

HOW
TO GIVE
A HOME
RUN.
Homily

**A Hard-Hitting Guide
for Preachers, Teachers,
and Soul-Reachers**

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Upfront



“WELL, YOU WENT YARD WITH THAT ONE, PADRE,” the tall man in the Michigan State pullover whose name I didn’t know towered over Fr. John by nearly a foot.

“OK...I don’t know what that means, but let’s pretend it’s good,” Fr. John responded with a polite but confused smile.

“I’m talking about your homily, Father. You parked it in the cheap seats,” the man extended the metaphor in a way that managed to further obscure the point. Still, I was with him one hundred percent.

Leaning in, I nudged the conversation forward, “Indeed. Your homily was a home run. You knocked it out of the park. Thank you.”

The Spartans fan moved on, leaving me with the deeply compassionate and insightful man who would become my spiritual director, mentor, and treasured friend. “Thank you,” he said as he took my out-stretched hand in both of his. Then with a bit of a chuckle he added, “Sometimes the Scriptures throw curve balls, so you take your best swing and hope for the best. Maybe I got lucky.”

I was struck by the understated confession in those words,

but I also knew it wasn't luck. It was the result of preparation, discipline, focus, and a deep spiritual life. This is true, I suppose, of any real professional. Surgeons, electricians, teachers, accountants, delivery drivers, and chefs don't just show up and take a blind swing, hoping to get lucky.

Fr. John played the analogy forward. "When you say a homily is a home run, what does that mean?"

It was a brilliant question. What defines success at the highest level? I am reminded of the woman who shook my hand after Mass and enthusiastically said, "That was a great homily! I agreed with every word!" At the time, I was taken aback. Is that what makes a homily great—that people agree as though you are expressing an opinion about installing new carpet? I had never thought of a homily as an op-ed. So what makes it effective? Should it be affirming, challenging, inspiring, reflective?

When I think of the greatest homilies I have heard in my lifetime, they all have one thing in common: they didn't just *hit home* with me; they *went home* with me. Literally. Something about them stuck, took root, and deepened the way I understand my relationships with self, neighbor, society, creation, and God. Some were indeed affirming, but most were something else. They were surprising and fresh, as well as being challenging, inspiring, and reflective.

A home-run homily clears the fence around the churchyard. It slips into pockets, purses, and gloveboxes and literally goes home with people. They think about it as they brush their teeth. They dunk their cookies in it and bring it up in conversation during the course of the week. It is memorable, even experiential, and people want to share it with others. And like home runs in baseball, it gets people on

their feet. They leave church with new life in their legs, ready to march forward and actively be the hands and feet of Jesus.

I've given a few home-run homilies along the way, many of which surprised me. People will bring them up years later, sending me back into my files to find the homily they're referencing so I can recall whatever it was that worked. It's like watching old game film.

Most of my experience with homilies, however, has been as a pew-dweller, so my expertise is certainly more as a listener than as a preacher. I've done the math and estimate I've listened to approximately 2,750 homilies. Some stuck. Most didn't. But along the way, a few cleared the churchyard fence in a way that was life-affecting, even life-changing. After I was ordained to the permanent diaconate, that became my gold standard: get the shadow of myself out of the way so the inspiring light of wisdom could change lives.

In responding to the call to write this book, I wanted to do so from the perspective of the people who plop in the pews Sunday after Sunday, people with whom I share a sacred kinship. We are the hungry yearning to be fed. In marketing parlance, it's a pull strategy rather than a push strategy. Instead of pushing messages at people, telling them what we want them to hear, we as preachers have a sacred opportunity to respond to the hopes, dreams, anxieties, stresses, and general context of real lives. The result is far more relevant and compelling.

Think of it as carrot cake.

After considering the homilists who have most effectively inspired deeper growth in the lives of people, I'm convinced there is no universal recipe for a great homily, no "Three Easy Steps to Rock Hard Abs" that applies to preaching.

It doesn't work that way. Great homilies are more art than science, and every preacher needs to work on his own individual stroke, like a golf swing or a secret salsa recipe. Please keep that in mind as you read the pages that follow. The invitation is to consider how you might adapt and incorporate these ideas, not how your preaching style should become them. The unique voice and giftedness that God seeks to express through you remains paramount.

My dad used to turn his hearing
aids off during the homily.

“Nothing is better than a bad
homily,” he’d say wryly.

Indeed.

If you can’t deliver more depth
than silence, choose silence.

Your listeners will
reward you for it.



