

The Whole Liturgy Preaches



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Week after week, the liturgy presents the story of Christianity. For the great majority of Roman Catholics, the hour devoted to the Sunday liturgy becomes not only a means of praise and worship but the center for instruction in the faith. According to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,

Although the liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine majesty, it likewise contains rich instruction for the faithful. For in the liturgy God is speaking to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his gospel. And the people are responding to God by both song and prayer. (33)

More recently, the US bishops, in their document, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* (PMF), explain that the privilege of preaching at the Sunday Eucharist affords us an opportunity to advance the Church's catechetical ministry (PMF, p.21). They also cite the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1074: "[The liturgy] is the privileged place for catechizing the People of God."

The Church is catechized and faith is cultivated through our prayers and hymns, the Scriptures, symbols, and gestures. All of this broadens our understanding of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world, and deepens our commitment to discipleship. The liturgy tells this story; in this way we can say that the whole liturgy preaches. With this in mind, and given the ongoing need for catechesis in praying with the new Missal, it may prove helpful for preachers to use the prayers and symbols of the Mass as their texts for the Homily. While preaching from the Scripture of the day is to be commended, the preacher may on occasion present a "liturgical Homily," that is, preach on one aspect of the Mass.

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), 65, states that the Homily "should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings of Sacred Scripture or another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners." The liturgical Homily serves a great need in the Church. Yves Congar explained this, shortly after the Second Vatican Council, in the essay, "Sacramental Worship and Preaching." He commented, "The liturgy preaches in words and actions." However, he advised that the lessons of the liturgy are not always apparent so they need to be expressed in a way that is suitable for a particular congregation. This, he says, is the function of the Homily. (cf. *The Renewal of Preaching, Concilium*, vol. 33. New York: Paulist Press, 1968).

In this essay, I would like to encourage preachers to consider the liturgical Homily and

Generous liturgical symbols speak to the assembly.
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the opportunity to preach occasionally on another text from the Mass. I will focus upon two statements from the GIRM text cited above. First, the term "another text" refers to the sacred text of the liturgy, that is, the prayers of the Mass. Second, we will consider the word "explanation" and distinguish between "instruction" and "interpretation." Then I will consider the baptismal symbols of the Easter liturgy as an example.

THE STORY OF THE SACRED TEXT

The Homily indeed may draw from the other prayers of the Mass. To be sure, this is not an innovation of the recent General Instruction. A footnote to the section quoted above indicates that the idea is taken from *Inter Oecumini*, "The Instruction on Implementing Liturgical Norms," published in 1964 (cf. 54). This instruction elaborated upon the description of the Homily given by the Second Vatican Council. Perhaps a note of background will prove helpful here.

Sacrosanctum Concilium restored the position of preaching and the prominence of the Word of God in the Liturgy of the Eucharist: "The two parts that, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the eucharist, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship" (56). The connection between the Word and Eucharist comprises a relation of call and response: the Lord calls to us through the proclaimed Word of God, and we respond by coming to the table to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. Some speak of the two tables of the liturgy, the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist.

The liturgical scholar Josef Jungmann explains that the position and purpose of the Homily—following the Scripture and explaining what has been proclaimed—corresponds to the



The Homily explains an aspect of Sacred Scripture or another text from the Mass. Those texts include the prayers of the Mass.

