

The Homily

Now, we come to the Homily as a key part of the Liturgy of the Word. And, if you open your Roman Missal and you turn to the Liturgy of the Word, there's a very brief note about the Homily. And effectively, what it says in essence is this...After the reading of the gospel, #17, then follows the Homily, which:

...is to be preached by a Priest or Deacon on all Sundays and Holydays of Obligation; on other days, it is recommended.¹

The first thing you want to know, just in the Order of Mass, is that the Homily is preached either by a priest or a deacon every Sunday of the year, and on Holy Days of Obligation. Now, it's become customary in the West for us to have homilies at daily Mass as well, but those are only recommended. It's not required for a priest to actually preach homilies at daily Mass, although it has become customary. Now, this is not the only thing the missal says about the Homily. There's also a description of the Homily in that general instruction about the mass that I said is at the beginning of the missal, which is a really important document explaining the Mass. And so, in that document, paragraph 65 gives us a little bit more information on what happens during the Homily. And I want you to just listen to this for a moment because this is the Church's official teaching on the Homily, and we want to emphasize what the Church teaches and then ask where is this from in Scripture and Tradition? The Missal says this...The Church teaches:

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

¹ Roman Missal, *The Order of Mass*, no. 17.

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.*²

Okay, so that's the Church's description here of the Homily in the Mass. I want to make a few points about it before we kind of emphasize where it's from in Scripture and Tradition. First, notice it says the Homily is part of the liturgy. All right, now, you might think, "Well, of course it is. Isn't that obvious? Why does the Church even need to say that?" And the answer is, as we're going to see in a minute, because that's not always been the case, that it has been an integral part of the liturgy. There are actually long periods of time in the Church's history where the homily dropped out of the liturgy and wasn't considered an essential or integral part of the liturgy. So, one of the things that the Church is making clear now is that it is a part of the liturgy. We'll come back to that and we'll look at how that happened in just a minute.

Number two, what is a homily? This is an important point. The Church says that it should be an explanation of the readings of Mass. So, think here about the scriptural readings: Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, Gospel. So, an explanation of the readings of Mass, or an explanation of the text of the Mass itself. So, when it says the Ordinary and Proper, those are technical terms. The Ordinary of Mass is just all the parts of Mass that we say every single Mass, like the Creed or the "Lord, have Mercy" or the "I Confess" or the words of Consecration. In other words, whatever part of the Mass doesn't change, if it's just there every time it's said in the Mass, it's the same, that's called the Ordinary. Other prayers that change, like at the beginning of the Mass when the priest prays the Collect, it'll be different at each Mass. That's called the Propers because they're proper to that particular day or that particular celebration of the Mass. You can preach on either one of those. So a priest could just explain the various parts of the Mass, as that would be a legitimate homily, or he can explain the readings of the Mass, but notice it takes the form of an explanation.

² *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 65.

The third element here is that when it comes to who can say the homily, it's either, obviously, a bishop can, but either the priest or the deacon at a Mass, but never a layperson. So the Church does not authorize laypeople to preach homilies, and that would include seminarians who are not yet ordained, are not supposed to preach at Mass because they're still in the lay state. They're not ordained into Holy Orders. Bishops, priests, and deacons are the only ones authorized to preach the Homily.

And then finally, this is an important thing: In contrast to some periods in Church history, like before the Second Vatican Council, it was officially optional to preach a sermon or a homily. It wasn't required. But in the new missal, it is obligatory. The Sunday Homily or a homily on a Holy Day of Obligation cannot be omitted without a grave reason. Right? So, there might be, you know, if you're in a situation of war or something, or there's an emergency that would make it gravely necessary to shorten the Mass and omit the Homily, that would be permissible. But ordinarily, without a grave reason, it's obligatory. It has to be done. There always has to be a homily at a Sunday Mass or a Mass of a Holy Day of Obligation. And then finally, notice the silence. Like we have talked about elsewhere in the Liturgy of the Word, the Church wants to foster meditation on the Word of God. The same thing happens here. The silence is meant to give a person a brief moment to reflect on what has been heard before we move into the proclamation of the Creed, the Profession of Faith. All right, so that's a basic description. That's an official description of the Homily by the Church in the Roman Missal.

