In his 1998 Apostolic Letter “On Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy” (Dies Domini [hereafter, DD]), Pope John Paul II gives a sustained theological and pastoral analysis of Sunday, with special attention to the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Close attention to the Pope’s reflections on Sunday and its Eucharist can be an inspiration to preachers as we prepare to preach on Sunday. Indeed, our homiletic task becomes clearer when we understand the homily as truly a “Sunday word.” I see six aspects emerging from the papal position.

The Sunday Homily Is an Essential Homily

Vatican II made the homily obligatory on the very days that celebration of the Eucharist is obligatory: Sunday, and other holy days. Now the Church makes obligatory only things she considers essential, so the Sunday homily is one of those essentials in the life of faith. Indeed, the Sunday homily holds pride of place among all the homilies we preach. There are implications here for the time we spend preparing to preach on Sundays. For instance, there are very few tasks of the ordained which are labeled “obligatory,” but Sunday preaching—and thus its preparation—is one of those. How might the preacher’s weekly schedule better reflect the Church’s understanding of the essential quality of Sunday worship, including its homily?

The Sunday Homily Is an “Easter Homily”

Sunday was a work day for the first Christians, not a part of “the weekend.” It was a most inconvenient day to gather, which is why the gatherings were most often held in the evening or very early in the morning. Christians met on that day because it was the day of the week that God raised Jesus from the dead. Every Sunday is a commemoration of the resurrection, and so every Sunday homily is in some sense an Easter homily. We preach Christ crucified and raised, the pledge of our own future glory. The resurrection was the defining event that influenced the telling of the story of Jesus; each pericope has as its subtext that Jesus is alive and with us. Our homilies must have the same character. If a preacher

Stephen Vincent DeLeers is assistant professor of homiletics at Saint Francis Seminary and director of continuing formation of clergy for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Fr. DeLeers currently serves as the president of the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics and the vice-president of the National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy. A longer version of this essay was presented by the author at the December, 2000 meeting of the Academy of Homiletics.
always speaks of Jesus in the past tense, for instance, the preacher risks consigning Jesus to the ranks of interesting historical characters. But, “Sunday is not only the remembrance of a past event: it is a celebration of the living presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his own people” (DD #31). Jesus is risen and lives among us, and our Sunday preaching must reflect that.

The Sunday Homily Renews Christian Identity

The Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day is also a privileged occasion for the renewal of our identity as brothers and sisters saved by Jesus Christ. As the Pope said,

For [the Risen Christ’s] presence to be properly proclaimed and lived, it is not enough that the disciples of Christ pray individually. . . . It is important therefore that they come together to express fully the very identity of the Church, the ekklésia, the assembly called together by the Risen Lord . . . (DD #31).

Our preaching, like Sunday itself, evokes and renews this identity. For instance, as a preacher uses the word “we,” he or she might expand it to make the identity of the assembly more clear: “we the Church.” Or again, a simple phrase like “sisters and brothers in Christ” affirms and renews our true identity and baptismal unity, and as such finds a home in our Sunday preaching. St. Augustine said of eucharistic communion: “receive who you are.” So too in our homiletic communion, the rest of the assembly hears anew who we are, in Christ.

The Sunday Homily Names the Week’s Struggles and Graces

What the Pope says about the Sunday Eucharist in general is a great prescription for our Sunday preaching:

The rhythm of the week prompts us to gather up in grateful memory the events of the days which have just passed, to review them in the light of God and to thank him for his countless gift. . . . The truth is that the whole community sharing in Christ’s sacrifice is especially evident in the Sunday gathering, which makes it possible to bring to the altar the week that has passed, with all its human burdens (DD #42; 43).

As preachers strive to make the Gospel come alive, we too gather up what has passed, view it in the light of God, and name the grace that abounds. To me, a big part of this is illustrating our homilies with materials in which people can recognize themselves. The heroics of a Mother Teresa, for instance—while edifying—are beyond where most people live their lives. Better that we be in tune with the way God’s grace is at work in homes and schools, at work and in the public square, and name that in our preaching.

The Sunday Homily Expresses Christian Joy

John Paul reminds us that Sunday, as the day of resurrection, is “the day of joy in a very special way.” He quotes the Didascalia—“On the first day of the week, you shall all rejoice” (DD #55). He then quotes Pope Paul VI’s Exhortation On Christian Joy. Pope Paul concluded that Exhortation by asking that, on the Lord’s Day, the Church should witness powerfully to the joy experienced by the Apostles when they saw the Lord on the evening of Easter. To this end, he urged pastors to insist “upon the need for the baptized to
celebrate the Sunday Eucharist in joy” (DD #58).

If the baptized are to rejoice on Sundays, we homilists must do our part to insure that the news we proclaim is good news. Homilies which leave people guilty and dispirited are by nature not Sunday homilies. We proclaim the good news of the resurrection and of our inclusion into Christ through baptism. We proclaim the good news of a world charged with the grandeur of God. We proclaim good news, and so celebrate the Day of Joy.

The Sunday Homily Expresses Christian Love

John Paul takes an important step beyond joy when he writes:

To experience the joy of the Risen Lord deep within is to share fully the love which pulses in his heart: there is no joy without love! . . . The Sunday Eucharist, therefore, not only does not absolve the faithful from the duties of charity, but on the contrary commits them even more “to all the works of charity, of mercy, of apostolic outreach . . .” (DD #69).

As homilists, we serve this aspect of Sunday preaching by keeping foremost in our minds the commandment of love. Our priority is love, for that is our identity: to love as we have been loved. The Sunday homily is not an occasion to slap people into submission, but to emphasize the gift of God’s love, a gift we are called to share.

Homilists suggest ways of living lives of love only in light of the freely-given gift God has already bestowed upon us. When our Sunday preaching reflects the theology of Sunday itself, it not only makes the word of God come alive, but also enlivens and empowers Christian response to the word, in worship and service. Indeed, John Paul notes that if love is experienced as central to the Sunday mystery, then “not only the Sunday Eucharist but the whole of Sunday becomes a great school of charity, justice, and peace” (DD #73). Preachers serve that vision by words we speak on Sunday.

So, in these six ways at least, our homilies on the Lord’s Day are to be true “Sunday words.” It is not without good reason, then, that John Paul can write clearly, much depends on those who exercise the ministry of the Word.

It is their duty to prepare the reflection on the Word of the Lord by prayer and study of the sacred text, so that they may then express its contents faithfully and apply them to people’s concerns and to their daily lives (DD #40).

In the end, what the Pope says about keeping Sunday holy applies equally well to Sunday Mass in general and the Sunday homily in particular: “today more than ever, [the Church] is unwilling to settle for minimalism and mediocrity at the level of faith” (DD #52). So, although our ministries are busy, and although some of us preach so frequently as to sometimes make it all seem a blur, the Church’s call is clarion clear: the Sunday homily takes priority, partaking of the very characteristics of the Lord’s Day itself. That homily should be prepared with special care, and delivered with all the joy and love of the day itself.