

# Preaching and the Rites of Initiation

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Before I speak to you about preaching and the rites of initiation, I have a confession to make. In my parish, when I preside for various rites of initiation, I sometimes choose not to preach about them. I preach from the scriptures on some other theme that I feel the community may need to hear instead. Here's why: I treat the homily as a literary unit, like an essay. I think it should develop one thought. I don't think it needs to embrace all the circumstances of the day - a survey of all the readings including the psalm, a nod to the day's feast or season, an expression of appreciation for groups in attendance, or a further explanation of a rite celebrated at that mass. The homily is not an after-dinner speech. The rites themselves are descriptive, and they may not need further catechesis. Besides, the liturgy provides other moments when the presider or someone else may insert comments. For example, after the greeting, an introduction to the ceremonies of the day may be given. The Prayer of the Faithful may include petitions for specific groups. Before the eucharistic prayer, reasons for thanksgiving may be noted. If there is a natural fit within the homily I'm developing, I will make it. But I sometimes feel that preaching about an initiation rite is forced. Often I don't do it. I trust the rite to convey its own meaning.

However, there are many rites of initiation in the Catholic Church, and some of them do warrant a special homily. I will survey the principal rites for the initiation of adults and children, making remarks about what may or may not be helpful in preaching for them.

All of these rites presume some form of evangelization. Here I'm speaking of evangelization in its first sense - bringing the gospel to those who have not yet heard it or engaged with it. I'm not speaking of its derivative sense, in which we all need to meet the gospel again and again, and are thereby evangelized by its message. The initiation rites of the Catholic Church presume that someone among the faithful has invited a friend or a spouse to meet Jesus Christ and hear his word. They presume that parents sincerely desire to hand their faith on to their children. The rites monitor the evangelization that is underway, and the homily - whatever its theme - becomes part of this very evangelization.

Let's begin, then, with the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Its first rite is called Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. It is the ceremony whereby those who have not been baptized publicly proclaim their first acceptance of the gospel, and the Church asserts its willingness to provide support and formation. The rite may be celebrated at a Sunday mass; however the liturgical books envision that it takes place at a liturgy of the word, probably because in some parts of the world, the unbaptized are so unfamiliar with mass that having them participate with the Sunday assembly in any way may seem disorienting. I

generally do celebrate this rite at Sunday mass, and when I ask those aspiring to be catechumens to tell the parish community what they are asking for and why, you can hear a pin drop as they speak their fledgling faith out loud to us for the first time.

At Sunday mass, a homily about this ceremony may be superfluous because the rite itself is so expressive. However, a good homily can be preached about its themes of faith, as would definitely be done if celebrated outside of mass. The principal theme of this ceremony is the foundations of faith - a first awareness of God, who sent Jesus into the world to make us disciples. The Rite of Acceptance establishes a canonical relationship between the catechumen and the rest of the community. The catechumen will enjoy certain rights, such as marriage in the Church or, God forbid, a Christian funeral. However, the ceremony is not about Catholicism; it's about evangelization. It is not the time to preach about how Catholics differ from other Christians, but how we Christians differ from everyone else. "RCIA" is not the "Rite of Catholic Initiation of Adults." It's the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It brings the unbaptized to baptism. The Rite of Acceptance directly links to evangelization. It uses primary symbols of our faith - signing people with the cross, inviting them to pass over the threshold of the church, giving them a place in the community, and stressing the importance of the bible as the guide of our formation. A homily about this occasion should stress discipleship to Jesus Christ.

During the period of the catechumenate, those undergoing formation may receive an anointing with the oil of catechumens, as well as special prayers of exorcism and blessing. These rites are not often celebrated on Sundays, but they may be. For example, after the homily, catechumens may come forward for an anointing, and this may be done more than once. The homily on such an occasion could handle themes of the struggles in the spiritual life, and the help that the Church affords through sign and symbol. The oil of catechumens is a kind of protective oil. It keeps evil forces away. It works like a spiritual mosquito repellent or sunscreen, protecting the catechumen from harm. A homily already developing such a theme might incorporate a reference to the oil of catechumens, but otherwise the prayers of the liturgy should provide sufficient catechetical content.

