



1 inviting them all to take to heart this reflection on the ministry of preaching in the context of the  
2 Sunday Eucharist in the special circumstances and needs of our time.

3 We recognize that qualified lay persons may be authorized to preach in churches and  
4 oratories, and we are grateful for the ways in which they enrich the Church through their  
5 proclamation of God’s Word.<sup>6</sup> We hope what is said here might also be useful for all those who  
6 cooperate with the bishop and his presbyters in the ministry of the Divine Word.<sup>7</sup> However, our  
7 focus in this statement is on preaching the Sunday homily, which is reserved to the ordained  
8 minister and which offers an ordinary and urgent opportunity for the Church to bring the gospel  
9 message to her people. The vast majority of such preaching takes place in the context of the  
10 parish, but we are aware that the Church gathers in various settings to celebrate the Lord’s  
11 Day—in hospital chapels, in prisons, in campus ministry settings, and even on the battlefield.

12 We are prompted to offer this reflection by Pope Benedict XVI’s call for a renewal of the  
13 preaching ministry in the wake of the October 2008 Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the  
14 Synod of Bishops on “The Word of God in the Life and Ministry of the Church.” In the post-  
15 synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, the Holy Father states that the Word of God is “a  
16 wellspring of constant renewal” in the Church and a power that “will be ever more fully at the  
17 heart of every ecclesial activity.”<sup>8</sup> Given the importance of the Word of God, the Holy Father  
18 repeated his statement from the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* that  
19 “the quality of homilies needs to be improved.”<sup>9</sup> In this earlier document, the Holy Father had  
20 also warned that the catechetical aim of the homily should not be forgotten.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See CIC, c. 766; USCCB Complementary Norm to c. 766 ([www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/canon-law/complementary-norms/canon-766-lay-preaching.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/canon-law/complementary-norms/canon-766-lay-preaching.cfm)); CCEO, cc. 608, 610 §4.

<sup>7</sup> See CIC, c. 759; CCEO, c. 608.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (*The Word of the Lord*), no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 59.

<sup>10</sup> See Pope Benedict XVI, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (*The Sacrament of Charity*), no. 46.

1           We are also aware that in survey after survey over the past years, the People of God have  
2 called for more powerful and inspiring preaching. A steady diet of tepid or poorly prepared  
3 homilies is often cited as a cause for discouragement on the part of laity and even leading some  
4 to turn away from the Church.

5   **Preaching the Sunday Homily and the Current Pastoral Context of the Church in the**  
6   **United States**

7   Thirty years ago, the former Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry issued the document  
8 *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*.<sup>11</sup> This text has proven very  
9 helpful in the life and mission of the Church, especially in the formation of preachers. However,  
10 new circumstances within the Church at this historical moment call for us to build on this  
11 previous document and to reflect anew on the ministry of preaching.

12           In the years since *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* was published, the Church, under the  
13 leadership of Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, has emphasized the need to engage in  
14 a “New Evangelization,” a call for a renewal of the Church first articulated by Pope Paul VI in  
15 his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.<sup>12</sup> In order for the Church to fulfill her mission “to  
16 the nations,” she must continually renew herself in her own members. In our day many Catholics  
17 have drifted away from active participation in the Church and are in need themselves of hearing  
18 again the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of recommitting themselves to discipleship.

19           At its heart, the New Evangelization is the re-proposing of the encounter with the Risen  
20 Lord, his Gospel, and his Church to those who no longer find the Church’s message engaging.  
21 Pope Benedict XVI has presented the New Evangelization as the focus, mission, and ministry of

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<sup>11</sup> USCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington DC: USCCB, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi (On Evangelization in the Modern World)*; Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio (On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate)*, no. 3.

1 the Church going into the future: “Recovering the centrality of the divine word in the Christian  
2 life leads us to appreciate anew the deepest meaning of the forceful appeal of Pope John Paul II:  
3 to pursue the *missio ad gentes* and vigorously to embark upon the new evangelization, especially  
4 in those nations where the Gospel has been forgotten or meets with indifference as a result of  
5 widespread secularism.”<sup>13</sup> In order to awaken this hunger and thirst for the Word of God in our  
6 time, we need to renew our preaching with lively faith, firm conviction, and joyful witness.

7 In announcing 2012-13 as a “Year of Faith,” Pope Benedict XVI declared: “What the  
8 world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and  
9 heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire  
10 for God and for true life, life without end.”<sup>14</sup> More than ever, therefore, an increasingly  
11 important objective of the Sunday homily in our day is to stir the hearts of our people, to deepen  
12 their knowledge of the faith, and to renew their living the faith in the world and participation in  
13 the Church and her sacraments.

14 Indeed, the Church in the United States faces a number of challenges that compel us to  
15 call for a renewed consideration of the Church’s mission to proclaim God’s Word. We know, for  
16 example, that through immigration the Catholic population is increasingly diverse in its cultural  
17 and ethnic makeup, and this diversity is found in many parishes, particularly those in urban  
18 areas. This diversity is a great blessing for our Church and our country, but it also raises new  
19 challenges for those who preach in such settings.

20 Likewise, recent studies have shown that many Catholics, for a variety of reasons, seem  
21 either indifferent to or disaffected with the Church and her teaching:

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<sup>13</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 122.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei* ([www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20111011\\_porta-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html)), no. 15.

- 1 • We know that the general social context in the United States has a strong emphasis on the  
2 individual and individual choice, which often eclipses the sense of community or of the  
3 common good that is essential to Christian life.
- 4 • Sadly, too, we must confess that the sexual abuse crisis has wounded the Church, and this  
5 scandal has led some Catholics to lose heart and leave the Church.
- 6 • While our society is dynamic and our country blessed with many resources and  
7 opportunities, there are sharp polarities in our political life today and, on the part of  
8 many, an undertow of uncertainty about our future.
- 9 • Pope Benedict XVI has frequently lamented the spirit of relativism that dominates the  
10 perspectives of many in our modern Western world, where absolute truth or enduring  
11 values are considered illusory—making the preaching of the eternal truth of the Gospel  
12 all the more difficult.
- 13 • While many people in the United States still enjoy the bounty of this land, there is also a  
14 feverish sense of consumerism and a focus on material satisfaction to the detriment of  
15 spiritual values.
- 16 • At the same time, the gap between rich and poor seems to be growing in our society, and  
17 a severe economic crisis takes a terrible toll.
- 18 • Although there have been advances made to overcome the sin of racism, we still have  
19 attitudes of prejudice that violate the dignity of the human person.
- 20 • While many young adults are idealistic and search out ways to be of service to society,  
21 there is also grave concern that the participation of young adults in the life of the Church  
22 has declined in a significant way.

1           We also recognize that many Catholics, even those who are devoted to the life of the  
2 Church and hunger for a deeper spirituality, seem to be uninformed about the Church’s teaching  
3 and are in need of a stronger catechesis. At a time when living an authentic Christian life leads to  
4 complex challenges, people need to be nourished all the more by the truth and guidance of their  
5 Catholic faith. Aware of this present social context and realizing the need for a deeper  
6 evangelization among our Catholic population, with renewed vigor the Church’s preachers must  
7 inspire and instruct the faithful in the beauty and truth of Catholic Tradition and practice.

8           We believe that the current circumstances of our world and the call for a fresh spirit of  
9 evangelization provide a connection between *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* and the present  
10 document. The former gave particular attention to the dynamics of composing an effective  
11 Sunday homily—practical wisdom that remains valid. Yet the homilist of today must realize that  
12 he is addressing a congregation that is more culturally diverse than previously, one that is  
13 profoundly affected by the surrounding secular agenda and, in many instances, inadequately  
14 catechized. The Church’s rich theological, doctrinal, and catechetical tradition must therefore  
15 properly inform the preaching task in its liturgical setting, for Jesus Christ must be proclaimed in  
16 a new way and with new urgency, and the Sunday liturgy remains the basic setting in which most  
17 adult Catholics encounter Christ and their Catholic faith. Therefore this statement will give  
18 special attention to the biblical and theological foundations for effective liturgical preaching and  
19 will consider the proper connection between the Sunday homily and the Church’s liturgy and  
20 catechesis.

21           We intend that this theological and pastoral reflection on the Sunday homily will be  
22 followed by the publication of practical resources that will help renew the preaching ministry of  
23 the Church, so urgent at this time.

1 **The Approach of This Statement**

2 We will begin our reflection on the Sunday homily by turning first to its theological and biblical  
3 foundations. As *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* turned for inspiration to the dramatic scene of Jesus’  
4 inaugural preaching in the Gospel of Luke, so too will we turn to Luke’s Gospel for our  
5 reflection on the preaching ministry of Jesus, not only in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry but in  
6 the beautiful account of the disciples on the way to Emmaus that leads the Gospel to its  
7 conclusion. Throughout the text we will also consider other rich biblical examples that illustrate  
8 the full scope of our preaching ministry.

9 We will then concentrate on the intrinsic interconnection between the Scriptures, the  
10 homily and its liturgical context, and the Church’s teaching and catechesis. Here the particular  
11 pastoral needs of our time that have prompted the call for a renewed evangelization are an  
12 important context.

13 Finally, we conclude our reflection with a consideration of the spirituality of the homilist.  
14 We will consider the necessary qualities of an effective preacher as well as the demands placed  
15 upon one who is called to the sacred task of interpreting the Scriptures and preaching the Sunday  
16 homily. What might we do as ministers of the Word to develop ourselves personally to improve  
17 the quality of preaching in our day?

18 **I. THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH’S PREACHING MINISTRY**

19 **Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate, and the Preaching Mission of the Apostles**

20 The ultimate foundation for the Church’s preaching ministry reaches to the opening chapters of  
21 Genesis where we learn that God, before the beginning of time, reveals himself through his  
22 creative and powerful Word. As Pope Benedict XVI notes in *Verbum Domini*, “The novelty of  
23 biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he

1 desires to have with us.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed our Trinitarian faith professes a God who in his very essence  
2 of infinite love is relational and self-communicating. The Father, from all eternity, is never silent.  
3 He, in the love of the Holy Spirit, eternally speaks his Word, who is his co-equal Son.

4           In the love of the Holy Spirit, the Father creates everything through his Son. Thus the  
5 Scriptures present the Word of God as all-powerful, creating the universe that teems with life and  
6 beauty and, with human beings as the pinnacle of material creation, shapes them male and  
7 female in his own image and likeness. Impelled by love, God, through his Word, gives reality  
8 and meaning to all of creation. The poetic words of the prophet Isaiah capture this fundamental  
9 biblical conviction: “Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return  
10 there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who  
11 sows . . . so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me  
12 void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Is 55:10-11).<sup>16</sup>

13           As the Holy Father notes in *Verbum Domini*, the New Testament parallel to the reflection  
14 on God’s creative Word in Genesis is found in the Prologue of John’s Gospel. “In reality, the  
15 Word of God, through whom ‘all things were made’ (Jn 1:3) and who ‘became flesh’ (Jn 1:14),  
16 is the same Word who is ‘in the beginning’ (Jn 1:1).”<sup>17</sup> In the light of this, Christian faith  
17 professes that the Word through whom the Father created the universe and guides the course of  
18 human history is the same Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. It is Jesus Christ, the  
19 Word Incarnate, who saves the world through his Death and Resurrection and gives new life to  
20 the world by the outpouring of his Holy Spirit. As Pope Benedict XVI relates in *Verbum Domini*,

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<sup>15</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Scripture translations are from the *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America, second typical edition* © 2001, 1998, 1997, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC; otherwise, from the *New American Bible, revised edition* (NABRE).

<sup>17</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 6.

