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LESSON FOUR

RESPONDING TO GOD

*“Please be brief...no more than 10 minutes, please!”*¹

– Pope Francis

During a General Audience in the early part of 2018, Pope Francis commented explicitly on the nature and purpose of the homily within the Mass, and he was unequivocal on the point that Catholic preaching should not be overlong. His plea for homiletical brevity led the headlines and inspired a good deal of conversation on social media. Predictably, some Catholics applauded his ideas, while others groused that more time should be taken by homilists to ensure the Gospel message was truly pounded into the assembly.

On social media, some Evangelical Protestants offered that Catholics could never last in their churches, where a lengthy sermon is central to their worship. At which point some Catholics responded, “Yes, but all you have is the Word, so you use more words to become intimate with God. If you had the Word made Flesh available to you, you wouldn’t want to sit through a long homily in order to get to it either.”

As usually happens once these faith-based thrusts and parries begin, the exchanges quickly devolved in a most un-Christian fashion, and only the hardest of Twitter participants could be bothered to hang around and explain transubstantiation, or to refight the Reformation.

The pope also cautioned that people can only begin to get anything worthwhile from a homily if they are willing to be open to it. “Those listening have to do their part, too,” Francis said.² Mass-goers should approach the homily with interest, “giving the appropriate attention, thus assuming the proper interior dispositions, without subjective demands, knowing that every preacher has both his merits and his limits.”³

Wait, what? Credit or blame for utility, effectiveness, and ultimate value of a homily is on us now? Well, to a point, yes. The Holy Father’s sentiments take a line from an Ethiopian monk of the fourth century, Moses the Black, who is credited with saying something similar: “The Lord gives a man



grace of speech in proportion to the sincerity with which his audience wishes to hear him.”⁴

Not every priest or deacon may be blessed with oratorical skills outside of the ordinary. A fully equal distribution of giftedness is as rare a thing in ordained clergy as with any of us. Hence, some priests might be terrific confessors but so-so preachers; some deacons might offer an ear-challenging *Exsultet* at the Easter vigil, but do a dandy job at the pulpit. Either way, most of us can tell when a homilist has really spent some time praying over and preparing his homily and when he is just winging it, and perhaps—given the prompts of the pope and Moses the Black—we must ask ourselves whether our demeanor during the homily encourages or discourages the preacher in his preparations. A homilist’s effort—along with our fullest participation and willingness to listen and to hear—really does matter at this very important juncture within the Liturgy of the Word. It is here in the homiletic section of the Mass that the priest (still *in persona Christi capitis*) is constructing the bridge that helps to transport the assembly from the Word to the Word made Flesh.



HOW CAN I KNOW, UNLESS SOMEONE INSTRUCTS?

Bishop Barron describes learning to play baseball as a child, and how his coach sent the children to the field to “smell the grass” and become acclimated to the feel of the dirt and the view afforded from different positions. “He was giving us the texture of the game,” he notes, adding that the homilist is, in a sense, doing the same thing for us. “Christ speaks in the Old Testament. Christ, the Word, speaks in those apostolic second readings. Christ speaks to us directly in the Gospel, opening up for us this kind of strange world.”

“We need a good mystagogue,” says the bishop, “a guide, someone who will move us through the thicket of the biblical world, helping us to understand it and then see our relationship to it. We need, in a word, a preacher; we need a homilist.”

The fourth phase of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is called “mystagogy,” from the Greek, meaning “to lead through the mysteries.” A mystagogue

is one who can help do that by means of scriptural interpretation that helps a seeker both better comprehend the extraordinary story of our ransom and redemption through Christ, and discover its relevance to his or her life.

We actually see a terrific example of all of this in the Acts of the Apostles where Philip, prompted by an angel of the Lord, departs down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza and meets an official in the court of the Ethiopian queen. The man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and now he was returning home.

Seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

The Spirit said to Philip,

“Go and join up with that chariot.”

Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and said,

“Do you understand what you are reading?”

He replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?”

So he invited Philip to get in and sit with him.

This was the scripture passage he was reading:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who will tell of his posterity?
For his life is taken from the earth.*

Then the eunuch said to Philip in reply,

“I beg you, about whom is the prophet saying this?

About himself, or about someone else?”

Then Philip opened his mouth and, beginning with this Scripture passage, he proclaimed Jesus to him.

