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Preparing a homily as an important element of pastoral care

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Abstract

Preparing a homily as an important element of pastoral care

The homily, which the Second Vatican Council assigned a special role among various forms of preaching the Word of God, is an important task for those, who are entrusted with pastoral care. The faithful eagerly listen to homilies, but at the same time, they often complain that their level is too low and expect homilies on the good level. Yet, the solution to the problem lies in good preparation of the homily. Also, preachers must be convinced that the time allocated for this is one of their most important pastoral duties. We have evidence of how the last popes, Benedict XVI and Francis, prepared their homilies. Working on a sermon is a creative process that goes through the following phases: research and collection of materials, incubation, illumination, and verification. The fruit of reflection and prayer is a homily characterized by Christocentrism, a positive message from which a moral call arises; it contains the teaching of the Church, actualizes the word of God, introduces the celebrated liturgy, and is single-thematic. Hence, in the pastors' belief in the important role of the sermon and its reliable preparation, there is an opportunity to improve the quality of the homily.

Keywords: preparation, homily, Benedict XVI, Francis

Abstrakt

Przygotowanie homilii jako istotny element postęgi duszpasterskiej

Homilia, której Sobór Watykański II przyznał szczególną rolę pośród różnych form przepowiadania słowa Bożego, jest ważnym zadaniem duszpasterzy. Wierni chętnie słuchają homilii, a jednocześnie narzekają często na ich zbyt niski poziom i oczekują, by były one lepsze. Rozwiązanie problemu tkwi w dobrym przygotowaniu homilii. Duszpasterze muszą się przekonać, że czas na to przeznaczony jest jednym z ich ważniejszych obowiązków duszpasterskich. Dysponujemy świadectwami o tym, jak ostatni papieże, Benedykt XVI i Franciszek, przygotowywali swoje homilie. Praca nad homilią jest procesem twórczym, który przechodzi przez fazy: kwerendy i zbierania materiałów, inkubacji, iluminacji oraz weryfikacji. Owocem przemyśleń i modlitwy jest homilia odznaczająca się chrystocentryzmem, pozytywnym przekazem, z którego wynika moralne wezwanie; zawiera nauczanie Kościoła, stanowi aktualizację słowa Bożego, wprowadza w celebrowaną liturgię i jest jednotematyczna. To właśnie w przekonaniu duszpasterzy o ważnej roli homilii i w rzetelnym jej przygotowaniu tkwi szansa poprawy jakości homilii.

Słowa kluczowe: przygotowanie, homilia, Benedykt XVI, Franciszek

Preaching the word of God is a divine-human event. It means that its effectiveness is determined by both God and man. However, human effectiveness depends on the preacher's good preparation and the appropriate disposition of the listeners. The good preparation of the preacher includes both his prior human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation, the right intention, i.e., preaching for the glory of God and the spiritual benefit of the listeners, as well as prayerful, thoughtful, and organized content.

This article aims to highlight and appreciate the important role of preparing homilies in the service of those entrusted with pastoral care. Pastors are obliged to preach homilies, and the audience has the right to receive spiritual food from their spiritual leaders. Although on the one hand, many voices are complaining about the low level of homilies, on the other hand, there are voices demanding that they be preached, even every day. An antidote that can be used to reduce the gap between the poor qualities of homilies expounded, and the demand for them is to increase the value of the preparation of homilies in the ministry of pastors. The source of the analysis will be the popes' statements and surveys conducted in Poland before the synod on synodality.

First, let's discuss the paradox of complaining about the quality of homilies and the demand for listening to them. Secondly, we will point out the importance of preparing a homily in the ministry of pastors. Thirdly, we will present different ways of preparing a homily using the example of Pope Benedict XVI and Francis. Fourth, we will deliver features of a well-prepared homily.

