

A TALK  
BY THE REVEREND RAY E. ATWOOD, ARCHDIOCESE OF DUBUQUE

11<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL PREACHING SEMINAR  
ARNOLD HALL  
PEMBROKE, MASSACHUSSETTS

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## **THE INTEGRITY OF HOMILETICS**

### INTRODUCTION

Yesterday, I provided a general overview of the history of preaching.

In this talk, I would like to focus on a particular aspect of preaching, which is a key part of both of my books on the subject.

This particular subject is not something I expected to learn when I began research, but I am glad that I learned it.

Again, I ask the Holy Spirit to touch our minds and hearts, and give us insight and inspiration for our preaching.

The Holy Spirit came down on the Apostles at Pentecost, and enabled them to speak in tongues (the first use of the vernacular, I might add) to the people gathered outside the Upper Room (Acts 2:4).

I pray that the Holy Spirit will use our tongues to preach inspiring messages.

One thing I learned while researching my books was the things that the masters of preaching have in common.

They were all men of the Church, men of Scripture, men of Tradition, men of study, and men of prayer.

They preached in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Constantinople, Rome, London, New York, and other cities.

They knew how to preach and the objects of preaching.

This is important because, while practical ideas, such as keeping a notebook with you at all times to jot down ideas, or saving articles and emails in homily files, are good and useful, your preaching philosophy shapes your homily preparation and delivery.

You can, for example, tell a person that green or blue are great colors to wear in an interview; you should turn off your cell phone; you should have a clean, crisp, 14-point font resume ready, be prepared to handle awkward silences, and you should avoid clichés in answering questions.

But if you have not done any homework on the company, or you come across as uninterested in the job, you're unlikely to be hired.

So too, practical ideas are great, but you will not be as effective if you don't have a solid preaching philosophy, rooted in study and prayer.

For example, if preaching is **teaching** only, you will teach and not exhort; if you think preaching is **sharing life stories**, you will share life stories, but not necessarily teach; if you think preaching is an **informal talk** about a point in the readings, you'll just talk; if you think preaching is **admonition**, you will admonish.

But if you understand preaching as an explanation of the prayers or readings at Mass, with the goal being to unfold the mysteries of faith and the principles of Christian living, then you will present a dimension or two of the faith and morals each week.

The masters were unafraid to proclaim the message in its fullness.

They were not selective heralds of the Gospel.

They understood and lived the words Saint Paul wrote to the Apostle Timothy: *“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers, and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry”* (2 Tim. 4:1–5).

That’s precisely what the masters did: proclaim the Word in its fullness.

I call this “pastoral” or “homiletic integrity.”

#### PASTORAL OR HOMILETIC INTEGRITY

Simply put, pastoral or homiletic integrity refers to the proclamation of the entire message of salvation rather than selected parts of it.

Saint Luke writes: *“And so I [Paul] solemnly declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from proclaiming to you the entire plan of God”* (20:26–27).

Paul is speaking to presbyters in Miletus, which is located about thirty miles south of Ephesus on the Turkish coast.

Paul reminds them of his commitment to the Gospel, talks about his own hardships and trials, and encourages pastors to protect the community from false prophets, which he calls *“savage wolves,”* who will not spare the flock of Christ.

One of the things I have discovered is the importance of integrity, or integration.

Integrity comes from the Latin word *integrare*, and means “to make complete,” or simply “wholeness.”

The masters of preaching, which include Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, John the Baptizer, Jesus, Peter, Paul, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Venerable Bede, Thomas Aquinas, Charles Borromeo, Alphonsus Ligouri, John Vianney, Fulton Sheen, John Paul II, Pope Benedict, and Pope Francis were and are masters of Scripture, masters of Tradition, masters of spirituality, and men of integrity.

They announced the entire message of salvation throughout the course of their preaching apostolate.

Their call is our call: to preach the mystery of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

The texts of the current *Lectionary* provide ample opportunity to reflect on a wide variety of topics.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council called for “the treasures of the Bible” to “be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way a more representative part of the Sacred Scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years” (SC, no. 51).

It also called the sermon “part of the liturgical action whenever a rite involves one.”

Therefore, “The ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled most faithfully and carefully” (no 35. 2).

The A,B,C Sunday and I,II weekday cycle of readings is the fulfillment of these decrees.

Consider this: One percent of the Old Testament and 17 percent of the New Testament were in the 1962 *Roman Missal* and 14 percent of the Old Testament and 71 percent of the New Testament are found in the 1998 *Lectionary for Mass*.

Cardinal Pell of Sydney, Australia commented several years back that after reviewing homilies he had delivered in a twenty-year period, that few contained a moral message.

This shocked and saddened him, but he resolved to preach clearly on moral topics in the future.

