



*By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text, during the course of the liturgical year; the homily, therefore, is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself; in fact, at those Masses which are celebrated with the assistance of the people on Sundays and feasts of obligation, it should not be omitted except for a serious reason. (Constitution on the Liturgy, 4-12-63, no. 52.)*

*The two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship. (Ibid., no. 56.)*

*The sermon, moreover, should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources, and its character should be that of a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy. (Ibid., no. 35-2.)*

# **The Liturgical Homily**

*J. F. Quigley, O.P.*

History will record the present age in the Church as one of renewal. Records will trace the movements and currents of thought from hopes and whispers through to maturation. It will assign causes, remote and proximate, and it will detail results. But history is too far removed from Love, and it is Love, the Person of the Spirit, who gives meaning to the present moment. What the Church is now, what it was and will be is but His concretized idea. That there be change in the Church testifies to the vivacity of His presence.

The renewal of the liturgy is the work of the Spirit. His voice as heard in the Constitution of the Liturgy must be listened to in faith. Priests and faithful, the one people of God, are called upon to respond to that voice with devotion and dynamism. In the words of Pope Paul. "One can say that the reforms may affect personally treasured and perhaps even acceptable habits (of following the Mass). One can say that the reforms require some effort at the outset which is not welcome. But we must be docile and have faith."

In the liturgical reform considerable attention has been given to preaching. The sacrament of the word is once again to enjoy the prominence it had in other days. Within the field of preaching itself special import is being given to the homily of the Mass.

## ***The Homily***

Scripture recounts the story of God's pact with man from the time of Adam to the advent of Christ. It is a story with moments of true greatness, moments of absurd depravity. Through it all God remained true, going so far as to send His own Son to be a mediator between Himself and sinful men. Christ healed

the broken world by the paschal mystery of His passion, resurrection and ascension. On the night before His death Jesus instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice as a memorial of His saving work and to continue for all time His sacrifice on the Cross. The Mass is this mystery, the sacrament of love, the paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us (Magnificat antiphon for the feast of Corpus Christi).

The Mass as we know it is made up of two parts — the liturgy of the word and of the Eucharist. By the word God's people are instructed; by the bread which is Christ they are nourished. Yet it would be a mistake to look on these parts as diverse. Rather they complement one another; they are two moments in one sacrifice. The Eucharist is the fulfillment of the word. The homily must be viewed in this context. As a liturgical place it is a bridge between word and table. Fr. Maertens writes of the homily that it is "a proclamation of the wonderful works of God manifested in salvation history, a proclamation which begins with Scripture and fulfills itself in the Eucharistic celebration. . . . it is a function which reunites in one cultic act the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Bread." \*

The function of the homily then is to proclaim the mystery contained in the word in such a way as to prepare the faithful for the sacrifice which is to follow. The homily can not use a scriptural text to take off on some pet theme. Nor is it merely an exhortation to go to communion. Its concern is the mystery of Christ. That mystery has been revealed in Scripture; it is made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice. As mystery it is incomprehensible and must remain so. Yet it can be further understood, better appreciated, more deeply probed. The different themes found in the liturgy of the word serve this purpose.

The homily is an instruction. The Constitution on the Liturgy states that by means of it the mysteries of faith and the guiding

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\* Thierry Maertens-Jean Frisque, *Guide Le L'Assemblée Chrétienne*. Tome I, (Casterman, 1964), p. 13. It is from this excellent work that the basic ideas of this article are taken.

principles of Christian life are expounded. There can be no doubt that the aim of the preacher must be practical. His instruction must be directed to the moving of hearts. Were it not so, it would be difficult to distinguish a homily from a lecture or other less affective modes of communication. Life situations and audience needs must always be born in mind. This is not incompatible with the homily as it is centered on one particular Eucharistic celebration. The liturgical theme of any celebration has consequences both for the moment and for the future. The preacher articulates these consequences so that the faithful more deeply share in the mystery of the Eucharist now being offered, and more fully live their Eucharistic commitment.

### *Elements of the Homily*

**EXEGESIS** The liturgy of the Word is God's message to us. Of prime concern is the content of the message. In another role we may be interested in the etymology of a word or the historical development of a "form". As hearers and faithful our only concern in Scripture is God's meaning. Evidently exegesis is demanded of the preacher. He must know the idea before communicating it. To cull the message from a lesson or passage requires the employment of the knowledge gained by scholars. The preacher should then have a familiarity with the latest developments in the field of scriptural studies. Technical proficiency is not required. Certainly much is being done to equip the preacher with a knowledge of exegesis. Courses in the seminary have been and will continue to improve. The amount of publications devoted to biblical scholarship have in recent years had a phenomenal growth. The new *Catholic Commentary on Scripture* should prove invaluable.

Exegesis provides boundary lines for the homily. The texts found in the liturgy of the word are not launching pads to some other star. Nor may the preacher approach the text with preconceived ideas as to the message. God speaks; man listens. What is said in this passage is explained. But exegesis alone does not provide the entire content of the homily.



**LITURGICAL ANALYSIS** Mass texts are not limited to lessons but include chants, verses, prayers, etc. Why this particular chant for this celebration or this prayer on the first Sunday of Lent? To answer these questions the homily should include some kind of liturgical analysis. This flows from the function of the homily as bridge between the liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic liturgy. All moments of the celebration are but one cultic act. An awareness of their integration is crucial to a fuller understanding of what is taking place.

