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Anatomy of a Homily

For over twenty-five years I have been teaching homiletics to ministerial students and also conducting preaching workshops for many dioceses and religious orders in the United States. A key segment of both enterprises involves critiquing. Both positive reinforcement and helpful challenges encourage preachers to keep improving. There are some weekends when I hear and help critique thirty homilies. A woman religious friend of mine once told me that because of hearing so many homilies, I have been spared the possibility of purgatory.

Many of the homilies I hear are excellent. I am especially impressed with many of our younger preachers who have been exposed to quality homiletic and biblical courses. There are many who ask, “Who are the great preachers of our time?” It is a worthy question. Certain individuals have always stood out as model preachers in every period of the Church’s history. But a far more important question is, “Where are the good and faithful preachers in our time?” I use “good” here in the Ciceronian sense of the “good person speaking well.” My reading of the homiletic signs of the times has taught me there are many good and faithful preachers in our time who take their preaching seriously but are never acknowledged in the press. I am also aware that many preachers have a long way to go. What follows are six areas that I believe need serious attention. These areas are not listed in order of importance but as they come to mind from my homiletic critiques.

(1) **Focus.** After viewing a homily, the first question I ask the participants in the group is, “What do you believe the homily was about?” In other words, what was the focus of the homily? I ask them to state the focus in one pithy sentence. If homilists, in their preparation, had come up with a clear, unified, and simple focus statement for the homily, chances are that the listeners will offer a similar focus statement when they are asked, “What was the homily about?” There are times when the homilist has not even thought about a focus. Some have told me, “I just get up there and speak.” Others seem to have two or three focus statements embodied in their homilies. That is simply too much for listeners to grasp in a seven-to-ten minute homily.

Ask any listener after Mass, “What were the three points of the homily?” Nobody will remember the three points. I sometimes tell preachers at workshops that a commercial has one focus: “The best
part of waking up is Folger’s in your cup.” Some respond, “But we’re not selling coffee, we’re selling the gospel.” To which I reply, “But they’re selling a lot more coffee than we are the gospel!” There is another group of preachers who have a clear focus statement in their head but never actually say it in their homilies. They place a heavy burden on the listener who is left to decipher exactly what this homily is all about. I wish Catholics had the tradition of some Protestants who have a sign outside their churches with the title of next Sunday’s sermon. Especially helpful are those pithy, creative titles that give you a clue that the preacher has not only prepared a homily but has done so with a clear focus statement in mind.

(2) Method. John Allyn Melloh, S.M., professor of homiletics at the University of Notre Dame, tells his students: “Method is your friend. It’s a help, not a straitjacket.” He offers the example of having surgery: “I would want to go to a surgeon who has a ‘method’ rather than to someone who says, ‘Well, what shall we try today?’”

Eventually, many preachers find a method that works for them. But they also could benefit from authors who have provided wise counsel on the matter of homily preparation. For example, it would be most helpful if preachers would pay attention to the method offered in the NCCB document *Fulfilled In Your Hearing: The Homily in The Sunday Assembly* (1982:29–39, hereafter FIYH). It is a method that works for most of the students I have taught.

Because of limited space, let me focus on one significant aspect of homiletic method: writing. After listening to a homily, I can always tell if the homilist has or has not written the homily. The homily that makes my teeth itch is the one that is composed at the ambo and not the desk. It rambles. It lacks precision. The listener wonders how the preacher goes from here to there because transitions are lacking. Transitions are needed because they are the bridges that help the listener in the journey. A homily not carefully written often lacks a solid ending. It is as if the preacher is a pilot who doesn’t know how to come in for a sure landing. This leads listeners to confusion and distraction.

I am not suggesting that the homilist takes a carefully written manuscript to the pulpit and reads it with exactness. That homiletic style gives the impression that the manuscript is more important than the listeners. Fulton Sheen once told the story of an elderly woman who chastised a young priest after Mass because he had read his entire sermon. She told him, “If you can’t remember it, how am I supposed to remember it?” What I am suggesting is that writing helps give the homily clarity, direction, and precise language.

(3) Poetic Language. Andrew Greeley believes that ministerial students should be required to write poetry, plays, and short stories
before ordination. I agree because the language of the homily is not the language of the philosopher or the theologian. Homiletic insights emerge from the philosopher and the theologian but the language must be that of the poet. Preaching is a theological event but the language of preaching must not only instruct but delight, inspire, and move listeners to faith. Karl Rahner described the priest as a poet. He chided his fellow theologians because they had lost the imagination of the poet and had become hopelessly prosaic: “Where are those ages when the great theologians wrote hymns as well?” (1964:24).