So, where does this come from? Where does this understanding of the Homily come from in Scripture and in Tradition? Well, if you look at the Old Testament, and you look, for example, at the liturgy of Moses in the Tabernacle, or you look at the liturgy of David, and Solomon in the Temple, there's no real evidence for homilies. There's no evidence that, you know, like when you offer a sacrifice of a lamb or something, that the priest would also give a homily in addition to the sacrifice. The homily doesn't really emerge as part of the liturgy of Judaism until you get to the time after the Babylonian exile, after the exile of the people of Judah in the 6th century BC, when the Jews were brought off into Babylon and they didn't have sacrifice, they didn't have a Temple, it had been destroyed. They developed a liturgy of readings and prayers from the Scriptures that is going to eventually manifest itself, kind of develop into the liturgy of the Synagogue. So,

the first real example of what we would think of as a homily is after the Babylonian exile, when the Jews come back in the book of Nehemiah 8, because the Temple still has yet to be restored, they're going to focus on the reading of Scripture and on the explanation of Scripture for the people. So, this is probably the first example of a homily that you would get from the Old Testament. Nehemiah 8:1-8 says this. It's a long passage, but it's worth quoting in full because some people would just like to skip the homily, "and let's move on to the Liturgy of the Eucharist." There's some questions about its significance. Well, let's look at how it functions in the Old Testament roots of the homily in Nehemiah 8. It says this:

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate...

No relation to Richard Nixon there, it was just the gate through which water was brought into the city.

and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. ² *And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding...*

Pause there. The Hebrew word for assembly is *qahal*. It means those who have been called out to assemble, and the Greek translation of *qahal* is *ekklesia*. So, you can literally say "before the church", if you want to translate it that way in the Greek

...on the first day of the seventh month. ³ *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.* ⁴ *And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Misha-el, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand...*

I wanted to name them because nobody, nobody remembers these guys and we should remember them, because these were his assistants.

*⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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 remained in their places. ⁸ And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*³ (Nehemiah 8:1-8)

Okay, now that's a mouthful, a lot going on there, but I want to highlight a few elements for you that are important for understanding not just the Homily, but the whole Liturgy of the Word, the cycle of readings. So, a couple of things. First, Ezra the priest brings the book of Moses, the book of the law, the Torah, before the assembly, and he reads it before the men, the women, and the children, all who could read or hear with understanding. So, in other words, this isn't just a service for the priests or the Levites. It's for all the people, including young people, including children who've reached the age of reason, who can listen and understand, right? And this assembly is called the *qahal* or the *ekklesia*, the Church. Alright, so we see a clear anticipation of the reading of Scripture to the Church in a liturgical assembly, men, women, and children included.

Second, notice the use of an ambo or a pulpit. It's an elevated pulpit that is going to be above the people so that when he proclaims to the people, they can hear him, right? So clearly, the reading is meant to be done audibly so that the people can

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

hear what is said, right? It's meant for their edification. That's why the qualification "with understanding" is there for the people who would be present.

Third, the people respond to the reading with an "Amen, Amen." And bowing their heads, they show reverence for the reading of the liturgy. They stand during it, so that they will be attentive as the book of the Law is being read. And they also lift up their hands, which was a standard prayer posture in ancient Judaism, was to lift the hands while praying. That was the Jewish posture of prayer, not just for the priests, but for the people as well. Also, the Levites here don't just... It isn't just that Ezra reads the law, but the law has to be explained. And so, this is the first vestige of what we might call a homily, that the Levites are going out to the people. What appears to be the case here is that the people are in groups, and they hear it, but the Levites are going to individually explain what it means. It's not exactly clear how this all played out liturgically, but what's clear is that their role is not just to read the Scripture, but to explain the Scripture. And therefore, we see the beginnings of what we would describe as a sermon or a homily, because they give the sense "so that the people can understand the reading." And this is precisely the function of the Homily we see today in the Roman Missal. Its to be explained, the readings are to be explained by the minister to the faithful so that they can understand what has been read. Well, that is the Old Testament.

