

THE HOMILETIC DIRECTORY: A REVIEW

Before we get into the text itself, perhaps it would be good to review what a “directory” is in church law. A directory is a document written by a Roman dicastery (office) to guide the implementation of existing legislation. By itself, it is not new law (it is administrative and not legislative). As the introductory letter accompanying the Directory mentioned, the hope is that the document serves as a synopsis of existing legislation and magisterial teaching. In addition, since it is not law (in the legislative sense), it cannot supersede existing law.

Directories can be legislative (promulgate new law) only if approved “*in forma specifica*” by the Pope. This document was not; it was approved only in “general form.” So – no new law. But it ought to serve as a solid anchoring point for what the “mind of the church” is on homiletics. As the document itself states: “This Homiletic Directory seeks to assimilate the insights of the past fifty years, review them critically, help preachers appreciate the purpose of the homily, and offer them assistance in fulfilling a mission which is vital to the life of the Church (#3).”

It carries universal authority, so it would be ‘weightier’ than a local document (unless a question of actual legislation is concerned – as noted above). But a papal encyclical carries much more weight. Again, this would be at the level of teaching not at the level of law (mandate). The legal weight of the directory would come from the legislative documents it cites (such as the GIRM and the Introduction to the Lectionary, as well as the *praenotanda* to other rites).

So, if we are to understand what the Church is asking in regards to homiletics, we need to look at a number of documents: the liturgical books themselves, this new Directory, and *Evangelii gaudium* by Pope Francis. In the US, we also need to look at *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* and *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*. All these together provide a rich tapestry for our reflection on this important ministry. Additional church documents that are relevant to preaching are listed in Appendix Two of the Directory.

The Homiletic Directory is divided into three parts. Part I presents a theology of the homily, reviews church teaching on the interpretation of the scriptures in the context of liturgy, and comments on preparation for preaching. The second part of the document applies these principles to specific preaching occasions. The document also includes two appendices: one connecting the Lectionary and the Catechism and the other, as mentioned above, a listing of important documents related to preaching.

Summary §§1-3

In the Introduction to the new *Homiletic Directory* we are reminded (§1) that this document was requested by those who took part in the Synod of Bishops in 2008 on the Word of God (*Verbum domini* #60). Pope Benedict had already made the homily a matter of concern (*Sacramentum caritatis* #46) and his successor, Pope Francis, has continued to make preaching a priority for the life of the Church (*Evangelii gaudium* #135-159).

The authors note that the aim of the *Directory* is twofold: (1) “to present the purpose of the homily as this has been described in the documents of the Church from the Second Vatican Council to the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*,” and (2) “to offer guidance based on these resources to help preachers carry out their mission properly and effectively” (§2).

From this review, the authors draw four themes for our particular attention (§2):

1. The place of the Word of God in the liturgy, and the implications of this relationship for the homily (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 24, 35, 52, 56).
2. The principles of Catholic biblical interpretation and the impact of such on the liturgical homily (*Dei Verbum* #9-13, 21).
3. The consequences for the preacher of this understanding of the Bible and of the liturgy – that this should shape not just homily preparation but the preacher’s whole spiritual life (*Dei Verbum* 25; *Presbyterorum ordinis* 4, 18).
4. The preacher must attend to the needs of the listener, including the culture and circumstances in which the preaching is to take place; the preacher must preach in a way that he can be heard (*Ad gentes* 6).

The introduction concludes with an important admonition, highlighting what is at the core of the preaching ministry. While a competent preacher must attend to developing his (or her) skills as a public speaker, learning how to use voice and gesture effectively, “[w]hat is essential, however, is that the preacher makes the Word of God central to his own spiritual life, that he knows his people well, that he be reflective on the events of the times, that he continually seeks to develop the skills that help him preach effectively and above all, that in his spiritual poverty, he invites in faith the Holy Spirit as the principal agent that makes the hearts of the faithful amenable to the divine mysteries” (§3).

Response

So: liturgical context, biblical hermeneutics, the person of the preacher, and the context of the listeners – all these must be attended to if we are to preach effectively. As a teacher of homiletics, I am gratified to see a Vatican document make these four points explicit: this is what most of us who teach homiletics have been saying for decades.

