

Word on Worship

Newsletter of the Worship Office, Archdiocese of Newark, NJ

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You stand up there in the pulpit — again — and the faces are all upturned, eyes looking at you intently with hope that what you say will make sense and help them when the Mass is ended and they go in peace. The Sunday homily.

It has always been an important moment, but in recent years every survey about parish life has told us that our people desperately want good homilies. They will even leave a parish and say they were not "being fed." There is a hunger. They are shopping around more than they used to and will even try other denominations. This is the place where they get to know you: your personality, your faith commitment, your values, your love of the Lord and them. They want to hear something of daily living, a valid and reasonable expectation. With all this in mind, I will concentrate on the preacher, remote and proximate preparation, and one method.

THE PREACHER

Many people are writing and speaking about priestly identity. At the 1995 National Federation of Priest Councils Convention, Cardinal Bernardin described one of its dimensions as "bearer of the mystery of God." To do that we need to be in touch with God. Haven't you noticed that, after a good retreat, your preaching seems better or at least a little more convincing? Haven't you noticed that, when you have drifted from prayer and

spiritual reading, the opposite happens? Hear Cardinal Bernardin reminding us that we bear the mystery and initiate others into it. "The believer is grasped, shaken, awakened by the powerful, fascinating force which in Jesus Christ is revealed as passionate, unconditional love." To pass the flame on to them, we have to be set on fire. Then we will truly speak to people "as if we are in the presence of the invisible." (Pope Paul VI)

Michael Himes, Boston College theologian, has a knack for good images. This is one of his. You go into a dentist's office concerned about the coming root canal. Another patient says, "What is that song they are playing?" and only then do you realize the music was playing softly in the background all the while. On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, I sat in a diner with a priest friend sharing that image. The waitress came over to take our order and said, "Would you believe that music." We both said, "What music?" and she said, "They are playing Christmas carols." Up to then, we hadn't heard a thing. Our task is to keep saying to people, "Would you believe that music?" — the music of God's unconditional love. But we cannot if we don't hear the music ourselves.

PREPARATION

I like to think of this in terms of remote and proximate. Remote. One of the best compliments I ever received was from a priest after a retreat I had given. He came to my room as I was packing to head for the airport. He said, "Frank, you found me where I was at." As a preacher that meant much more to me than words like "brilliant." How can they get the message unless we find where they are at? When Arthur Miller was asked to describe the difference between an ordinary play and a great one, he said, "In any successful play there must be something that makes the audience say to themselves, "Good Lord, that's me! That's me!" Really listen to your people when they say to you, "That hit home," or "I felt like you were talking right to me," or "you gave me something to think about." Then,

UP IN THE PULPIT AGAIN

look again at the homily just preached and figure out why it found them where they are at. Here are some guidelines you might find helpful:

- Develop a good eye. The super salesman in *Music Man* gave some advice to his fellow salesmen with the song, "You Gotta Know



the Territory." Take a good look at all the life happening around you. Notice the story underneath the vignettes, the incidents, the turns in the road.

- Develop a good ear. Listen to the folks. Hear their challenges, their needs, their fears. A Baptist preacher once described his method for preparing this way. "I read myself full, think myself clear, pray myself hot, and let myself go." Read the authors your people read... Bombeck, Landers, the Times Op Ed page. Take note of the cartoonists who portray life so cleverly. See movies and plays through the eyes of a preacher. Live life to the full. Boring preachers live boring lives and preach boring homilies and bore thousands each week. Be alert to all the life around you.
- Sharpen your imagination. The Lord Jesus had a good eye, a good ear, and a knack for images. Chesterton wrote, "There was a man who dwelt in the East centuries ago and now I cannot look at a sheep or a sparrow, a belly or a wheat field, a raven or a sunset, a vineyard or a mountain without thinking of him." Novels and poetry can help develop imagination. Some of the most creative people are in advertising. Take note of their images.