What about the New Testament? Well, if we want to look at the New Testament, we have to turn to one of the most important passages in the New Testament, and that is the story of Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Now, I've done a whole video set on this, like I can give an hour-long presentation just on the road to Emmaus, but we don't have time for that. I just want to focus on the element of the story that is important for understanding the Homily. So, we're going to look at some select verses from Luke 24:13 and following. And most people know this story. They know the story of Jesus meeting the disciples on the road to Emmaus. But we haven't necessarily thought about its implications for the Homily. And so, I want you to see that by looking at it briefly. So it says this:

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 they have a whole series of exchanges that takes place. If you skip down a few verses. After He's rebuked them for not believing that he was the Messiah and not understanding what the prophets and everyone has spoken about the necessity of the Messiah to suffer and then enter into his glory, it says these key words:

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)

How does this relate to the Homily? Well, just as we saw Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth in the Gospel of Luke 4, doing the scriptural reading and proclaiming the Gospel in that sense, and its fulfillment in him. Now we see Jesus explaining the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and notice what He does. He does two key things. First, it says, He began "with Moses and the prophets." So, he starts in the Old Testament, and he interprets to them in the Scriptures all the things that are about him, right? Effectively, what He's doing is giving a homily, opening up the Scriptures, and explaining how they point to him, to his fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament in his passion, his death, his resurrection.

Second, notice the way the disciples describe what Jesus is doing explaining the scriptures. It says that their hearts begin to burn within them as he talks to them on the road and opens up the Scripture. What does that mean, "open up the Scriptures"? Well, if you've ever tried to read the Bible, you'll know that the Bible can come off as a closed book. It's not all immediately obvious what it means. So, you know, some passages in Scripture are clear, like "you shall not commit adultery" or "you shall not steal." I mean, these are pretty clear. But other passages, like some of the prophecies or Isaiah's visions, or Ezekiel's visions, or even passages in the stories of the Exodus, can be very mysterious. Like, what does this

mean? What are the implications of this? So Jesus here is explaining the Scriptures, and he's opening up the mysteries. He's opening up the meaning, the hidden meaning often, in the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, as it prefigures Him and is fulfilled by Him through his life, his death, and his resurrection. So, what you could argue is that the activity of Jesus on the road to Emmaus is, in a sense, the first homily after the resurrection, where Christ Himself is going to explain the meaning of the Scriptures that he has fulfilled through His passion, His death, and resurrection. It's the risen Christ himself explaining the Word of God to His disciples. We'll come back to that a little bit later.

A third Biblical foundation for the Homily, or the sermon, is from the book of Acts. I love this story. In Acts 20:7 and following, we see that it's not just Jesus who explains the Scriptures, it's also the Apostles. In this case, the Apostle Paul. In Acts 20, we have a little window into an early Christian liturgical service, and we see the role that the sermon or homily plays in that gathering. Listen to what it says, Acts 20:7. So this is Luke speaking in the first person about his travels with Paul:

⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread...

That's an ancient Christian description of the Eucharist, the breaking of the bread.

*Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day; and he prolonged his speech (Greek *logos*; Latin *sermonem*) until midnight.* ⁸ There were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered. ⁹ 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.* ¹⁰ But Paul went down and bent over him, and embracing him said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." ¹¹ And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. ¹² And they took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted. (Acts 20:7-12)

So, this is a famous story, what I like to call Paul's killer homily. This is a killer homily. No. Sorry, I couldn't help myself there. Dad jokes, couldn't avoid it.

So, a couple of points here. First, when it says the breaking of the bread, that's not just a name for a meal. In Acts 2:42, Luke will use that as a technical term for the Eucharistic breaking of the bread that the early Church celebrated. This is one of the earliest names for the Eucharist. It was modeled on Jesus' actions at the Last Supper, where he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples. Right? So, we see that this breaking of the bread in the early Church is accompanied by an explanation, a sermon or a homily. And in this case, if you actually look at the ancient Latin translation of the New Testament, known as the Vulgate, the Latin word here for Paul's word that he speaks is *sermonem*, right? So, in Greek, it's called a *logos*, which can mean a word, saying, or a speech. And in Latin, it's called a sermon, a *sermonem*. So, this is a description of Paul's sermon that accompanied the breaking of the bread.

A third aspect of it that's interesting is that it's long, and I mean really long. And a lot of times, the Church would celebrate the Eucharist in the evening, like think about Easter Vigil. And in this case, Paul's homily goes on until midnight. He preaches a sermon, his speech, as the RSV translates it, until midnight, and as is true to this day, sometimes, just sometimes, people fall asleep during the homily, especially if it's a long homily. So Paul is preaching so long that this poor guy Eutychus, who's sitting in the window, falls asleep, falls out of the window, and is taken up dead. But thankfully, Paul, being the saint he was, is able to simply embrace him and say, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." And they take up the young lad alive, even though he fell out of the window and appeared to be dead. So, this just gives us a little window into the fact that in the breaking of the bread, the sermon, right, the speech of the person leading that assembly, was a very important part of the Apostolic Church in its worship, in the Eucharist. Okay, so that's just a couple of biblical roots of the sermon. So, we can see that sermon is rooted in the activity of Jesus himself during his public ministry, the activity of Jesus, the risen Christ, after his resurrection, and the practice of the Apostles, in this case, St. Paul.

