamation of the Gospel to all would be without the basic tools and methods that help to ensure an accurate understanding of this Gospel. Surely every preacher ought to have a basic library to turn to in the preparation of homilies. A good Bible dictionary will help in picturing the background of a passage; a concordance will locate other passages that are related; a "theological" dictionary of Scripture will trace ideas that recur through Old and New Testaments; Gospel parallels will set similar texts that occur in more than one Gospel side by side. Standard commentaries on the major books of the Bible that appear in the lectionary should also be ready at hand, as well as exegetical commentaries based on the lectionary itself.

The texts of Scripture from which our preaching flows are not locked in antiquity. They are texts which have nourished the church's life throughout all its history, sustaining it in times of trial, calling it back to fidelity in times of weakness and opening up new possibilities when it seemed immobilized by the weight of human traditions.

The history of the interpretation of the Scriptures is part of the contemporary meaning of the Scriptures. The way they have been preached, the liturgical expressions they have generated, the prayer they have nourished, the magisterial statements they have inspired, the theological systems they have fostered, even the heresies they have occasioned, expand and deepen the way the Scriptures speak to us today.

It is the faith of the church that the preacher must proclaim, not merely his own. Consequently, the more familiar the preacher is with the history of scriptural interpretation and the development of the church's doctrine, the more capable he is of bringing that word into dialogue with the contemporary situation. Church doctrine is nourished by profound meditation upon the inspired Word, the exegesis of the fathers, conciliar documents and the teaching of the Magisterium. Therefore, the qualified preacher will lead his people to ever greater unity of faith among themselves as well as with prior generations of believers.

It is somewhat more difficult to speak of what is involved in the understanding of people and how the priest/preacher can prepare himself for this demand of his office. Surely part of the rationale of the requirement that students in theological seminaries have a background in the liberal arts, with an emphasis on philosophy, is that familiarity with the leading ideas, movements, and personalities of human civilization (or at least of Western civilization) will enable preachers to engage in a critical dialogue with contemporary culture, recognizing what is conformable with the Gospel, challenging that which is not. The great artistic and literary achievements of a culture are surely a privileged means of access to the heart and mind of a people.

Regular and sustained contact with the world's greatest literature or with its painting, sculpture, and musical achievements can rightfully be regarded by preachers not simply as a leisure time activity but as part of their ongoing professional development. The same can be said of attention to modern entertainment media—television, film, radio—or to the theater. Dramatic presentations that deal sensitively with significant human issues can provide a wealth of material for our reflection and our preaching, both in its content and in its form.

If preachers are to know and understand their congregations today, some familiarity with popular forms of entertainment may also be necessary. We need not spend whole afternoons watching soap operas, memorizing baseball statistics, or listening to the latest hit albums. Yet if we are totally unaware, or give the impression that we are unaware of the ac-

tivities and interests to which people devote a good deal of their leisure time, energy, and money, it will be difficult for us to make connections between their lives and the Gospel, or to call them to fuller, richer, and deeper levels of faith response.

Finally, preachers need to devote some time and energy to understanding the complex social, political, and economic forces that are shaping the contemporary world. Watching the evening news on television or scanning the headlines of the daily paper may be a beginning but it is not enough. Preachers need exposure to more serious and sustained commentary on the contemporary world, the kind of exposure that can be gained through a program of reading or through conversation with people who are professionally involved in such areas as business, politics, or medicine. Without this kind of informed understanding of the complex world we live in, preaching too easily degenerates into platitudes of faith, meaningless broadsides against the wickedness of the modern world, or into an uncritical affirmation of the wonderful advances that have taken place in modern times.

To have a comprehensive knowledge of the social, political and economic forces shaping the contemporary world, while at the same time specializing in scriptural exegesis and theology and being pastorally competent may well appear to be an overwhelming, even impossible, expectation to lay on any one person. The point to be made here, however, is not that preachers must know everything, but rather that there is no limit to the sources of knowledge and insight that a preacher can draw upon. There are many avenues which lead toward a deeper understanding of the human condition. Some will travel more easily down the avenue of the social sciences, others down the avenue of literature and the arts, others down the avenue of popular culture. What ultimately matters is not which avenue we take, but what we take with us as we travel.

As long as we carry the Word of God with us, a word that we have allowed to touch on our own lives in prayer and reflection, and as long as we speak that word in language and images that are familiar to the dwellers of the particular avenue we are travelling, the Word of God will be preached, and the possibility of faith and conversion will be present.

### **The Limitations of the Preacher**

It may be good to close this section with a word of caution. While preachers, like other people, cannot be expected to know everything, they are easily tempted to give the impression that they do. As one perceptive critic put it, preachers in their pulpits are people who speak ten feet above contradiction. The Word of God which we are called to proclaim is a divinely inspired Word, and therefore an authoritative and un-failing Word. But we who are limited and fallible possess no guarantee that our understanding of this Word—or of the human situation—is without error and therefore relevant and binding.

Preachers accept their limitations not by making the pulpit a sounding board for their personal doubts, anxieties or problems, but by offering people a Word which has spoken to their lives and inviting these people to think and ponder on that Word so that it might speak to their lives as well. A recent poster says it well: "Jesus came to take away our sins, not our minds." What preachers may need to witness to more than anything else is the conviction that authentic, mature faith demands the hard struggle of thinking and choosing. What the Word of God offers us is a way to interpret our human lives, a way to face the ambiguities and challenges of the human condition, not a pat answer to every problem and question that comes along.

Some years ago a survey was taken among a group of parishioners. They were asked what they hoped to experience during a sermon. When the results were in, the answer was clear. What the majority wanted was simply to hear a person of faith speaking. Ultimately, that's what preaching is all about, not lofty theological speculation, not painstaking biblical exegesis, not oratorical flamboyance. The preacher is a person speaking to people about faith and life.



### III. The Homily

The Sunday Eucharist is a privileged point of encounter between a local Christian community and its priest. Within this Eucharistic celebration the homily is a moment when this encounter can be especially intense and personal. We want now to look at the nature and function of this form of preaching, to relate it to the issues we have already raised in speaking of the assembly and the preacher, and finally to suggest a method for building and preaching the homily.