Summary §§4-8

Part I of the *Directory* places the homily in its liturgical setting, the privileged (but not only) setting where God speaks to us. Because it is part of the liturgy, the homily “is also an act of worship” as well as a “hymn of gratitude” – a way to glorify and praise God (§4). More than that, preaching is “sacramental” – that is: “Christ is present in the assembly gathered to listen to his word and in the preaching of his minister, through whom the same Lord who spoke long ago in the synagogue at Nazareth [Lk 4:21] now instructs his people” (§4; see *Verbum Domini* 56). Because it is an integral part of the liturgy, preaching the homily is reserved to those ordained to lead the Church’s worship, which does not exclude lay preaching in other contexts and under special circumstances (§5).

Paragraph 6 lists what the homily is *not*: a lecture or speech, a sermon on an abstract topic, an exercise in biblical exegesis, catechetical instruction, and personal witness on the part of the preacher. However, “this does not mean that topical themes, biblical exegesis, doctrinal instruction, and personal witness have no place in preaching; indeed, they can be effective as elements in a good homily” (§7). In addition, the homily must both be directed to the needs of the specific assembly as well as draw inspiration from the life of that community; that is, it is thoroughly contextual (§8; see *Evangelii gaudium* 139).

Response

It is always good to hear church documents reminding us that Christ's presence in the liturgy is not limited to the mode of the Eucharist, but that Christ is also present in the modes of the gathered assembly, the presider, and – germane to this topic – the word proclaimed (including the preaching). I appreciate the document also reminding us that, contrary to pre-Vatican II practice, the homily is an integral part of the liturgy – it is not an interruption. And, as all liturgy, it is an act of worship. The ambo is another altar. The contextualization of the homily – both in terms of liturgy and in terms of the assembly – is an important development in contemporary homiletics. Of course, preaching that honors these contexts requires time and study, which places a great responsibility on those of us who would dare exercise this ministry.

Summary §§9-15

“What, then, is the homily” (#9)? In order to answer this question, the *Directory* first turns to the introductions to the liturgical books we use at Mass: the Missal and the Lectionary.

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) calls the homily “necessary for the nurturing of the Christian life” and describes it as an “exposition of some aspect” of the scriptural readings or liturgical texts, which takes into account both the liturgical (“the mysteries being celebrated”) and social (“the particular needs of the listeners”) contexts (GIRM 65).

The introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass* (OLM) expands on this description, stressing that Word and Sacrament form a single act of praise of God and proclamation of the paschal mystery. The OLM reiterates the Church's teaching that “Christ himself is present and active in the preaching of his Church” and that the homily is to help lead to a fruitful and active celebration of the Eucharist. In order to do so, the homily must “be truly the fruit of meditation, carefully prepared, neither too long nor too short, and suited to all those present, even children and the uneducated” (OLM 24; *Directory* 10).

What makes the homily particular is its liturgical context (#11); the homily is not a theology lecture or bible study session. The homily bridges the Liturgy of the Word (during which the paschal mystery is proclaimed; #12) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist (where the paschal mystery becomes present; #13). But the homily does not stop there: it must lead the listener not only from Word to Eucharist, but also from liturgy to life (#14).

Response

I am always gratified to see a reminder that homilists must always keep context in mind: the liturgy we are celebrating and the people who are gathered, not to mention what is happening in the community and world, ought to intimately inform our preaching.

As I've mentioned before, according to sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet there is a certain dynamic to liturgy: gift → reception → return-gift. I think we see this dynamic playing out here in this discussion of the homily. The proclamation (gift) is actualized in Eucharistic communion (reception); but we know we have truly received the gift (opened ourselves to it) *only* if we live Eucharistic lives. The homily, then, can echo that same dynamic and help the assembly make those connections and draw out the implications of celebrating the liturgy in their lives.

Summary §§16-19

The second section of the Directory is entitled, “Interpreting the Word of God in the Liturgy.”

