

The Homily

Do you know the difference between a “homily” and a “sermon”? Did you even know there IS a difference?

When I put the question to my Catholic Geek friends (we discuss things like this) one said “I know the difference: a homily is shorter!” Another tried a more serious answer: “Catholics do homilies, while Protestants do sermons.”

We may want to use the terms interchangeably; even dictionaries use those words to define each other. But there are nuances that make them different. “Homily” is rooted in the Greek “homiletikos” which means “conversation”, while “sermon” comes from the Latin “sermo” or “speech”.

I always think of a sermon as a some kind of annoying harangue (you know, the “hellfire and brimstone” kind of thing). I bristle at harangues; I don’t like speeches, but I love a good conversation. A good homily feels like a conversation, a breaking open of God’s Word and how we apply it to the concrete situations in our lives. I listen to the priest or deacon, and continue the conversation in my mind, responding with how God’s Word is alive in my life.

The Church chooses the word “homily” in most documents. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy calls the homily an integral part of the liturgy:

“By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text, during the course of the liturgical year; the homily, therefore, is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself; in fact, at those Masses which are celebrated with the assistance of the people on Sundays and feasts of obligation, it should not be omitted except for a serious reason.” (#52)

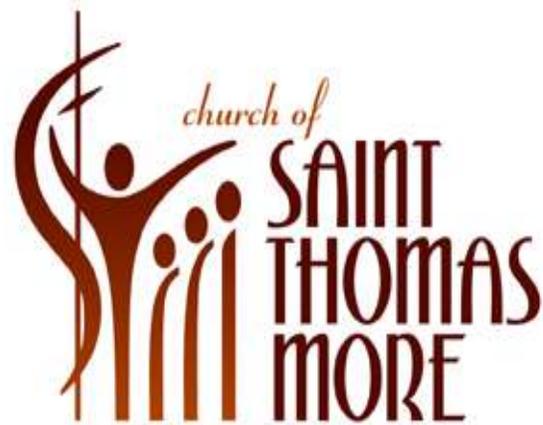
The homily attempts to do what the Scriptures themselves do: proclaim the wonderful things that God has done and continues to do for us. A sermon, while it may be a holy speech, need not have any connection to the Scriptures at all. Liturgical scholar Lawrence Johnson puts it this way:

“By basing his preaching on the liturgical texts, the homilist breaks open God’s word by actualizing it, by showing how God is continuing to act and speak among his people today. Through the homily, the members of the assembly are called to become a holy people so that they can better celebrate the Eucharist and offer themselves with and through Christ in the Eucharistic Prayer.” (“The Mystery of Faith, pg 48)

Who Can Preach?

So **who** can preach, and **when**?

We need to make a distinction between preaching in general and preaching at mass. Only the ordained (priests and deacons) can preach a homily at mass. The church document *Redemptionis Sacramentum* is quite clear on this:



The homily, which is given in the course of the celebration of Holy Mass and is a part of the Liturgy itself, should ordinarily be given by the Priest celebrant himself. He may entrust it to a concelebrating Priest or occasionally, according to circumstances, to a Deacon, but never to a layperson. (RS #64)

This is to more clearly outline the roles each minister plays when we gather for liturgy. The way I see it, there is a powerful symbol when the priests and deacons who break open the Word of God in the homily are the same ones who break the Bread of Life that we share in communion. Thus, they call the community to conversion and faith through both the Word and the Eucharist.

However, we are all called to preach the Good News!

Preaching the Word of God is an exercise of Christ's prophetic office, in which all Christian believers share (*Lumen Gentium #12*). The Code of Canon Law tells us:

In virtue of their baptism and confirmation, lay members of the Christian faithful are witnesses to the gospel message by word and by example of a Christian life, they can also be called upon to cooperate with the bishop and presbyters in the exercise of the ministry of the word. (Canon 759)

So, we preach with our words and our actions in our daily lives. At times, we non-ordained can preach in a formal way in a public setting. Each week, those who lead our Children's Liturgy of the Word break open the Gospel and other readings in language that children can understand. Lay people can also preach at a retreat, as part of a faith sharing group, or at a public prayer service.

When we sing and pray evening vespers, several non-ordained people preside and preach at the service. It is always interesting to hear other people break open God's Word, and learn how that Word is alive and active in their lives.

Steve Raml
Director of Liturgy & Music