The Fundamental Mistakes of Preaching

Kenneth Untener

In his reflection Bishop Untener recounts his experience of a diocesan-wide program in which he and a group of priests come together to prepare and evaluate their preaching. He provides eight practical admonitions or cautions for preachers to keep in mind.

One of the best tips I ever heard about writing or speaking is, “Don’t act as if you were superior to your material.”

Another, specifically directed to homilists is, “Don’t give the impression that your own conversion is complete.”

Just those two would help many a homily. But I cite them here in reference to this article. I’m happy to pass along what I’ve learned so far about homilizing, but I’m still learning.

You need to know how I have learned whatever it is I have learned.

In 1993, with the unanimous support of the Presbyteral Council, I began a program in the Saginaw Diocese that works like this. I go through the list of priests and choose four, plus a deacon or lay preacher, and send each a letter. They are to tape (live) a Sunday homily within the next three weeks and send it to me. I also tape one of my homilies and add it to the batch.

Upon receiving these homilies my secretary prepares and mails to each of us a “kit” containing a tape and typed transcript of each homily, and notification of a date and time when we will all meet at my office. Our task in the meantime is to listen to the homilies (including our own) and make notes. We then gather at the appointed time for two hours and talk about the homilies. There is no “teacher”

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—we are like professional musicians trying to help one another. Besides specific critiques of each homily, our discussions are wide-ranging, e.g., what works and what does not, what a homily is supposed to be in the first place, the joys and sorrows of preaching.

At the end of the two hours, we set another date and do the whole thing again—tape a homily, send it in, etc. We do this a total of four times. Then I send a letter to four other priests (plus a deacon or lay homilist) and start the same process with them. And so on.

We have just finished going through the whole presbyterate, and we are starting over. Homilists, like musicians, authors and golfers, are never finished perfecting their skills.

Having been part of each session, listened to over a thousand homilies, had hundreds of my own critiqued, I have learned a lot. Two years ago I wrote a book in an attempt to summarize and pass on what I have learned. But the learning continues and there’s much more I wish I had said.

In this article I will use the via negativa, citing what I perceive to be the most fundamental mistakes we homilists tend to make. I will number them for convenience, but this is not an attempt to rank them.

#1 Neglecting the Great Mysteries

There is a fascinating incident in the Acts of the Apostles. When St. Paul first came to Ephesus, he found people who knew about Jesus, but not the whole story. They had been taught by Apollos who “spoke and taught accurately about Jesus, although he knew only the baptism of John” (cf. Acts 18:24ff.). When Paul asked them about the Holy Spirit, they said, “We have never even heard that there is a holy Spirit.”

We do not know how this happened, but let us imagine this scenario: Apollos was one of the first disciples called by Jesus and was with Jesus throughout his entire ministry—except the last two months. He had a job opportunity in Ephesus (about six hundred miles away) and took it.

In Ephesus, Apollos preached about Jesus—the kind of person he was, the kind of life he led, his teachings on forgiveness, the Sermon on the Mount, the coming of the reign of God, his miracles, the parables. Apollos had been there for all of it. But he never knew the rest of the story.

Think for a moment. What would be missing from what Apollos taught? Missing would be the part that gives full meaning to all the rest. Apollos would know nothing about the crucifixion, death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit. These are not simply a few items in a long list of truths. These are the events through which the disciples were later able to interpret everything about who Jesus was and what he did... and what he was still doing.
Now here is the question. Could Apollos have given many of the homilies we preach? I think so.

We tend to neglect the great mysteries—death, resurrection, the Spirit, the Trinity, grace, sin (vs. sins), redemption, the mystery of God. We preach on the Passion only on Palm Sunday and Good Friday and on those two days, since the whole Passion is read, we usually preach briefly. We preach on the resurrection at the beginning of the fifty-day Easter season, but we have the resurrection narratives only for two Sundays after Easter. Then we shift to the “good shepherd” section of John’s Gospel (Apollos could preach on that one), and for the rest of the Easter season until Pentecost we have John’s Last Supper discourse, parts of which are so difficult we resort to the first or second reading.

