

V. Constructing the Homily

A. BASIC OUTLINE

1. *Write out your thesis, your purpose, and the response you seek.*

This list of rules is intended to function in many ways like the countdown that airline pilots use for takeoffs and NASA uses for space launchings. This is to say that part of its function is not so much to see that particular operations are performed but to make sure that nothing important has been overlooked. I seldom take a number of these steps in an explicit way, but a homily preparation process in which such actions are not implicit would leave too much margin for error.

For instance, I seldom sit down and actually write out my thesis, purpose, and the response I seek. The rule is one that I borrowed from someone else's book. But it is an extremely important thing for someone to do who is just beginning to prepare for preaching in a methodical way. When I was receiving my first homiletics instruction from The Rev. James T. Cleland, one of the things that we had to do for every sermon we handed in was to summarize it in one sentence. He said that if we did not understand what we wanted to say that clearly, we would have a very hard time making the point clear to anyone else.

Then, with a twinkle in his eye and his Scot's burr, he would say: "If there's a mist in the pulpit, there's a fog in the pew." Writing the thesis out is a very good way of finding out whether you really know yourself what you are trying to say.

After you know that, it is worth asking why you want to say that. What difference does it make in the life of a Christian whether he or she knows or believes that? When you know what you want to say and that it is worth saying, you need to know how you can tell if the message had gotten across. Most contemporary thinking about the writing of objectives is that they should be stated in terms of clearly observable behavior so that one can readily tell whether they have been accomplished or not. For instance, one could preach on the thesis that the gospel lays on us the obligation to feed the hungry and say that one's purpose was to make the congregation aware of the millions of persons who are starving in Third World countries. If one then stated as the response sought something about each member of the parish feeling deeply the tragic situation of so much of the world's population, it would be hard to tell whether that objective had been achieved except for gasps or tears during the homily, or someone's saying after Mass, "Oh, Father, that's so terrible." But if your objective is to get parishioners to sign a card handed out by the ushers with the missalette on which they promise to eat no lunch on Fridays for the next three months and give what they save to the Maryknoll missionaries, you can tell how many did it. But until you have specified what response you want

made to your sermon, you will never know whether it was made or not.

2. *Prepare an introduction that is brief, interesting, and raises the issue.*

This rule, borrowed from George Buttrick, reflects an insistence of homileticians on the tripartite division of sermons that is as firm as Caesar's similar conviction about Gaul. The theorem is not so simplistic as an affirmation that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is rather that they have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The real affirmation is that the way you lead your audience into your subject and the way that you tie it all together at the end makes a lot of difference in the way that people are able to respond to it.

Even though most priests recognize the etymology of "introduction" and know that it means a leading into, it is amazing how few public speakers seem to recognize that the function of the first part of an address is to enable their audience to get into the subject as quickly and deeply as possible. If you do not snag the attention of those who hear you in the first few sentences you utter, it is unlikely that you will ever get it. Yet you cannot use an attention getter that has nothing to do with what you really wish to say. As soon as you have finished the interesting part, attention will wander. And using something other than what you really want to talk about is an admission that you do not really consider the subject very interesting yourself. An introduction is a place to show

that you take both the subject and your audience seriously.

Tried and true ways of involving hearers from the start include opening a homily with a question, a problem, or a difficulty. This starts their minds to working. It engenders curiosity. Another classic method is to tell a story, if that story is really related to what you wish to talk about. These techniques will be discussed with more precision when particular outlines, or, better, "strategies" for homilies are presented below.

3. *Consider in what sequence your points are most naturally and effectively presented.*

The standard textbooks on homiletics are filled with discussions of how many categories of sermons there are. Four basic kinds usually get listed, although various authorities make some of these four subdivisions of the others. The four, some of which have been mentioned already, are: expository, textual, topical, and problem-centered. For our purposes, they may be defined as follows: an expository sermon is a verse-by-verse interpretation of a passage of scripture in which application to the congregation is intermixed with the running commentary on the text; textual preaching seeks to deal with a shorter passage of scripture—often just a verse or a part of a verse—and to apply that to the lives of the congregation; topical preaching does not begin with a passage of scripture but with a subject—sin, grace, redemption, world peace, the ecumenical movement, what have you—

and discusses an aspect of that from a point of view that is consistent with biblical teaching; problem-centered preaching, also called "life situation preaching," deals with a topic, but one of a particular sort: a problem, whether personal, social, community, national, or international, from the perspective of Christian faith. As suggested earlier, eucharistic homilies do not readily fall into any of these categories since they presuppose the liturgical year and the lectionary, yet they focus more on a situation with which members of the congregation have to deal than on biblical interpretation.

In addition to these basic categories of sermons, various writers on preaching have talked about several patterns into which the outlines of sermons fall. Again, few homilies at Mass will fall precisely into any of these patterns, but it is worth listing a number as suggestions of sequences in which points can fall naturally and effectively. The list of patterns to be presented is drawn from a dated but classic textbook of homiletics, *In the Minister's Workshop* by Yale professor Halford E. Luccock.

(a) the Ladder sermon is one in which the points follow one another as the successive rungs on a ladder do. Each point builds on the one before and leads to the one that follows. A ladder sermon might, for instance, begin with a "lowest common denominator" consensus affirmation and then, step by step, move on to affirmations that are progressively more restrictive, so that the last point is the sharpest and most adequate statement of the issue of which the homilist is capable.

(b) a Jewel sermon is almost the opposite of the ladder. Far from having each point build on the previous one, the points are like the facets of a diamond that one sees while turning it around and examining it. The diamond cutter will undoubtedly know how the facets are interrelated but the more casual viewer will appreciate each for itself without seeing greater connection between them than that they are aspects of the same thing.

