The Modern Catholic Homily

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It was a surprise to many to read that Vatican II’s document on the priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, declared that ‘priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have as their primary duty the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all’.¹ Most would have thought that the primary duty of priests was the celebration of the sacraments, the pastoral care of the people of God, and leadership of the Christian community.² This had probably been the dominant thinking since the Council of Trent, which, while never articulating a theology of priesthood, did focus on the power (*potestas*) of the priest to confect the Eucharist, to absolve the penitent and to anoint the sick and dying, but it did begin a renewal of Catholic preaching.

This renewal would bear rich fruit in the first document of Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, dedicated to the reform of the liturgy. In this article, I will sketch the development of Catholic preaching from Trent to Pope Francis with special emphasis on the move from sermon to homily and the reforms since Vatican II.

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* reintroduced the term ‘homily’,³ which meant an explanation of the meaning of the sacred text and emphasised the need for love of scripture.⁴

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³ The word ‘homily’ is derived from the Greek word ὀμιλία (*homilia*), which means to have communion or social intercourse with a person or a gathering. The specifically Christian use of the term ‘homily’ refers to a familiar discourse on a liturgical text by a pastor to a congregation during a liturgical action (W.J. O’Shea and T.D. Rover, eds, ‘Homily’, in New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thomson/Gale, 2003), 62–4. Probably, the first usage was by Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* (153–55 CE).
By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year. The homily, therefore, is to be highly esteemed as a part of the liturgy itself.\(^5\)

Rather than the homily standing somewhat apart from the ritual of eucharistic celebration, the council saw an intimate connection between the Liturgy of the Word and the eucharistic liturgy as ‘one single act of worship’.\(^6\) The final document of the council, *Dei Verbum*, further emphasised that ‘the study of the sacred page, should be the very soul of sacred theology’ and that in the ministry of the Word ‘the liturgical homily should hold pride of place’.\(^7\)

While the renewal of the church was the primary agenda of the council, it was the renewal of the liturgy that had the most immediate impact on the lives of both ordained and lay members of the church, notwithstanding the fact that other documents of the council would, upon reflection, necessitate a rethinking of the place of the church in the world, its relation to other religious traditions, and the use of a more inductive approach to theological reflection.

**The Impetus for a Renewal of Preaching in the Council of Trent**

Vatican II’s theme of *aggiornamento* did not arise in a vacuum, so I would like to begin by recalling an element of the renewal that began with the Council of Trent (1545–63), which was a watershed in the reform of Catholic preaching. It defined the office of preaching as belonging ‘chiefly to bishops’\(^8\) and decreed that all the ordained with pastoral responsibility were ‘to preach the holy Gospel of Jesus Christ … feed the people committed to them with wholesome words in proportion to their own and their people’s mental capacity’.\(^9\) Refreshingly, it also emphasised the importance of brevity and clarity of discourse.\(^10\)

In the twenty-third session of the council, bishops were urged to establish colleges so that young men could be ‘educated in religion’ and ‘trained in ecclesiastical discipline’.\(^11\) These colleges would be the beginning of the seminary system, which coincided with a revival of preaching that had a significant impact on Europe. New religious orders such as the Jesuits, Capuchins, Oratorians and Theatines made preaching a priority, although the focus was often moral, concerning itself with virtues and vices, punishments and

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5. Ibid., n. 52.
6. Ibid., n. 56.
9. Ibid. While Trent emphasised the importance of preaching it was not alone, because prior to the council’s deliberations, it had been the concern of some of the humanist scholars, notably Desiderius Erasmus, whose final book was titled *Ecclesiastes: On the Art of Preaching (Ecclesiastes: sive de ratione concionandi)*, published 1535.
10. Ibid., Session XXIII, chap. XVIII.
11. Ibid., Session V, chap. II.
rewards, or doctrinal, concerning itself with questions raised during the Reformation. 12

The production of the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* was a significant boost to the renewal of Catholic life and was rapidly translated into several languages. The development of seminaries assisted not only in educating future clergy, but they provided some support for more effective preaching. However, by the baroque period, the sermon had become increasingly disconnected from the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the readings of the day, symbolised by the movement of the pulpit ‘ending up halfway down the side of the nave’. 13 Enlightenment preaching, when it did occur in the Catholic community, appealed more to the mind than the heart and was often utilised to promote personal morality and loyalty to the church. Contrary to the mood of the era, Alphonsus Liguori sought to proclaim ‘the faith in simplest terms possible to reach the poor and unlearned’. 14

