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Survey



Maybe it is time we gave priests a break from giving homilies so we can hear what the rest of the church has to say.

By Karen Dix, a religious educator and a retired director of faith formation from Addison, Illinois.

[Sounding Boards are one person's take on a many-sided subject and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of *U.S. Catholic*, its editors, or the Claretians.]

Please take the survey that follows this essay.

Here I am once again, listening to a boring homily. “God is merciful. And, you know, you can seek God’s mercy whenever you need it. Because God always forgives you if you are really sorry. As I said, God is full of mercy...”

I want to stand up and ask: “Have you had any experience with God’s mercy? Do you know anyone who has? Do you at least know a story about it, or are you just going to read from the Catechism?”

The homilies I hear aren’t always boring. Some are just bizarre. One year during Advent I heard this at daily Mass: “Did you see the movie, *The Nativity*? Well, Hollywood is wrong. Mary did not have any pain when Jesus was born. We know she didn’t because the Bible says she wrapped him in swaddling clothes. Now if she had a regular delivery she couldn’t do that, she’d be too weak.”

I looked around and thought, “Are these other people really listening? Have billions of mothers been so weak after childbirth they could not wrap their baby in a blanket?” I didn’t see anyone rolling their eyes though, so I guess they were just thinking about what they needed to get at the store.

Yes, I have at times been frustrated with poor preaching. I have also been fortunate to hear hundreds of really good homilies in my home parish. But by limiting preaching only to those

who are ordained, we're missing an important ingredient that could make homilies much more relevant to the people in the pews.

Once I was invited to give a reflection at Sunday Mass on Pope John Paul II's Gospel of Life. I spoke of the pope's concern for women as he declared that they too were victims in cases of abortion, something I had never before heard anyone actually say in church. I echoed the unique role of mothers and women to build a world that values life in all its dimensions, and people later told me they were touched that I had spoken of the bond I had with my babies before they were born. They had never before heard someone speak from the pulpit who had actually been pregnant.

While it seems most Catholics are supportive of their priests, regardless of the quality of their preaching, if you get them talking many will say they wish the homilies they hear on Sundays would be better. The main comment I hear from Catholics is that the homily should relate to our real lives. Many say that the bar is set low, and the most they hope for is a short sermon. They would like to see one central message, inspired by the scriptures and illustrated by real life stories.

Of course, being a good homilist requires effort and talent. I don't have to work too hard to make the case that not everyone is gifted with public speaking skills. Some speak too low, repeat pet phrases too often, or are just really uncomfortable in front of an audience. While most seminaries require classes in preaching, they do not guarantee success.

As a public speaker, I know that the shorter the time I have for the talk, the greater the challenge. It would be easy to just start talking, rambling at will, giving lots of information without filtering it. But to deliver an effective message in a limited time requires editing and proper organization of the material. Before I give a speech, I prepare it and give it aloud to myself beforehand.

That kind of preparation takes time. These days many parishes in the United States only have one priest, and being the pastor, he must attend and plan meetings, counsel people, prepare liturgies, meet with couples to be married, celebrate sacraments--all by himself. While I sympathize with these demands, they can lead to subpar preaching. Many priests just lack the time to plan a good homily.

That's why it is time for the church to allow lay Catholics to preach. I propose that there be a program within dioceses to train non-ordained preachers. Candidates would need to be gifted in public speaking and have a solid background in scripture. They would be people well known to their pastors, who would assign them to speak on occasional weekends. They would be approved by the local bishop and have his stamp of approval: I can be trusted, I am trained, I will teach in the name of the bishop.

As was the case with my own "reflection" at Sunday Mass (technically, a layperson cannot give a "homily"), many pastors do currently allow people other than priests and deacons to speak at Mass. It may be directly about the readings for that Mass, or it could be on a different topic that is relevant to the parish community. Occasionally it is just a talk by a member of the parish finance committee.

When I served as director of faith formation at a parish, I spoke each year around Catechetical Sunday on the importance of lifelong learning and spiritual growth in the midst of raising kids. My friend Jill, who now attends my parish in St. Charles, Illinois, recalls that her

former parish in New Jersey invited laypeople to speak on special occasions, including Mothers Day. She remembers the powerful witness the mothers would give of how God was present in their lives.

In such cases the celebrating priest often gives a short homily or just makes a few comments before turning it over to the layperson. Pastors have mentioned to me that they often have to fend off criticism from a few folks for allowing laypeople to speak at Mass, but they make these exceptions in cases where there is an important message best delivered by someone with an expertise.

In some parishes, a religious sister on the staff regularly preaches. Deacons, who can often add the perspective of people with wives, children, and careers outside the church, usually have the faculty for preaching but are still not often given this role. I know that many priests love the preaching part of their ministry. Others are less enthusiastic and may welcome occasional relief from this obligation.

Canon law does make clear that the person who should preach is priest celebrating the Mass but there is a narrow opening for the necessity of others taking on this role. The General Instruction for the Roman Missal states that a priest celebrant “may entrust the homily to a concelebrating priest or occasionally to a deacon but never to a layperson.”

The U.S. bishops in 2001 addressed the role of lay preachers, saying “if necessity requires it in certain circumstances or it seems useful in particular cases, the diocesan bishop can admit lay faithful to preach... when he judges it to be to the spiritual advantage of the faithful.” The bishops clarified, however, that the homily is always reserved for ordained ministers and that no bishop can authorize a layperson to preach at this time during the Mass.

It is suggested that laypersons may speak at other types of events, outside of Mass. In certain circumstances, they can speak during Mass, but this should never be confused with a homily. In light of our current situation of priest shortages and the growing role of laypeople in parish life, the church should give serious attention to changing this thinking. If the bishops have already recognized the value of lay preaching, why not take the extra step of allowing laypeople to give the homily?

The Catholic faithful have a lot to gain from listening to non-ordained preachers. They can offer expertise in catechesis, medical ethics, social justice, or family life. They can bring a different perspective—one of being married, or a parent, or a woman, or someone in a workplace facing the challenges of living the gospel. Many lay people lead retreats, teach in diocesan programs, are theology professors, or write books. But their audiences would ordinarily be small compared to the Sunday assembly.

Why not give the folks in the pews a chance to hear some of these different voices? I have found that many Catholics are open to this idea. Imagine the insights that would be possible if preaching in the church were opened to the gifts so many laypeople have.

As St. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” He goes on to list the many different types of gifts that the believers may share. Surely, we as a church so many years later can still be open to hear the wisdom of those who have a different calling than the priesthood. After all, Paul himself was a great preacher, called by our Lord into service of the word—even if he wasn’t ordained.

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