The period of the catechumenate closes with the Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names. Customarily this is celebrated as a diocesan event with the bishop presiding at the cathedral. In the United States, most but not all dioceses combine the Rite of Election with the Call to Continuing Conversion for baptized candidates who will be received into the full communion of the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil. The preaching is absolutely central. There is no other theme the bishop should explore but the meaning of the ceremony. However, a homilist often pursues the wrong trail for two reasons: the choice of readings and the presence of the baptized candidates.

With regard to the readings, the Rite of Election is frequently celebrated on the Saturday following Ash Wednesday - or on the afternoon of the First Sunday of Lent. Almost everyone celebrates it as a liturgy of the word because the

primary participants are not yet eligible for communion. However, the RCIA thinks that the Rite of Election is taking place on the First Sunday of Lent at the community's mass. Planners often move it to a weekday, or at least to a time on Sunday when no one is gathering for the eucharist, so that it won't conflict. The discrepancy has caused those preparing the celebration to abandon the readings assigned to the Rite of Election and compile their own. These sometimes adopt themes from Lent or even Easter as a way of exploring election. However, the readings are supposed to be those for mass on the First Sunday of Lent. The gospel should be the temptation in the desert, which sets the stage for the spiritual battle between right and wrong that the elect will engage during the upcoming scrutinies and throughout their period of purification and enlightenment that extends from this ceremony up until their initiation at Easter.

With baptized candidates present, the Rite of Election has become a hybrid of election and lenten preparation. The word "election" calls to mind the Chosen People of the Old Testament. Just as God chose a people for a covenant of old, so we believe that God is choosing a people today for entrance into a new covenant with Jesus Christ. As the first chosen people crossed the waters of the Red Sea into freedom, and the waters of the Jordan into their own Promised Land, so the new chosen people pass through the waters of baptism to claim freedom in Christ and their hopes for heaven. This is neatly captured in the climax of the Rite of Election, when the bishop says, "I now declare you to be members of the elect, to be initiated into the sacred mysteries at the next Easter Vigil." The call to continuing conversion, however, has no comparable richness. The baptized candidates are already elect. They already stand on the same shores of baptism as the Catholics who are present. So, the bishop delivers a separate message to them at the climax of their ceremony: "the Church recognizes your desire (to be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and) to have a place at Christ's eucharistic table. Join with us this Lent in a spirit of repentance. Hear the Lord's call to conversion and be faithful to your baptismal covenant." In so many words, the bishop is making this pronouncement: "Have a nice Lent." The occasion tempts the homilist to stress what the Catholic Church offers that other Churches do not - a pope, the eucharist, seven sacraments, devotion to Mary, and so forth. The theme of the Rite of Election is not the Catholic Church, but divine election - the choice of God who invites specific people to the waters of baptism and life in Christ. The Rite of Election extends a further arm of evangelization - drawing those who were unfamiliar with the gospel closer to a covenant with Jesus Christ.

One of the more controversial rites for preachers is the scrutinies. "Scrutiny" is a word for which we need another word. It's not the most welcoming expression in the lexicon of evangelization. "Come on over! Ask us about the Catholic Church, and we'll give you a scrutiny!" But it is the word that comes down to us through the history of the catechumenate, and it has its origins in the opening verses of Psalm 139: "O LORD, you search me [or "scrutinize" me] and you know me. You yourself know my resting and my rising; you discern my thoughts from afar. You mark when I walk or lie down; you know all my ways

through and through” (Revised Grail Psalter). During the scrutinies the Church prays that the elect will approach initiation with proper motives and a pure heart. To that end, scrutinies include exorcisms, during which the priest imposes hands upon the elect. These are not your Hollywood-head-spinning-split-pea-soup-spewing kind of exorcisms, but ones that rescue the unbaptized human from the lure of sin. Those who are baptized have a sacramental advantage over the unbaptized. Children of God in Christ, they have spiritual aids to tame evil. The unbaptized do not yet share this advantage; hence their susceptibility to sin, sacramentally speaking, is wild. The exorcisms in the scrutinies drive away whatever keeps the elect from committing themselves to Christ while strengthening the positive growth already begun.