(c) the Classification sermon assigns persons or things to different categories. The application of the Parable of the Sower which compares various responses to the preaching of the gospel with the receptivity of different kinds of soil to seed engages in such classification and has offered the text for countless classification sermons. So is the sermon I heard in which it was said that life is like a hall in which there are four doors: wealth, power, fame, and Jesus.

(d) the Skyrocket sermon, according to Luccock, is not just a fizz and a bang, but is a life-situation sermon that begins on the ground in life, it rises up to a spiritual truth that illuminates the situation on earth, and comes down to earth again in several stars that light up different aspects of the situation on the ground. There are similarities between this pattern and one that I will recommend later as a natural pattern for a liturgical homily.

(e) the Roman Candle sermon "consists of a succession of statements or observations which follow without any particular design except that they are all related to the subject" (Luccock, p. 141).

(f) the Analogy sermon “talks about one thing in terms of another” (p. 142). The “great I am” sayings of the Fourth Gospel in which our Lord identifies himself as the vine, the light, the water of life, the Good Shepherd, and so on, offer opportunities for such sermons.

(g) a Surprise Package sermon makes a beginning in which the development and perhaps even the end seems entirely predictable, but then it takes an unexpected turn.

(h) the Twin sermon, sets forth opposing or contrasting aspects of one truth or passage of scripture.

(i) a sermon employing the Chase technique is one that does not start off by giving the congregation an answer to a question, but instead leads it step by step through the process of arriving at a solution.

(j) the structure of a Rebuttal sermon is obvious: it is an effort to refute a position advanced by someone else that the preacher considers to be false or dangerously misleading. Thus it examines the arguments and conclusions of the opponent one by one.

In the more recent literature of homiletics there has been less inclination to list such patterns, even though they do give some idea of the infinite number of ways in which thought may be developed. Indeed that variety has been the impetus for the change, because now there is a widespread assumption that each idea has its own natural way to unfold and letting this organic development occur seems more important than sticking to some arbitrarily constructed pattern.

As already indicated, these questions apply with special force to the liturgical homily. One of the reasons this is so is a matter of time available for the homily. In this ten or fifteen minutes you are lucky if you can take one point from the gospel and apply it effectively to the life situation of the congregation. There can be, however, basic dynamics to the way that such one-point homilies develop. In the two rules that follow there will be a presentation of two of these dynamics, one that I developed in another book and one developed by Eugene L. Lowry.

4. *Present your thought in this sequence:*

a) *Do not begin with the gospel but start instead with either the situation to which it is applied that can set the congregation to thinking about the issue at stake.*

b) *Show that the situation in the gospel is analogous to the situation to which it is applied to set the congregation to thinking about the issue at stake.*

c) *Transfer the perspective of the gospel to the situation of application.*

All of the steps taken up to this point lead very easily into this kind of presentation. The first step was to see what the gospel says. The second was to find an area of the life of members of the congregation to which that point could be applied. Next the way of applying that point was thought through. You already know, therefore, what you are going to say. The question is how to say it. And the thesis argued here is that you do not begin your homily by exegeting the gospel because the average person in the pew does not know very much about sacred scripture and

is not very interested in it—as such. No, the sermon should begin with a presentation of the problematic area of life, describing that so that your hearers can accept the description as an accurate statement of the way things really are. This is the situation in which they find themselves and in which they need some help.

The next step is to describe the situation in the gospel so that they can see that it is analogous to their own situation. They are not unique. Things have happened before that have a lot in common with what is happening to them. This is where the fruits of your exegetical study come in, but use only what is necessary to show that a common principle operates between the situation in the text and the situation in the congregation. It is this common principle that justifies applying to the contemporary situation the perspective taken in the gospel on the ancient situation.

And that is what is done next. You will be saying in effect that if these two situations are indeed comparable, then the implications of the gospel for our own situation are whatever you have deduced them to be. In this way your people are led to understand their lives in the light of the gospel. This event will be seen in the light of the total mystery of Christ and become a part of what is celebrated in the liturgy that day.

5. *Or present your thought in this sequence:*

a) *Upset the equilibrium (Oops!)*

b) *Analyze the discrepancy (Ugh!)*

c) *Disclose the clue to the resolution (Aha!)*

d) *Experience the gospel (Whee!)*

e) *Anticipate the consequences (Yeah!)*

Eugene L. Lowry, who is the originator of this pattern for a sermon, rejects the traditional wisdom that says success in preaching comes from “telling them what you are going to tell them, telling them, and then telling them what you have told them.” He believes, correctly I think, that much of the interest of a sermon is the suspense of seeing its plot unfold. His technique is a variant of the problem-centered sermon. He begins with noting a discrepancy in the manner discussed under rule no. 7 in the previous chapter. This discrepancy is not just important to the preacher in getting the idea for the homily, it is what the homily begins with. The listeners are caught up into the homily by the intrinsic interest of the problem. Indeed, the planning of the homilist may begin with the solution (what Lowry calls the “scratch”) rather than the problem (which he calls the “itch”). But the homily itself always begins with the discrepancy, the ambiguity. Lowry is convinced that a sermon is, among other things, a dramatic literary genre that has its own basic plot. In this genre, as in other dramatic plots, everything grows out of the ritual of the initial conflict. It is the conflict that creates and sustains interest. That conflict is the discovery that all is not right in the world. There is a snake in Eden. There is discrepancy between the sense of the congregation of what Peter Berger has called the “OK-ness of life” and life as it is actually experienced. The

homily begins, therefore, by upsetting the equilibrium of the congregation when the preacher calls attention to this discrepancy. Lowry's students refer to this stage of the sermon as the experience of "Oops!"

