

Homilies Relevant to the New Evangelization

In line with Benedict XVI's encouragement of the new evangelization, it is important to reflect on the role of homilies for Sunday and feastday Masses, with a view to their improvement. Millions of disciples of Christ all over the world listen to them. Many of the faithful ask themselves about the quality of those homilies, particularly with respect to content: at times, they hear themes unrelated to the readings of the Mass, or they are exposed to what are strictly the personal opinions of the celebrant. On other occasions, they may receive a mere reiteration of those liturgical readings. Moreover, some members of the faithful will frequently exchange impressions after Mass that, in effect, depict those defects more or less accurately.

However, there are instances where a lack of needed focus in the preaching is not easily or immediately detected. For example, one can listen to some pleasant ideas during an Easter Vigil homily, consisting of a commentary on the liturgical rite and presenting the death of Christ as His way of accompanying and consoling each of us in our sufferings in life and especially at death. Yet, it is only later, when the individual can quietly review the homily more deeply and critically, that he asks himself: It's all well and good that the Lord accompanies and consoles me both in words and deeds, but does He save me, redeem me and grant me a new life directed to the Life and to the Resurrection, after I die? Did I hear something in that homily about the crucified Jesus as the propitiatory victim for the sins of all men?

Examples could be multiplied. That is why, in his recent post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini*,¹ Benedict XVI notes "the attention that has been paid to the homily throughout the Synod"² and then recalls what he had stated in his immediately prior post-synodal apostolic exhortation concerning the Holy Eucharist, namely, that "the quality of homilies needs to be improved."³ The preoccupation of the Magisterium with homilies is not new,⁴ but there is evidently greater emphasis being placed today on the importance of quality in homilies.

¹ A consideration of the proposals set forth in the 2008 ordinary Synod of Bishops, dedicated to the Word of God.

² BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 59.

³ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (February 22, 2007), n. 46.

⁴ Vid. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 35 or *Institutio generalis Missalis Romani*, 2002 (nn. 29, 65-66).

THE HOMILY, PART OF THE EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

Let us return to a teaching of the Roman Pontiff contained in n. 59 of *Verbum Domini*:

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, I pointed out that “given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved. The homily ‘is part of the liturgical action’ and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the Word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful.”

The homily is not an occasion to communicate to the faithful something distinct from what is read in the sacred texts. It is itself “part of the liturgical action” rather than some optional addition. Its purpose is “to foster a deeper understanding of the Word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful.”

The Holy Mass is the action of God in the Trinity of Persons: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the action of Christ—the one Priest—through human instruments, His priests. They lend their being—words, gestures, intelligence, heart—in order to act *in Persona Christi Capitis*, in the name of Jesus Christ Head of the Church, not in their own names. The celebrant, therefore, should aim at helping the faithful—as well as himself—to comprehend, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, so that it will be more effective in their lives.

MAKING PRESENT THE WORD OF GOD WITHIN THE EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

The Holy Father continues: “The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives.”⁵

The fundamental condition of men and women with respect to God is immutable: we are the God’s creatures who are formed in His image and likeness, to the point of being His beloved sons and daughters. Nevertheless, circumstances of human life have changed, particularly against the backdrop of the world, as in areas of work and culture. Consequently, there is a need to “update the biblical message.” We all need to “discover the presence and the efficacy of the Word of God in our own modern lives.” It is important to make more accesible the Word of God, as it really is: that is, as the eternal Word, always up-to-date, always youthful, and directed to each of us personally—to me, in first person, in this unique point of my life and “autobiography.”

In a world in which we are immersed in our demanding schedules of work and are surrounded by an imposing and aggressive culture that is not easy to understand, a mere reading of the Word of

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 59.

God may fail to have a real impact on our lives, remaining as it were the isolated top floor of God's house without a stairway of communication with that ground floor, which is each Christian.

The homily is not as a lecture taught in a classroom or, for that matter, given in a house of worship outside of the Mass or other liturgical ceremony. It forms part of the divine action, the celebration of the Eucharist, in which the one Sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary is made present once again. For that reason, the homily is of a unique character, as part of a larger entity. The Pope writes, "[The homily] should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer and the Eucharistic liturgy."⁶ So, we are about to renew our faith in the Trinity by reciting the Nicene Creed, and then we will make our petitions for our necessities, followed by that segment of the eucharistic liturgy in which we offer our whole being so that the Lord make Himself present once more in the Sacrifice of the Cross, followed by His Resurrection and Ascension to the Father.

