

## ***PREACHING THE MYSTERY OF FAITH: THE SUNDAY HOMILY***

In 2012, the Bishops of the United States issued a new Statement on preaching, entitled *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily*. This Statement builds upon, but does not replace, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*.

The entire document may be downloaded from: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-life-and-ministry/upload/usccb-preaching-document.pdf>.

Other resources for the preaching ministry may be found on our website:  
<http://www.davenportdiocese.org/lit/litpreach.htm>

Here is an outline of the new Bishops' document on preaching:

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## Introduction

The document begins by reminding us that the “Church is the bearer of Christ’s word to the world down through the ages until the Lord returns.” That is why the Church exists: to evangelize. And by “Church” that means all of us. However, the document—which is addressed primarily to priests, deacons, and those who prepare them to preach—is focused on one particular aspect of proclaiming the word: the Sunday homily. Taking their cue from Pope Benedict’s *Verbum Domini* and *Sacramentum Caritatis*, the US Bishops also call for a “renewal of the preaching ministry” in our parishes. In fact, they make an astounding claim that should make us who preach shudder, examine ourselves, and do whatever we need to do to improve our preaching: “*We are also aware that in survey after survey over the past years, the People of God have called for more powerful and inspiring preaching. A steady diet of tepid or poorly prepared homilies is often cited as a cause for discouragement on the part of laity and even leading some to turn away from the Church.*”

Preaching does not occur in a vacuum. The preacher must be attentive not only to the local community—and to the liturgical feast—but also to the wider culture. Preaching in the United States will necessarily be different than preaching in Argentina... or the Philippines... or Tanzania... or Japan.

Before setting out their teaching on the Sunday Homily, the US Bishops provide a ‘snapshot’ of the cultural milieu in which we preach, and the challenges that this milieu raises for the proclamation of the Good News. They note that many Catholics (perhaps especially among younger generations) are indifferent to or disaffected with the Church and her teachings, for a variety of reasons. While they mention the scandal of sexual abuse within the church, they also note the strong emphasis on the individual over the community, the focus on material satisfaction over the spiritual life, and a spirit of relativism that denies the possibility of absolute truth or enduring values that color life in this country. The Bishops also observe that the sharp polarizations in our political life, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the persisting racism and prejudices which color our common life also affect parishes as well. Further challenges to preaching the Gospel include the cultural and ethnic diversity found in many of our parishes as well as a tendency for many Catholics to be uninformed about the Church’s teaching.

It is in, and into, this context that we preach, a context that makes it difficult to hear the Good News. Therefore, the US Bishops are calling for a renewal in the preaching ministry—including the spirituality of the preacher.

## Part I: The Biblical Foundations for the Church’s Preaching Ministry

*Preaching the Mystery of Faith* (PMF) begins with the assertion, as *Verbum Domini* notes, that God “reveals himself through his creative and powerful Word”—in creation and especially in the Incarnation. God speaks, as it were, and it happens. The ultimate word is the Incarnate Son; now God is not only heard, but seen. In Jesus, we also see the power of the spoken word: what Jesus speaks, comes to be: Lazarus comes out of the tomb, the daughter of Jairus rises from her bed, the sea is stilled. In his very being, Jesus proclaims the Good News. After Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension, and with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the task of continuing to proclaim the Word was entrusted to the Apostles. From Jerusalem to the ends of the world, the early Church proclaimed the Gospel. But there is a difference. While Jesus bore testimony to the Father as well as to himself, the Apostles bear witness to Christ—not to themselves. Jesus—the Paschal Mystery—is not only the source but the content of their preaching... in the power of the Holy Spirit. As preachers, these are the footsteps in which we walk. We are “apprentices to Jesus the Master and so draw inspiration and learning about preaching” from his

example. How so? The Bishops, like the Holy Father, recommend *lectio divina* – the prayerful reading of and meditation on the Scriptures. It is in that divine encounter that we are formed and converted.