The next stage is to see what issues are really at stake in this perceived discrepancy. This calls for looking behind our surface behavior to discover the motives, fears, and needs that are the cause or causes of the discrepancy. It is assumed, therefore, that the source of all our problems is not so much in the area of behavior as it is in the motivation behind the behavior. That motivation has to be diagnosed correctly. This is perhaps the most difficult part of the homily, the hardest intellectual (and spiritual) work of the preacher, because one's ability to match up the problem with the biblical solution is determined by the accuracy of this diagnosis. This stage of the homily is called the "Ugh!"

When the true nature of this problem has been revealed through such diagnosis, then one can move on to a resolution of it. But—and this is one of the most distinctive aspects of Lowry's analysis of the homiletical plot—the resolution does not usually come from the direction from which it is expected. The theological reason that he gives for this is the radical discontinuity between worldly wisdom and the gospel. If there were no gospel, the human condition would be without hope. This means that the previous step which diagnoses the problem has to be stated from the perspective of ordinary human wisdom. The clue to the resolution is seeing the situa-

tion from the point of view of God rather than from that of ordinary mortals. This principle of reversal was intrinsic to the parables of Jesus. His concession to the point of view of his opponents was the diagnosis, but after his attention was interlocked with theirs, he performed the reversal that forced them to look at the same situation from a new perspective. Since the reversal is called a *clue* to the resolution, this step is called the "Aha!"

When the clue to the resolution has been disclosed, it will always be seen that the resolution is in the gospel. It is here that the Christian solution to the problem is presented. The virtue of Lowry's approach is that it does not put the preacher in the position of answering questions that no one is asking. The need for the answer is felt before the answer is given, so that when it does come it is perceived as the gospel, the good news, that it is. This experiencing of the gospel stage is appropriately designated as "Whee!" (Or, maybe inappropriately. The trouble with pedagogical devices is that they work better with some people than others.)

The final element in this homiletical plot is to anticipate the consequences, to see the implications of this insight for future living. Note that this is not a series of exhortations. Much that has sailed under the banner of preaching has been harangues or pep talks urging people to make greater efforts. There is always an implied Pelagianism to such efforts, an assumption that people were not doing better simply because they were not trying hard enough. The basic

assumption of the gospel, though, is that unaided human efforts are inadequate to meet the demands of living. God needs to intervene in history and in our lives in a way that opens new possibilities for us. This stage in the homiletical plot, therefore, is to show what the possibilities are that were opened up in the experiencing of the gospel. The designation of this step is "Yeah!"

6. *Or, let the narrative determine the sequence.*

Another sermon pattern that has proved effective, especially in the hands of skillful practitioners, has been to retell a story from the Bible, enlarging upon it narratively, and making frequent application to aspects of contemporary life that parallel details of the story. This pattern has been used especially by some of the great preachers in the Black churches, but has been by no means confined to them. The discussion of deep memory above shows why this method is so effective. Nothing grasps attention so much as a good story. As noted above, Fr. Fred Baumer called his cassette course on homiletics, *Preacher: Storyteller of God*. Perhaps the best way of describing this method is to quote extensively from Dr. Henry H. Mitchell's important study of *Black Preaching*:

It is probable that the one skill above all others which can open the door to influence and service is the skill of telling the story in the dramatic, imaginative Black idiom.

As is true with all good story telling, the Black Bible story must first of all be a work of art in its own

right. The teller must tell it as if the telling were an end in itself, even though he may intersperse asides to sustain the obvious relevance of the action in the story. At any time while the story is being told, the teller must be caught up in it as if he had seen it happen. In the best tradition of the folk storyteller of all cultures, he must play all roles and make the story live. He must so communicate the story as to cause his audience to feel as if they, too, are at the scene of the action.

And yet the story must never be told for the sake of mere entertainment. The Black preacher, like the writer of a play, has a message. Plays and stories are processes which engage the vital emotions of an audience, making possible a new understanding and a new orientation and commitment. No matter how charming the story or how captivated the audience, the Black preacher must take care of business and lead the hearer to do something about the challenge of this part of the Word of God. The response so often and so freely generated by this great art must be focused beyond the teller to the source of the message, and to his will for the worshipper (pp. 133f.).

As Dr. Mitchell says, storytelling is an art that is common to all cultures. It is also one which meets with a positive response in all. It is hard to imagine any effective preaching that does not draw on it to an extent. The point here, though, is that the basic pattern for a homily can be formed by following the narrative of the gospel.

B. FILLING IN

1. *Decide what information you need to make the situation of application vivid, real, and important for the congregation.*

Both the pattern recommended by me in rule no. 4 of the last chapter and that borrowed from Lowry in rule no. 5 presuppose that the homily will begin with a discussion of a situation that is of real concern to members of the congregation. Rule no. 6 of chapter III listed the areas in which such situations may fall as liturgical, personal, parochial, theological, ethical, social, or political. There is nothing definitive or sacrosanct about that list but it does show something of the range that responsible preaching will cover over a period of time. Sometimes the aspect of the total mystery of Christ that is being celebrated that day will be all that is needed in the way of application, and the homilist's aim will be merely to enable the congregation to participate fully in the liturgy that day. At other times the gospel will seem to offer hope and help to individuals who are facing one kind of difficulty or another in their lives. Sometimes there is an issue before the parish to which the propers speak. Or the universal church may be disturbed by an issue that the appointed lection illuminates. An important moral or ethical issue may be widely debated in the society at a time when the gospel offers a perspective important in arriving at a Catholic assessment of the matter. Or there may be a social or political question on which the church should speak out (just as there are others on which it should remain silent, at least in its official voice).

