

Catholic

UPDATE

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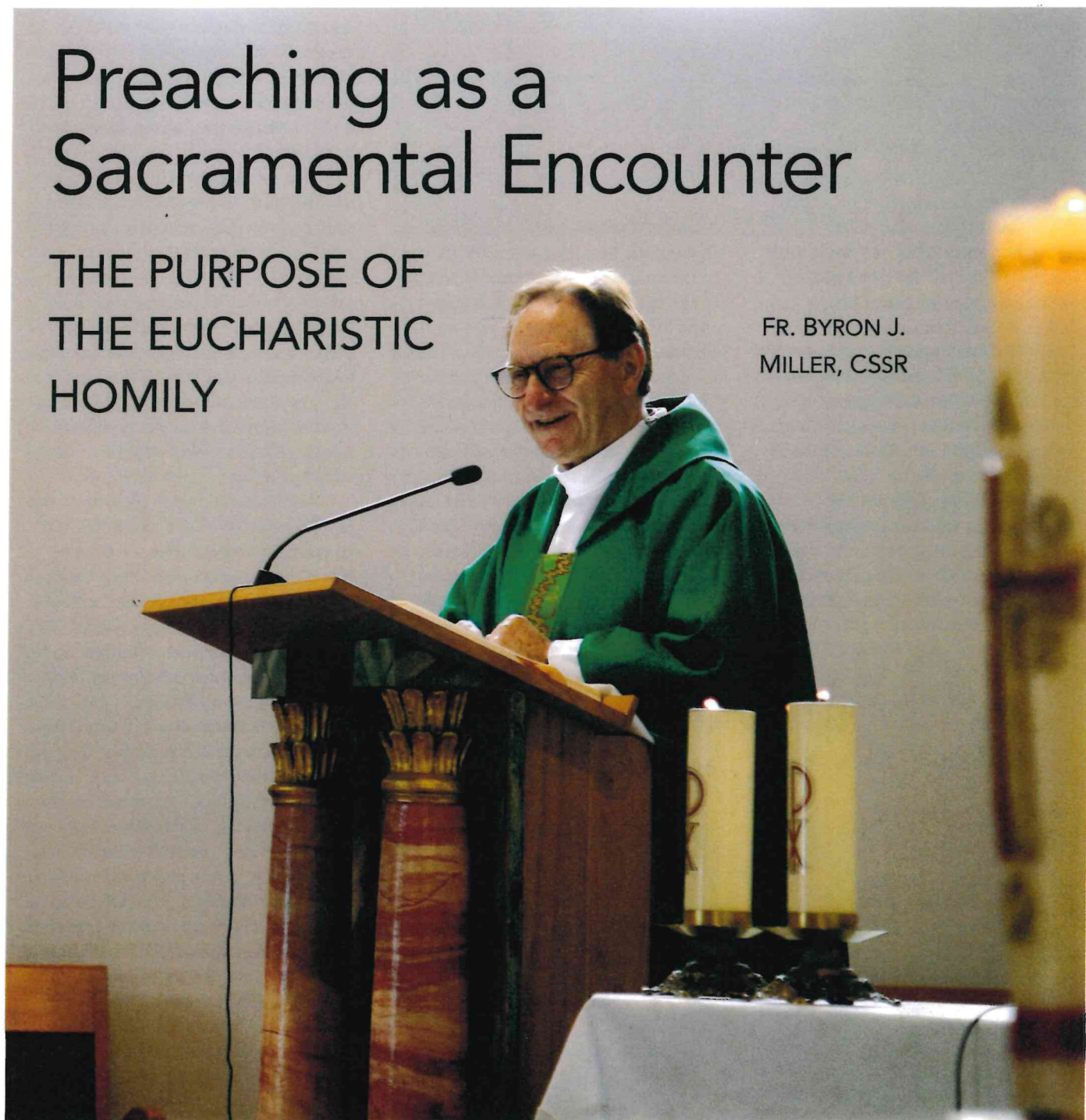
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Catholic Traditions WHAT WE DO AND WHY WE DO IT

Preaching as a Sacramental Encounter

THE PURPOSE OF
THE EUCHARISTIC
HOMILY

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“Ah, Lord God!” said the prophet Jeremiah, “I do not know how to speak.” So, the Lord extended his hand and touched Jeremiah’s mouth, saying, “See, I place my words in your mouth!” (See Jeremiah 1:1, 4–10.)

