

Catholic Review Column: The Joy of the Gospel, Part 8 of 9

As almost everyone knows, Pope Francis lives at a Vatican guest residence known as “The House of St. Martha.” Early in the morning he can be found in the chapel of that residence praying. He then celebrates holy Mass in the residence chapel for those who are staying there, at which he delivers a brief homily without notes. As I read the summaries of these homilies (available online), it seems clear to me that they are the fruit of his prayer and reflection on the Scriptures of the day. Pope Francis has a knack for choosing an image or a turn of phrase that helps bring home the meaning of the Scriptures and helps us apply God’s Word to our daily lives.

Likewise, in his exhortation, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of good preaching. He challenges those charged with preaching the Gospel, especially bishops, priests and deacons, to continually improve their homilies. He challenges us to prepare better for preaching by listening more prayerfully and carefully to the living Word of God as it comes to us in the teaching and worship of the church. So also, he insists, the preacher must be in touch with the people he serves.

“The homily,” he writes, “is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate with his people.”

Often people rightly speak about the need to be “nourished” when they take part in Sunday Mass. Conversely they complain when they feel they haven’t been nourished. I used to think this a strange complaint. After all, what is more spiritually nourishing than receiving the body and blood of Christ in holy Communion? Pope Francis, however, sheds light on what people mean when they speak of being “nourished” at Mass. He tells us that the homily is neither entertainment nor a lecture in which truths and values detached from the Gospel are expounded. Rather, he reminds us that the homily is preached most often in the context of the Eucharist.

“This context,” he writes, “demands that preaching should guide the assembly, and

the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist.”

What makes for this all-important, life-changing encounter with Christ in holy Communion? Pope Francis begins with a most basic proclamation of the Christian faith: Christ, the Son of God, assumed our humanity, preached the good news of the Father’s love, suffered and died for the forgiveness of our sins and rose from the tomb so that we might share God’s glory. At the heart of every homily is the consoling truth that “Jesus Christ loves (us); he gave his life to save (us); and now he is living at (our) side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and free (us)” (EG no. 164). We who preach the Gospel must have utter confidence in that proclamation and in the church’s teaching on faith and morals that flows from it. Indeed, it must be evident that we who preach have staked our very lives on this utterly important truth, brimming with life, beauty and divine charity.

But how best to communicate the truth of Jesus’ love? Pope Francis offers a lot of guidance. First, the homilist must know and love the people. He must be attuned to their joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams. He must show that he is happy to be among the people to whom he preaches. So also he must be attuned to the culture – not compliant with it – but attuned so that he can preach the Gospel in a way that “hits home.” Pope Francis would also say that the Gospel is most effectively preached when a loving, welcoming, atmosphere prevails in our parish communities.

It should go without saying, a homilist must be well prepared for the task of preaching. Pope Francis minces no words in criticizing unprepared preachers. Rather, those who preach must approach this task as a sacred duty, full of reverence for the truth, deeply attentive to the meaning of the Scripture texts the church sets before us, and conscious of how they relate to the entirety of the Bible. The homilist must have also internalized the Word of God upon which he is to preach. He says this: “The Sunday readings will resonate in all their brilliance in the hearts of the faithful if they have first done so in the heart of their pastor” (EG, no. 149). And again, “Whoever wants to preach must be the first to let the Word of God move him deeply and become incarnate in his daily life” (EG, no. 150).

There are many resources designed to assist homilists, but there is no substitute for the homilist to spend time prayerfully reading the Scriptures on which he is to

preach, striving to understand the literal sense of the text, seeking not to impose his own ideas, but rather trying to grasp what the Lord is saying – first to the homilist and then to the people. And since preaching God’s Word is so important, Pope Francis urges homilists to put their talents and creativity to work in presenting the message in a way that people can understand and relate to, especially by using attractive and memorable images. He also recommends that it be kept simple and brief, a sentiment with which I suspect many of my readers will agree.

May the living Word of God always resound in our churches, in our hearts, and in our families to the glory of God and for our salvation.