Whatever the area of application, if it is to be described in such a way that the people present can recognize it as their own situation, the homilist must know enough about it to talk about it intelligently. Since no one has universal competence, that means that a lot of homework will have to be done in preparation for this part of the homily. Since the day is long past when the priest is likely to be the only or one of the better educated persons in the parish, important issues of credibility are involved here. Often the laity will have followed reports in newspapers and magazines and will recognize misinformation when they hear it. If they do not find the preacher reliable in matters about which they do know something, they will have difficulty postulating such reliability in areas in which they are less well informed. This does not mean, of course, that information relayed in a homily has to be encyclopedic; it only has to be accurate and balanced. Yet certain graphic details will do much to enliven a presentation and evoke interest.

2. *Use only as much exegesis as is necessary to legitimate your interpretation and application of the gospel.*

Some clergy preach like functional fundamentalists; nothing they ever say in a homily suggests that they have any question about the literal historical accuracy of everything in the Bible. Sometimes, though, those who consider historical-critical exegesis to be an important tool in their preaching go too far in the opposite direction. They want to tell the congregation all of the information about the pericope they learned

while doing their exegesis. Much of it will not be relevant to the application that is being made and few lay people find such data exciting for its own sake. Besides, the study of the gospel was not conducted so that one could garner every possible bit of information about the passage. No, we study in order that we may know what point the evangelist is making in that pericope. What is of concern, then, is not the information, but the significance of the information. And not even all of the significant information needs to be included in the homily. Include only as much as is necessary to get your point across or to show that your interpretation is valid. Otherwise we may find ourselves in the position described by Grady Davis: "Instead of a finished statue, we may offer our people the chips we made in carving it" (*Design for Preaching*, pp. 204f.).

3. *Scan the application for differences between the clerical and lay perspectives and then restructure from the perspective of your hearers.*

The life of the average priest is very different from the life of the average lay person. Whenever one began seminary, whether minor or major, at the theologate or earlier, as a religious or diocesan, at that point one's preoccupations became different from those of even good Catholic laity. After that, your basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter are taken care of. While careerism and ambition are certainly not unknown among the clergy, they at least take different manifestations and operate in more restricted arenas. While a vocation to celibacy

does not eliminate your sex drive, it does curtail severely the number of prudent outlets through which it may be channeled. It would be possible to extend the list, but doing so would only be to belabor the obvious. The point, though, is that we understand life in terms of our experience of it. And, when we try to apply the gospel to life, our inclination is to apply it to life as we have experienced it. Illustrations that come very naturally to priests may be very foreign to lay persons. Most of our preaching, however, is addressed to lay persons and so it needs to illuminate their lives instead of our own. This calls for enormous empathy on our part, an empathy that must be schooled by close observation, careful listening, and reading a good bit of secular literature. Even then, habit is strong, so it helps to look back over what we have put together and make certain that it is really appropriate.

4. *Check the chain of your argument for weak links.*

The story is told of the janitor of a large Protestant church who was cleaning up the church one Monday morning and discovered that the pastor had left the manuscript of his sermon for the day before in the pulpit. Picking it up to return it to the pastor's study, the janitor noted that in the margin of the typescript were hand written notes which proved upon inspection to be instructions for delivery. In addition to such directions as "softly" and "pause dramatically," he came across one that said, "Argument weak here. Yell like hell." Unfortunately, yelling is not enough (although the good pastor had at least gone over what

he had written and he recognized a weak argument when he saw one). Sometimes a point will seem more cogent when we first set it down than it does upon re-reading. When that happens, the only honest thing to do is to replace it with a stronger one or leave that point out.

5. Decide what points need clarification, illustration, and emphasis.

At this stage we are moving from an outline to a full manuscript. Now is the time to decide upon the relative importance of the various components of the homily and see that attention is given where it is needed and not allowed to dissipate on irrelevancies. The amount of time given to a point should be in proportion to its significance.

Sometimes a necessary step in the argument is a bit complex or abstruse. If the congregation's understanding of what follows depends on getting this point straight, then it is necessary to take as much time as is necessary to state the point clearly.

As indicated in our original definition of homily, the matter of illustration is crucial to the development of good sermons. More argument is advanced through narrative analogy than through closely reasoned expositions of concepts. Nothing perks up attention so much as a good story, and nothing is quite so persuasive as hearing the principle applied in an account of the lives of people. Illustrations may be drawn from a range of sources: the Bible, great litera-

ture, current fiction, TV shows or movies, the newspapers, memory (if it does not violate confidences or embarrass individuals), or your own creative imagination. About the only source to be avoided is published collections of sermon illustrations. The story told really needs to illustrate the point you are making and it is unlikely that anyone ever tried to make exactly that point before. You need, therefore, to find your own illustrations that really fit what you are trying to communicate.

Emphasis is given in a number of ways. Some of them have already been indicated, such as amount of time devoted to the point, clarification, and illustration. Others will be aspects of delivery such as volume and rate of speed. Still others will include the choice of language; an artful phrase can be memorable. Then, too, the use of quotations can help either by lending authority to what is said or because someone has anticipated you in finding the most expressive way of phrasing the particular point. And, it should be remembered, emphasis is relative. To emphasize every word in a homily is to emphasize none since then they are all treated equally. The emphasis of some parts of a homily requires the de-emphasis of others. Make sure that people have their attention called most forcefully to the points in your homily that you consider most important.