English translations of the *Catechism of Trent* were not particularly good. 15 In 1911 the Very Rev. John Hagan DD, Rector of the Irish College in Rome, edited a *Compendium of Catechetical Instruction* in four volumes, containing a new translation of the Roman Catechism. The purpose of Hagan’s work was to provide resources for catechetical teaching. Using this work in 1920–21, two Dominicans, John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan, in seeking to make the catechism more suitable for parochial preaching, prepared *A Parochial Course of Doctrinal Instructions for All Sundays and Holydays of the Year Based on the Teachings of the Catechism of the Council of Trent and Harmonized with the Gospels and Epistles of the Sundays and Feasts*. 16 Their sermon program was organised in the following format:

First Sunday of Advent
1. Dogmatic Subject: The Second Coming of Christ.—*They shall see the son of man coming in a cloud with great power and majesty* (Luke xxii. 27) Pages 80 ff., 519.
2. Moral Subject: The Sixth Commandment.—*Let us walk honestly, as in the day: not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities* (Rom. xiii. 13). Pages 473, 534, 535, 565 ff.

There is much to applaud in a systematic catechetical program in preaching, but, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is hard to know if the program was implemented or widely followed. However, the contribution of

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13. Ibid., 43.
14. Ibid., 68.
16. Ibid., xxxi.
these two Dominicans who followed the founding editor as editors of *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* was exceptional in the annals of Catholic journalism in the United States. Fr McHugh was coeditor for thirty-four years and Fr Callan carried on as sole editor until 1957, when he got some help from a regular contributor, Fr Aidan M. Carr, OFM Conv., who became associate editor in October 1957. Even then Fr Callan was given the title ‘Editor Emeritus’, so he was editor for forty-five years—a truly remarkable accomplishment. 17

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, English-language preaching was shaped by the influx of migrants to Australia and North America. Parish missions were a staple in these countries and proved very effective in consolidating and renewing faith commitment through visitation of the people, preaching and instruction, which were the constituent components of ‘the mission’. 18 Commenting on the American scene, Jay Dolan concluded that all missions ‘followed a similar path, preaching great truths of salvation which aimed at a religious revival by bringing people face to face with the evil of sin and the harshness of God’s judgement’. 19

Prior to Vatican II, a major factor in reshaping Catholic preaching was Pius XII’s encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which freed Catholic biblical scholarship from the constraints imposed on it by Pius X, 20 and permitted Catholic scholars to engage in contemporary modes of interpretation of Scripture. In addition to playing catch-up with Protestant scholars, Catholics began to read and study the Scriptures, ultimately preparing the way for a more exegetical style of preaching.

**The Influence of Vatican II and the Contributions of Paul VI and John Paul II**

The first task of Vatican II was the reform of the liturgy, and the council fathers announced their intent in the opening paragraphs of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, where they stated that there were ‘particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy’. 21 The constitution operated under three principles in undertaking this reform: first, recognition of the fundamental role of Scripture and the expansion of its use in the liturgy; 22 second, revision of ritual action so that it was more comprehensible in and of

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22. Ibid., n. 24.
itself and more closely connected to the proclamation of the Word;\textsuperscript{23} third, the use of Latin was ‘to be preserved’, and not only the homily but the entire liturgy was to be conducted in the vernacular.\textsuperscript{24}

In this revision, the homily was seen as occupying a prominent role, for it is ‘by means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are to expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year’.\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Dei Verbum} emphasised that the Scriptures are truly the Word of God; therefore, ‘the study of the sacred page’ should be the very soul of sacred theology. The ministry of the Word, too—pastoral preaching, catechetics and all forms of Christian instruction, among which the liturgical homily should hold pride of place—is healthily nourished and thrives in holiness through the Word of Scripture’.\textsuperscript{26}

This renewed emphasis on the importance of the homily for the spiritual nurture of people was welcomed in most quarters, and subsequent years saw a strengthening of this focus. The Eucharist is of course the primary context in which the Word is proclaimed, but ritual must be well celebrated; and it is strengthened when the homily is nurturing and accompanied by quality music. It is not uncommon to hear of a number of Catholics who seek out a community where these two elements are evident in the celebration of the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{27}

In the wake of the council, a variety of documents emphasised the renewal of the liturgy and the connection of the homily with the biblical text or another text from the ordinary or proper of the day’s Mass.\textsuperscript{28} ‘A homily on the sacred text means an explanation, pertinent to the mystery celebrated and the special needs of the listeners.’\textsuperscript{29} In this instruction on the implementation of \textit{Sacrosanctum Concilium}, the Sacred Congregation of Rites was already emphasising not only the biblical and liturgical texts but also the needs of the congregation.