Start with Energy



PEOPLE LEAVE FOOTBALL GAMES EARLY. It's crazy. Just clear the cobwebs and try to wrap your brain around this: Reasonable people who are allowed to have credit cards, operate heavy machinery, and fix the brakes on your car will plan for weeks, spend \$150 or more per ticket, put on special clothes, and arrive at the game three hours early, where they drop another \$50 for parking, \$20 for a hamburger, and a semester's worth of college tuition for a beer. But it's worth it! They're so excited; this is an event! These are the moments that make memories. Then—hold your breath for this—if the game is disappointing, they go home after the third quarter and mow the lawn. Boom. Just. Like. That.

See, they come with an expectation, specifically an expectation that the game will be engaging and the experience will be rewarding. They've invested a lot of their time, passion, and money. They expect something in return, and when they don't get it, they try to get some of their own life back, even if it's the mow-the-lawn part of life.

Compare that to Sunday morning. This is sacred time

for people and families. After a hectic and often stressful week, a week riddled with dental visits, cold French fries, and a toxic stream of angry news, they want to get some of their life back; they want to reroot and breathe. So they come to church. Or not. Increasingly, they are taking sabbath in a fishing boat, online, or at a local coffee shop with Sunday morning jazz, a blueberry scone, and good conversation. Contrary to conventional thought, the question isn't *if* people celebrate sabbath; it's *how* they choose to celebrate it. They're seeking renewal of spirit, rejuvenation of heart, and inspiration of mind. They're seeking something they can carry with them into the week ahead, a spiritual snack they can pull from their pocket like a box of raisins and chew on from time to time. It might be challenging, it might be comforting, but it's always nourishing. When they do come to church, this is the expectation they bring with them. It's the expectation they place on the homily, and if the experience doesn't deliver, they leave and try to get some of their life back, even if it's the mow-the-lawn part.

Catholic clergy have long blamed declining Mass attendance on secularization and disengagement from organized religion. That's a bit convenient. We blame the masses like lackluster playwrights, so we don't have to admit to a lack of inspiration, relevancy, or energy. Imagine advancing such an argument in any other context.

"Listen, Dr. Amazing Kareenakov, attendance has really dropped off for your lecture and demonstration on the magic of the yo-yo. It just doesn't speak to people anymore."

"That's because they've been lured away by the dark temptations of movie theaters and the bedazzled costumes of Disney on Ice. We need to tell them to come back and

rediscover the therapeutic benefits of spinning a plastic disk on the end of a string.”

“Well, perhaps they can only watch *rocking-the-baby* so many times.”

“It’s called *Rock-the-Cradle*. The trick is called *Rock-the-Cradle*. See, this is the problem. You’re supposed to be promoting my lecture, but you don’t even know the basic terminology.”

“That’s not the problem. People just don’t find it compelling.”

“You know, if you actually came to my lecture more than once—and by the way, I saw you texting during the demonstration—but if you had actually listened, you would know that time spent with a yo-yo lowers your blood pressure, but watching princesses with sharp steel blades strapped to their feet fly through the air raises your heart rate. What I do is good for people!”

“Perhaps it lowers their blood pressure because it puts them to sleep.”

“So you’re saying they just want to be entertained? I’m sorry, but I’m here to educate.”

While Catholic and mainline Protestant churches conveniently assign their woes to the notion of secularization (as though engagement with a world beyond church walls is somehow new), interest in spirituality keeps expanding and enrollment at big-box megachurches keeps increasing. What gives? Clearly, the desire for spiritual encounter and growth hasn’t waned, nor has the appeal of sabbath. What has changed is that people have become empowered and have gone shopping. Some are finding their sabbath at Starbucks, others on a yoga mat in the park, others at a *Six Flags Over*

Jesus megaplex, and still others with a bagel while watching Oprah's *Super Soul Sunday*.

For those who understand the experiential and spiritual depth of Eucharist, it might be very difficult to imagine how any of these other roads lead to a truly meaningful encounter with sacred mystery. Sadly, however, many former regular churchgoers are now out experimenting with other sabbath options for that very same reason: they're looking for a meaningful encounter that their Catholic experience didn't provide. Over the years, I've sat through far too many meetings and presentations that dismissed the rampant spiritual searching and seeking people are doing with a simple hand-wave usually followed with a comment such as, "People today just want to be entertained. Without Big Bird, they never would have learned to read."

Wow. Just, wow.

I've watched Oprah's *Super Soul Sunday*. It's not exactly *America's Got Talent*. There are no drum kits or praise bands, no dry ice machines, no sequined angelic dancers. No one is swallowing swords, eating fire, or balancing blind-folded over a tank of sharks. It's simply a conversation that opens people up. That's it. People don't want to be entertained; they want to be opened up, engaged, and inspired.

