

## The Homily

### The Homily

*[T]he Homily... is to be preached by a Priest or Deacon on all Sundays and Holydays of Obligation; on other days, it is recommended. (Roman Missal, The Order of Mass, no. 17)*

### The Homily as Part of the Liturgy (2011)

General Instruction of the Roman Liturgy: *The Homily is part of the Liturgy and is highly recommended, for it is necessary for the nurturing of the Christian life. It should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners. The Homily should ordinarily be given by the Priest Celebrant himself or be entrusted by him to a concelebrating Priest, or from time to time and, if appropriate, to the Deacon, but never to a lay person... On Sundays and Holydays of Obligation there is to be a Homily at every Mass that is celebrated with the people attending, and it may not be omitted without a grave reason. On other days it is recommended, especially on the weekdays of Advent, Lent, and Easter Time, as well as on other festive days and occasions when the people come to church in greater numbers. It is appropriate for a brief period of silence to be observed after the Homily.*<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

### Nehemiah Reads the Law to the People and the Levites Explain

<sup>1</sup> And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. <sup>2</sup> And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup> And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. <sup>4</sup> And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Ma-aseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Misha-el, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. <sup>5</sup> And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. <sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup> Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Ma-aseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people

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<sup>1</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 65.

*remained in their places.* <sup>8</sup> *And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.* (Nehemiah 8:1-8)

### **Jesus on the Road to Emmaus**

*That very day [Easter Sunday] two of them were going to a village named Emmaus... While they were talking, Jesus himself drew near and went with them... And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.* So they drew near to the village to which they were going... So he went in to stay with them. *When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them.* And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, “*Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?*” (Luke 24:13, 15, 27-30)

### **The Apostle Paul’s Late Night Sermon**

<sup>7</sup> On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, *Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day; and he prolonged his speech (Greek logos; Latin sermonem) until midnight.* <sup>8</sup> There were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered. <sup>9</sup> And a young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window. *He sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer; and being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.* <sup>10</sup> But Paul went down and bent over him, and embracing him said, “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.” <sup>11</sup> And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. <sup>12</sup> And they took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted. (Acts 20:7-12)

## **Tradition**

### **The Homily at Roman Mass (2<sup>nd</sup> Century)**

St. Justin Martyr: After the lector concludes, *the president verbally instructs and exhorts us to imitate all these excellent things.*<sup>2</sup>

### **Lectio Continua and Homilies on the Gospel of John (5<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Augustine: *It is right, brothers and sisters, that I should, as best as I can, explain the text of the divine scriptures, and especially of the holy gospel, without leaving anything out, and that I should be nourished by it as much as I can manage, and that I should serve up to you what has nourished me.* The first part was dealt with last Sunday, as I remember; that is, “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1-5). That is, I believe, as much as I dealt with; those of you who were here will remember; those of you who were not here must believe me and believe those who were willing to be here... So would those who were not here not insist on our going back over the earlier part, but rather

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<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:68.

listen now—along with those who were here—to what comes next. The gospel continues: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John” (John 1:6).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Preaching of the Homily by a Priest (5<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Pope St. Leo the Great: *Take care that no person other than a priest of the Lord dare assume the right to teach or preach, whether this individual be a monk or a lay person claiming to be knowledgeable.... [I]t is not permitted that a person who has not been ordained a priest assume to himself the office of preaching since in God’s Church it is fitting that all things be orderly so that in the one Body of Christ both the more preeminent members may fill their office and those lower in rank may not oppose those who are higher...<sup>4</sup>*

### **The Custom of Priests (not Just Bishops) Preaching (6<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Synod of Vaison: For the building up of all the churches and for the advantage of all the people, not only in the cities but in rural areas, presbyters have the power to preach [God’s] word. If due to sickness a presbyter cannot preach, deacons can read aloud homilies written by the holy fathers; for if deacons are worthy to read what Christ spoke in the Gospel, why should they be considered unworthy to read in public the writings of the holy fathers?<sup>5</sup>

### **The Homily on the Gospel Reading (Early 7<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Gregory the Great: Because, the Lord willing, we will celebrate three Masses today, we cannot speak at length on the gospel reading. *Yet the birth of our Redeemer compels us to say a few words...<sup>6</sup>*

### **The Homily: The Scripture Readings or the Text of the Mass (1562, 1963)**

General Instruction of the Roman Missal: The Second Vatican Council [in 1963] ordered additionally that *certain prescriptions of the Council of Trent [in 1562] that had not been followed everywhere* be brought to fruition, *such as the Homily to be given on Sundays and feast days* and the faculty to interject certain explanations during the sacred rites themselves.<sup>7</sup>

## **Mystagogy**

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on John*, 2.1-2. In Saint Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1-40* (trans. Edmund Hill, O.P.; Works of Saint Augustine I/12; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2009), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Leo I, *Letter 119*, To Maximus, Bishop of Antioch. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:123.

<sup>5</sup> Synod of Vaison, Canon 2 (529AD). In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:151.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels* 2.8 (on Luke 2:1-14, Christmas). In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:79.

<sup>7</sup> General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 13. Cf. Council of Trent, Session 22, Doctrine and Canons on the Sacrifice of the Mass, Chapter 8 (Sept 17, 1562); Vatican II, Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 52.

### **Spiritual Nourishment and the Homily**

*Benedict XVI: Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved. 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 and the life of the community, so that the word of God truly becomes the Church's vital nourishment and support. The catechetical and paraenetic aim of the homily should not be forgotten. During the course of the liturgical year it is appropriate to offer the faithful, prudently and on the basis of the three-year lectionary, “thematic” homilies treating the great themes of the Christian faith, on the basis of what has been authoritatively proposed by the Magisterium in the four "pillars" of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the recent *Compendium*, namely: the profession of faith, the celebration of the Christian mystery, life in Christ and Christian prayer. (Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum of Charity*, *Sacramentum Caritatis* no. 46).*

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. What is the definition of a Homily? What is its relationship to Scripture and the Gospel?

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2. Is the Homily part of the Liturgy? When must it be preached, and when is it optional?

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### **For Further Reading**

Jungmann, Joseph, S.J. *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*. 2 Volumes. Translated by Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R. Reprint. Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012.

Gregory the Great. *Forty Gospel Homilies*. (Cistercian Studies 123; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990).

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily*. Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2012.