Without going into a history of the development of the Mass, we know that in some celebrations there is seemingly no connection between a prayer or chant and the lessons. This is due in part to the fallibility of historical transmission. In such cases use must be made of what is had. In the ideal, of course, all the elements of the Mass blend harmoniously together. This is not to say that there is only one theme for each Mass. Many times there will be others, in which case the preacher has his choice. So, for example, the theme of a given Mass may be directed to obedience or self-denial or charity. Bearing in mind the needs of his audience at this time the preacher opts for one. In such ideally composed Masses the chants, prayers, verses, the epistle and gospel, all are utilized and directed to the Eucharistic mystery and the life situation. The Mass for Christmas is such a composition. The entrance song, chants, prayers, epistle and gospel speak of the birth of Christ. All the elements blend into the rich theme of divine love — "God so loved the world as to give His only Son." In the liturgical analysis this theme is referred to the Eucharistic mystery, a mystery which reveals the divinity of Christ born on Christmas day and which furnishes a communion with this divinity.

**BIBLICAL THEME** There is not a theme found in a single text of Scripture which can be isolated from the whole of the Bible. For a full appreciation of any particular theme it is necessary to see its development, its application, in other moments of sacred history. So it is that to grasp the role of the family in God's plan we must look to the Old Testament and New. What were the

familial relationships among Abraham, Sara and Isaac? Of what significance is the concept of family as seen in the poignant story of Hosea? St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians elaborates a concept so staggering, so exalted that it frightens one. Family love is as the love Christ Himself bears toward His Church.

This element of a homily differs from the first (exegesis) inasmuch as here the preacher is not determining the meaning of a text. This he has done already. What remains is that he strive for a deeper understanding of that meaning by combing Scripture for parallel treatments of that theme. The faithful then see Scripture as one story, their story.

**DOCTRINAL ELEMENT** The homily is for the individuals of a congregation. The preacher must feed these people, he must provide them with doctrine and move them to action.

The encounter between God and man is grounded in the Eucharistic celebration. Man is raised above himself and meets his God in Christ, sacramentally present. In a moment of time man's love is actuated and he is one with his fellows. The Eucharistic mystery gives man ontological place in the history of salvation. In St. Thomas' phrase, this mystery is a *sacramentum unitatis ecclesisticae* (a sacrament of ecclesial unity). Each theme treated in a liturgical celebration places man in a line of history and projects the route he is to follow. The liturgy of the word traces that line, at times broken by sin, from Adam through Abraham to Christ.

The homily then cannot be solely an analysis of some liturgical theme for its own sake. The preacher as prophet must offer his people doctrine. His office is to teach, to lead, to show how each man can assume his place in divine history. The particularized way in which he does this at a given celebration will be determined by the theme of that celebration. Here the Mass for the feast of the Holy Family might offer itself as an example.

The texts of this Mass speak of family life. The gospel is the story of the finding in the temple. The epistle recounts St. Paul's analysis of family relationships. The other texts and prayers but-

gress that theme. Seen in a context of salvation history we see the family:

**of Israel** — For the Israelite the family was the essential unit of the tribe or clan. It fulfilled the immediate needs of man. In the Old Testament there was a gradual evolution in the idea of family life, reaching a highpoint in Hosea where it served as a symbol of the love Yahweh bore to the chosen people.

**of Jesus** — Christ's answer to Mary in the gospel, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?", indicates that He did not consider His earthly family as an absolute. As Jesus is later to point out, those who hear and keep His word are His brothers, sisters, mother. His is a universal family in love, under the fatherhood of God.

**of modern Christians** — "Charity is the bond of perfection." So says St. Paul in the epistle of the Mass. By charity the family is held together as one. In a world stung by egoism the Christian family is a sign of what can and should be the condition of all men. The Eucharist is the source of this fraternal love, uniting each member of the family and each family of the universe, the family of the Father.

Using these notions the homily can place the family in the line of salvation history while charting its present and future role. Put in a Eucharistic setting, attention can be directed both to the present celebration and daily life.

### **Conclusions**

These then are the various elements of the liturgical homily. All combine so that the homily may truly be the bridge between the texts and the Eucharist, the word and Sacrament. It should not be thought that this is the only form of preaching. The communication of the Christian message at times demands other approaches. Retreats, missions, instructions, etc., witness to this. Nevertheless it seems clear that the mode of preaching during the Mass is to be the liturgical homily.

There shall be a homily on Sundays and feast days of precept in all Masses which are celebrated with the people present. No exception may be made for conventual, sung, or pontifical Masses.

On other days, a homily is recommended, especially on some of the weekdays of Advent and Lent, as well as in other circumstances when the people come to church in larger numbers.

By a homily from the sacred text is understood an explanation either of some aspect of the readings from holy Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or Proper of the Mass of the day, taking into account the mystery which is being celebrated and the particular needs of the hearers. (*Instruction by the Sacred Congregation of Rites, 9-26-64, nos. 52, 53.*)

The liturgical homily has not been the usual form of Mass preaching, at least in our own day. To develop the form will require both patience and industry on the part of the preacher; to appreciate the form, to reap the benefits it offers, the faithful must listen and respond. The aim of all liturgical action, the goal of the present reform, is that the people of God be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all. It is to this end ultimately that the liturgical homily is directed.

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