1 “Now the word is not simply audible; not only does it have a *voice*, now the word has a *face*, one  
2 which we can see: that of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>18</sup>

3 Therefore the Gospels consistently portray the divine power of Jesus’ words. At the tomb  
4 of his friend, “he cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out . . .” (Jn  
5 11:43-44). Kneeling next to a young child who had died, he said, “‘Little girl, I say to you,  
6 arise!’ The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around” (Mk 5:41-42). With his  
7 frightened disciples in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, he “rebuked the wind, and  
8 said to the sea, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ The wind ceased and there was great calm” (Mk 4:39). Precisely  
9 because he is the Divine Word, what Jesus speaks comes to be.

10 This mission of proclaiming the Word was entrusted to the Apostles in the wake of the  
11 Resurrection. Through the gift of the Spirit lavished on the Church at Pentecost, the Apostles  
12 immediately began to proclaim the Gospel to the crowds present in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-4). That  
13 dynamic and urgent mission of proclamation would continue as the Spirit impelled the Apostles  
14 and other missionaries to carry the message of the Risen Christ to the world.

15 Even so, there is a difference in kind between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of  
16 the Apostles. Jesus, though bearing testimony to the Father, also bears testimony to himself.<sup>19</sup>  
17 The Apostles, for their part, bear testimony not to themselves but to Jesus. He indeed becomes  
18 the principal content of their preaching. Beginning with the preaching ascribed to Peter in the  
19 Acts of the Apostles, the texts of the Old Testament are referred to Jesus, to his Death and  
20 Resurrection. Ultimately the Lord’s Paschal Mystery becomes the basis of all preaching.

21 That this kind of preaching begins on Pentecost is no accident. Christian preaching  
22 derives from the Risen Lord and finds its voice and force through the gift of the Holy Spirit. As

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<sup>18</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 12.

<sup>19</sup> See Lk 4:21; Jn 3:11; 5:31-47; 8:14-18; 10:25; 15:26; 1 Tm 6:13; 1 Jn 5:7-8.

1 Paul himself affirmed, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3).  
2 And further, “God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Gal  
3 4:6). This defines the preacher’s task: enabling the whole community and each individual  
4 believer to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit and to say with one’s whole being, “Jesus is  
5 Lord,” and to cry out to God, “Abba, Father!” To preach Christ is ultimately to preach “the  
6 mystery of God,” to preach the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and  
7 knowledge” (Col 2:2-3).

### 8 **The Mission of Jesus as Preacher of the Word**

9 We can think of ourselves as apprentices to Jesus the Master and so draw inspiration and  
10 learning about preaching from the example of Jesus himself as presented in the Gospels. Using  
11 the technique of *lectio divina*, which Pope Benedict XVI has recommended to all believers, we  
12 are able to absorb more deeply the breathtaking beauty and power of the Scriptures.<sup>20</sup> This  
13 venerable method of approaching the Scriptures, the pope observes, begins with a prayerful  
14 reading of the biblical text, then a meditation on its message, followed by a prayerful response on  
15 our part concerning what the Lord may ask of us through this biblical passage, and finally,  
16 contemplation of what conversion of heart and mind will be necessary to bring the message of  
17 the Word to action in our lives and those of others. It is that movement from prayerful  
18 attentiveness to the Word to reflection on its meaning and to proclamation of the message in  
19 speech and action that undergirds the preaching ministry itself and provides the logic of this  
20 statement.

### 21 **The Kingdom of God as the Keynote of Jesus’ Preaching Mission**

22 The key motif of Jesus’ preaching in the Synoptic Gospels is his announcement of the coming  
23 Reign of God: “After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of

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<sup>20</sup> See *Verbum Domini*, nos. 86-87.

1 God: ‘This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the  
2 gospel’” (Mk 1:14-15). Jesus’ words are a dramatic summons to attention and response. The  
3 moment that the people of Israel had longed for was about to appear. Jesus wanted to wake his  
4 people from their spiritual slumber to hear the Good News of God’s deliverance.

5         What is now at hand is the “Kingdom” or “Reign” of God. The Bible firmly proclaims  
6 that God alone is the Sovereign of Israel; human monarchs can only serve on God’s behalf. The  
7 repeated failures of some of Israel’s kings to administer God’s justice, particularly to the poor  
8 and vulnerable, and the spiritual corruption of its political structures through the centuries led to  
9 a longing that God himself would ultimately come to liberate Israel at the end of the age and to  
10 transform her into a holy people, a people who would know the fullness of peace and justice, the  
11 fruits of the Covenant. God’s “Reign” or “Kingdom” was a way of speaking of God’s own  
12 redeeming presence and therefore would mean healing and forgiveness, true justice and lasting  
13 peace. Thus Jesus makes the Kingdom of God the keynote of his mission and teaches his  
14 disciples to pray to the Father: “Thy Kingdom come” (Mt 6:10).

15         Jesus himself is the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Through his words of truth and  
16 forgiveness and his healing actions during his earthly ministry, Jesus already anticipated the  
17 fullness of the Kingdom of God that would be realized at the end of time. Origen of Alexandria  
18 called Jesus himself the *autobasilea*, the “Kingdom in person.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus, the Incarnate Son of  
19 God, is the realization of the deepest hopes of Israel: the perfection of the covenant, the temple  
20 par excellence, the supreme prophetic Word, and the meeting of the faithful God and obedient  
21 Israel. It is this dramatic Good News that Jesus announces at the very beginning of his mission in  
22 Galilee.

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<sup>21</sup> In Origen’s commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, *Patrologia Graeca* XIII (1862), p. 1197. See also the words of St. Ambrose, “Where Christ is, there is his kingdom,” quoted in the CCC, no. 1025.

1 All effective homilies have this sense of urgency and freshness, revealing the startling  
2 beauty and promise of the Kingdom of God and of the Jesus who embodies it and brings it to  
3 reality through his Death and Resurrection. The message of the Gospel is truly a matter of “life  
4 and death” for us; there is nothing routine or trivial about it. If a homilist conveys merely some  
5 example of proverbial wisdom or good manners, or only some insight gained from his personal  
6 experience, he may have spoken accurately and even helpfully, but he has not yet spoken the  
7 Gospel, which ultimately must focus on the person of Jesus and the dynamic power of his  
8 mission to the world.

9 Since the Kingdom of God is at hand, the only proper response is a radical change of  
10 heart: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). The Greek word that lies behind “repent”  
11 here is *metanoiete*, which literally means a “change of mind” or “change of perspective.” Jesus  
12 invites his first hearers to turn from sin, to change their attitude, their entire manner of living, and  
13 to now see reality in the light of the Gospel, the Good News of God. This is why every effective  
14 homily is a summons to conversion. The announcement of the Kingdom through the words and  
15 examples of the homily, if it is clear and compelling, inevitably leads the hearer to a desire to be  
16 changed.

17 The need for repentance does not mean that homilies should simply berate the people for  
18 their failures. Such an approach is not usually effective, for concentrating on our sinfulness,  
19 unaccompanied by the assurance of grace, usually produces either resentment or discouragement.  
20 Preaching the Gospel entails challenge but also encouragement, consolation, support, and  
21 compassion. For this reason many teachers of homiletics warn, quite legitimately, against  
22 “moralizing” homilies, which harp excessively or exclusively on sin and its dangers. But when  
23 the offer of grace is also clear and presented with pastoral sensitivity, the recipient of that grace

1 wants to change and wants to know what the new life in Christ looks like concretely. We think of  
2 the people’s heartfelt response to Peter after his Pentecost discourse: “What are we to do, my  
3 brothers?” (Acts 2:37).

4 At the same time, our responsibility toward our brothers and sisters in Christ includes the  
5 need for “fraternal correction” done in a spirit of charity and truth. As Pope Benedict XVI noted  
6 in his Lenten reflections for 2012, “We must not remain silent before evil. I am thinking of all  
7 those Christians who, out of human regard or purely personal convenience, adapt to the  
8 prevailing mentality, rather than warning their brothers and sisters against ways of thinking and  
9 acting that are contrary to the truth and that do not follow the path of goodness. Christian  
10 admonishment, for its part, is never motivated by a spirit of accusation or recrimination.”<sup>22</sup>

11 The command that immediately follows “repent” is “believe the good news.” The Greek  
12 term that translates as “believe” is *pisteuete*, and this word carries the sense of trust or  
13 confidence. Belief involves accepting Jesus and his teachings as Good News, which is handed on  
14 in the living tradition of the Church. Faith is a matter of the mind and the heart and the will. The  
15 unrepentant person trusts in himself or in some worldly value, but the converted person has the  
16 courage to trust in Christ, which is to say, to place one’s entire life in Christ’s hands, a radical  
17 healing and renewal of the whole person. A good homily is an occasion to find healing precisely  
18 through confidence in Christ Jesus. This is why it is crucial that the homilist be a man of faith,  
19 capable of making the reality of his faith visible and radiant. Catholic laity want their homilist to  
20 be passionate and excited about what he is preaching, to deliver homilies that are heartfelt and  
21 drawn from the depths of his own faith and commitment.

## 22 **Jesus as Prophet and Teacher in the Gospel of Luke**

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<sup>22</sup> Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for Lent 2012, November 3, 2011  
([www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/lent/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20111103\\_lent-2012\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20111103_lent-2012_en.html)).

1 To draw further instruction about homiletic preaching from the Scriptures themselves, we turn  
2 first to the famous scene in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue  
3 of Nazareth (Lk 4:14-30). It can also highlight, in the spirit of *lectio divina*, this statement's  
4 emphasis on the proper connection between the Sunday homily, the Eucharist, and the context of  
5 the Church's catechesis needed for today. In addition to this passage we will also turn to Luke's  
6 account of the Risen Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35).

7 As is the case with each of the Gospels, Luke presents Jesus as a dynamic proclaimer of  
8 the Word of God, driven by the power of the Spirit (Lk 4:14; 4:43-45). Jesus' role as God's  
9 definitive prophet is a particular emphasis of Luke's portrayal. This is clear in the opening scene  
10 of Jesus' public ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30), which serves as a kind of  
11 overture or keynote of the entire mission of Jesus. Preaching on a Sabbath (which Luke notes  
12 was "according to his custom"), Jesus chooses the passage from Isaiah 61, which proclaims  
13 God's liberating justice: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring  
14 glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to  
15 the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." As the  
16 entire congregation hangs on his words, Jesus rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant,  
17 and dramatically proclaims: "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

18 So here at the outset of Luke's Gospel, we can find in the inaugural prophetic preaching  
19 of Jesus a connection to the Church's ongoing mission, including the particular circumstances of  
20 our own day and the need for evangelization. Proclaiming the message of the Kingdom preached  
21 by and embodied in Jesus' person and mission is intrinsically linked to the Church's mission of  
22 justice, a constant and powerful message, amplified in a strong way in the teaching of recent  
23 popes. A straight line can be drawn from the call for justice on behalf of those who are

1 vulnerable in the Old Testament (“the widow, the orphan, and the stranger”) to the fulfillment of  
2 that mission of compassion and justice in the ministry of Jesus (and taught in the ongoing  
3 Magisterium of the Church). The Church’s urgent call for respect for human life, particularly for  
4 those who are most vulnerable, the call for justice for the poor and the migrant, the  
5 condemnation of oppression and violations of human and religious freedom, and the rejection of  
6 violence as an ordinary means of solving conflicts are some of the controversial issues that need  
7 to be part of the Church’s catechesis and to find their way in an appropriate manner into the  
8 Church’s liturgical preaching.<sup>23</sup>

9         Luke’s beautiful account of the Risen Christ’s encounter with two of his followers on the  
10 road to Emmaus (24:13-35) also provides powerful insights into the ministry of liturgical  
11 preaching. Two discouraged disciples leave Jerusalem after the events of Good Friday, their  
12 hopes that Jesus was the promised redeemer of Israel having apparently been proven to be in  
13 vain. The entire momentum of the Gospel of Luke leans toward Jerusalem, the city of the  
14 Passion and Death of Jesus, the city of the Resurrection and the sending of the Spirit. Yet these  
15 two disappointed and confused disciples are heading *away* from Jerusalem. At the same time, we  
16 know that they cannot forget Jesus, who had captured their hearts and fired their hopes. On their  
17 way they discuss all that had happened to Jesus, “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God  
18 and all the people” (Lk 24:19). They are, accordingly, evocative of all the followers of Jesus  
19 throughout the centuries to the present day: seeking the Lord, fascinated by him, but at times  
20 bewildered and even disillusioned and apt to walk the wrong path.