The orientation of the homily is this: to prepare and introduce ourselves into the divine action by offering ourselves with Christ. This insertion of ourselves therefore acquires distinct accents, according to both the texts proposed by the Church for each celebration of the Mass and the circumstances of the participants. The homily should facilitate our letting ourselves be taken up by Christ, to be saturated with His blood in His wounded hands, so that we may be cast as good seed throughout the wheatfield that is our world, in the environments of family and daily work and in our active participation in public life.⁷

CHRIST, CENTER OF THE HOMILY

The Roman Pontiff spells out some consequences of the singular role of the homily: "... those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart. Generic and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God's word should be avoided, as well as useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message. The faithful should be able to perceive clearly that the preacher has a compelling desire to present Christ, who must stand at the center of every homily."⁸ The priest, enamored of Christ, preaches with zeal and joy, because Jesus attracts all souls and leaves no one indifferent.

Christ is the center of every homily. He is the content, because the goal is "to show Christ." To achieve this, we rely on those authors who have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to commit that content in a narrative form that is both human and divine: the four Gospels, accompanied by the other writings

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ Cf. ST. JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *The Forge*, n. 894.

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 59.

of the Word of God. Christ is the content; He is the Way, the Truth and the Life that illuminates each man. These sacred writings are wonderfully suited to present-day circumstances and to all times; they are ageless. The parables elicit thought and questions on the part of the reader or listener. On occasion they impel him to draw out a conclusion himself.

At the same time, the beloved portrait of Jesus Christ has been and will continue to be guided by God Himself, through the light and fire of the Holy Spirit, who informs the intelligence and heart of the preacher and faithful participating in the Mass.

According to Benedict XVI, “The faithful should be able to perceive clearly that the preacher has a compelling desire to present Christ, who must stand at the center of every homily.”⁹ Logically enough, the homily should reflect the fact that the Gospel passage of the Mass assumes even greater importance than the other readings.

The faithful should be able to grasp the love of the homilist for Christ, as manifested in his tone, the expressions he employs, his joy, simplicity and enthusiasm. The homilist therefore must prepare himself in a special way for the homily, namely, by means of meditative study united intimately with his personal prayer, as the Holy Father so expresses: “For this reason preachers need to be in close and constant contact with the sacred text; they should prepare for the homily by meditation and prayer, so as to preach with conviction and passion.”¹⁰ To underscore the point, this requires a solid theological preparation, but never separated from meditation.

Naturally, the faithful will notice the comportment of the pastor, as well. Calling to mind an observation of St. Jerome, “In the priest of Christ, thought and word must be in agreement,”¹¹ the Roman Pontiff reminds us, “...preaching needs to be accompanied by the witness of a good life.”¹²

THREE QUESTIONS IN PREPARING A HOMILY

Benedict XVI makes his own the suggestion of the 2008 Synod of Bishops that answering the following questions was central to preparing a homily well: “What are the Scriptures being proclaimed

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 60.

¹¹ More fully, “Your actions should not contradict your words, lest when you preach in Church, someone may begin to think: ‘So why don’t you yourself act that way?’ ... In the priest of Christ, thought and word must be in agreement” (ST. JEROME, *Epistola* 52,7: *CSEL* 54, 426-427).

¹² BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 60.

saying? What do they say to me personally? What should I say to the community in the light of its concrete situation?" Focusing on these three questions will in themselves improve homilies greatly.¹³

1. What are the Scriptures being proclaimed saying?

First of all, one must know what the readings say. The celebrant will normally need to update his understanding of the texts by recurring to appropriate sources. Parallel texts of other Gospels is an obvious starting point, particularly with respect to the Gospel of the day, as well as following up with implicit or explicit references in the day's Mass readings to passages from the Old Testament. One should, of course, read the texts in light of Tradition and with the aid of magisterial statements made over the centuries, which are, by the way, organically synthesized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The faithful—clergy and laity alike—are grateful to God for the light shed by Benedict XVI, from his two-volume work *Jesus of Nazareth* to his other writings and homilies, as well as the writings, discourses and homilies of his predecessor John Paul II, and, for that matter, the work of Ordinaries in their respective ecclesiastical circumscriptions.

So many affirm that Benedict XVI will go down in history for the outstanding quality and style of his homilies, calling to mind the eloquence of the Church Fathers.¹⁴

Regarding the Gospel passage in particular, it is very profitable to review commentaries on the life of Jesus. Benedict XVI provides an excellent source such works in both of his volumes of *Jesus of Nazareth*: R. Guardini, F. M. Willam, K. Adam, G. Papini, D. Rops, to name but some. We can cite a few more, just as examples of more recent scholars: Justo Pérez de Urbel, the "Emmanuel" of Carles Cardó, and Abad G. Ricciotti.

Obviously, this is a matter of previous and ongoing preparation. It has been said with a certain sense of humor that a good homily requires a knowledge of exegesis proper to biblical theology, but the homily is not the time to give a class on exegesis.