#### **The Homily and Faith**

Like all preaching, the homily is directed to faith. As Paul writes, "But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe unless they have heard of him? And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach?" (Romans 10:14). Some preaching is directed to people who have not heard the Gospel and is meant to lead them to an initial acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior. Other forms of preaching are directed to a deeper understanding of the faith or to its ethical implications.

The homily is preaching of another kind. It may well include evangelization, catechesis, and exhortation, but its primary purpose is to be found in the fact that it is, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, "a part of the liturgy itself" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #52). The very meaning and function of the homily is determined by its relation to the liturgical action of which it is a part. It flows from the Scriptures which are read at that liturgical celebration, or, more broadly, from the Scriptures which undergird its prayers and actions, and it enables the congregation to participate in the celebration with faith.

The fact that the homily is addressed to a congregation of believers who have gathered to worship indicates that its purpose is not conversion from radical unbelief to belief. A homily presupposes faith. Nor does the homily primarily concern it-

self with a systematic theological understanding of the faith. The liturgical gathering is not primarily an educational assembly. Rather the homily is preached in order that a community of believers who have gathered to celebrate the liturgy may do so more deeply and more fully—more faithfully—and thus be formed for Christian witness in the world.<sup>2</sup>

### **Faith as Interpretation**

To say that preaching, the homily included, is directed to faith is another way of saying that preaching is involved in the task of interpretation. “Faith” can be defined as a way of seeing or interpreting the world. The way we interpret the world, in turn, determines the way we relate to it. For example, if we believe that a particular race or class of people are our enemies, we will relate to them with suspicion and hostility. A friendly gesture will be interpreted not as a genuine sign of good will but as a ruse to get us to lower our guard. On the other hand, if we believe that a group of people are our friends, we will tend to excuse even a hostile gesture with the explanation that there must have been some mistake: they didn’t recognize us or we have misinterpreted their gesture. Our “faith” in the way things are has led us to live in the world in a way that corresponds to what we believe about it.

The Christian interprets the world not as a hostile and evil place, but as a creation of a loving God who did not allow it to destroy itself, but sent his Son to rescue it. The Christian response to the world, then, is one of acceptance and affirmation—along with the recognition that it is still awaiting its full redemption.

One of the most important, and most specifically human, ways in which faith is communicated to individuals and communities is through language. The way we speak about our world expresses the way we think about it and interpret it. One of the reasons we speak about our world at all is to share our vision of the world with others. The preacher is a Christian specially charged with sharing the Christian vision of the world as the creation of a loving God. Into this world human beings unleashed the powers of sin and death. These powers have been met, however, by God through his Son Jesus Christ,

in whom he is at work not only to restore creation, but to transform it into a new heaven and a new earth.

### **Faith Leading to a Response**

When one hears and accepts this vision of the world, this way of interpreting reality, a response is required. That response can take many forms. Sometimes it will be appropriate to call people to repentance for the way they have helped to spread the destructive powers of sin in the world. At other times the preacher will invite the congregation to devote themselves to some specific action as a way of sharing in the redemptive and creative word of God. However, the response that is most general and appropriate “at all times and in every place” is the response of praise and thanksgiving (Eucharist).

When we accept the good news that the ultimate root and source of our being is not some faceless Prime Mover, not a merciless judge, but a prodigally loving Father who calls us to share in his love and to spread it to others, we sense that it is indeed right to give him thanks and praise.

Although we have received this good news, believed in it, and sealed our belief in the sacrament of baptism, we need to rediscover the truth of it again and again in our lives. Our faith grows weak, we are deceived by appearances, overwhelmed by suffering, plagued by doubt, anguished by the dreadful silence of God. And yet we gather for Eucharist, awaiting a word that will rekindle the spark of faith and enable us to recognize once again the presence of a loving God in our lives. We come to break bread in the hope that we will be able to do so with hearts burning. We come expecting to hear a Word from the Lord that will again help us to see the meaning of our lives in such a way that we will be able to say, with faith and conviction, “It is right to give him thanks and praise.”

The preacher then has a formidable task: to speak from the Scriptures (those inspired documents of our tradition that hand down to us the way the first believers interpreted the world) to a gathered congregation in such a way that those assembled will be able to worship God in spirit and truth, and then go forth to love and serve the Lord. But while the task is

formidable, it is not impossible, especially if one goes about it with purpose and method.

### **The Homily and the Lectionary**

The homily is not so much *on* the Scriptures as *from* and *through* them. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the selection of texts to be read at the Eucharistic liturgy is normally not left to the preacher, but is determined ahead of time and presented in the form of a lectionary. The basic purpose of a lectionary is twofold: to ensure that the Scripture texts appropriate to a feast or season are read at that time, and to provide for a comprehensive reading of the Scriptures. Thus, we find in the lectionary two principles guiding the selection of texts: the thematic principle (readings chosen to correspond to the "theme" of a feast or season), and the *lectio continua* principle (readings taken in order from a book of the Bible which is being read over a given period of time).

In the section of the lectionary entitled "Masses for Various Occasions," we find the thematic principle at work in a way that corresponds more closely to what some liturgical planners refer to as the theme of a liturgy: e.g., readings appropriate for Christian unity, or for peace and justice. Such thematic liturgies have their place, as the lectionary title indicates, on various or special occasions, rather than at the regular Sunday liturgy.<sup>3</sup>

It is to these given texts that the preacher turns to prepare the homily for a community that will gather for the Sunday liturgy. Since the purpose of the homily is to enable the gathered congregation to celebrate the liturgy with faith, the preacher does not so much attempt to explain the Scriptures as to interpret the human situation through the Scriptures. In other words, the goal of the liturgical preacher is not to interpret a text of the Bible (as would be the case in teaching a Scripture class) as much as to draw on the texts of the Bible as they are presented in the lectionary to interpret peoples' lives. To be even more precise, the preacher's purpose will be to turn to these Scriptures to interpret peoples' lives in such a way that they will be able to celebrate Eucharist—or be reconciled

with God and one another, or be baptized into the Body of Christ, depending on the particular liturgy that is being celebrated.<sup>4</sup>

To preach from the Scriptures in this way means that we have to "get behind them," as it were. We have to hear these texts as real words addressed to real people. Scholarly methods of interpreting Scripture can help us do this by putting us in touch with the life situations that originated these texts, or by making us more aware of the different ways language can function as a conveyer of meaning. But scholarly methods are not enough. As we emphasized in the second chapter, the preacher needs to listen to these texts meditatively and prayerfully.