6. Avoid generalizations and abstractions.

Homilies that are about everything in general are about nothing in particular. A sermon pattern men-

tioned by Luccock that he did not recommend was the “Magellan sermon,” which goes around the world every Sunday (p. 154). One of the advantages of narrative illustrations is that they help keep the homily focused and concrete. Generalizations, including this one, sound vague, bland, and irrelevant. They seldom threaten guilty consciences and certainly do not offer hope to the discouraged. If you have something to say, say it. If you do not, for God’s sake shut up!

7. *Make strongest points first.*

This rule violates the received wisdom on the subject, which urges one to build to a climax. The difficulty is that if you begin with your weakest points, by the time that you get to what you really want to say, you may have no audience left.

8. *Arrange your thought in a progression so orderly that it seems inevitable.*

The best book on writing clear English prose other than Strunk and White’s *Manual of Style* is *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge. They state a number of principles and illustrate the violation of these by quotations taken from newspapers and the writings and speeches of people who should know better. This rule is very close to their nineteenth principle, which is: “The order of ideas in a sentence or paragraph should be such that the reader need not rearrange them in his mind.” To illustrate the principle they state the natural order of a familiar letter:

Acknowledgement of previous letter.

Comment on the points raised in it, in order of importance—the recipient’s interest being given priority.

New information of importance—the recipient’s interests being given priority.

Questions.

Postscript.

Then they describe the sort of writing that does not measure up to their standard:

It would take up too much space to analyse a mis-handled argument in full. But readers will be familiar with the sort of argument that, if it ever commits itself to a statement of the problem, does not do so until a mass of jumbled evidence on subsidiary points has been adduced, after which it gives the verdict, and then evidence on the principal point, and then an irrelevant report on ‘what the soldier’s wife said,’ and then contradictory statements about evidence on subsidiary points, and then perhaps a reconsideration of the verdict, and then fresh evidence, and finally a restatement of the verdict (p. 126).

They had written communication in mind, but what they have to say applies even more to oral communication, since hearers cannot look back over the material if they missed a connection. An ideal for written prose is that the reader should never have to look back over what has already been read. Consid-

erations of the order of presentation are even more important for listeners who have no way to review.

9. *Make every element in the homily contribute to one unified effect.*

If the foregoing rule is observed, this one will be automatically. Yet there are differences of nuance between the two. This one, for instance, has some negative implications, the chief of which is to avoid what my teacher, Dr. Cleland, referred to as "baby kangaroos." By these he meant little sermons within a sermon, subsidiary points that were developed independently even though they had little connection with the main topic under consideration. When the issue gets mentioned in passing, the preacher decides that something ought to be said about that, too, and interrupts the flow of thought to do so.

This does not mean that there never should be digressions. In Greco-Roman rhetoric, planned digressions were considered to be one of the noblest ornaments in the art of the orator. In fact, St. Paul's rhapsody on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is such a rhetorical digression. As noted above, the secular use of the word *homilia* in Greek was to denote an informal, discursive talk characterized by digressions. The issue, then, is not whether there should ever be a digression; but whether the digression strengthens or weakens the total impact of the homily. The need for homilies to appeal to the deep memory rather than the surface memory often means that coming at a subject from the side rather than head on can be

more effective. Just as in a mystery story, the audience does not need to know the significance of everything said at the moment that it is said. But here we are talking about carefully achieved artistic effects, not fumbling around.

The one unified effect also calls for consideration in such matters as word choice, illustrative matter chosen, the level of diction, use of the voice, consonance with the liturgy, and many other such factors. It is not too much to say of a good homily what Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren said of a good poem: it is a "well-wrought urn."

10. *Appeal not only to the surface memory with conceptual arguments, but to the deep memory with metaphors as well.*

What needs to be said on this subject has been said in the discussion under rule no. 8 in chapter IV. The issue was raised there as an aspect of developing an idea and now it needs to be considered as a part of filling in the outline, putting flesh on the skeleton.

11. *Build toward an end that is a climax or a resolution.*

A homily should conclude, not just stop. Another of the sermon patterns to which Luccock gives a negative recommendation is the Elephant sermon which, he says, "has a large trunk before, of introduction, description, illustration, or diagnosis, with such a little tail behind, of positive remedy or word of salvation" (p. 126). A homily, as we said, should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The conclu-

sion gives closure, it ties everything together so that all that was said may be seen to have been a unified statement. Conclusions can take a number of forms from summary to emotional crescendo. They are the place where the general statement is made personal, the message is applied to the lives of the congregation. By then the discrepancy has been diagnosed and the remedy is ready to be prescribed. Here the good news must be heard.

12. *Recognize that communication is not just a one-way street.*

The architecture of a church has always been an indication of the theological understanding of those who built it. The gothic and baroque churches in which there are large and elaborate pulpits to which one must ascend by a staircase were built by persons who placed great emphasis on the magisterium of the church. Homilies were regarded as words from on high. The role of the preacher was to speak and that of the congregation was to listen. Such an arrangement results from what Myron R. Chartier has referred to as a "conveyor belt" theory of communication:

. . .in which meaning is taken from one person's head and dumped with 100 percent accuracy into another person's head. To these preachers, words are the carriers of information rather than vehicles for the stimulation of meaning. The shortcoming of the conveyor belt theory is that it suggests that meanings are inherent in the words used or in the messages sent. Actually, one person's meaning is never identical

with that of other persons, because meanings are in people's minds, not in the words they use (*Preaching as Communication*, pp. 60f.).

Anyone who has preached very long has had the experience of being told that a particular homily was very helpful to the speaker at that point in his or her life. Before we begin to preen too much, we ask what point in that homily proved so helpful. Then, to our surprise and embarrassment, we are told something that we do not remember having said. Much of what parishioners will understand us to say will depend on their personal context when they hear it as well as on their life history and general world view. When writing, therefore, we need to expect that what we say will be heard in as many different ways as there are people listening. We need also to expect that this personal appropriation of what we say will more often be an enrichment than an impoverishment of what we had intended.

