

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 11: Shaping a Response to the Word

Have you ever heard anybody complain about the preaching in the Catholic Church? Have you ever voiced such a complaint yourself? I'm sure no one in this parish would ever be disappointed by the preaching here, of course, but I suspect you've heard such complaints somewhere sometime.

It's easy to complain, of course, but much harder to improve the situation. Most people who complain about the quality of preaching are quick to agree that they wouldn't want the job themselves.

Preaching is always a challenge. It requires finding useful connections between the Word of God and the people to whom it is addressed. It means figuring out how the word of the Lord applies to our own time and what it might say to the people assembled for the liturgy.

Of course, those people who make up the assembly are often quite diverse. They range in age from one to a hundred. They are male and female. Some are highly educated and others less so. There are both the wealthy and the poor. Some are liberal and others conservative. Some are eagerly attentive and others wish they were anywhere but here. Trying to speak one message to such a diverse group is never simple.

It might help to realize that the task of the preacher is also the task of those who listen. Together we must figure out what God is asking of us. Together we must make the word of God come alive in our own time and in our own lives. Perhaps the main function of the preacher is to be a catalyst who prompts everyone to grapple with this shared task.

We used to call what the preacher does the "sermon." In the Catholic tradition, the preaching at Mass is more properly called a homily. A sermon can be on any topic the preacher desires. A homily is supposed to be based on the readings of the day, the feast being celebrated, or some part of the liturgy itself. Its ultimate goal is to help us enter more deeply into the liturgy and thus to draw closer to the Lord who speaks to us.

One of the primary purposes of the homily is to help us all become more aware of how God is at work in our world and in our lives. The homilist tries to name what is happening all the time, to lift it up for us to see it more clearly, and then to challenge us to respond to God's action. Being aware of the ways that God is present among us day by day should lead us all to a sense of gratitude for God's presence and gifts. Thus the homily helps us to prepare to give God thanks and praise and leads us into the rest of the Mass.

Yet the work of the homily is not finished when the preacher sits down. The value of a homily depends on those who hear it. Do they listen attentively? Do they try to remember a key idea or word that struck home? Do they use the silence after the homily to try to figure out how they will respond? The real work of the homily begins when we walk out the church doors.