As preachers we go to the Scriptures saying, "What is the human situation to which these texts were originally addressed? To what human concerns and questions might these same texts have spoken through the Church's history? What is the human situation to which they can speak today? How can they help us to understand, to interpret our lives in such a way that we can turn to God with praise and thanksgiving?" Only when we approach the Scriptures in this way do they have any possibility of becoming a living word for us and for others.

Such prayerful listening to the text demands time, not just the time of actual reading and praying and studying but, just as importantly, the time of standing back and letting the text dwell in our unconscious mind. This period of "incubation," as it is often called, is essential to all human creative effort. It is especially important for the homilist when reflecting upon texts which have become overly familiar, or which seem inappropriate for a given situation. With the use of a lectionary, the readings assigned for a particular day may seem to have little to say to a specific congregation at a specific time in its life. However, if the text and the actual human situation are allowed to interact with one another, a powerful interpretative word of faith will often emerge. But for this to happen we need to dwell with the text and allow it to dwell with us. Only then will the text reveal new meaning to us, a new and fresh way of interpreting and speaking about our world.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Homily, the Congregation, and Homily Services**

If the homily must be faithful to the Scriptures for it to be the living Word of God, it must also be faithful to the congregation to whom this living Word of God is addressed. The homily will be effective in enabling a community to worship God with praise and thanksgiving only if individuals in that community recognize there a word that responds to the implicit or explicit questions of their lives.

There are many ways in which priests get to know their congregations and allow themselves to be known by them: involvement with parish organizations, individual and family counseling, social contacts, visits to the sick and the bereaved, planning for weddings and baptisms, the sacrament of reconciliation, and, equally as important, simply being with people as a friend and member of the community. The preacher will be able to draw on all these contacts when he turns to the Scriptures to seek there a Word from the Lord for the lives of his people.

This pastoral dimension of the homily is the principal reason why some homily services, especially those that do little more than provide ready-to-preach homilies, can actually be a hindrance to effective preaching. Since the homily is integrally related to the liturgy, and since liturgy presupposes a community that gathers to celebrate it, the homily is by definition related to a community. Homily services can be helpful in the interpretation of scriptural texts (though generally not as much as some basic exegetical resources) and give some ideas on how these texts can be related to contemporary human concerns. But they cannot provide individual preachers with specific indications of how these texts can be heard by the particular congregations to whom they will preach.

Homily services can provide valuable assistance to the preacher when they are concerned to relate the interpretation of the lectionary texts to the liturgical season in which they appear, and when they are attentive to the *lectio continua* principle of the lectionary. They may also be helpful in suggesting some possibilities for the development of a homily, or in providing suitable examples and illustrations. The primary help

that a good homily service will offer is to make available to the preacher recent exegetical work on the specific texts that appear in the lectionary and to indicate some ways in which this biblical word can be heard in the present as God's Word to his people. They can never replace the homilist's own prayer, study, and work.

### **The Homily and the Liturgy of the Eucharist**

A homily is not a talk given on the occasion of a liturgical celebration. It is "a part of the liturgy itself." In the Eucharistic celebration the homily points to the presence of God in people's lives and then leads a congregation into the Eucharist, providing, as it were, the motive for celebrating the Eucharist in this time and place.<sup>6</sup>

This integral relation of the homily to the liturgy of the Eucharist which follows the liturgy of the word has implications for the way in which the homily is composed and delivered. In the first place, the homily should flow quite naturally out of the readings and into the liturgical action that follows. To set the homily apart by beginning or ending it with a sign of the cross<sup>7</sup>, or by delivering it in a style that is totally different from the style used in the rest of the liturgy, might only reinforce the impression that the homily is simply a talk given on the occasion of a liturgical gathering, one that could just as well be given at another time and in another context.

Although the preaching of the homily properly belongs to the presiding minister of the Eucharistic celebration, there may occasionally be times when it is fitting for someone else, priest or deacon, to preach. On these occasions the integral relation of the homily to the rest of the liturgy will be safeguarded if the preacher is present and actively involved in the whole of the liturgical celebration. The practice of having a preacher slip in to read the Gospel and preach the homily, and then slip out again, does not do justice to the liturgical integrity of the homily.

### **Homiletic Style**

As regards the structure and style of the homily, we can take a lead from the use of the Greek word *homileo* in the New Tes-



tament.<sup>8</sup> While the etymology of the word suggests communicating with a crowd, its actual use in the New Testament implies a more personal and conversational form of address than that used by the classical Greek orator. The word is employed in reference to the conversation the two disciples engaged in on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:14) and of the conversation Antonius Felix, Procurator of Judea, had with Paul when the latter was held prisoner in Caesarea (Acts 24:26). The New Testament usage suggests that a homily should sound more like a personal conversation, albeit a conversation on matters of utmost importance, than like a speech or a classroom lecture. What we should strive for is a style that is purposeful and personal, avoiding whatever sounds casual and chatty on the one extreme or impersonal and detached on the other.

One of the ways we can move toward a more personal style of address in our homilies is by the way we structure them. Many homilies seem to fall into the same three-part pattern: "In today's readings . . . This reminds us . . . Therefore let us . . ." The very structure of such homilies gives the impression that the preacher's principal purpose is to interpret scriptural texts rather than communicate with real people, and that he interprets these texts primarily to extract ethical demands to impose on a congregation. Such preachers may offer good advice, but they are rarely heard as preachers of good news, and this very fact tends to distance them from their listeners.