21         We can draw several important lessons for homiletic preaching from this rich Gospel  
22 account.

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<sup>23</sup> See CIC, c. 768 §2; CCEO, c. 616 §2.

## 1 **1. The Paschal Mystery Informs Human Experience**

2 Jesus comes to join the two disciples, though at first they are prevented from recognizing him.  
3 To provoke a response, Jesus asks them what they were discussing. One of them, Cleopas,  
4 answers, “The things that have taken place [in regard to Jesus of Nazareth].” When pressed,  
5 “What sort of things?” (Lk 24:19), Cleopas offers a succinct summary of the major events of  
6 Jesus’ life and ministry: he was a prophet mighty in word and deed; he was handed over by the  
7 chief priests and leaders; he was crucified and put to death; there was even a report that he had  
8 risen from the dead. In short, these disciples have the basic facts but they do not yet understand  
9 their profound meaning.

10         And this is why Jesus says to them, “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to  
11 believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things  
12 and enter into his glory?” (Lk 24:25). What would enable them to see Jesus in full, the  
13 indispensable key to interpreting him, was nothing other than the self-emptying love of the  
14 Messiah revealed in his Death and Resurrection. Everything that Christ taught and all of his  
15 actions were conditioned by this outpouring of life on behalf of others, the heart of the Paschal  
16 Mystery.

17         It is in this vein that Jesus then turns his disciples’ attention to the Scriptures, and  
18 “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the  
19 scriptures” (Lk 24:23). The sacred writings of the Old Testament, which these disciples knew  
20 well, now took on a new resonance as they were placed in relation to Jesus and his life-giving  
21 Death and Resurrection. A fundamental conviction of the New Testament is that the hopes and

1 longings of the Old Testament were not in vain but find their fulfillment in the person and  
2 mission of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

3         This familiar and deceptively simple passage carries enormous implications for preaching  
4 in the setting of the Sunday Eucharist. First, the homilist is speaking to people who are, at least  
5 to some degree, searching for Jesus Christ and the meaning that the Gospel can give to their  
6 lives. This is what ultimately draws them to the Eucharist, no matter how fragile their faith and  
7 understanding might be. The homilist, therefore, addresses disciples who—like their spiritual  
8 ancestors on the road to Emmaus—may be tending, in varying degrees, in the wrong direction,  
9 confused and unsure. Indeed, the *Kyrie, eleison*, the traditional plea for Christ’s mercy at the  
10 opening of the Eucharist, takes for granted precisely this fact that we are sinners who have lost  
11 our way. Those who hear a homily may be aware of the basic facts about Jesus, but they might  
12 grasp only vaguely or inadequately what draws that data into a pattern of profound and ultimate  
13 meaning for human life.

14         Homilies are inspirational when they touch the deepest levels of the human heart and  
15 address the real questions of human experience. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*,  
16 spoke of people having “little hopes” and the “great hope.” “Little hopes” are those ordinary  
17 experiences of joy and satisfaction we often experience: the love of family and friends, the  
18 anticipation of a vacation or a family celebration, the satisfaction of work well done, the blessing  
19 of good health, and so on. But underneath these smaller hopes must pulsate a deeper “great  
20 hope” that ultimately gives meaning to all of our experience: the hope for life beyond death, the  
21 thirst for ultimate truth, goodness, beauty, and peace, the hope for communion with God himself.  
22 As the pope expresses it, “Let us say once again: we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep

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<sup>24</sup> See The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (TJPSS) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), nos. 19-21.

1 us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass  
2 everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and  
3 who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain.”<sup>25</sup>

4 Every homily, because it is an intrinsic part of the Sunday Eucharist, must therefore be  
5 about the dying and rising of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial passage through suffering to new  
6 and eternal life for us. By means of that pattern, the People of God can understand their own  
7 lives properly and be able to see their own experience in the light of the Death and Resurrection  
8 of Jesus. In light of the encounter on the road to Emmaus, an essential element of all good  
9 preaching is evident: reflecting on our personal and collective experience in the light of the  
10 Paschal Mystery.

## 11 **2. The Mutual Illumination of the Old and New Testaments**

12 Jesus often built his teaching about the Paschal Mystery on the firm foundation of the Old  
13 Testament. His practice affirms for us that the preaching of the Sunday homily should typically  
14 involve the bringing together, in mutual illumination, of the Old Testament and the New  
15 Testament.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the Sunday readings in lectionaries revised after the Second Vatican  
16 Council were chosen to demonstrate this very connection.

17 A Sunday Old Testament reading, for example, both speaks of God’s actions among his  
18 Chosen People, the Jews, and points toward Christ, the Messiah, whose teaching and example  
19 are found in the day’s Gospel passage. The Responsorial Psalm, along with its antiphon, often  
20 echoes underlying motifs found in the readings and gives voice to the faith of those who hear

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<sup>25</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi (On Christian Hope)*, nos. 30-31.

<sup>26</sup> For a complete exposition on the relationship of the Old and New Testaments relative to preaching, see the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism” (1985), as well as its “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 (1974), and the USCCB’s “God’s Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching” (1988).

1 God's Word. The homiletic practice of both the Latin Rite and the Eastern Churches has always  
2 shown how the Old and New Testaments blend together into the single voice of God speaking to  
3 his people in two important ways. First, the New Testament recognizes the authority of the Old  
4 Testament as revealed by God, who thereby shows us his plan for salvation. Second, the New  
5 Testament appropriates the writings of the Old Testament by developing them in the light of  
6 Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> It is in connection with this latter step that St. Augustine formulated his now-  
7 famous dictum: "In the old the new lies hidden; in the new the old comes to light."<sup>28</sup>

8 For the Christian, Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament attributes the utmost  
9 importance to the truth of the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>29</sup> Of course, the supreme reader of the Old  
10 Testament is Christ himself, who applied to his own life, Death, and Resurrection all that the  
11 Scriptures had promised (Lk 24:27).<sup>30</sup> It is through this rich relationship between the Old and the  
12 New Testaments, in all of their various interrelated images and types, that the homilist is able to  
13 proclaim to the faithful the one supreme mystery of faith that is Jesus Christ.

### 14 **3. The Sunday Homily as Integral to the Eucharist**

15 The Gospels more than once portray Jesus preaching in the context of the Sabbath synagogue  
16 service, such as in Luke's opening scene of Jesus' ministry. They also present Jesus offering  
17 profound reflections to his disciples in the context of the last Passover meal celebrated on the eve  
18 of his Death (see Jn 13-17). Luke concludes the Emmaus narrative with Jesus staying with his  
19 disciples to share a meal with them and, in so doing, revealing to them his presence: As the  
20 travelers come near the town to which they are going, they press their mysterious friend to stay  
21 with them. He sits down with them, gives thanks, and breaks bread, at which point they

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<sup>27</sup> See TJPSS, 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, no. 2, 73: PL 34, 623.

<sup>29</sup> See TJPSS, nos. 20-21.

<sup>30</sup> See TJPSS, no. 43.

1 recognize him and he vanishes from their sight. It is then that they admit to one another that their  
2 hearts had been “burning within” them as Jesus opened the meaning of the Scriptures for them  
3 (Lk 24:32). The Emmaus account illuminates the interpenetration of the two dimensions of the  
4 Eucharistic liturgy. Jesus’ explanation of the Scriptures (the Liturgy of the Word) leads to an  
5 intense experience of communion with the Risen Christ (the Liturgy of the Eucharist), and the  
6 very vividness of the latter brings about a deeper appreciation of the former (“Were not our  
7 hearts burning within us?”).

8           One of the most important teachings of Vatican II in regard to preaching is the insistence  
9 that the homily is an integral part of the Eucharist itself.<sup>31</sup> As part of the entire liturgical act, the  
10 homily is meant to set hearts on fire with praise and thanksgiving. It is to be a feature of the  
11 intense and privileged encounter with Jesus Christ that takes place in the liturgy. One might even  
12 say that the homilist connects the two parts of the Eucharistic liturgy as he looks back at the  
13 Scripture readings and looks forward to the sacrificial meal. This is why it is preferable that the  
14 celebrant of the Eucharistic liturgy also be the homilist.<sup>32</sup> In addition, this very integration of the  
15 homily into the texture of the liturgy warrants the use of the Lectionary readings as the basis for  
16 the homily.<sup>33</sup> A proper focus on the Lectionary readings as the prime source of the homily does  
17 not in any way preclude the homilist’s illustrating the implications of the biblical message also  
18 through reference to the orations of the particular Sunday liturgy, to elements of the Creed, to the  
19 Eucharistic Prayer, or to Church teaching found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or other  
20 Church documents.<sup>34</sup>

#### 21 4. The Connection Between Eucharist and Mission

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<sup>31</sup> See *Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)*, no. 52.

<sup>32</sup> See *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)*, no. 66.

<sup>33</sup> See CIC, c. 767 §1; CCEO, c. 614 §1.

<sup>34</sup> See *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 52; *Dei Verbum*, no. 24; CIC, c. 768, and CCEO, c. 616.

1 Finally, the Emmaus story reminds us that the homily plays a key role in establishing the  
2 connection between the Eucharist and mission. Once they recognize the Risen Christ in “the  
3 breaking of the bread,” the two disciples resolve to return to Jerusalem, despite the lateness of  
4 the hour, and rejoin the community they had left. In a word, they reverse direction and head back  
5 to where they should be going. There, along with the rest of the disciples, they encounter the  
6 Risen Christ anew and are given the mission of being his witnesses and preaching the Gospel of  
7 repentance and forgiveness to the world (Lk 24:36-49), a mission that would explode with power  
8 with the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. This dimension of the Emmaus account corresponds to the  
9 sending on mission that concludes the Mass of the Roman Rite: “Go and announce the Gospel of  
10 the Lord.”<sup>35</sup> Our encounter with Jesus inevitably leads to mission; our love for Jesus translates  
11 into our love for others. This is why the homily, which participates in the power of Christ’s  
12 Word, ought to inspire a sense of mission for those who hear it, making them doers and  
13 proclaimers of that same Word in the world. A homily that does not lead to mission is, therefore,  
14 incomplete.

15

## 16 **II. THE MINISTRY OF LITURGICAL PREACHING**

### 17 **The Christological Foundation of the Homily**

18

19 The Death and Resurrection of Jesus—the culmination and heart of Jesus’ mission of revealing  
20 God’s love for the world—is the central act of our salvation. And, as St. Paul writes citing a  
21 teaching that he himself had received and consequently counts as a foundational expression of  
22 tradition, “Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures,” and “he rose again on the third  
23 day, according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). The homilist, then, must again and again put

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<sup>35</sup> Excerpt from the English translation of *The Roman Missal* (International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc., 2010), 144.