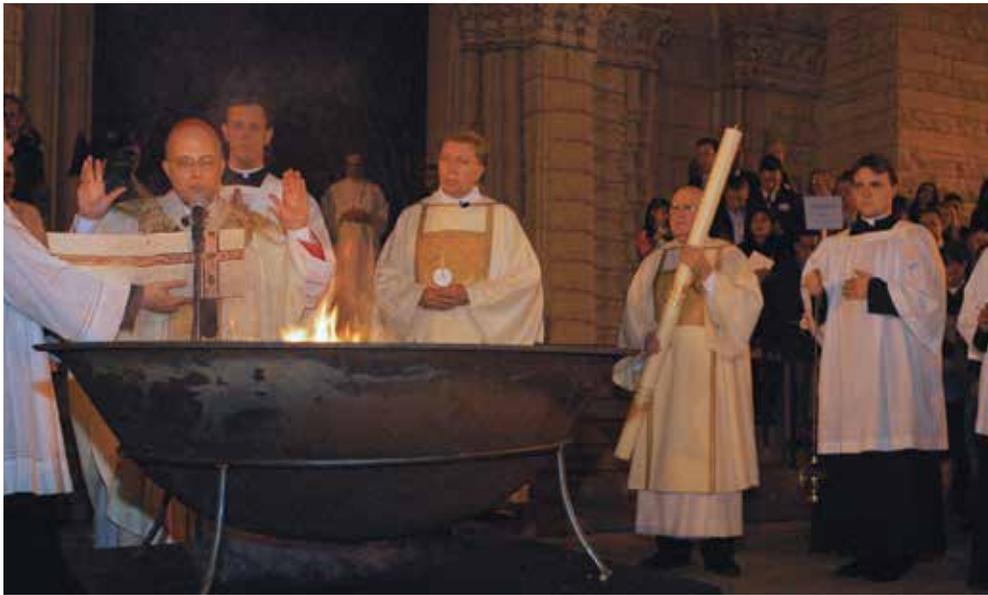


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most ancient tradition of the Church. He cites Justin Martyr’s “First Apology,” “And on the day called Sunday all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to imitation of these good things” (67). I quote this at length to show that it is not only in the verbal telling of the story, but in the structure and the performance of the liturgy as well, that we keep faith with our Christian ancestors. The whole liturgy preaches.

The liturgy is the story and the priest is the storyteller. In the document, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (FYH, 1982), the US bishops state that “The Sunday Eucharist is a privileged point of encounter between a local Christian community and its priest” (p. 17). I suggest that the priest stands before the community as the storyteller, the one charged with passing on the tradition through the celebration of the Eucharist. And the story continues in our day. This is an experience of “anamnesis” in that we do not merely recall the events of the Last Supper and the life of Christ, as if it were simply an occurrence from two thousand years ago. Rather, we participate in these events as we encounter the Lord anew in the breaking of the bread. In the words of Pope Benedict, when he addressed the bishops’ synod on the New Evangelization, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical claim or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Each week we re-enter that story through the gathering of the assembly, by the opening of the Word of God, by sharing in the Body and Blood, and by being sent to live this story.

Fulfilled in Your Hearing, forty years after its publication, remains a valuable resource for preachers in its description of both the content and style of Roman Catholic homiletics. It should be required reading for every preacher. However, one fault of this document is that it focuses the preaching solely on the Scripture

readings of the day, virtually ignoring the opportunity to preach on the other prayers. Fr. Edward Foley, OFM CAP, makes this argument cogently in his essay “The Homily Beyond Scripture: ‘Fulfilled in Your Hearing’ Revisited” (*Worship*, v. 73:4, July 1999). He includes references to church documents that expand the notion of the “sacred text.” For example, in the “Introduction” to *The Lectionary for Mass* (LMI, 1981) we read, “. . . the homily explains the text of the Sacred Scriptures proclaimed in the readings or some other texts of the Liturgy . . .” (24). Foley does point out that the Council document, *Dei Verbum*, states, “. . . all the preaching of the church . . . should be nourished and ruled by sacred scripture” (21), but then he

advises the reader to glance back earlier in the same document where we find, “Tradition and scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God, which is entrusted to the church” (10). It seems, then, that since the time of the writing of the Council documents, the notion of the “sacred text” has been expanded to include the “text” of the entire liturgy.