Hold that thought.

A few years ago, a colleague and I led a series of focus groups on the relationship between religion and spirituality, and the role of the local parish in that relationship. Participants were all members of a local Catholic parish, so there were no nondenominational, Protestant, or non-religious participants. These were all Catholics. In fact, they were mostly happy Catholics, not disillusioned malcontents

with axes to grind. Two themes came through loudly, clearly, and consistently: first, spirituality was seen as opening people up while religion was seen as closing people down; second, study participants desperately wanted their Catholic parish to bridge this divide by giving the spiritual piece more weight. A lot more weight. They wanted to be opened up. They wanted a religion that explored more deep, ponderous questions, not one that provided trite, pat answers. This is a very big deal. Even people who were still engaged in their Catholic religion and were coming to Mass every week were saying that they were looking for something more.

Again, people don't want to be entertained; they want to be engaged and inspired.

As a preacher, can you do that? Can you engage and inspire other people? Can you invite them into ponderous, soul-searching questions rather than spoon-feeding trite answers? Gosh, I hope so. That's sort of Homiletics 101, wouldn't you agree? If you are among the very narrow cast of people given the privilege of preaching in a Catholic church or any other Christian church for that matter, you've very likely invested a great deal of your life in studying your material. You know it, you understand it, and everyone sitting in the pews hopes to high heaven you are able to apply it. More on that later. For right now, let's focus on the disposition with which you bring it. Obviously, you have a passion for it. Please tell me you have a passion for it. I mean, you've dedicated your whole life to it after all.

My high school social studies teacher, Mr. Borely, had a passion for basketball. He became a high school teacher so he would have an opportunity to coach basketball, not because he loved teaching. For most of us, it was obvious he

found the material to be every bit as dry and uninspiring as we did. He once fell asleep during his own lecture on trade castes in India. Seriously, he started bobbing his head and mumbling his words. Every few minutes he'd suddenly bolt up, shake his head a bit, and blink his eyes rapidly, exactly the way I have in church many times. Finally, he just leaned against the blackboard and stopped talking. We all started laughing. Then the bell rang and jolted his attention. He leapt forward looking confused. After that, we just tried to get him to talk about basketball in every class.

I learned nothing about world cultures that semester, but I learned how to triangulate a defense. Honestly, Mr. Borely was a smart guy. He had the knowledge of the social sciences, just not the passion. Perhaps the most important lesson I gained from him was this: no audience will ever be more engaged by your material than you are. Period. Whether you're an actor delivering a soliloquy, a businessperson giving a presentation, a professor offering a lecture, or a preacher sharing a homily, your emotions precede your words. If you're excited, your material will be exciting; if you're reflective, your material will be reflective; and if you're boring, your material will be boring. No one will ever believe in your homily more than you do or be inspired by it more than you are. Period. This is nonnegotiable.

Sit with that thought for a moment. Rest there. Take a deep breath and stare contemplatively at a tree.

You are a conduit of energy and your words are fish or seaweed or discarded cigarette butts that float along in the stream. So be very intentional about your energy. Feed it. Nurture it. Thriving life needs the flow of fresh water. Take your energy for long walks in the woods and share an after-

noon with it at the beach. Spend time getting to know it over a glass of wine so that it won't frighten you. Breathe it in; breathe it out. Steep it in your tea. Let the life-giving stream of the Holy Spirit flow through you and water the Christ-seeds preplanted in people's hearts.

Nothing healthy, vibrant, or dynamic is going to flow through stale, skanky, or polluted waters. You know what thrives in lifeless water? Pond scum. No one rubs sleep from their eyes, brushes their teeth, and comes to Mass looking for pond scum. Well, maybe some do. But they are outliers. When I was a kid, we had a woman in our parish who seemed to live for pond scum—Mrs. Sapherady. Everyone, even Fr. Charlie in private conversations, referred to her as Mrs. Severity. Her jet-black hair was wound so tight into a beehive that it pulled her electric blue eye shadow onto her forehead. She was the sort of person who would write to the bishop if Fr. Charlie's knee didn't linger on the floor long enough when he genuflected. After I yawned while serving Mass, Mrs. Sapherady volunteered to be in charge of the Mass servers "because someone has to step up and parent these lazy kids before they all go to hell and take the rest of the parish with them." Then and now, I believe Mrs. Sapherady came to church mostly to have her own spiteful darkness validated. She welcomed pond scum so she could skim it off, hold it up to your face, and growl, "SEE?!" Perhaps if she could just fix all the people around her, she could find peace.