Father Landry asked me to make my talks practical, and so in keeping with his wishes, I would like to provide several examples of pastoral or homiletic integrity.

## PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

### Example One

First, let's look at some homily titles delivered by Pope Saint Gregory the Great.

These are some things on which reflected:

"Who is my mother?"

"By the Sea of Galilee"

"A treasure hidden in a field"

"Into the wilderness"

"The twelve Jesus sent out"

"The harvest is great"

"A village called Emmaus"

"The barren fig tree"

"Many are called, few are chosen"

"There was a certain rich man"

## Example Two

Next, let's look at some homilies delivered by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux on Christmas Eve:

"The three benefits which we owe to the birth of Christ"

"On the spiritual Jews and the spiritual Jerusalem, and the desire which all the blessed feel for our salvation"

"On the three days, the three watches, the three winds, and the three unions"

"On the spiritual riches which Christ brought on earth"

"On the manner in which we must prepare and sanctify ourselves for the vision of God"

"On the manner in which each of us should make himself a Bethlehem of Judea, so that Christ may be born in his soul"

## Example Three

The following sermons were delivered by Saint John Vianney, and cover the entire liturgical year:

First Sunday of Advent: The Last Judgment

Second Sunday of Advent: The eternal truths

Third Sunday of Advent: Fear of Man

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Penance

Epiphany: Called to the Faith

First Sunday after Epiphany (Holy Family Sunday): Religious pictures in the home

Septuagesima: The Word of God

First Sunday of Lent: Temptations

Third Sunday of Lent: Indulgences

Palm Sunday: Behold, the King comes

Low Sunday: Easter Confession

Second Sunday after Easter: Perseverance

Pentecost: Children of the Holy Ghost and Children of the world

Second Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Mass

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Hope

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: The Second Commandment

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: On False and True Virtue

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: The Particular Judgment

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: The Soul

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Rash Judgment

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Humility

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Lukewarmness

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost: Anger

#### Example Four

I have taken the fourth example from my books.

After reviewing the *Lectionary*, I have found various topics on which to preach.

I include a biblical text that could serve as a starting point or inspiration for these homily topics.

First Sunday of Advent B: Atheism and Agnosticism (“*O Lord, you are our Father*”)

Fourth Sunday of Advent A: Cohabitation (*"When Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together . . ."*)

Epiphany: The guidance of faith (*"The magi followed the star"*)

The Baptism of Jesus: Baptismal commitments to renounce Satan and profess Christ (*"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"*)

Second Sunday of Lent A: The contraceptive mentality (*"Abraham looked up into the sky and saw the number of the stars, and God said, 'Thus shall your descendants be'"*)

Third Sunday of Lent A: Conversion (*"The Samaritan woman came for water"*)

Second Sunday of Easter C: Miracles (*"Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the Apostles"*)

Sixth Sunday of Easter A: Apologetics (*"Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you a reason for your hope"*)

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time C: Same-sex marriage (*"There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee"*)

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A: Women's Ordination (*"He called them"*)

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time C: Abortion (*"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you"*)

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B: Purgatory (*"Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness"*)

Seventeenth through the Twenty-First Sundays in Ordinary Time B: The Eucharist (*"I am the Bread of Life"*)

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time A: Indulgences (*"I will give you [Peter] the keys to the kingdom of heaven"*)

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time A: Fraternal Correction (*"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone"*)



Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time B: Annulments (*“Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?”*)

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A: Religious Liberty (*“Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God”*)

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time C: Immigration (*“You shall not oppress an alien, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt”*)

#### CONTINUE

These are not proof texts *per se*, but instead windows for a prayerful reflection on important topics and contemporary applications of biblical truths.

I recall a homily Pope Benedict delivered at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, 2012.

He began by talking about priests as sharers in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, “so that we might be *‘consecrated in truth’* (Jn. 17:19).”

After discussing the priest’s configuration to Jesus, he spoke about “a group of priests from a European country issued a summons to disobedience, and at the same time gave concrete examples of the forms this disobedience might take . . . such as the question of women’s ordination” (homily, April 5).

He asked went on to ask: “Is disobedience a path of renewal for the Church?”

“Do we merely sense a desperate push to do something to change the Church in accordance with one’s own preferences and ideas?”

He went on further to talk about the virtue of obedience within the context of the “fresh currents of life” which burst forth after the Second Vatican Council.

He pointed to examples of holy priests “who have gone before us and shown us the way: from Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch, from the great pastors Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great, through to Ignatius of Loyola, Charles Borromeo, John Mary Vianney, and the priest-martyrs of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and finally Pope John Paul II.”

My point is that the readings provide ample opportunities for us to address a wide range of topics relevant to the people of today, as Saint Paul and other preachers have done throughout Church history.

