

Fire Starters: Igniting the Holy in the Weekday Homily. Richard J. Sklba. Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2013. Pages, xi+605. Paper, \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-8146-3415-8.

“You preach every Sunday, don’t you?” The question came from a member of the local ministerial alliance. “No, I preach every day.” The young minister was incredulous. “Every day?”

A typical Catholic parish schedules a daily Eucharist, and the priest who presides - or a deacon who assists - may preach. We usually do not prepare the weekday homily as completely as the Sunday, but we preach. The people at daily mass usually form a caring community of prayer, service and inspiration for the preacher.

Preaching every day can be a charm or a chore. It is hard to be creative every day, especially when the meaning of a pericope is not apparent. Inspirational resources exist for people who want to reflect on the daily mass readings, but few are aimed at the preacher.

Enter Richard J. Sklba, a bishop, biblical scholar, and pastoral theologian. Sklba has composed a commentary on every biblical passage of the two-year Roman Catholic lectionary cycle for weekdays of Ordinary Time - Monday through Saturday, weeks one through thirty-four, the first readings, the responsorial psalms, and the gospels. This practical aid for preachers radiates with exegesis and spirituality, world literature and comparative religions. Preachers need not purchase many commentaries and look up passages. It’s all here, day by day.

The layout is exceptional. Headings for each week bleed to the margin, so any day’s readings are easy to find. Summaries of biblical books stand separate from daily commentary. “Literary Links” that contextualize a pericope introduce the gospels.

These are “starters” - not homilies. They “provide an initial spark of personal prayer” not just for the preacher but for anyone interested in *lectio divina* on the Word of God. The subtitle of the book takes the metaphor differently. Drawing from Hebrews 12:29 (“Our God is a consuming fire”), it reads: “Igniting the Holy in the Weekday Homily.” Presumptuous as it sounds that anyone’s starters could set the Holy One on fire, it probably means that they ignite holy thoughts.

Such imprecisions recur at rare intervals in the book. Writing compartmentalized commentary is tedious, and the author has made a few connections that escape the reader, such as how the lectionary version of Sirach 51 reflects the fruits of research since 1976 (144), or how the Assyrian bas-reliefs of a winged solar disc influenced the blessings of Aaron and of Saint Francis (167). A superabundance of exclamation points does not help.

The preface warns the reader that some material is repeated, and this is true. Praiseworthy as it is to comment on the daily psalm, there are only 150 of them in the bible, but 408 responsorials in the weekdays of Ordinary Time. Etymologies of some words recur. Some quotations, such as one by Desmond Tutu, appear too many times (4, 358, and 592, for example).

Sklba comments acutely on verses the lectionary omits, such as those pertaining to Hulda the prophetess (205). He points out differences between the lectionary and the bible it excerpts.

There is no bibliography. The reader takes the author’s interpretations at face value. But listeners do that with virtually every homily they hear.

Still, the book is excellent. The author’s expertise ranges throughout the bible - Old and New Testaments, gospels and epistles, historical and wisdom books, prophets and psalms.

Details in every section remain fresh, and the author's energy has not flagged by the end of week 34. It made me hoping he'll prepare another volume for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and feast days. We preach on those weekdays too, and we can use the help that Sklba so capably gives.

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