1 into relief this “according to the Scriptures” of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus and its  
2 meaning for our lives. Every scriptural text on which he preaches leads to that center and sheds  
3 light on the mystery of that principal deed of God from different biblical perspectives—from  
4 some event in Israel’s history (the first reading), from an apostle’s theological reflection (the  
5 second reading), and from a particular Evangelist (the Gospel reading) who speaks of the life of  
6 Jesus in such a way as to show its climax in his Death and Resurrection.

7 As noted above, making this connection is what Jesus did for the two disciples on the  
8 road to Emmaus. The homilist should rely on the presence of the Risen Lord within him as he  
9 preaches, a presence guaranteed by the outpouring of the Spirit that he received in ordination. As  
10 the Risen Lord himself did, the homilist, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” interprets  
11 for his congregation “what referred to him in all the Scriptures.” And whatever is taught, the  
12 lesson is summarized in this way: “Was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things  
13 and enter into his glory?” (Lk 24:26-27). Thus the person and mission of Jesus, culminating in  
14 his Death and Resurrection, is ultimately the central content of all the Scriptures.

### 15 **The Essential Connection Between Scripture, the Homily, and the Eucharist**

16 Looking at this fundamental pattern of preaching in the Emmaus narrative illustrates the essential  
17 connection between Scripture, the homily, and the Eucharist; for it was in the “breaking of the  
18 bread” that the disciples ultimately recognized their Risen Lord, and it was then they realized  
19 that their hearts were burning within them “while he spoke to us on the way and opened the  
20 Scriptures to us” (Lk 24:32). This is why virtually every homily preached during the liturgy  
21 should make some connection between the Scriptures just heard and the Eucharist about to be  
22 celebrated. Depending on what opportunities the texts in question provide, such a connection  
23 might be very brief or even only implicitly indicated, but at other times a firm connection should

1 be established and drawn out. From the vantage point of Christian faith, the center of the  
2 Scriptures is the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice that brought redemption  
3 to the world. The sacrifice of the Eucharistic liturgy is the memorial of the Lord’s Death, during  
4 the course of which we recognize that “the Lord has truly been raised” (Lk 24:34), is present to  
5 us and recognized by us in the breaking of the bread. When this connection is consistently made  
6 clear to the Christian people, they will understand the Scriptures and the mystery of the Eucharist  
7 ever more deeply. This is what the Council Fathers were speaking about when they said, “The  
8 Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so  
9 far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to  
10 offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ.”<sup>36</sup>

11 Constructing homilies in such a way that this vision is actually achieved is, of course, a  
12 challenging project. But homilists should not be daunted by the task and should be encouraged  
13 by the grace of their ordination and by the great tradition of preaching that belongs to the whole  
14 Church. Their theological studies were geared toward helping them to move knowledgeably  
15 among the Scriptures<sup>37</sup> and to understand deeply the sacraments, which are so intimately joined  
16 to the Scriptures. There is no end to how much we can grow in the knowledge of these things.

### 17 **The Sunday Homily, Doctrine, and the Church’s Catechesis**

18 The full scope of Jesus’ preaching reminds us that when we have the privilege of preaching the  
19 homily to a congregation at the Sunday Eucharist, we also have an invaluable opportunity to  
20 advance the Church’s catechetical ministry.<sup>38</sup> This intrinsic relationship between preaching,  
21 doctrine, and catechesis is also reflected in the ministry of Paul the Apostle. Paul describes  
22 himself as “compelled” to preach the Gospel: “For *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord*

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<sup>36</sup> *Dei Verbum*, no. 21. See also *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 18; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 51, 56.

<sup>37</sup> See *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 24; CIC, c. 252 §2; CCEO, c. 350 §2.

<sup>38</sup> See CCC, no.1074: “[The liturgy] is therefore the privileged place for catechizing the People of God.”

1 *will be saved.* But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they  
2 believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to  
3 preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, *How beautiful are the*  
4 *feet of those who bring the good news!*” (Rom 10:13-16).

5         We do not have direct access to Paul’s preaching, but interpreters of Paul have noted the  
6 liturgical context of his letters. Paul’s letters were most likely read in the liturgical assemblies of  
7 the early Christian communities. While his letters are not Sunday homilies as such, they are, in a  
8 sense, an “extended homily,” with the bearer of the letter communicating Paul’s teaching  
9 contained therein to his communities and perhaps amplifying Paul’s message in doing so. Paul’s  
10 letters show evidence of this liturgical setting, typically opening with greetings and prayers of  
11 thanksgiving and praise (e.g., Rom 1:8-10; 1 Cor 1:4-9) and concluding with words of blessing  
12 (e.g., Rom 16:25-27; 2 Cor 13:13). Parts of early Christian hymns are also found in his letters  
13 (e.g., Phil 2:6-11).

14         For Paul, the heart of his apostolic preaching is the mystery of Christ, especially the  
15 central mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Paul’s proclamation focuses on the  
16 initial gift of salvation in Christ freely given to us through faith in Christ: “But God proves his  
17 love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Paul’s purpose is to  
18 draw his hearers into full awareness of the depth of that mystery in which they have already been  
19 plunged through Baptism. Paul’s words of thanksgiving for Christians remind them of their own  
20 call to new life in Christ: “I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God  
21 bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse  
22 and all knowledge, as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not  
23 lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:4-7).

1           But Paul also spends considerable time in his letters illustrating how faith in Christ and  
2 participation in the life of the Church have an impact on the totality of Christian life, offering, as  
3 it were, an extended catechetical presentation for his communities. Indeed, in two separate places  
4 Paul's letters identify the express purpose of his ministry of the Word: to "present everyone  
5 perfect in Christ" (Col 1:28) and "so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped  
6 for every good work" (2 Tm 3:17). He more than once contrasts a life lived according to the  
7 "flesh" with that lived according to the "Spirit" (e.g., Rom 8:1-13). In his Letter to the  
8 Philippians, Paul argues against divisions and factions in the community by appealing to the  
9 profound humility of Jesus himself, who did not cling to his divine status but became flesh for  
10 us, even to dying on the Cross (see Phil 2:1-5). In his first Letter to the Corinthians, Paul  
11 responds to a number of practical questions and problems presented by Christians (factions,  
12 marital problems, immorality in the community, how to respond to the issue of eating meat  
13 offered to idols, and so on) by spelling out what kind of behavior life in Christ demands.

14           Paul also deals extensively with what we could call doctrinal issues, as for example, in  
15 responding to the Christians' questions about life beyond death (1 Thes 4:13-18, 2 Cor 5:1-10,  
16 and 1 Cor 15) or the nature of the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:17-34). In the latter two instances, Paul  
17 cites the early Church's credal tradition about Jesus' Death and Resurrection that he himself had  
18 received and now passes on to his community (1 Cor 11:23-26; 15:3-5). Paul also urges his  
19 fellow Christians to immerse themselves in the life of the Spirit, to pray always (1 Thes 5:17),  
20 and to sing spiritual hymns and prayers of praise to God (Col 3:16). He also exhorts the  
21 Christians to encourage one another, to be bound together in affirming and respectful speech, to  
22 use their diverse gifts in harmony, to love one another and thus build up the Church as the Body  
23 of Christ (see especially 1 Cor 12-14).

1           This same pattern in Paul’s proclamation of the Christian message—announcing the  
2   mysteries of redemption and then drawing out the meaning of these mysteries for Christian life—  
3   is vividly illustrated in the Letter to the Ephesians, a text that may have been intended as a later  
4   summation of the Apostle’s teaching. The epistle begins with an acclamation of praise that God  
5   has chosen to reveal to the followers of Jesus the mystery of his will, the mystery of God’s  
6   redemptive love revealed in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, and the forgiveness and  
7   reconciliation that flows from that divine source (Eph 1:3-10). From that foundation, Ephesians  
8   goes on to consider the reconciling work of Christ, who through his Death on the Cross makes  
9   peace, bringing together both Gentile and Jew into one new person by breaking down the wall of  
10   enmity between them. And further still, from that cosmic vision of God’s redemptive and  
11   reconciling love, the epistle derives the necessity of unity within the Church herself as the Body  
12   of Christ and sets forth her mission of proclaiming God’s reconciling love to the world. Thus  
13   Paul believed that the initial grace of faith in Christ was meant to transform the entirety of one’s  
14   existence, and therefore in his preaching he reflected at some length on what Christian life  
15   should mean for those to whom he preached the Gospel.

16           Certainly, doctrine is not meant to be propounded in a homily in the way that it might  
17   unfold in a theology classroom or a lecture for an academic audience or even a catechism lesson.  
18   The homily is integral to the liturgical act of the Eucharist, and the language and spirit of the  
19   homily should fit that context. Yet catechesis in its broadest sense involves the effective  
20   communication of the full scope of the Church’s teaching and formation, from initiation into the  
21   Sacrament of Baptism through the moral requirements of a faithful Christian life. As the  
22   *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes, “Catechesis is an education in the faith of children,  
23   young people, and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted,

1 generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into  
2 the fullness of Christian life.”<sup>39</sup> The *Catechism* itself is organized into four “pillars” of Christian  
3 life, reflecting on the Creed, the celebration of the Christian mystery in our liturgical and  
4 sacramental life, the moral responsibilities of life in Christ, and finally, the meaning of Christian  
5 prayer.

6 Over time the homilist, while respecting the unique form and spirit of the Sunday  
7 homily, should communicate the full scope of this rich catechetical teaching to his congregation.  
8 During the course of the liturgical year it is appropriate to offer the faithful, prudently and on the  
9 basis of the three-year Lectionary, “‘thematic’ homilies treating the great themes of the Christian  
10 faith.”<sup>40</sup> Consequently, diocesan bishops may offer occasional suggested themes for Sunday  
11 homilies in their own dioceses in order to guide the teaching of the faithful by the clergy and to  
12 ensure effective and timely catechetical preaching on significant pastoral concerns, while at the  
13 same time preserving the importance of preaching on liturgical seasons and the texts of the  
14 *Lectionary for Mass*. It would also be helpful for experts and publishers to prepare pastoral aids  
15 for the clergy to help connect the proclamation of the readings with the doctrines of the  
16 Church. The beautiful words of Ephesians express this apostolic longing to communicate the full  
17 sense of the Christian mystery: “. . . that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you,  
18 rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the  
19 breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses  
20 knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17-19).

21 Therefore a wedge should not be driven between the proper content and style of the  
22 Sunday homily and the teaching of the Church’s doctrine. To encounter the living presence of

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<sup>39</sup> CCC, no. 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 46.

1 the Risen Christ in the Word of the Scriptures and in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood is not  
2 incompatible with effective communication of what faith in Christ means for our lives. Without  
3 being pedantic, overly abstract, or theoretical, the homilist can effectively spell out, for example,  
4 the connection between Jesus' care for the poor and the Church's social teaching and concern for  
5 the common good; or Jesus' pronouncements on the prohibition of divorce and the Church's  
6 teaching on the sacredness of the marriage bond; or Jesus' confrontations with his opponents and  
7 the Church's obligation to challenge contemporary culture about the values that should define  
8 our public life.

