

How to start a homily

The secret they don't teach you in seminary...

Some preachers illustrate their homilies with examples drawn from their personal lives. Such preachers often rank such homilies among their best and most memorable deliveries.

The practice of highlighting a personal story, however, raises a question. Did the story prove illuminating—or even interesting—to the listeners as well?

I recall the advice of the Lutheran minister who taught me to preach: “Personal references season a homily. But salt lightly.”

Making the connection

In *Preaching as a Social Act*, Don Wardlaw tackles this issue from another perspective. Using a pie-chart to illustrate his point, he highlights the area where the world of the biblical text, the insights of the preacher, and the experience of the assembly overlap.

According to Wardlaw, it is the shaded area—where the three spheres mingle—that preachers find the best opportunity to make connections with their listeners.

The advantage of this approach is its tempering influence. It reminds the preacher that, in addition to his or her subjective response to the text, accommodation must be made for the lived experience of the listeners as well.

But which “world” gets first billing? The preacher’s, the Bible’s, or the listeners’?

Assembly first

If the setting is a Bible study, the world of the Bible would obviously get first billing. If the setting is informal faith sharing, the leader’s personal reflections would be an appropriate starting point. But at the sacred liturgy, according to *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: Preaching in the Sunday Assembly*, the homilist interprets the lives of the listeners in light of the Word of God. This means that the preacher’s first order of business is to “hold up a mirror” so the listeners can peer into their—not the preacher’s—life experience.

This doesn’t mean that a preacher never includes personal stories or references, but it does reinforce a healthy, John-the-Baptist-instinct: “I must decrease so the Lord can increase.”

Another reminder to cut back on the salt occurs each time a homilist vests for liturgy. Before reaching for the stole, the symbol of ordination, the preacher dons the baptismal vestment of the alb. Through this rubric, the church is telling us that the effective homilist must first be clothed with the faith and longing of the people of God.

The implications of this starting point are varied and exciting. Lepers show up with I.V. tubes, prodigal sons sport tattoos, and Martha of Bethany gets upset about soccer practice and dance recitals.

Seeing Christ

Most importantly, a listener-centered approach ushers the preacher into the lives of the people where the Lord himself longs to be noticed: not in the life of a synagogue official but in the house of a coworker whose child is diagnosed with leukemia; not in the drudgery of mending nets but in a life of packing bearings and greasing axles; not in the building of grain bins but the stuffing of a financial portfolio.

The result? For the listener, preaching that reflects God's Word at work in the world. For the homilist, the satisfaction of seeing Christ in a thousand places.