

## CATECHESIS 7: The Joy of the Gospel – The Homily

*The Homily:* The Pope says everyone at Mass suffers from the homily – the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!

After this jokey start he gets more serious and more positive about the role of the homily. Potentially, he says, it “can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God’s word, a constant source of renewal and growth” (#135). The faithful, he believes, attach great importance to it; and as to the pastor, it is the touchstone of his closeness to the people and his ability to communicate with them (ibid.) Just as in the New Testament we see Jesus and the apostles preaching with authority and conviction, so in our day too God seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and displays his power through human words (#136). Because of the liturgical context in which the homily takes place it is a distinctive genre; it is not an entertainment, but part of the dialogue between God and his people, leading to what should be “a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist” (#138). In the homily the great deeds of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the covenant are restated. Therefore, in order to meaningfully contextualise his remarks, the pastor must know the heart of his community, whether the desire for God is alive and active in them, or no longer so (#137). The Pope sees the homily as “part of the offering made to the Father” at Mass, and “a mediation of the grace Christ pours out during the celebration” (#138) .... No pressure, then, on the preacher! In a sense the priest must be self-effacing - and the people learn to look beyond him: “the words of the preacher must be measured, so that the Lord, more than his minister, will be the centre of attention” (ibid.)

The Pope compares the homily to ‘a mother’s conversation’: though it may sometimes be tedious, as mothers can be at times when speaking to their children, nevertheless it will always bear fruit if what he calls ‘an ecclesial and maternal spirit’ is present (#140). “The Lord truly enjoys talking with his people; the preacher should strive to communicate that same enjoyment to his listeners” (#141), being close to them, warm, unpretentious, and joyous in his manner (#140) – all with the aim of speaking ‘words which set hearts on fire’ (#142-144).

“The preacher,” writes the Pope, “has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people” (#143). How can this be done? Certainly it is a demanding task for the preacher – but it is demanding on the people too, because the people must come to the experience ready to listen to God: “In the homily,” writes the Pope, “the hearts of believers keep silence and allow God to speak” (#143). Though the Lord and his people very often speak, he says, without intermediaries, in the homily someone serves - as an instrument for the Lord, and to express the feelings of the people - “so that afterwards each may choose how they will continue the conversation” (ibid.) Furthermore Christians find their identity between what the Pope calls ‘two embraces’ – the one, they receive in baptism, as little ones; the other, as prodigal children, they receive from the merciful Father who awaits us in glory: “Helping our people to feel they live in the midst of these two embraces is the difficult but beautiful task of one who preaches the Gospel” (#144). The one is pure grace, communicating unconditional love; the other is also pure grace, but helps us see our responsibilities to God and our brothers and sisters in the light of that love we have so freely received.

I’m glad the Pope fully flags up the demanding nature of preaching, both for the people and the preacher. He offers plenty of rich insight and helpful advice to the preacher which I won’t trouble you with here, but will ponder for myself. Hopefully what I have shared is sufficient to persuade you that you have an indispensable role to play, by the readiness with which you come to Mass - to deepen your walk with the Lord and your love for him - and in particular your readiness to *let him encounter you* through the homily in that surprising, gracious and loving way of his we can experience if properly disposed.

Without your openness to receive from the Lord, even the most silver-tongued homilist preaches in vain. But where there is readiness and openness, the homily can be an important part of the Church’s new evangelisation, to help you grow spiritually, to inflame your hearts, so that you can respond to God’s love ever more fully in your lives (cf. #15).

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