People like that can suck the life out of a preacher. Seriously. If you get two or three Mrs. Sapheradys in a mid-sized parish and they band together, it's exhausting. If these people had been in the crowd when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, they would have grumbled that the bread

wasn't toasted, Jesus didn't hold his hands properly when offering the blessing, and the Greenbergs shouldn't have gotten any because they let their son and his illicit wife—they got married on a beach for God's sake!—spend the night together in their home while the younger children were there. What kind of a Christian example is that?! Without even realizing it, you start building a preventive defense into every homily.

Forgive me for sounding uncharitable, and I know I'm being just a little hyperbolic, but this is a big deal. The Mrs. Sapherady mindset represents a very narrow band of Catholic people—two, maybe three percent—but they manage to give themselves an amplified and disproportional voice. It depletes, sullies, and stymies the flow of a preacher's energy, unless...pause to prepare for a reality check...unless the preacher is of the Mrs. Sapherady ilk. Then you basically end up with a dwindling but engaged, self-righteous, often judgmental congregation that prays for all the lost souls they've driven toward other sabbath options.

As an aside, how sincere is a prayer that focuses on what's wrong with other people?

Most preachers are reluctant to break themselves open and pour themselves into a heartfelt homily only to deal with an aftermath of confrontation and criticism. Once after delivering what I thought was a relatively safe but insightful homily reflecting on the way the Holy Family shows us that a healthy experience of family is defined by love shared, I was confronted by a man who demanded I be fired (I'm an unpaid volunteer deacon). The accusation: I "reduced" family to love, thereby diminishing the importance of structure, and thus giving permission for homosexual people to

enter into family units as long as they love each other. Yup. I didn't make it home in time for lunch that day.

If you've been preaching or speaking in public for more than six months, you've likely encountered Mrs. Sapherady. I'll give you a little space here to disentangle yourself from the memories and shake it off. If you have never been confronted by her, it's likely because: (A) your homilies are so dull even the critics aren't listening (sorry), or (B) you *are* Mrs. Sapherady (even more sorry).

Back on point here: start with your energy, your spirit. Before your assembled or online community receives your words, they receive the energy that flows through you. That's the music on which your lyrics ride. So think of your energy like the dials on a radio: there's a tuner and a volume. The best, most compelling, and engaging preachers are in control of both. For readers who don't remember radio dials, think of your energy as your Spotify account.

Remember, we're talking about energy here, not content. So the idea of a "tuner" refers to the type of energy: reflective, inspiring, joyful, comforting, contemplative, etc. Be intentional about this. When you consider the Scriptures within the context of the day, what is the energy seeking to flow through you into the community?

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, a couple of people asked me to preach on the importance of wearing a facemask in public. Fair enough. It was very topical, arguably a respect-for-life issue, and unnecessarily controversial. I prayed about it. At that particular moment in time, however, I sensed the Spirit seeking to bring unifying joy to our community. Because my homily preparation always begins with spiritual discernment, not with content determination,

I knew I had to dial my tuner to joyful hope. The challenge of social responsibility would have to wait for another day.

Likewise, *volume* here does not refer to the volume of your voice; it refers to the intensity of your energy. Some homilies, such as Easter, call for big energy that fills the entire church and spills into the streets outside. Other homilies, such as the one I just mentioned during the height of pandemic, call for a more regulated energy that carries joyful hope to the hearts of people where it can take up rest.

I suppose I should back up and clarify something here. All this talk about energy may have a few people worried that I've steered this train around the New Age bend. Please. The entwined relationship between Spirit and energy goes all the way back to the creation stories, way back to when any idea of new age was, actually, the original new age. It's the breath of life God blows into the lungs of humanity, the blast from angelic trumpets upon Christ's birth, the Spirit that descends like a dove upon Jesus as he emerges from the Jordan, and the tongues of fire that lap down upon the apostles at Pentecost. It's all these things and more. And when you stand in front of a gathered community to offer a homily, it's that same sacred energy that seeks to flow through you. Start there. Begin by identifying and becoming one with the sacred energy that seeks to flow through you.

A Few Things Worth Hanging On To

- People haven't abandoned sabbath. They're looking for a more meaningful and relevant sabbath experience.
- Spiritually seeking people want to be opened up, engaged, and inspired.
- People first engage your energy before ever receiving your words.
- A homilist is a conduit for Spirit, and words are fish that swim in the stream.
- No one will ever believe in your homily more than you do or be inspired by it more than you are.
- Begin by identifying what sort of energy the Spirit is seeking to have flow through you into the community.