Another way of structuring the homily, and one that is more in keeping with its function of enabling people to celebrate the liturgy with deepened faith, is to begin with a description of a contemporary human situation which is evoked by the scriptural texts, rather than with an interpretation or reiteration of the text. After the human situation has been addressed, the homilist can turn to the Scriptures to interpret this situation, showing how the God described therein is also present and active in our lives today. The conclusion of the homily can then be an invitation to praise this God who wills to be lovingly and powerfully present in the lives of his people.<sup>9</sup>

The point of the preceding paragraph is not to substitute a new straight jacket for an old one. There is no one correct form

for the homily. On occasion it may be a dramatic and engaging story, on another a well-reasoned exposition of a biblical theme showing its relevance to the contemporary situation, or the liturgical day, feast or season. It might also take the form of a dialogue between two preachers or involve the approved local use of visual or audio media. Ideally, the form and style will be determined by the form and style of the Scriptures from which it flows, by the character of the liturgy of which it is a part, and by the composition and expectations of the congregation to which it is addressed, and not exclusively by the preference of the preacher.

Whatever its form, the function of the Eucharistic homily is to enable people to lift up their hearts, to praise and thank the Lord for his presence in their lives. It will do this more effectively if the language it uses is specific, graphic, and imaginative. The more we can turn to the picture language of the poet and the storyteller, the more we will be able to preach in a way that invites people to respond from the heart as well as from the mind.

### **The Limits and Possibilities of Liturgical Preaching**

But isn't all this too limited a view of preaching? Does it really respond to the needs of the people? Doesn't regular Sunday preaching have to take into account the ignorance of the Scriptures on the part of large numbers of Catholics, even those who participate regularly in the Sunday Eucharist, and deal in some systematic way with the fundamentals of the faith? Is there not a crying need for regular and sustained teaching about the moral imperatives that flow from an acceptance of the Good News? What about all those times when people's lives are shattered, when they simply are psychologically incapable of offering God praise and thanks, when it seems they have nothing to be thankful for? How do we speak to all the people in our congregations who have yet to hear the basic Gospel message calling them to faith and conversation, or who may even need a form of preaching that heightens their sensitivity to basic human realities and in this way readies them for the hearing of the Gospel?

In the last analysis the only proper response to these ques-

tions is a pastoral one. Priests will have to decide what form of preaching is most suitable for a particular congregation at a particular time. We would simply like to make two points here. First of all, social science research contends that the oral presentation of a single person is not a particularly effective way to impart new information or to bring about a change in attitude or behavior. It is, however, well suited to make explicit or to reinforce attitudes or knowledge previously held. The homily, therefore, which normally is an oral presentation by a single person, will be less effective as a means of instruction and/or exhortation than of interpretation—that is, as a means of enabling people to recognize the implications, in liturgy and in life, of the faith that is already theirs.

The second point to be made is that the liturgical homily, which draws on the Scriptures to interpret peoples' lives in such a way that they can recognize the saving presence of God and turn to him with praise and thanksgiving, does not exclude doctrinal instruction and moral exhortation. Such instruction and exhortation, however, are here situated in a broader context, namely, in the recognition of God's active presence in the lives of the people and the praise and thanksgiving that this response elicits.<sup>10</sup>

It may very well be that what God is doing in the life of a congregation at some particular moment is asking them to change in a way that is demanding and disorienting. The homily can be one way of helping to bring about that change, and it can still lead to a response of praise and thanksgiving by showing that our former way of life, comfortable as it may have been, was a way that led to death, while the new way, with all of its demands and difficulties, is a way that leads to life.

But even though the liturgical homily can incorporate instruction and exhortation, it will not be able to carry the whole weight of the Church's preaching. There will still need to be special times and occasions for preaching that addresses human values in such a way as to dispose the hearers to be open to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, preaching intended to bring the hearers to an inner conversion of heart, and preaching intended to instruct the faithful in matters of doctrine or morality. These three kinds of preaching—sometimes referred

to as pre-evangelization, evangelization, and catechesis—can be found today in evangelistic gatherings, the adult catechumenate, youth ministry programs, spiritual renewal programs, Bible study groups and many forms of religious education.

The homily can complement all these forms of preaching by attending more specifically to what it is to accomplish. Such would be to show how and where the mystery of our faith, focused upon by that day's Scripture readings, is occurring in our lives. This would bring the hearers to a more explicit and deepened faith, to an expression of that faith in the liturgical celebration and, following the celebration, in their life and work.

But is it really possible to create this readiness for praise and thanksgiving in congregations as large and diverse as those in which many of us minister? In these congregations some people will be feeling a sense of loss because of a recent bereavement; some facing marital difficulties; some having problems adjusting emotionally to school, job, home or community; some struggling with a deep sense of guilt stemming from their inability to deal maturely with their sexuality, or because of their addiction to drugs or alcohol. Others in our congregations will be struggling with the relevance of the Gospel to oppressive economic structures, to world peace, or to the many forms of discrimination in our society. Is it really possible to say to these people, "Look at the way in which God is present in your lives and turn to him with praise and thanksgiving?"

Obviously, it will not always be easy to do this. And we will never be able to do it, at least not with any honesty and integrity, if we have not recognized the active presence of God in our own lives, as broken and shattered as they may be, and out of that brokenness affirm that it is still good to praise him and even to give him thanks. We need to remember in situations like this that our celebration of the Eucharist is done in memory of Jesus Christ who, *on the night before he died*, turned to God and praised and thanked him out of the very depths of his distress. Praise and thanksgiving, therefore, do not automatically imply the presence of euphoria.

We can and must praise God even when we do not feel like it, for praise and thanksgiving are rooted in and grow out of

faith, not feeling, a faith which interprets this world by saying that in spite of appearances often to the contrary, our God is a loving God. It is for this reason that even at the time of death, we celebrate a Eucharist, because we believe that for his faithful ones life is changed, not, as appearances would seem to indicate, taken away.

The challenge to preachers then is to reflect on human life with the aid of the Word of God and to show by their preaching, as by their lives, that in every place and at every time it is indeed right to praise and thank the Lord.

## IV. Homiletic Method

Every art is based on a theory and a method, and preaching is no exception. Some artists, it is true, work solely from inspiration. They do not know why or how they do what they do. Consequently, they are incapable of passing their insight on to others. But they have a method nonetheless, and if their work is lasting, their method will sooner or later be uncovered by interpreters and critics of their work.