This is how Walter Burghardt says it: "Without imagination the preacher limps along on one leg. You may have memorized Mark and ransacked Rahner, you may be an expert on things liturgical and put onerous hours into your homily, but if your homily is only a masterpiece of Claretian clarity you are in deep trouble. If you are forever explaining things to grown ups you are hardly a homilist."

They say that when Burghardt prepares, he prays, reads some poetry, and listens to music. All this touches a special place in him. Maybe that's why his homilies touch a special place in us.

- Have heart. That place just mentioned could be the heart. Preaching without it would be like trying to drive a car without a motor. Our people come with a need to be "heartened" and hopefully we can get them to take heart. Because you serve them, you know there are some broken hearts out there in your congregation. We read the scripture and pass it through our own hearts.

- Bring your sense of humor with you. Humor can relax the congregation and free them up to learn. Sometimes through it there is bonding and humanizing. But caution is needed. Don't drag it in or your comedy will sound like a "joke of the week" routine. It works best when it truly fits, comes out of a story you are telling or illustrating, a point you are making. Be careful of racism or sexism or humor at someone's expense. In the right setting, it can help the homily; in the wrong one, it can hurt.
- Clip, xerox and save. My final suggestion for remote preparation is to assemble a file of material. When a story moves you, an image strikes you, or an incident impresses you, save it. Work out your own system for saving things you might one day use.

All of the above will help you become a preacher but let's get a little more definite and think about next Sunday's homily. We all have worked out our own method for proximate preparation. Here are some things I have found helpful:

- Read the Scripture early in the week. I like to read the passages aloud once then think about the Word and notice what it prompts. Is there a theme? Does a topic jump out? What did it mean to the original hearers? What does it mean today? Every once in a while —driving, walking, praying — think, and think some more.
- Check the homily resources. Read as many as you can get your hands on. They will not become your homily, in fact should not; but they will give you some insights into Scripture, will surface some stories and images, will offer another person's approach.
- Get a hook. It helps if you presume disinterest or boredom on the part of the assembly and work on pulling them in. There are some dull and bland first lines... "In the readings" ... "On this important day in the liturgical cycle"... "Canon Law is very clear on"... "Holy Mother the Church says."

Here are some better ones taken from a new book of homilies by J. Ronald Knott — his opening lines include incidents from his life, unusual personal reactions to the readings, trivia, and occasional humor. Some examples: "For the eleventh year in a row, I'm a ten

million dollar loser." "Have you ever been so overcome with fear that you could barely function?" "I have a friend who has a cat..." "The only way to take a licking and keep on ticking is prayer." "I find it difficult to live in the present..."

In this article, I have discussed the preacher and his preparation. It has been a set of directions for finding people where they are at. I have said little about the homily itself.

THE HOMILY

There are all kinds of effective approaches or methods: the expository, the exhortatory, the Scripture, the meditative, the doctrinal. I would like to recommend one that seems to be gaining popularity among today's preachers, that of storytelling. And I want to strongly suggest a book which you will find most helpful. It is, *Storytelling the Word — Homilies and How to Write Them*. The author is William J. Bausch; the publisher, Twenty-third Publications. This is a show-and-tell book: first Bausch tells us how and then he includes several homilies illustrating the method. He weaves about a hundred stories into the text and includes a valuable index referring to stories included in all his books on preaching. This is a book to read, to use and to save. No matter how good a preacher you are now, it will make you a better one.