During much of Ordinary Time we have miracles and parables which seem much more down-to-earth and enable us to draw behavioral lessons for our listeners. The great mysteries lie within all these texts, but we’re more inclined to use them to preach/teach behavior.

Homilies are meant to go to the root of what it means to be a Christian. Instead we tend to preach about how we’re supposed to live the faith, without illuminating what underlies it all. Apollos could have given a lot of the homilies we preach.

#2 Preaching as Though We Get to Choose What to Say

This gets to the core of what a homily is. On the one hand, we are well aware that we are not preaching our message. We preach what Jesus preached and taught, as handed on by the Church.

On the other hand, we can treat it as our message insofar as we think we can arbitrarily determine what we are going to say as long as it is connected with the Scriptures and is within the bounds of orthodoxy. We can easily find ourselves doing something like this: We look at the Gospel first, think about it, and say, “Nothing really jumps out at me. I think I will use a line from the second reading and preach about factions in the community.”

I describe a homily as:

Trying to discern what the Lord is doing/speaking through this event (these Scripture texts, these liturgical texts, this liturgical feast or season, this historical time and place, the gathering of these people) . . . and helping to illuminate this for the assembly.

We homilists don’t simply choose what we want to say. Our first task is to discern what the Lord is saying. The question is not what Jesus once preached, but what Jesus is preaching to us here and now. It is much like ministering a sacrament. Those who minister a sacrament do not decide what effect they want it to
have. They are instruments the Lord uses to do what he is doing. When we preach we exercise a similar role. We are instruments of what the Lord is speaking to us through this liturgical event.

To put it another way, we exercise a function similar to that of the biblical authors through whom God spoke to the people. It is the same Spirit who guides us as we select what is to be said, compose it, and deliver it. When we preach we are an instrument of what the Lord is doing in this liturgical event. It will take us down new paths. One could use the analogy of Jesus saying to Peter, “You used to dress yourself and go where you wanted” but now “someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

**#3 Using the Scriptures as a Platform to Teach and Moralize**

We have been making progress in the relationship of homilies to the Scriptures. Within my own life as a priest I can identify three stages:

1. When I was ordained in 1963, the Archdiocese of Detroit (like most dioceses) issued “sermon outlines” which we were to follow. In effect they were lesson plans based on the Creed, the Sacraments, and the Commandments. They connected with the Scriptures after the fact, i.e., the author of the outline found a way to connect the lesson *post factum* with something from the Scripture readings of the day.

2. After Vatican II, such outlines disappeared and we were taught to base our homilies on the Scriptures of the day. No longer was a predetermined lesson connected after the fact to the Scriptures. We began with the Scriptures. But we did not go too deeply into them. Most of us were taught to make sure we “applied” them to people’s lives. So, after establishing the “platform” provided by the Scriptures, we went on to spend the second half of the homily moralizing about human conduct.

Connecting with real life is a laudable goal. But instead of connecting with the “real life” deep aspirations and questions within the human spirit, most of us tried to connect with the day-to-day stuff of proper behavior. Once finished with the Scriptures, we were into our own agenda. If it was social justice, most of our homilies were about social justice. If it was building community, most of our homilies were about building community. And so forth and so on.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the first words quoted in the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus are exactly the same:

In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:1).

From that time on [after the temptation in the desert], Jesus began to preach and say: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17).
We think of the word “repent” as striking our breast and promising to do better. But the Greek word means to “think again.” The English word actually has the same literal meaning. The word “pensive” has to do with thinking. Thus, “re-pent” means to “re-think” the way we see God, creation, other people, ourselves and change our lives accordingly.

We do not change people’s conduct by telling them what to do. We do this by enabling them to see things differently, which is what the great mysteries of our faith do.

(3) We are gradually moving on to a third stage: Opening up the Scriptures for and with the assembly. We are gradually moving there, but I think we are still very much caught in the stage of using the Scripture to teach and moralize.

Let us consider the gospel passage in which Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world.” The pattern in Stage #2 would be first of all to explain the text and point out why salt and light were so important to ancient peoples. That takes care of our obligation to deal with the Scripture text. Then we talk about how we are supposed to make a difference in our world (salt) and give good example (light), and we use down-to-earth examples to apply this to today’s world.

