

PART ONE:

THE HOMILY AND ITS LITURGICAL SETTING

I. THE HOMILY

4. The unique nature of the homily is captured well in St. Luke's account of Christ's preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth (cf. Lk 4:16-30). After reading a passage from the Prophet Isaiah he handed the scroll back to the attendant and began, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21). When we read this passage reflectively, we can sense the excitement that filled that small synagogue: to proclaim God's Word in the sacred assembly is an event. As we read in *Verbum Domini*: "... the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives; he speaks today to his people, who hear and respond" (52). It is a privileged setting, although it is not the only setting. Certainly, God speaks to us in many ways: through the events in our lives, through our personal study of Scripture, in times of quiet prayer, But the liturgy is a privileged setting because it is there that we listen to God's Word as part of the celebration that culminates in the sacrificial offering of Christ to the eternal Father. The Catechism states that "the Eucharist makes the Church" (CCC 1396), but also that the Eucharist is inseparable from the Word of God (cf. CCC 1346).

Because the homily is an integral part of the liturgy, it is not only an instruction, it is also an act of worship. When we read the homilies of the Fathers, we find that many of them concluded their discourse with a doxology and the word "Amen": they understood that the purpose of the homily was not only to sanctify the people, but to glorify God. The homily is a hymn of gratitude for the *magnalia Dei*, which not only tells those assembled that God's Word is fulfilled in their hearing, but praises God for this fulfillment.

Given its liturgical nature, the homily also possesses a sacramental significance: Christ is present in the assembly gathered to listen to his word and in the preaching of his minister, through whom the same Lord who spoke long ago in the synagogue at Nazareth now instructs his people. In

the words of *Verbum Domini*: “The sacramentality of the Word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. By approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God’s word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard” (VD 56).

5. It is because the homily is an integral part of the Church’s worship that it is to be delivered only by bishops, priests, or deacons. So intimate is the bond between the table of the Word and the table of the altar that it is fitting that “The Homily should be given by the priest celebrant himself” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 66), or, in any case, always by one ordained to preside or assist at the altar. Well-trained lay leaders can also give solid instruction and moving exhortation, and opportunities for such presentations should be provided in other contexts; but it is the intrinsically *liturgical* nature of the homily that demands that it be given only by those ordained to lead the Church’s worship (cf. *Redemptionis sacramentum* 161).

6. Pope Francis observes that the homily “is a distinctive genre, since it is preaching situated within the framework of the liturgical celebration; hence it should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or lecture” (EG 138). The liturgical nature of the homily sheds light on its unique purpose. In considering this purpose, it might be helpful to say what the homily is not.

It is not a sermon on an abstract topic; in other words, the Mass is not an occasion for the preacher to address some issue completely unrelated to the liturgical celebration and its readings, or to do violence to the texts provided by the Church by twisting them to fit some preconceived idea. Nor is the homily simply an exercise in biblical exegesis. The people of God have a great hunger to explore the Scriptures, and pastors should provide them with opportunities and resources that enable them to deepen their knowledge of God’s Word. However, the Sunday homily is not the occasion for in-depth biblical exegesis: there is not the time to do this well, and more importantly the homilist is called to proclaim how God’s word is being fulfilled here and now. Next, the homily is not catechetical

instruction, even if catechesis is an important dimension of the homily. As with biblical exegesis, there is not the time to do this properly; furthermore, this would represent a variation on the practice of presenting a discourse at Mass that is not really integral to the liturgical celebration itself. Finally, the time for the homily should not be taken up with the preacher's personal witness. There is no question that people can be deeply moved by personal stories, but the homily should express the faith of the Church, and not simply the preacher's own story. As Pope Francis warns, preaching that is purely moralistic, doctrinaire, or simply a lecture on biblical exegesis detracts from the heart-to-heart communication which should take place in the homily, and which possesses a quasi-sacramental character, because faith comes from what is heard (cf. EG 142).

7. In saying that the homily is none of these things, this does not mean that topical themes, biblical exegesis, doctrinal instruction, and personal witness have no place in preaching; indeed, they can be effective as *elements* in a good homily. It is very appropriate for a preacher to relate the texts of a particular celebration to the events and questions of the day, to share the fruits of scholarship in understanding a passage of Scripture and to demonstrate the connection between the Word of God and the doctrine of the Church.. Like fire, all of these things make good servants but poor masters: if they serve the purpose of the homily, they are good; if they take the place of the homily, they are not. Furthermore, the preacher needs to speak in such a way that his hearers can sense his belief in the power of God. He must not lower the standards of his message to the level of his own personal witness, fearing that he will be accused of not practicing what he preaches. Since he is preaching not himself, but Christ, he can, without hypocrisy, point out the heights of sanctity, to which, like every other individual, in his pilgrim faith he is aspiring.