As they traveled along the road

they came to some water,

and the eunuch said, “Look, there is water.

What is to prevent my being baptized?”

Then he ordered the chariot to stop,

and Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water,

and he baptized him.

When they came out of the water,



the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip
away, and the eunuch saw him no more,
but continued on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:28-39)

Philip had been urged toward this meeting by an angel and, in his role as guide and mystagogue, he was able to help his companion ascertain the prophet's meaning in Christ; but notice that after explaining the scriptural lines, Philip "proclaimed Jesus to him." He went beyond scriptural exposition into dynamic witness, and it was the combination of the two that filled the Ethiopian with a desire to be baptized, thereby beginning a lifelong engagement with mystery through an encounter of intimacy.

Within the Mass, this is the role of the homily: to explain what we have just heard, and then to offer witness to the assembly that will prepare us for a sacramental encounter with Christ. "The homily grows organically out of the proclamation of the Word, as the mystagogue does his work," says Bishop Barron. The preacher is not meant to be speaking for himself, but for Christ and for his Church.



THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST & OUR UNDERSTANDING

To emphasize this point, exposition and witness come to us from a cleric "in the robes of a temple priest." One purpose for the use of robes in worship is to mask the priest's own individuality, in much the same way that a humeral veil is used during Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament and during Eucharistic processions.

The veil, as explained by Deacon Greg Kandra of the Diocese of Brooklyn, is used neither because the priest or deacon is unworthy to touch the monstrance nor as an additional sign of reverence. Rather, the humeral veil is used by clerics in order to separate them from the act of blessing. "The priest or deacon blesses the faithful with the Blessed Sacrament, but by wrapping his hands in the humeral veil, he signifies his own removal from the action. *He* doesn't bless the people. *Christ* does."⁵

In the same way, the robes used within the liturgy of the Mass help us to separate the man from the Messiah he represents to us.

Incidentally, a similar idea is at work in the caution against well-meaning applause breaking out during Mass routinely. Spontaneous applause, particularly when it accompanies an announcement or some sort of welcome, will sometimes happen. However, when it becomes a regular feature of Mass, it is good to be reminded of Pope Benedict XVI's words of caution: "Wherever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment."⁶

Just so, the liturgical "trappings" of the priesthood help us to keep our attention and understanding centered on the essence of the Mass, not the clergy at its service.

It is an unfortunate truth that Catholic preaching in the form of the homily can sometimes itself become the catalyst for skewing our focus, particularly if it moves too quickly away from Scripture and into the everyday.

Classes in public speaking often urge a presenter to begin with a joke or two—something to "break the ice" and put an audience at ease—and that's a good toastmaster's trick, but a homily is something different, and on that point Pope Francis was emphatic in his February remarks, even quoting his own apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The homily is not a trite discourse, nor a conference, nor a lesson, but...it is taking up 'once more the dialogue which the Lord has already established with his people,' so it may find fulfilment in life."⁷

Bishop Barron makes exactly that point when he talks about the homily as a bridge between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. It is a continuum of a conversation meant to bring us ever more deeply into intimacy until we finally reach our moment of Communion.

So while a homily may, in fact, begin with an anecdote or joke—particularly one that touches on the Word we have just heard—it should not take us so quickly away from scripture. "We run too quickly away from the Gospel," Bishop Barron suggests, turning the focus upon ourselves and on what is amusing or ordinary. The danger is that, in an effort to emphasize what is *relatable*, the homily will fail to show the Gospel's *relevance* to our lives. Relevance and relatability are both important, and a sound presentation should contain *both*. Relatability contains a quality of passive empathy: we can comprehend feelings and reactions that are common to our reality and nod our heads saying, "I can see that..."



Relevance has a more dynamic aspect to it: having discovered something to which we can relate, relevance instructs, and that spurs us on to some sort of action, either interiorly or exteriorly.

This is why Bishop Barron suggests that the homily is a time to remind the assembly that our participation in the Mass extends into the Gospel readings themselves, where we can identify with the men and women surrounding Jesus in significant, applicable ways.

The Gospel story of the adulterous woman facing a crowd of accusers is relatable to us: we have all experienced what it is like to stand justly or unjustly accused. We can relate to this woman and therefore we can identify with her. When Jesus speaks in her defense, asking the crowd who is without sin and able to cast the first stone, we can appreciate that, too, because we have all at some point harshly judged another.