2. What do the readings say to me personally?

The second question posed by the Synod to the celebrant is very important in his attempt through the homily to make the readings resonate with the faithful. The Roman Pontiff comments in n. 59 of *Verbum Domini*: "The preacher 'should be the first to hear the Word of God which he

¹³ *Ibidem*, n. 59.

¹⁴ The combination of excellent content and style in the homilies of Benedict XVI can especially be appreciated by reading a convenient collection of them, published as "Omèlie di Joseph Ratzinger, papa. Anno liturgico 2010" (a cura di Sandro Magister, Libri Scheiwiller, Milano 2010, p. 420).

proclaims,¹⁵ since, as St. Augustine says: ‘He is undoubtedly barren who preaches outwardly the Word of God without hearing it inwardly.’¹⁶

There is a well-known description of three levels of intellectual and pedagogical development in a professor: when he is young and teaching beyond the depth of his mastery of the subject matter, transmitting ideas he has come across recently but without any deep assimilation or critical understanding of them; when he has matured and is conveying what he truly knows and understands; and, finally, when he has reached the level of a “master,” teaching not all that he knows but what his students need to learn. This last stage marks a point of real “interiorization” of the discipline and its existential insertion into one’s own life.

3. What must I say to the community, taking into account their concrete situation?

Because he habitually deals with Jesus and endeavors to be another Christ, the homilist focuses on his brothers and sisters. He speaks with Jesus Christ about them, including their spiritual and material necessities. He asks for light in his personal prayer: “Lord, what would you say this Sunday? What do you want me to say?”

In an ethos of cultural decadence, we all need to hear the animating, affectionate and positive tone of Jesus, which is full of light, joy and hope. The celebrant of the Mass also seeks to transmit another fundamental truth underscored in the first letter of St. John: “In this is the love, not that we have loved God, but that He has first loved us, and sent His Son a propitiation for our sins.”¹⁷

In a climate of feeling oneself loved by God and knowing oneself to be a child of God, it is much easier to understand and embrace the doctrine and words of life taught by Jesus and conveyed through the Church. There follows a more operative desire of being formed well, of remaining firm in the faith in what is so often a pagan environment, and of acknowledging one’s own sins without either hiding them or falling into despair over them.

In present-day circumstances, we all need an abundance of healthy doctrine. The Holy Father accordingly recommends that there also be short commentaries in daily Mass: “The homily for Sundays and solemnities should be prepared carefully, without neglecting, whenever possible, to offer at weekday Masses *cum populo* brief and timely reflections which can help the faithful to welcome the word which was proclaimed and to let it bear fruit in their lives.”¹⁸

¹⁵ *Propositio* 15 of the 2008 Synod of Bishops.

¹⁶ *Sermo* 179, 1: PL 38, 966.

¹⁷ *I Jn* 4, 10.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 59.

In any case, homilies need to be prepared well, with ample study and prayer and avoiding improvisation. That way, one can think with precision and clarity, crafting in an attractive way what one is going to say, within the framework of a reasonable time. In fact, it is generally important to avoid delivering long homilies, which so often reflect poor preparation, as with that writer of a three-thousand page text who provides his editor with the lame excuse that he lacked sufficient time to shorten it.

EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON FRIENDSHIP WITH JESUS

There is a capital point that cannot be taken for granted. In my view and as has so often been pointed out by Benedict XVI, an over-arching ingredient to an effective homily is the preacher's friendship with Jesus. In the foreword to volume one of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict discusses the widespread impression of so many Christians that we know little about Jesus with any real certainty. It is as if only later did a prior faith in His divinity give rise to the image that people have of Him. "This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air."¹⁹ This expression "...Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends," is a decisive key in understanding this pontificate, which assigns so much importance to personal dealings with Jesus in the Word, the Eucharist, and in all the liturgy.

One does not know Jesus truly if he does not accompany Him daily with the Twelve, the seventy-two disciples, the holy women who minister to the Teacher, and so many others. The new evangelization arises from a renewed friendship with Jesus, who is not simply a figure from the past. We can speak of Him with the enthusiasm and joy of the apostle John in his first letter: "I write of what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have handled: of the Word of Life. And the Life was made known and we have seen, and now testify and announce to you, the Life Eternal which was with the Father, and has appeared to us. What we have seen and have heard we announce to you, in order that you also may have fellowship with us, and that our fellowship may be with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that you may rejoice, and our joy may be full."²⁰ For example, note how St. Cyril of Jerusalem expresses this contemporaneous relationship with Christ in his catechesis (of years 348-350):

Whatever action Christ engages in is a motive for joy for the universal Church, but the greatest motive for glory is the cross. As Saint Paul expresses the matter so pointedly

¹⁹ JOSEPH RATZINGER-BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus de Nazareth, From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) xii.