A family had a visitor from Ireland who went to their parish church for Sunday liturgy. When he returned, they asked about the homily. They asked with some apprehension because they knew the priest was, let's say "average" in that department. The young man thought for a minute and said, "Well, let's say your Father is a tryer".... May we all keep trying and may we all keep getting better at it.+

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STIRRING UP HEARTS

The eucharist offers a center and a source of life for the Christian community called to express faith in Jesus Christ. People come to Sunday Mass because they believe that relationship to God in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit happens in liturgy. The faithful believe that their lives are blessed and transformed through the grace of Jesus Christ. For these reasons alone care for the quality of the liturgical life of the parish reflects an awareness of the incarnational/sacramental character of religious symbolism. Quite simply, liturgy is related to life. Liturgy as ritual embraces basic Christian concerns and affections: praise and thanksgiving, sorrow and repentance, intercession and dependence, relationship and love, hope and aspiration, justice and peace. Within this context preaching engages these convictions and feelings in relationship to God's word, the scriptures, so that conversion and transformation remain a continual and authentic expression of discipleship of Jesus Christ. Liturgical preaching, therefore, attempts not simply to inform but to transform hearts. The focal points of preaching, then, are liturgy and people, as Jesuit Walter Burghardt once put it. In liturgy the words and actions of Christ are made present.

In 1982 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: the Homily in the Sunday Assembly*. This document viewed the homily as an effort to speak the truth about God's presence in relationship to the life of the community. The homilist has the task of being a "mediator of meaning" (*Fulfilled*, p. 7) and is concerned to read the present moment from the vantage point of scripture, to interpret the community's experience through the prism of God's word. This challenge calls for a number of skills: an educated understanding of the scriptural passages, an awareness of the culture in which the community lives, a basic understanding of the Church's tradition and mission, a sense of the needs and concerns of the local parish community and some knowledge of rhetoric, i.e., the ways to communicate effectively.

Even more foundational than the skills needed

to preach effectively is the homilist's personal commitment to discipleship of Jesus Christ. One who has entered the Paschal Mystery through lived faith is continually appropriating and internalizing God's word and celebrating that bond in sacrament and ministry. As a consequence the faith-filled homilist would tend to rise above a delivery that is perfunctory or overly intellectualized. His personal and communal experience of faith would serve to energize the message. Indeed a homilist's spirituality is gradually revealed in the very work of preaching.

SKILLS FOR PREACHING EFFECTIVELY

An engaging homilist is interested in maintaining an informed relationship to God's word. Every priest and deacon has received some formal education in the scriptures. In fact since Vatican II clergy and laity alike have attended scripture classes and have shared the word of God in small groups. In other words, scripture has received a new impetus in Catholic faith life and rightly so. Those who are called to communicate the meaning of the scriptural passages to others need to be open to continuing education. Scripture classes, personal reading and diocesan workshops serve this goal. A good education in the word of God counters any biblical fundamentalism as well as a purely subjective interpretation of God's word.

Secondly, the homilist cannot preach apart from an awareness of the kind of world he inhabits. History and culture need to be viewed from within the scriptural word. Culture reflects social worlds of meaning and is mediated through literature, the theater, art, mores, politics, religion, and the like. Culture can manifest the presence and absence of grace, reveal the struggles and anxieties of a people, appear sensitive or antagonistic toward religious values. Recently, Pope John Paul II used the phrase "culture of death" to signify a corporate climate indifferent to the moral atrocities of abortion and euthanasia. That judgment rested upon the life-affirming character of God's word as well as almost two thousand years of Christian tradition.

The present cultural climate communicates stories of rugged individualism, moral relativism, dedication to materialistic goals as well as sensitivity to social injustice, environmental decay and gender exploitation. Sifting through the cultural messages of our day, the homilist must energize the fires of faith, hope, and love by bringing the word of God as light and discernment to the present day. Theologian Karl Rahner, S.J., once claimed that there needs to be a touch of the poet within the heart of the preacher.

Thirdly, the homilist recognizes that the Church's theological tradition forms an essential background for Christian preaching. To preach is to serve the redemptive love of Jesus Christ. Systematic and moral theology, liturgy, and sacraments provide a context for preaching the word of God. Theological education not only can help to obviate distortions in preaching but assist the homilist in focusing upon the essentials of Christian faith (hierarchy of truths). The homily is intended to lead the community to "the mystery of Christ, which is ever made present and active within us" (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, no. 35, 2). Obviously, theological knowledge serves that goal.

