

## Homiletic “Commandments”

### Introduction

Shortly after taking on the role of Director of Formation for the Permanent Diaconate a colleague from the Diocese asked me what I was doing with the students. When I told him that I was mainly dealing with those in the final year of preparation before ordination and spending a great deal of time with them on homiletics, he responded with the encouraging words, “I don’t really think that you can teach homiletics at all!” To some degree I can agree with this remark. Each of us has a particular style that is consonant with our personality, our character. Some people can relate stories well, others make a real mess of it, for example. There are, however, some matters that can be addressed in a class on homiletics – a boring speaking voice, a frequent tendency to drift off the point, that kind of thing.

There are some time-honoured sayings that can be teased out successfully by a teacher of homiletics,

“Tell what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them. Then get off!”

“If you haven’t struck oil after five minutes stop boring!”

No doubt other bon mots come to mind along the same lines. There are some excellent hints about preaching in the recent Homiletic Directory<sup>1</sup>. This is especially true of Part One of the document, which relies heavily on some very lively comments of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.<sup>2</sup> In working with diaconal students over the past couple of years I have put together “10 Commandments” for preaching homilies. They are both somewhat tongue-in-cheek but offered with an underlying serious purpose. I offer them here as a “work in progress”, if you have any further suggestions, please feel free to offer them.

### **Ten Commandments for Preachers of the Word (A work in progress – 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition)**

1. Preaching is a sacred duty. Always respect the Word, and the People to whom the Word is addressed.
2. Always remember that the first person you are preaching to is yourself. Be personal but never self-referential.
3. The Good News is both consolation and challenge. We are called to preach the Full Gospel, not just the bits we like.
4. Less is usually more, but requires more preparation.
5. “I preach with my Bible in one hand and my newspaper in the other.” (attributed to Karl Barth) The message should be relevant to the actual lives of the congregation.
6. Avoid jargon, technical vocabulary and long words in general, insofar as possible use ordinary language.
7. Avoid stories or quotations that go on and on and on...

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. paras 135-159.

8. Do not use the microwave!
9. Get as much honest feedback as you can... and listen to it
10. Whereas commandments 1-5 may NEVER be broken, 6,7 and 8 may – occasionally and for very, very good reasons based on the Word and the needs of the congregation, not your own ego!

**1. Preaching is a sacred duty. Always respect the Word, and the People to whom the Word is addressed.**

This three-way process – between the homilist, the Word, and the Congregation – is a complex one that Pope Francis likens to a dialogue,

Dialogue is much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue. (E.G. §142)

And in the next paragraph he writes,

The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people. The dialogue between God and his people further strengthens the covenant between them and consolidates the bond of charity. (E.G. §143)

So, no pressure then!

**2. Always remember that the first person you are preaching to is yourself. Be personal, but never self-referential**

I remember a retreat given in my secondary school by a visiting priest – a Jesuit, or a Redemptorist, I forget what species he was. Almost every talk centred on sex and adolescent male deviancy in this matter. Apart from learning a few new ideas that we had never thought of before, it quickly became apparent who was the one with the problem! In a rather more positive way Pope Francis has made this observation,

... if in the course of the liturgical year a parish priest speaks about temperance ten times but only mentions charity or justice two or three times, an imbalance results... The same thing happens when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God's word. (E.G. §38)

**3. The Good News is both consolation and challenge. We are called to preach the Full Gospel, not just the bits we like.**

This is related to the previous points. Reviewing personal notes from previous homilies is a very useful insight into your own priorities and hang-ups. If we are only preaching about the challenge of the Gospel then people are missing out on words of comfort and consolation, and may turn away feeling utterly hopeless in the face of impossible demands. Similarly, if all they hear are soft words of comfort week after week after week, the Gospel becomes like gooey marshmallow – overly sweet with little or no substance. Pope Francis summarises the matter like this,

... (P)reaching should guide the assembly, and the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist. (E.G. §138)

Notice that the preacher is also called to respond to the Word in his own life. People are very quick to pick up on hypocrisy.

A little story might help to illustrate this point. When I was first ordained the parish I worked in had both a main church and what was called a “chapel-of-ease” (a local school hall). This particular Sunday I was due to say Mass at the chapel. The Parish Priest had been saying Mass in the parish church. As I was leaving, the congregation from the first Mass was coming out of church. Two well-known characters of the parish came up to me and said, “OK, so what has he been buying himself now? He only ever preaches about poverty when he is feeling guilty about spending money on himself.” Being the loyal curate I did not divulge that he had just taken possession of a colour television-set – still an expensive novelty at the time. A couple of months later, and after the PP had just bought himself a new car, I slipped into the sacristy to hear his sermon at the first Mass on Sunday morning and, sure enough, he preached on the virtue of poverty and the evils of consumerism and materialism!