Artists who are conscious of their method are in a much more advantageous position than those who are not. They are able to channel and direct their work more easily, can work more efficiently within time constraints, and can adapt their method to changed circumstances and demands. They know what they are doing and how they go about doing it, and they can pass this information on to others who might like to learn from them.

Ultimately, individual preachers will have to develop their own method for moving from the Scriptures to the homily, learning from their own successes and failures, as well as from other preachers through whose words they have heard the Word of God. The description of a method for building the homily that follows is not intended as—nor could it possibly be—a foolproof system for producing outstanding homilies week after week. Rather it provides a model that includes the major components of the creative process (data gathering, incubation, insight, communication) and does so within the framework of a week.

This method also respects the understanding of the homily that is central to this document: a scriptural interpretation of human existence which enables a community to recognize God's active presence, to respond to that presence in faith through liturgical word and gesture, and beyond the liturgical assembly, through a life lived in conformity with the Gospel.

The most important feature of any method is precisely that it be methodical, that is, orderly and regular. In the prepara-

tion of the homily, as in other creative endeavors, the total amount of time we spend preparing may be less important than our observance of a regular pattern of activity spread out over a certain period of time. Doing the same thing each day for the same amount of time is often a condition for success, whether this be in study, in prayer, in writing, or in artistic achievement. A regular daily pattern of activity for the preparation of the Sunday homily is likewise often the key factor in effective preaching over the long term.

Each of us called to the regular ministry of preaching needs to determine just what part of each day of the week is going to be devoted to the preparation of the Sunday homily. The time we spend each day need not be lengthy, but it needs to be determined ahead of time and be held sacred. Schedules, of course, are always to be adjusted for emergencies, but unless we determine in advance that a particular time is going to be used for a particular purpose, and stick to it, it is all too easy to have our entire day filled with appointments and meetings which we felt we could not turn down or postpone because “we had nothing special planned.”

One final preliminary remark. The method that follows describes a process that extends over a week’s time. Some form of “remote preparation” is also in order. Such preparation could take the form of reading a recent work on the theology of the particular Synoptic Gospel that will be the “Gospel of the Year” or spending some time planning a unified sequence of homilies for a particular liturgical season.

One of the reasons our preaching is less effective than it could be is that we have not taken seriously enough the *lectio continua* principle of our lectionary. We preach each Sunday’s homily as if it had no connection with what preceded or what will follow. It should be possible, and indeed it would emphasize a sense of continuity and identity in the congregation, if from time to time our homilies would end on a “to be continued” note.

### **Reading, Listening, Praying**

The preparation for a Sunday homily should begin early in the week whenever possible, even on Sunday evening. The first

step is to read and reread the texts for the liturgy. Frequently the texts will be familiar, so it is important for us to do everything we can to make this reading as fresh as possible. Read the texts aloud; read them in several versions; if we read and understand Greek or Hebrew, we might try to read them in the original. Even if our knowledge of these languages is minimal, we may find ourselves becoming aware of nuances and connections that can easily be missed if we rely entirely on translations.

At this point in the preparation process it is helpful, indeed almost essential, to read the texts in context—that is, to read them from the Bible rather than from the lectionary only. In reading and rereading the texts, continue to read all four of them (Gospel, Old Testament, Psalm, New Testament), even if a decision has been made about which text will become the focus of the homily. It is not necessary for a homily to tie together all the readings. Indeed, for the Sundays throughout the year, when the New Testament lesson is chosen without reference to the Old Testament or the Gospel, attempts to impose some kind of thematic unity can be quite artificial. Nonetheless, the reading of the texts side by side, even if they are unrelated to one another, can often prompt new and rich insights into the “now” meaning of the Scriptures.

Read the texts with pen in hand, jotting down any and all ideas. Keep in mind that what we are listening for is a Word from the Lord, a Word which can be heard as good news. We will be all the more disposed to hear and receive such a word if our reading is a prayerful, attentive listening to the text of the Scriptures. Try to read the text without asking “What does it mean?” Approach it humbly, dwell with it, and let it speak for itself.

### **Study and Further Reflection**

One of the major temptations of students when they are assigned a paper is immediately to run to the “experts.” The same temptation afflicts preachers. All too often our preparation for a homily consists of looking up the lessons, reading them over quickly, and then turning to a commentary or a homily service to find out what they mean and what we might



be able to say about them. By so doing we block out the possibility of letting these texts speak to us and to the concerns we share with a congregation.

Another danger in going to the commentaries too early is that we program ourselves for preaching which, in content and style, is academic rather than existential. We look for information about the texts that we can pass on to our hearers. We think of the text as a container of a hidden meaning that we have to discover and pry loose with the appropriate tools, rather than as a word spoken directly to us by the Lord. This approach to the text leads to preaching that is a word about something rather than a word, God's Word, to someone.

The process of personal reflection and interpretation, therefore, should go on for a couple of days without the aid of commentaries. We are our own interpreters first of all, and then when we do turn to the professional exegetes, we do so for the purpose of checking out the accuracy of our own interpretation. We will frequently receive new insights and ideas from the professionals, and these will be helpful to us. If we have allowed the texts to speak to us directly, we will be much better prepared to speak a word that is expressive of our own faith and in touch with the concerns of our people. We will also be able to better recognize and use the insights the professional exegetes give us.

### **Letting Go**

Sometime in the middle of the preparation process we should allow ourselves to step back from the work we are doing and give free reign to the subconscious processes of our minds. At times we will find that our preparation has brought us to a roadblock. A passage may make no sense to us. It may even scandalize us. We may want to ignore it, but it will not go away. The more we wrestle with it, the more troublesome it becomes. The words of Jesus about love for enemies fly in the face of our natural inclination for retribution; his words about selling possessions and giving them to the poor contradict our instinctive sense of the necessity for prudent stewardship. Paul's teaching that sin and death entered the world through one man seems to contradict everything we hold

about individual, personal freedom and responsibility. We sense a real tension between the Word of God and the human situation.

When this happens we have one of the best signs that we are on to something vital. The Word of God may in fact be challenging our faith, calling us to conversion, to a new vision of the world. This period can be a difficult one, for we can feel that we are being asked to give up a way of looking at and dealing with the world which has served us well and with which we have grown comfortable. At a time like this we need to let go in order to allow the Holy Spirit to work within us and lead us to a deeper and richer faith.