And with good reason. We know that the liturgy is replete with references from Scripture. For example, we begin and end by signing ourselves with the cross (see Matthew 28:16–19). For the greeting, “The Lord be with you,” see the introduction and conclusion to the letters of Paul, especially 2 Corinthians 13:14. The “Hosanna,” commemorating the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, can be found in all four Gospel accounts; see Matthew 21:9–10; Mark 11:9–10; Luke 19:37–39; and John 12:12–13. During the Eucharistic Prayer we hear the words from the Last Supper; see Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–20. See also the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, a passage referred to as “the bread of life discourse.” John does not record the details of the Last Supper, but it is in chapter six that we find a parallel account of the Lord’s last meal, especially with the fourfold action: he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it. For the Lord’s Prayer, compare Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4; see also 1 Chronicles 29:10–13. Later, the “Lamb of God” recalls the recognition of Jesus by John the Baptist; see John 1:29. The prayer, “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof . . .” echoes the centurion’s response to Jesus and is found at Matthew 8:5–8. These are but a few examples of the scriptural references we find throughout the liturgy. These “texts”—the various parts of the Mass—need to be opened, just as the Scripture is opened. In doing so, we will have a better understanding of where we stand as disciples of Christ, which should encourage the full, conscious, and active participation of the assembly.

Moreover, besides the scriptural references, we know that Christ is present throughout the celebration of the Eucharist, as

stated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. He is present especially in the Eucharistic elements, as well as in the proclaimed Word, in the minister, and in the assembly (7). All the liturgy becomes the subject for the liturgical Homily. The whole liturgy preaches.

A LIVING EXPLANATION

As mentioned earlier, according to the GIRM, the Homily should be an “explanation” of one aspect of the Scripture or of another text. We need to qualify “explanation,” since the intention here is not for the preacher to deliver an academic description of the readings or prayers. Instead, we may take our cue from article 24 of the LMI, cited earlier. The Homily is described as a “living explanation,” the purpose of which is to “lead the community of the faithful to celebrate the Eucharist actively, so that they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by faith.” The US bishops stress the need for a more personal and dynamic style for preaching. They refer to the many surveys conducted over the past few years that show that the faithful want more powerful and inspiring preaching. Homilies that are poorly prepared and presented will turn people away from the Church. In our day we need to hear from a preacher who will stir the hearts of the hearers, deepen their knowledge of the Christian faith, and renew their participation in the life of the Church (PMF, p.4).

In *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, the bishops offer some practical guidelines for communicating this living explanation. The preacher’s language should be specific, graphic, imaginative, using clear images rather than abstract concepts. In other words, it should employ the language of the poet and the storyteller (FYH, pp. 24–25). Further, they note that the Homily is a weak medium for instruction. The classroom or the church hall is the proper place for instruction. In the classroom, I can presume that my students have studied the assigned readings for class, perhaps prepared a question or comment, and attend class with a modicum of interest. (As I say, this is a presumption.) Then my lecture will review and, I hope, advance their understanding of the material. However, the preacher cannot make the same presumption. Moreover, the reason for the faithful attending worship on any given Sunday will range from sincere devotion to strict obligation—and the preacher strives to speak to all people. Moreover, the Homily should not be so much an instruction as an interpretation.

This point regarding interpretation is repeated throughout FYH. The Homily interprets the human condition through the text. The process of human understanding requires interpretation. We comprehend our experience and make judgments based on categories of understanding which we have acquired throughout our lives. The Christian faith offers us such categories as a way to interpret the human condition and the world. To quote the bishops, “The Christian interprets the world . . . as a creation of the loving God” (FYH, p.18). Consequently, we strive to behave in a moral way out of obedience to Jesus Christ and because we hope to recognize the Lord around us. Our faith allows us to see one another as God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it (see Ephesians 2:10).