In writing we should also remember that while we preach we will receive countless signals in body language and in other ways of how the faithful are responding to what we are saying. That means that we should never be so bound to a manuscript that we lose our freedom to respond to the messages we are receiving from the faces turned toward us. Indeed, many writers on homiletics consider such eye contact with the congregation to be so important that they suggest that a preacher never go into the pulpit with a written text. My own view is that the number of ways of preaching well is as great as the number of

good preachers. Each needs, therefore, to experiment until she or he has discovered what works out best personally. But whether a manuscript is used or not, the preacher should prepare with an expectation of two-way communication while the homily is being preached.

As we shall note later, that two-way conversation needs to continue after the homily is delivered. Some can arrange for a discussion session afterwards in which people share the thoughts set in motion by the homily. Others will want to have "feedback sessions" with a special group that was asked beforehand to evaluate the homily. There are other techniques as well. These all help prevent preaching from being a one-way street of communication.

13. *Aim at leading your hearers to understand, to feel, and to act.*

A homily needs to accomplish these three things. First, it should help the congregation to know what the issues are. They should know what the alternatives are and what is to be said for each. They should know what is at stake in the choice between alternatives. All of that is a matter of the mind. The homily should see that it is well informed. But it is not enough to know what is going on, one must also care. Emotions must become engaged. People are to be called on to choose a side, take a stand, feel passionately involved in the outcome. And that emotion must be put to work to influence the results. The homily needs to elicit all these results.

One hears so many more bad speeches than good ones that it is easy to forget the power of really effective public speaking. Anyone who remembers the Second World War, though, will have little doubt that an address can lead an audience to understand, to feel, and to act. Much of Hitler's whole theory of government was that the person who was capable of moving crowds emotionally should be their leader and the hypnotic power of his oratory is still evident in old news reels, even to people who despise everything he stood for and do not understand the language in which he spoke. By the same token, we remember how the will to resist was drilled into the British people by the speeches of Winston Churchill; his voice provided the calcium needed for their backbones. And the United States, which had become convinced in a time of depression that "the only thing to fear is fear itself" by the voice of Franklin D. Roosevelt over a radio, was equally ready to respond to that voice when it called us to war. More recently, one thinks of how important the oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr. was to the entire civil rights movement. Speech can be a powerful tool in the hands of a skilled craftsman.

14. *Proclaim the good news rather than chide or exhort.*

There have been so many abuses of the privilege of preaching that the *Oxford American Dictionary* can give as its third definition of *preach*: "to give moral advice in an obtrusive way." How far this is from the definition given above that "to preach . . . is to proclaim the good news that in Jesus Christ God has

acted finally and decisively for the reclamation of a lost world" (above, p. 18). How eloquent St. Paul would have been in his disdain of those who have tried to turn the gospel into a new law.

From the New Testament on, Christian preaching has had two aspects, proclamation and paranesis, publishing the good news of Jesus Christ and spelling out its implications for daily living. And there is a good bit of behavior, even among the faithful, that needs changing. Thus it is not surprising that so much of our preaching is in the hortatory vein. Morris J. Niedenthal, though, has offered a distinction between the "ironic" and the "heroic" that makes possible a strategy of paranesis that is consistent with the gospel we proclaim:

The difference between ironic statements and heroic statements reflects different stances in truth. Ironic perception and statement acknowledge and affirm the novelty and surprise of God's grace. Irony calls attention to and celebrates the amazing grace of God which exposes religious pretension and which utilizes sinners in the advancement and fulfillment of his purpose. Ironic perception and statement are appropriate to a stance which affirms that God loves and justifies sinners. Furthermore, ironic criticism cuts so deeply not because it shows up our failure to achieve heroic stature but because it goes straight to our denial of ourselves as human beings. Irony therefore affirms human beings in the concrete actuality of each: a mixture of weakness and strength, cowardice and courage, sin and faith.

Heroic perception and statement on the other hand tend to become legalistic, because they glorify human courage, human self-willing determination, and human achievement. Heroic criticism cuts at the point of our failure to become what we should be ideally, not our failure to become what we are. It criticizes people by saying that they should be *more* courageous, *more* involved, *more* committed. Heroism therefore affirms only human strength and cannot accommodate human weaknesses. The preacher needs to learn the distinction between the ironic and the heroic modes of perception and their statements. The ironic is open to the novelty of grace and its operations; the heroic on the other hand often becomes legalistic (p. 146).

The temptation at this point is to exhort preachers to become ironic rather than heroic in their approach, but such an attempt would violate the very principle it hopes to uphold.

15. *Equip the congregation to participate in the rest of the liturgy.*

Whatever other application of the gospel is made in a homily, it must never be forgotten that it is in the context of the eucharistic liturgy that the homily is preached and that word and sacrament are inextricably bound up in one another. The connection is organic: the homily is based on the gospel which is appointed because of the liturgical season. The total event of Mass with homily is occupied with a particular aspect of the mystery of Christ. What is recalled in preaching is made present and celebrated in the

liturgy. While, therefore, it is perfectly proper to refer the main thrust of the homily to an issue for the individual, church, or world that lies outside the time of the liturgical assembly, that assembly should never be ignored. As William Skudlarek puts it, "We need to know why we should lift up our hearts" (p. 70).