I am not suggesting that the homilist should begin with a preconceived idea and search for biblical support from the Sunday readings to address the idea.

That would do damage to the text, the liturgy, and the homilist's credibility.

I am suggesting that we should be mindful of the "signs of the times," and look for ways to apply the Gospel to contemporary life.

The examples I have provided clearly illustrate the fact that the *Lectionary* texts provide bridges between biblical life and contemporary life.

#### WHAT DOES MAN SEEK?

What are people looking for in preaching?

What kinds of topics do they want us to address?

A partial list could include:

The greatness of God and the glory of divine nature

The full human nature of Christ

The Mother of God

The angels

The impact of Original Sin

The importance of Scripture and Tradition in the life of the Church

The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist

A sound explanation of the Pro-Life Movement

The Last Things (death, judgment, heaven, hell)

Moral questions (abortion, sterilization, in-vitro fertilization, just war, capital punishment, environmental protection)

### THE MASTER'S EXAMPLE

Jesus was not afraid to tackle a variety of issues in His own preaching.

These included: anger and adultery, civil disobedience and courage, divorce and detachment, love of neighbor and enemies, fasting and freedom, greed and the great commandments, honesty and humility, the Kingdom and conversion, retaliation and responsibility.

And these are just a few of many examples we could cite.

Our Lord demonstrated by His own example the importance of homiletic or pastoral integrity.

Creativity and fidelity to the revealed Tradition and Scripture are not mutually exclusive.

They go hand in hand.

Saint Paul, in a powerful passage, reminds the Apostle Timothy:

*“Proclaim the word, be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but following their own desires and insatiable curiosity will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:2–5).*

Selective preaching without hard truths can be compared to a mother who feeds her children Apple Jacks and pancakes for breakfast; candy and chicken fingers for lunch; pizza and pop for dinner; and cheese and crackers for a midnight snack every night.

These items taste great, but they are not a proper regular diet.

Fruits, vegetables, salads and lean meats are also part of a healthy diet, and so too, the themes of temptation, sin, and greed as just as important and necessary to cover as are love, joy, and peace.

Perhaps people are leaving our churches because they are being fed superficial sweet food rather than satisfying spiritual fare.

Both Pope Francis and the U.S. bishops have noted the impact of preaching on declining Mass attendance.

The Holy Father wrote: “We know that the faithful attach great importance to [the homily], and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God’s word and a constant source of renewal and growth” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 135).

The bishops wrote: “We are also aware that in survey after survey over the past years, the People of God have called for more powerful and inspiring preaching. A steady diet of tepid or poorly prepared homilies is often cited as a cause for discouragement on the part of the laity and even leading some to turn away from the Church” (*Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 2).

## STORY

I am reminded of the story of a parishioner of a small parish who had fallen away.

He hadn’t attended Mass for years.

One evening the church caught fire and became engulfed in flames.

The whole parish came out to help put out the fire, forming a line, passing buckets, trying to control the conflagration.

The priest was amazed when he noticed the fallen-away Catholic in line, carrying and passing buckets of water—more involved than he had been in years.

A few days later, the priest visited the man and asked, “Joe, why after so many years of being away from the Church did you come and help fight the fire?”

Joe replied, “Well, father, it is simple. I never came to church before because the church was never on fire before!”

That fallen-away Catholic said a profound truth: people will come to a place that is alive, active, and on fire with the Spirit of God.

Perhaps one reason that people are not attending Mass is that they are being fed spiritual sweet food rather than satisfying spiritual fare.

I am always saddened when I hear priests say things like: “It’s Christmas or Easter again, and I don’t know what to say. What more can you say, except ‘Jesus is born’ or ‘Jesus is risen, alleluia!’”

Really?

That’s all there is to those feasts?

If the great feasts of the Church can be exhausted in the preaching of an average pastor, then I say take away the decorations, the pomp and circumstance, the smells and bells, because we don’t have much of a mystery to celebrated.

Pastoral or homiletic integrity is not just about choosing a wide variety of topics throughout the year, but includes choosing a variety of topics for every feast, as we saw with Saint Bernard.

## PERSONAL INTEGRITY

The final section of the narrative portion of the fifth book of Matthew’s Gospel is Our Lord’s denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees.

Speaking to the crowds and the disciples gathered before Him, Jesus says: “*The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses*” (Mt. 23:2).

He acknowledges their position as successors of Moses and their authority as teachers.

*“Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you.”*

He orders them to follow the official teachings handed down by the scribes.

The Mosaic Law is still intact.

Then there is a shift, a distinction.

*“But do not follow their example.”*

The crowds are to do as they are told, but not what they see the teachers doing.