Homilists may not always experience this kind of direct divine *intervention*, but they usually feel, or hope for, divine *inspiration* in their preaching. In the book *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, the US Catholic bishops wrote, “If the words of Scripture are divinely inspired, as we believe them to be, then divine inspiration must be at work when those words are made alive and contemporary to the believing community in and through” the ministry of preaching.

“Whoever preaches, let it be with the words of God” (1 Peter 4:11). Preachers are called to proclaim foremost the gospel according to Jesus Christ: “All sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 134). This proclamation of the Word of God is a sacramental encounter of grace. It responds to our innate desire to know God and God’s saving works through Christ.

While many people readily encounter the transcendent mystery of God in preaching, too often others regard the homily as a discipline to patiently endure before partaking

of the Eucharist at Mass. However, nourishment derived from “breaking open the word” and reflecting on it is intended to prepare us for the sustenance that comes from the “breaking of bread.” Pope Benedict XVI, in his exhortation *Verbum Domini* (The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church), echoed the words of the Second Vatican Council when he explained, “Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other.”

The Purpose of a Homily

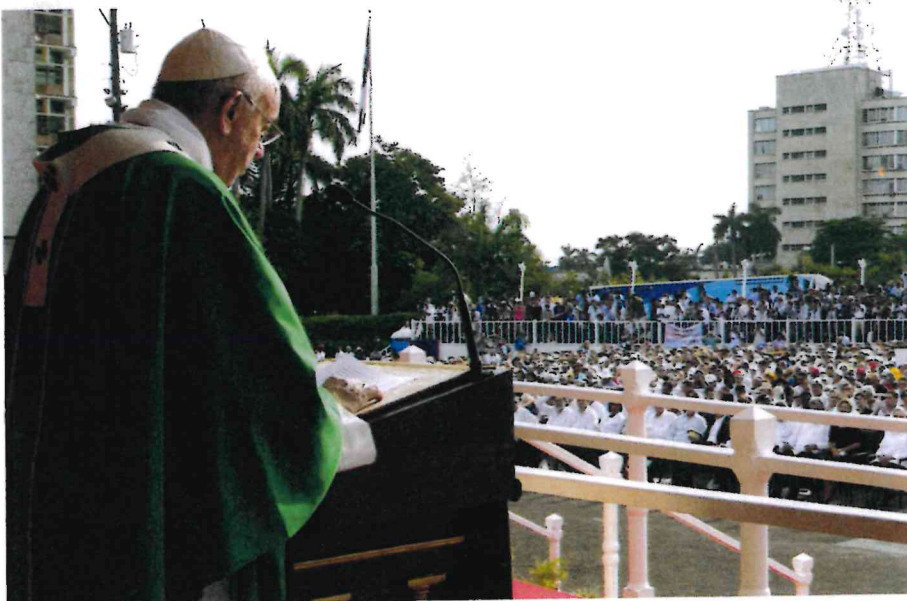
Also in *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, the bishops write, “The function of the Eucharistic homily is to enable people to lift up their hearts, to praise and thank the Lord for his presence in their lives.” They go on to say that the preacher gives the congregation “words to express their faith” and, in so doing, “joins himself and the congregation in a common vision.” As such, the homily is far more than a personal witness or testimonial. Preaching attempts to explain the sacred mysteries and inspire fidelity to the Christian way of life by making the proclaimed Word of God relatable to its listeners. (See *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 65.)

Homilies not only put us in touch with the mystery of God, they also tell us something about ourselves. For example, the three parables of mercy—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—also known as “the gospel within the gospel” in Chapter 15 of Luke, reveal as much about us as they do about God. Because the Scriptures are meant to speak to us at different stages of life and provide multiple levels of meaning to the openhearted, the preacher always has a sacred treasure of timeless, universal stories to draw from!