Paragraph 16 reminds us that the homily is an integral, organic part of the liturgy. Therefore, when we prepare to preach, we must “see the constellation of the readings and prayers of the celebration as crucial” to interpreting the Scriptures of the day. One of the treasures of the Second Vatican Council is the Lectionary – structured to help emphasize the unity between the Old and New Testaments.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lays out three criteria for interpreting the Scriptures in accord with Vatican II (§17):

1. Being attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture” (CCC 112; Directory §§18-19);
2. Reading the Scriptures “within the living Tradition of the whole Church” (CCC 113; Directory §20); and
3. Being attentive to the analogy of faith (CCC 114; Directory §21).

Each of these criteria needs to be unpacked.

As Catholics, we read the Scriptures as a whole – with Christ and his Paschal Mystery at the center. It is the preacher’s task to help the assembly “read the Scriptures in the light of the Paschal Mystery in such a way that Christ can reveal his very heart to them” (§18).

This means that we read the Old Testament *retrospectively* – we read backwards through the lens of Christ (and so the OT cannot be read simplistically as an unambiguous prediction of Christ’s coming). I recommend a careful read of another document – the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (JPSSCB; 2002) – to get a proper understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In summary, this document presents great gains in our understanding of the relationship between the OT and NT, between Jews and Christians. Specific gains include:

- A rejection of supersessionist readings of the OT (and a supersessionist approach to Judaism);
- An acknowledgment that the Christian interpretation of the OT is retrospective;
- A similar acknowledgment that Jewish interpretation of the OT is legitimate and that Christians can learn from Jewish exegesis; and
- Recognition that first-century Judaism was more complex than the NT often suggests, and that Jesus and emerging Christianity need to be viewed as part of that context.

The liturgical context calls us to take the structure of the Lectionary seriously, a structure that highlights the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The heart of the Sunday readings is the Gospel; the Psalm and First Reading are chosen in light of that text (in Ordinary Time, the Second Reading is not specifically chosen to ‘link’ to the other selections). But, in keeping with JPSSCB, we must be careful in *how* we make the connections between the two Testaments. It is incumbent upon those of us who preach to be intentional about carefully avoiding any anti-Jewish readings of the texts.

Resources to assist in this endeavor are found on our Preaching Links webpage:

<http://www.davenportdiocese.org/lit/litpreach.htm#AntiJudaism>.

Response

Since preaching is not the same thing as conducting a Bible study, we do not need to compulsively comment on every text. However, what we are called to do is look at all the readings and prayers and as: what do these texts, together, have to say to us today? As we look at life through the lens of these readings and prayers, what do we see? In doing so, any particular text may serve as the anchor for the homily; it does not always have to be the Gospel.

Summary §§20-25

As mentioned in the last issue, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lays out three criteria for interpreting the Scriptures in accord with Vatican II (§17):

1. Being attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture” (CCC 112; Directory §§18-19);
2. Reading the Scriptures “within the living Tradition of the whole Church” (CCC 113; Directory §20); and
3. Being attentive to the analogy of faith (CCC 114; Directory §21).

Each of these criteria needs to be unpacked. In the last issue, we commented on #1 – that we attend to the unity of the Scriptures. Now we attend to the other two points.

As Catholics, we interpret the Scriptures within the life of the Church (§20). While the “relationship between Tradition and Scripture is profound and complex,” *Dei Verbum* – Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – makes it clear that there are *not* two revelations but a single revelation, Jesus Christ, mediated through both the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church (see especially paragraphs 2, 6, 9-10). The liturgy is a “unique manifestation of this relationship.” Not only was the liturgy the original setting for the development of what eventually became the New Testament, but the liturgy itself – its words and its actions – are rooted in the Bible.

The “analogy of faith” refers to the fact that our various doctrines work together in a “hierarchy” of truths (§21). At the core of our faith lies the mystery of the Trinity, and God’s invitation to share in this divine life – a reality “revealed and effected through the Paschal Mystery” of Jesus Christ. Therefore, at the heart of Catholic preaching lies the proclamation of the Paschal Mystery; at Eucharist, such a proclamation should help the hearer enter into that mystery through the celebration of the Eucharist. Such an encounter with Christ is transformative – and preaching can help draw out the implications of that transformation (§22).

Resources for connecting Scripture and Tradition include the *Catechism* (§23) and the writings of the Church Fathers (§25), who were “great masters of the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture” that transcends the literal meaning revealed through exegesis (while remaining rooted in it) and interprets the Bible through the lens of the Paschal Mystery (§24).