*“For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders (their actions are in contrast to Jesus Himself, who invited His disciples to bear the yoke of obedience to His Word, which is lightened by His grace), but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation ‘Rabbi.’”*

Here Our Lord warns against excessive external show, represented by prayer boxes, tassels, symbolic seats, and lofty greetings.

*“As you for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called ‘Master’ you have but one master, the Messiah.”*

He goes on to announce a series of “woes,” and six times calling the scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites” or actors who play a role, but refuse to live a life consistent with that role.

The use of the images of cup and dish and whitewashed sepulchers illustrates the Pharisees’ concern for external signs of holiness in place of internal holiness.

The true disciple is a man of holiness on the inside and the outside.

Both cup and dish are clean in and out.

He's talking about integrity.

My research and reading since publishing my first two books has led me to discover a second kind of integrity, a kind that is equally important to the first.

It is personal integrity.

This integrity can help us become effective and transformative figures.

Personal integrity means integrity of heart, mind, body, and soul.

It is wholeness and holiness.

We are all born with a certain personality, but our character is determined by our actions.

In the case of preaching, each of us has different gifts and talents, including the gift of our personality.

But our decision to live the faith as fully as possible determines our character.

We shape our character by the way we live, and other see that.

## STORY

I am reminded of the story of two women sitting next to each other at a bar.

After a while, one looks at the other and says, "I can't help but think, from listening to you, that you're from Ireland."

The other woman responds proudly, "Yes, I sure am!"

The first one says, "So am I. And where about in Ireland are ya from?"

The other woman answers, "From Dublin, I am."

The first one responds, "So am I! And what street did you live on in Dublin?"

The other woman says, “A lovely little area. It was in the west end. I loved on Warbury Street in the old central part of town.”

The first one says, “Faith, and it’s a small world. So did I! So did I! And what school did ya attend?”

The other woman answers, “Well now, I went to Holy Heart of Mary, of course.”

The first one gets really excited and says, “And so did I! Tell me, what year did you graduate?”

The other woman answers, “Well now, let’s see. I graduated in 1964.”

The first woman exclaims, “The good Lord must be smiling down upon us! I can hardly believe our good luck at winding up in the same pub tonight! Can you believe it? I graduated from Holy Heart of Mary in 1964, me self!”

About this time, Michael walks into the bar, sits down, and orders a beer.

Brian, the bartender, walks over to Michael shaking his head and mutters, “It’s going to be a long night tonight.”

Michael asks, “Why do you say that, Brian?”

Brian answers, “The Murphy twins are drunk again.”

#### PROPER CONDUCT

Saint Paul instructs the Philippians to “*conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear news of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together for the faith of the gospel, not intimidated in any way by your opponents*” (1:27–28).

We preachers of the Word need to be men of sound mind, body, and soul.

The U.S. bishops tell us: “To preach the Gospel authentically to the Christian community, the homilist should strive to live a life of holiness. In the Gospel



according to Matthew, Jesus strongly challenges those religious leaders who *'preach but . . . do not practice,'* those who *'tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but . . . will not lift a finger to move them'* (Mt. 23:3-4) . . . The homilist who humbly and confidently seeks the light and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the preparation of the homily proclaims God's word with great clarity, integrity and effectiveness" (PMF, III, 33).

The document has a beautiful section on the personal qualities of the homilist, something that is not found in any other document.

#### FOUR QUALITIES OF A PREACHER

It lists four qualities of the preacher.

*First, the preacher is a "man of holiness."*

The bishops write: "To attempt to evangelize through words and example those who need to revitalize their faith, without awareness of one's need for ongoing spiritual renewal, would be in vain" (PMF, 33).

They continue: "The homilist who humbly and confidently seeks the light and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the preparation of the homily proclaims God's word with greater clarity, integrity, and effectiveness" (ibid).

Holiness is part of preaching integrity.

After noting that the homily is not a mere public address, but instead a liturgical act which requires personal reflection, careful study, and prayerful silence.

They note: "The evangelizer must also first make sure that his own life has engaged the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

This means pondering the meaning of the texts we proclaim, trying to understand their deeper senses, and applying them to our lives.

They quote Pope Francis, who quotes Saint Augustine: “He is undoubtedly barren who preaches outwardly the word of God without hearing it inwardly” (ibid, 34).

Before we preach to others, we have to preach to ourselves, and ensure, to the best of our ability, that we believe what we are preaching.

Before we can preach prayer, we need to pray.

Before we can preach forgiveness, we need to forgive.

Before we can preach against gossip, we need to refrain from gossip.

Before we can preach obedience, we need to obey.

Before we can preach love, we need to love.

Before we can preach faith, we need to believe.