### **Drafting**

A time for writing should be scheduled at least two days before the preaching of the homily in order to provide ample time for alterations. Knowing that there will be opportunity to rework the homily will do much to save us from writer's block. At this stage we need not be concerned with matters of style, or even with making sure that the homily is tightly reasoned and well constructed. The point is simply to begin getting ideas down on paper so that we will have something to work with.

It is quite possible that we will come to this stage of preparation still not having any idea—any new and fresh idea, that is—of what we are going to say. We may simply feel empty and without inspiration. Begin writing anyway, for the very act of writing often unleashes a flow of ideas that will be new, fresh, and exciting. It is often at this point of initial writing that the difficult text suddenly opens up its meaning and provides a new, a richer understanding of how God is present in our lives. At this point, too, the two readings which had seemed so totally unrelated may suddenly come together and illuminate one another. When something like this happens (sometimes referred to as the moment of insight, or the "aha" experience), we may well have the central idea for our homily.

So, at this point, simply write. Jot down words, phrases, unrelated sentences. Think of sketching the homily, or of working on an outline, rather than writing out a text. In fact, it is better

not to put the ideas in too fixed a form at this point, for we may find that it then becomes difficult to alter them. Don't stop to think of the best way to say something; don't go back and cross out words and phrases because they don't sound right. There is time for that later. Let the pen or the typewriter simply go, even though we are sure that we will not use anything we are putting down on paper. The very act of writing is a way of calling to the surface the ideas and the words that will in fact be the stuff of which our homilies are made.

### **Revising**

The revising stage is one of the most important and the one that is too easily omitted for lack of time. To revise is frequently to cut: the good but extraneous material that surfaced in the jotting down stage of preparation; the technical theological terms and jargon "in" words that creep into our vocabularies; the use of the non-specific "this" or "it" at the beginning of sentences; the moralistic "therefore let us" or "we should" which we so easily resort to in winding up the homily; the references to "he" and "men" when the words are meant to include everyone; the vague generalities that can be replaced with specific incidents or examples.

The time for revising is also the time to arrange the material in the order best suited to gain, and hold, people's attention and to invite them to a response of faith in God's Word. In the sketching stage a story may have occurred to us which exemplified perfectly the human situation being addressed by the Word of God. Bring that story up front. Use it as the opening so that people are able to identify with the situation right from the beginning. Beginning the homily with "in today's Gospel . . ." or words to that effect, risks losing the attention of the congregation right at the beginning for they will not have been given any indication of why they should be interested in what was said in today's Gospel.

The time of revising is also the time to make sure that the homily does in fact have a central, unifying idea, and that this idea is clearly stated and repeated throughout the homily. We need not repeat the idea in the same words all the time, but we need to come back to it several times. People will inevitably

drift in and out, no matter how good the preacher is. The re-statement of the central idea is a way of inviting people back into the homily again if they happen to have been distracted from what we were saying.

Finally, the time for revising is the time to make sure that the homily is fashioned not simply as a freestanding talk, but as an integral part of the liturgical action. Does the conclusion in any way lead people into the liturgy that follows? Have we spoken the Word of God in such a way that God has become more present in people's lives and they are enabled to be drawn more fully into the act of worship for which they have gathered? Remember that a homily is not a talk given on the occasion of a liturgical celebration, but an integral part of the liturgy. Just as a homily flows out of the Scriptures of the Liturgy of the Word, so it should flow into the prayers and actions of the Liturgy of the Eucharist which follows.

### **Practicing**

After revising the homily, practice it. Repeat it several times to become familiar with what has to be said and how to say it. Practice it aloud and ask if that is really "me" speaking. Does it sound natural, or have I introduced words and phrases that sounded good when I jotted them down but are not suited to oral communication? It may be helpful to preach the homily to a friend or co-worker or to use an audio/video tape recorder. Can I say to that person without embarrassment what I intend to say to the congregation? Do I really believe what I am saying, or have I hidden behind some conventional expression or piety or theology that I would probably not use in any other situation?

### **Preaching**

Our emphasis on the importance of writing in the preparation of a homily does not in any way imply that homilies should normally be read. Writing is a means to arrive at good organization, clarity of expression, and concreteness. Whether or not we actually take a manuscript to the pulpit with us will depend on a number of things: the nature of the gathering (very formal or more informal); how familiar we are with our

own material; how apprehensive we feel about forgetting something essential.

Sometimes we know what we are going to say so well, and are so enthused about it that a manuscript would only get in the way or distract us. On the other hand, there may be times when we are sure that our message will be clearer and more forceful if we have the text with us. As long as we have something to say, as long as we are saying it, and as long as we establish and maintain rapport with the congregation, we may be able to preach quite effectively from a text.

In general, it is much better to speak from notes or an outline—or without any written aids at all, for such a way of preaching enables us to enter more fully into direct, personal contact with a congregation. If we feel we must take the text with us, be familiar enough with the material so that instead of reading it, we can simply have it present as an aid to our memory.

In preaching, as in all forms of communication, remember that it is the whole person who communicates. Facial expression, the tone of voice, the posture of the body are all powerful factors in determining whether a congregation will be receptive to what we have to say. If, as we preach, we remember that in carrying out this ministry we are showing our love, and God's, for the people, we will more easily avoid a delivery that sounds affected ("churchy") or impersonal.

### **The Homily Preparation Group**

An effective way for preachers to be sure that they are addressing some of the real concerns of the congregation in the homily is to involve members of that congregation in a homily preparation group. One way to begin such a group is for the preachers to invite four or five people they trust and can work with easily to join them for an hour at the beginning of the week. In a parish setting it is advisable to have one of the members drop out after four weeks and invite someone else to take his or her place. Similarly, a second will drop out after the fifth week, so that after eight weeks or so they will be working with a new group of people.

A homily preparation group can also be formed by gathering

the priests in the rectory, the parish staff, priests from the area, priest and ministers, or a priests' support group. The presence of members of the congregation in a group is especially helpful in raising issues that are of concern to them and which the homily may be able to address. Groups that involve only clergy or parish staff members can also be a rich source of insight into the ways in which the Scriptures point to the continuing presence of God in human history.