Now, what about the Tradition? Well, we could spend so long just looking at the development and the role of the homily or the sermon in the history of the Roman Tradition, and you might be thinking, real quick, why do you keep saying homily or sermon? Basically, there are two ways of referring to the speech that will often accompany the reading of Scripture in the liturgy. In our day, people will tend to use those terms to distinguish between a sermon, which can be a discourse on any particular topic, like it might be on a moral issue, or a theological issue, or a mystery of faith, that may or may not be directly connected to the text or liturgy of the Mass. We tend to use the word homily this day to talk about specifically an explanation of the readings or an explanation of the Mass itself, or the parts of the Mass, right? So that's how they tend to be used in contemporary parlance. But basically, a sermon just means a speech. That's what the Latin word *sermon* means here as a translation of the Greek word *logos*. So, the use of a speech or a sermon or homily about the readings or about some truth of the faith during the liturgy is going to take a lot of different forms over the course of the centuries. So, we don't have time to go through those in a lot of detail, but let me just hit a few highlights from the Roman Tradition of the role of the Homily in the liturgy.

First, St. Justin Martyr, once again our earliest description of the Roman liturgy in the 2nd century, outside the Bible itself, the Apostolic liturgy, tells us this:

After the lector concludes, the president [presider] verbally instructs and exhorts us to imitate all these excellent things⁴

So, notice what Justin says. The priest who's leading the liturgy, presider, they call him a presbyter sometimes, the elder, after they've done the readings, is going to give a sermon, an exhortation, instructing the faithful on how to imitate these excellent things. What things? What they just heard in the Scriptures. So, see, the homily here is connected to the readings. It's part of the Liturgy of the Word, because in it, the priest will explain how to live according to what they've just heard in the scriptural readings.

⁴ Justin Martyr, 1 *Apology* 67. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:68.

A second element from the Tradition that's important is that, over time, a system of readings is going to develop where the priest or the bishop will preach through particular books of the Bible, like one of the Gospels. So, for example, this is one of several volumes. St. Augustine preached homilies on the Gospel of John. And if you look at St. Augustine here, basically what he's doing, he's working through the Gospel of John over multiple liturgical services in sequence, kind of in the order in which they appear in John, giving homilies to the Latin Church in North Africa in the 5th century. And Augustine says this about his homily:

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...

So he got through like one verse or just a few verses.

those of you who were here will remember; those of you who were not here...

Oops, somebody skipped Mass

must believe me and believe those who were willing to be here...

A little barb there at those people who skipped Mass.

So would those who were not here not insist on our going back over the earlier part, but rather 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).⁵

⁵ 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 1/12; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2009), 55.

So, look at what Augustine is saying. This is important. In the 5th century, not only does Augustine see the homily as an explanation of the Scriptures, that's important. The homily is not, you know, where he just kind of reflects about anything and everything. It's not some kind of vague or abstract meditation. He's not focused on necessarily telling personal stories about himself or anecdotes or anything. The core of the Homily is not telling another story and commenting on that. The core of the Homily is explaining the scriptures that the people have just heard read, in this case, explaining the Gospel of John.

Second, notice that he's doing it according to semi-continuous reading, or in this case, continuous. He read one part of the Gospel for last Sunday and preached about that, just four or five verses. Now, he's going to move to the next verse and preach about that as he's working through the Gospel with the faithful. So, you can see him preaching the Gospel in a continuous way. Just like today, if you go to Mass, we are going to hear the first part of Matthew 13 one week, and we will come back the next week and pick up where we left off and move through the Gospel in a continuous way. And that's what the Homily is supposed to do. It's supposed to explain the Gospel as it moves through the reading of the Gospel over the course of successive weeks and Sundays in the Church's liturgy.

A third part here, I just think this is funny, is that people who skip Mass, they're not going to understand what was read or what was said last Sunday because they didn't come to Mass for whatever reason. And so Augustine basically tells them, "Look, if you weren't here, then, you know, you're just gonna have to pick up where we left off and follow along with me as best you can. Now, we're starting in verse six with John 1." So, it just gives us a little window into what the homily was like with one of the greatest preachers in the history of the Church, namely, St. Augustine.