We need to live what we preach, just like the Master Himself.

*The second section is titled: “The Preacher as a Man of Scripture.”*

“As one whose duty is to proclaim the word of God, the homilist must necessarily be a person with a deep love of the Scriptures and one whose spirituality is profoundly shaped by God’s Word,” the bishops write.

The document lists several ways this happens: immersing oneself in the “language, stories, rhythms, speech patterns, and ethos of the Scriptures” . . . memorizing important biblical passages, and being familiar with the general narrative of the Scriptures.

It even suggests that priests carry them when they travel, or “by computer or other mobile technology.”

Biblical commentaries, including Jerome’s massive tome, as well as the homilies of Origen, Augustine, Ephrem, John Chrysostom and Jerome are recommended.

A particularly effective means of immersing oneself in the biblical text is *lectio divina*.

Pope Benedict described the four-fold spiritual preparation of *lectio divina* in his exhortation *Verbum Domini*: read, meditate, pray, and contemplate.

First, we are to read the Scriptures and ask, “What does the passage say? What is its original meaning?”

Second, we are to meditate on the Scriptures and ask, “What does the passage say to me here and now? What message does God want me to take from it?”

Third, we are to pray on the Scriptures and praise and thank God for His Word.

Finally, we are to contemplate the Scriptures and ask, “What action or decision does this Scripture passage require of me? What must I do with the message I have heard?”

The bishops give examples of ways a preacher can connect the biblical world with the modern world:

“The birth of a child today is an echo of the Birth of Christ; a time of suffering in a hospital right now is in some way connected to the suffering of Jesus on the Cross; a summons to a vocation heard by a young woman in a parish is [like] the call heard by Mary of Nazareth from the angel Gabriel; a failure of integrity by a business executive is reminiscent of the Israelites’ failure in the desert; a struggle for justice in our society is supported by Amos’ cry of protest on behalf of the poor, and so on” (Ibid., 35).

*The third section is titled: “The Preacher as a Man of Tradition.”*

Knowledge of and adherence to the Church’s Sacred Tradition is as essential as knowledge of Scripture.

Blessed John Henry Newman said that “the teaching of the Bible is like a seed, which has gradually unfolded across space and through time.”

The bishops recommend that homilists tap into theology, spirituality, liturgy, lives of the saints, formal teachings of the Church, art, architecture, and poetry in order to enrich preaching.

“[Preachers] should cultivate a real love for the writings of the doctors of the Church and study with eagerness the manner in which the Church’s life and teaching have developed.”

*The final section is titled: “The Preacher as a Man of Communion.”*

“Effective preaching also entails a thoughtful and informed understanding of contemporary culture,” the bishops write.

They quote the Second Vatican Council which demands the Church to be attentive to “the signs of the times,” or “signals coming from today’s world.”

The bishops quote Saint John Paul II, who wrote: “Within the Church’s life the priest is a man of communion, in his relations with all people he must be a man of mission and dialogue. Deeply rooted in the truth and charity of Christ, and impelled by the desire and imperative to proclaim Christ’s salvation to all, the priest is called to witness in all his relationships to fraternity, service and a common quest for the truth, as well as a concern for the promotion of justice and peace” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, no. 18).

The bishops identify a man of communion as one who understands the language, mores, customs, and history of the people he serves.

In his preaching, the homilist builds a bridge between the biblical world and the contemporary world.

He is a poor bridge-builder if he cannot understand those on the other side of the bridge, namely, the congregation to whom he preaches.

So we can see that Holiness, Scripture, Tradition, and Communion make up the integrity of effective homilists.

You could call these things the four legs of the table of preaching.

## THE MASTER'S EXAMPLE

Jesus was the man of perfect integrity, the Word-made-Flesh.

Before He preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, on a boat near the Sea of Galilee, on a mountain, or on the lonely road to Emmaus, Our Lord lived what He taught.

He could preach effectively because He embodied what He taught.

He could say, "*Lead us not into temptation*" because He resisted temptation in the desert.

He could say, "*Stop making my Father's house a marketplace*" because as a young man He had declared the Jerusalem Temple to be "*my Father's house.*"

He could say, "*Blest are they who show mercy,*" because He showed mercy to sinners, like Zacchaeus and the adulterous woman.

He could say, "*Go, sell what you have and give to the poor*" because He had no place to lay His head.

Pope Paul VI, in a famous quote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, wrote: "The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life . . . Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he listens to teachers, it is because they are his witnesses."

Saint Charles Borromeo expressed homiletic and personal integrity in a sermon excerpted in *The Liturgy of the Hours* on his feast day:

"If teaching and preaching is your job, then study diligently and apply yourself to whatever is necessary for doing the job well. Be sure that you first preach by the way you live. If you do not, people will notice that you say one thing, but live otherwise, and your words will only bring cynical laughter and a derisive shake of the head" (Office of Readings, Nov. 4, *Liturgy of the Hours* 4:1545).