²⁰ *1 Jn* 1, 1-4.

and from such deep personal knowledge: *But as for me, God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Certainly, the fact that the man born blind received his sight in Siloem was worthy of admiration; but how would this benefit so many blind people the world over? So too was the great and preternatural resurrection of Lazarus, four days after his death; but this affected only him physically, so in what way would this benefit all those throughout the world who were dead by cause of sin? An admirable thing was the multiplication of the five loaves as an inexhaustable fount, sufficient to feed five thousand men; but, in what way would it benefit all those in the world who found themselves tormented by the hunger of ignorance? Marvelous was the work of liberating that woman from the bondage that Satan had inflicted by way of illness for eighteen years; but how did that aid us, who have been enchained by our sins? In contrast, the triumph of the cross gave light to those suffering the blindness of sin, liberated us from the bonds of sin, and redeemed all men.²¹

Christ is not relegated to the past: He lives and acts now in the twenty-first century, as He did in the fourth century of St. Cyril. In a way, He acts more universally now than during His years of earthly life.

SAINTS, RAYS OF LIGHT FROM THE WORD OF GOD

Benedict XVI joyfully refers to the role of the saints in *Verbum Domini* : “The interpretation of sacred Scripture would remain incomplete were it not to include listening to *those who have truly lived the word of God: namely, the saints*. Indeed, ‘*viva lectio est vita bonorum.*’ The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading and assiduous meditation.”²²

The Pope not only has in mind those saints of centuries long past but those of more recent times and, indeed, even those who are practically contemporaries:

Every saint is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of God: we can think of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his search for truth and in his discernment of spirits; Saint John Bosco in his passion for the education of the young; Saint John Mary Vianney in his awareness of the grandeur of the priesthood as gift and task; Saint Pius of Pietrelcina in his serving as an instrument of divine mercy; Saint Josemaria Escrivá in his preaching

²¹ ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechesis* 13,1. 3. 6. 23: PG 33, 771-774. 779. 799. 802.

²² BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 48.

of the universal call to holiness; Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, the missionary of God's charity towards the poorest of the poor, and then the martyrs of Nazism and Communism, represented by Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), a Carmelite nun, and by Blessed Aloysius Stepinac, the Cardinal Archbishop of Zagreb.²³

With gratitude to God, I recall hearing a homily preached by St. Josemaría, who from his youth placed himself in the life of Jesus as “one more person” and counseled that this was a way for all to achieve sanctity: “If you wish to get close to our Lord through the pages of the Gospels, I always recommend that you try to enter in on the scene taking part as just one more person there. In this way (and I know many perfectly ordinary people who live this way) you will be captivated like Mary was, who hung on every word that Jesus uttered or, like Martha, you will boldly make your worries known to him, opening your heart sincerely about them all no matter how little they may be.”²⁴

TWO INSTRUMENTS REQUESTED BY BENEDICT XVI

We should expect before long to have as a resource a homilistic directory, as recommended by Pope Benedict: “The art of good preaching based on the Lectionary is an art that needs to be cultivated. Therefore, in continuity with the desire expressed by the previous Synod, I ask the competent authorities, along the lines of the Eucharistic Compendium, also to prepare practical publications to assist ministers in carrying out their task as best they can: as for example a Directory on the homily, in which preachers can find useful assistance in preparing to exercise their ministry.”²⁵

In addition, through his *Motu proprio "Ubicumque et semper"* of September 21, 2010, Benedict XVI has constituted a new Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, which has as one of its tasks, “to promote the use of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as an essential and complete formulation of the content of the faith for the people of our time” (art. 3, n. 5°). The faithful will find in that great work of the pontificate of John Paul II, a complete formulation of the faith suited for our time, which presents the Second Vatican Council in all its beauty and in the proper doctrinal and living context of the Magisterium throughout the centuries. The homilist will thus find a rich vein for meditating the liturgical texts. It is also worth bearing in mind the utility of the *Compendium of the Catholic Church*, as an tool which is perhaps more accesible for study and memorization.

The triennial cycle of the lectionary for Sunday Masses and solemnities permits one to consider all facets of the mystery of Christ. But from the early times of our Church, the detailed study of the profession of faith has been a wonderful complement in appreciating this mystery of our Lord, as it has

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ ST. JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, n. 222.

²⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), n. 60.

developed so consistently over the centuries. Consequently, a study of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, individually or in groups, contributes to a greater knowledge of the organic whole of divine Revelation, in all its beauty and harmony. The readings of the Mass are not situated at the margin of the liturgy, but are in direct connection with the liturgical homily. A more assiduous use of the *Catechism* will undoubtedly contribute to quality preaching directed toward the exciting challenge of the new evangelization.

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