Pope Francis spoke pointedly as he addressed nineteen men about to be ordained. During the ordination Mass in Rome nearly a year ago, he told the candidates to read and meditate on the Word of God so that it would permeate their lives. Such time spent with the Word, the pope said, would be “the nourishment of the People of God.” The preacher who is immersed in Scripture, he noted, speaks from a rich interior life. “May your homilies touch the heart of the people because they come from your heart, because what you’re telling them is what you carry in your heart,” he said.

Months later, at the ordination ceremony of a bishop, the pope provided a similar insight into preaching. “Homilies should be the transmission of God’s grace,” Pope Francis told Bishop Angelo De Donatis. “Simple so that everyone can understand them and everyone will want to become a better person.”

The pope’s homilies, statements to bishops and priests, and his writing, portray concern for the quality of preaching. An emphasis on preaching is prominent in his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, in which much of chapter three is devoted to the homily and its preparation. There, he writes, “Let us renew our confidence in preaching, based on the conviction that it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and that he displays his power through human words” (136).

As I speak throughout the United States on liturgical matters, the two biggest concerns, if not complaints, that I hear regard music and homilies. The good news is that the complaints reveal expectations on these topics. The person in the pew thirsts to hear the Gospel as it is proclaimed both in preaching and song. One blogger expressed her expectations clearly: “What I really long for is preaching that is so engaging, so apt, so skillfully arranged and insightful, so revealing of and affirming of the truth of the gospel as we want it to be lived as well as believed, that I don’t want it to end at the end of 5 minutes!”

This request is a tall order! But she expresses what so many people desire. However, of all my priestly activities, the most difficult is that of preaching. History shows that I am in good company, though. We know that Moses had a speech impediment (Exodus 4:10), that Jeremiah thought himself too young to preach (Jeremiah 1:6), and that Paul, by his own admission, experienced fear and trepidation (1 Corinthians 2:2–4). Months ago, I took consolation in the words of Thomas Reese, SJ, who admitted that he found preaching to be a challenge (NCR Today, April 30, 2015).

Public speaking is not the problem. I do this daily in the classroom and regularly in public presentations. At these times, I know my audience and, therefore, how to direct my words to the group. The assembly at Mass, though, is diverse. Some individuals may be happy, others may be deep in mourning, and many may be simply apathetic. I also may be left with questions of how to address a group that spans the educational gamut, an age range from children to elderly, and includes many whose mother tongue is other than English.

DEVELOPMENT OF DOCUMENTS ON THE HOMILY

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has sought to provide guidance to preachers on the purpose of the homily, its content, and preparation. What is first apparent in the direction being taken is a change in terminology. In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), we see that the word sermon is no longer used: “Preaching should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources, being a proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy” (35.2). Later, the document develops
the idea of the homily as a separate genre: “By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year; as part of the liturgy itself therefore, the homily is strongly recommended; in fact, at those Masses celebrated with the assistance of the people on Sundays and holy days of obligation it is not to be omitted except for a serious reason” (52). The distinction between a sermon and homily is important since a sermon can be any kind of spiritual or moral lecture but is not necessarily tied to the Sacred Scriptures as is a homily. Now I am inclined to ask if preaching is the same thing as the homily, or it has its own genre.

The US bishops have provided assistance to priests and deacons through the 1982 document Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly and the 2013 Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily. The former emphasizes that the proclamation of the Gospel is the primary duty of priests. Although the document focuses on the Eucharist, its principles could be applied to preaching during other sacramental rites and the Liturgy of the Hours. Thirty years later, Preaching the Mystery of Faith addresses new circumstances within the Church, particularly engagement in the New Evangelization. While complementing the previous document, it reflects anew on the ministry of preaching. Its approach establishes “the intrinsic interconnection between the Scriptures, the homily and its liturgical context, and the Church’s teaching and catechesis” (p. 6). Both documents look at the phenomenon of preaching within the US context, implicitly recognizing that preaching may differ from one culture to another and one language group to another.

Now the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has issued the Homiletic Directory, which seeks to assimilate the insights of the past fifty years to help preachers appreciate the purpose of the homily. The genesis of this document dates to Pope Benedict XVI, who asked the congregation to draw up the Directory after many participants at the 2005 Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist and the 2008 synod on the Word of God requested a handbook to help priests with their homilies. The need for such a directory was underscored by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (EG), when he wrote: “We know that the faithful attach great importance to it [the homily], and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case” (EG, 135).