From this treasure, it is preferable for a homilist to suggest rather than spell out, to evoke more than simply explain. He isn’t asked to merely paraphrase the Scriptures that were just proclaimed or expound on some lofty doctrine. According to the US bishops, the more homilists “can turn to the picture language of the poet and the storyteller, the more [they] will be able to preach in a way that invites people to respond from the heart as well as the mind.”

The ideal is to preach like Jesus—to invite the listener with a radical choice to enter into the kingdom of God by telling a short, compelling story with simple images to convey a moral or religious lesson, and then to let listeners draw the relevant implications without further explanation. However, in practice, not all preachers are so gifted in relating masterful parables like Jesus, nor are all listeners so inclined at drawing their own meaning. Pope Francis wrote that the faithful attach great importance to the homily and “both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them, and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case” (*Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel], 135).

Yet, if we believe that God’s love is revealed in the preaching dynamic, then why do ordained ministers and the laity “suffer” through the homily?



Seven Challenges for the Effective Preacher and the Attentive Listener

Both homilist and listener have a role in preaching as a sacramental encounter and for overcoming the challenges that too often make the homily a test of endurance rather than a time of enlightenment. How can the preacher in the pulpit, and the parishioner in the pew, overcome those challenges?

1. FAMILIARITY

The Message and the Messenger

Over time, regular churchgoing Catholics may become familiar with the biblical readings of the three-year liturgical cycle. It is tempting to stop listening after the first few words of a familiar passage. Both listener and preacher are challenged to approach Scripture as if there is something new to be heard—because there is!

Likewise, familiarity may breed contempt for the preacher. Much like the people of Jesus' hometown, who thought they knew him and could not hear his message (See Mark 6:1–6.), listeners may fail to listen to a familiar voice. In an international study of popular spiritual practices, published by *Communications Psychology* in March 2025, Catholic sermons triggered the highest levels of boredom. The challenge for the listener is to dispel these preconceived notions: *He offers me little that I haven't already heard from him before, or God cannot speak to me through this minister.*

In *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, theologian Frederick Buechner describes this challenge in a relatable way: "In the front pews, the old ladies turn up their hearing aids, and a young lady slips her six-year-old a Life Saver and a Magic Marker. A college sophomore home for vacation, who is there because he was dragged there, slumps forward with his chin in his hand. . . . The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. . . . Everybody knows the kinds of things he has told them before and not told them, but who knows what this time, out of the silence, he will tell them?"

May the Lord Jesus,
who made the deaf to hear and
the mute to speak,
grant that you may soon receive
his word with your ears
and profess the faith
with your lips,
to the glory and praise
of God the Father.
Amen.

EPHPHATHA PRAYER
FROM THE ORDER OF BAPTISM



2. ENVIRONMENT

Making Every Word Count

Preachers often have an enlightened message to deliver in their homily, and worshipers may be receptive to hearing it, but various obstacles prevent this from happening. Good acoustics depend on the size and design of the church, the amount of hard reflective surfaces, and the quality of the sound system. Inferior portable microphones can be more problematic than beneficial. Some preachers may desire greater intimacy with the assembly by preaching away from the ambo or chair (See *GIRM* 136.); however, if the microphone at the ambo is superior to the remote one attached to the preacher, he may "connect" with those in the front of church but further alienate those in the back who can neither hear nor see him speaking. Intimacy between the homilist and the assembly is most desirable, and variables like the size of the congregation and the preaching location determine how it is best achieved. Congregation members who have difficulty hearing can use hearing devices, if available, or request them if they're not. Sitting where one can see and hear is important for those who struggle with hearing loss.

3. DISTRACTIONS

Struggling to Stay Engaged

We can expect external distractions, such as crying babies, ringing mobile phones, or coughing spells, to inevitably erupt during the homily. Sometimes, it's helpful for the preacher to acknowledge the distraction if he can do so without embarrassing anyone. When preachers with heavy accents or peculiar mannerisms of speech are challenging to understand, we can easily entertain internal distractions, like preparing a mental grocery list or wondering what sports teams are competing on TV after Sunday Mass. When the mind wanders, it may be helpful to imagine the preacher and listeners engaged in a collective form of prayer to God, asking, "What do I need to hear today?"



