

Dear brother priests and deacons,

We live at a time in the life of the Church that is both critical and privileged: “critical” because of the difficulties of passing on the faith in our very secular society; and “privileged” because “the power of God” is most assured and most effective in the midst of “human weakness” (2 Cor 12:9; 1 Cor 1:17-31).

Responsibility for the Church’s mission is the shared responsibility of all the baptized. But we are addressing this letter to you because you and we have the awesome capacity to make things either better or worse through our ministry of the word.

The homily and how it works:

As you know, there are different ways of announcing God’s word: evangelization, catechesis, instruction, exhortation etc. There is a proper time and place for each of these. But it is not in the liturgy. The form of preaching specific to the liturgy is the homily. Our letter is about the homily, and how it brings hope and transformation.

So, how is the homily different from other forms of preaching? Contrasting it with “sermons” can help to highlight the difference: a sermon tells us what *we should be doing*; a homily helps us to see what *God is doing*. The difference is far-reaching: when people are constantly reminded of what they should be doing, they can feel weighed down with a sense of failure and guilt. This can be debilitating. A homily works in the opposite way: it is about what God is doing in spite of our failures. This is life-giving.

The story of Zaccheus illustrates this: it doesn’t start with a reminder of what he should be doing; it starts with the experience of Jesus coming into his life. That discovery is what makes Zaccheus want to change his life. So, too, for the Samaritan woman: she was coy about even speaking with this stranger, let alone telling him her tale. But his manner of conversing enabled her to become increasingly free. From feeling awkward about him knowing too much (and trying to distract Him), she became glad He knew everything, and couldn’t wait to tell others about Him. In other words, God doesn’t enter our lives in response to our conversion; our ever-deepening conversion comes about through the ever-surprising discovery of God’s first loving us. As St Paul says: “God loved us while we were still sinners” (Roman 5:8)

Reminding people of what the law requires isn’t necessarily their greatest need: as St Paul says, the law can only point to what we should do; it does not empower us to do it. (Gal. ch.3). In fact, he says the law really only points out our failings (Rom 3:20). The discovery of God’s unexpected, unmerited love, on the other hand, is empowering and un-crippling. As with Zaccheus, it generates the desire to do even more than the law asks for! This is why focusing on God’s love is not a soft option or a let-off. The commandments aren’t being forgotten; we are looking at what generates a greater willingness to keep them. Such is the focus of the homily.

How to do the homily:

The scriptures form a backdrop, or tapestry, in which people gradually learn to see how God has acted in other people’s lives. From this we take our cue for seeing how God is at work in our own lives. The homily points to examples. (Although some gospel stories are more in the genre of metaphor than historical narrative, they nevertheless point to Jesus and the meaning of discipleship.)

God's word is like a mirror that we hold up to ourselves and our people (at different angles for the different liturgical seasons) so that we can see ourselves in a new light. It can happen that we have been there many times before, but suddenly see ourselves as if for the first time. We really know ourselves only when we know how much we mean to God. That's why homily time should not be overtaken by sermons.

How much we mean to God is what people discover when our preaching makes connections with their own deepest yearnings: with what their hearts were made for – their need for love, belonging, justice, peace, reconciliation, and all that makes life more truly human, and the world a better place. If these connections are not made, the Gospel does not come across to them as “good news” and remains external to them. The focus is on the mysteries of salvation, but in a way that notices how God desires what we ourselves most deeply desire.

Our ability to preach like this presupposes, therefore, our first-hand knowledge of people's lives and our empathy with them in their struggles, joys and sorrows. We are not merely “applying” the scriptures to their situations; we are discerning God's presence in their lives, and in our own. Read *Evangelii Gaudium* 154,155. Knowing how to discern God's presence in our own lives is our most fundamental preparation for helping others to see God's presence in theirs. For this, we recommend your personal use of the Ignatian daily “examen”, as well as lectio divina.

To “see” God in creation and in people's lives involves seeing creation, and our own existence, as gifts. That kind of “seeing” leads to grateful living. It is the polar opposite of living as if creation were not a gift, as if there were no God to thank for it, and as if we were not accountable. “As if” living is not real living. Of course, there is an element of teaching within homiletic preaching.

God speaks through us:

“At various times in the past and in various ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, God has spoken to us through his Son...” (Heb.1:1) The Son speaks to us still: in the liturgy we give voice and visibility to what He is saying and doing:

“...it is Christ himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the assembly”.

(Constitution On the Liturgy ,n.7).

It is a ‘live’ broadcast, not a recording! In the sacraments, especially, God's word brings about what it announces. It is the word which Isaiah likened to *“the rain and snow which come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth,... and does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.”* (55:10,11)

Other ways of speaking:

Pope Francis speaks of the Eucharistic celebration as the context of the homily (*Evangelii Gaudium* 137). Breaking open the word belongs as much as breaking the Bread. The context determines some of the homily's characteristics: for example, the aim of the homily is to guide the whole assembly, including ourselves, to a “life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist” (ibid. 138); the homily's tone, style and content should never be alien to our sense of Christ among us. The context also qualifies its duration: “If the homily goes on too long it will affect two characteristic elements of the liturgical celebration: its balance and rhythm.” (ibid. 138); (at weekday Masses it should not exceed five minutes). Francis speaks also of the need for a conversational, “heart-to-heart” manner of speaking (ibid

139-144). (The Greek verb *homileo* suggests this too.) And what he says about preparing to preach leaves us without any excuse for not doing so; (cf. 145ff). (Some priests find it helpful to have someone or a small group to help them reflect on their homily – the one coming up, or the one just given.)

What is said here about discerning God's presence has in mind mainly those still living, and often struggling. But it applies also to the celebration of the saints, and *mutatis mutandis* to the lives of those we bury. The eulogy is not a kind of "he was a jolly good fellow"; it is about tracing the human signs of God's goodness in that persons' life, for which we are giving thanks.

Given how much is at stake, the preparation of homilies deserves a very high priority. However, sometimes pressure or circumstances can prevent us from being in the right frame of mind and heart for giving a homily. This can happen to any of us, even without fault on our part. When this happens, please do not fill up the homily time with a sermon or exhortation or pious moralizing. These belong to other times. Just invite the congregation to let the scriptures resonate in their hearts for a few minutes in silence. We need to get more used to silent times in the liturgy. Then let's make sure our manner of proclaiming the Eucharistic prayers (neither fastidious nor rushed) witnesses to our own awareness of Christ's real presence in the celebration of the liturgy. That is another way of speaking God's word. Of course, texts from the ordinary and the proper of the Mass can also be drawn upon in the homily.

Let us love the liturgy. So much of what goes under the heading of special devotions, devout practices, and "spiritual life" focuses on what *we ourselves* are doing. Liturgy is about what *God* is doing – "the wonderful Plan God so kindly made in Christ from the beginning, to act upon when the times had run their course...(Eph. 1:9). That's so much bigger. And He's doing it anyway! This is what we are drawn into in the liturgy. The homily reflects this focus.

Greater awareness of God's presence and merciful love is catching, and enables people to "come alive" to their faith. When that happens, others are more likely to want that faith too. And so even our "preaching to the converted" reaches far and wide. Let us enjoy the privilege that is ours.

Fraternally, in Christ,

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