1. The paradox of complaining about the quality of homilies and the demand to listen to them

Pope Francis, who can easily be considered the "Pope of homilies," expressed criticism at least twice during 2023 about the quality of the homilies he preached. Once, he called it a "disaster", and another time he called it a "torture." In a speech on January 20, 2023, to a group of priests, diocesan liturgical directors, who participated in Rome in the course "Full participation in the liturgical action" conducted by the Pontifical

Institute of Liturgy at the University of San Anselmo,¹ Francis spoke about the need to improve the quality of sermons and proposed that they last eight, ten minutes, no more! He emphasized that homilies are not lectures.

At times I hear someone [say]: ‘Yes, I went to Mass in that parish ... yes, a good lesson of philosophy, forty, forty-five minutes ... Eight, ten, no more! And always a thought, a sentiment and an image. Let people take something home with them.’²

In a comment on this statement, Christopher Lamb quoted an observation from the listener of the homily, Ellen Lynch, a communications professional living in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the United States, who wrote on Twitter: “It is so true. I once was at a Mass where the homily was 50 minutes!!! Do I remember anything beyond how it felt like torture? Nope.”³

Francis made a second critical assessment of the homily during a press conference on the plane, returning from World Youth Day in Lisbon.

Some of you, through Matteo [Bruni], asked why I cut short the homilies that you received. When I speak—not the “academic” addresses, those I try to do more clearly—when I speak, I always make an effort to communicate. You have seen how even in the “academic” addresses I make some joke or comment that brings a smile, in order to keep communication open. With the young people, the long addresses contained the essence of the message, and I took from them what I felt served communication. You saw how I asked some question, and immediately

1 Ch. Lamb, *Catholic homilies are often a ‘disaster’ says Pope*, “The Tablet”, Jan 24, 2023, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/16448/catholic-homilies-are-often-a-disaster-says-pope> (Aug 2, 2023). The meeting concerned implementation, i.e., putting into practice the conciliar liturgical reform in individual dioceses and liturgical formation under the indications contained in the apostolic letter of Francis *Desiderio desideravi* of June 29, 2022.

2 Ch. Lamb, *Catholic homilies are often a ‘disaster’ says Pope*, “The Tablet”, Jan 24, 2023, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/16448/catholic-homilies-are-often-a-disaster-says-pope> (Aug 2, 2023). There is a clear reference here to *Evangelii gaudium*, 157.

3 K. Duffy, *Pope Francis and the Search for Solutions to the Bad Sermon Phenomenon*, Mar 27, 2023, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/pope-francis-and-the-search-for-solutions-to-the-bad-sermon-phenomenon/> (Nov 20, 2023).

the response showed me where things were going, whether I was on track or not. Young people don't have a great attention span. Think that, if you make a clear address with an idea, in image, and emotion, they can follow you for eight minutes. Parenthetically, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, which was my first Exhortation, I wrote a long, long chapter on the homily. Because, homilies—there is parish priest here and he knows this—homilies are sometimes a torture, blah blah blah..., and the people... In some countries, the men leave church to have a smoke and then come back. The Church needs to be converted on this aspect of the homily. Homilies need to be brief and clear, to have a clear message and to be affectionate.⁴

It may sound paradoxical, but the fact is that, on the one hand, there are so many critical comments about homilies. On the other hand, wishes are expressed for homilies to be preached often, even daily, because people want to listen to them. This is evidenced by surveys collected in Poland among respondents during preparations for the synod on synodality in the Church.

During the synod, the problem of the low standard of homilies was raised. The issue of inappropriate presentation of Catholic social teaching was introduced, which is why many people perceive the discussion of this topic as political sermons, sometimes even with personal references. The moralizing tone of homilies in which there is no place for the Good News and the *kerygma* is also discouraging. In many cases, priests are unprepared to preach the word of God. Homilies often lack a deep explanation of the Word read, the truths of faith, and any reference to the Bible. Celebrants often read other people's texts downloaded from the Internet and preach too short or too long and complicated sermons or homilies, thus disregarding or even insulting the listeners. The faithful greatly appreciate these places where a short homily is preached daily during Holy Mass, explaining the word of God being read. The need to preach brief homilies on weekdays and meditate on the word of God every day for at least three minutes was emphasized.⁵

4 Francis, *Papal Speeches*. In-Flight Press Conference, Sunday, Aug 6, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/august/documents/20230806-portogallo-voloritorno.html> (Sep 10, 2023).