We passively relate to all of it, but Jesus' words and actions in the story bring personal perspective, whether we are identifying with the woman or her neighbors or both. Suddenly, we are not mere accusers and we are not merely accused. We are instead a woman who has been shown mercy and must express gratitude. We are a face in the crowd who has been personally indicted—forced into a recognition of self that severs any lingering attachment to a judgmental mob mentality—and we must now seek mercy for ourselves and make our own reparations. And yes, we too must express gratitude for mercy.

Christ's approach within that drama invites us to examine ourselves, as accused and accuser, and then to take action. We may resolve to withhold easy judgments; we may go to confession because this Gospel story, relatable and relevant, has reminded us of sins we did not fully recognize until the homilist helped us see ourselves as the woman or as the crowd—both liable to right judgment, but the beneficiaries of unearned mercy.

How might a homily about Jesus and the Canaanite woman bring us the same sense of passive recognition and dynamic action?

And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!"

My daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not say a word in answer to her.

His disciples came and asked him, “Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us.” He said in reply, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But the woman came and did him homage, saying, “Lord, help me.”

He said in reply, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.”

Then Jesus said to her in reply, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that hour. (Matt 15:22-28)

Is the Gospel story relatable to us?

Sure. There is so much going on in this exchange, which is so frank, so clever, and so full of mercy. A gift for deft wordplay is the sign of an active, engaged mind, and in this scene—so full of affectionate, word-based and rather Semitic humor—one can imagine Jesus throwing back his head in good-natured appreciation of the woman’s quick wit as she answers his challenge with one of her own. A homilist would certainly do well to start by pointing out how a simple openness to conversation with another can take surprising turns. We can relate.

Is it relevant?

Absolutely. Jesus loves us, this we know (for the Bible tells us so!), but he never loves us with that sort of syrupy sentimentalism that can overtake us when we allow our affections to override the instinct to speak a truthful word.

Is it both relevant and relatable?

Indeed! What we see here is that Jesus never “loves us too much” to challenge us, and that scene above is a good example of it. Here we have a chance to talk back to some modern interpretations of this exchange, where Jesus is cited as being “dark” or “unloving.” It’s a chance to examine the simple truth that we really do choose how we receive a thing, including a Gospel story. Rather than being dark, Jesus seems to be acting here as a good teacher who wants his student to “stand and deliver,” so to speak.



“Stand and deliver” is of course the catchphrase of historic highwaymen and thieves; however, the phrase works here because it really breaks down to: “Hand over the goods, deliver to me what is valuable.”

Jesus is the divine teacher, and a good teacher finds a way to bring out the very best in students—to make them “deliver of themselves,” to put something more behind their answers. He does it over and over in the Gospels—makes people declare what it is they want and why they are asking him. His challenge says, “Declare yourself, that you may be more fully the man or woman you were created to be, and not some prostrate creature.”

Does it inspire reflection and subsequent action?

Yes! Had this encounter between Jesus and the woman not involved a challenge—had Jesus simply shrugged and healed her daughter upon demand—it would not have been as memorable. Moreover, a key bit of theological information would not have been passed along to us; the important message to the Gentiles (*do not be afraid to seek your salvation here, it is for you, too*) might have been lost.

On a personal level, the woman would not have been uplifted in a public way; she would not have had her cleverness—a gift of her individuality and a sign of her God-intended unique personhood—acknowledged. She would have simply been one more woman ducking her head and lowering her eyes. Instead—after an encounter with Christ—she had dignity and could hold her head up.

We can choose to believe that those are the reasons Christ challenged her, and as we approach Christ in the Eucharist, we know now that we are free to question him—reverently, lovingly, honestly—in that encounter. The action this duality of relatability and relevance can inspire us to take in our life of faith—through prayer, through evangelical witness, through outreach—is incalculable.

Bishop Barron would urge us to look at every Gospel story and see ourselves in the role of Jesus’ interlocutor, or as his persecutor, or as his denier, or as the supplicant yearning to be seen, heard, and healed.

Preaching during the Liturgy must speak of these things. The preacher must be capable of explaining them, proclaiming them, lifting the

community's minds and hearts up toward them. All the texts must be brought to the event that encompasses them: the Lord's Death and Resurrection.⁸ –
Abbot Jeremy Driscoll

THE NICENE CREED

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin
Mary, and became man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.