The new *Homiletic Directory*, in discussing the preparation for preaching, says: “Pope Francis emphasizes this admonition with very strong words: a preacher who does not prepare himself and who does not pray is ‘dishonest and irresponsible,’ a ‘false prophet, a fraud, a shallow imposter.’ Clearly in the preparation of homilies, study is invaluable, but prayer is essential” (HD, no. 26).

Francis, like his predecessor, preached a Gospel message that he first lived.

This requires both spiritual and academic preparation.

In my second book I highlight three virtues that make up the spirituality of an effective homilist.

## HUMILITY

*The first is humility.*

Humility is a virtue by which we recognize our place in relationship with God.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we see two men: one recites a litany of accomplishments, and acts as if he expects God to reward him.

The other man recites a litany of mercy, asking God to forgive his sins and set him free.

God hears both men, but He justifies only the second because of the man’s humble heart.

The Tax Collector’s humble heart and prayerful attitude pleased God.

He could be a suitable vessel for the work God wanted him to do, and the same is true for us.

God has called us to be servants of the Word rather than the masters of it.

A servant, like the Blessed Mother, listens attentively to the Word and submits his heart and will to the Word.

Humble hearts produce moving discourses.

People can tell humility from pride easily, so it is important to cultivate this virtue every day.

I received a lesson in humility early on in my priesthood.

At a wedding reception, there was a stage with the main table, suitably decorated, and several chairs all lined up in a nice neat row.

I figured the priest must sit up with the wedding party because I was part of the wedding.

So I marched up and looked for my seat.

Then a grandmother came over to me and discreetly said, "Father, your chair is not up here. It's down here with us!"

Since that day I totally related to the passage: "*If you are invited to a wedding, go take the lower place, lest someone come and say, 'Give your place to this man'*" (Lk. 14:10).

## LOVE

*The second virtue of effective homilists is charity or love.*

Charity is love for God and neighbor.

Jesus told us to love God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul, and then to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This means sharing our gifts, understanding the needs of others, and caring for those less fortunate than ourselves.

This two-fold love is expressed by the homilist.

He shows love for God by proclaiming His Word.

He shows love for neighbor by applying that Word to the neighbor's life.

Love is self-revelation, caring, and understanding for other.

A homilist is a man of love.

Love is the more excellent way (1 Cor. 12:31).

He is patient with those who fail to understand the message.

He is kind to those who struggle with the message.

He is not jealous of those who seem to go through life without struggling.

He is not pompous in his mannerisms or attitude.

He is not inflated in his presentation.

He is not rude to those who criticize him.

He does not seek his own interest or approval in preaching.

He is not quick-tempered with those who get upset with him.

He does not brood over injurious remarks, letters, or emails about his preaching.

He rejoices in the truth as it is revealed to him.

He bears the burdens of homily preparation and presentation.

He believes in God's mercy.

He hopes for the salvation of his people.

He endures in his work as long as God keeps him going.

Love never fails.

And the preacher who loves is evident to everyone.

Pope Francis compares the homilist to a mother's conversation with her children, a conversation which includes words of encouragement as well as correction.



He writes: “The spirit of love which reigns in a family guides both mother and child in their conversations; therein they teach and learn, experience correction and grow in appreciation of what is good. Something similar happens in a homily. The same Spirit who inspired the Gospels and who acts in the Church also inspires the preacher to hear the faith of God’s people and to find the right way to preach at each Eucharist” (EG, no. 139).

## OBEDIENCE

*The third virtue is obedience.*

Obedience means following the directives of a superior, knowing that his will is God’s will.

In the parable of the two sons, only the son who refused to obey and changed his mind was pleasing to God.

In the end, we are judged by deeds and *not* mere words.

In the end, God wants our obedient service.

The obedient servant is not naïve enough to think that his superior is divine, but he knows the superior is put in his life for a reason, and that through submission of mind and will, the servant will fulfill his task.

Obedience to the Church’s Magisterium and liturgical directives is a sign of love for God and His people.

The preacher will study and follow the clear directives of the Church’s authorities in carrying out his important work.

## PUSHBACK

No matter how carefully we prepare, no matter how well we articulate the message, there will be some kind of pushback from doing this sacred work.

The world does not want to hear the fullness of the Gospel.

This was illustrated to me in a humorous way a few weeks after I was ordained.

Before taking up my duties as associate in a new parish, I was helping out in a small parish outside Cresco, Iowa.

It was a hot, Sunday afternoon.

As I was preaching in a small church, a mother and her daughter sat in the back row.