5 Synod 2021–2023. Synteza krajowa. Ku Kościołowi synodalnemu: komunია, uczestnictwo, misja, koordynacja A. J. Galbas, Ruda Śląska 2022, p. 21, https://synod.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Synteza_SYNOD_2021_2023_mobile.pdf (Aug 6, 2023).

Also, a working document prepared in October 2022 by the synod secretariat for the continental stage—based on the syntheses of all Episcopal Conferences of the Universal Church, as well as the Eastern Churches and other groups of the faithful such as religious institutes and lay movements—took up the issue of homilies. In the context of shortcomings related to celebrating the liturgy, the poor quality of homilies was also mentioned. Respondents accuse them of shallow thematic content, expecting them to focus on the biblical texts proclaimed in the liturgy, the liturgical celebration, and the social life of the listeners.

The reports do not fail to point out the main shortcomings of the actual celebratory praxis, which obscure its synodal effectiveness. In particular, the following are emphasized: the liturgical protagonism of the priest and the risk of the passivity of the wider liturgical community; poor preaching, including the distance between the content of the sermon, the beauty of faith and the concreteness of life; and the separation between the liturgical life of the assembly and the family network of the community. The quality of homilies is almost unanimously reported as a problem: there is a call for *deeper homilies, centered on the Gospel and the readings of the day, and not on politics, making use of accessible and attractive language that refers to the lives of the faithful* (Maronite Church).⁶

This statement proves that listeners value homilies and expect appropriate quality from their preachers. High-quality homilies cannot be expected if the pastors called to preach them do not devote adequate time to their preparation.⁷

2. The importance of preparing a homily in pastoral care

Since the homily is the weekly food of the faithful, its preparation is a constant responsibility of pastors. The Council of Trent (1545–1563)

6 General Secretariat of the Synod, *Synod 2021–2024. For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” (Is 54:2). Working Document for the Continental Stage*, Vatican City, October 2022, 93, see 64; <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continental-EN.pdf> (Sep 7, 2023).

7 See H. Sławiński, *Konieczność przygotowania homilii. Na kanwie aktualnych polemik o pomocach kaznodziejskich*, „Przegląd Homiletyczny” 12 (2008), pp. 17–24.

already attached great importance to pastors zealously and systematically preaching the Word of God to the faithful. This council reprimanded the negligence of pastors in this respect, imposing canonical and financial penalties on the lazy: lazy pastors who neglected their duty to preach were to be deprived of their financial benefits. However, it was necessary to support financially those who duly contributed to this service.⁸

The last council, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), does not say anything about sanctions against pastors who neglect the preaching of the Word of God. Still, it treats the tasks of pastors positively: it emphasizes that preaching the Word of God is a priority function in the ministry of priests. In the *Decree on the Ministry and Priestly Life*, we read:

The word of the living God unites the People of God, rightly demanded from the lips of priests. Since no one can be saved unless he first believes, priests, as collaborators with bishops, have the duty of preaching the Gospel of God to everyone [...]. Therefore, Priests are indebted to all to share with them the truth of the Gospel they enjoy in the Lord.⁹

8 “Archpriests, curates, and all those who [...] have the cure of souls, shall, at least on the Lord’s days, and solemn feasts, either personally, or if they be lawfully hindered, by others who are competent, feed the people committed to them, with wholesome words, according to their own capacity, and that of their people; by teaching them the things which it is necessary for all to know unto salvation, and by announcing to them with briefness and plainness of discourse, the vices which they must avoid, and the virtues which they must follow after, that they may escape everlasting punishment, and obtain the glory of heaven. And if any one of the above neglect to discharge this duty [...] let not the watchful pastoral solicitude of the bishops be wanting, [...]; lest that word be fulfilled; The little ones have asked for bread, and there was none to break it unto them. Wherefore, if, after having been admonished by the bishop, they shall neglect this their duty for the space of three months, let them be compelled by ecclesiastical censures, or otherwise, at the discretion of the said bishop; in such wise that even-if this seem to him expedient-a fair remuneration be paid, out of the fruits of the benefices, to some other person to discharge that office, until the principal himself repenting shall fulfil his own duty” (The Council of Trent, Session 5, II: *On preachers of the word of God, and on Questors of alms*, 11, <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch5.htm> (Oct 9, 2023)).

