

## VI. Delivering the Homily

One can have the best homily in the world and see it go flat because of the way in which it is delivered. The following rules point out some of the more obvious pitfalls.

### 1. *Do not read.*

The danger in preaching from a full manuscript is that you may find it easy to read it word for word. Eye contact is lost, body language responses from the congregation are missed, and people tend to read with less expression than they use in their ordinary speech. This is not to say, however, that one should never use a full manuscript in the pulpit. With practice you can develop a technique of dropping your eyes momentarily at the beginning of a sentence. By the time that you have written the manuscript, revised it, and gone over it several times, it should be familiar enough for you to follow it very closely with just these glances at the page. Often the congregation will not even know the manuscript is there. The chief advantages in using a manuscript are that the homily will be more tightly organized, more carefully phrased, and easier to keep within an allotted time. The chief disadvantage is that something of rapport with the congregation is inevitably lost.

2. *Do not ramble in undisciplined extempore.*

Some clergy assume that the only alternative to preaching from a full manuscript is to be totally unprepared. It is hard, though, for a congregation to take a homily more seriously than its preacher takes it. If it is not important enough for the one who delivers it to prepare, then it is not important enough for those in the congregation to listen to. Most of the many steps in preparation that have already been listed are as necessary in extempore preaching as they are in preaching from a manuscript. Furthermore, these are not the only alternatives. Some clergy preach from notes that remind them of the basic outline of what they wish to say. These may also include key phrases. Others write out the whole homily and then make notes from it that they use. There are probably still some who memorize the entire text, a practice that used to be more common. Others work to get the sequence of their thought so inevitable that they will not need notes when they speak. A good deal of experimentation is needed to discover what style works best for a given individual, but depending on the inspiration of the moment does not work well for anyone. One has no right to make the word of God appear boring.

3. *Project your voice without shouting.*

No matter how good your thought is and how well you have phrased it, it does no good unless people can hear it. Since priests do a lot of their work by public speaking, most have learned to manage adequately. For those who have not, there is always

the possibility of finding a good voice teacher and taking lessons. Unless you do, much of your ministry is doomed to being ineffectual. It is to be hoped that those who speak too loudly will have friends who love them well enough to tell them. It is hard for anyone not to recoil from assaults on the ears.

4. *Become aware of your gestures and mannerisms and adjust them appropriately.*

Many seminaries these days use video taping equipment in their homiletics classes. This means that the prayer of Robert Burns, "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us/To see oursels as others see us," has finally been answered. How many seminarians have been surprised to learn that whenever they were speaking or practicing for presiding at the liturgy (what we used to call "dry runs"), they had a tendency to rock back and forth from their heels to their toes or that the only gesture they customarily made was to use their hands to describe the shape of a basketball in the air. And others have seen that they began by taking a tight grip on the edges of the pulpit and held on for dear life until the homily was over. Since most gestures and mannerisms are unconscious, the only hope for those who have not had the benefits of such technology is to ask a group of parishioners to watch them over a period of time and report to them what they do. In secondhand bookstores can be found manuals of elocution from the turn of the century with illustrations of the appropriate gesture for every emotion. Our age is suspicious of such melodrama, but a few well-executed

gestures can add real emphasis to a homily. And we need to know about our mannerisms, because they can be very distracting.

5. *Call attention to what is being proclaimed rather than to the proclaimer.*

The gospels make it very clear that there are few things more contrary to the religion of Jesus than the self-importance of religious functionaries.

6. *Make each proclamation a testimony.*

There is an old saying to the effect that “you can’t sell what you haven’t bought.” There are a lot of con men around who can question that, and religion has always been a fertile field for charlatans to work in. Even liars can say true things. When John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, was awaiting conversion, he was advised by the Moravian pastor Peter Boehler to “preach faith until you have faith and then preach faith because you have faith.” Yet there is something about the authenticity of a statement of a deeply held commitment that is hard to resist. As Robert Bellah said, no revolutionary can bring the future in whose life the future is not already present. All of this is to say that a homily is, among other things, a reflection of the spiritual life of the priest.