A raft of documents followed the conclusion of the council and many of these made mention of the homily and its purpose. The 1969 \textit{General Instruction on the Roman Missal} saw the homily as an integral part of the liturgy and a source of nourishment for Christian life.\textsuperscript{30} In subsequent documents, the following phrases became familiar: ‘preaching must be effective’, ‘people have

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{23} Ibid., nn. 34–5.
\bibitem{24} Ibid., n. 36.
\bibitem{25} Ibid., n. 52.
\bibitem{26} Vatican Council II, \textit{Dei Verbum}, n. 24, in Flannery, \textit{Vatican Council II}.
\bibitem{28} The homily ‘should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners’. Paul VI, \textit{General Instruction of the Roman Missal} (1969; London: Catholic Truth Society, 2011), n. 65.
\bibitem{30} Paul VI, \textit{General Instruction on the Roman Missal}, n. 41.
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a right to be nourished by the word of God’, there is a ‘need for active participation’, preaching should be ‘concrete’, it should ‘expound and explain’ according to the needs of the listeners’, and ‘adapt to the mentality of the times’.

Statements from the papacy, various congregations and liturgical documents emphasised the importance of the homily. The *General Catechetical Directory* of 1971 noted that it is ‘a living tradition, since through it God continues his conversation’. The 1973 *Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* emphasises that ‘The Bishop is called, therefore, to meditate upon the Word of God and to devote himself generously to this ministry (cf. Acts 6:4), so that everyone can render obedience not to the word of men, but to God, the source of revelation’.

The mood of renewal of preaching is clearly evident in the documents of the day, but a certain tension began to emerge between the desire to proclaim the Word drawing on the biblical and liturgical texts and the desire to educate the faithful in respect of their understanding of the Catholic faith. This is evident in Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, published in 1975, and John Paul II’s 1979 apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*. Both documents emphasise the importance of the homily, but they differ in their hopes for the outcome of excellent liturgical preaching.

Paul VI believed that ‘the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God’, which motivates one to evangelise—a responsibility that is ‘the vocation proper to the Church [and] her deepest identity’. He hoped that the fruits of evangelical preaching would be faith, hope, love, peace and unity. He also emphasised that evangelical zeal should spring from holiness of life, cause the preacher to ‘grow in holiness, which is nourished by prayer and above all by love for the Eucharist’. Under the influence of the Spirit, the preacher is called to reach out to a world that does not know the Lord and to those who no longer practise their faith, while being a support to believers.

John Paul II situated catechesis within the broad context of evangelisation, and saw it as having a twofold character ‘of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and message of our Lord Jesus Christ’. The hoped-for catechetical fruits of preaching centred on the biblical texts and sought to be a

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34. Ibid., n. 14.
35. Ibid., n. 43.
36. Ibid., n. 76.
38. Ibid., n. 19.
renewal in the faithful of the ‘mysteries of the faith and with the norms of Christian living’.  

These are not opposing hopes, but they do emphasise different understandings of the role of the homily. Both popes agreed on the fact that the homily occurs during the liturgy, that it is based on Scripture and accommodated to the hearers. However, Paul VI emphasised the power of the proclaimed word to convert and renew, while John Paul II emphasised the importance of systematically educating people. Paul VI saw the homily as productive of Christian community, an expression of the faith of the homilist and of love for those being evangelised, while John Paul II urged preachers to have a substantive message and reserved the role of the homilist to ordained ministers.

In Catechesi Tradendae, John Paul II introduced the importance of ‘inculturation’ for both evangelisation and catechesis, insisting that the gospel message cannot be isolated from the culture in which it was formed, but also how it must be inserted into the very heart of contemporary cultures. In accord with Gaudium et Spes, both popes were concerned with the world of those who are hearers of the Word, not excluding the preacher, and encouraged the preacher to speak in ordinary language, giving people the message and knowledge of Christ and the church.