The scrutinies are supposed to take place on Sundays, and they are so important that to do fewer than three requires the permission of the bishop (RCIA 34/3). Very few priests know that they are supposed to solicit this permission, and even fewer bishops know that they give it. Nonetheless, this provision shows how seriously the Church takes the scrutiny rites.

For preachers, the scrutinies pose a unique problem. The prayers for the exorcisms link to the gospel passages that are proclaimed from the Lectionary for Mass in Year A for Sundays 3, 4 and 5 of Lent: the woman at the well, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus - all from John’s gospel. During Years B and C of the cycle, if you have scrutinies at mass on those Sundays, the assembly is supposed to hear the Year A gospels. In fact, if for some serious reason you plan to baptize an adult at some other time of year, the sacrament should be preceded by a non-Lenten period of purification and enlightenment; the scrutinies should take place on three Sundays, even if it’s Ordinary Time, and the scrutiny gospels replace *those* readings. More commonly the situation arises during lectionary years B & C during Lent. It challenges preachers - as well as musicians - who usually prepare for multiple weekend masses with one set of scriptures in mind. If you have more than one preacher in the parish, one could prepare the scrutiny homily while the others handle the remaining masses. In many parishes, though, this is not an option. In those cases, preachers are essentially being told: prepare two homilies. Some of them choose a different solution: They simply refuse to use the readings from Year A. As a result, huffy members of the catechumenate team complain about uncooperative priests, who in turn argue that they are just trying to manage an already crowded weekend of parish life. However, there has been a slight change in the legislation between the publication of the 1972 typical edition of the RCIA and the 2008 third edition of the Roman Missal. The 1972 edition said that the readings of Year A were to be used at scrutiny masses in Years B and C. The 2008 third edition of the missal, translated into English in 2011, has a slightly different legislation. It doesn’t say that the Year A readings are proclaimed, but the Year A gospels are. This should be good news for preachers. They can prepare a homily about the first reading, the psalm, or the second reading - or about the penitential rite or the Lamb of God or some phrase from the Creed - and use the same homily all weekend, including the scrutiny mass. Perhaps the homily will address the themes of the scrutiny;

perhaps not. But if it does, it should help people understand the power of Christ over Satan, the ultimate impotence of sin and death, and the hope we have amid the trials of life. These are valuable themes for all in the Christian life, though especially for those approaching the waters of baptism.

The post-Vatican II Lent has a double focus. It has always provided spiritual renewal for the faithful who on Ash Wednesday receive the mark of sinfulness and the threat of death. This focus continues, but Lent also provides spiritual preparation for the elect. The Year C gospels for Sundays 3, 4 and 5 especially focus on the renewal of those already baptized: the barren fig tree, the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the story of the woman caught in adultery. All these offer hope to the sinner who repents. Year B's gospels anticipate the events of Holy Week: Jesus driving the money-changers from the temple, Jesus telling Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up like the serpent in the desert, and Jesus informing Andrew and Philip that the grain of wheat must fall to the earth and die. Only the Year A gospels clearly focus on the path to baptism.

Lent includes two other rites for the elect, the presentation of the Creed and of the Lord's Prayer. These too have a long history in the liturgy of the Church. They are occasions on which the community hands on to the elect two of its greatest treasures. The presentation rites are not supposed to take place on Sundays. I generally choose a weeknight when something else is going on - Stations of the Cross, a meeting of the Knights of Columbus, or a Lenten mass. The presentations can be anticipated even months before the Rite of Election if the parish has too many activities during Lent. But the long tradition is that they form part of the immediate preparation for baptism. For example, some of the Church Fathers used the Creed as the springboard for prebaptismal catechesis. It became the spiritual textbook that helped the elect prepare to make their baptismal promises, just as the scrutinies prepared the elect to renounce sin. The presentation of the Creed traditionally follows the first scrutiny: The elect don't receive the Creed until purification is underway. You don't get a blood transfusion until your arm has been cleansed.