Fourthly, a sensitive homilist grows aware of the needs and concerns of the local parish community. In ministering to people one learns a great deal. Not only does one encounter people of deep faith, hear stories of unselfish love and devotion, walk hand in hand with people who suffer setbacks, but also one discovers in our very ministry parish needs. Some of these can be met from resources within the parish community. As a consequence of knowing the community, the homilist is able to move the community to serve each other's needs and to develop a ministerial consciousness, in other words, to grow as a "people of God."

Fifthly, a good preacher is conscious of ways to communicate the word of God to others. Above all else good communication involves the homilist in showing how the scriptural text reveals what is true about ourselves. This calls for a creative use of images and metaphors, stories and phrases in order to enliven the spirit. Performance is not as critical as knowing scripture and a touch of literature, art and poetry. Very often it is the imaginative use of sources that jars loose some sense of awareness and insight and moves us toward action.

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Homilies do not simply happen; they are the product of study, prayerful reflection, and hard work.

- Good preaching needs to appeal to human experience so that people recognize their lives in the message. The word of God is given to illumine people's lives, to lead them to Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life. Homilists can draw on their own experience in communicating the scriptural message but not in such a way as to draw attention to themselves. Jesus taught effectively in parables and stories revealing the character of the human in relationship to God and to neighbor. The challenge is to be personal but not self-focused.
- A good homily should have substance to it, a message, but stated with a certain simplicity. One good idea is sufficient as long as it reveals a dimension of the scriptural passages in an engaging way. Simply to repeat the scriptural story is not a homily.



Rather the people need to find God's presence in the midst of their lives. The homily serves that intent in affirming, prophetic, reconciling and grace-filled ways.

- A biblically based homily offers vision, hope, challenge, and some direction to the community but the homily is not primarily didactic or moralistic. The homily is ordinarily not the time to get across some



personal view of life or to correct behavior or to suggest some self-help mechanisms. Some homilists fixate on one or two issues and repeat the same message week after week. The proper corrective is to center upon the biblical passages chosen for the church's liturgy and to correlate the word of God with the mission of the Christian assembly. This goal requires preparation in order to communicate the good news.

- Since preaching is a communication event it is well to know some basics of good communication: one needs to be heard, the point to be made must be clear in the homilist's mind, pace is important so that people can assimilate the word, gestures assist imagery, a beginning question can draw out interest from the gathering, stories can support the point to be made. A good homily leaves the faithful with a sense of Christian identity and understanding or hope or mission. Something happens between the homilist and the people that is life-giving.
- A poor homily generates its own kind of responses. People may be bewildered because no particular point was made in the homily. Or perhaps the people are angry, not because the homilist was prophetic, but because they were subjected to the homilist's idiosyncrasies. A bad homily can bring about shame in people who feel embarrassed that the homilist offers such trivial fare. Or sometimes people feel pity for the homilist who is so inept at the task of preaching.

People gathered for worship are called to be more than an audience. They are to be part of a community's faith celebration of praise and thanksgiving to God. In the midst of the liturgical action the homilist is called to stir up hearts to manifest that faith commitment in the world of the secular and the profane. This article suggests that only a major investment of personal prayer, time, and study can bring about successful preaching.+

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DOING IT RITE

The Liturgy of the Word

The following is how according to the liturgical documents, the liturgy of the word should be celebrated at a Sunday Mass.

Before Mass the Lectionary should be placed on the pulpit and opened to the first reading of the day. (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM], 80, 89) The Lectionary is not carried in the entrance procession, rather the Book of Gospels is brought forward by either the deacon, or if a deacon is not present, by a reader. (GIRM, 82, *Lectionary for Mass: Introduction* [LMIn], 28.) The Introduction referred to is that of the second edition of the Lectionary for Mass. This Introduction is available in *The Liturgy Documents, Third Edition*, published by Liturgy Training Publications. The minister carrying the Book of Gospels walks before the presider, or if there are concelebrants, before the concelebrating priests. After being brought forward, the Book of Gospels is placed on the altar. The introductory rites of Mass continue at the presider's chair.

