**Notes on Preparing a Homily**

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**Notes on Preparing a Homily[[1]](#footnote-2)**

**A: Attitude**

1. **Preparing a homily is a serious responsibility.**

People can tell and will sometimes express an opinion on whether or how well they feel a homily has been prepared. Give-away signs that insufficient care has been taken include:

* Easy, obvious, “thin” or trite content;
* The material does not sound like you;
* People feel “preached at”;
* It is “bookish”;
* It doesn’t relate to their real lives or your own experience;
* It is rambling or lacking in structure, a beginning, a message and a planned ending.
1. **Good homilies emerge from prayer…**

…not from study, knowledge, opinion or self-centredness.

They are NOT essays or an intellectual exercise. They emerge from our relationship with God.

“If the words of scripture are divinely inspired, as we believe them to be, then divine inspiration must be at work when those words are made alive and contemporary to the believing community in and through our ministry.” (“*Fulfilled in your hearing” 1982* US Bishops’ Conference).

Preparing a homily is necessarily a prayerful experience if we are to engage with the divinely inspired text(s), take it to heart and express it appropriately. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that enables us to discern the message of scripture and make it our own. It is the same Spirit that enables us to convey the message truthfully and from the heart. And it is the same Spirit that enables us to discern what to say, why and how.

Preaching today is no different than when the apostles preached. It is the same message, the same Lord and the same Spirit at work through his witness…you. Anything other is fraud, pretence and self-serving.

1. **The homily is a part of the liturgy.**

(cf. *SacrosanctumConcilium* 52, “The homily, therefore, is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself.”

The placing of the homily immediately after the readings and before the profession of faith (on major days) and the prayers of need, is deliberate. Scripture is first read and then “opened” through prayerful contemplation by the homilist. The natural next steps are both to express our faith (in the Creed) and to recognition of our own needs and the needs of others.

Our prayerfully composed homily, our words, become part of the liturgical words of the Mass. They are that important and deserving of careful, prayerful preparation.

**B. TheThree tasks in preparing a homily**

**1. To discern** what the Lord is doing/speaking here and now.

The message of scripture does not live in a Bible; it lives in people and through people to enlighten the world. Mission is the central purpose of the Church; the Church exists to spread the message of God’s living word.

The discerned message of scripture through a homily comes alive within the combination of:

* The texts themselves (on Sundays, all 4 scriptural texts);
* The theme of the liturgical gathering (eg. The season, feast, special occasion);
* The milieu of the assembly (all that is going on in our world and church right now);
* The real life experiences, hurts, circumstances of those assembled together to hear God’s word.

These four dimensions make up the “Now” of each homily. Every homily is preached in a different “Now”. Homilies cannot, therefore, be re-run or dragged out of the drawer three years on when the same readings re-occur.

Christ speaks now in this liturgy since “He is present in his word, since it is He himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church (cf. *SacrosanctumConcilium* 7 and *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* 9). The homilist is involved as a messenger and tool of the Word, otherwise he is faking and deceiving. Prayer, humility and service of the people are key watch-words in preparing any homily.

**2. To help in God’s wanting to light up the lives of his people.**

Once you have discerned, through His Spirit in a prayerful way, what the Lord is speaking through these scriptures and for this “Now”, it is your task to light up the message for the assembly.

Always work from the texts and then take into account the theme (eg. Season etc.), the milieu and the lives of the assembly. Do not try to fit the scriptures to your idea or message discerned in isolation from the liturgical texts.

Remember that a lot of preparation for the homily has already taken place within this liturgy in songs, symbols, prayers and, crucially, the Word of God already speaking to each listener.

1. **To do all of behalf of the Church…**

…not one’s own self, or ego or to make your point! Preaching at Mass is always by an ordained minister because it is to be Christ *capitis*speaking, through his chosen and graced (by ordination) minister of his Church. It is to be more than a private individual giving personal witness.

**Note**:It is not the skill, words or power of the homilist that shapes the assembly or the individual believer. It is the power of the Word of God carried and implanted by the Holy Spirit for every individual hearing differently. The power of the homily is through the Spirit of God at work. The only power the homilist actually has is the Spirit of God at work in him. Without the working together of God and his instrument – the homilist – only words and ideas pass around the church.

Giving a homily is a ministry, never mastery.

**C. When is a homily not a homily?**

1. When it’s not written for this “Now”, these people, this week, God speaking to me for this “Now”.

2. When it’s someone else’s homily written for an unknown (to you) worshipping assembly and for a situation other than that at this “Now”. Taking someone else’s homily verbatim is insulting to you and to the people you are supposedly serving. How can it be the Holy Spirit working through you if no discernment of the meaning by you and for this “Now” has taken place.

