

# “Rite” Preaching:

## Tips on preaching the Liturgy

by  
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### **More Than Meets the Eye**

“Mommy, what’s going on up there?”

A child’s outburst of curiosity is a common occurrence during the sacred liturgy. As soon as it happens, the parent grabs the pointing finger and shushes the little one. Congregants smile while the celebrant strives to ignore the distraction.

But the child is making an important point. If, indeed, God’s Spirit lifts our prayers like incense and divine grace manifests itself its wonder in things like flowing water and crackling fire, then the child’s question bears merit. Revelation is taking place. Therefore, words that acknowledge the nature and significance of that revelation are appropriate and fitting.

### **Mystagogical Preaching**

Preaching about the sacred liturgy rather than on the sacred Scripture is permitted and, at times, encouraged. This is especially true during the Easter season, when the newly baptized—along with the rest of us—grow in their appreciation of the way the sacred liturgy embodies the mystery of salvation in Christ and unfolds the splendor of the Trinity.

The blessing of palms, the washing of feet, the veneration of the cross, a church aglow with candle light—these are a few of the symbolic actions available for homiletic discourse during Holy Week. The rest of the liturgical year offers an equally abundant fare. The signing of the senses in the Rite of Acceptance, the sign of the cross at the beginning of Mass, the sign of peace at the door of the reconciliation room are a small sample of liturgical signs from other times in the year.

Like passages in the Bible, these signs and gestures invite the faithful to experience an encounter with the living God. Preaching on the rites, like preaching on the Scriptures, serves as a bridge connecting life on earth with life in heaven.

### **Exploration, Not Explanation**

During the liturgy, we use the stuff of human life to access the life of God. In doing so, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us reverence the reality of God, which is mysteriously hidden within creation and all that life on earth entails.

The goal of mystagogical preaching, therefore, is to explore the mystery of God, not explain it away. With

this homiletic starting point, the symbols and gestures of the liturgy serve not as objects to analyze and subdivide, but as sensory connectors between sacred liturgy and ordinary life.

Effective mystagogical preaching occurs when the appearance of ordinary things gives way to the extraordinary presence of grace: when bread and wine in the church take on the taste of bread and butter in a kitchen; when confessing your sins feels as good as washing your hands.

## **Liturgical Spirituality**

When was the last time you experienced an awareness of grace? Did it splash cool on your arm as you canoed a river? Was it scribbled on a note hidden inside your lunch box? Did you catch its glance in the eyes of a friend or stitch its pattern into the folds of a quilt? Did you note its color, floating like wine, in a chalice of gold?

Developing a good eye for grace in moments of ordinary life makes the power of sacramental grace more apparent and the preaching of it more effective.

### **“IS IT RAINING?”**

An Excerpt from a Homily on the Sprinkling Rite

The sky is overcast.

The ballgame might be called off.

Conversations at the door of the church might get cut short.

A few drops of rain can change everything.

Have you ever noticed how much attention  
we give to those first few drops?

We look at the sky,

then ask the person next to us,

“Did you feel a drop of rain?”

Then we ask ourselves:

Will the picnic be called off?

Will we bale hay tomorrow?

Did I close the kitchen window?

It’s the same with those drops of water flung through the air  
at the beginning of Mass,  
sparkling in the light of stained glass windows,  
falling through a thundering song of praise.

“Did you feel that drop?”

“Is it starting to rain?”

“Is it starting to rain some grace?”

Like a springtime shower,  
the sprinkling rite at the start of Mass  
is a harbinger of the fact that,  
upon encountering the presence of God  
here within the liturgy,  
our well-laid plans for the day—and for life itself—could be altered.

If ordinary rain brings reset to the construction worker,  
and prosperity to farmers,  
a baptismal shower does so much more!

Baptism rains down eternal life,  
washes away the grime of sin,  
and places heaven within our reach.

This shower of springtime grace!

This “holy water” that refreshes the earth...  
and changes our lives forever!