THE FIRST READING

After the opening prayer, the assembly is seated, there is a brief period of silence, and the liturgy of the word then begins. (LMIn, 28) The first reading is proclaimed by a reader, trained and designated for that purpose. After the opening prayer, when all have been seated, the reader reverently approaches the lectern to announce the word of God. It should be noted that each of the scripture readings is proclaimed from the same lectern or pulpit (LMIn, 16, 33, GIRM, 272.) One lectern is not reserved for the first and second readings and another for the gospel. "The reservation of a single place for all the biblical readings is more significant than the person of the reader, whether ordained or lay..." (Appendix I to the General Instruction, 66c)

While the presider or other minister may give a "brief, well prepared" introduction before the scripture readings (LMIn, 15, GIRM, 11), in most cases it is better not to do

so. Such introductions are generally too long, they tend to paraphrase the reading, and they add extra words to an already wordy part of the liturgy.

Upon reaching the lectern, the reader waits until all are attentive and ready to listen to the word of God, then he or she begins by announcing *A reading from....* The reader does not say *Our first reading is a reading from....* It is obvious to the assembly that this is the first reading of the liturgy. Nor does the reader mention the heading printed before the scripture passage. These captions, usually chosen from the text itself, are meant to highlight the theme of a reading and to make connections between the readings of the same Mass. (LMIn, 123) They are not there to be proclaimed to the assembly. "The sole title to be announced is the one indicating the book of the Bible or, where applicable, its author." (Appendix II to the General Instruction, 89)

When the reader has finished proclaiming the word of God, he/she pauses for a moment, then proclaims, *The word of the Lord*. The reader does not elevate the Lectionary as he/she says this acclamation, since the word of the Lord referred to is the word just announced to the assembly not the printed text.

"At the conclusion of the reading, *The word of the Lord* may be sung, even by someone other than the reader; all respond with the acclamation. In this way the gathered assembly pays reverence to the word of God it has listened to in faith and gratitude." (LMIn, 18) After the acclamation of the assembly the reader should remain at the lectern and by his/her bodily posture lead the assembly in a brief period of reflection. Afterward, the reader gracefully moves from the lectern, which is now approached by the psalmist.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The responsorial psalm should be led by a

psalmist or cantor of the psalm from the same lectern used for the first and second readings and the gospel. Like them, it too is the inspired word of God and "an integral part of the liturgy of the word." (GIRM, 36, LMIn, 22) As the word of God, the psalm is not replaced with other hymns or songs. "The choice of texts that are not from the psalter (permitted at the entrance, offertory and communion) is not extended to the chants between the readings." (Appendix I to the General Instruction, 36)

"As a rule the responsorial psalm should be sung." (LMIn, 20) Preferably the psalmist should sing the verses of the psalm and the entire assembly should sing the response. While the psalm used should be that assigned to the reading, to facilitate the people's singing the response, one of the seasonal psalms found in the Lectionary may be used. (LMIn, 89)

THE SECOND READING

After the responsorial psalm when the psalmist has left the lectern, another reader approaches to announce the second reading. "Whenever there is more than one reading, it is better to assign the readings to different

readers, if available." (LMIn, 52) The reader begins the second reading by simply saying *A reading from....*, not *Our second reading is a reading from....* Readers do not count off the readings for the assembly. If this were the case the gospel reading would begin with the words, *Our third reading is....*

After the reflection following the second reading (c.f. above), the reader should remove the Lectionary as he/she leaves the lectern so there is room for the Book of Gospels. As an object of reverence, the Lectionary should not be put on a lower shelf of the lectern. The reader might place the Lectionary on the credence table or in some other suitable place, but not one which displays the Lectionary to the congregation.