#### **4. Less is usually more, but requires more preparation.**

In order to be brief and to the point even more preparation is needed than when you are just spouting forth on some hobby-horse. Blaise Pascal once apologised to a friend at the beginning of a letter that it was a long one, this time, because he did not have time to write a short one! Pope Francis summarises the point in this way,

(The homily) should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture. A preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of faith. If the homily goes on too long, it will affect two characteristic elements of the liturgical celebration: its balance and rhythm. (E.G. §139)

#### **5. “I preach with my Bible in one hand and my newspaper in the other.”**

In my interview at Durham University before being accepted as a student in the Theology Department the then Head of Department, Canon Douglas Jones, quoted this adage of the great Twentieth Century, Protestant scholar, Karl Barth and asked me what I thought it meant. I cannot remember what my mumbling and bumbling response was at the time, but in spite of whatever it was I was accepted as an undergraduate. Forty years later the meaning of his words is very clear. These days more modern means of communication need to be taken into consideration, but the point is well made. Whilst the homily is certainly not a time for broadcasting the latest news, unless it touches the actual lived experience of the congregation at this moment, the message will have no impact whatsoever. This is how Pope Francis tackles this issue,

Let us keep in mind that we should never respond to questions that nobody asks. Nor is it fitting to talk about the latest news in order to awaken people’s interest; we have television programmes for that. It is possible, however, to start with some fact or story so that God’s word can forcefully resound in its call to conversion, worship, commitment to fraternity and service, and so forth. Yet there will always be some who readily listen to a preacher’s commentaries on current affairs, while not letting themselves be challenged. (E.G. §155)

Looking at the way in which the Pope's preaching on environmental matters, on mercy, and so on, have been latched on to, but not listened to, by elements of the Media is a perfect illustration of this.

**6. Avoid jargon, technical vocabulary and long words in general, insofar as possible use ordinary language.**

The story is told of an enthusiastic priest delving into the mysteries of the Scriptures shortly after the introduction of the current rite of Mass, with its lectionary. He taught in the Junior Seminary and wanted to get across to the lads current ways of understanding the Scriptures. He had been reading a book by a leading scripture scholar and was puzzled. Going into the Profs Common Room the next morning after breakfast, he asked an equally enthusiastic Professor of Scripture, "What is the meaning of 'the problematic of the hermeneutic'?" Before the Scripture Prof could answer a voice, from another Prof, came from behind a newspaper, "It means the stupid b..... doesn't know what he is talking about!"

Whether or not the story is apocryphal or not the point is well made. If we are about communicating a message, and that is most certainly what we are about in a homily, there is no point whatsoever in sounding clever by using long words, technical language, Greek or Latin words. This is how Pope Francis addresses this problem,

The greatest risk for a preacher is that he becomes so accustomed to his own language that he thinks that everyone else naturally understands and uses it. If we wish to adapt to people's language and to reach them with God's word, we need to share in their lives and pay loving attention to them. Simplicity and clarity are two different things. Our language may be simple but our preaching not clear. It can end up being incomprehensible because it is disorganised, lacks logical progression or tries to deal with too many things at one time. We need to ensure, then, that the homily has thematic unity, clear order and correlation between sentences, so that people can follow the preacher easily and grasp his line of argument. (E.G. §158)

Once again, then, no pressure!

**7. Avoid stories or quotations that go on and on and on...**

Some people can tell a good story. I cannot, and I very, very rarely use one in a homily. Someone who thinks that they can tell a good story, but cannot, quickly loses his audience to puzzlement and boredom. Even when you are able to tell a story well remember that what you say, and what people are actually capable of hearing, are two very different things. Most preachers will have had the experience of someone reporting back to them something was apparently said in a homily, only to find that the message has become completely turned upside-down by the listener. This is especially true of any long stories or quotations from famous authors. Keep it brief and to the point!

**8. Do not use the microwave!**

I culled this point from a rather good book on homiletics called “Preaching Better”.<sup>3</sup> Written by the late Bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, Ken Untener, it is now, sadly out of print. The point refers to re-heating/recycling old material. Occasionally I do use a microwave to cook something from scratch, but usually I use it for de-frosting or re-heating. The result can be fine for getting physical nourishment from food, but not so good for getting spiritual nourishment in a homily. Homilies need to be much more immediate, speaking to *that* day or *that* week, and to *that* congregation. Pope Francis is particularly scathing about preachers who are too busy to prepare homilies and who re-cycle old ones all the time, “A preacher who does not prepare is not ‘spiritual’; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received.” (E.G. §145)

**9. Get as much honest feedback as you can... and listen to it.**

People are not in the habit of standing up in church after a homily and giving marks, as a judge would in a skating or gymnastics competition... thank God! However, the downside to all this is a reluctance for people to say anything about the homily by way of feedback. If we preach week after week, after week, with no one telling us how we are communicating, the danger is that we become lost in our own dreamland rather being based in the reality of people’s lives and needs. Sycophancy is not helpful either. We have all heard the comment, particularly after a funeral service, “Nice service, Vicar.” The comment is often passed in embarrassment, for want of not knowing really what to say. It is all very polite and well meant, but fairly useless in helping us to evaluate how we are going about things. We need to have at least one or two people to offer honest, and specific feedback if we are going to develop our skills at communicating the word.

**10. Whereas commandments 1-5 may NEVER be broken, the others may – occasionally and for very, very good reasons, based on the Word and the needs of the congregation, not your own ego!**

This is a bit of a get out clause in the sense that some of the commandments I have outlined can be broken in a way that still communicates the message but let’s be clear on this point... What matters is the message, not our own ego, and certainly not any excuse about having no time to prepare! I have used technical vocabulary – and explained it – occasionally. I have given a quotation consisting of a whole paragraph, occasionally – and usually have offered it in written form in the newsletter, as well. Sometimes to good effect, but not always, which is a useful point to end on by quoting some more words of Pope Francis,

We are not asked to be flawless, but to keep growing and wanting to grow as we advance along the path of the Gospel; our arms must never grow slack. What is essential is that the preacher be certain that God loves him, that Jesus Christ has saved him and that his love always has the last word. (E.G. §151)

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<sup>3</sup> **Preaching Better – Practical Suggestions for Homilies**, Paulist Press, New York/Mahway, 1999.