I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

It is at this point in the Mass where many parents find their children, especially their teenagers, sighing and rolling their eyes as they follow the celebrant's cue to "stand and profess our faith." The Nicene Creed, for many, feels like "an awful lot of big words and concepts" that should be obvious, so why does it bear repeating?

"For some reason we're all standing up and reciting this lengthy, rambling, ancient creed, and it doesn't seem to fit into the liturgy," acknowledges Bishop Barron. But it bears repeating, particularly at this part of the Mass as we near the end of the Liturgy of the Word, because it is a recognition and restatement of "all of Scripture on one page—a one-page summary of all that we have heard." As with the Responsorial Psalm, each time we assert "I believe," we are responding to and affirming God's Holy Word. .

The distinctive language of the creed is often what makes the prayer—and it is true prayer—seem incomprehensible to some: "God from God, light from light, True God from True God." But these concepts are at the heart of the faith, and it was during the Council of Nicea that they were nailed down as a resolute and immovable declaration of the totality of Christ, fully human and fully divine.

That declaration was made necessary by Arius and the followers of Arianism, who had argued that Jesus was neither fully human nor fully divine, but a kind of demi-God like the myth of Zeus. The Council of Nicea "said 'no' to Arius," remarks Bishop Barron, "with the very words that we stubbornly repeat, every Sunday, 'begotten, not made, consubstantial ('one in being') with the Father...'"

Each “I believe” is a “yes” to the truth of Christ and a resounding “no”—a giant rebuke—to Arius and his followers.

This continues today because even now we find people who will try to argue that Jesus was merely a “profound teacher” or some sort of elevated master, rather than the Logos, the Word made Flesh. To them, we say it week after week: Yes, Christ is God, who “came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.”

Bishop Barron calls those “fighting words” and says “the liturgy makes not a lick of sense without their inclusion.”

In a way, the Nicene Creed can be thought of as a “disinfectant”—the proclamation of truth over wrong ideas, novelties, and easy heresies that can contaminate the life of faith.

It might even be thought of as the Catholic equivalent of the *Shema Yisrael* in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!” Just as the Hebrews repeat this assertion even today—reinforcing the truth that I AM is the One God and Creator of all—we use the Nicene Creed to declare that Christ is more than a great figure from the past, more than a higher being. We proclaim that he is nothing less than the active, alive, redemptive person of I AM *and* a man whose body and soul are fully human.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

As the Liturgy of the Word comes to a conclusion, we stand and speak, and our speaking is a faithful response to everything that has occurred up to this point. Demonstrating that we have heard God’s Word, absorbed it, and affirmed it, we now ask that he hear us—the universal Church— as we beg his help for the whole world and for some particular or specific needs. This is, suggests Bishop Barron, a wonderfully bold expression of our faith, “an almost in-your-face” response to the Word as we say, in essence, “Having heard all you have done, Lord, having sensed that we’re a part of that story, now we have the confidence to stand up and ask, ‘Lord, may you do something just as great for us.’”

Every baptized person, Barron reminds us, is “Priest, Prophet and King, and the Prayer of the Faithful is an exercise of the priestly office...as a priest prays for others, so are we praying for the world.”

In the Church's liturgy the divine blessing is fully revealed and communicated. The Father is acknowledged and adored as the source and the end of all the blessings of creation and salvation. In his Word who became incarnate, died, and rose for us, he fills us with his blessings. Through his Word, he pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit. (CCC 1082)

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What is the purpose of the homily? Upon what is it to be based? (CCC 132, 1154, 1724)
2. What is a “mystagogue” and how does the homilist act in that capacity? (CCC 132, 137)
3. How does Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36) act as a bridge between the Old Testament and Jesus Christ?
4. What was the Arian heresy and how did the Church respond? What remains of the Church’s response today, and when is it proclaimed? (CCC 465; John 1:1-5; Luke 1:30-35; Col 2:9-10)
5. What part of the Mass succinctly summarizes the whole of our Faith? (CCC 196, 197)
6. How are the Prayers of the Faithful an exercise of the baptized congregation’s priestly office? (1 Pet 2:5-9; CCC 1273, 2634)