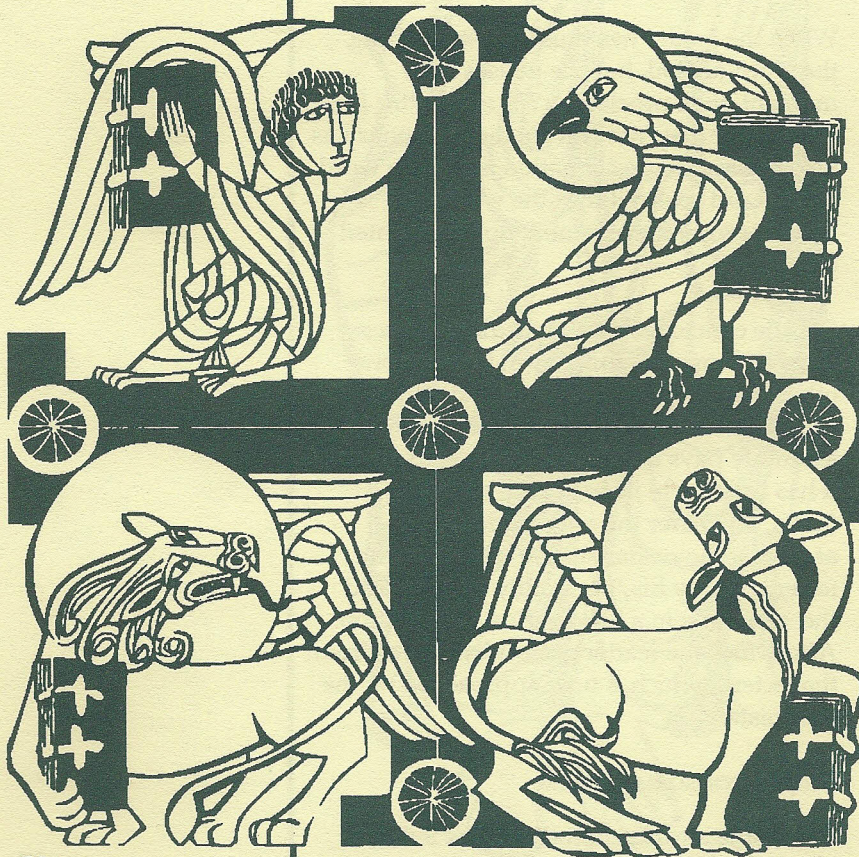
THE GOSPEL READING

All stand for the gospel acclamation. "The *Alleluia* or verse before the gospel (i.e., Lenten acclamation) must be sung and during it all stand. It is not to be sung only by the cantor who intones it or by the choir, but by the whole congregation together." (LMIn, 23)

During the gospel acclamation the deacon, or in his absence, the priest, reverently takes the Book of Gospels from the altar, holds it high before the assembly for a few seconds and carries it to the lectern. There he holds the book high until the conclusion of the gospel acclamation, then lowers it, greets the people, announces and proclaims the reading. In carrying the Book of Gospels to the lectern the deacon or priest should not necessarily move in the most direct path. If the altar is close to the lectern, he might process partially around the altar as he goes to proclaim the gospel, in this way at least a small processional route is created.

The procession with the Book of Gospels may be accompanied by servers carrying lighted candles, and burning incense. This should be done on more solemn occasions.

Ideally the gospel should not be read by the presider. "Since by tradition the reading of the scriptures is a ministerial, not a presidential function, it is proper that as a rule a deacon or, in his absence, a priest other than the one presiding read the gospel." (GIRM, 34) A deacon who is to read the gospel, bowing not kneeling, asks a



blessing of the presider before taking the Book of Gospels from the altar and moving to the lectern. (LMIn, 17) If a concelebrant is to read the gospel, he does not seek the blessing of the presiding priest. Instead, bowing before the altar, he inaudibly says the prayer *Almighty God, cleanse my heart...* (LMIn, 17) However, if a bishop is presiding, the priest who is to read the gospel does ask a blessing. (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, 174)

If no deacon or other priest is present to proclaim the gospel reading, the presider inaudibly says the prayer *Almighty God, cleanse my heart...* while bowing to the altar, not to the tabernacle or cross. (GIRM, 93) He then carries the Book of Gospels to the lectern.