3. When it avoids the clear focus of the scriptural text.

For example, if the final sentence of the following text was taken by the preacher as the focus:

“Jesus said to them “Come and see”. So they went and saw where he was staying…and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon (John 1: 38-39).

and a homily about our use of time in a busy world ensued.

But avoiding the focus of the scriptural texts also occurs:

* By focussing on a side issue not related to the “Now”;
* By ignoring the scriptural texts altogether to preach on something else;
* By separating the homily from the theme and purpose of this assembly.

4. When it is a lecture, a teaching lesson or a fact and information-giving exercise.

There is a clear distinction between teaching (providing information for absorption/learning) and preaching. A homily relates to living out faith, conversion, relationship with God. A homily draws out message and meaning for changing, deepening, supporting lives. It is not about the scripture and related doctrine. It is and conveys a faithful message of inspired scripture for the lives of both ourselves (firstly) and those to whom we minister.

**D. Method**

- read and re-read the readings (all of them), noticing parallels and links; -

- discern a core thought;

- research around the texts if you feel the need, but stay with your core thought . Do not be led by your research into simply copying/paraphrasing other people’s work.

- if you read related homilies, draw out only what may be directly related to your core thought and appropriate for this occasion.

- jot ideas and thoughts and then draft.

- edit, cut back, develop your core thought.

-write and edit.

- settle on your final homily.

**Tips:**

**Get started** up to a week beforehand so that:

* You have time to mature, test, replace or prayerfully confirm your key thought.
* You have time to notice links between the scripture message and your life, to give new insights, fresh thoughts and appreciation of the scripture message in your own life.
* You can try out your ideas and discuss with others (your wife, a close friend or your priest or a parish prayer group).

**Recognise that homilies take time** and may not be possible if confined to a specific time slot, especially if time is by then (too) short. One rule of thumb is at least 30 minutes for every minute of the eventual homily.

**Use your talents and resources** as a graced and spiritual person, firstly, as an informed Christian who has lived, studied, pondered, discussed your faith time and time again. You are immensely experienced in a relationship with God, gifted by the Holy Spirit, yet fallen from faithful following of Christ over and over again. If all this was not so, how could you possibly preach authentically.

**Aim small.** One key point, one aspect from the wealth you will find in every scripture, one focus. Try to do more and you risk overload, wordiness, length, losing people, complication, need for explanations and complex structure. Taking on lots of points leads you towards broad-brush statements, thin content skimming the surface of a lot and making the homily, frequently, hard to follow. One key point is enough for any homily. Don’t try to find lots.

**E. Beginnings, Endings and the Middle**

**Beginnings:**

Get to the point. Consider going straight to the central message without any introduction. Ask yourself if an introduction really necessary. Does it only add distraction from the message? Does my introduction really assist understanding or focus?

Keep any introduction as brief as possible. Here is where to concentrate you editing because an un-thought-through homily, when drafted, may well contain padding in the introduction as you search for the right words to get to your message.

Building up, through an introduction, to make a point is often counter-productive as people turn off during a round about way of starting, or they just lose interest. Maybe it’s poor or unnecessary beginnings that lead people into the habit of switching off as soon as the homily begins. Every homilist has the task of capturing attention within the first sentence or short paragraph – and without resorting to sensational words or stories that draw attention away from the message within the homily.

**Endings:**

Plan and use an appropriate ending. Endings are frequently omitted or, alternatively, protracted to the detriment of the heart of the homily.

Unplanned and unedited endings cause rambling, additional sentences that each try to conclude but, somehow, another sentence is needed to improve the ending…and so on. That’s how endings become rambling. Even a couple of wasted sentences can come across as rambling and fumbling for a way to end.

Avoid “Finally” or “In conclusion”. That you are drawing together your homily should be obvious. “Finally” (and its equivalent words) smack of inviting people to wake up now or, alternatively, that you are giving a speech. Let the message carried by the Holy Spirit to each listener, in their circumstances, be the final word – even if that came at some other point in your homily.

The ending is to underscore or draw from the key message of the homily. You may have structured your homily to lead to the key message, thus making any end section superfluous.

Beware of a fresh start within the ending, as another point is made. There is always much more that could be drawn out than that can ever be opened up in a single homily.

Edit your draft to find and remove any mini homily added at the end of your main homily. There is always a danger of an “addendum” mini homily if you preach, for example, on the gospel (and 1st reading) and then try to work in something distinct drawn from the 2nd reading.

In editing your ending, think of a small plane coming in to land. Pilot your homily down to a smooth landing and not with a runway bounce or small re-take-off to land in a nearby field.