The mother was fanning herself and the daughter was sitting quietly.

At one point, as I was preaching, the daughter looked up at her mother and asked, "Mom, when is he gonna shut up?"

The mother whispered something in the girl's ear, and a minute or so later the girl said to her mother, "You said he'd shut up in a minute. He's still talking?"

I quickly ended the homily, and was humbled by the experience.

#### WHAT IS NEEDED

The most important reason for Sunday Mass attendance is that God provides a weekly opportunity to experience rest and worship, as the angels and saints do in Heaven.

Sunday Mass and Sunday rest are a little foretaste of heavenly worship and rest.

People should be drawn into the sacred mysteries by the proper celebration of the sacred liturgy, by the reception of Holy Communion, and by the proclamation of the Gospel.

The dramatic drop in Mass attendance is a powerful indictment of modern preaching and worship, illustrating how lack of conviction is driving worshippers from the pews and churches.

People need and want preaching based on Scripture and Tradition rather than politics and current events.

Better apologetics is needed.

Lack of catechesis in pulpits and classrooms has resulted in a growing conviction that there are no strong reasons for Christian belief.

This is not true, but if there are no strong reasons for Christian *belief*, then there are no strong reasons for Christian practice, and both decline.

This has been happening since the Sixties.

I think this situation can be remedied in part by improve homily preparation and delivery.

We need to pray more, study Scripture more, and work harder to create bridges between the ancient biblical text and modern listeners.

What I believe we desperately need in the Church is *creative fidelity*, which is fidelity to biblical message and the Church's teachings, combined with creativity in communicating the timeless message of Christ.

Our Protestant friends excel in creativity, I must say.

Three signs outside churches announcing the coming weekend homily stay in my mind:

The first on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent (B), the Ten Commandments: "Are you ill? Take our Lord's two tablets and call me in the morning."

The second on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent (A) on Our Lord's encounter with the Samaritan woman: "The Culligan Man and the Shady Lady."

The Good Friday Sermon in my town was announced: God's arithmetic: "One cross, three nails, four-given."

Creative fidelity requires a great amount of prayer, in particular Eucharistic Holy Hour.

I cannot stress highly enough the need for daily Eucharistic prayer, apart from holy Mass and the *Liturgy of the Hours*.

Time with the Lord is the hour of power, a time to recharge spiritually, and allow the Lord to speak, as Newman put it, "*cor ad cor loquitur*" (heart to heart).

Sheen once gave three great reasons for Eucharistic Adoration:

*First, Jesus asks us to do it.*

*"Will you not keep watch for one hour?"* He asked in the Garden of Gethsemene (Mt. 26:40).

I think that very question is posed to each of us today.

Can you not take one hour, less than five percent of your day, to spend with the One who loves you so much?

The answer is clear: we control our own schedules, and need this time.

*The second reason is that it helps remedy our defects.*

We all have defects of character and faults, some serious.

We all need to hear the words of Saint Paul: "*Do not overcome evil, but overcome evil with the power of good*" (Rom. 12:21).

*The third reason is that we can use this time to intercede for others who desperately need us.*

The message we have discussed includes the full range of the revelation and its application to today's world.

#### FOUR KINDS OF SHEEP

The final element is the audience, or the flock of God.

Personal and pastoral integrity requires us to look beyond ourselves to those to whom we are preaching.

There are four different kinds of people in our pews.

*First, there are outcome-oriented people.*

They ask the question, “What?” and learn by movement.

These people want homilies that get to the point and move along with a succinct and relevant message.

*Then there are people-oriented people.*

They ask the question, “Who?” and learn by feeling.

They are moved by personal stories, accounts of the lives of saints and sinners, and anecdotes that touch the heart.

*Then there are service-oriented people.*

They ask the question, “How?” and learn by listening.

They respond to homilies that encourage them to reach out to others in service.

*Finally, there are process-oriented people.*

They ask the question, “Why?” and learn by reading.

I would venture to guess that any congregation on any given Sunday has at least one person from each of these groups, and effective homilies reach out to all four types of people.

Pastoral integrity is the means by which, over a period of weeks or months, we reach all four groups.

Personal integrity is the quality we bring to the pulpit, by recognizing who we are and living the message we preach.

## TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR PREACHING

Before presenting an examination of conscience in the area of preaching, I would like to present my Ten Commandments for preaching.

These are practical and important principles for effective homiletics.

They run parallel to the Ten Commandments of Moses.

On one side of the tablet are three Commandments dealing with God.

*The First Commandment: "See preaching as an expression of your love for God's People."*

The time and energy spent in homiletic preparation and delivery show the faithful how much you care about them.