It should be noted that in greeting the people before proclaiming the gospel, no gesture is made by the deacon or priest as he says *The Lord be with you.* (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, 141) If incense is used the deacon or priest incenses the book with three swings of the censer after announcing the reading and marking himself with the sign of the cross. (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, 141)

After reading the gospel, the minister says *The gospel of the Lord*, he then kisses the book while saying inaudibly *May the words of the gospel wipe away our sins.* (GIRM, 95, 131) He may also sing the concluding words, even if the gospel itself has not been sung. "It is appropriate for *The Lord be with you, A reading from the holy gospel...*, and at the end *The gospel of the Lord* to be sung, in order that the assembly may sing the acclamations. This is a way of bringing out the importance of the gospel reading and of stirring up the faith of those who hear it." (LMIn, 17)

The Book of Gospels may then be taken to some side table or other suitable location. (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, 141) The book may also be left open on the lectern after the reading. In this way the homily may be seen as flowing from the gospel of the Lord which has been proclaimed to the people and is now further opened to them in the homily. In no case, is the Book of Gospels simply relegated to a shelf of the lectern.

THE HOMILY

The homily follows. It is required on Sundays and holy days. It is improper to



omit the homily in order to make announcements or special appeals. "Any necessary announcements are to be kept completely separate from the homily; they must take place following the prayer after communion." (LMIn, 27)

As a rule, the homily is given by the presider. (GIRM, 42) The presider may give "the homily either at the chair, standing or sitting, or at the lectern." (LMIn, 26) There is no sign of the cross either before or after the homily. Making the sign of the cross at this time separates the homily from what has preceded it. "The homily is part of the liturgy; the people have already blessed themselves and received the greeting at the beginning of Mass. It is better, then, not to have a repetition before or after the homily." (Appendix II to the General Instruction, 42) Following the homily, the presider returns to

the chair for a period of silent reflection. (LMIn, 28) The homilist should not immediately begin the profession of faith after preaching.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

Following the reflection, all stand and give their assent to what they have heard in the liturgy of the word by reciting the profession of faith. It is obligatory on Sundays and solemnities. If catechumens are present, they are dismissed by the presider or deacon before the assembly professes its faith. The profession of faith may be sung. If so, all are to sing it together or in alternation. Considering its length and text, the profession of faith is better recited than sung. "At the words *by the power of the Holy Spirit*, etc., all bow; on the solemnities of the Annunciation and Christmas all kneel." (GIRM, 99).

GENERAL INTERCESSIONS

The general intercessions or prayer of the faithful immediately follows the assembly's profession of faith. In these prayers, which should be included in any Mass with a congregation, the people of God exercise their priestly function of interceding for all humanity. (GIRM, 45) The introduction to the intercessions is given by the presider from the chair. In his introduction, which is addressed to

the assembly, he invites the people to pray for those in need. This introduction is an extended *Let us pray*.

The petitions, which may be sung or spoken, are then announced by the deacon either at his chair or at the lectern. In the absence of a deacon, they may be offered from the lectern by the reader, cantor, some other minister, or even by some of the faithful. (LMIn, 30, 31) The assembly takes part in the general intercessions by standing and by responding to each intention either with silent prayer or with a spoken or sung response. It should be noted that the petitions of the general intercessions are usually addressed to the people and not to God. The petitions are requests for the people to pray for specific intentions.

After the petitions, the presider concludes the general intercessions with a closing prayer, addressed to the first person of the Blessed Trinity. It is prayed by the presider with hands extended, in the same manner as other presidential prayers. (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, 144)

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