9         Making a thoughtful and integral connection between the Scripture passages proclaimed  
10 in the Eucharist and the requirements of Christian belief and life should also be keyed to the  
11 seasons of the liturgical year: reflection on the ultimate purpose and direction of our lives in the  
12 Advent season; the gift of life and the joy of the Incarnation at the Christmas season; the need for  
13 repentance and renewal during Lent; the dynamic gift of the Spirit in our lives at Pentecost. We  
14 know, too, that at certain moments in the liturgical year, such as Christmas or Easter, the  
15 assembly will likely include many Catholics who participate only occasionally in the Church's  
16 liturgy. Although not in the context of Sunday worship, similar pastoral opportunities are present  
17 at weddings or funerals, when family members who may have strayed from the practice of their  
18 faith are present at these moments of family joy and sorrow. This is obviously not the time to  
19 chide such Catholics for their absence. Rather, the homilist should use the beauty of the liturgy  
20 and the contents of the homily to open the Scriptures, to make a gracious and thoughtful  
21 connection to the meaning of Christian faith in the world today, and to invite back those who  
22 have lost contact with the Church. This is precisely the rationale of the call for a New  
23 Evangelization of those Catholics who, for whatever reason, have drifted away from their

1 spiritual home. Through the prayerful celebration of the Eucharistic ritual and through the  
2 graceful and respectful proclamation of the Word, all are invited to be aware of their deepest  
3 spiritual and human longings and to immerse themselves again in the mystery of Christ present  
4 in the Eucharist, who alone is able to quench their deepest spiritual thirst.

5         The doctrines of the Church should direct the homilist and ensure that he arrives at and  
6 preaches about what is in fact the deepest meaning of Scripture and sacrament for Christian life.  
7 For doctrines simply formulate with accuracy what the Church, prompted by the gift of the  
8 Spirit, has come to know through the Scriptures proclaimed in the believing assembly and  
9 through the sacraments that are celebrated on the foundation of these Scriptures.

10         The most central mysteries of our faith—the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the redemption  
11 that Christ reveals in his Paschal Sacrifice—were attested in the Scriptures and are proclaimed  
12 and celebrated in the Eucharist. They were formulated with precision over time by the Church’s  
13 Magisterium to keep the communities that read the Scriptures and celebrated the Eucharist in the  
14 same communion of right understanding and right worship (*orthodoxy*) about these things, a  
15 communion that was to hold across the whole world and through the centuries. For that same  
16 reason these doctrines ought to be seamlessly introduced and articulated still today in the course  
17 of our liturgical celebrations in order to ensure that by reading the Scriptures and celebrating the  
18 Eucharist we understand ever more deeply the essential beliefs of the Church.<sup>41</sup>

19         One effective way to do this might be to connect some point of the homily to a phrase or  
20 key idea of the Creed that will be immediately recited by the assembly when the homily is  
21 finished. The Creed has the same center that the Scriptures and the Eucharist have. It is that the

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<sup>41</sup> The CCC expresses this well (no. 170): “We do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch . . . All the same, we do approach these realities with the help of formulations of the faith which permit us to express the faith and to hand it on, to celebrate it in community, to assimilate and live on it more and more.” See also CIC, cc. 760, 767 §1, 768, 769; and CCEO, cc. 614 §1, 616.

1 “one Lord Jesus Christ . . . suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in  
2 accordance with the Scriptures.” But this Jesus is “true God from true God, begotten, not made,  
3 consubstantial with the Father.” The homilist proclaims and teaches that this is the one “who  
4 came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became  
5 man.” This is the one whom we see moving about, speaking and acting in the Gospels. This is  
6 the one who “suffered death and was buried and rose again.” We see here what St. Cyril of  
7 Jerusalem meant when, in handing over the Creed to those who would soon be baptized, he  
8 explained, “The most important doctrines were collected from the whole of Scripture to make a  
9 single exposition of the faith.”<sup>42</sup>

10         So, when all is said and done, why should the homilist preach doctrinally and  
11 catechetically? Because, as Paul and the Evangelists knew, the people are drawn to Jesus and his  
12 Gospel by the beauty and truth of the mysteries of our faith. The ultimate goal of proclaiming the  
13 Gospel is to lead people into a loving and intimate relationship with the Lord, a relationship that  
14 forms the character of their persons and guides them in living out their faith. A good homilist, for  
15 example, is able to articulate the mystery of the Incarnation—that the eternal Son of God came to  
16 dwell among us as man—in such a manner that his listeners are able to understand more deeply  
17 the beauty and truth of this mystery and to see its connections with daily life. By highlighting his  
18 humanity, his poverty, his compassion, his forthrightness, and his suffering and Death, an  
19 effective homily would show the faithful just how much the Son of God loved them in taking our  
20 flesh upon himself. And by expanding the congregation’s love for the humanity of Jesus, the  
21 homilist could also move his fellow Christians to a deeper sense of justice, with a sense of  
22 compassion for the most vulnerable and the poor and of the broken humanity of their neighbors.  
23 Likewise, a homilist could speak about Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist in a way that

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<sup>42</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 5:12, 1.

1 draws upon the Catholic doctrinal tradition of transubstantiation, underlining the significance of  
2 this awe-inspiring presence of the Risen Christ in our midst. Our Catholic piety and reverence in  
3 the liturgy could be explained by our dramatic belief in God’s fulfillment of his promise to be  
4 one with us. As the homilist points to the experience of our communion with God, he could draw  
5 attention to our bond of communion with each other.

6 Of course, what is essential for speaking about the mysteries of our faith with passion and  
7 conviction is that the preacher himself grasps the doctrinal significance of their truth and so loves  
8 these mysteries himself that he can communicate that love and truth to his listeners.

### 9 **The Role of Scripture in the Homily**

10 An effective homily takes its cue from the very nature of the Scriptures themselves, which use a  
11 rich variety of literary forms to communicate their message: narratives, metaphors, hymns,  
12 prayers, proverbial sayings, and poetry all have their place within the pages of the Bible. These  
13 stories and sayings of the Bible have had a profound influence over time on the Christian  
14 imagination, and indeed still have an impact on popular culture itself. Like good poetry, the  
15 Scriptures give us the language to express our deepest hopes and longings, to find the right  
16 words for our grief and loss, our moments of joy and peace, our attempts to thank and praise  
17 God.

18 A prime example is, in fact, Jesus’ own preaching. Matthew’s Gospel, for instance,  
19 portrays Jesus on a boat near the shore, teaching the vast crowds that follow him in parables,  
20 those pointed stories that were characteristic of Jesus’ preaching ministry (see Mt 13:1-53). The  
21 discourse begins with the parable of the sower (13:1-9), which Jesus would later explain to his  
22 disciples (13:18-23). The seeds fall on various types of soil, determining the outcome of the  
23 harvest; Jesus will use the sower parable to identify the kinds of conditions and responses

1 necessary for the “word of the kingdom” to thrive. Jesus goes on to use a profusion of other  
2 images and brief stories to illustrate aspects of the Kingdom of Heaven: a field in which an  
3 enemy sows weeds among the wheat and the lesson that the two should remain together in our  
4 complex world until the harvest; a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large bush where the birds  
5 of the sky come and dwell in its branches; the yeast that a woman mixes with three measures of  
6 wheat flour and that manages to leaven all of it; a man finding a treasure in a field and selling  
7 everything he has to purchase the field (and its treasure); a merchant who finds a “pearl of great  
8 price” and sells all that he has to purchase it; and, finally, the story of the dragnet that, when  
9 thrown into the sea, collects “fish of every kind”: when it is hauled to shore, the fish have to be  
10 sorted and the good fish put into buckets.

11           This remarkable abundance of images and stories, all found in only one chapter of  
12 Matthew’s Gospel, tells us that Jesus was not an abstract preacher but laced his preaching with  
13 rich images and provocative stories. The images and examples are drawn from the agrarian  
14 context in which his audiences in first-century Galilee lived and from the fishing industry that  
15 thrived around the Sea of Galilee, where most of Jesus’ ministry took place. As natural  
16 storytellers usually are, Jesus was a keen observer of human life, with all of its beauty and  
17 complexity. His metaphors and stories have a poetic and unforgettable spirit and have worked  
18 their way into the literature of every human generation since.

19           But Jesus was not content simply to cite ordinary examples; there is in Jesus’ parables a  
20 quality of strangeness, something out of the ordinary, that grips the imagination and triggers  
21 wonderment on the part of the hearer: the incredible bounty of the harvest (“hundred or sixty or  
22 thirtyfold”), the amazing size of the bush that blossoms from a tiny mustard seed, the huge  
23 amount of flour that is leavened (“three measures,” estimated at sixty pounds—enough bread to

1 feed a village!), the radical act of selling everything one has to buy the treasure in the field or the  
2 pearl of great price.

3           The special power of the parable is to engage the listener about its meaning. Artful  
4 human speech, especially in stories, can appear to veil truth for those who do not engage it and  
5 yet can reveal truth for those willing to listen and ponder its meaning. Some cultures in particular  
6 relish stories that bring home to them the practical wisdom of the Gospel. Jesus did not simply  
7 lecture his audiences but enticed them by evoking experiences they were invited to think about  
8 and try to understand. Being an effective storyteller may not be a gift that comes easily to  
9 everyone who must preach, but the lesson here is that the homilist must have empathy for human  
10 experience, observe it closely and sympathetically, and incorporate it into his preaching.<sup>43</sup>

11           The goal of the homily is to lead the hearer to the deep inner connection between God’s  
12 Word and the actual circumstances of one’s everyday life. In some instances one’s own  
13 experience—told in an appropriate way without drawing too much attention to oneself—can also  
14 be effective, especially when this experience is one that resonates with similar experiences of  
15 those with whom it is shared. Pope Benedict XVI makes this very point: “The homily is a means  
16 of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s  
17 word is present and at work in their everyday lives. . . . Consequently, those who have been  
18 charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart. Generic  
19 and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God’s word should be avoided, as well as

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<sup>43</sup> The role of reflection on experience was a particular emphasis of *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*: “In order to make such connections between the lives of the people and the Gospel, the preacher will have to be a listener before he is a speaker. Listening is not an isolated moment. It is a way of life. It means openness to the Lord’s voice not only in the Scriptures but in the events of our daily lives and in the experience of our brothers and sisters” (10).

1 useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the  
2 Gospel message.”<sup>44</sup>

3           However, the homilist cannot be content simply to repeat the biblical language found in  
4 the readings but must open its meaning and help illumine the experience of those who hear the  
5 biblical word. The homily is intended to establish a “dialogue” between the sacred biblical text  
6 and the Christian life of the hearer. The homily in its most effective form enables the hearer to  
7 understand the meaning of the Scriptures in a new way and, in turn, helps the message of the  
8 Scriptures, proclaimed in the context of the liturgy, to illumine the experience of the hearer. Thus  
9 the homily brings together both the biblical message and the contemporary experience of those to  
10 whom the homily is offered. Apt stories that illustrate human experience or the realities of  
11 contemporary culture help enliven the homily and open avenues for understanding the meaning  
12 of the biblical text, which comes from an ancient time and culture but still has the capacity to  
13 transcend the chasm of time and to touch, inspire, and challenge the contemporary Christian.

#### 14 **The Homily as an Ecclesial Act**

15 We should also note that the preaching of a homily, since it occurs in the context of the Church’s  
16 liturgy, is by definition a profound ecclesial act, one that should be in evident communion with  
17 the Church’s Magisterium and with the consciousness that one stands in the midst of a  
18 community of faith. The homily is not an isolated example of biblical interpretation or a purely  
19 academic exercise. It is directed *from* faith, that of the Church and of the ordained minister who  
20 preaches in the name of Christ and his Church, *to* faith—that is, the faith of the Christian  
21 community gathered in a spirit of prayer and praise in the presence of the Risen Christ. Thus the  
22 words of the homilist should be in harmony with the spirit and teaching of the Church. While the

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<sup>44</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 59.

1 homily should be respectful of those who hear it and therefore be thoughtful, well-prepared, and  
2 coherent, the Sunday homily is not a time for theological speculation. It is a sacred ecclesial act  
3 meant to lead from the biblical word to the Eucharistic action and thereby to nourish faith and  
4 build up the Body of Christ gathered in prayer. This ecclesial sensitivity in liturgical preaching  
5 was a hallmark of the Church Fathers, many of whose extant writings are in fact the record of  
6 their preaching.