8. It should also be emphasized that the homily should be tailored to the needs of the particular community, and indeed draw inspiration from it. Pope Francis speaks eloquently to this point in *Evangelium gaudium*:

The same Spirit who inspired the Gospels and who acts in the Church also inspires the preacher to hear the faith of God's people and to find the right way to preach at each Eucharist. Christian preaching thus finds in the heart of people and their culture a source of living water, which helps the preacher to know what must be said

and how to say it. Just as all of us like to be spoken to in our mother tongue, so too in the faith we like to be spoken to in our ‘mother culture,’ our native language (cf. 2 Macc 7:21, 27), and our heart is better disposed to listen. This language is a kind of music which inspires encouragement, strength and enthusiasm (139).

9. What, then, is the homily? Two brief selections from the *Praenotanda* of the Church's liturgical books begin to answer this question. First, in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* we read:

The homily is part of the Liturgy and is strongly recommended, for it is necessary for the nurturing of the Christian life. It should be an exposition of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or from the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners (65).

10. The *Introduction of the Lectionary* expands somewhat on this brief description:

Through the course of the liturgical year the homily sets forth the mysteries of faith and the standards of the Christian life on the basis of the sacred text. [...] 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” [SC 35, 2]. Through the readings and homily Christ’s Paschal Mystery is proclaimed; through the sacrifice of the Mass it becomes present. Moreover Christ himself is always present and active in the preaching of his Church.

Whether the homily explains the text of the Sacred Scriptures proclaimed in the readings or some other text of the Liturgy, it must always lead the community of the faithful to celebrate the Eucharist actively, “so that they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by faith” [SC 10]. From this living explanation, the word of God proclaimed in the readings and the Church’s celebration of the day’s Liturgy will have greater impact. But this demands that the homily be truly the fruit of meditation, carefully prepared, neither too long nor too short, and suited to all those present, even children and the uneducated (OLM 24).

11. A few fundamental points should be underscored in these two descriptions. In the broadest sense, the homily is a discourse about the mysteries of faith and the standards of Christian life in a way suited to the particular needs of the listeners. This is a concise description of many kinds

of preaching and exhortation. The specific form of the homily is suggested by the words “on the basis of the sacred text,” which refers to the biblical passages *and* the prayers used in a liturgical celebration. This point should not be overlooked, because the prayers provide a useful hermeneutic for the preacher’s interpretation of the biblical texts. What distinguishes a homily from other forms of instruction is its *liturgical context*. This understanding becomes crucial when the setting for the homily is the Eucharistic celebration: what the documents say here is essential to a proper understanding of the purpose of the homily. The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist together proclaim God’s wonderful work of our salvation in Christ: “... through the readings and homily Christ’s Paschal Mystery is proclaimed; through the sacrifice of the Mass it becomes present.” The homily at Mass “must always lead the community of the faithful to celebrate the Eucharist actively, ‘so that they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped through faith’ [SC 10]” (OLM 24).

12. This description of the homily at Mass suggests a simple yet challenging dynamic. The first movement is suggested by the words: “through the readings and homily Christ’s Paschal Mystery is proclaimed.” The preacher speaks about the readings and prayers of the celebration in such a way that their meaning is found in the death and Resurrection of the Lord. It is striking how closely “the readings and homily” are associated in this formulation, to the point that a poor proclamation of the biblical readings can adversely affect the understanding of the homily. *Both* are proclamation, and this underscores once again how the homily is a *liturgical* act; indeed, it is a sort of extension of the proclamation of the readings themselves. In connecting the readings with the Paschal Mystery, the reflection could well touch on doctrinal or moral teaching suggested by the texts.

13. The second movement is suggested by the words: “through the sacrifice of the Mass it [the Paschal Mystery] becomes present.” The second part of the homily prepares the community to celebrate the Eucharist, and to recognize that in this celebration they truly share in the mystery of the Lord’s death and Resurrection. Virtually every homily could be conceived as implicitly needing to say again the words of the Apostle Paul: “The cup of benediction that we bless, is it not a communion in the