The Code of Canon Law in commenting on ‘the Preaching of the Word of God’ (cc. 762–72) reminds the preacher of the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel to all from ‘the sacred text throughout the course of the liturgical year’. In 1991 the Revised Introduction to the Lectionary gathered together much of what had been written about homilies since the conclusion of the council and affirmed the confluence of the spoken word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist in proclaiming the paschal mystery of Christ.

John Paul II returned to the issue of the proclamation of the liturgical word on numerous occasions throughout his long pontificate and to the importance of inculturation of the Word of God. The Roman Catechism and the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 document on The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church provided additional support for a renewed emphasis on biblical and liturgical preaching. The latter document was of particular importance, as can be seen in the following statement:

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39. Ibid., n. 48.
41. John Paul II, Catechesi Tradendae, n. 53.
42. Ibid., n. 49.
43. Code of Canon Law, c. 767.
Based upon various forms of the philosophy of hermeneutics, the task of interpretation involves, accordingly, three steps: 1. to hear the word from within one’s own concrete situation; 2. to identify the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put in question by the biblical text; 3. to draw from the fullness of meaning contained in the biblical text those elements capable of advancing the present situation in a way that is productive and consonant with the saving will of God in Christ.45

What is clear in these postconciliar documents is that there are numerous statements on the role of the homily. These statements are not entirely harmonious, but it is evident that good preaching relies on a multiplicity of factors that must consider a variety of texts, which include the texts of the congregation, the biblical and liturgical texts, the texts of the preacher and the texts of the ecclesia in the world. The addressing of these issues is an incomplete task, but it reminds the preacher of the importance of a variety of factors that contribute to effective preaching.

**The Contribution of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**

Issues about the evolution of Catholic preaching were further examined when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued its document, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily*, in November 2012, where they expanded on their influential 1982 document, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*.

However, there is a significant difference between the two documents, with the earlier document emphasising the place of the assembly, offering practical advice about homily preparation, and guiding the preacher ‘to interpret the human situation through the Scriptures’.46 The subsequent document, issued thirty years later,47 recognised that US congregations were more diverse, more secular and more in need of catechesis than the previous generation.48 In response to this changed situation, the bishops focussed on a richer theological and spiritual basis for the ministry of preaching and emphasised the necessity of a catechetical component in preaching as an intrinsic part of the ‘new evangelisation’.

While seeking to give new life to preaching, the later document offered an extended reflection on the spirituality of preaching, emphasising that the preacher is called to be a person of holiness, a person of Scripture and Tradition, and one who seeks communion with the hearers of the Word, while connecting with their everyday experiences. In so doing, the bishops sought to nourish the

45. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St Paul Books and Media, 1993), n. 120.
48. Ibid., n. 5.
lives of the faithful and emphasise their baptismal commitment to be missionary disciples.49

The Contributions of Benedict XVI and Francis

The second US document was also influenced by Benedict XVI’s two complementary apostolic exhortations, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007) and *Verbum Domini* (2010), which reminded us that ‘the Eucharist opens us to an understanding of Scripture, just as Scripture for its part illumines and explains the mystery of the Eucharist’.50 Both documents affirm the close connections between the Word of God, the sacramental celebration, and the life of the community for which the catechetical and paraenetic dimensions of the homily should play a role.51 *Verbum Domini* further affirms the role of the scripturally based homily in all liturgy and the formation of a missionary community of disciples.52

In the very first year of his pontificate, Pope Francis spoke on several occasions about the necessity for those who minister to understand the world of their congregations. At the Chrism Mass on 28 March 2013 and in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, published on 24 November of the same year, the Pope spoke powerfully of priests as shepherds who have the ‘smell of the sheep’.53 In the exhortation, Francis further emphasised how the ordained must get involved in peoples’ lives and take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ by standing alongside people, no matter how challenging this may prove to be.54

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis reiterated a familiar recommendation from his predecessors that all actively build on their baptismal vocation of initiation into communion and mission by being faithful to this sacrament and becoming missionary disciples.55 Two significant elements of this vocation are relationship with the Lord and the community, and participation in the gospel mandate to evangelise.