The presentation of the Lord's Prayer was always made near the end of Lent. St. Augustine did it on Holy Saturday. That is still an option, though more commonly it takes place on a weekday after the Fifth Sunday of Lent. The Lord's Prayer is strong food, so the elect receive it near the end of their preparation. After surgery a patient may advance through a liquid diet before taking food to chew. Even though many unbaptized believers say the Lord's Prayer daily, the opening words will have more meaning after baptism. Jesus Christ is the Only Begotten Son of God, and we the baptized are children of God by adoption. That entitles us with Christ to call God our Father.

The presentations of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer take place at small gatherings during Lent; they include a liturgy of the word and homily - not the eucharist. Because of the nature of the event, no conflicting purposes abound, and the homily should address the rite. For the Presentation of the Creed, the homilist may treat the importance of this system of belief for the community. After

a good homily, the people will recite the creed with great intensity, to pass the words of their faith to a new generation of believers.

The Presentation of the Lord's Prayer occurs in the proclamation of the Gospel, done by the priest, even if a deacon is assisting. The priest is the presider of the entire ceremony, so he presents the Lord's Prayer. He gathers the elect directly in front of the ambo, and proclaims the pertinent passage from Matthew 6. As Jesus taught the prayer to his disciples, so his voice - through the proclaimed gospel - reaches the ears of the elect. The preacher should address the ceremony at hand, speaking about the prayer that Jesus taught us, and especially its opening words. English is one of the few languages that requires an adjectival personal pronoun to precede the noun it modifies. In the original Greek, in Latin, in Spanish, in German, and in many other languages, the very first word of the prayer is "Father". The second word is "our". "Father" should be the focus of the preaching on this occasion - not just who God is under this title, but who we are, who are entitled to use this title whenever we address God.

The Mass of Chrism is not properly a rite of initiation, but it is relevant to the initiation rites. The reason chrism is consecrated near the end of Lent is to provide a fresh supply for the rites of initiation at the Easter Vigil. For the sake of convenience, while the bishop is consecrating chrism, he blesses the other oils used in the administration of the sacraments - the oil of catechumens and the oil of the sick. Two of these oils, then, especially pertain to the catechuminate. One would think that the homily at the mass of chrism would make this point. Normally, it does not. In the postconciliar revisions of the chrism mass, a renewal of priests' promises was affixed to it with all the delicacy of duct tape. At the time, the Mass of Chrism was always celebrated on Holy Thursday, broadly interpreted as the day when Jesus instituted the sacrament of holy orders at the Last Supper. In the 1960s when many priests were rethinking their commitment to the ministry, Holy Thursday morning, when priests concelebrated with the bishop, seemed like a good logistical choice for renewing promises.

Now, however, the Mass of Chrism may be celebrated earlier than Holy Thursday, and that separation breaks the link between this mass and the Last Supper. However, the renewal of promises remains. With the number of priests concelebrating and renewing their promises, the chrism mass has turned into a festival for priests. The homily often reflects this interpretation. The readings and prayers of the day, however, give other testimony. All the readings apply to the anointing of the baptized. From Revelation we hear how Christ made us all a kingdom of priests. Isaiah says that God has anointed him to announce good news, and Jesus in the gospel proclaims that he fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. The psalm recalls the anointing of David. Jesus is the anointed one of God, and all the baptized share in this mystery. The collect for the chrism mass also sounds the theme of the universal priesthood of the baptized: "O God, who anointed your Only Begotten Son with the Holy Spirit / and made him Christ and Lord, / graciously grant / that, being made sharers in his consecration, / we may bear witness to your Redemption in the world. / Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son...." That prayer stresses the gathering of those who have been consecrated,

that is anointed, in baptism. Even the prayer for the consecration of chrism has nothing to do with the ministerial priesthood, everything to do with baptism. Hence, although the chrism mass is not one of the rites of initiation, it runs parallel to them and supports them. Yet the homily of the day often treats a subsidiary theme. Far better would be for all those gathered, laity and clergy alike, to hear about the significance of the oils in the sacramental life of those who follow Christ.

