

The Homily

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.



So now comes the part of the Mass that is often the most loved and the most hated by Catholics. Preaching consistently well can prove to be a challenge for priests (and deacons) who often live very busy lives and are called to preach all week long at weekday Masses, funerals, and weddings, in addition to being thoroughly prepared to deliver “a barn-burner” every weekend. No excuses here, just explanations. The homily is obviously a critical moment in the Mass and there are high expectations that the people of God will be edified and instructed.

Sadly, most Catholic priests do not have the reputation of being great preachers. Indeed, we clergy often think we are better than our people think we are. One of the chief reasons people say they leave the Church is uninspired preaching compared to the relatively inspired and interesting preaching found in many non-Catholic denominations. There is work to do on improving our preaching to be sure, but DON'T leave the Blessed Sacrament to go and sit in a “Word Church!” Even if the preaching is entertaining and informative it just isn't worth the price of leaving behind

Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Also, good preaching can be over-rated. Paul, according to his own words, was not a great preacher (1 Cor. 2:1; 2 Cor. 11:5; Acts 20:7ff) and yet he was the greatest evangelist the Church has known.

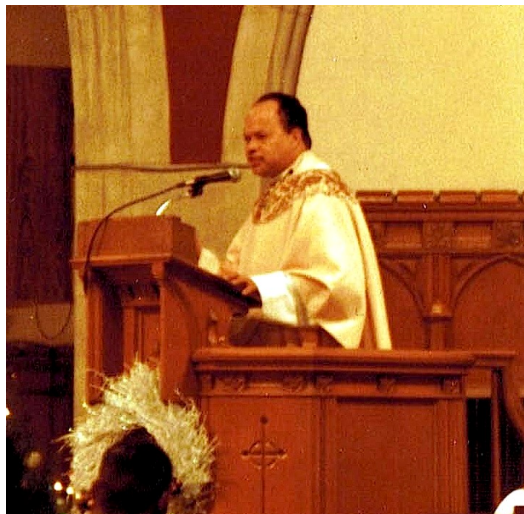
So, What is a Homily? Years ago we just called it a “sermon.” Yet, in recent decades the Church has preferred the term “Homily.” This is probably due to the communal nature that the ancient word homily evokes. Homily comes from late Latin homilia, from late Greek homilein, and emphasizes a more interpersonal “conversation,” or “discourse.” The Greek work homilein means to consort with or to address a kindred or related people. The root word homos, meaning “same”, is included in the word homily. Hence, this is more than an impersonal address to a crowd of people only vaguely known (i.e. a sermon or lecture). Rather, this is a family conversation, a conversation or address to kindred spirits who share much in common—at least we hope!

History – This is a pre-Christian element in the Liturgy. It was part of the Jewish synagogue service. It is recorded in scripture that Jesus Himself preached in the synagogue (cf. Luke 4:16-31). Likewise Paul makes use of the synagogue homily to proclaim Christ (e.g. Acts 13:14ff). The early Christians brought the synagogue service into the Mass and thus the homily was tied to the reading of the scriptures. The preaching of a homily was the particular duty of the Bishop but priests were also allowed to preach. During the fourth century in the east, it was the custom, if several priests were present, for all of them to preach in turn and then finally, the Bishop (Whew!). After the fall of Arius (a Third Century priest-heretic who denied the divinity of Christ and widely disseminated his views leading countless others into error) priests were forbidden to preach in Alexandria and North Africa. Likewise, in Rome they were also forbidden. This restriction was variously applied and enforced in different areas. Perhaps it should be stated that the

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priests of this time were not always the most learned of men. The seminary system as we know it today did not exist and there would be concerns about the orthodoxy of the sermon, as well as, its effective delivery. In general then, preaching at Mass seems to have declined after the problems of the Third Century, but it would *not* be fair to say that it disappeared entirely. This is especially true when we consider that in many of the well-established areas of North Africa and Italy there was a bishop present in even the smaller towns.

By the beginning of the Middle Ages there was a strong return to preaching of the Word of God. However, the character and liturgical role was changing. It was modeled more on sermons outside of Mass. There was the rise of the preaching orders (*e.g.* Franciscans and Dominicans) at this time and they preached outside of the liturgy in town squares and meetings. This form of preaching began to enter the churches and influenced the nature and content of the Homily which became less and less a textual explanation and applications of the readings, and was replaced by a catechetical format in which an exposition of the Creed, the Our Father and the Ten Commandments was often the focus. This practice continued to be the norm as a general rule.



Present Instructions emphasize that the homily is a part of the Mass itself and seems to nod to both traditions described above. Namely, the homily is not merely to be an explanation of the readings but also should explain the mysteries of faith as related to the readings and the liturgy of the day applying them especially to the norms of Christian life (cf. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy # 52.)

Norms- The homily should develop some point of the readings or of another text from the ordinary or from the proper of the Mass of the day, and take into account the mystery being celebrated and the needs suitable to the listeners. The Homily is required on Sundays and holy days of obligation at all Masses that are celebrated with a congregation; it may not be omitted without a serious reason. It is recommended on other days, especially on the weekdays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter season, as well as, on other feasts and occasions when the people come to church in large numbers. The priest celebrant should ordinarily give the homily.

The homilist must be an ordained member of the clergy. A deacon, a priest, or a bishop may preach. This is not merely a question of being learned, for many members of the laity are quite learned in theological matters. Rather, as Catholics, we are convinced that the sacrament of Holy Orders confers a unique charism and grace which empowers the priest to speak for God in a supernatural manner. The Third Instruction on the Correct Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states the following: “...*the Purpose of the homily is to explain the readings and make them relevant for the present day. This is the task of the priest, and the faithful should not add comments or engage in dialogue or anything similar during the homily.*”(Liturgicae instaurationes # 3, 2.)

Finally, we might end with St. Paul’s instruction to Timothy regarding the preaching and teaching task of the clergy: *Loquar quae decet sanam doctrinam* (speak that which befits sound doctrine).