After the group has gathered and spent a few minutes quieting down, the following steps can be followed:

**1. Read the passages** (15 minutes). Begin with the Gospel, then the Old Testament, Psalm, and New Testament. As one of the participants reads the passages slowly, the others listen and jot down images, words or phrases that strike them.

**2. Share the words** (10 minutes). This is not a time for discussion but simply an opportunity for each person to share the words or phrases which resonated and fired the imagination. As this sharing is going on, the homilist may pick up some recurring words and phrases. He may be surprised to hear what parts of the Scriptures are being highlighted. These responses are already a sign of the concerns, questions and interests that are present in the lives of the congregation.

**3. Exegete the texts** (10 minutes). One of the members of the group presents a short exegesis of the texts. The task is not to bring to the discussion everything that could be said, but to make a special effort to determine what concrete human concerns the author was addressing when the text was written. What questions were there to which these words were at least a partial answer? When dealing with the Gospel passage, one way to answer this question is to show how other evangelists treated the same materials.

**4. Share the good news** (10 minutes). What good news did the first listeners hear in these accounts? What good news does the group hear? Where is God's promise, power and influence in our personal story present in the readings?

**5. Share the challenge these words offer us** (10 minutes). What is the doubt, the sin, the pain, the fracturing in our own lives which the passage touches? To what form of conversion do these words call us? In responding to these questions, the

group may resort to generalities. By gentle persuasion and personal example the homilist can encourage the group to speak personally and with examples.

**6. Explore the consequences** (5 minutes). What difference can the good news make in my life? What happens if the scriptural good news is applied to contemporary bad news? Can my life be changed? Can the world be transformed if people believe in the good news and begin acting according to it? These are questions to which final answers cannot be given. They demand prayer and reflection.

**7. Give thanks and praise** (5 minutes). Conclude with a brief prayer of thanksgiving for God's saving Word.

Working with a homily preparation group will help to ensure two things: that the homilist hears the proclamation of the good news in the Sunday Scripture readings as it is heard by the people in the congregation; and secondly, that the preacher is able to point in concrete and specific ways to the difference that the hearing of this good news can make in the lives of those who hear it. When the preacher spends time with the congregation, struggling with how the Word touches real life, the possibility of this homily striking a listener as "talking to me" increases. The Word of God then achieves that for which it was sent. Preacher and listener, responding together, are nourished by the Word of God and drawn to praise the God who has again given a sign of his presence and power.

### **The Non-negotiables of Homily Preparation**

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there is no one way to prepare a homily, nor does a particular method work the same way all the time for the same person. But no matter what the method, there are certain elements in the preparation of the homily which cannot be omitted if our preaching over the long term is going to be scripturally sound and pastorally relevant. We may be able to "wing it" on occasion, but to try to sustain a weekly ministry of preaching with little more than a glance at the lectionary and the quick consultation of a homily service is to attempt the impossible.

Effective preaching—that is, preaching that enables people to hear the Word of God as good news for their lives and to re-

spond accordingly—requires time and serious work. Unless we are willing to accept the drudgery that is a part of preaching, as it is of all creative work, we will not know the joy of having the Scriptures come alive for us, nor the profoundly satisfying experience of sharing that discovery with others.

To conclude this chapter on homiletic method we would point to what we consider to be the non-negotiable elements of effective preaching:

**1. Time.** The amount of time will vary from preacher to preacher. However, the importance of the ministry of preaching demands that a significant amount of time be devoted to the homily each week, and ideally, that this time be spread out over the entire week.

**2. Prayer.** All preaching flows from faith to faith. It is only through prayer that faith is nourished.

**3. Study.** Without continuing study, stagnation sets in and preaching becomes insipid. Preachers have a professional responsibility to continue their education in the areas of Scripture, theology, and related disciplines. They might well make a book on preaching part of their regular reading program.

**4. Organization.** Much preaching suffers from lack of direction and the absence of a central, controlling idea. The writing and revising of homilies helps to ensure that there is a point to what we preach.

**5. Concreteness.** Another common fault of preachers is their tendency to speak in vague generalities or to use technical theological language. Once again, writing and revising helps to ensure that homilies are concrete and specific.

**6. Evaluation.** In public discourse we easily fall back on familiar ideas and set patterns of speech. More often than not, we are unaware of such tendencies and need the feedback of others to alert us to them.



## Epilogue: The Power of the Word

The pulpit of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna displays an elaborate handrail in which are carved a detailed series of ugly, mythical creatures. The open mouths and oversized snouts of the beasts are there to remind the preacher of his inadequacies as he ascends the stairs. At the very top of the handrail, carved into the pillar that separates the stairs from the open, circular pulpit, stands a dog, jaws open, barking down at the ominous figures. The hellish beasts are not to enter the sacred place. The preacher has been enjoined to leave his sinful self behind as he prepares to speak God's Word.

The medieval artisan has captured in stone the inner tension of all of us who dare to preach. We are aware that the words we speak are human words, formed through reflection both on the Scriptures and on our personal experience of the needs of our community. Looking into the faces of the people who sit before us, we see those who are holier, more intelligent, and more creative. And yet they wait for us to speak, to preach, to proclaim and witness to the presence of God among us. Our theology tells us that the words we speak are also God's Word. "What we utter is God's wisdom, a mysterious, a hidden wisdom" (1 Cor 2:7).

We dare to utter that sacred Word because we once heard the voice of Mystery who spoke to Isaiah: "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And we answered with Isaiah, "Here I am; send me" (Is 6:8). With Jeremiah we trust that the Lord will place his words in our mouths, despite our youth or age, our ignorance and our inadequacies (Jer 1:6–9). Even when we fall on our faces, the promise of Ezechiel is there, that a voice will speak to us and a spirit enter into us and set us again on our feet (Ezek 2:1–3). We believe that the Word we speak is the Word God intends to have an effect upon the world in which we live.

For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come  
And do not return there till they have watered the

earth, making it fertile and fruitful,  
Giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats,  
So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;  
It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achiev-  
ing the end for which I sent it (Is 55:10–11).