Never repeat your homily in a summarized form and imagine that your ending is anything other than repetition. Repeating yourself in a homily can annoy, will simply lengthen the homily and demonstrate a lack of editing. You are not teaching or hammering knowledge home. Believe that your listeners are wanting to pick up on God’s word for them within what you say. What resonates for any person will do so without any repetition.

Be careful about “salad” endings. These are when there is lots of “lettuce” – “let us” do this, do that, take up this or that practice, change like this or that. “Let us…” can come across as false or trite if your listeners do not believe that you yourself will lead the way and exemplify whatever practice, observance, way of behaving you are proposing. “Let us…” is not always a poor way to end, but use “salad” endings sparingly and with broad suggestions, because everyone’s life, circumstances, spirituality and way of living out their faith is different. Calls to specific uniform practices or observances ignore all of this.

**The Middle**

“Too many thoughts!” or “unfocussed” are the most frequent complaints about homilies (according to Bishop Untener in his book *Preaching Better)*. Both of these faults almost inevitably lead to a homily being too long – another major obstacle to the message of the Scriptures reaching the people we are called to serve.

Adequate time for preparing a homily is crucial – and that’s much more than an hour or two from scratch! Time to ponder, to let thoughts emerge from careful and prayerful reading of the texts is a real necessity. The less time is devoted to prayerful reading and preparation and editing, the more likely the homily will be broad, multi-pointed and long.

But more. A visiting bishop at a Chrism Mass here in Hallam, speaking directly to the assembled priests said, “Unless you pray, you will have nothing to say” – and he meant a lot more than dutiful recitation of the Office. The quality of your own spiritual life and lived faith is remote preparation for preaching. Nothing can substitute for this. It is because of our own spiritual life that the Holy Spirit can speak through our prayerfully considered words. When our spiritual life is at a low ebb, so will our preaching be.

Bishop Untener likens the nature of a homily, as distinct from a talk, to a precious jewel. Extending this simile, the good homilist finds the jewel through the Holy Spirit at work within him. As the servant of the people, you are called to bring out and show the beauty of that jewel. Seeing this God-given jewel, those you serve will be uplifted and drawn towards the beauty of other jewels of God elsewhere, wherever they are found in their own lives.

The “jewel” is the one key point, insight or discerned truth for our living that you have found in your preparation. This “jewel” is attractive. Through hearing God’s word made relevant to my life, the beauty of the jewel is understood and taken to heart.

The “jewel” in a homily need not be something new or sensational, but may simply convey a truth that you and (through you) those listening can re-affirm, bring afresh to mind, heart and life.

The image of the “jewel” is helpful since it conveys smallness. Few homilies have a huge jewel like the Cullinan diamond but the core of good homilies are like the diamondin an engagement ring. To the person who has received that tiny diamond, it is precious.

The jewel image also makes a contrast between a key thought (an idea, point or statement) and a “jewel”, mined from prayer, embodying something of the depth and richness of God’s message and truth.

A key thought leads to a theme running through a homily. A “jewel” may well centre on a single sentence around which the homily is structured. That sentence may be from the gospel or other scripture readings or it might be from your time in prayer and pondering. Often the “jewel” may be led up to and then displayed at the end of the homily, placing the jewel into the hands of those you serve (and rendering an ending unnecessary).

Untener gives a good contrast between a homily containing a theme and one containing as “jewel”:

1. With only a theme:

“I’m going to talk about how we are called to give witness to our faith. We need to stand up for our faith whether we’re at home, at work, with our friends. Peter and Paul were willing to do that – they both diedas martyrs – and people down through the centuries have done the same. There are martyrs today too. Too often we take our faith for granted and don’t realize that we are often out ofr step with the world around us. We need to give witness to that [Note: Working within a broad theme like this can result in a homily that has no focus and repeats bromides that we’ve heard a hundred times.]”.

1. With a “jewel”:

“I’m going to use the image of daytime running lights in cars. Their purpose is so *others* can see the car rather than vice versa. People have “running lights” too from the moment they get out of bed in the morning. Others see our “running lights” whether we intend it or not. We need to take a good look at what they see. [Note: This is an insight that holds great promise for development]”.

You will never know what is the “jewel” for each person. What strikes you as precious may not be the same for others but, maybe, something else in what you have said is precious for them. It is the Spirit who implants what is needed from your homily for each attentive listener. Your role is to hold out, as best you can, what the Holy Spirit has offered to you. God uses it as he will.