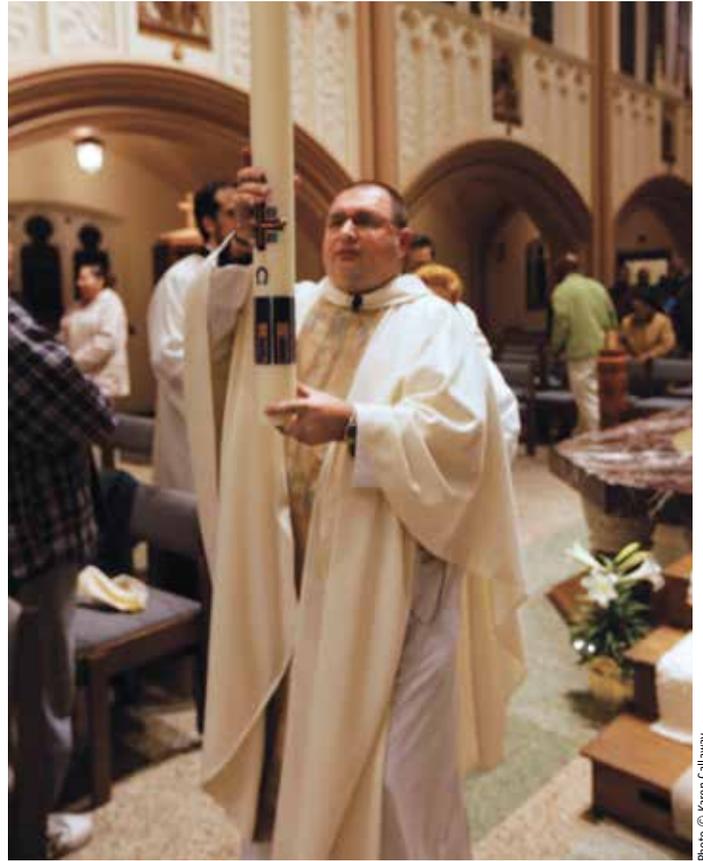


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Our prayers and symbols address human situations. Preachers need to consider how our symbols interface with our lives.

I think of the Gospel story of the paralyzed man who was carried by his friends to meet Jesus (see Luke 5:19). When they arrived, they found the house crammed with people, so they climbed on top of the house and made an opening in the roof, and lowered him down. Having caught the attention of Jesus, he marveled at their faith and healed the man. We do not hear about the faith of the crippled man, but only of the men who carried him to the Lord. The preacher is like those stretcher bearers, helping to carry the congregation to Christ. Unfortunately, too many preachers are content to remain outside the house, explaining through instruction—talking about Christ—to the faithful, rather than bringing them inside for a face-to-face encounter. The preacher, properly prepared, goes inside the house and repeats the psalmist’s introduction, “Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face” (Psalm 24:6). A “living explanation,” that is, interpreting the human condition through the sacred text, may provide the entryway for an encounter with the Lord.

PREACHING THE SYMBOLS OF BAPTISM

In preparing to preach, the individual needs to ask, “What is the human situation to which the liturgical prayers and symbols may speak in the present day?” The question for the preacher, then, is not “What can I say about the text?” but “What does the text say to me?” The Homily responds to that question. For example, consider the symbols of Baptism within the Easter Vigil: the water bath, the white garment, the anointing with chrism, and the candle. Please note that we should beware of

explaining symbols. Rather, if they are used properly, there will be little need for explanation. Water washes us clean, providing an opportunity for a fresh start. Also, when the water is blessed we hear a short course on the history of salvation through the use of water. Candles, lit from the Paschal candle, light the way through darkness. A bright white robe suggests a new creation. The chrism, applied to the forehead as well as to the face, causes the skin to glisten, indicating that we are looking upon someone special. And as with all the Christian sacraments, we celebrate what God is doing through these individuals. Moreover, it is not solely about them. The catechumens echo the faith of the congregation. Hearing them pronounce their baptismal vows should remind us of our promises to the Lord and to the Church. Likewise, seeing the newly baptized blessed and anointed should remind all the faithful of their place with God and within the community. This place within the community is symbolized by the singing of the Litany of the Saints. We call upon the sanctified as they are part of the greater Christian community, still alive to us.

