Care for the quality of the liturgical life of the parish community reflects an awareness of the incarnational and sacramental character of religious symbolism. As the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy noted some years ago: “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy faith” (See Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, no. 6). Simply put, liturgy is related to life and celebrates life. Liturgy as ritual embraces basic Christian concerns and values: praise and thanksgiving, sorrow and repentance, intercession and dependence, relationships and love, hope for the future, justice and peace.

Within this context preaching ponders these convictions, values, and feelings in relationship to God’s word so that conversion and transformation, faith and conviction remain a continual and authentic expression of discipleship of Jesus Christ. As Donald Senior once put it: “Preaching with a biblical character should understand the power of rhetoric [in the classical sense], meaning language and forms of discourse capable of moving the human spirit” (Senior, 389).

In 1982 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops published Fulfilled in Your Hearing: the Homily in the Sunday Assembly. This document viewed the homily as an effort to speak the truth about God’s presence in relationship to the life of the community. The homilist has the task of being a “mediator of meaning” (Fulfilled, 7) and is concerned to read the present moment from the vantage point of Scripture, to interpret the community’s experience through the prism of God’s word. This challenge calls for a number of skills: an educated understanding of the scriptural passages, an awareness of the culture in which the community lives, a basic knowledge of the church’s tradition and mission, a sense of the needs and concerns of the local parish community, and some knowledge of effective communication.

Even more foundational than the skills needed to preach effectively is the homilist’s personal commitment to discipleship of Jesus Christ. One who has entered the paschal mystery through lived faith is continually appropriating and internalizing God’s word and celebrating that bond in sacrament and ministry. As a consequence the faith-filled homilist would tend to rise above a delivery that is perfunctory or overly intellectualized. His personal and communal experience of faith would serve to energize his message. Indeed a homilist’s spirituality

Fr. John F. Russell, O.Carm., is professor of preaching at Immaculate Conception Seminary, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey.
is gradually revealed in the very ministry of preaching.

**Skills for Preaching Effectively**

An engaging homilist is interested in maintaining an informed relationship to God’s word. Every priest and deacon has received some formal education in the Scriptures. In fact, since Vatican II, clergy and laity alike have attended Scripture classes and have shared the word of God in small groups. In other words, Scripture has received a new impetus in Catholic faith life and rightly so. Those who are called to communicate the meaning of the scriptural passages to others need to be open to continuing education. Scripture classes, personal reading, and diocesan workshops serve this goal. A good education in the word of God counters any biblical fundamentalism as well as any purely subjective interpretation of God’s word.

Second, the homilist cannot preach apart from an awareness of the kind of world he inhabits. History and culture need to be viewed with the insights from the biblical word. Culture reflects social worlds of meaning and is mediated through literature, the theater, art, mores, politics, religion, and the like. Culture can manifest the presence and absence of grace, reveal the struggles and anxieties of a people, appear sensitive to or antagonistic toward religious values. Pope John Paul II used the phrase “a culture of death” to signify a corporate climate indifferent to the moral atrocities of abortion and euthanasia. That judgment rested upon the life-affirming character of God’s word as well as almost two thousand years of Christian tradition.

The present cultural climate communicates stories of rugged individualism, moral relativism, dedication to materialistic goals, as well as sensitivity to social injustice, environmental decay, and gender exploitation. Sifting through the cultural messages of our day, the homilist must energize the fires of faith, hope, and love by bringing the word of God as light and discernment to the present day. Theologian Karl Rahner, S.J., once claimed that there needs to be a touch of the poet within the heart of the preacher.

Third, the homilist recognizes that the church’s theological tradition forms an essential background for Christian preaching. To preach is to serve the redemptive love of Jesus Christ. Systematic and moral theology, liturgy, and the sacraments provide a context for preaching. Theological education not only can help to obviate distortions in preaching but assist the homilist in focusing upon the essentials of Christian faith (hierarchy of truths). The homily is intended to lead the community to “the mystery of Christ, which is ever made present and active within us” (Constitution on the Liturgy, 35:2). Obviously, theological knowledge serves that goal.

Fourth, a sensitive homilist grows aware of the needs and concerns of the local parish community. In ministering to people one learns a great deal. Not only does one encounter parishioners of deep faith, hear stories of unselfish love and devotion, walk hand in hand with people who suffer setbacks, but also one discovers within ministry various parish needs. Some of these can be met with resources within the parish community. As a consequence of knowing the parish community, the homilist is able to move the community to serve each others’ needs and to develop a ministerial consciousness, in other words, to grow as a people of God.

Fifth, a good preacher is conscious of ways to communicate the word of God to others. Above all else good communication involves the homilist in demonstrating how the scriptural text reveals what is true about our lives. This calls for a creative use of images and metaphors, stories and phrases, in order to enliven the spirit. Performance
is not as critical as knowing Scripture and a touch of literature, art, and poetry. Very often it is the imaginative use of sources that jars loose some sense of awareness and insight and moves us toward action.

Some Practical Considerations

Homilies do not simply happen; they are the products of study, prayerful reflection, and hard work.

1. Good preaching needs to appeal to human experience so that people recognize their lives in the message. The word of God is given to illumine people’s lives, to lead them to Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life. Homilists can draw upon their own experience, but not in such a way as to draw attention to themselves. Jesus taught effectively in parables and stories revealing the character of the human in relationship to God and to neighbor. The challenge is to be personal but not self-focused.

2. A good homily should have substance to it, a message, but stated with simplicity. One good idea is sufficient as long as it reveals a dimension of the scriptural passages in an engaging way. Simply to repeat the scriptural story is not a homily. Rather, the people need to find God’s presence in the midst of their lives. The homily serves that intent in affirming, prophetic, reconciling, and grace-filled ways.

3. A biblically based homily offers vision, hope, challenge, and some direction to the community, but the homily is not primarily didactic or moralistic. The homily is ordinarily not the time to get across some personal view of life or to suggest some self-help mechanisms. Some homilists fixate on one or two issues and repeat the same message week after week. The proper corrective is to center upon the biblical passages chosen for the church’s liturgy and to correlate the word of God with the mission of the Christian assembly. This goal requires preparation in order to communicate the Good News.

4. Since preaching is a communication event, it is well to know some basics of good communication: one needs to be heard; the point to be made needs to be clear to the homilist; pace is important so that people can assimilate the word; gestures assist imagery; and a beginning question can draw the gathering to attention. A good homily leaves the faithful with a sense of Christian identity and understanding or hope or mission. Something happens between the homilist and the people that is life-giving.

5. A poor homily generates its own kind of responses. People may be bewildered because no particular point was made in the homily. Or perhaps the people are angry, not because the homilist was prophetic, but because they were subjected to the homilist’s idiosyncrasies. A bad homily can bring about shame in people who feel embarrassed that the homilist offers such trivial fare. Or sometimes people feel pity for the homilist who is so inept at the task of preaching.

People gathered for worship are called to be more than an audience. They are to be part of a community’s celebration of praise and thanksgiving to God. In the midst of the liturgical action the homilist is called to stir up hearts to manifest a strong faith commitment in the world of the secular and the profane.

References