7 Fidelity to the Church's Magisterium does not mean, however, that the homily should be  
8 an abstract affirmation of doctrine. The purpose and spirit of the homily is to inspire and move  
9 those who hear it, to enable them to understand in heart and mind what the mysteries of our  
10 redemption mean for our lives and how they might call us to repentance and change. Here again  
11 we can find wisdom in Jesus' own example. One of the most enticing scenes in the Gospels is  
12 Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel (Jn 4:4-42), a passage provided in  
13 the Lectionary as appropriate for the rite of preparation of adult candidates for Baptism.

14 John tells us that Jesus, making his way from Jerusalem to Galilee, passed through the  
15 region of Samaria. Tired from his journey, he sat down by a well associated with the Patriarch  
16 Jacob. Samaria was a place that Jews typically avoided, yet John presents Jesus, the Good  
17 Shepherd (Jn 10:11), as not hesitating to extend his mission to this region. To the well, at the  
18 hottest time of the day, comes a Samaritan woman. John relates how the ensuing dialogue of  
19 Jesus with the Samaritan woman is both challenging and respectful, probing yet tender and filled  
20 with understanding, as the Master offers this woman the gift of divine life, living water that will  
21 forever slake her thirst.

22 There are dimensions of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman that are important  
23 for effective homiletic preaching, especially its catechetical dimension. In the course of their

1 conversation, Jesus makes a blunt demand: “Go call your husband and come back” (Jn 4:16).  
2 The woman responds without hesitation that she has no husband, and Jesus, in an artful, almost  
3 playful way, concurs: “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband.’ For you have had five  
4 husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband” (Jn 4:18). His moral judgment could  
5 not be clearer and more direct, but the woman is able to hear it receptively precisely because of  
6 the sensitivity and respect Jesus shows her, reflective of Jesus’ respect for women illustrated  
7 throughout the Gospels.

8 Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman shows us that moral challenges presented  
9 by the Church’s teaching—such as those in this Gospel story dealing with the delicate issues of  
10 sexuality, marriage, and relationships—can be offered and can be heard, provided that they are  
11 made in the context of the promise of grace. Some ethnic groups, for example, are reluctant to  
12 speak openly with each other about sexual matters, yet there is a need to do so in a reverent and  
13 thoughtful manner. The homilist can artfully inspire this by recalling the beauty and dignity of  
14 human sexuality, by recalling the respect owed one’s spouse, by challenging the often crude and  
15 exploitative discourse about sexuality that pervades our contemporary world, and by recalling  
16 the teaching of the Church on the sacredness of the body and the meaning of marriage.

17 The woman at the well was not put off by Jesus’ willingness to confront her situation;  
18 indeed, it drew from her a word of praise: “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet” (Jn 4:19). It was  
19 Jesus’ manner, his willingness to communicate with the woman and listen to her with respect,  
20 that enabled him to speak with her about the difficulties of her life.

21 This example from John’s Gospel demonstrates that preaching the Word of God should  
22 reveal God’s enlivening and forgiving grace, engage human experience with respect and care,  
23 and address in a truthful and proper way the realities of sin and human frailty. Jesus’

1 conversation with the woman at the well led her to a renewed life and a sense of joy and purpose.  
2 So the Sunday homily—involving inspiration, information, and moral instruction—is meant to  
3 lead finally to the right praise of God, to true “thanksgiving,” which is at the heart of the Liturgy  
4 of the Eucharist.

5         Nearly all parish communities include women and men who have been harmed  
6 emotionally and spiritually by an abortion experience. While reminding the community of the  
7 beauty and sacredness of human life, the homilist should always emphasize God’s infinite mercy  
8 for all sinners, including those suffering after an abortion. Like the woman at the well, such  
9 individuals need to be invited to approach the Church without fear, in order to receive God’s  
10 forgiveness and healing grace.

### 11 **III. THE ONE ORDAINED TO PREACH**

#### 12 **The Preacher as a Man of Holiness**

13 To preach the Gospel authentically to the Christian community, the homilist should strive to live  
14 a life of holiness. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus strongly challenges those religious  
15 leaders who “preach but . . . do not practice,” those who “tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and  
16 lay them on people’s shoulders, but . . . will not lift a finger to move them” (Mt 23:3-4). To  
17 attempt to evangelize through words and example those who need to revitalize their faith,  
18 without awareness of one’s own need for ongoing spiritual renewal, would be in vain. The  
19 homilist who humbly and confidently seeks the light and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the  
20 preparation of the homily proclaims God’s Word with greater clarity, integrity, and  
21 effectiveness. This in turn enables him and the hearers to participate more fully and actively,  
22 with more understanding and authentic faith, in the Eucharist.

1           Indeed the time given to preparing the homily must begin with a fruitful time of  
2 reflection and prayer. Just as the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy itself is not a theatrical  
3 performance or simply a matter of the rituals being correctly carried out, neither is the homily  
4 simply an exercise in good public speaking. Along with the study and care given to the content  
5 of the homily and the manner of its presentation, there should also be time for personal reflection  
6 on the meaning of the Scriptures and scrutiny of one’s own spiritual life in prayerful silence. As  
7 Pope Benedict XVI notes in *Verbum Domini*, “Preachers need to be in close and constant contact  
8 with the sacred text; they should prepare for the homily by meditation and prayer, so as to preach  
9 with conviction and passion.”<sup>45</sup> In this sense, the evangelizer must also first make sure that his  
10 own life has engaged the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Quoting St. Augustine, the pope  
11 observes, “He is undoubtedly barren who preaches outwardly the word of God without hearing it  
12 inwardly.”<sup>46</sup>

13           Especially for the preacher, the commitment to prayer also entails praying with and on  
14 behalf of the people to whom he preaches. The true pastor and good shepherd knows his people’s  
15 sorrows, their anxieties, their weaknesses, their capacity for love, their abiding joys, and their  
16 deepest longings.<sup>47</sup> Only when the homilist, in a spirit of faith and love, is conscious of his own  
17 deepest experience and those of his people can he preach persuasively to them.

## 18 **The Preacher as a Man of Scripture**

19 As one whose duty is to proclaim the Word of God, the homilist must necessarily be a person  
20 with a deep love of the Scriptures and one whose spirituality is profoundly shaped by God’s  
21 Word.<sup>48</sup> This entails being someone who habitually immerses himself in the language, stories,

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<sup>45</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 59.

<sup>46</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 59.

<sup>47</sup> See CIC, c. 529 §1.

<sup>48</sup> See *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 4

1 rhythms, speech patterns, and ethos of the Scriptures. The words of the Bible should be readily at  
2 hand and often on his lips; he should commit important passages of Scripture to memory and  
3 have a sure grasp of the narrative thrust of the entire Bible. His Bible should be near at hand,  
4 carrying it with him when he travels or perhaps staying linked to it by computer or other mobile  
5 technology. He may bring it with him when he prays before the Blessed Sacrament. Moreover,  
6 every preacher should regularly consult good scriptural commentaries, both of the technical and  
7 “spiritual” type. Also to be recommended are the homilies and biblical commentaries of the  
8 Church Fathers, especially those of Origen, St. Augustine, St. Ephrem, St. John Chrysostom, and  
9 St. Jerome.

10 As noted above, a particularly effective means of immersing oneself prayerfully in the  
11 biblical texts is the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, a discipline that includes attentive and  
12 prayerful reading of the Scriptures and contemplation about their meaning for one’s life—an  
13 approach warmly recommended by Pope Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*.<sup>49</sup>

14 The whole point of these methods and practices is that the preacher learns to see the  
15 world through biblical eyes. He should become adept at noticing the analogies between the Bible  
16 and ordinary experience so that he can illumine the latter through recourse to the former. The  
17 birth of a child today is an echo of the Birth of Christ; a time of suffering in the hospital right  
18 now is in some way connected to the suffering of Jesus on the Cross; a summons to a vocation  
19 heard by a young woman in a parish is not unlike the call heard by Mary of Nazareth from the  
20 angel Gabriel; a failure of integrity by a business executive is reminiscent of the Israelites’  
21 failure in the desert; a struggle for justice in our society is supported by Amos’s cry of protest on  
22 behalf of the poor, and so on. Thereby the Scriptures give voice to our deepest longings and  
23 aspirations.

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<sup>49</sup> See *Verbum Domini*, nos. 86-87.

1 **The Preacher as a Man of Tradition**

2  
3 Along with a profound love of the Scriptures the homilist should also have knowledge of and  
4 religious adherence to the Church’s Sacred Tradition and its essential link to Scripture. From the  
5 perspective of Catholic faith, the one Word of God is expressed both in Scripture and in the  
6 Church’s Tradition.<sup>50</sup> Blessed John Henry Newman said that the teaching of the Bible is like a  
7 seed, which has gradually unfolded across space and through time.<sup>51</sup> Theology, spirituality, the  
8 liturgy, the lives of the saints, the formal teaching of the Church, great Catholic art, architecture,  
9 and poetry—all of these constitute the unfolding of the Word of God within our Catholic  
10 heritage. Tradition along with Scripture, therefore, is an important source from which preachers  
11 can draw inspiration.<sup>52</sup> Preachers should have the *habitus* of theology: the steady practice of  
12 reading the theological masters (both ancient and modern) and meditating on the great questions  
13 that they entertain. They should cultivate a real love for the writings of the doctors of the Church  
14 and study with eagerness the manner in which the Church’s life and teaching have developed.

15 **The Preacher as a Man of Communion**

16 Effective preaching also entails a thoughtful and informed understanding of contemporary  
17 culture. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council made this point when they insisted that  
18 leaders within the Catholic Church must be deeply attuned, not only to Scripture and Tradition,  
19 but also to the “signs of the times,” signals coming from today’s world. As noted in the preface  
20 to *Gaudium et Spes*, “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially  
21 of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the  
22 followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their

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<sup>50</sup> See *Dei Verbum*, nos. 9-10.

<sup>51</sup> Blessed John Henry Newman, *An Essay of the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Christian Classics Inc., 1968), 80.

<sup>52</sup> CIC, c. 760.

1 hearts.”<sup>53</sup> This is the spirit of “communion” that Pope John Paul II noted belongs to the exercise  
2 of priesthood: “Within the Church’s life the priest is a man of communion, in his relations with  
3 all people he must be a man of mission and dialogue. Deeply rooted in the truth and charity of  
4 Christ, and impelled by the desire and imperative to proclaim Christ’s salvation to all, the priest  
5 is called to witness in all his relationships to fraternity, service and a common quest for the truth,  
6 as well as a concern for the promotion of justice and peace.”<sup>54</sup>

7         It would be inappropriate for the homilist to impose on the congregation his own partisan  
8 views about current issues. Yet for preaching to be so abstract that it reveals no awareness of or  
9 concern for the great economic and social issues that are affecting people’s lives in a serious way  
10 would give the impression that the words of Scripture and the action of the Eucharist are without  
11 relevance for our everyday experience and our human hopes and dreams.<sup>55</sup> Preachers should be  
12 aware, in an appropriate way, of what their people are watching on television, what kind of  
13 music they are listening to, which websites they find appealing, and which films they find  
14 compelling. References to these more popular cultural expressions—which at times can be  
15 surprisingly replete with religious motifs—can be an effective way to engage the interest of those  
16 on the edge of faith.

17         The population of the United States is marked by extraordinary diversity. Even within  
18 the Catholic Church the liturgical, theological, and spiritual traditions of the various Eastern  
19 Catholic Churches are different from those of the Latin Church. Yet all these traditions of the  
20 East and the West are of equal dignity and are essential components of the one Catholic Church.