9 Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, Dec 7, 1965, 4.

The obligation to preach the Word of God results from the identity of the priest received in the sacrament of Holy Orders, as well as from the right of the faithful to be provided with the spiritual food by their pastors. Let us add that the priestly service is carried out by both priests and their superiors—bishops, and in their case, the proclamation of the Word of God is a priority task too. *The Council's Decree on the Pastoral Functions of Bishops in the Church*, “*Christus Dominus*,” states: “In fulfilling their duty to teach, let them announce the Gospel of Christ to people—which is at the forefront among the essential tasks of bishops.”¹⁰

Good and effective performance of the ministry of preaching is impossible without direct, regular preparation prior to it. Pope Francis highlighted the importance of preparing a homily in pastoral service in his programmatic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. He considered this preparation so important that even other religious services should give way to it, not to mention other pastors unrelated to pastoral care activities.

Preparation for preaching is so important a task that a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity should be devoted to it. With great affection I wish to stop for a moment and offer a method of preparing homilies. Some may find these suggestions self-evident, but I consider it helpful to offer them as a way of emphasizing the need to devote quality time to this precious ministry. Some pastors argue that such preparation is not possible given the vast number of tasks which they must perform; nonetheless, I presume to ask that each week a sufficient portion of personal and community time be dedicated to this task, even if less time has to be given to other important activities. Trust in the Holy Spirit who is at work during the homily is not merely passive but active and creative. It demands that we offer ourselves and all our abilities as instruments (cf. Rom 12:1) which God can use. A preacher who does not prepare is not spiritual; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received.¹¹

In such an important document, Francis considered programmatic for his pontificate, the entire third point of the third chapter of the

¹⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus*, 12.

¹¹ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, Nov 24, 2013, 145.

exhortation was devoted to the preparation for preaching.¹² From a negative perspective, however, it must be admitted that homilies are becoming one of the causes of apatheism, or indifference, especially among young people. Francis mentioned this in his exhortation *Christus vivit*. He linked the fact that many young people do not expect anything from the Church, among other things, to the laziness and superficiality of priests and, more precisely, to the lack of “care in preparing homilies and preaching the Word of God.”¹³ Bishop Robert Barron made similar annotations: research conducted in 2012 among Catholics who left the Church showed that one of the reasons was the poor quality of homilies.

Preparing a homily turns out to be one of the fundamental issues of homiletics as a field of practical theology. Moreover, the entire study of theology, properly understood, is a preparation for preaching the Word of God. Theology is for preaching, not the other way around. According to Francis, a homily must be well prepared in prayer and study of the word of God, and it should be able to be expressed in a clear and short summary.¹⁴ Francis emphasizes that preparing a proclamation is a creative process.¹⁵ A good pastor is a creative artist, and each well-prepared homily is a work of art. Does not world literature contain sermons as great speeches that shaped history: from the Sermon on the Mount

¹² Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 145–159.

¹³ Francis, *Christus vivit*, 40; see H. Sławiński, *Inspiracje Franciszka dla postugi słowa*, „Polonia Sacra” 25 (2021) no. 4, p. 59; K. Duffy, *Pope Francis and the Search for Solutions to the Bad Sermon Phenomenon*, Mar 27, 2023, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/pope-francis-and-the-search-for-solutions-to-the-bad-sermon-phenomenon/> (Nov 20, 2023).

¹⁴ “And the homily must be prepared well; it must be brief, short! A priest told me that once he had gone to another city where his parents lived, and his father told him: ‘You know, I am pleased, because my friends and I have found a church where they say Mass without a homily!’. And how often do we see that during the homily some fall asleep, others chat or go outside to smoke a cigarette.... For this reason, please, make the homily brief, but prepare it well. And how do we prepare a homily, dear priests, deacons, bishops? How should it be prepared? With prayer, by studying the Word of God and by making a clear and brief summary; it should not last more than 10 minutes, please” (Francis, General Audience, Feb 7, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180207_udienza-generale.html (Nov 10, 2023)).