That which lies at the heart of Jesus’ preaching should also inform ours: the Kingdom (Reign) of God.

Jesus both announced the coming Reign of God, and is himself the embodiment of that Kingdom. His healings and exorcisms, his ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as his preaching, all gave witness to the reality of this Reign, to the Good News. Preachers today follow in Jesus’ footsteps. It is our task to preach Jesus and the Kingdom he proclaimed, a Kingdom that requires a change of heart... *metanoia*... conversion: “repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). The homily is an invitation to embrace God’s Reign, and so to change... to repent. But—and here the Bishops are clear—that “does not mean that homilies should simply berate the people for their failures.” Concentrating on sinfulness, without the corresponding Good News of God’s grace, inevitably produces only resentment and discouragement, and fails. “For this reason many teachers of homiletics warn, quite legitimately, against ‘moralizing’ homilies, which harp excessively or exclusively on sin and its dangers.” At the same time, it is our duty as preachers to “not remain silent before evil” and to faithfully preach the truth of the gospel, in season and out, in love.

The Bishops point to the portrayal of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel as an especially rich source for reflection on the ministry of preaching. They begin with the account of Jesus preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:14-30), emphasizing that the prophetic call for justice is fulfilled in Jesus and is therefore part of the Church’s ongoing mission. However, their emphasis is on the account of the encounter between the Risen Christ and the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). From this text, the Bishops draw four important principles to guide Sunday preaching:

1. The Paschal Mystery informs human experience
2. The mutual illumination of the Old and New Testaments
3. The Sunday homily as integral to the Eucharist
4. The connection between Eucharist and Mission

### *The Paschal Mystery*

“Homilies are inspirational when they touch the deepest levels of the human heart and address the real questions of human experience” (p. 15). But we only see ourselves—and our experiences—through the lens of Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. Therefore, the Paschal Mystery must lie at the heart of every homily—for that is the pattern of our lives as well.

### *Mutual Illumination*

The relationship between the Old (First) and New Testaments is complex, and an ongoing area of theological and interreligious inquiry. This dynamic relationship is brought out in the design of the lectionary, and so should also inform our preaching. It is important to see that the relationship is not unidirectional or simplistic; the New does not *replace* the Old (supercessionism is not an option) but—the New Testament recognizes the authority of the Old and develops those writings in the light of Jesus. In other words, we read the Old Testament *retrospectively*, back through the lens of the Paschal Mystery. Of particular note are the references made to other ecclesial documents, including the very important (and almost unknown) Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*.

## *Sunday Homily & Eucharist*

The Emmaus story has Jesus breaking open the word—and then sharing a meal with the two disciples. It is in that sharing that his presence is revealed—a revelation made possible by what had already been shared on the road (and, via this shared communion, a deeper appreciation of what was heard on the road comes about: “Were not our hearts burning...?”). Word and Sacrament are inseparable; and one link between these two parts of the liturgy is the homily—which is why the presider is the usual preacher. In addition to the lectionary texts, the prayers from the Missal are therefore another source for the preacher to engage.

## *Mission*

Just as after encountering Jesus in word and in the breaking of the bread the disciples respond by rushing back to Jerusalem to share the Good News, the homily is an important way to draw out the implications that the readings and the liturgy have for mission. As the Bishops note, “Our encounter with Jesus inevitably leads to mission; our love for Jesus translates into love for others.” Or it should. So, the homily must also lead to mission.

## Part II: The Ministry of Liturgical Preaching

Christ is (or ought to be) the foundation for every homily; his death and resurrection stand at the center of all our preaching. Just as the Risen Christ “broke open” the Scriptures on the road to Emmaus, preachers today are called to do the same. In fact, we notice from the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus the intimate relationship between word proclaimed, the homily, and the Eucharist. The disciples encountered Christ as he recounted and explained the Scriptures (with burning hearts) but only ultimately recognized him only in the breaking of the bread. We follow the same pattern in our Eucharistic liturgy: the word prepares us for recognizing Christ in the Eucharist, but the Eucharist is what sheds ultimate light on the meaning of the Scriptures. Preachers are challenged to always keep these connections in mind; sometimes preaching on such connections explicitly but at other times simply letting them inform the preaching implicitly.

