MINISTRY OF PREACHING THE HOMILY

“They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’”

(Luke 24: 32)

THE POWER OF THE WORD

The Scriptures and the Church both affirm the power of the word of God.

- Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21)
- Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword . . . (Hebrews 4:12)
- He [Christ] is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) 7]
- Although in the readings from Sacred Scripture the Word of God is addressed to all people of whatever era and is understandable to them, a fuller understanding and a greater efficaciousness of the word is nevertheless fostered by a living commentary on the word, that is, by the Homily, as part of the liturgical action. [General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2010)29]

REALISING THE POWER

Realising the full power of God’s word depends on both reader and preacher. The word is weakened if the liturgical readings are not first proclaimed faithfully, intelligently and audibly. It is also weakened by poor preaching.

- . . . in survey after survey over the past years, the People of God have called for more powerful and inspiring preaching. A steady diet of tepid or poorly prepared homilies is often cited as a cause for discouragement on the part of the laity and even leading some to turn away from the Church. [Preaching the Mystery of Faith (2012) 2]

By contrast, good homilies are powerful.

- Catholic laity want their homilist to be passionate and excited about what he is preaching, and to deliver homilies that are heartfelt and drawn from the depths of his own faith and commitment. (PMF 12)

- All effective homilies have this sense of urgency and freshness, revealing the startling beauty and promise of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus who embodies it and brings it to reality through his Death and Resurrection. The message of the Gospel is truly a matter of “life and death” for us; there is nothing routine or trivial about it. (PMF 10, 11)

THE PURPOSE OF THE HOMILY

The homily aims to shed light on people’s lives through the prism of the paschal mystery.
• Every homily, because it is an intrinsic part of the Sunday Eucharist, must therefore be about the dying and rising of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial passage through suffering to new and eternal life for us. By means of that pattern, the People of God can understand their own lives properly and be able to see their own experience in the light of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. (PMF 15)

The homily is the bridge between word and sacrament; its immediate aim is to move the assembly to praise and thanks.

• The purpose of the homily at Mass is that the spoken word of God and the liturgy of the eucharist may together become a proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ. (Lectionary for Mass: Introduction (1981, 1998) 24)

• As part of the entire liturgical act, the homily is meant to set hearts on fire with praise and thanksgiving. . . every homily preached during the liturgy should make some connection between the Scriptures just heard and the Eucharist about to be celebrated. (PMF (2012) 17, 18)

The homily also looks beyond the celebration; its ultimate aim is to inspire a sense of mission.

• . . . the homily, which participates in the power of Christ’s word, ought to inspire a sense of mission for those who hear it, making them doers and proclaimers of that same word in the world. A homily that does not lead to mission is, therefore, incomplete. (PMF 18 )

THE WORD PREACHED

The homily at Sunday Mass is of its very nature liturgical. It draws on the word proclaimed and on the liturgy being celebrated.

• Preaching should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources, being a proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy. (CSL 35)

• An effective homily takes its cue from the very nature of the Scriptures themselves, which use a rich variety of literary forms to communicate their message: narratives, metaphors, hymns, prayers, proverbial sayings, and poetry all have their place within the pages of the Bible. (PMF 27)

ROLE OF THE HOMILIST

The homilist’s task is to forge a connection between the word of God and people’s lives.

• The goal of the homily is to lead the hearer to the deep inner connection between God’s word and the actual circumstances of one’s everyday life. . . The homily in its most effective form enables the hearer to understand the meaning of the Scriptures in a new way and, in turn, helps the message of the Scriptures, proclaimed in the context of the liturgy, to illumine the experience of the hearer. (PMF 28, 29)
In this sense the homilist is a seeker and bearer of meaning for people. He is a host, offering the assembly the hospitality of a generous space in which they can find the living truth of the gospel for themselves.

- Homilies are inspirational when they touch the deepest levels of the human heart and address the real questions of human experience. . . The true pastor and good shepherd knows his people’s sorrows, their anxieties, their weaknesses, their capacity for love, their abiding joys, and their deepest longings. (PMF 15, 34)

**KNOWING THE WORD**

If the homily is to shed light on people’s lives, the homilist must first love and know and pray the Scriptures.