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4. CONTENT**Grace Beyond Personal Perspective**

Congregations include people who call themselves conservative or liberal, traditional or progressive, conventional or cutting-edge. The preacher is one person who cannot possibly lean in the same direction as every member of the congregation. The challenge for preachers is to avoid appealing only to those who prefer a certain style of liturgy. They must also find ways to convey the message that God is loving and merciful, not vindictive and unforgiving. Likewise, they must prevent themselves from being special-interest spokespeople of a political party, especially in today's climate, when partisanship foments extremism. The pulpit is not a soapbox for political allegiances or a platform for the gospel according to Fox News or CNN. By the same token, listeners must not demand that the homilist support their agendas. In his 2017 homily for Pentecost, Pope Francis said that when Christians "take sides and form parties, when we adopt rigid and airtight positions, [we] become Christians on the 'right' or the 'left' before being on the side of Jesus." That's because Christ's message doesn't align completely with any political party.

5. DURATION**Preachers Watch the Time, So the Assembly Doesn't**

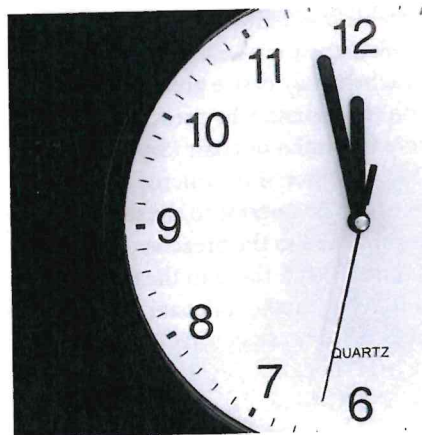
Speaking with liturgical directors in 2023, Pope Francis called lengthy, obtuse homilies "a disaster," and he urged preachers to limit their homilies "to no more than eight to ten minutes" and to always include in them "a thought, a feeling, and an image." Even if we didn't live in an age of media sound bites and shorter attention spans, the basic principle for brevity is normally advisable for homilies. Ironically, though, a lengthy homily that's well prepared and artfully delivered can be more engaging than

a short, unprepared one! Regardless, a quote often attributed to Mark Twain delivers an opinion on brevity that still stands: "No sinner is ever saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon."

6. AUTHENTICITY AND EMPATHY
The Honest Voice and the Receptive Ear

"Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." This maxim, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, applies to homilists and to all Christians who want to model their faith in action. Practice what we preach. "I won't take my religion from any man who never works except with his mouth," wrote Carl Sandburg in his poem "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter." During his missionary work in Peru, Pope Leo XIV learned how to repair used cars for service in ministry. Undoubtedly, his preaching benefited from the experience.

In the same way, listeners must practice what they profess. Most members of a congregation would find it difficult to speak for ten minutes before a crowd. Listeners should pray for the preacher, pray that God's voice is heard at this time and in this place, and pray that a needed message is spoken. Such listeners will hear what they need to hear.



Fr. Byron Miller, CSsR, is an Associate Editor for Liguori Publications. He previously served as its president and publisher (2015–2023) and is the author of numerous faith-based publications.

7. PREPARATION**Shared Labor in Anticipation of the Sacramental Encounter**

The secret to both preaching and hearing a true, timely, needed message is to prepare. Homilists are often parish priests who find it difficult to spend the hours needed to prepare a succinct, well-researched, well-spoken homily. Nevertheless, such time is well spent. Congregation members who seek to be engaged by the Scriptures will review the Sunday readings before Mass, perhaps even take time to study a commentary or discuss the lessons in a prayer group. We would not expect a homilist to preach "off the cuff." Nor should one listen "off the cuff."

As Fr. Karl Rahner encourages in this excerpt from his Prayer for Priests, the best preparation may be to pray for the preacher:

*God has told him to proclaim
God's word.
Perhaps he has not entirely
understood it himself.
Perhaps he adulterates it.
But he believes, and despite his
fear he knows
that he must communicate God's
word to you.
For must not some of us say
something about God,
about eternal life, about the
majesty of grace in our sanctified
being?
Must not some one of us speak of
sin, the judgment and mercy of
God?
So my dear friends, pray for him,
carry him,
so that he might be able to sustain
others by bringing to them
the mystery of God's love revealed
in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

—FR. KARL RAHNER, SJ