¹⁵ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 145.

delivered by Jesus of Nazareth, through Bernard of Clairvaux, Martin Luther King to John Paul II!

Like any creative process, preparing a homily takes place in successive stages described by the psychology of creativity. These are: material collection, “incubation period”, illumination period, and verification stage. Let’s discuss them briefly.

(1) Collecting material first involves getting acquainted with the biblical and liturgical texts intended for a given celebration, taking into account the periods of the liturgical year. We should consider the possibility of selecting appropriate prayers, songs, and possibly fragments of literature for the holy texts. Then, one must find points of contact between sacred texts and what concerns man and society. It is about real-life experiences, observations, conversations with people, and information from TV, radio, newspapers, and the Internet.

(2) Then comes the time of incubation, which is a frustrating stage: we don’t know what kind of homily one can create. Nevertheless, you have to learn to endure these frustrations. While the previous stage, i.e., collecting information, occurs on the conscious level, the incubation stage occurs on the unconscious plane. It precedes the next stage, which involves relieving tension due to illumination, sometimes during the most routine activities, such as a walk or preparing for rest.

(3) The illumination stage is, in other words, finding an idea for a homily, creating a connection between the text and the listeners, and discovering the direction in which the text is to be updated. Not every idea is right; it may turn out to be dreadful. One then needs to look for new solutions and take further considerations. It is best to consider several ideas that can be compared with each other and then decide on the best one at a given moment.

(4) The final stage of creative work on the homily is the verification phase. It is about giving the selected idea an appropriate structure and linguistic form. Jan Twardy undertook an in-depth discussion of the individual stages of creative work in his dissertation “The Concept of Creative Work on a Sermon.”¹⁶

16 J. Twardy, *Koncepcja pracy twórczej nad kazaniem. Inspiracje psychologiczne w niemieckojęzycznych publikacjach homiletycznych 1970–1996*, Rzeszów 1998, pp. 157–174.

3. The example of the preparation of a homily by Benedict XVI and Francis

A good homily can only be delivered by a well-prepared preacher. This is the purpose of the human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral formation of candidates for the priesthood and the permanent formation of priests. Although every priest is a theologian by profession, it must be emphasized that theology serves preaching. The purpose of the entire formation of the pastor finds its synthetic expression in the gesture of the cross on the lips and the prayer of the pastor, who begins the day with the Liturgy of the Hours: “Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise” (cf. Ps 51:17).

In addition to further preparation of the pastor, each preaching service requires reliable, direct preparation of each homily. Each pastor develops his own method of immediate preparation based on the homiletical education he has received and the experiences of other masters of the word.

Having testimonies from recent popes, one knows how they prepared their homilies. In his interesting doctoral dissertation entitled *Homily in the Theory and Practice of Benedict XVI*, Jakub Wiśniewski included a letter he received from Pope Benedict XVI on November 7, 2019 in response to a question about how the Pope prepared his homilies:

Unfortunately, I cannot answer your question about the method of preparing sermons and the entire process. I simply prayed for enlightenment first, then read the biblical text in German and Greek, and then looked through the commentaries as my time permitted, which seemed useful for that matter. Then, I wondered what this text had to say to me personally and how it affected people listening to my sermon. The confrontation between the living reality of today and the Word of Scripture should ultimately bring that Word to me and the congregation. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you more about my preparation for preaching. Of course, their background is the effort to live according to the Word of God.¹⁷

17 J. Wiśniewski, *Homilia w teorii i praktyce Benedykta XVI*, Kraków 2021, pp. 288–289.

Benedict XVI tried to live by what he taught. The testimony of his work in preparing a homily reflects his teaching in *Verbum Domini*.¹⁸

Pope Francis uses another, less academic, method of preparing a homily. We got to know it thanks to the record of Diego J. Fares, who conducted numerous conversations with Franciszek. In one of them, when asked about the method of preparing homilies, the popes confessed:

I start preparations the day before. At noon the day before the morning Holy Mass. I look through the next day's readings and usually choose one of the two. Then, I read aloud the text I had chosen. I need to hear sounds and listen to words spoken aloud. At that time, I marked the words that moved me the most in my recently reading book. I circle these words that move me. For the rest of the day, these words and the thoughts associated with them ebb and flow as I do my thing. At the same time, I meditate, reflect, and enjoy things... However, there are days when nothing comes to my mind until evening when I have no idea what to say the next day. Then I do what Saint says. Ignacy: I'm going to sleep on it. And then, as soon as I wake up, inspiration strikes. The right thoughts come to mind, sometimes sounding strong or a little weaker. But it is so. I feel like I'm prepared.¹⁹

Both the first and second testimonies mention the previously discussed stages of creative work on the homily: collection and analysis of source material, incubation, illumination, and verification.

18 "Hence, it is necessary for preachers to 'remain familiar' and to engage frequently with the sacred text; they should prepare for the homily in meditation and prayer so that they preach with conviction and passion. The Synod Assembly encouraged us to ask ourselves: 'What do the texts we read say? What do they tell me myself? What should I say to the community regarding its specific situation?' The preacher should 'be the first to apply to himself the word of God that he preaches' because—as St. Augustine—'the action of one who preaches the word of God externally and does not listen to it internally is undoubtedly fruitless.' We need to prepare Sunday and holiday homilies with particular care" (Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Sep 30, 2010, 59).

19 J. M. Bergoglio, *Nei tuoi occhi è la mia parola. Omelie e discorsi di Buenos Aires 1999–2013*, Milano 2016; quote by D. J. Fares, *Dziesięć rad papieża Franciszka*, Łódź 2018, pp. 79–80.

4. Features of a well-prepared homily

A well-prepared homily, which is the result of meditation and reflection, is characterized by the following features: it is Christocentric, it contains a positive message, it preserves the priority of the Good News to the moral obligation, it includes the teaching of the Church, it is an update of the Word of God, it contains an element of mystagogy, and it is single-thematic.

In contemporary theology, it is emphasized that Christ—the Incarnate Word of God—is the main preacher of the Word of God and, simultaneously, the basic content of preaching, including the main content of homilies. He is the Good News that the first witnesses of His life proclaimed, and the Evangelists recorded His words and deeds. The same Christ lives and works among believers both during the liturgy and in everyday life.²⁰ As Benedict XVI wrote in *Verbum Domini*, “It must be clear to the faithful that the preacher is interested in presenting Christ, who should be at the center of every homily.”²¹ When speaking about the Christocentrism of preaching, one should add that one means Trinitarian Christocentrism. Thanks to Christ, it has been revealed that God is one in Three Persons: God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All Christian worship is directed to God the Father, in the Holy Spirit, through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ.

The second feature of a well-prepared homily is the transmission of a positive message. The entire history of God with people is filled on the one hand with human infidelity and sin and on the other with God’s faithfulness: the whole history is subordinated to the almighty God who loves His creation and is faithful to His promises. Indeed, our world is not perfect, but it is the best possible, and is in a constant state of development. Everything will be fine in the end. No situation is hopeless. Even the message about Christ crucified is complemented by the message about His resurrection and glorification. God’s plan to save people is an entirely positive message.

²⁰ H. Sławiński, *Chrystus urzeczywistnił Pismo*, Kraków 2007, p. 16.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 59; por. Ch. Smith, *The Sociology of a Superb Sermon*, Apr 30, 2019, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-sociology-of-a-superb-sermon/> (Nov 20, 2023).