For one thing, they have heard it all before. It is predictable stuff. For another, we all go home with “bad marks.” For still another, as mentioned above, we do not change people’s behavior by telling them what to do. We change behavior by helping them see things differently. That is what a homily is supposed to do: open our eyes to the great mystery of God proclaimed in the Scriptures, and thus see life differently.

The mistake is to use the Scriptures as the occasion to say something about real life, but without any serious engagement of the text. We use the text as a peg, a thought-starter, and then go on with our own development. We never get into deeper theological reflection on the Scriptures, but move quickly toward offering applications. We give pat answers, instead of trying to let the light of the Scriptures and God’s grace open us up to a deeper, wider perspective, a richer understanding of life. People never get to enjoy basking in great mysteries of our faith—which may be why we have such a difficult time with “mystagogia.”

#4 Neglecting the Old Testament

The Old Testament is not an antique in our religious museum. Nor is it the wreckage of something we Christians have left behind. It is the foundation on which stands all that we hold sacred.

Jesus was a Jew. He prayed the Jewish Scriptures (the “Our Father” could be prayed word for word by a Jewish person today). He celebrated the Jewish feasts. He fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.
The earliest Christian community was Jewish and drew upon the Jewish traditions. They remembered how Jesus fulfilled them, went beyond them, and the memory helped.

We need to regard more highly than we do the Old Testament. We need to pray it more. And we need to preach it more.

Raymond Brown pointed out that the New Testament covers a relatively short period of time—about seventy years—which today is less than one lifetime. The Gospels (apart from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke) cover only two or three years. The New Testament (especially the Gospels) is a success story. Jesus dies and rises. Peter is thrown into prison and is miraculously set free. Paul persecutes and then becomes a Christian. Gentiles are converted.

The Old Testament covers a much longer span of time—nearly two thousand years. There are success stories (e.g., the Exodus) but they take a long time. And there are long, long stretches of great suffering, lasting not a lifetime, but generations—the exile, a long string of poor leaders, a long drought with no prophets. But through the years the people managed to believe in God’s promise: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

We need to hear this message so that we can trust in God and learn to bear hardships and setbacks over which we have no control. We also learn that sin has consequences. . . . that there is a sameness, a pattern to the way we humans act, the way we fall into sin—from Adam and Eve to Peter. We learn that it is okay to think of God nonphilosophically. . . . to picture God as getting angry, jealous, pleased. . . . to picture God as being able to be talked into and out of things.

We need to take more time with the Old Testament, learn from it, meditate on it, identify with it. . . . and preach it.

#5 Giving a Talk Rather Than Talking to the People

A homily is always “live” as opposed to a taped message. The truth is, some homilies could just as well be on tape. We prepare it, box it, and give the contents to the people. It may be nicely wrapped (i.e., not a monotone) but we’re still “delivering” it rather than speaking “live” from the heart. We do it “live” when our interaction with the people affects what we are saying and how we are saying it. And they can tell the difference.

Sometimes, after discussing a homily in our groups, I ask the person to extemporize briefly what they most of all wanted to say. They begin to speak thoughtfully, from the heart, “live”—and it is ten times better than the homily they gave.

Weekday homilies are usually “live” because we feel free to speak this way. (A very frequent comment from parishioners is, “I wish they’d preach on Sun-
days the way they do on weekdays.”) But on Sundays we go into a different “zone,” perhaps because we lose our nerve. It is not easy to speak from the heart to a large group.

In order to speak “live” we have to get hold of our material. What we have to say has to be so much part of us that we could not forget it, any more than we could forget a great incident we cannot wait to tell a friend about. We could tell it six different ways.

Getting hold of our material is the step in homily preparation that is most often left out. We finish writing the homily, go over it so we can get through it, but never really get hold of it.

This may be a symptom of the Number 1 problem with most homilies—too many thoughts. To get hold of our material we have to have a “sense of the whole.” Sometimes we cannot get a “sense of the whole” because there is no “whole.” There is a theme, but not a whole. Instead of one thought with depth (that we could never forget) we have a number of related thoughts strung together.

Generally speaking, the larger, more important the event, the less likely the homily will be “live.”

