

What is a Homily?

You know it when you hear it. You can probably describe it to a stranger. But can you define the word “homily”? You know it comes between the proclamation of the Gospel and the Creed. You know it's that time in the Mass when Father or Deacon talks about the Scripture readings taken from the Lectionary. But can you describe the difference between a homily and a speech, between a homily and a retreat talk?



Homilies are like the platypus: an odd creature that seems to belong to several different species all at once. Homilies are talks but not really. They are like lectures but not entirely. They resemble speeches but seem to lack some of the essential elements of a speech. We could think of them as essays that are read aloud, but homilies aren't composed in the same way that essays are. Nor are they composed for the same reason.

So, what is a homily? Rather than worrying about defining the parts of a homily that make up the whole, let's focus on the *purpose* and *occasion* of the homily.

The *purpose* of the homily is to unpack the Lectionary readings of the liturgy in a way that shines the Word of God on both our lives in this world and our lives in the world to come. God's Word is wisdom for growing in holiness right now and encouragement for persevering on our way toward His heavenly banquet. Scripture is at once ancient and new, ageless and contemporary, historical and prophetic. The homily serves as our moment of reflection, instruction, exhortation, and consolation.

A good homily will use Scripture as a framework for understanding our relationship with God; for teaching us about how to grow in His grace; for encouraging us

to hold fast to the faith; and for offering us comfort when we fail. A good homily will always challenge and help; it will always inform and direct; it will always bring Scripture to bear on the real lives of God's people.

That's the purpose of a homily. What's the *occasion* of a homily? Homilies are preached at liturgies, the public rites of the Church – Mass,

baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, ordinations, and sometimes at public prayer events where preaching is encouraged. If you have ever been to the French Quarter during Mardi Gras you've seen the street preachers calling sinners to repentance. Though these preachers are preaching, they are not preaching homilies. Why not? Because a homily is always preached during a liturgical occasion, using Lectionary readings specifically assigned to the occasion. On any given Sunday, around the world, all Catholics are hearing read the same readings at Mass. Though the homilies they hear are undoubtedly different, the sources of those homilies are the same – the Lectionary readings and the prayers of the liturgy.

As the Body of Christ, the Church, we participate in the divine life through the sacraments, personal prayer, good works, and by hearing and doing the Word of God. Homilies are preached so that our participation may be knowledgeable, fruitful, and on-going.

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