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples received encouragement from the Master to preach the Gospel, that is, the Good News, and not to complain about reality and to proclaim disasters, following the example of the mythological Cassandra of Troy, who prophesied misfortunes. The homily, like the word of God announced before it, is the Good News.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, “that in everything God works for good for those who love him”. The constant witness of the saints confirms this truth: St. Catherine of Siena said to “those who are scandalized and rebel against what happens to them: Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man, God does nothing without this goal in mind”. St. Thomas More, shortly before his martyrdom, consoled his daughter: “Nothing can come but that that God wills. and I make me very sure that whatsoever that be, seem it never so bad in sight, it shall indeed be the best.”²²

Even if, in the homily, it is necessary to respond to dramas, condemn sin, and apply admonitions and warnings—all this does not lose the character of a positive message because all admonitions take into account the chance of man’s conversion. God, rich in mercy, never doubts in man, which is the basis of the hope that permeates the homilies.

The third feature of a well-prepared homily is the priority of the saving indicative over the moral imperative. As in the Decalogue, also in a homily, it must first be said what God does for man, and only then can moral instructions resulting from God’s gift be drawn. All human morality is a response to God’s calling, as Stanisław Olejnik put it in the title of his post-conciliar textbook on moral theology: *In response to God’s gift and calling*.²³ The proclaimed word of God is related to life and human

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P19.HTM, 313.

²³ *W odpowiedzi na dar i powołanie Boże. Zarys teologii moralnej*, Warszawa 1979; see L. Szewczyk, *Chrystocentryczne głoszenie zasad życia chrześcijańskiego*, in: *Głosimy Pana Jezusa Chrystusa. Treść przepowiadania*, ed. by H. Sławiński, Kraków 2017, pp. 173–196; M. Orzoł, *Odpowiedź na wezwanie. Treści parenetyczne przepowiadania homilijnego*, in: *Homilia integralna. Studium treści przepowiadania homilijnego*, eds. M. Dąbrówka, M. Klementowicz, Tarnów 2017, pp. 117–130; A. Derdziuk, *Treści teologicznomoralne w homilii*, in: *Homilia integralna*, pp. 107–116.

morality: “The word of the Lord enters through the ears, reaches the heart and passes into the hands, into good deeds.”²⁴

The fourth feature of a good homily is the transmission of the message of salvation following the teachings of the Church. It is beneficial to deepen the content of the sermon by referring to the Fathers of the Church and good theologians, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and documents of the Holy See. Since a homily is not a lecture but a liturgical act, the necessary doctrinal explanations cannot become independent of the life of the listeners and the context of the liturgy but only constitute an explanation of the salvific message. Filling homilies with the catechism content is not easy, but it is necessary. Pope Benedict XVI postulated in the exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*:

The catechetical and encouraging purpose of the homily should be kept in mind. It is advisable that—starting from the three-year cycle of the lectionary—appropriate thematic homilies should be presented to the faithful in which the great issues of the Christian faith are discussed during the liturgical year. Their content must be drawn reliably from the Magisterium based on the four “pillars” defined by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the recently published *Compendium*: profession of faith, celebration of the Christian mystery, life in Christ, and Christian prayer.²⁵

Before the Second Vatican Council, it was popular to preach thematic catechism sermons independent of the liturgy. Currently, it is not about returning to them but about preaching homilies enriched with the content contained in the *Catechism of the Church*, in its compendium, as well as in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.²⁶ As recent re-

²⁴ “the Word of the Lord enters through the ears, goes to the heart and passes to the hands, to good deeds” (Francis, *General Audience*, Feb 7, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180207_udi-enza-generale.html (Nov 10, 2023)).

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, Mar 13, 2007, 46.

²⁶ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html (Aug 6, 2022).

search has revealed, the doctrinal content in homilies is very modest.²⁷ Also, the 2022 working document for the continental stage of the synod on synodality—based on syntheses of all Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church, as well as the Eastern Churches and other groups such as religious institutes and lay movements—stated that “The quality of homilies is almost unanimously indicated as a problem: calls for ‘deeper homilies, focused on the Gospel and the readings of the day, not on politics, using accessible and attractive language that relates to the lives of the faithful.’”²⁸ The catechetical goal of the homily remains a postulate to be developed: how to include catechetical elements that are didactic in a short speech that is not a lecture but part of the liturgy.