This section summarizes: Vatican II has given us “[1] a renewed understanding of the homily as integral to the liturgical celebration, [2] a fruitful method for biblical interpretation, and [3] an incentive for preachers to familiarize themselves with the riches of two thousand years of reflection on the word of God” which is our heritage (§25). *How* to do so is the subject of the next section of the document.

Response

All preaching needs to be rooted in the Tradition; that is, it needs to be doctrinally sound. What we preach is the faith of the Church, not our own opinions. And we can certainly learn from the preachers and teachers who have gone before us. So far, so good. But we need to be careful.

First, as Pope Francis, the US Bishops, and even this document remind us: the homily is not an academic lecture. To be “catechetical” – that is, to echo (teach) the faith – does not mean to present material as if one is in a classroom. The homiletic genre needs to be respected.

Second, I do get a little nervous when individuals hold up Patristic preachers (essentially those from the first 500 years of our history) as the ideal. I worry about a too-facile appropriation of the patristic approach in a contemporary setting: our contexts (including the presuppositions that we bring to the texts) are worlds apart. We can’t just “cut and paste” from an early homily and think it will make sense today. I am especially concerned about how the Jewish people are treated by some of the Church Fathers (ex: Chrysostom) and how for the Church Fathers the Old Testament was seen only as preparatory for the New... while, as mentioned last time, contemporary Catholic teaching accords both the Old Testament and the Covenant with the Jewish people enduring value on their own.

Summary §§26-36

Echoing Pope Francis, the *Directory* admonishes us: “in the preparation of homilies, study is invaluable but prayer is essential” (§26; see *Evangelii gaudium* §§145, 151). Just as the Eucharistic Prayer precedes the distribution of Communion, so the readings precede the homily – where “God’s holy Word is ‘distributed’ for the nourishment of his people” (§26).

As Pope Benedict XVI (especially in *Verbum Domini*) and others have also mentioned, the recommended way to prepare prayerfully to preach is through the use of *lectio divina* (§27). The *Directory* then proceeds to review each of the steps of *lectio* in the light of homily preparation.

During *lectio* (§§29-31), the reading of the text, the preacher should also bring to bear the tools of critical biblical scholarship, in order to understand the text in its context. At the same time, the liturgical context – and the use of the text in the lectionary – need to be taken into consideration. However, the aim of such study and prayer is not to “understand every little detail of a text, but to discover its principal message” (§30; cf. EG 147). One of the tasks of the preacher is to “translate” what he or she has learned into the language of the assembly, a language that is “simple, clear, direct, well adapted” (§31; *Evangelii nuntiandi* 43).

The second step, *meditatio* (§§32-33), involves exploring what the text is saying to us – what is challenging, troubling, pleasant, moving, or attractive (§32; cf. EG 153). At the same time, such insights need to be placed in conversation, or tested against, the Church’s Rule of Faith. In particular, the *Directory* reminds us that the text is to be viewed through the lens of the Paschal Mystery. Finally, in addition to reflection in light of one’s own experiences and the faith of the Church, preparation for preaching requires reflection in light of the life of the community which will hear the preaching. That is, the preacher must also “contemplate his people” (EG 154).

Oratio is our prayerful response to God (§34). The *Directory* mentions that such a prayerful response can take the form of the petitions used in the third form of the penitential act or in the prayer of the faithful, composing them in light of the scriptures of the day.

Finally, *contemplatio* (§35), in this document, refers to the disposition of the preacher – a trusting by the preacher that “it is ultimately God who is at work bringing his Word to fruition” (§35). Far from absolving the preacher from any responsibility in preparing the homily, such a trusting stance frees the preacher from anxiety. Once he (or she) has done what is in his or her power to do, the rest is up to God.

Pope Benedict XVI added a fifth step to the traditional approach to *lectio divina*: action (*actio*). This is the homily’s concrete answer to the question: what are we being sent (the *missa*) to do? “[P]reaching, when combined with the nourishment of the sacraments received in faith, opens up the members of the liturgical assembly to practical expressions of charity” (§36).