On the day before Easter, those to be baptized may participate in the Preparation Rites. These ceremonies may include the ephphatha, the recitation of the Creed, and even the presentation of the Lord's Prayer. If the Lord's Prayer has already been presented, then the logical gospel passage for this event is the miraculous cure of the deaf man with a speech impediment. On that occasion, the Aramaic word Jesus uttered must have rung so powerfully not just in the ears of the infirm but in those of the bystanders as well that it was retained in Matthew's otherwise original Greek. Certain elements of this story make it especially beloved in the history of the catechumenate. The man is brought to Jesus by his friends, who act similar to evangelizers and sponsors today; they ask for handlaying, similar to the gesture incorporated in exorcisms; Jesus takes the man apart from the crowd, as catechumens were dismissed from the liturgy for their formation; Jesus works the miracle through words and actions, as is practiced in the Christian sacraments. Even though the ephphatha rite has appeared among prebaptismal ceremonies for many centuries, only after the Second Vatican Council has it included the proclamation of the originating passage, Matthew 7:31-37. A simple homily may prepare for the coming initiation rites: As the elect have opened their ears to the gospel, now we pray that their mouths may proclaim the wonders they are about to experience.

That brings us to the sacraments of initiation themselves, celebrated during the Easter Vigil. The resurrection of Christ blends seamlessly with baptism. The homily will precede the baptisms, but it can still speak about their significance. Baptism is one of the symbols of the resurrection. Some people wonder, "When during the Easter Vigil do we celebrate the actual moment of Jesus rising from the dead? Is it at the fire? The Exsultet? The Gloria? The alleluia?" Well, it's all of these. The Vigil unfolds the mystery of the resurrection in layers. Before Vatican II the liturgy had two distinct parts - a vigil and a mass. Easter did not begin until the Gloria, when the altar candles were lighted. Today, the altar candles are still lighted during the Gloria, but the whole Vigil is considered one celebration of the eucharist. It presents manifold images of the risen Christ: the lighting of the paschal candle and its procession into the church like the pillar of fire leading Israel from slavery to freedom; the singing of the Gloria to highlight the solemnity and joy of the day; the chanting of the alleluia for the first time since before Ash Wednesday; the proclamation of the gospel of the resurrection, through which the risen Christ speaks to the gathered community; the baptisms, in which those who have been preparing for membership in the body of Christ become children of God by adoption; and the eucharist, when the entire community shares the sacramental body and blood of the risen Christ for

the first time on Easter Day. A homily could explore any of these themes, linking the initiation rites to our belief in the resurrection, and guiding us under sacramental signs to the hope of future glory.

The Easter Vigil is still not very well attended in the average parish community, but it is the single most important celebration of the eucharist each year, and the homily should reflect it. It requires extra care and attention. On days such as Easter and Christmas, originating events such as weddings and funerals, I think the homily needs to stay “close to the bone.” The central theme of the homily should adhere to the celebration underway. If it’s Christmas, the main theme should be something like “Christ is born for us.” You can package that in a hundred different ways, but when people go home from that celebration, they should remember the significance of the incarnation and the difference it makes in their lives. For Easter, the basic theme of the homily I think should be, “Christ is risen.” Once again, you can build the argument in a hundred different ways, with stories and images, biblical and liturgical references. But the tone of the homily should redound with joy, and its message should lift the hearts of all believers: The resurrection we celebrate is not merely a historical event, but one in which we may participate. Easter is different from Christmas. We will never participate in the incarnation the way Jesus did; but we may share his resurrection. That good news needs to be proclaimed, especially at the Easter Vigil.

