



Why are Homilies so long anyway? To answer that question, we start by realizing that we don't always understand the Word of God perfectly when we first read it. Whenever we read a Bible passage, we should ask ourselves: "What is God saying here?" Sometimes it is pretty easy to listen to God; sometimes, it is not so easy. Sometimes reading the Bible can answer questions that we have; sometimes reading only seems to bring more questions. We humbly recognize that understanding everything about God and us is not always super-easy. So, in humility, we realize we need help. That is where the preachers of the Word come in—those who have been given a special grace to help God's people understand better his communication with us. With years of prayer and study, some preachers can become incredible resources, such as Cardinal Newman, who was known to preach on average about an hour and a half for every sermon!

Drawing Everyone Closer

In the homily, the bishop, priest, or deacon tries his best to help us hear what God is saying. We try to explain the Scripture and apply it to our lives in the local area. As we said last time, the whole point is to draw each heart in the congregation closer to Jesus. This is really important: the priest seeks out each heart. That is why sometimes the homily focuses on something you already know, do, or believe; that is why the homily might not always be perfectly on track with what you are thinking about. Because there are a lot of people in the pews with different backgrounds and experiences, preaching a homily that directly addresses everyone can be a little tricky. Have you noticed that sometimes the preacher says the same thing in a couple of ways? This is one way of helping different people to understand the same message.

Listening with Open Hearts

Make no mistake about it, though—the homily is not just the preacher trying to help people understand God's message to us. One of the most important parts of the homily involves everyone sitting in the pews: all are invited to listen with an open heart. Each one is encouraged to follow the homily in his or her heart, taking in what is helpful and being on the lookout for the true needs of the heart. If we believe that God is working through the ordained clergy who are preaching, then there will always be something in the homily for us; we just have to listen for it.

Another important part of listening to the homily is an openness to being challenged. If we think we already know it all (or enough), our hearts won't be ready to receive God's message to us through the preacher. We have to be ready to admit that we don't know everything and that we don't always understand everything perfectly. Listening to the homily takes some humility. I recall one of the seminary professors at Mount St. Mary's—Sister Joan—who had listened to decades of homilies day after day, including thousands by deacons in the seminary who were still learning their way. Even though she knew so much more than we did, even though at times it seemed we were trying her patience, she was always there in the front row, ready to listen attentively. What great humility! The preacher needs this same humility also, which is why we said above that he tries his best. Remember that when you hear something challenging, it is the preacher's duty to proclaim the truth, and perhaps could be God calling you closer to his heart through the preacher's very words.

This being said, we all know that the homily to the congregation is not always a spectacular touchdown pass. Sometimes we are distracted or tired. Sometimes we hope the preacher will speak on something in the readings that interests us, but he doesn't get to it. Whatever the case, the Lord only asks us to give a good effort at true listening, knowing there will be something there that will help us. And when that wooden pew seat starts to get a little hard, just think of the people in years gone by who listened to homilies for hours on end and remind yourself: "Wow, it is almost time for the Creed and the Prayers of the Faithful!"