Response

When I was doing my doctoral work in homiletics, the small group that I was a part of developed a schema for homily preparation that was intimately tied to *lectio divina*. It is confirming to see official Church documents echoing the insights that we had come to, which we have been teaching, and which we have been using as part of our homily preparation for years. In our model, we made *oratio* the final step – conceiving of the homily itself as a prayerful response to our encounter with God.

When teaching preachers, I encourage them to write a “focus” and a “function” statement: the former is a one sentence summary of what they want to “say” in their homily and the latter is a one sentence summary of what they want the homily to “do”. If the homily is an encounter with Christ, we should be transformed; transformed, we should be moved to action in some way. Is that how we experience our Sunday preaching? If not, why not?

Summary §§37-38

Part II of the *Directory* focuses on “concrete examples and suggestions to help the homilist put into practice the principles presented in this document” (#37). Therefore, this section should not be read as a recipe book to be used in cookie-cutter fashion, but simple as “ways of approaching particular themes and texts throughout the course of the liturgical year” (#37). Not all texts are covered, and not all the meanings possible in a given text are explored.

As the *Directory* itself cautions: “in what is offered here, no attempt is made to exhaust all that could be said about a given celebration or to move in detail through the whole liturgical year. Rather, in the light of the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, indications are offered on how particular texts could be handled within a given homily” (#38). What is offered here is a pattern, one possible approach. The preacher must still keep in mind the concrete situation of the assembly, the cultural context, and the liturgy being celebrated.

Rather than beginning with Advent, the *Directory* begins with the Paschal Triduum, following Pope Benedict’s emphasis on the Paschal Mystery (#38; see *Verbum Domini* #52). The *Directory* then treats Eastertime and Lent before addressing Advent, Christmastime, and, finally, Ordinary Time. The section concludes with comments on preaching at other occasions: weekdays, weddings, and funerals.

Response

I get very concerned when a single approach to preaching is proposed, especially an approach that proposes or privileges a single meaning for a text or set of texts. While homilists may find the reflections here to be helpful in their preparation, just as reading any commentary might be, I would hope that they would appropriate the pattern—and the content—in a critical fashion.

Overall, I see two specific problems in this section. First, insights from the document *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scripture in the Christian Bible* seem to be missing. This omission leads to use of the Old (First) Testament in ways that can reduce it to a simple promise-fulfillment schema and even borders on supercessionism. Second, while some may find references to the *Catechism* to be helpful, preachers must keep in mind that preaching is not a catechetical lecture. While preaching must always be doctrinally sound, the genre of the homily must be respected.

Summary §§39-56

The *Directory* begins its reflection on the lectionary with the Paschal Triduum and Eastertime. The authors first connect the Holy Thursday reading of the Passover from Exodus to Christ's own paschal meal—and to the Eucharist being celebrated (#39). Jesus is presented as the Lamb of God—whose blood saves the people (#39) from sin and death (#40). On Good Friday, we hear from the prophet Isaiah before hearing the account of the Passion. The *Directory* describes Isaiah's oracle as a "prophetic foreshadowing of Christ" (#46). The Easter Lectionary is described in some detail, with connections made to the *Catechism* (#51-55). The *Directory* points out that preaching through Eastertime should help prepare the assembly for the celebration of Pentecost: Easter, Pentecost, and the Eucharist interpret and inform each other (#56).

Response

We must be careful not read the Christian Eucharist as a *replacement* for the Jewish Passover; rather, Christians have seen in the images used to explain the Passover a way to shed light on what Christ's paschal mystery—and the Eucharist mean. We need to remember that, as Christians, we read the First (Old) Testament *retrospectively* through the lens of the paschal mystery (see *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*). So, while it is true to say that, as Christians, we find in the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah a way to speak of Jesus and the events of the Passion, it would be an error to say that is the *only* way the texts can be read.

As noted before, while the preacher may want to refer to the *Catechism* as part of homily preparation, and while all homilies should be doctrinally sound, we need to be careful not to confuse a homily for a catechetical lecture. In addition, during Eastertime, we must be careful with how we use the Acts of the Apostles. As noted in *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching*, Acts will at times give the impression that all Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus to all Jews – a perspective rejected by the Church today.

See: <http://www.davenportdiocese.org/lit/liturgylibrary/Calendar/litGodsMercyEnduresForever-LentTriduumEaster.pdf>.