For the next 50 days the newly baptized are invited to church with their godparents, taking seats with the rest of the assembly. This is the period of mystagogy, and its centerpiece is the Sunday homily. RCIA 245 says that the neophytes are “introduced into a fuller and more effective understanding of mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received.” They are to take part in the neophyte masses of the Sundays of Easter. The readings from Year A are especially highlighted; they include excerpts from the First Letter of Peter, which carries so many baptismal themes that some wonder if it is an early example of preaching on initiation. Hence, the preaching during the Easter season is supposed to be mystagogy. What does that mean?

Fine studies have been made by authors such as William Harmless, Craig Satterlee and Lester Ruth. In general, they speak about the way preachers adopt a certain playfulness with symbols. They can start with any of the signs from the initiation rites - water, oil, bread, wine; processions, fire, readings or prayers. Then they expand on the role of these symbols in ordinary life. Water gives life, but it also destroys; oil protects, but its aroma also pleases; bread is broken, and it is shared; wine comes from crushed grapes, yet it causes inebriating joy. Any of these symbols can help people connect everyday life with the extraordinary opportunity of life in Christ.

However, there are several challenges with mystagogical preaching in the Roman Rite today. In the early Church, mystagogy took place during the first week of Easter. The newly baptized gathered at the cathedral with the bishop and heard - in some cases - extraordinary preaching about the sacraments they had

received. These had not been fully explained to them beforehand, having been part of the *disciplina arcani*, or hidden formation, so the neophytes were hearing for the first time an explanation about these rites that they had so wondrously experienced days earlier. The memory of the events was fresh, and interest had peaked. In the post-Vatican II restored catechumenate, the framers of the rite probably thought it was impractical for the newly baptized to return to church every day for a week, and for priests or bishops to preach at length about the ceremonies every day, having just exhausted themselves with the Triduum. So they stretched out the mystagogical days to a week of weeks - seven Sundays, not seven weekdays. The presidential prayers at mass during the Easter Octave come from an ancient tradition and still presume that the neophytes have come for the eucharist, but the RCIA never mentions it. This gives us a seven-week mystagogical timetable that never before existed. It is hard on the third, fourth, fifth, seventh Sunday after the Easter Vigil to recall the events of initiation; everybody has moved on. Besides, these Sundays fall during the year's busiest month, May, when Mothers' Day, anniversaries, and graduations crowd for attention on the calendar. It is impractical to preach only about the initiation rites for seven weeks when so many other demands crowd the table. Still, it can be done if the preacher chooses to think back to the Easter Vigil for inspiration to drive the homily's argument.

The RCIA proposes other occasions for the newly baptized to assemble. For example, it suggests celebrating eucharist with the bishop. In some ways this appeals more than having him preside at the Rite of Election. Ideally, if the bishop as the father of the diocese can only be present once in the entire process of initiation, he should baptize all the elect at Easter. Logistically this is nearly impossible. So what is second best? The Rite of Election has won out, but it would be equally important, if not more so, for the bishop to celebrate eucharist with the newly baptized. He could then offer some mystagogical preaching of his own.

Finally, the RCIA suggests that the neophytes celebrate the anniversary of their baptism. The missal formerly included a set of presidential prayers for such an occasion, though they were dropped after the Second Vatican Council. Nonetheless, the RCIA still recommends a reunion. Does this mean they should gather at the next Easter Vigil? Or on the anniversary date of their baptism? It doesn't say, but the next Easter Vigil makes a good choice. The homily that blends themes of the resurrection of Christ with the sacraments of initiation will also warm the hearts of those remembering their baptism one year ago.