The Homiletic Directory is divided into two parts: the homily and its liturgical setting and the ars praedicandi. So what does this document offer that is not found in the US bishops’ documents? First, it considers the universal question about what preaching is (or should be). Second, the Directory puts forth preaching as an art and states that it should be approached as such. The overall value of the Directory lies in the following points: that the Lectionary invites the homilist to see the Scripture as mutually revelatory (19), that an organic unity exists between the Bible and liturgy (20), that doctrines can guide the preacher and ensure that he arrives at and preaches about the deepest meaning of Scripture and sacrament (21), and how the Paschal Mystery shapes not only what we believe but also enables us to act in the light of the realities we believe.

Drawing on Evangelii Gaudium, the Homiletic Directory notes Pope Francis’ observation that the homily “is a distinctive genre, since it is preaching situated within the framework of the liturgical celebration; hence it should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or lecture” (EG, 138). The document goes on to state what the homily is not. It is not:

• a sermon on an abstract topic;
• an exercise in biblical exegesis;
• catechetical instruction; or
• a time for the preacher’s personal witness.

Having determined what the homily is not, the Directory seeks to describe the homily in positive terms. “In the broadest sense,” it states, “the homily is a discourse about the mysteries of faith and the standards of Christian life in a way suited to the particular needs of the listeners” (11). Preaching at Mass, the homilist should show people how God’s Word is being fulfilled in their midst, how it calls them to growth and conversion, and how it prepares them to celebrate the Eucharist. Focusing on what it means to preach in a liturgical context, the document states that the homily “reflects on the meaning of the readings and prayers of a given celebration in light of the Paschal Mystery; and it leads the assembly to the Eucharistic celebration in which they have communion in the Paschal Mystery itself” (15).

HOMILY PREPARATION
But how does one preach effectively? Considering the words of Pope Benedict XVI in Verbum Domini and Pope Francis in Evangelii Gaudium, the Directory emphasizes the importance of prayer, study, and reflection in the preparation of the homily. Particular attention is paid to lectio divina. The Directory establishes that since the homily will be delivered in a context of
Throughout the liturgical year, the starting point for the homily is the Sacred Paschal Triduum.

prayer, it should be composed in such a context. “The homily requires a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection, and pastoral creativity,” the Directory states. The operative word in this statement is prolonged. When inadequate time is given to homily preparation, the results are evident. Good preaching takes time filled with study, reflection, and prayer.

The Directory encourages entering into a spiritual sense of sacred Scripture in its recommendation to engage in lectio divina while preparing the homily. This section of the document provides a valuable service to the readers by taking them through a fourfold process, showing how to integrate their study of Scripture with reading (lectio), meditation (meditatio), prayer (oratio), and contemplation (contemplatio). In the explanation of each of these stages, the Directory emphasizes the liturgical context of the homily. Prior to lectio, the Directory guides the reader, the homilist needs to be immersed in scholarship on the text.

As a preparation for this first stage, the homilist should consult commentaries, dictionaries, and other scholarly resources that can help him understand what the biblical passages meant in their original context. But then he must also observe carefully the incipit and explicit meanings of the passages in question in order to determine the significance of why they begin and end where they do in the Lectionary (29).

During meditatio, the homilist asks what the text is saying to him, what he finds pleasant, what in the text is moving, and what the Lord wants him to change in his life. But that is only the first part of this step, the Directory points out. Guided by the Rule of Faith, the “homilist reflects on the readings in light of the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s Death and Resurrection, and he extends his meditation to this mystery as it is lived out within Christ’s Body, the Church, including the circumstances of the members of the Body that will gather on Sunday” (32).

The oratio stage, the Directory notes, provides time both for expressing to God a reaction to the readings and a reflection on the liturgy. “This shift from meditation to prayer, when considered in the context of the liturgy, highlights the organic connection between the biblical readings and the rest of the Mass” (34).

Finally, contemplatio brings the individual to examine the conversion that the Lord is asking. The Directory notes that, in the liturgical context, this stage can give hope to the preacher because “it is ultimately God who is at work bringing his Word to fruition, and that the process of forming the mind of Christ within us takes place over a lifetime” (35). To this four-stage process, the Directory recognizes a fifth, actio, which Pope Benedict noted in his apostolic exhortation Verbum Domini. The homily should help the hearer see ways to live the Gospel, to take action. “Viewed in its liturgical context,” the Directory states, “this suggests the ‘missa,’ the sending out of God’s people who have been instructed by God’s Word and nourished by their participation in the Paschal Mystery through the Eucharist.”

THE ART OF PREACHING

The first part of the Directory reviews the principles of lection assignments, while the second part, entitled the Ars Praedicandi, gives practical consideration for the readings spread throughout the liturgical year. The entire Directory emphasizes the unity of Scripture and demonstrates how the readings in the Lectionary are presented throughout the entire liturgical year in a unified manner. The Directory seeks to provide concrete examples and suggestions but not sample homilies.