A well-prepared boxed message is not necessarily a bad homily. People appreciate the preparation and the organization. But they thirst for a “live” message from the heart.

#6 “Burying Our Lead”

Journalists will tell you that their editor sometimes reviews an article and says, “You buried your ‘lead.’ Rewrite it and start with what you have here in the middle. Let the rest flow from that.”

This is true of many homilies. Time after time in our groups we tell one another, “You have a great thought here on the second page. You should have started with that and stay with it.”

When writing a homily, instead of thinking of a “beginning” as though it were a unit all its own, we should think, “How am I going to get into it?” The “it” is the core thought of the homily into which the homily should flow from the very beginning.

It frequently happens in homilies that we “do a beginning” (which may be quite interesting), then shift into our real message. The listeners catch the shift right away and figure that now we are getting into the “religious stuff,” so they more or less tune out the rest. Such shifts reinforce the idea that the real world is one thing, and religion is one step removed from it.

Another problem with beginnings occurs when our first words are not really part of the homily at all. We begin with things that could have been part of the
Introductory Rites—e.g., thanking the bishop for coming, or acknowledging the presence of a twenty-fifth anniversary couple who will be renewing their vows after the homily. The homily is part of the flow of the word of God, and inserting such comments between the Gospel and the homily is just as inappropriate as inserting them between the first and second Scripture reading.

#7 Failure to Edit

Editing is more than touch-up work. It can involve drastic changes.

When we start writing or outlining our homily, we tend to work in linear fashion—we stay with the development we had in mind when we started, and each unit is an add-on to the previous one. Most good writing, however, involves major changes of direction along the way . . . and after we have completed the whole text/outline.

Editing along the way: We figure we are about half-way there . . . and suddenly we see the whole landscape from a different vantage point. What we had intended as a small part of the homily could become the heart of it. But doing this would require a new direction and new material. We are faced with a major overhaul, which usually means that some of the parts will have to be thrown out (always painful). Do we dare it . . . or just go on?

Editing when we’ve finished the text/outline: As far as we are concerned the homily is finished, except for some minor tinkering. We do not allow ourselves to wonder, “Is there a better way to do this?” This is the point at which we need to have the nerve to let the creative juices flow, and be open to a major rewrite.

One of the things we do in our homily groups is have a journalist review two of the transcripts at each session, and go over them as if she were an editor. It is amazing to see how many sections get cut or reordered and how many unnecessary or weak words get circled. We have come to the conclusion that most of us were never taught to do this and, in fact, seldom do.

Editing may be the step that could turn a mediocre homily into a great one.

#8 Picturing the Homily as the Main Event

The homily is important. But so is the whole Liturgy of the Word, the preparation of the gifts (giving the assembly a sense of their “flow” toward the altar), the Eucharistic Prayer, the Communion Rite. I recently received a letter from a lay person which said:

One realization I’ve had recently is that . . . there’s a clear danger of the homily eclipsing the rest of the liturgy—in length and “weight.” I get tired, just wishing for more really good Eucharistic action in addition to a worthwhile homily.
How important is a homily? I have asked different folks. Here are some of their comments:

“It’s not what I go to Mass for.”

“A poor homily (like poor music) can get in the way, but there’s much more than that.”

“I’m so happy when it’s good.”

“I look forward to the homily. There will always be something good even in a bad homily.”

“I expect God to reveal himself in the whole event. If it were not so, I wouldn’t go.”

We would do well to realize that the homily is only one part of the ritual, a relatively small part, and, therefore, craft a jewel rather than trying to seize the whole event with our preaching. If we approach it this way, we are more apt to preach well, and preach from the heart.

*Postscript*

My experience in working with homilists is that they take this ministry seriously and are trying to do their best. They are people of faith, people who have an adequate theological and scriptural background, life experience. They are people of goodwill, open to anything that will help them improve. They simply do not get much help. They get some reactions, encouragement, and kindness. Church musicians get the same. That helps them survive, but does not help them improve.

I chose the *via negativa* not because I wished to be negative, but because it seemed a way to be concrete and helpful. Homilies, I believe, are much better than they used to be. We are moving in the right direction. We need hands-on help to keep us moving in that direction.