There is a great deal of discussion currently about the topic of “doctrinal” preaching. Some lament the lack of knowledge about the faith among some in our congregations and suggest that the answer to this problem is abandoning the lectionary and instead “preaching” on doctrinal topics. Nothing could be further from what the US Bishop call for in this new document.

To be fair, the Bishops are concerned about the doctrinal content of preaching. They lament that too often homilies are either theologically lacking or even doctrinally incorrect. All homilies are doctrinal in that they ought to reflect the faith of the Church, teaching it in the way proper to the genre of preaching. As the Bishops state:

Certainly, doctrine is not meant to be propounded in a homily in the way that it might unfold in a theology classroom or a lecture for an academic audience or even a catechism lesson. The homily is integral to the liturgical act of the Eucharist, and the language and spirit of the homily should fit that context. Yet catechesis in its broadest sense involves the effective communication of the full scope of the Church’s teaching and formation, from initiation into the Sacrament of Baptism through the moral requirements of a faithful Christian life....Over time the homilist, while respecting the

unique form and spirit of the Sunday homily, should communicate the full scope of this rich catechetical teaching to his congregation.

This is a real challenge to those of us who preach: on the one hand, to respect the liturgical context (including the liturgical season) and scriptural roots of the homily while at the same time making sure that they are not only theologically sound but explicitly touch on the content of the faith (as appropriate). The key to doing this well is refusing to hold doctrine, Scripture, and liturgy as somehow opposed to one another; whether expressed in the careful language of theology, the poetry and stories of the Bible, or the ritual of liturgy, our faith is not fragmentary but a unified whole.

All that being said, the Bishops still remind us that the Scriptures lie at the heart of our preaching, and that a central task of the preacher “is to lead the hearer to the deep inner connection between God’s word and the actual circumstances of one’s everyday life.” They also recall Pope Benedict XVI’s words: “The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives. . . . Consequently, those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart. Generic and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God’s word should be avoided, as well as useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message.”

Preaching is an act of the Church as much as it is the act of an individual preacher. Therefore, it is incumbent on that preacher to be faithful to the Church’s teaching—in the ambo as well as outside of it. Again, being faithful to the Church’s teaching doesn’t mean “that the homily should be an abstract affirmation of doctrine.” Instead, if we are faithful to the Scriptures, to the Liturgy, and to the Magisterium, the homily is more likely to be that kind of intimate encounter that will “inspire and move those who hear it, [and] enable them to understand in heart and mind what the mysteries of our redemption mean for our lives and how they might call us to repentance and change.”

### Part III: The One Ordained to Preach

What makes for a good preacher? What sort of man should a priest or deacon be in order to preach effectively? Here, the Bishops offer some insights that go beyond technique and instead write about the person of the preacher.

The Bishops begin this section by unambiguously stating: “To preach the Gospel authentically to the Christian community, the homilist should strive to live a life of holiness.” In other words, the first person who needs to *hear the word and be converted by it* is the preacher himself. That means that the preacher must spend adequate time in prayer and reflection. “Just as the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy itself is not theatrical performance or simply a matter of the rituals being correctly carried out, neither is the homily simply an exercise in good public speaking.” Study in the context of prayer, seeking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is crucial. This is not to say that the preacher ought to be isolated. On the contrary, the commitment to prayer includes prayers for others—and that means getting to know them and their “sorrows, their anxieties, their weaknesses, their capacity for love, their abiding joys, and their deepest longings.”

Second, the preacher is called to be rooted in the Scriptures, “someone who habitually immerses himself in the language, stories, rhythms, speech patterns, and ethos of the Scriptures.” As previously mentioned (*n.b. also see above*), to this end the Bishops especially encourage the practice of *lectio*

*divina*. The point is to learn to “see the world through biblical eyes” – seeing the analogies between life today and the world(s) of the Bible.