Let us try to find an appropriate metaphor to convey the notion of ars praedicandi by looking at the art of cooking. In preparing a multicourse meal, you would not start with hors d’oeuvres, then move to the first course, only later to decide what the main course would be. Rather you start with the main course (la pièce de résistance) and then work forward and backward to design a meal that is coherent, harmonious, delicious, and beautiful. The same is true with the art of preaching. The starting place, the Directory points out, is the Paschal Triduum—the epicenter of the liturgical year. Beginning with the Triduum, one can move forward and backward, looking first to the fifty days of Easter leading to Pentecost. Next, the Directory looks at Lent as the time of preparation for the holiest days of the year. It looks at each of the Sundays reflecting on the readings in light of the overall feast and season. It then moves to the Sundays of Advent leading to the Christmas season. This approach uses the Paschal Mystery as the lens through which the entire liturgical year is seen. Instead of considering each Sunday as its own entity, or even as an entity within a season, this organic approach helps us view the relationship of Sunday to Sunday and season to season. After looking at the major feasts and seasons, the Directory has something to say about Sundays in Ordinary Time, taking into consideration the three-year cycle of the Lectionary. Finally, the Directory looks to the role of the homily in weekday liturgies and occasional liturgies, such as weddings and funerals.

Additionally, the Directory reviews the principles by which the Lectionary was organized. There is a certain hierarchy
Among the biblical-liturgical texts. The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. For this reason the other readings, in their established sequence from the Old and New Testaments, prepare the assembly to hear the Gospel. Every Gospel passage provides an explanation and viewpoint from which to reinterpret and understand the Paschal Mystery celebrated in that liturgical moment. If the other texts are fundamentally oriented toward the Gospel, clearly their understanding depends on their link with the Gospel and on the Christological interpretation of the readings. The Old Testament reading is chosen in light of the Gospel, and the Responsorial Psalm is inspired by the reading that precedes it. The selection from the Epistles on Sundays presents a semicontinuous reading, a rule that was followed during most of the liturgical year in the early Church, so it is not usually connected explicitly to the other readings. For the major liturgical seasons, certain indications lead us to regard the Second Reading as an element suggesting witness. The text of the Epistles tend to suggest values and behaviors that fit in with the point of view from which the Paschal Mystery is being celebrated. Nonetheless, because of the unity of the whole of Scripture, some connection between the Second Reading may be found with the Old Testament reading and the Gospel, but some mental gymnastics may be required to find this connection. Therefore, it is not necessary to bring all three readings into the homily.

The primary objective of the plan and layout of the Old Testament was that it should prepare for and declare in prophecy the coming of Christ and of the messianic kingdom. The Old Testament foretells this coming by means of various foreshadowing signs and symbols. For although Christ founded the new covenant in his Blood, the books of the Old Testament are given a place in the preaching of the Gospel and attain their full meaning in the New Testament. The internal logic is clear: Christ himself is the center of and fullness of all of Scripture, as he is of the entire liturgy.

Finally, we will consider again the *ars praedicandi*. Especially since the Bishops’ Synod on the Eucharist, it has become common to speak about the *ars celebrandi*. There is growing awareness that good liturgy requires an artful sense. Slavishly and mindlessly following rubrics does not produce life-giving liturgies. The second section of the *Homiletic Directory*, then, suggests essential questions of method and content that the homilist must know and take into account in the artful preparation and delivery of the homily, with interpretive keys for the cycle of Sundays and feasts. In this section, the criteria outlined in the first part of the Directory are put into practice: typology between the Old and New Testaments, the importance of the Gospel reading, the ordering of the readings, and the nexus between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, between the biblical message and the liturgical texts, between celebration and life, and between listening to God and the particular assembly. The Directory does not give any magic formulae for how to preach well; it does not propose that you begin with a personal anecdote or funny story followed by three points. Formulaic approaches are abandoned in favor of helping the homilist get in touch with his artful side, whether this be music, drama, poetry, the art of cooking, flower arranging, or whatever that brings the homilist into touch with the artful.

While the Directory uses the language of homilies as an art, it does not go into detail about how to achieve this. However, if preaching is an art, the Directory suggests that it must have an inherently good structure. I am inclined to look at music to find my artful metaphor. For example, I might take my cue from the musical Sonata-Allegro form. Basically, there is an introduction (always short); an exposition (no more than two themes); the development (in which the themes are expanded and transformed); and finally the recapitulation (themes, returning to the “home key”); followed by an optional coda to tie things up. It is important that each homilist find his artful metaphor to discover the *ars praedicandi*. ◆

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