*The Second Commandment: "Honor God's Name in every homily you deliver."*

The homily should aim at the glory of God and the salvation of men.

*The Third Commandment: "Respect the liturgical context and the biblical form of the texts on which you preach."*

This means not forcing a topic on a particular text but bringing out implications and applications from the texts themselves.

The next four Commandments deal with God's people.

*The Fourth Commandment: "Use humor and good illustrations, but never undermine your own authority, or that of the Church when you preach."*

Sometimes homilists present their own opinions, which may differ with Church belief or practice, and these add to the cynicism of some of the faithful.

*The Fifth Commandment: "Give life by the homilies you deliver."*

Make each homily a source of renewal and inspiration for the people.

*The Sixth Commandment: “Do not be afraid to address various dimensions of human sexuality, remembering that the body is God’s Temple, and needs to be treated as one.”*

We sometimes listen too closely to those who say the Church is obsessed about sex.

I often hear lay people say things like, “Why doesn’t the Church talk about issues like contraception and in vitro fertilization? We need someone to form us in the Church’s vision of these matters.”

*The Seventh Commandment: “Be honest and do not steal or waste peoples’ time with frivolous or irrelevant commentary.”*

Time is precious; use your time wisely.

*The Eighth Commandment: “Tell the truth always.”*

This means seeking the guidance of the Spirit of truth and Jesus, who is the truth, and presenting it in a clear, direct and passionate manner.

*The Ninth Commandment: “Use your homilies to change hearts.”*

Try to promote healthy and holy relationships among the faithful.

*The Tenth Commandment: “Promote good stewardship of time, talent, and treasure in your homilies.”*

A good steward is one who responds to God’s bountiful grace and shares his or her talents with others.

An effective homilist encourages and inspires good stewardship.

#### EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

I think an examination of conscience in the area of integrity is in order.

This examination could take the form of a few well-considered questions.

Have I announced the entire message of salvation, and not just the easy topics, like love, joy, peace, but contraception, civic responsibility, and the selfishness of greed?

As I look at my homilies, do I address, or do I shy away from parts of the Gospel that are too challenging for people?

Do I try to reach all four types of people in every homily, or do I minister only to those who are like me?

Do I call on my Confirmation gifts of understanding and fortitude in preaching?

### STORY OF INTEGRITY

If we are to be effective preachers of the Word to people on the outside, we need to be men of integrity on the inside.

I am reminded of the story of a group of young businessmen who were rushing to take the train after office hours.

Unintentionally some of them pushed over the little stand of a blind man who was at the corner selling apples.

His basket tumbled, and apples and coins were scattered on the floor.

In total distress, the blind vendor fell on his knees and began to grope for the apples and the coins.

By then, the young businessmen were already in their seats reading the newspaper.

But, as the train began to move, one of them saw the blind man groping on the floor, and jumped up at once from the train to help him.

It took a while to bring all the apples back into the basket and to collect the coins.

The generous businessman missed the train and had to find another way of returning home.



But before leaving, he told the old man, “Brother, I am sorry for what we did to you. It was unintentional. Don’t worry now. Most of the apples and the coins are already in the basket, but in case something got lost, take this.”

He then placed some money in the man’s hands.

The blind man turned to him, and asked, “Are you Jesus Christ?”

## CONCLUSION

You might have thought throughout this talk, “This is a tall order. Can a simple parish priest or pastor really fulfill all these high ecclesial expectations?”

The answer is, “yes” with God’s grace, of course.

You don’t have to be perfect, or hit a home run every weekend.

But you need to try, to work, to pray, to do your best for God’s people, knowing that for many, the short time they listen to you may be the only Christian formation they receive every week.

We owe them our best effort.

Our love for the Lord, held deep in our hearts, and expressed in preaching, announces Christ to those who sit in the pews.

We have been given an extraordinary opportunity every week to touch hearts and shape lives.

The Church provides us with the Scriptures, the *Catechism*, a huge variety of spiritual and theological texts on which to reflect, and the lives, philosophies, and homilies of dozens of great preachers and teachers of the Word.

These men, ordained and inspired by the Spirit, were cooperators with the grace they received, and their congregations benefited immensely.

With these gifts, and the desire to proclaim Christ in His fullness, we can have a positive impact on the Church and world.

Saint Paul writes to the Apostle Timothy: *“Until I arrive, attend to the reading, exhortation, and teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was conferred on you through the prophetic word with the imposition of hands of the presbyterate. Be diligent in these matters, be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to everyone”* (1 Tim. 4:13–14).

These are powerful and timely words for us.

I say to you: attend to the reading, do not neglect your gifts, and be diligent in the important ecclesial work entrusted to you.

May Our Lady, Mother of the Word made Flesh, accompany us.

Thank you.