We too stand in sacred space, aware of our personal inadequacy, yet willing to share how the scriptural story has become integrated into our thoughts and actions while we walked among those who turn their faces toward us. The words we speak are human words describing how God's action has become apparent to us this week. Is it any wonder then that excitement and tension fill us in the moments before we preach? With a final deep breath may we also breathe in the Spirit of God who will animate our human words with divine power.

## Appendix

This document on preaching has dealt mainly with what the individual preacher can do to improve the quality of the Sunday homily. In conclusion, we offer some recommendations for steps that can be taken on the national, diocesan, and parish levels to foster more effective preaching.

### National

1) A doctoral program in homiletics to prepare teachers of preaching should be established with diocesan support, perhaps at the Catholic University of America.

2) Seminaries, especially at the theologate level, are urged to emphasize preaching as a priority (cf. *Program of Priestly Formation*, 3rd Edition, Chapter III, Art. 2, Homiletics).

### Diocesan

1) Programs to improve preaching skills should be established at the diocesan or regional level.

2) Programs for the study and deeper understanding of Scripture and preaching theology should also be established.

3) A Center for Preaching Resources should be founded in each diocese by the diocesan office for worship or continuing education, or by the seminary.

4) The Bishop(s) of the diocese should model the nature and purpose of the homily in preaching. They should not accept more preaching engagements per day than allow for preparation.

5) Criteria for the granting of faculties to preach should be clearly formulated and followed.

6) Continuing development of good preaching should be supported by the diocese through the granting of time and funding.

### Parish

1) A resource center should be established within each

parish to assist preachers and lectors in fulfilling their ministry.

2) Groups to help preachers prepare and evaluate their homilies should be formed.

3) When there are several preachers in a parish, their preparation for preaching should be coordinated.

4) Readers should be trained in the effective proclamation of Scripture and provided opportunities to grow in their understanding of it.

5) Job descriptions for priests should be evaluated in order to highlight the importance and provide adequate time for preparation of the ministry of preaching.

6) Some record should be kept of the themes of each Sunday's homily in order to bring the parish community into contact with the major facets of our faith each year, and to avoid undue emphasis on one truth at the expense of others.

\* \* \*

At all levels, national, diocesan and parish, bishops and priests are urged to invite religious and laity to read this document so as to assist, encourage and support priests in efforts toward a renewal of preaching in the church.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The material on "audience analysis" is voluminous. Access to the most up-to-date studies can be found by consulting the bibliographies of recent books on speech communication. Such materials frequently describe various methods for determining with some accuracy the interest and abilities of an audience.

<sup>2</sup>While the homily is not the same as catechetical instruction, as Pope Paul VI makes clear in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (#43 and 44), the homily can certainly be a means of catechesis for Christian communities. The homilist who preaches from the Scriptures as these are arranged in the lectionary over a three-year cycle of Sundays and feasts will certainly deal with all the major truths of the faith. It will still be necessary, however, to provide educational opportunities in and through which the faithful can reflect more deeply on the meaning of these truths and on their concrete contemporary implications for Christian life. In the early church such a systematic presentation of the truths of the faith was given to the newly baptized in the post-baptismal preaching known as mystagogy.

<sup>3</sup>A fuller description of the principles guiding the choice of readings can be found in the introduction to lectionary. These principles should be familiar to all preachers, for a knowledge of how and why passages of Scripture are assigned to certain times and feasts provides an important key to the liturgical interpretation of those readings in preaching.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. *Lectionary for Mass*. English translation of the Second *Editio-Typica* (1981) #24 prepared by International Commission on English in the Liturgy.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* #8–10.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* #24.

<sup>7</sup>With regard to the sign of the cross before and after the homily, the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship gave the following official *responsum* in 1973:

Query: Is it advisable to invite the faithful to bless themselves before or after the homily, to address a salutation to them, for example, "Praised be Jesus Christ"? Reply: It all depends on lawful local custom. But generally speaking it is inadvisable to continue such customs because they have their origin in preaching *outside Mass*. The homily is *part* of the liturgy; the people have already blessed themselves and received the greeting at the beginning of Mass. It is better, then, not to have a repetition before or after the homily. Source: *Notitiae* 9 (1973) 178.

<sup>8</sup>*Keryssein*, "To proclaim," is the word most frequently used for preaching in the New Testament. The word "presupposes that the preachers are heralds who announce simply that which they are commissioned to announce, not in their own name, but by the authority of the one who sends them" (John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 689). Although the practice of first-century Jewish synagogues may have included explanations and applications of the Scriptures as part of the regular service, the New Testament itself does not use a specific technical word to describe the kind of preaching we refer to as a "homily," that is, the exposition of a text of Scripture which takes place in and as a part of a liturgical celebration. The word *homileo* does appear in the New Testament, and its usage there can provide a way to understand a homiletic approach to preaching as distinguished from preaching addressed to unbelievers (*kerygma*).

<sup>9</sup>The continuing ability of Scripture texts to speak to situations that are temporally and culturally distinct from those to which they were originally addressed is one way in which the canonicity of the Scriptures continues to be affirmed by the church. The canon is, in fact, composed of those writings which the church considers too important to forget because they address issues which are present in every generation, albeit in different garb and guises.

<sup>10</sup>In the Apostolic Exhortation, *On Catechesis in Our Time*, 1979, #48, Pope John Paul II observes, "Respecting the specific nature and proper cadence of this setting [i.e., liturgy, espe-

cially the Eucharistic assembly], the homily takes up again the journey of faith put forward by catechesis and brings it to its natural fulfillment. At the same time it encourages the Lord's disciples to begin anew each day their spiritual journey in truth, adoration and thanksgiving. Accordingly, one can say that catechetical teaching, too, finds its source and fulfillment in the Eucharist, within the whole circle of the liturgical year.

"Preaching, centered upon the Bible texts, must then in its own way make it possible to familiarize the faithful with the whole of the mysteries of the faith and the norms of Christian living . . ." Cf. also: *Sharing the Light of Faith*, An Official Commentary on the National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States, 1981, p. 54, Office of Publishing Services, U.S.C.C., Washington, D.C.



# Additional Resources

## **The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist**

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