Summary §§57-77

The *Directory* next covers the Sundays of Lent, focusing on the Gospels. The Gospel reading on the First Sunday of Lent recounts the temptation of Jesus in the desert—a story echoed on our Lenten journey and in the history of Israel (#58-59). The *Directory* points out that the “language of the Preface is a bridge between Scripture and Eucharist” – which may offer the preacher way to connect Word and Sacrament. The *Directory* also rightly points out that the focus of our preaching is not history but Christ’s real and abiding presence in the Church, and his victory over temptation and death in which we share, and the celebration of which at Easter is already being pointed to at the start of Lent (#60-63).

“The Gospel on the Second Sunday of Lent is always the account of the Transfiguration” (#64). The *Directory* mentions that this story points out that “cross and glory belong together” and again points out that the words of the Preface provide an excellent summary of the mystery being celebrated (#65). A connection to the sacraments of initiation is also made: just as Jesus is in solidarity with us when it comes to temptation we, baptized into his death and resurrection, will be one with him on glory (#67). Connections are also made to the other proper texts of the day (#68).

The Cycle A readings for the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent are emphasized because of their importance in regard to initiation. “The association of the themes of water, light, and life with baptism are quite evident; by means of these biblical passages and the prayers of the liturgy, the Church is leading her elect toward initiation at Easter” (#69). The *Directory* rightly stresses that the faithful and those to be initiated travel Lent together (#70)—the faithful helping to prepare the elect and, though not explicitly mentioned, the elect encouraging the rest of us by their example.

Finally, the *Directory* reminds us that the homily on Palm/Passion Sunday should be brief, a daunting task given “the many theological and emotional elements of this day” (#77). It is suggested that the homilist focus on the hymn from Philipians, “which admirably summarizes the whole Paschal Mystery” (#77)—the mystery into which we are to be plunged even more deeply as Holy Week unfolds.

Response

This section of the *Directory* offers some very helpful insights. First, connections are made between the gospels and the liturgical texts (prefaces, propers, ritual prayers associated with the Scrutinies) which can be fruitfully mined by the preacher in order to better ensure that the homily helps lead the assembly to the Table and deeper into the mysteries of Lent. Second, the Lenten readings are spoken of in terms of a trajectory towards Easter, for both the faithful and those to be baptized. We are all heading to the font—some for the first time, some to renew their baptismal commitment, for we all journey through the deserts of sin, ignorance, and death (#69).

For those who want to delve deeper into possible relationships between the readings and liturgical texts, I recommend the 3-volume series by Gueric DeBona, published by Liturgical Press: *Between the Ambo and the Altar: Biblical Preaching and the Roman Missal* (Years A, B, and C).

See: <https://litpress.org/Products/3563/Between-the-Ambo-and-the-Altar-ThreeVolume-Paperback-Set> for details.

Summary §§78-109

The *Directory* next covers the Sundays of Advent, again focusing on the Gospels” the first Sunday (#80-86) stresses Christ’s coming at the end of time, the second and third Sundays (#87-95) turn our attention to John the Baptist, and the fourth Sunday (#96-109) focuses on the events just before the Nativity (#78). The first readings on these Sundays, taken from the Prophets, are also stressed in this section of the *Directory*.

We are reminded that Advent holds in tension a double sense of the Lord’s coming: “in the graces of the Christmas feast and... in judgment at the end of time” (#79). The preacher is reminded to keep both senses of the season in mind, not forgetting that Christ is also truly present in the Eucharistic assembly. As St. Bernard taught, “between Christ’s two visible comings, in history and at the end of time, there is an invisible coming here and now” (#79).

Response

This section provides rich material for the preacher’s reflection, and helpful direction for preaching during this theologically dense season. However, the preacher must be careful on how the prophetic texts are used in preaching.

As mentioned before, we must be careful not to treat the relationship between the prophets and the gospel using a simplistic promise-fulfillment schema. As Christians, we read the Prophets retrospectively—through the lens of the Paschal Mystery. We cannot preach in a way that suggests that the prophetic texts were obvious in their meaning and that the Jewish people were too blind to see a Messiah that was so clearly predicted. Such an approach distorts the more complex relationship between the two Testaments and misunderstands the nature of messianic expectations in first century Judaism.