7. *Make each homily an address, an act of communication, a transaction between the homilist and the congregation.*

The verb traditionally used with sermons or homilies is “to deliver.” In our changing social world, not as

many things are delivered as used to be. When I was a boy, though, grocery orders were phoned in and brought to the house in a panel truck. And I even spent a few days as a Western Union telegram boy, delivering messages on my bicycle. To those who have participated in such transactions, it is axiomatic that no one has made a delivery until the order has been received. The onus was on the deliverer as much as on a process server. By the same token, the preacher’s responsibility is not merely to say something or even to say something religious and significant, but to say something to somebody so that they will hear it and can understand it and act on it. Thus those who preach must remember that what is at stake are the lives of the persons who hear them. No homily has been delivered until its message has been received.

8. *Do not drop your voice at the end of sentences.*

This refers to the most common fault of those who speak in public and the result is that the meaning of much that they say is lost. Beyond that there is really little to be said about it except, “Don’t do it.”

9. *Avoid liturgical cadences.*

This refers to what someone has called a “stained-glass” voice, a sort of holy tone that some clergy affect while performing their duties in public worship. Such tones are common to many societies and are even cultivated in some. Henry Mitchell, for instance, says that it is used by many Black preachers in the inspirational climax at the end of a sermon,

but he insists that it cannot be used effectively by anyone for whom it is not a natural style of language (*Black Preaching*, pp. 163-67). Anyone who has heard examples of the sort of preaching he is talking about knows what virtuoso performances they can be. But in congregations where it is not a natural style of language, a special "holy tone" is generally thought to be hypocritical. Lay people generally prefer clergy who have the same way of speaking inside and outside of church.

10. *Treat microphones and amplifiers with distrust.*

When you can get by without a public address system, do. It is always hard to be certain whether one is working or not, or on or off. And it seems that more often than not, when you get the volume turned high enough to be clearly heard, then you start getting feedback that causes raucous whines. It is certainly wise to test any system over which you are going to be speaking before the time comes to use it. In fact, it is a good idea to stand in any new pulpit from which you are to preach just to "try it on for size" and get the feel of what it will be like preaching from there. Do not let yourself in for unnecessary surprises. To say one ameliorating word in favor of sound systems: they do allow a greater range of inflection with less vocal effort.

11. *Arrange for accurate and representative feedback.*

Almost the only opportunities most clergy get for evaluation of their preaching is what people say at the church door or, if another priest on the staff hears

you, what might be said in the rectory. Being told, "Nice sermon, Father," or "I enjoyed your talk," gives one very little sense of areas in which to work for improvement. If you really want to work on improving your preaching, you have to arrange for more accurate and detailed responses.

Anyone who has a class or group that meets to discuss the homily has an opportunity at least to know whether the intended message got across, even if feedback is not the purpose of the discussion. Many clergy, though, have found it helpful to have a small group that has agreed to be present when they preach, listen carefully, and meet together with them afterwards to say as honestly as possible what they felt to be successful and what they felt to be less successful in the homily. Sometimes this group has a rotating membership so that additional reactions can be heard. In any case, it is a good idea to have a diverse group that represents different constituencies in the parish, since what goes over well with one group may miss another entirely.

There are also ways in which clergy can evaluate their own preaching. The usefulness of video tape for this purpose has already been mentioned and, in parishes that can afford it and have other uses for it, it may be a wise investment. Almost anyone can afford a cassette tape recorder, though, so almost every priest can hear what he sounded like even if he cannot see what he looked like.

When you have begun to evaluate your last homily, you have already begun to work on the next, since

the only reason for going back over what you did last time is to make it possible to do better next time. Thus the work never ends. Nor should it, since to us has been given the high task of helping men and women understand their lives from the perspective of the God who made them, has redeemed them, and seeks to have them inherit all that he has prepared for them.