- As one whose duty is to proclaim the word of God, the homilist must necessarily be a person with a deep love of the Scriptures and one whose spirituality is profoundly shaped by God’s word. (PMF 34)

The ancient practice of *lectio divina* can be of great assistance to the homilist.

- [It] begins with a prayerful reading of the biblical text, then a meditation on its message, followed by a prayerful response on our part concerning what the Lord may ask of us through this biblical passage, and finally, contemplation of what conversion of heart and mind will be necessary to bring the message of the word to action in our lives and those of others. (PMF 9)

The homilist must use all the resources necessary to ensure that the homily is based on an informed interpretation of the word of God.

- 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. [*Fulfilled In Your Hearing* (1982) 27])

At the same time the homily is not meant to be simply an explanation of the Scriptures.

- The homily is not so much on the Scriptures as from and through them. . . the preacher does not so much attempt to explain the Scriptures as to interpret the human situation through the Scriptures. . . if the text and the actual human situation are allowed to interact with one another, a powerful interpretative word of faith will often emerge. (*FIYH* 50, 52, 55)

**LECTIONARY, BIBLE AND LITURGY**

The homilist needs to understand how the lectionary is organised. The readings for the annual cycle of feasts and seasons are chosen and arranged to draw the church ever more deeply into the paschal mystery.

The homilist therefore needs to be familiar with the rhythm of the church’s seasons and feasts and to be aware of the rationale for the choice of texts for the day. This means taking time to see where in the Bible the readings are to be found and to consider how each passage relates to the rest of the
book from which it is taken. It can also be a very illuminating exercise to identify what chapters and verses have been omitted and wonder why.

PREPARING THE HOMILY

Experience has shown that the following steps contribute significantly to effective preaching.

- Begin a week in advance; take the time to read the texts, check them with the Bible and the liturgical calendar, reflect on them and pray with them.
- Consult biblical commentaries and homiletic resources.
- Bring the texts into conversation with current affairs and the issues that affect the local congregation; reflect on the readings in this light and discuss them with parishioners.
- Draw on the arts – novels, plays, poetry, painting, film, music – for words and images that will capture the assembly’s imagination.
- Choose language that is concrete and graphic rather than general and abstract.
- Prepare whatever is needed – whether a full text, notes, or a list of key points – that will ensure the homily is well delivered.
- Seek objective feedback from members of the parish to help evaluate the homily.

SPEAKING PERSONALLY: GETTING THE BALANCE

How personal should the homilist be? Two wise writers offer complementary advice:

“Can every homily be personal? Should every homily be personal? It depends on how you understand ‘personal’. If ‘personal’ means that the preacher offers some revealing, intimate aspect of his or her life in the course of preaching, I would say ‘Spare us’. If ‘personal’ means saying something that touches the hearts of the people involved and that is specific to the occasion, I would give a tentative ‘yes’. . . . This willingness to share one’s faith makes a homily profoundly personal.”

“. . . it is a temptation for preachers to make themselves the centre of attention. . . . But it is only if we speak in our own voices as the person that we are that people may recognise the good news, the happening of grace. If they catch my doubts, hesitations, struggles and surprises and delight, then they will recognise their own. If it passes through the prism of my own complexity, tested and found true there, then paradoxically it is more likely that I will disappear from the scene and it is the happening of grace that will be spotted.”

PARTICULAR ISSUES

Mode and length

There is no absolute rule as to what mode of delivery or what length of homily is right. What matters is that the homily achieves its goal of capturing the assembly’s attention, engaging them in full, conscious and active participation, and inspiring them to live the gospel.
Difficult texts

It can be tempting to omit or remain silent about difficult texts, such as those that are patriarchal, violent, or culturally remote. Instead, these can provide an opportunity to shed light on the need to continually interpret the word of God for each generation.

Jews and Pharisees

The gospels’ characterisation of Jews in general and Pharisees in particular needs to be dealt with in an informed and careful way. This is especially the case during the Easter season when the readings are drawn so much from the gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles.

A LAST WORD

• Some years ago a survey was taken among a group of parishioners . . . What the majority wanted was simply to hear a person of faith speaking . . . The preacher is a person speaking to people about faith and life. (FIYH 39)

FURTHER REFERENCE


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