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<sup>53</sup> *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*, no. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Blessed John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis (I Will Give You Shepherds)*, no. 18.

<sup>55</sup> The Church’s social doctrine is an indispensable aid in helping the preacher apply the Scriptures and clarify the moral and ethical implications of the social and political order (see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*).

1 The Eastern Churches that are in full communion are often characterized as “ancient” and  
2 “venerable,” because they draw in a special way on the teaching and spirit of the early Church  
3 Fathers. The Patristic writings are a primary resource for proclamation in the Eastern Churches;  
4 each of them has a treasury of outstanding preachers who share in the common mission to  
5 proclaim the Word of God within the celebration of the divine liturgy.

6 In the last fifty years, our country has received substantial numbers of immigrants from  
7 Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, South America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe,  
8 Vietnam, the Philippines, India, China, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and many other places. This  
9 influx of peoples has made the United States one of the most culturally diverse countries on the  
10 planet, and a very significant number of these new immigrants are Catholics. The Church in the  
11 United States has benefited greatly from the cultural wealth and diversity of experience that these  
12 new immigrants have brought to our shores. In many cases, the presence of Asian, Latin  
13 American, Eastern European, and African Catholics has meant new life for parishes that had  
14 been fragile. So much diversity is both an opportunity and a challenge for any preacher.

15 Particular cultures often have their own preferences for which style of preaching they  
16 find most compelling. Take, for example, the tradition of preaching in African American  
17 communities.<sup>56</sup> The fruit of a rich and fertile past, this tradition has matured into an actual style  
18 and art of delivering a homily. In the African American experience of preaching, the style of the  
19 homily often becomes more interactive between the homilist and the assembly, with the  
20 assembly often making a response from their hearts: “Amen!”, “Yes, Lord!”, “Thank you,  
21 Jesus!” As *In Spirit and in Truth* reminds us, “Traditionally, good ‘Black preaching’ is rich in  
22 content and expression, relies heavily on the biblical text, and draws generously from story,

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<sup>56</sup> See *Plenty Good Room: The Spirit and Truth of African American Worship* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1990).

1 song, poetry, humor, anecdote, and descriptive language. . . . The homily must enable the  
2 community to worship God with praise and thanksgiving.”<sup>57</sup>

3         Once he has come to know the customs, mores, practices, history, and religiosity of a  
4 people, a homilist can draw on that richness in order to make his presentation of the faith fresh  
5 and enlivening. Moreover, by examining a culture or Catholic ritual tradition other than his own,  
6 he can learn different expressions of the one Catholic faith, and this can only enhance his own  
7 appropriation of the faith and his presentation of it to others. Learning a new language can give  
8 an entirely new texture to his words and ideas, enabling him to express the mystery of the Gospel  
9 in a compelling manner.

10         At the same time, cultural complexity poses a sharp challenge to the preacher in the  
11 effort to communicate the faith to people, because he may not share their education, background,  
12 and assumptions. Pastoral ministry, and especially the ministry of preaching, challenges the  
13 ordained minister to have a deep respect for other cultures and, to the extent possible, to enter  
14 into another culture with humility, attention, and deep love. He should strive, above all, to learn  
15 the language of the people he serves and, as best he can, to appreciate their manner of thinking,  
16 feeling, and acting. Only then can he preach heart to heart. Also, he ought never to forget that,  
17 despite enormous differences among us at the level of language, practice, history, lifestyle, and  
18 social class, we remain, in spiritual essentials, one. Everyone wants joy in life, but at times  
19 sadness strikes; everyone is finite and yet has expansive hopes and longings; everyone seeks  
20 friendship but also experiences times of loneliness and isolation; everyone sins; everyone is a  
21 subject worthy of respect; and everyone is called by God. The liturgical assembly is challenged  
22 also. It must make the extra effort to listen attentively to homilists for whom English is not their  
23 first language. Listeners of the homily ought to welcome the wisdom offered by these preachers.

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<sup>57</sup> *In Spirit and in Truth: Black Catholic Reflections on the Order of the Mass* (USCCB, 2005), no. 35.

1 The homilist speaking to a culture not his own can find encouragement in the Christian  
2 communion in which he and his people share, a unity meant to be celebrated in the Eucharist  
3 itself.

4 Although the Catholic population in the United States is blessed with many different  
5 cultures, the Hispanic/Latino segment of the Catholic community is growing at a particularly  
6 rapid rate and poses substantial opportunities and challenges for effective preaching in this  
7 context.<sup>58</sup> Many Hispanic Catholics are especially attuned to the symbolic and sacramental world  
8 of Catholicism. Successful preachers who may come from a different cultural context would do  
9 well to immerse themselves in Hispanic popular piety, a world in which Mary and the saints are  
10 venerated with intense fervor and affection and in which there is profound devotion to the Virgin  
11 Mary and the suffering Christ. Popular religiosity should not be looked down upon, and the  
12 homilist should learn from it and relate to it with respect and sensitivity.<sup>59</sup> This requires exposure  
13 to the people’s neighborhoods or *barrios*, their homes and associations, and even their countries  
14 of origin, if at all possible. As with any cultural group, people appreciate pastors and preachers  
15 who cultivate personal relationships with them and demonstrate a willingness to move beyond  
16 their comfort zones and enter the world of the “other.” In this regard Spanish-language ability is  
17 an urgent need. Opportunities for pastoral immersion experiences in Latin America can also have  
18 an important formative impact. Seminaries and permanent diaconate formation programs are

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<sup>58</sup> See *Encuentro and Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry* (USCCB, 2002) concerning the particular urgency needed for the Church in the United States to respond properly to the growing Hispanic/Latino Catholic population.

<sup>59</sup> See *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 13; *Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*, no. 67; *Marialis Cultus* ([www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19740202\\_marialis-cultus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus_en.html)), nos. 30-31; and the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* ([www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20020513\\_vers-direttorio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html)).

1 urged to include Spanish-language preparation and proper exposure to Hispanic cultures into  
2 their programs of priestly formation.<sup>60</sup>

3         Of particular relevance for preachers who wish to connect with these congregations are  
4 the serious social, economic, and political struggles of the Hispanic/Latino poor. The Church in  
5 the United States, like U.S. society as a whole, is characterized by a growing gap between those  
6 who are well off and can live comfortably, and a significant working class—many of them  
7 Hispanic/Latino—who increasingly find it difficult to make ends meet. Hispanics face daunting  
8 issues such as a lack of access to education and medical care, crime, poor housing, youth at risk,  
9 and immigration concerns. The effective preacher will be aware of and acknowledge people’s  
10 struggle for a better life in the United States and in their countries of origin.

11         At the same time, however, the homily should not replicate civic or political discourse.  
12 Especially in the context of the Eucharist, people want to hear God’s Word robustly and  
13 reverently proclaimed. The preacher is successful if he plumbs the depths of the Scripture and,  
14 when appropriate, recalls stories about Mary and the saints. The people want the preacher to  
15 witness to God’s presence and power as displayed in miracles and other manifestations of divine  
16 transcendence.

17         For immigrant groups—most notably Hispanic/Latino—an important issue is the  
18 heightened tension between parents and children around issues of assimilation. Preachers need to  
19 be sensitive to the process by which parents convey the faith to new generations, who often  
20 know little Spanish (or other particular language of origin). Good preaching honors the  
21 experience of immigrant families and sympathizes with the challenges of adapting to life in the

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<sup>60</sup> “Seminarians must learn Spanish and become familiar with Hispanic culture. Also, provide clergy and religious with opportunities to learn Spanish and to gain an understanding of the customs, cultures, and histories of Latin America. This is no longer an option—it is a need” (*Encuentro and Mission*, no. 55, 2c); PPF, 5th edition, nos. 172, 182, 189, and 228.

1 United States. In this regard preaching must reflect insight into the Church’s evangelizing  
2 mission, which requires cultural discernment based on gospel values that go beyond those of any  
3 particular culture. Preaching in Hispanic/Latino contexts requires familiarity with the policy of  
4 ecclesial integration as distinct from assimilation, which has been specified in USCCB  
5 documents.<sup>61</sup> In the context of adjustment to a new culture and way of life, preaching among  
6 Hispanic/Latino and other non-European communities correlates with the Church’s overarching  
7 goal of communion in diversity. In certain pastoral circumstances, bilingual or multilingual  
8 preaching may be a good option to ensure that all in the congregation understand the homily.

9         The increasing presence of international priests in the pastoral life of the United States is  
10 a great blessing but also requires sustained efforts at cultural and linguistic adaptation,  
11 particularly in relationship to effective preaching. Dioceses and religious communities need to  
12 offer these brother priests opportunities for intense language preparation and help in  
13 understanding the varied social and pastoral contexts of Catholics in this country.

#### 14 **Speaking with Respect and Reverence for Others**

15 The unique opportunity to address an entire congregation with the innate authority of the  
16 preacher in the Sunday homily also requires sensitivity and respect when speaking of other  
17 Christians or other religious traditions. A spirit of respect based on a sound knowledge of their  
18 traditions should characterize observations in homilies about Orthodox or Protestant Christians,  
19 with whom we enjoy a real, if imperfect, communion. After all, Orthodox Christians are linked  
20 with us in the “closest intimacy”<sup>62</sup> by the same sacraments, including the Eucharist and Holy  
21 Orders. Protestant Christians, too, are our brothers and sisters in Christ, based on a common  
22 Baptism and a reverence for the Scriptures, and have a preaching tradition from which we have

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<sup>61</sup> See *Encuentro and Mission*, no. 38.

<sup>62</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio (Decree on Ecumenism)*, no 15.

1 much to learn. This common Christian identity must always provide the context when speaking  
2 of other Christians in homilies, especially when commenting on specific differences.

3         The diversity of the American population and the tensions within contemporary society  
4 should also alert the preacher to the need for respect and a thoughtful use of language when  
5 speaking of other faith communities in the Sunday homily. A succession of statements by  
6 modern popes and U.S. bishops, for example, has emphasized the need to avoid any prejudice or  
7 anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic views in Catholic preaching. Proclamation of the Scriptures should  
8 be, if anything, an occasion for promoting respect for Judaism and the Jewish tradition, the  
9 spiritual ancestry from which Jesus and the Gospels emerged.<sup>63</sup>

10         The political turbulence and violence in the Middle East sometimes contributes to local  
11 prejudice against Muslims in our country. It is important to remind the faithful that, as stated  
12 clearly in *Nostra Aetate*,<sup>64</sup> recent papal teaching, and statements of episcopal conferences,  
13 Catholics are called to respect Muslims. An emphasis on peace and patience together with the  
14 encouragement to foster good relations with local Muslims is crucial, therefore, when preaching  
15 about Islam in any context.

16         Whether commenting on other faith communities or on the secular culture in which we  
17 are immersed, the homily is not a place for bitter invective, coarse rhetoric, or stereotypes and  
18 caricatures of other people's religious traditions or ethnic backgrounds. Prophetic challenge of  
19 false values is a legitimate and often necessary responsibility of preaching that draws its  
20 inspiration from Sacred Scripture. But the Eucharistic context of prayer and thanksgiving should  
21 encourage a tone of charity and respect in homilies even when using words of admonition or  
22 warning.

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<sup>63</sup> JPTSS, no. 87; *Nostra Aetate (Declaration on the Church's Relations with Non-Christian Religions)*, no. 4.

<sup>64</sup> See *Nostra Aetate*, no. 5.

## 1 **IV. INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURES AND PREPARING THE HOMILY**

### 2 **Interpreting the Scriptures in the Community of Faith**

3 Preparing an effective homily necessarily entails interpretation of the Scriptures. In the context  
4 of preaching, such interpretation cannot be simply an intellectual exercise but must be a serious  
5 attempt to understand the Scriptures in the light of faith.