So one of the things that the Church did, by the way, after the Second Vatican Council, in the three-year cycle of lectionary readings, was restore that ancient practice of preaching through the Gospel in a continuous way. Whether it's the Gospel of Matthew, or Mark, or Luke. Before Vatican II, when they had a one-year cycle of Gospel readings, those Gospel readings were selected from different Gospels as you went through the Sundays of the year. So one would be from

Matthew, another might be from Luke, another might be from John. Now, there was some rationale to how they were chosen, but the principle wasn't a continuous reading through a book. That ancient Roman practice that we see witnessed in Augustine is something that's been restored in the contemporary Roman Missal.

The third aspect from the Tradition that's important goes back to the 5th century, and this one is crucial. It's that the Homily should be preached by an ordained minister and should be preached by a priest in particular. So, it can be a deacon as well, but the priest is the ordinary preacher of the Gospel, or preacher of the Homily. In the 5th century AD, Pope St. Leo the Great actually had to make this explicit because there were at times people who, in various churches, would allow laypeople, unordained people, to preach the homily, and Leo made clear that that was not permissible in the Roman Church. In one of his sermons, Pope St. Leo the Great said this:

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...⁶

So, he's being very clear here that someone has to be ordained in order to preach. Why? Well, because in Leo's day, the sermon, the homily, was part of the liturgy, and the person who was explaining the Scriptures is doing so as a representative of Christ. So, just as Christ explained the scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the priest has been ordained, or in this case the deacon on occasion as well, we will see in other elements in the Roman Tradition, will be ordained and empowered through the grace of Holy Orders to explain the Scriptures, to open the Scriptures and explain them to the faithful. And that is the case to this day. We already heard in the Roman Missal, to this day, that the Homily can be given by, obviously, a bishop, priest, or deacon, but never by a layperson.

⁶ Leo I, *Letter 119*, To Maximus, Bishop of Antioch. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:123.

Now, you'll notice in that quote from Pope St. Leo Great that he appears to describe only a priest preaching the gospel. And you may think, well, wait, what about deacons? And the answer to that question is fairly complex, and I don't have time to get into it now. For our purposes here, you just need to know a couple of things. First, it actually was the custom in the early Church in some places, that not even a priest could preach, but preaching was reserved for the bishop alone. It was always seen that any priest that preaches in liturgy is doing so as a deputy of the bishop, because the bishop is the final liturgical authority in his diocese, and he could depute priests to preach, but they had to have his permission in order to do so. And this idea actually carries well into the Middle Ages, like when the Dominicans were founded, they were the Order of Preachers because they actually had received that permission to preach anywhere and everywhere, even though they weren't bishops. So, the idea was the bishop is the supreme preacher in his diocese. He can depute priests to preach as well. And then eventually, the discipline is going to permit not only priests but also deacons to preach, although that'll be in a somewhat more limited capacity.

So, for example, in the 6th century, there was a Synod at a place called Vaison where it actually dealt with the question of priests and deacons preaching, and it says this about the role of priests preaching:

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 [=priest] have the power to preach [God's] word.

So pause there. What they are saying is that the bishop can't get everywhere to preach, so we are going to allow priests, especially in rural areas, to preach on his behalf.

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?⁷

⁷ Synod of Vaison, Canon 2 (529AD). In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:151.

This is really interesting. It is showing that in the 6th century, it was not permitted for deacons to preach their own sermons, but because they read the Gospel, they could be permitted to read sermons from some of the holy fathers. In other words, some of the Church Fathers. So, for example, we've mentioned Augustine's homilies. Here I have a copy of Pope St. Gregory the Great in the 6th century. This is 40 Gospel homilies that he preached. So, if you want to get an example of what ancient homilies were like, and their similarities and, frankly, some significant differences to modern homilies, I cannot recommend highly enough reading St. Gregory the Great's 40 Gospel Homilies. It is a beautiful book, spiritually very influential and very enriching. This had a major impact on Western preaching and Western understanding of the Gospels. And I love it. In one of these homilies, it's Christmas, and Gregory's tired, and he actually says this:

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...*⁸

So, he gives a homily, but it has to be a short one because he's saying so many masses, because it's Christmas Day, celebrating the birth of the Redeemer.

Pope Gregory the Great, we have his sermons, or his homilies, we have the sermons of Pope Leo the Great in the 5th century, homilies of Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century. This was the Roman Tradition at the time of Gregory and Leo, two of the greatest popes ever, that part of the Mass, an important part of the Mass, was the preaching of an explanation of the scriptural readings for that Mass in the form of sermons and of homilies.

