

What Is the Purpose of the Homily at Mass?

Today's second reading from Hebrews highlights the Priest's need to preach-teach-sanctify the people of God in the homily.

"Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was."

(Hebrews 5:1-4)

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was the preacher of all preachers. He said what He meant and meant what He said. He proclaimed the truth in season and out of season, whether convenient or inconvenient. He came to disturb the comfortable and to comfort the disturbed. And His first homily (Mark 1:14-15) was remarkably short: **"Repent and Believe in the Gospel."**

I'm sure you'd love your pastor to preach one sentence homilies. All the while connecting Faith with Life, Liturgy of the Word with Liturgy of the Eucharist, Catechism with Evangelization, Charity with Justice, and frequently adding a little humor.

Still, the homily must always serve the message the preacher believes the Holy Spirit is desiring to communicate to His people. It would be a shame to preach a homily on the Word of God, and the only thing people really remember is the joke or humorous story. Attempts at humor that do not connect with God's word or that overshadow God's word should be left out.

Defining a homily is elusive. Homilies are like short theology classes, but not really. They are like speeches, but not really. They are like short stories, but not really. They are often down to earth, but not really. Sometimes I think Lord, why me? There are plenty of people who are more talented or intelligent, better communicators or story tellers, who are funnier than I.

Talking with priest friends, I know good preachers are frustrated when their homilies don't seem to bear much fruit. As a general rule it's said that every minute of preaching requires an hour of prayer (10-minute homily = 10 hours in prayer). From time to time we receive compliments and words of praise, but inside we are not always convinced we are connecting. Then I'm reminded Moses had a speech impediment, Jeremiah felt too young, and Paul was anxious about public speaking.

Since the homily is the bond between the liturgy of the Word and Eucharist, its importance cannot be underestimated. And because too many use the homily as the basis for judging the Mass as either beautiful or boring, clergy must take the homily seriously and seek to improve their homiletic skills. It's why receiving constructive (charitable and honest) feedback from the people in the pew is important. In other words, don't tell father or the deacon how good the homily was when it really wasn't. Or supposedly how bad it was because we really didn't want to hear the tough-love message he needed to preach.

What is purpose of the homily at Mass? That said, let me give you what I think are the four main purposes for every homily:

1. The first purpose of the homily is to lead us to worship. Our main reason for going to church on Sunday is to fulfill the Third Commandment – Keeping Holy the Lord's Day. Although, the homily is not the most important part of our worship, it has a crucial role in serving as our moment of reflection, instruction, consolation, and exhortation. For this reason, the homily should always seek to connect us in Word and Sacrament and our continual need for conversion of mind and heart.

2. The second purpose of the homily is repentance (conversion), the greater part of our active participation in the liturgy. As I said at the beginning, in his first "homily" Jesus called all His disciples to **"Repent and Believe in the Gospel."**

3. The third purpose of the homily is catechesis. Since we all have a baptismal call to holiness, we need to be continually formed in the truths of our faith so we can correctly form our conscience according to fundamental matters of faith and morals. Hence, the great challenge is to (re)introduce Christ's faithful to our ongoing need to become more intentional disciples.

4. The fourth purpose of the homily is to become true servants of the Gospel. The first responsibility of clergy is to practice what we preach and to seek new ways to deliver the good news to people's hearts, so they too will desire to be saints.

Though we are sinners, who often fall short of loving God and our neighbor as our self, our God is always with us. And since we are in this earthly pilgrimage together, please say a few extra prayers for your Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, to grow in holiness and in their preaching, for we desire nothing more than to love and serve you and help lead you to heaven.