With these symbols in mind, we could add that the whole liturgy preaches—and sometimes without words. We should apply the symbols generously so they may speak clearly: pour the water, slather on the chrism, and don a robe rather than a bib. These symbols, and how they are used, demonstrate the Church’s care for her members. We remember, also, that three of these symbols will be used again at the funeral. Holy water is sprinkled on the casket; the Paschal candle stands in the sanctuary; the white pall covers the casket like the robe worn in Baptism. These symbols help to welcome us into the Church and accompany us when we leave the earth to enter eternal life.

For the Homily itself, the lengthy vigil presents a problem for the preacher. We have listened to nine readings of Scripture (or at least five) which followed the blessing of the new fire and the singing of the *Exultet*. And we have the rite of Baptism plus the Liturgy of the Eucharist ahead of us. The juxtaposition of the Homily challenges the preacher. Some will omit preaching, supposedly for “pastoral reasons,” claiming that we already have heard so much Scripture and we still have a long ritual. Nevertheless, the rubrics of *The Roman Missal* clearly state, “After the Gospel, the Homily, even if brief, is not to be omitted.” The Homily offers a pause along the way of the journey to Easter. We need an inspired word to give direction to our path, showing us where we have come from and where we are going. It opens up the grand pageantry of the Easter celebration and it poses the question, “So where do we go from here?”

The preacher may find it appropriate to use the Creed, another “symbol,” as the text for preaching. In general, the US bishops recommend preaching on the Creed. The Creed shares the same center as the Scriptures and the Eucharist, namely, the Paschal Mystery. This mystery proclaims that the “One Lord, Jesus Christ. . . . suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” This is the one whom we see moving about, speaking and acting in the Gospel; the one who suffered Death and was buried and rose again. The bishops cite Cyril of Jerusalem, when he would hand over the Creed to those about to be baptized and explained to them, “The most important doctrines were collected from the

whole of Scripture to make a single exposition of the faith” (PMF, p. 26).

Finally, the symbol of the “Lamb of God,” spoken every time we gather for worship, takes on special significance at Easter. The priest will proclaim, “Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the lamb.” Notice a small point here, that the command “behold” has replaced the statement “this is.” This change follows the twofold criteria for the new translation. First, “behold” follows the Latin text, *ecce*, more accurately. Second, this word is taken right from Scripture, namely, the episode in which John the Baptist points the disciples to Jesus. Further, generally speaking, the phrase “this is” presents a problem in the liturgy, leaving us to wonder to what “this” refers. Notice in the Liturgy of the Word we no longer say “*This is* the word (or Gospel) of the Lord,” but, “The Word (or Gospel) of the Lord.” The reason for this is that the emphasis should be on the presence of Christ in our midst, revealed through the proclaimed Word, rather than on the book itself, be it the Lectionary or the *Book of the Gospels*. Similarly, before the Eucharist, we are made aware of the presence of Christ with us here and now, which we affirm in coming to the table and partaking of his Body and Blood. “*Behold the Lamb of God.*”

The Easter Homily challenges the preacher in another way. All preaching tests the faith of the preacher. On Easter Sunday we have to contend with the question of what we really believe about the Paschal Mystery and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We need to ask, just what is the relevance—the Good News—of the Resurrection for us today? Indeed, we know what happened; it is a familiar story. But why should it be relevant for Christians—for anyone—in the twenty-first century? What is its meaning for the citizens of a consumer society, driven by technology and running at a furious pace? How will we make the message of the Resurrection relevant for the modern world?

For the liturgical Homily, in general, the goal is to nurture the faith of Christians and to direct them toward Jesus Christ. As the liturgy is the source and summit of our faith, the whole liturgy points us toward the Son of God. The whole liturgy preaches. ♦

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