C. PHRASING

1. *Thou shalt not bore.*

When you come right down to it, the idea that the most exciting message the world has ever heard can be presented in a way that makes it sound old hat and dull is mind boggling. There are probably only two circumstances under which that could happen: (1) we are uninteresting, or (2) we find the gospel uninteresting. In either case, something ought to be done about it. In neither area, though, can anything significant be done during the week that one is preparing for a single homily. Nor, for that matter, can much be done about the suggestions that follow for livening up one's speech. Developing an interesting oral style takes years, but each of the techniques has to be practiced every time a talk is put together. Practicing them this time will at least make this homily better than it would have been otherwise. For long term improvement, though, attention must be paid to those who use the language well. Reading poetry is one way to improve a prose style. Listening to people who speak well and analyzing what contributes to their effectiveness helps. A little judicious borrowing can even be excused. While some people have a natural ear for speech and thus a native elo-

quence, few ever become effective speakers without study and working at the task.

2. *Eschew technical, pietistic, abstract, or pretentious language.*

A multitude of linguistic sins is included in this list and it takes great charity on the part of parishioners to cover them all. Theology, like any other academic discipline, has its own verbal shorthand that can speed up conversation between those who know it, but those who have not been to seminary seldom speak the language. The problem is not that the concepts are too technical for them to understand, but simply that the vocabulary is unfamiliar. It is very good discipline in clarity for us to see if we can translate the concept into everyday words.

A distinction is presupposed between pious and pietistic. The simple and straightforward language of devotion is not offensive, but we are generally offended by the impression that someone is trying to talk a better game of religion than he or she plays. Then, too, language that is vague and theoretical leaves the whole burden of application on your audience. It forces them to test whether you are talking about anything or not. And any words you use just to impress people will succeed in doing so—negatively.

3. *Use ordinary language, the language in which your parishioners think their own thoughts.*

There was a time when elevated diction was thought appropriate for the pulpit, perhaps because it seemed

to lift us into an awareness of God's transcendence. Such language seems less successful now, perhaps because recent years have disclosed so much corruption in high places that ordinary citizens have become suspicious of anything that could be an instrument to bamboozle. At any rate, I have an unscientific conclusion that people today are more likely to trust plain than fancy talk. If it really is the sort of language in which parishioners think their own thoughts, they will be more open to it, since the ideas will seem less like something that someone else is trying to impose on them and more like conclusions to which they could come independently.

4. *Strive for vivid, expressive, vigorous articulation.*

This may sound like an impossible thing to do if the previous rule of using ordinary language is observed. Yet notice the expressiveness of the following passage:

When you come right down to it, there is no law that says you have to use big words when you write or talk. There are lots of small words, and good ones, that can be made to say all the things you want to say, quite as well as the big ones. It may take more time to find them at first, but it can be well worth it, for all of us to know what they mean.

Some small words, more than you think, are rich with just the right feel, the right taste, as if made to help you say a thing the way it should be said.

Small words can be crisp, brief, terse—go to the point, like a knife. They have a charm of their own.

They dance, twist, turn, sing. Like sparks in the night they light the way for the eyes of those who read. They are the grace notes of prose. You know what they say the way you know a day is bright and fair at first sight. And you find, as you read, that you like the way they say it. Small words are gay. And they catch large thoughts and hold them up for all to see, like rare stones in rings of gold, or joy in the eyes of a child. Some make you feel, as well as see; "the cold deep dark of night, the hot salt sting of tears."

Small words move with ease when big words stand still—or, worse, bog down and get in the way of what you want to say. There is not much, in all truth, that small words will not say—and say quite well (Joseph A. Ecclesine, *Printer's Ink*).

The astute reader will have noticed that no word in this passage has more than one syllable. Measurements of the reading level of passages of prose rely on only two indicators: the number of syllables in words and the number of words in sentences. The goal of plain, vigorous prose is not impossible; it just takes discipline.

5. *Revise what you have written.*

A card published by the printing house of a religious community has the legend "I am infallable" with the second "a" of infallible crossed out and replaced with an "i" and the insertion of the word "almost." The rest of us do use the erasers on our pencils or the correction fluid or tape on our typewriters. That means that when we have finished a manuscript for a

homily, we should read it over. Ideally we will do so just after we have finished and then some hours later we will do it again. The first time will be just to catch the obvious errors and make marginal revisions. By the second revision, though, we may have a little emotional distance on what we have written and be able to think of a better way of saying what we want to get across. We need to do that re-reading, therefore, when we still have time to put some of these good ideas for revision into practice. It is said that a recent President did not have time to look over an example of his speechwriter's art until he had actually to deliver it. In the speech was a joke he had not heard before and thought was immensely funny. He thus suffered the embarrassment of appearing to laugh inordinately at his own joke. Worse embarrassments await the homilist who never looks at his manuscript until he mounts the pulpit.

6. Make clarity your first goal.

This goal has been articulated in different ways at several stages in the homily preparation process, but it cannot be stressed too often. Perhaps an example of the difference that clear expression makes will offer encouragement to make the effort. The following piece of gobbledygook was written by "someone in the human resources department of a middle-sized state":

It is recommended that the focus, scope and purpose be clearly delineated and understood. Then, with the existing resources, the restructuring of the developmental process will be guided by the central

concepts of the previously stated management philosophy. Specific functional and administrative activities, service outputs, and staff capacity development will be defined as real need demands are anticipated or identified. Armed with this real need information, a working management tool can be accurately designed through the use of the proposed management model.

Compare that paragraph with one written by the great authority on management, Peter Drucker:

It is not possible to manage, in other words, unless one first has a goal. It is not even possible to design the structure of an organization unless one knows what it is supposed to be doing and how to measure whether it is doing it.

Now, let's hear it for clarity!