The fifth feature of a good homily is updating the word of God and addressing life issues. Therefore, a good sermon conveys words that matter to the audience and helps interpret reality through God’s presence and action in the world. In addition to developing biblical exegesis, analyses of social problems and the culture of the addressees are useful in preparing homilies.²⁹ According to Pope Francis, preachers should listen to the people to discover what the faithful need to hear. In this way they learn “of the aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering.”³⁰

In the contemplation of the people, the idea is to connect the message of the biblical text with the human situation. In other words, discerning the needs of homily recipients is about reading God’s message in events,

and this is much more than simply finding something interesting to say. What we are looking for is what the Lord has to say in this or that particular circumstance.

27 S. Dyk, H. Sławiński, L. Szewczyk, *Przepowiadanie homilijne w Polsce. Analiza aspektów treściowych i formalnych wybranych homilii*, „Collectanea Theologica” 93 (2023) no. 2, pp. 189–225.

28 General Secretariat of the Synod, *Synod 2021–2024*, 64, 93.

29 H. Sławiński, *Kultura lokalna jako kontekst przepowiadania globalnego orędzia*, „Roczniki Teologiczne” 66 (2019) fasc. 12, pp. 95–106; A. Draguła, *Chrystocentryczna interpretacja ludzkiej kultury*, in: *Głosimy Pana Jezusa Chrystusa. Treść przepowiadania*, ed. by H. Sławiński, Kraków 2017, pp. 295–308.

30 Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 154; The Bishop’s Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing. The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*, Washington 1982, p. 14.

Preparation for preaching thus becomes an exercise in evangelical discernment, wherein we strive to recognize—in the light of the Spirit—a call which God causes to resound in the historical situation itself. In this situation, and also through it, God calls the believer.³¹

Recognizing the listeners' needs includes their experiences, joys, disappointments, fears, suffering: of their own and those of others, a sense of uncertainty, and worries about their loved ones. At the same time, "one never has to answer questions that no one asks themselves,"³² and also one has to remember that there are questions to which there are no easy, unambiguous answers, for example, the question about the suffering of innocent children.

The sixth feature of a good homily is mystagogy. The homily is an integral part of the liturgy, which means that it grows out of it and leads to it; it is part of the liturgical dialogue, enriches it, and creates an opportunity to experience the mystery being celebrated more consciously. The atmosphere of the liturgy of the day permeates the homily, which is particularly clear in the direct references to liturgical texts and symbols. A good homily points to God's current action, to the fact that He is present and active, especially in the liturgical assembly. Mystagogy in the homily allows listeners to be touched by the closeness and action of God and respond with repentance, request, propitiation, thanksgiving, and praise.³³

Finally, the seventh feature of a good homily is its single-topic nature. In this context, Pope Francis laconically expressed it after his homiletic master: "A good homily, as the old master told me, should contain 'one thought, one feeling, and one image.'"³⁴

So much for the content. When it comes to form, the homily should be spoken from the heart, with passion, conviction, commitment, kindness towards the listeners, and respect for the pluralism of the congregation.

³¹ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 154.

³² Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 154–155.

³³ See S. Dyk, *Homilia w osmozie z teologią liturgiczną*, „Polonia Sacra” 21 (2017) no. 2, pp. 27–43; M. Dąbrówka, „Zaprowadzi ich do tryskających źródeł”. Treści mistagogiczne przepowiadania homilijnego, in: *Homilia integralna*, pp. 149–170.

³⁴ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 157.

It is best when it is spoken or secondarily spoken—it is a term used by Walter Ong, who dealt with orality. The primary form of interpersonal communication was speech and orality. After the invention of writing, the way people communicate changed. The text written and delivered is secondary orality. The idea is not to read in a boring way but to speak, even if the speech has been written down beforehand.

Conclusion

The homily restored by the Second Vatican Council contributed to making God's word more abundantly available to the faithful. They value homilies and expect them from their pastors, and at the same time, they complain about the poor quality of the content they hear and expect the level of sermons to be higher. The way to do this is to convince pastors that the time devoted to preparing a homily is as important as other pastoral duties and even comes to the forefront of these duties. To a large extent the chance to improve the quality of sermons lies in the pastors' belief in the important role of the homily and its consistent preparation.

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