See God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching (Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops September, 1988), #11-15 – either on our website or in the September 2015 edition of *LiturgyNotes*.

Summary §§110-139

This section of the *Directory* reviews the Christmas Season. The liturgies of Christmas itself, Holy Family, Mary the Mother of God, Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord are treated.

The Vigil Mass for the Christmas and the three Masses for Christmas itself (the Masses at Night, Dawn, and Day) each have unique readings, stressing particular aspects of the mystery of the Incarnation. The *Directory* notes that one purpose of the homily is to help move the assembly to a more full participation in the liturgy of the Eucharist; to that end, the preacher may highlight that the liturgical texts for Christmas highlight the “today” of Christ’s coming. Another central image at these liturgies is Christ as the Light of the world (#110-119).

On the Feast of the Holy Family (#120-122), the preacher is urged that “rather than simply giving a moral exhortation on family values, [he] should take his cue from the Scripture readings of this day to speak of the Christian family as a school of *discipleship*” (#121). It is also recommended that if the preacher is not planning on explicitly addressing St. Paul’s instruction that wives are to be subordinate to their husbands

then the shorter version of the reading should be used. If the preacher is going to explore the implications of this text for today, highlighting that the “subordination” which Paul speaks of is to be mutual and done out of reverence for Christ needs to be stressed (#122).

The remaining feast days (Mary, Mother of God [#123], Epiphany [#124-130], and Baptism of the Lord [#131-139]) continue to unpack the mystery of the Incarnation for us. Jesus is born fully human; one of us—a solidarity expressed by his acceptance of baptism in the Jordan.

Response

The mystery of the Incarnation is central to the Christian faith. However, the preacher must be careful not to let the homily become a lecture on the theology of the Incarnation (or, on the Feast of the Baptism, on Trinitarian theology) but instead help the assembly experience this reality in their lives here and now. *Today* is born for us a Savior... where and how do we encounter Christ?

Again, we must be careful not to paint the Jewish people as “blind” to the “obvious” arrival of the Messiah. We read the First Testament retrospectively. Messianic expectations differed widely among Jewish believers at the time of Jesus. The Gospel writers and editors tell the birth narratives in particular ways to make specific theological points, not to report on the details of what happened. A good preacher keeps all these things in mind.

Summary §§140-149

This section of the *Directory*, which covers Sundays in Ordinary Time, opens with the reminder that while other seasons have a “distinctive character” that is not the case for Ordinary Time. Likewise, there is no “theme” assigned to individual Sundays; rather, our focus is always on the “celebration of the mystery of Christ” (140). We are also reminded that, in accord with Vatican II’s desire that “the treasures of the Bible [be] opened up more lavishly” (SC 21) to the faithful, we now have a three-year cycle of readings organized around the three Synoptic gospels. The gospels are read in semi-continuous fashion during Ordinary Time, and the Old Testament reading and psalm are chosen to harmonize with it (140-141, 146). The second reading is independent, with various letters read in semi-continuous fashion (147). There is nothing wrong with preaching on (through) the second reading rather than using the gospel / first reading / psalm as the primary homiletic focus (148). Certainly, the preacher does not have to “say something about each reading, or to build artificial bridges between them: the unifying principle is how Christ’s Paschal Mystery is revealed and celebrated at this liturgical gathering” (149).

On the one hand, the each of the three years unfolds according to a similar pattern: “the early weeks deal with the beginning of Christ’s public ministry, the final weeks have an eschatological theme, and the intervening weeks take in sequence various events and teachings from our Lord’s life” (141). On the other, “[e]ach year is distinctive as well, because it unfolds the doctrine proper to each of the synoptic Gospels” (142). This structure is important for the preacher to keep in mind: “The homilist should avoid the temptation to approach each Sunday’s Gospel passage as an independent entity: awareness of the overall structure and distinctive features of each Gospel can deepen his understanding of the text” (142).