I am not suggesting that preachers quote poetry or construct their homilies in rhyme. I am suggesting that we take seriously the advice of 

**FIYH** and “turn to the picture language of the poet and storyteller” (25). Many of the homilies I hear use abstract nouns that end in -ion. They are filled with “church chat” that might be the language of theologians and clerics but not the language of most people. Robert Frost once said that “every poem begins with a lump in the throat.” Preachers must ask themselves, “What moved me as I prepared this homily? Have I captured that passion and concreteness in my words?” Preaching is a heart-to-heart talk. If a homily lacks heart, it probably won’t move others.

(4) Use of the biblical texts. Vatican II’s renewal of the homily signaled a return to biblical preaching: “All the preaching of the Church . . . should be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture” (*Dei Verbum*, 21). Thirty plus years after this advice, many preachers are still not certain about what to do with the biblical readings found in the Lectionary. Some simply avoid any reference to the Scripture readings. A colleague of mine told me that she heard a homily preached on Holy Thursday in which the preacher talked about the bunions on his feet and the stress of Holy Week on the priests of the parish. My friend was waiting for at least a simple transition from bunions to the washing of feet by Jesus in John’s Gospel but no reference was ever made to Scripture. Could it be that such preachers are frightened by biblical scholarship and avoid going into the Scripture readings with depth for fear of contradicting biblical scholars?

Catholic Theological Union’s Leslie J. Hoppe, O.F.M., and Barbara E. Reid, O.P., recently conducted a study in which a representative sample of homilies by priests whose seminary education took place after Vatican II were assessed on how they used the Bible in their preaching. One of their conclusions is that many of the preachers they observed used the biblical “text as an illustration or as a point of departure from which to move into a pre-conceived notion or theme on which to preach” (Hoppe-Reid, 1998, 37). While biblical courses in Catholic ministerial schools have improved greatly over the last three
decades, I am not convinced that we have always come up with teaching strategies that help construct an appreciation of the Bible as a book of the Academy and also as a book of the Church. Sound exegesis must always be accompanied by a prayerful dwelling with the biblical texts (*lectio divina*). While homilists should make use of the best of contemporary biblical scholarship, they should also be taught that the homily is not a biblical lecture but a biblical interpretation of life addressed to a particular liturgical assembly in a particular place and time. As *FIYH* puts it, “the preacher does not so much attempt to explain the Scriptures as to interpret the human situation through the Scriptures” (20).

(5) Interpretation. Recently I had a lively exchange of ideas with a couple of bishops about what a homily is and what it is supposed to do. At first, the bishops said that people today are spiritually hungry. I have no quarrel with that. That is why many have responded to authors like Kathleen Norris who offers a convincing Christian apologetic not by argument but by her faith-filled interpretation of life as graced. Where I departed from the bishops was their solution to a spiritually hungry people. They were convinced that the homily should be a teaching tool, offering information about what the Church teaches. Certainly teaching is a significant part of preaching, but turning the homily into an information tool is not the answer. Søren Kierkegaard once noted, “there is no lack of information in the Christian land, something else is lacking.” The “something else” that is often lacking in our homilies is an interpretation of our lives in light of the gospel. That is the working definition of the homily found in *FIYH*. The document retrieves the image of the interpreter, an important image in synagogue preaching, that is missing in conciliar and post-conciliar documents on the nature of the homily. The document takes its title from Luke 4:15-30, Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth. That sermon did not offer information but an interpretation of people’s lives. It spoke to the present by transforming the historical revelation into a contemporaneous, dynamic reality: “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” Many of the homilies I hear at workshops are not interpretations of life but explanations of a theme or a teaching. I believe that our preaching would greatly improve if we begin to grasp the significance of the homily as an interpretation of life in light of the Scriptures which leads the assembled to “be able to worship God in spirit and truth, and then go forth to love and serve the Lord” (*FIYH*, 19).

(6) Length. The Introduction of the 1981 *Lectionary for Mass* advises: “The homily . . . [should be] neither too long nor too short” (24). Granted that advice is imprecise, but it does recognize the dangers of long-winded homilies which are not appropriate within the parameters
of a eucharistic celebration and also of “homilettes” which short-change the assembly’s need to respond in thanksgiving to God’s word. In a study conducted a number of years ago in the Archdiocese of Seattle, laypersons settled on seven minutes as the average length for a Sunday homily. Perhaps this reflects our USA Today attention span or the fact that seven minutes is the average time between commercials on American television. In my experience of critiquing homilies, I often notice how the long-winded homily is also the one that was never written out as a manuscript. Once again, writing makes for clarity and precision and also for a good sense of timing. Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, who taught homiletics before becoming a bishop and who meets each week with a group of his priests to critique their homilies, often reminds preachers, “Don’t think they’re enjoying it half as much as you are!”

The preachers I have worked with over the past twenty years who I admire are the ones who are always striving to improve in the central act of ministry, the proclamation of the gospel. They are the ones who are convinced the Spirit of God animates their human words with divine power. They are the ones who take seriously these six areas of preaching that always need to be renewed.

REFERENCES


