

The Mass (Part XVI)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE HOMILY

The homily is directly related to the readings from Sacred Scripture. While there are a variety of styles of delivery, the focus is on illuminating the word for the people to assist them in encountering God, present in his word. Before considering the details of this, perhaps a few liturgical notes would assist us.

It is highly recommended that the homily is given whenever a significant number of people are present for Mass. In a modern suburban parish there are only a few occasions when this would not be so. It is therefore considered an integral part of the liturgy of the word.

This might be disappointing to those who are in a hurry or who might be distracted by the homily. In addition, the homily seems very dependent on human gifts and skills, rather than by the mystery of the living tradition that is so much a part of the Mass.

The mechanics of the effect that the homily has on us probably cannot be determined by human inspection. What is behind a good homily is more than the capabilities of the preacher. In the end, it may have more to do with the listener than the one speaking.

What we call ‘inspiration’ is the domain of the Spirit, whose movements are freedom itself. Innumerable times, I have been complimented on a particular point in a homily, a point I never made. How God’s word strikes a chord in us is a great mystery.

There are, however, a few suggestions that might help. To make a good homily better (or even a bad homily good) the key is a kind of active spiritual listening. The beginning of this is in the preparation for Mass, bringing your needs in prayer to the Mass. As well, it is necessary that we clear a path for the Spirit, by confessing our sins, either in the sacrament of Penance or, if our sins are venial, in the penitential rite of the Mass. Those who are bored with Mass, or think all homilies are “off point” might need to ask when the last time was that they went to confession.

The second step is to focus on the readings from Holy Scripture. If there is a long period of “dryness” with the homily, it may be necessary to reflect on the readings before Mass. There are many groups in the parish who do this together in what is sometimes called a “lectionary Bible study”. It is likely that some form of preparation would help us, even if it is to quickly glance through them just before the Mass begins.

Look for a key phrase, especially one that might be challenging or that you have not noticed before. Pray that God will open your heart to his word. Meditate on that phrase, holding it in your thoughts as the homily proceeds. See Jesus speaking his words to those who appear in the Gospel, speaking them to you.

There is something to the notion that as we hear the readings, in the context of the Mass, there is a “spiritual moment” when God can place his word before us. While homilies find their subject matter in the vast teachings of the Catholic Church they are, of course, linked to the Gospel and other readings. And, since these are ancient texts, there are occasional needs to explain details related to their origin.

This is not, however, to be a lecture either in “biblical history” or theology. It is intended to apply the Good News of God in Christ to the everyday lives of God’s people. We come to the Father with problems, hopes and dreams, and he answers them all with the Word Incarnate, Jesus, his only Son.