6         The homilist today has access to numerous resources for such a study of the Scriptures,  
7 including commentaries, articles, books, and websites from reliable Catholic sources. Several  
8 publishers also provide homily aids that are geared toward the Lectionary readings and provide  
9 both exegesis of the biblical passages and leads for preaching. Many priests and deacons use the  
10 Lectionary readings as an ongoing source for their prayer and meditation, merging homily  
11 preparation with their daily habit of prayer; for this, too, there have appeared several new  
12 resources that provide reflections on the Lectionary readings, drawing on both Patristic and  
13 contemporary sources.

14         The modern Church has benefited enormously from the historical-critical method of  
15 biblical interpretation, the stated purpose of which is to understand the intention of the particular  
16 human authors of the Scriptures as they addressed their own audiences and to reconstruct the  
17 historical and social context in which the biblical texts originated. Historical criticism reminds us  
18 that biblical religion, unlike mythic systems, is rooted in real events and persons and that God  
19 has deigned to reveal himself in the realities and particular circumstances of human history. This  
20 accords completely with the fundamental conviction of the Incarnation. Furthermore, the  
21 recovery of the original sense of the biblical books in their historical contexts enables the Church

1 to set aside ungrounded and extravagant interpretations or unwarranted eisegesis—that is to say,  
2 reading into a text a meaning that is quite alien to it.<sup>65</sup>

3 As Pope Benedict XVI has observed, it is also important to augment use of the historical-  
4 critical method with other legitimate methodologies and, above all, with a perspective of faith.  
5 Probing a biblical text simply for its historical context or treating the biblical text from a purely  
6 scientific or empirical point of view is not sufficient when the purpose, as in liturgical preaching,  
7 is to open the meaning of the scriptural passage for Christian life today.<sup>66</sup> The Church has  
8 traditionally recognized that there are a variety of approaches to a faithful interpretation of the  
9 Scriptures summarized in the classical “fourfold senses” of Scripture.<sup>67</sup> The literal or historical  
10 sense remains fundamental, and other “spiritual” senses should be elaborated in relation to this  
11 fundamental sense, which probes the meaning intended by the biblical author. But one can also  
12 view the Scriptures from an “allegorical” perspective, linking biblical events or symbols based  
13 on the unity of the Scriptures, such as seeing in the crossing of the Red Sea a foreshadowing of  
14 the liberation from sin effected in Baptism. The “moral sense” focuses on how the events and  
15 teaching of Scripture guide us to act justly, while the “anagogical sense” reflects on biblical texts  
16 as signs or indicators of our eternal destiny. These approaches were a hallmark of Patristic  
17 preaching, which was characterized by a great love of Scriptures as a whole and a profound  
18 sense of communion with the Church. The Fathers did not have the resources of modern  
19 exegesis, but they were attuned to the various senses of the Scripture in their interpretation, and  
20 their preaching had a rich biblical resonance.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> “The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation of this kind is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the incarnation itself” (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Pontifical Biblical Commission [Rome, 1993]).

<sup>66</sup> See *Verbum Domini*, nos. 35-41.

<sup>67</sup> CCC, nos. 115-118; see also *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II, A, 2.

<sup>68</sup> See *Verbum Domini*, no. 37.

1           Likewise, while appreciating the particular characteristics and theological perspective of  
2 an individual biblical book is helpful, Christian faith takes into account as well the entirety of the  
3 Bible as an inspired and sacred text. If we only focus on the diverse voices of the individual  
4 biblical books, we can lose a sense of the one voice of God as it speaks coherently and  
5 consistently through the whole of the Scriptures, especially as the entirety of Scriptures, from the  
6 truth of Christian faith, finds its ultimate coherence in the person and mission of Jesus Christ.  
7 Thus the Fathers of the Church delighted in typology—finding prefigurement of events in the life  
8 of Jesus or the Apostles in the great figures and experiences of Israel in the Old Testament.  
9 Homilists today, while respecting the integrity of the Old Testament as Scripture, can also  
10 artfully use the whole spectrum of the Bible to convey the message of the Gospel.<sup>69</sup>

11           The Magisterium of the Church, inspired by faith and the guidance of the Spirit, views  
12 theology and dogma not as distortions but as clarifying interpretive guides to the Bible, the  
13 reliable unfolding of the authentic meaning of the scriptural texts. Accordingly, the Church  
14 encourages exegetes and preachers to approach the Bible with a keen sense of the sacred text’s  
15 essential unity as well as with an appreciation of how the *Logos*, Jesus Christ—articulated and  
16 developed theologically in the course of Sacred Tradition—provides the proper interpretive lens  
17 for the whole of Scripture.<sup>70</sup>

## 18 **Preparation for Preaching the Homily**

19 *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* provides practical advice about how best to prepare for the Sunday  
20 homily, advice that is still valid.<sup>71</sup> This text continues to serve as an important resource in many  
21 seminaries, permanent diaconate formation programs, and continuing education programs.

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<sup>69</sup> See CCC, no. 130.

<sup>70</sup> See CCC, nos. 128-129.

<sup>71</sup> See *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 29-39.

1 Good homiletic preaching begins and ends with an engagement with the Word of God.  
2 Preparation begins several days before the Sunday liturgy with attentive reading of the assigned  
3 Scripture passages, listening to them in one's heart and mind and praying over them in silence.  
4 Next should come study of the text, perhaps consulting a good commentary or articles on these  
5 biblical texts, study that will trigger further reflection. The homilist may need to wrestle for a  
6 while with the challenging aspects of the biblical word, searching for ways it could connect to  
7 ordinary experience and how it might be proclaimed to the congregation the homilist serves.  
8 Then comes the process of drafting the homily in a thoughtful manner, finding the right words,  
9 moving examples, and apt metaphors that will bring home to the listener the beauty and truth of  
10 the Scripture—and then reviewing and revising the text of the homily until it is ready. Good  
11 homilists often practice their homily ahead of time, hearing how it sounds out loud and seeking  
12 to preach it with passion and strength. Finally comes the moment of preaching itself. Normally  
13 the effective homilist will not be content to simply read a written text of his homily but will have  
14 so internalized what he wants to preach that the text or outline serves only as an aid to a direct  
15 proclamation of his message. Many priests and deacons will follow up their preaching by  
16 seeking out trusted friends or parish staff to ask how it came across and what could be done to  
17 make their homily even more effective.

18 The ministry of preaching, as the primary duty of the ordained priest, is worthy of this  
19 kind of hard work.<sup>72</sup> Over time, careful preparation and honest evaluation will ensure that the  
20 homilist will be more effective in the life-giving work of bringing God's Word to the people.

### 21 **Assisting Those Who Hear the Scriptures and the Homily**

22 Just as the homilist must be immersed in study and reflection on the Scriptures to proclaim the  
23 Gospel faithfully, so too should members of the congregation who listen to the homily do what

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<sup>72</sup> See *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 4.

1 they can to receive properly and savor the biblical message. For this, there are numerous  
2 resources of various sorts on biblical study geared toward the lay reader, including increasing  
3 numbers of materials on the Internet and through social media. Catholics should be encouraged  
4 to prepare themselves beforehand for a fruitful encounter with God’s Word read and proclaimed  
5 in the context of the liturgy. This means not only thoughtful study of the historical background  
6 and context of the Bible but also the development of a habit of prayerful reflection upon the  
7 meaning of the biblical text as in the manner of *lectio divina*.

8         In addition to the study of and prayerful reflection on the biblical texts, there are other  
9 steps that the congregation can be encouraged to take. The liturgical celebration itself should  
10 properly accent the sacredness and importance of the biblical texts contained in the Lectionary  
11 by the beauty and artistry of the *Book of the Gospels*, the reverence shown it during the liturgy,  
12 the effective manner in which the Scriptures are proclaimed, the opportunity for moments of  
13 silent meditation after they have been proclaimed, and also the proper use of Scripture in sacred  
14 song.<sup>73</sup>

### 15 **Life-Long Growth in Preaching**

16 Given the importance of the preaching ministry for the life and mission of the Church, it is not a  
17 surprise that becoming an effective homilist capable of bringing the message of the Scriptures  
18 into the life of the Christian community is a life-long and demanding process. Accordingly, the  
19 *Program for Priestly Formation* (PPF) as well as the *National Directory for the Formation,*  
20 *Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States* emphasize the importance of  
21 courses in Scripture along with other intellectual and spiritual formation in the Church’s liturgy  
22 and dogma. Preparation for preaching also needs to include opportunities for supervised practice  
23 to develop the skills of the future preacher. Seminaries, schools of theology, permanent diaconate

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<sup>73</sup> See *Verbum Domini*, no. 66; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 30; GIRM, no. 56.

1 formation programs, and diocesan offices of continuing education for clergy are urged to offer  
2 in-service courses and workshops for priests and deacons in order to review the quality and  
3 manner of their preaching and to find ways to continue to develop their ministry of the Word.<sup>74</sup>

#### 4 **CONCLUSION**

##### 5 **Mary as Hearer and Bearer of the Word**

6 Mary, the Mother of God and Mother of the Word Incarnate, can serve as an example for those  
7 who preach the Sunday homily. Mary is “the one in whom the interplay between the word of  
8 God and faith was brought to perfection.”<sup>75</sup> When she heard the Word, she listened intently and  
9 responded with an unhesitating “yes.” This is why Church Fathers, such as St. Ephrem and St.  
10 Augustine, could say that Mary conceived the Word in her heart before conceiving the Word in  
11 her womb. Mary surveyed the great events surrounding the Birth of her Son, and she treasured  
12 them in her heart. Her response revealed a profound contemplative spirit that strove to  
13 understand God’s will for her and the destiny of her Son (Lk 2:19, 51). At the wedding feast of  
14 Cana, Mary turned to the table servants and quietly instructed them: “Do whatever he tells you,”  
15 revealing thereby her intense focus on Jesus and her docility to his Word (Jn 2:1-12). In her  
16 *Magnificat*, the Mother of Jesus spoke as her Son would, fearlessly proclaiming the prophetic  
17 Word (Lk 1:46-55). For all of these reasons, Pope Benedict XVI says, “Mary is the image of the  
18 Church in attentive hearing of the word of God, which took flesh in her.”<sup>76</sup>

19         And so we conclude by appealing to you, our dearest brothers, who share with us this  
20 sacred responsibility of hearing and proclaiming the Word. As we all know, our beloved Church  
21 today faces many challenges and great opportunities. Some of the challenges can seem

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<sup>74</sup> See *Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests* (USCCB, 2001).

<sup>75</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 27.

<sup>76</sup> *Verbum Domini*, no. 27.

1    overwhelming and beyond our power to address. Many priests and deacons feel overburdened.  
2    Yet we are the Church of Jesus Christ, and we believe that the Spirit that first animated those  
3    confused and fearful disciples in the Upper Room is still with us. There may be some things we  
4    can do little about on our own and have to leave in the merciful and loving hands of the Risen  
5    Christ. But our ministry of preaching is something all of us can address and improve. Each of us,  
6    drawing strength from our people and in communion with the whole Church, can pray the  
7    Scriptures more intensely, can prepare our homilies more intently, and can give all our mind and  
8    heart to bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to our people gathered before us at the  
9    Eucharist. In union with the bishops of the whole Church, the Holy Father has encouraged us to  
10   make this a new era of proclaiming the Gospel to our Catholic people and indeed to the whole  
11   world.

12            May we who are ordained to preach the Sunday homily, like Mary who brought the  
13   Incarnate Word into the world, conform our lives to her Son and proclaim effectively the Word  
14   of salvation to all.

15