A brief overview of each of the three years is then given. During Year A (143), the homilist is encouraged to keep Matthew’s use of Five Discourses as an organizing principle for his gospel in mind, drawing out the connections between Jesus’ life (the narrative portions of the gospel) and his teaching (the

discourses). During Year B, distinctive features of Mark's gospel should be kept in mind—such as the theme of misunderstanding. In addition, the use of chapter 6 from John's gospel (the Bread of Life discourse) opens up possibilities “to preach for several weeks on Christ as the living Bread who nourishes us with both his word and his Body and Blood” (144). The homilist during year C is encouraged to echo Luke's emphasis on gentleness, forgiveness, and mercy (145).

In the end, the preacher does not have to say everything about all the readings. As the *Directory* puts it, “in any case, his purpose is not to create a *tour de force* that exhaustively ties together all the various threads in all the readings, but to follow one thread as it leads the people of God into the heart of the mystery of Christ's life, death, and Resurrection which becomes present in the liturgical celebration” (149).

Response

This section helpfully reviews the structure of and rationale behind the revised Lectionary, and offers a very brief insight into what makes each of the three synoptic gospels unique. The *Introduction to the Lectionary* as published in the UK has a helpful set of tables that provide an overview of the structure of the gospels as related to the lectionary readings; it may be accessed at: <http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Rites/Lectionary.pdf>.

The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible provides a nuanced view of the relationship between the two Testaments, and it would have been helpful to have those insights included in this document. The document is available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

Summary §§150-156; Appendix I and II

The *Directory* concludes with a discussion of preaching that occurs on occasions other than Sundays: weekdays, weddings, and funerals.

The *Directory* notes that while preaching a homily on weekdays is not strictly required, it is encouraged (especially during Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter) and it provides the homilist an opportunity to preach on texts that are not heard on Sunday (§§150-151). Of necessity, weekday preaching ought to be brief, which often—it is noted—“requires additional preparation” (§§150, 152). The homilist is also urged to attend to how the weekday lectionary in ordinary time is arranged, and make sure the sequence of readings is not interrupted or readings omitted too often by the observance of saints' feasts (§§152-153).

The *Directory* next turns its attention to weddings and funerals. While not providing much in the way of specifics, the document does stress that the preacher must attend to the reality that many who are present at these occasions are either not Catholic (or even Christian), no longer practice the faith, or are not well-formed in what the Church teaches about the vocation of marriage or the mystery of death (§§154-155).

The *Directory* concludes with two appendices. Appendix I (§§157-160) addresses the question of the *Catechism* as a resource for preaching. The authors note that “[a] concern that has been voiced often in the years since the Second Vatican Council, notably in Synods of Bishops, has been the need for more

doctrine in preaching" (§157). In response to such a need, it is suggested that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) might be a good resource—"but it is important that it be used in a way that is consonant with the purpose of the homily" (§157; emphasis mine).

What does this mean? At a minimum, we must keep in mind that "the Sunday liturgy is not an 'occasion' on which to deliver a sermon, that would in its topic be contrary to the liturgical season and its themes" (§158). In addition, the preacher must remember that his "task is not to make the readings at Mass fit a preconceived schema of topics, but to invite his listeners to ponder the faith of the Church as it emerges naturally from the Scriptures in the context of the liturgical celebration" (§159). With these *caveats* in mind, the *Directory* provides a list of paragraphs from the CCC that "resonate with the biblical readings for Sundays and holy days... chosen either because they cite or allude to the specific readings, or because they treat topics found in the readings" (§160). The *Directory* encourages the homilist "not simply to consult the *Catechism* in a cursory fashion, but to meditate on how its four parts are mutually related" (§160). Appendix II provides a bibliography of "post-conciliar ecclesial sources relevant to preaching."

Response

The reminder to be attentive to the structure of the weekday lectionary and choice of readings is helpful; preachers should be familiar with what the *Introduction* to the *Lectionary* instructs in this matter. Preaching at the rites presents its own set of challenges. It is good to keep in mind that on occasions such as weddings and funerals there are those who will be present who are either not Catholic or are no longer practicing the faith. These are evangelical opportunities. Finally, as I have noted before, homilies *do* teach, and must be doctrinally sound – but they are not catechetical sessions or theology lectures. The preacher must always return to the purpose of the homily: a transformative encounter with the Word of God.

For those interested in reading more on preaching at the rites (and feasts), I recommend James Wallace's *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feasts and within the Rites* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002).