**F. Writing, Editing and Length**

**Writing:**

No matter how fully our homily is written down and taken with us into church, or whether we (bravely)preach without notes, there is always need to write beforehand. Once we have discerned our core thought, found the “jewel”, we need to find words and ways of using those words to convey what we want to say. This cannot be done “on the hoof”.

Writing done how we will express our thoughts, how we will begin, how we will end our homily is key to finding the best ways to expressourselves and to avoid length and verbiage.

**Why write things down?**

* To ensure the clarity of what we are trying to say. My thought may seem clear, but when we come to express it in words, clarity sometimes evades us. That thought may turn out to be not so great as we imagined. Expressing it in writing forces out how good it is and how useable.
* To trigger other related thoughts that add clarity and help relate the message to the lives of listeners.

message to the lives of listeners.

* To find new and attractive ways to express thoughts, avoiding clichés and hackneyed ways of speaking.
* To be able to edit down to what is really needed to carry the message more clearly.

Jotting down thoughts or isolated sentences might well help in the earlier stages of preparing a homily. This can be like sketching where quite a lot can be achieved in outlining a homily before committing the sketch to a final considered drawing. Just as with sketching, there may be different “lines” or words/sentences tried out but the best one becomes clear when they are put to paper. And, as with sketching, though lots may be jotted, the best line and the overall balance and accuracy become clear – as do obviously unhelpful lines.

There are various views about what the notes taken into church should best comprise – full text, key sentences in sequence, key words, nothing. What is important is that you are able to convey what you have prayerfully planned to say and in an attractive or acceptable way. You will want to do justice to the quality of your preparation and the “jewel” you are offering to those you serve. Above all, you will want to fulfil your call to preach worthily and as well as you can, with the help of God.

All this takes writing firstly and then, importantly, editing.

**Editing:**

No book, article or letter is published without editing. That’s because the publisher is looking for quality of the contents to match the quality of the publication. A homily is an integral part of the Liturgy. Our words are words of this Mass. It is, surely, incumbent on us, as homilists, to self edit towards the best we can offer as God’s minister and servant of his people here.

A useful way to edit a draft homily is to try to give each section or paragraph a title and to ensure that those titles relate to what you are trying to say and that they progress in a helpful way.

Editing involves cutting. It hurts, but it is better than obscuring your message in padding or superfluous material, however interesting. There is always another homily to be written another time. It may even help to produce a draft of a second homily, not for use now, that contains rejected material ready for another day.

Don’t be tempted to start again at the last minute. That places you in the position of the homilist who hasn’t bothered to prepare properly. Use what you’ve been preparing; don’t lose heart.

Edit to find unnecessary words. Why, for example, use two adjectivesif one will be clear?Extra words lengthen and deaden homilies.

**Why edit anyway?**

To find and remove:

* wasted words;
* words and sentences that are sloppy, flabby or padding;
* verbiage.; that is, words or sentences without point;
* length. Nobody likes a long homily (or a short one made to feel long);
* unhelpful words, illustrations, examples and idioms;
* repetition (unless purposeful and helpful).

To achieve;

* A crisp, to-the-point, relevant and clear homily;
* A memorable and understood key message drawn from your reflection;
* A deepening of appreciation of the message within these texts;
* The solace of God’s word feeding his people through his Holy Spirit working through you.

**Length**

What is appropriate for the “Now”. A strange paradox declares “The bigger the occasion, the smaller the homily needs to be”. Think of Good Friday or a large funeral with eulogies from family members. How valuable would it be, how much would be added, if you gave a full length homily.

**What is full length, too long or too short?**

“Full length” includes an assumption of a good structure that (to use again the analogy of flying a plane) takes off, has a steady flight with good visibility for passengers and comes in and lands smoothly.

“Too long” is when people are uncomfortable, have switched off or got lost or distracted. And that can be within a minute of two when a homily is ill prepared or badly presented. It may be part way through a sound homily (for example, someone has been taken ill and all are distracted). You may then need to cut short to conclude sensibly but ditching lots of material.

Untener tells the story of preaching a homily at an informal World War II Remembrance Day service when an old woman interjected that her husband had been killed during the war. Another woman then volunteered, in a German accent, that her husband too had fought and been killed. The atmosphere immediately became charged but Untener continued with his homily. He later regretted not ending at once with a simple call to reflection on what war can do to us, even years later, and on the wars we still carry on in our lives, injuring and damaging only ourselves and the commandment of Christ to love one another.

What is too short? Is there such a thing if a good message has been clearly offered. But extreme brevity for effect can look like just that, or can come across as lack of sufficient interest by the homilist to prepare more.

**G. Stories**

Everyone loves a story but all stories are not equal. “Just because a story is interesting doesn’t mean it ministers the word” (Unteger p.89).