Apart from adult initiation, homilies also pertain to the initiation of infants and children. The baptism of infants may take place outside of mass or during it. I always prefer to baptize during a Sunday mass so that the entire community may witness the spiritual birth of new members and support growing families. Some parishes have too many baptisms for this approach, but where the number is manageable, baptizing can enliven Sunday mass. I generally do not preach about the baptism, but continue my practice of preaching about the readings. If there is a natural fit to the baptism, I make some allusion, but I do not make it a priority in

the homily. The rites of baptism during mass unfold at the very beginning, after the homily, before the Lord's Prayer, and during the final blessing. There are plenty of words addressed to the parents, family and the community; there are even some words addressed to the infant. In my opinion, the homily at a Sunday mass does not need to include more. However, when baptism takes place outside of mass, then, certainly a brief homily about the sacrament pertains. I usually improvise these based on the scripture proclaimed. Baptisms outside of mass are normally poor expressions of liturgical celebration. In most parishes these take place on Sunday afternoons when the community has dispersed and other ministers have gone home. Baptisms outside of mass usually have no music for everyone to sing, an abbreviated liturgy of the word, an impromptu homily, and an informality that keeps the occasion light and enjoyable, but remote from the quality of worship that parishes can offer during a Sunday mass. Ideally, a baptism outside of mass would have it all - parish musicians who would select appropriate music and lead it several times during the ceremony, processions from door to word to font to altar, several people proclaiming the readings - even a deacon at the gospel, a homily prepared to move hearts and inspire those who gather infrequently at church, and a general sense of prayer and participation. But that's not happening, and we're usually too tired after the masses on Sunday to introduce this change. The homily is only one symptom of the challenge.

Confirmation is usually celebrated by a bishop, and he usually preaches about the sacrament - as he should. However, the theology of confirmation is poorly understood, and the homily can range across quite a number of topics, like a metal detector in an open field, searching for lost coins. Some bishops retain a former practice of turning the homily into a final exam, to see if the students really have learned their catechesis. For a homily close to the bone, the basic message should be that confirmation is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and that the confirmed should now share that gift with the community.

I admit, though, that at confirmation this year with members of my own parish, most of whom speak only Spanish, I found myself wishing that the bishop would communicate pastoral messages to the parents: the importance of annual religious education for children, instead of single-year sacramental preparation for first communion and confirmation; the beauty of sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church, which is sorely neglected in the hispanic community; the joy of receiving communion, which many hispanics forsake for the joy of living with someone outside of marriage, a decision they justify by a corollary belief learned from priests and catechists: one should feel unworthy in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and be content to adore, not to receive. I think our people need to hear these themes from the top, and I caught myself wishing that the bishop would use the occasion of a confirmation homily to deliver catechesis to parents. It's not a very liturgical way of preaching, but it would instill sacramental values that we badly need.

First communion masses are often celebrated apart from the Sunday liturgy, but they may take place during regular Sunday masses; some parishes split the group so that families and parishioners can celebrate together on

different occasions. The homily at a first communion mass may address the event or something more generic from the readings. A children's homily can be especially effective. A homily addressed to children will reach the adults, and it can incorporate techniques used at any mass for students at a Catholic school, engaging the participation of the children through question and answer or even drama. The preacher should carefully think through the key idea to convey, and build the homily around it. If the idea is something like, "We want this to be your first communion, not your last communion," the parents will hear the message.

So, as you can see, the rites of initiation are many and complex, and preaching at them is just as complex. On some occasions the homily needs to be very explicit for the occasion being celebrated, but on others, especially when the rites are one part of the bigger celebration of a parish Sunday mass, the homily could pursue another theme. The rites themselves convey sufficient meaning, and everyone could hear a homily more broadly based on themes for all those gathered on this day. Nonetheless, when preachers take the time to reflect upon the individuals preparing for initiation, the life stories that have brought them here, the scriptures, prayers and ceremonies of the day, they will do the entire community a favor. They will reveal the power of the paschal mystery in the sacraments of the church, and they will draw the faithful to a realization of the demands and joys of faith.