7. Use correct grammar.

There are in every parish persons who know how English is correctly written and spoken and it sets their teeth on edge to encounter solecisms from the clergy. Many would be more forgiving if one fell into one of the classical christological heresies or broke a priestly vow in not too shocking a fashion. Nothing will make them lose the train of your thought and go off on one of their own quite so easily. Simple charity requires that one not offend them gratuitously.

8. Develop a clean English style.

The simplest guide to achieving that is to master the

manual from which this one takes its format: William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*.

9. *Write for the ear rather than the eye.*

There are many differences between good oral and good written communication, too many to be discussed here. As an indication of the kinds of differences, though, we can look at those compiled by H. Grady Davis, who sets forth rules about words and rules about long sentences. The rules for words are:

If he is to write for the ear:

1. The preacher should learn to express himself in *as few words as possible*.
2. He should learn to use *words that sound well together*.
3. He should cultivate a preference for *short, strong, clear, familiar words*.
4. He should cultivate a preference for *sensuous rather than abstract, and specific rather than general words*.
5. He should rely on *strong nouns and verbs* to carry the weight of his thought.

Now the successful use of longer sentences depends on the observance of these basic principles.

1. The first factor is the *skeletal structure* of the sentence. The basic structure of the good longer sentence is logical, uncluttered, obvious.

2. A second factor, *connecting words*, is closely related to the first. The connecting words show the relation between structural parts of the sentence and mark the transition from one to another.

3. A third factor is *correspondence of parts*, of the phrases within a clause and of the clauses within a sentence. This means parallel construction and repeated construction.

4. A fourth factor is *co-ordination*. It means joining together elements of equal rank, words, phrases, and clauses, adding one to another with or without conjunctions.

5. A fifth factor is the *length of inner parts* of the sentence. Here is a difference between writing for the ear and for the eye. The ear cannot manage an element within the sentence that grows too long.

6. A final factor is that of the positions of *natural strength* in the sentence. The strongest places in a long sentence, as in a short one, are the beginning and the end. (*Design for Preaching*, pp. 265-93).

The entire discussion by Davis is very helpful and would repay any speaker's reading.

10. *Jerk wandering attention back.*

As we all know from our own attempts to listen to other speakers, it is hard to keep one's attention focused on what is being said. The experienced preacher will know this and include efforts to regain attention at points where it is likely to flag. Any sustained argument is likely to lose hold on some of the

audience. So is the prolonged use of one tone of voice. Other danger spots can be recognized by a loss of eye contact. A change of pace, an alternation of voice level, a little comic relief, telling a story—these and other techniques can be used to bring wandering sheep back into the fold.

11. *Use humor appropriately.*

Humor is a subject on which homiletical authorities diverge. Some say that it is inconsistent with the solemnity of the task of preaching. Since Jesus used it as a very effective tool, though, one assumes that the disciple is not greater than his Lord. Sometimes, though, what passes for preaching does not appear to differ materially from the routine of the standup comic. Surely the preacher should have something serious to say. Perhaps the best rule is to say that it should never become an end in itself. It must advance the argument of the homily rather than interrupt it. Humorous stories can sometimes make telling points very effectively. Probably, though, most of the humor that is injected into homilies should not be in the form of jokes told. Humorous turns of phrases are less likely to divert attention and more likely to reinforce a point. Irony can be quite telling. In trying to steer a middle course between being a buffoon and a sobersides, the criterion to remember is that the humor must always be a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

12. *Avoid embarrassing references to individuals.*

This is not quite to say that no one in the congrega-

tion should ever be mentioned from the pulpit, but it comes close. Certainly no one should ever be criticized or held up to ridicule. Something regarded as harmless humor or teasing by the preacher may not be so regarded by the butt of it. Even efforts to hold up a member of the parish as an example can misfire, either because the person preferred anonymity or because envy might be inspired.

13. *Use self-disclosure discreetly.*

When it comes to talking about oneself in a homily, you are almost in a damned if you do and damned if you don't situation. All preaching that is worthwhile has an element of testimony, or personal witness, to it. It helps the congregation to know that the herald believes the good news. The preacher's faith makes the gospel more credible to those in the pew. Yet at the same time, too frequent self-reference sounds like either boasting or self-absorption. One trend in recent years has been very upsetting for the faithful. In seminary, especially during Clinical Pastoral Education but at other times as well, those preparing for ordained ministry have been praised for taking risks by sharing their pilgrimage, their faith and their doubts. Such revelations which elicit praise in seminary, can be very threatening to the laity in a parish. They prefer teachers of the faith who are rock-solid so they can be a firm support in times when the laity have doubts. This picture can be exaggerated, but there have been many newly ordained clergy who have discovered that the behavior that won them approval in seminary is not always the behavior that has the same effect in the parish.

14. *Anticipate the effect of what you say on your hearers.*

What is called for here is empathy in advance. You can mean something one way that can be understood by those who hear you in a very different way. At the lowest and probably least harmful level, this can be no more than unintended double meanings, one of which is off color. And, because of the very solemnity of the occasion, nothing is as funny elsewhere as it is in church. Sometimes a preacher makes a slighting remark about a belief or religious practice that means a great deal to someone in the congregation. Even more likely to produce fireworks is a statement that makes light of the political convictions of parishioners. This is not to say that a priest should never say anything with which anyone can disagree. Far from it, but the way such things are said is very important. One must always take the persons with whom one disagrees very seriously and treat them with respect. As children of God they should expect no less from those who claim to represent Christ. Furthermore, clergy get into enough hot water inevitably and they do not need to increase the supply when they can avoid it by simply thinking about how what they say will sound to someone else.

15. *Stop on time.*

Nuff said.