1. **Stories that gain attention**:

Beware! If the story is unconnected or connected only artificially to the core of the homily, then it is padding or a distraction and, possibly, self serving only. If the message of the homily would be the same, with no added strength because of the story, then why divert attention away from the message? Tempting and, no doubt, entertaining though such stories might be, are they worthy of this liturgy, a helpful part of this Liturgy of the Word and assisting you in conveying the message of this homily? If “Yes” to all there questions, go ahead. Always remember, the homily is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word. It is never a break or interruption in the Mass.

1. **Stories to illustrate the message**:

A story that puts relevance, “flesh and blood”, real life link to the core thought of the homily is valuable and may make the difference between your homily being heard and understood or being dismissed as just another homily. These stories can be recognised because, without them, the message of this homily suffers. If you have such a story, use it.

1. **A story that is the message:**

These are treasure and, probably, very rare. Jesus’ parables are these kinds of story. The example of the women who confronted each other at the Remembrance stories (above), could be said to be a living story that spoke for itself. If you have the gift to write a story that itself is the message of the reading(s), use it, making sure that your story and the readings are understood in relation to one another.

**Be honest, open, truthfully yourself…**

…but never self-centred or superior!Use illustrations from your own life if that will help.

**Tips:**

* Be very careful if you ever use the word “You”. Should it be “We”. Remember you are first preaching to yourself.
* Preaching is always as a sinner serving those who know their failings, who know they are sinners.
* If you can, move away from behind the lectern. Why place yourself “up there” when you could be among the people, speaking more closely.
* Love the people you are serving by preaching.

**G. Pitching a homily**

When preparing a homily, try to think about the people you will preach to. Not generally, but individually. Recall some faces, people in the parish you know. The purpose of picturing real people is to help you keep your homily focussed on them and not on the book you’ve raided to trigger this homily or on the point you’re going to make regardless. If a homily is not true to the lives of those listening, they will switch off.

Recalling actual people in the parish also helps you not to pitch your homily either too high and over the heads of people or - much more likely – underestimating their grasp of their faith, their life-long relationship with Christ, their appreciation of the scriptures and the depth of their faith forged in real lives perhaps much harder than yours.

Try out on others your draft homily or your initial ideas – maybe the “jewel” you have found. Your wife may be a good person to choose because she knows when you’re faking, plagiarizing or being true to yourself. Your wife is certainly a good person to receive honest feedback from, once the homily has been delivered. Listen and learn from her.

As you grow in confidence you will be able to notice the faces of the congregation and can see tell-tale signs of attentiveness or mind wandering. Take note of what you see and be guided by it.

**H. Presentation**

Having experience and skills in speaking in public (a related but not similar skill to preaching), may help a new homilist. But all the skills of a salesman, after-dinner speaker, comedian, teacher, trainer or manager will not substitute for “from the heart” and prayer-based preaching. A homily is not a secular address but part of the meeting of God’s people and his Word within prayer and worship. A good homily relies of God’s Holy Spirit at work both within the homilist (even long before writing the homily has been approached) and his Spirit alive and active within those seeking to hear God’s word for them with their weekly time set aside for this.

The skills of presenting are many and varied and are beyond the scope here. If you are unsure of your skills or you know that there are aspects of how you come across that need addressing, seek help. Some voice types are easier to listen to or to hear than others. Techniques may be needed to help your voice. You may well have habits or traits that get in the way. Watch out for them and always listen to feedback, however hard to hear. Beware of both deadpan sameness of delivery tone and distracting over-emphasis or exuberance. The best or deepest of homilies can be lost simply because of what is perceived to be “boring” (or “pushy”) presentation.

Proper familiarity with what you have prepared, confidence with the quality of your completed homily and self awareness (which includes humility both at the giftedness entrusted to you and in the face of God’s presence in his word) will go a long way towards facilitating that connection between what you are saying and the minds and hearts of those listening and seeking spiritual sustenance.

**A Last Word**

*“The homily is ‘part of the liturgical action’ and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful. Hence ordained ministers must ‘prepare the homily carefully, based on an adequate knowledge of Sacred Scripture’. Generic and abstract homilies should be avoided. In particular, I ask these ministers to preach in such a way that the homily closely relates the proclamation of the word of God to the sacramental celebration”.*

Pope Benedict XVI in *SacramentumCaritatis* (2007) 139-140, that includes quotations from Vatican II’s *SacrosanctumConcilium.*

1. These notes draw heavily on the book *Better Preaching* by Ken Untener, St.Paul’s Publishing 1999 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)