Third, the preacher is also called to be rooted in the Church’s Tradition: “[t]heology, spirituality, the liturgy, the lives of the saints, the formal teaching of the Church, great Catholic art, architecture, and poetry.” The Bishops call on preachers to “have the *habitus* of theology” – that is, to read the theological masters and engage the questions with which they wrestle.

Finally, the preacher needs to be a “man of communion.” By that, the Bishops mean that preachers need to have a “thoughtful and informed understanding of contemporary culture” – or, as the Vatican II put it – to be able to read the “signs of the times.” *Gaudium et spes* (#1) states: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time, especially of those who are poor and afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.” This is the spirit of communion that John Paul II called priests, and, by extension, all who minister: entering into relationship and dialogue with all. The great cultural diversity found in the US can be quite a challenge for preachers, but is also a profound gift. The bottom line is that preachers must spend time with those in their communities, in an attitude of receptivity and respect.

The Bishops close this section with an admonition: when speaking of others in their homilies, especially other Christians or those of other religious traditions, preachers must do so with a “spirit of respect based on a sound knowledge of their traditions.” It is especially important to avoid any anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish, or anti-Muslim rhetoric. If differences are to be pointed out, such must be done without “bitter invective, coarse rhetoric, or stereotypes and caricatures.” Resources on avoiding anti-Judaism in preaching are found on our website at: <http://www.davenportdiocese.org/lit/litpreach.htm> #AntiJudaism.

#### Part IV: Interpreting the Scriptures and Preparing the Homily

Interpreting the Scriptures as part of preparing a homily is much more than an intellectual undertaking; it “must be a serious attempt to understand the Scriptures *in the light of faith*” (emphasis mine). The starting point for interpretation is the historical-critical approach: using the various methods of interpretation to get at the “intention of the particular human authors of the Scriptures as they addressed their own audiences and to reconstruct the historical and social context in which the biblical texts originated.” This approach (which uncovers what is called the “literal” [as opposed to “literalist” or “fundamentalist”] meaning of the text) accords with the Incarnation itself: God comes to us in the particularity of human life.

But getting back to this meaning is only the starting point. In liturgical preaching, the preacher is challenged to probe the deeper meanings that might be found in the Scriptures and to bring those meanings to bear on contemporary life. How does the liturgical context itself, the structure of the lectionary, and the underlying unity of the Scriptures help us understand a particular reading? How has this passage been interpreted in the past; that is, what does the tradition have to offer here? While never ignoring the literal meaning, and without imposing our own interpretation from the outside, we can ask: what does this passage say about Christ, about the moral life, about our eternal destiny, about the mysteries of our faith?

The Bishops point their readers back to *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* as a source of practical advice on how to prepare the Sunday homily. They emphasize that preparing to preach requires the investment of time

and effort, calling priests to intentionally give this “primary duty of the ordained priest” the importance it is due. This prioritization goes beyond setting aside dedicated time each week to prepare a homily; it also includes giving preaching an important place in one’s life-long formation as a priest (or deacon).

As preachers (and other ministers), we have the responsibility of helping those who *hear* the homily benefit as much as possible from it. To that end, the Bishops mention the importance of Bible study, of group and individual *lectio divina*, of giving the texts themselves the proper reverence due them in the liturgy (such as using a Lectionary and a Book of the Gospels that are beautiful and well-made), and to allowing appropriate silence after each reading and the homily so the proclamation of the word can be a real encounter with Christ. Liturgical music, they also mention, ought to be deeply steeped in the Scriptures so what we hear proclaimed and what we sing are mutually reinforcing.

### Conclusion

The Bishops conclude their document with a meditation on Mary as the hearer and bearer of the word/Word—appealing priests (and deacons) to see in her the model both of one who receives the word first and then proclaims it, brings it birth, faithfully... a ministry that we can all “address and improve” in our own lives.