

# (Re-) Learning the Mass

## Part 13 – Liturgy of the Word (4)

Following the Gospel, the homily follows on at least Sundays and Holy Days, and is encouraged on weekdays as well. Sometimes it might seem as though it is a break in the liturgy, so much so that announcements might be fittingly made at this point. Some might wish that the homily were somewhere else, perhaps after Mass. But this fails to recognize that the homily is truly a liturgical act. The homily is not a speech or a lecture; What is it then? St. John Paul II taught that the liturgical proclamation of the Word was in essence the dialogue between God and his people. In the homily, Pope Francis teaches, the dialogue is taken up once again, “so it may find fulfilment in life.” The most authentic interpretation of the Scriptures is living it out in our lives, its “becoming flesh in us, being translated into works...and the homily also follows this path in order to help us so that the Word the Lord may go to the hands, by passing through the heart.” (*Catechesis on the Mass*, 7 Feb 2018).

Further, when preaching occurs in the liturgy, “it is part of the offering made to the Father and a mediation of the grace which Christ pours out during the celebration.” The purpose of the preaching is that it “should guide the assembly, and the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist”, (*Catechesis on the Mass*) thus bringing to completion the purpose of the Liturgy of the Word – we remember and meditate upon what God has done, are called to deeper conversion, and desire to enter into deeper communion with our Lord.

A lot could be said about how good homilies need to be then! Pope Francis did exactly this in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (n. 135-176). But it is not only something the preacher does! Pope Francis also teaches that “those who listen to it must also do their part. Firstly, by paying proper attention, that is, assuming the right interior disposition, without subjective pretexts, knowing that every preacher has merits and limitations. If at times there is a reason for boredom because a homily is long or unfocused or unintelligible, at other times, however, prejudice creates the obstacle” (*Catechesis on the Mass*). It has been said that St. Teresa of Avila was always able to obtain some profit from each homily she heard (even though she lived in a time not known

for its great preaching!). While the quality of homilies and improving them is important, we should recognize that by the Holy Spirit, working through imperfect instruments, God can speak to us in some way even in a poor homily, just as we might hope that God can work through our own stumbling and wandering, and bear good fruit despite ourselves.

Why is the homily at Mass only given by the priest or deacon? It isn't because a lay person would be unable to preach well. Well-trained laypeople are able to preach at certain times outside of Mass. The reason goes back to the nature of the Mass and the symbolism of the gathered community. The priest has responsibility for the role of Christ as shepherd, in teaching, governing, and sanctifying the faithful, roles he plays in and outside of the liturgical assembly. This is why under normal circumstances, the main celebrant gives the homily – the bishop, if he is present, the priest celebrant, or a concelebrating priest, or “from time to time, if appropriate,” the deacon, because he shares in their ministry, but in a secondary fashion (*GIRM*, 66). It's not a practical reason, but a sacramental one- by the grace of Holy Orders, bishops, priests, and deacons represent Christ to the gathered assembly. The same principle will be at work when we look at the distribution of Communion – priests and deacons are the ordinary ministers, because of their primary role in sanctifying the people.

After the homily, the whole gathered people say (or sing!) the Creed on Sundays and solemnities, our response of faith to the readings and their explanation in the homily. We profess that we consider ourselves to share the faith of the Church, confessing the great mysteries of our faith as discerned and defined by the Church over the first centuries following Jesus' earthly life. The Nicene Creed came from the Council of Nicaea in 325, with further refinements from the Council of Constantinople in 381, professing faith especially in the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit.

When the Creed has been said, we move into the “Universal Prayer,” more commonly known as the Prayer of the Faithful. In it, we all exercise our baptismal priesthood in praying for the Church and the world, and prepare more immediately to participate in Christ's paschal sacrifice.