Part of the care for the flock is the call for a renewal of preaching as a way of bringing into the hearts and lives of both believers and the non-practising an experience of joy that bears fruit in lives of evangelical witness. ‘The heart of its

49. Ibid., n. 18.
message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ.\textsuperscript{56} This is something that those of us called to preach know and believe, but knowledge is not enough without opening our hearts to the experience of God’s loving mercy so that our preaching touches not just the hearts and minds of our congregations but is first and foremost an ongoing openness to our own conversion.

This is hardly surprising in that the document is a response to the 2012 Synod on The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. Our ability to evangelise depends to a significant extent on our own experience of God and our experience of the way that God works in the hearts and lives of all our brothers and sisters. Francis furthers his reflection by inviting us to practise the way of \textit{lectio divina}, not just as a spiritual practice but as a practice in prayerful homiletic preparation. We are familiar with the fourfold pattern of \textit{lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio}, which Benedict XVI in \textit{Verbum Domini} reminded us leads to \textit{actio},\textsuperscript{57} but we are busy people and often the demands of our lives and ministry mean that we may not make time for this profound practice. However, it is not enough to engage the biblical and liturgical texts for an occasion, for we need to see the texts in context and it is about this that I wish to offer some further reflections by returning to something that I adverted to earlier in this article.

\textit{Continuing Homiletic Renewal through ‘Contemporary Texts’}

On any occasion when we are called on to preach a homily it is worth reflecting on the texts of the congregation, the biblical and liturgical texts, the texts of the preacher, and the texts of \textit{ecclesia in mundo}. The ‘texts of the congregation’\textsuperscript{58} invite us to think about those who will be present, the occasion for which they gather, the demographic they come from, their typical occupations and preoccupations. It may be a homogenous assembly, but it is equally probable that they will be heterogenous, so can we imagine some of those who will hear the homily?

It is essential that the homily focus on some aspect of ‘the biblical or liturgical texts’, although the latter are often forgotten as part of the range of homiletic possibilities.\textsuperscript{59} However, a review of the available texts needs to be accompanied by reference to the context from which they are drawn—by which I mean both the literary and the historical contexts. This time of reflection on the

\textsuperscript{56} Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, n. 11.
\textsuperscript{57} Benedict XVI, \textit{Verbum Domini}, n. 87.
\textsuperscript{58} Paul VI, \textit{Evangelii Nuntiandi}, spoke of the critical importance of fidelity to the text and fidelity to the congregation. ‘This fidelity both to a message whose servants we are and to the people to whom we must transmit it living and intact is the central axis of evangelization’ (n. 4). http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, accessed 24 October 2018. Francis, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, n. 154.
\textsuperscript{59} Paul VI, \textit{General Instruction of the Roman Missal}, n. 65.
texts is also a time of prayer as we seek not only the wisdom of the texts and their commentators but also the wisdom of God’s Spirit, whom we invoke as a consistent part of our preparation.

The ‘texts of the preacher’ also have import for our homily as we become increasingly mindful of the ongoing conversion and commitment to which the Lord is calling us. We generally preach best when we are also preaching our own conversion, not in the sense of self-indulgence in personal testimony but mindful of how the texts touch our hearts. Our journey through life has its trials and its triumphs and these inform who we are as we come to proclaim the Word. Whatever our rhetorical gifts it remains essential that our lives be open to being touched by the Word we proclaim.

Finally, ‘the texts of the ecclesia in mundo’\(^{60}\) confront us with an awareness that we all belong to a larger context and these contexts form, inform and transform who we are and who we are becoming, individually and collectively. These realities may not be at the forefront of our minds when we engage in proclamation, but they remind us that our existence is shaped by forces and institutions larger than ourselves.

Informed by councils, popes, synods, Episcopal conferences and the experiences of life, education, ministry and honest feedback, we are motivated to attend carefully and prayerfully to the preparation of homilies that we hope will, under the influence of God’s Spirit, engage, sustain, nourish, form and transform the hearts and lives of all who gather. Our role is to preach in ways that are ‘simple, clear, direct, well-adapted, profoundly dependent on Gospel teaching and faithful to the magisterium, animated by a balanced apostolic ardour coming from its own characteristic nature, full of hope, fostering belief, and productive of peace and unity’,\(^{61}\) and to be mindful that the fruits of what we do and say belong to the One who works in all our lives.

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\(^{61}\) Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 43.