Now, that's at the time of Pope Leo and St. Gregory. Things did change, however, after them, in the early and later Middle Ages. I don't have time to go into a ton of detail about this, but suffice it to say that when you move into the Middle Ages, in the Roman liturgy, the homily becomes optional. It drops out, in fact, in many celebrations of the Roman liturgy. So, that by the time you get to the Council of Trent in the 1570s, when the Missal of the Council of Trent is going to be issued,

⁸ Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels* 2.8 (on Luke 2:1-14, Christmas). In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:79.

which is going to be the kind of standard form of the Mass all the way from the Council of Trent up to the 20th century and the Second Vatican Council, if you actually look at the Order of Mass, the homily is not an integral part of the liturgy. In other words, if you look at the order of Mass, you're going to have the Gospel reading, and then it's going to go straight from the Gospel to the Nicene Creed, right? So, there isn't any official, necessary, required place for a sermon, for a homily. In other words, the sermon is optional; it's just not part of the liturgy.

Now, in 1570, when this missal was issued, there were no prescriptions for the saying of a homily at all. Within 30 years, however, Pope Clement VIII is going to actually add the option of saying a sermon or preaching a homily after the Gospel reading to the Roman Missal. So, it's funny, sometimes people will say that no changes were made to the missal of the Council Trent. That's actually not true. Even within 30 years, a major change was made, which was the provision for saying a sermon as part of the liturgy, as a preaching of the liturgy. The reason Pope Clement VIII did that is because the Council of Trent, when it met, had actually encouraged preachers and priests to say a homily, to preach a sermon or homily as part of the liturgy, but people weren't doing it, perhaps in part because it isn't in the book. It isn't in the Missal. So, the Pope added that option of preaching a sermon to the later edition of the Missal, in order to encourage priests and bishops to actually preach a sermon at Sunday Masses in particular. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. There was actually a tendency to neglect the opportunity or the option to preach the sermon all the way down to the 20th century. And so, when the Second Vatican Council met and the reform of the liturgy was taking place, one of the key reforms was to restore the ancient role of the homily or sermon to an integral part of the liturgy, so that every Sunday when you would come to Mass, it would be absolutely explicit that the homily was part of the liturgy and that it was obligatory to say a homily. So, you don't have to take my word for it. You can actually look at the teaching of the Church here, in the General Instruction, the introduction to the Missal, it actually says this:

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.⁹

So what you see here is that in the Council of Trent it had actually recommended that homilies or sermons be given on Sundays and feast days, and the Scriptural texts and the sacred rites be explained, but that recommendation was widely disregarded. It wasn't heeded. And so, when the Second Vatican Council met, they said we need to restore the homily to its rightful position as an explicit part of the liturgy and not just an option. Not just an option, but an obligation. So, that's a major restoration of the Roman liturgy, going back to the homilies of Leo the Great and Gregory the Great and St. Augustine.

Okay, well, that's probably more history about the homily than you ever wanted to learn, but there it is. So, I'd like to end by asking, okay, what about today? What role does the Homily play today and how can we as the faithful enter more deeply into what's happening during the mystery of the Homily at every single Mass? And here, I would like to end with a quotation from Pope Benedict XVI. In a beautiful document called *Sacramentum Caritatis*, which was published in 2007, the Holy Father gives a teaching on the role of the homily in the liturgy and I was arrested, I was struck when I first read it back in 2007 because he recognized that the homily is a part of the mass that is not only integral and important, but which really needs to be cultivated in our day and time. So let's listen to what the Pope said about the homily and we'll reflect on that in closing. Benedict XVI wrote:

Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved.

I really laughed when I read that. I was like, wow, tell me how you really feel, Holy Father. He's very blunt, like, we need to improve the homily. Why? Because the Word of God is important. Benedict continues:

⁹ 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.

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.”

So the homilies are to be biblical. So the minister needs to know the Scriptures.

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.*¹⁰

So, what's Benedict saying there, in essence? That the principal role of the homily is to explain the Scriptures, to explain the Word of God, so that the Scriptures that have been heard, read, proclaimed, and acclaimed can become nourishment for our souls. So that by explaining the Word of God to us, in a sense, the priest or the deacon or the bishop helps us have the same experience that the Apostles had on the road to Emmaus when they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us, while he opened to us the scriptures?"

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation Sacrament of Charity, *Sacramentum Caritatis* no. 46.