

HOW NOT TO GIVE A HOMILY

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As I was thinking about what to say today in this article I realized how much it bothers me when the preacher begins, "As I was thinking about what to say today. . . ." The wrong beginning can sink a homily faster than a screaming child.

Incidentally, the reason the child is screaming is that the parents aren't leaving. It's not that they like what the preacher is saying and want to stay. It's usually that the talk is so bad that they aren't listening to the preacher anyway and figure nobody else is either. Might as well let the baby cry.

Does this article seem too stream-of-consciousness? Too negative? I hate that in homilies too. And don't you just want to stand up and run out when the talk goes on and on and on? And you can't tell what the point is? And the homilist keeps talking about what you need to do and not about what we can do?

Here's some stuff we preachers should never do:

- We shouldn't tell people what they should never do.
- We shouldn't talk about all three readings and the feast -- it's too much to cover.
- We shouldn't go unprepared and assume no one will notice. They all will.
- When we do prepare we shouldn't talk about the preparation. "As I was thinking about what to say." Nobody really cares about that. They care about the theme of our talk. Not the process we took in writing it.
- We shouldn't subscribe to homily services as if we think they know what our people need to hear.
- Assuming we write out the talk, we shouldn't read it off the page.
- We shouldn't repeat the same talks we gave three years ago or at the last parish.
- We shouldn't use old stories, as if God hasn't done anything significant in our lives the last few months.
- We shouldn't talk down to the assembly, nor should we belittle any other person or institution.
- We shouldn't omit ourselves from the people we direct our talk to.
- We shouldn't condemn, threaten, or end on a note of despair. This is good news, remember?
- We shouldn't waste the first sentence. It should be unique to this particular talk, and prepare people for what they will hear, and what the conclusion should be.
- At funerals we should never say, "I never knew the deceased." Even if it's true, it only makes the family feel worse.
- We shouldn't move around too much and distract the assembly.

- We shouldn't say, "If only one person gets something out of this talk, I'll feel like I've done my job." We haven't. We should aim a little higher. A lot higher. Don't let anyone out alive.
- We shouldn't use humor that's not integrated to the talk. Comedy routine is not the literary unit we emulate. Humor should come naturally to the homily.
- We shouldn't make more than one conclusion. The talk should have one unifying theme that governs its introduction, content, and conclusion.
- We shouldn't end (or begin!) with some trite line--like good morning, thank you, or the sign of the cross.
- We shouldn't assume we know how to give a good homily, even if we write articles about how to give a bad one.

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