

## inside the listener

get them to reform their lives.

Jay Cormier, director of communications in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., has written a book titled "Giving Good Homilies." In it he suggests that people respond to what they hear "when they see something in it for themselves."

A homily, Cormier thinks, can work its way inside those who hear it. The homily that involves "a form of storytelling" can trigger the listeners' own stories, reminding them of something that happened in their own lives and perhaps offering fresh insight to their personal experiences.

As I reflected on Cormier's comments, two homilists — quite different in their approaches — came to mind. Each has had an impact on me, though in different ways. And they remind me that homilists are not all alike. I think there is no simple recipe or mold for a good homily.

One homilist I remember well was a widely traveled theologian. He had a marvelous sense of how to tell a story for maximum effect. In fact, you might say he was a person with an actor's sense of timing and flair for the dramatic. He had a special gift for bringing a congregation into the situation he was describing.

When he spoke about the first Easter, for instance, listeners

somehow felt they were present when Mary approached the tomb and saw the stone rolled away. They felt her amazement at the empty tomb.

Listening to that priest, one felt impelled to respond in a positive way, to do something about one's own life.

The other homilist had a much different technique. Using the simplest of language he conveyed a vivid sense of Scripture.

Once on Good Friday, he explained why he always liked to think of Christ's death as a point of beginning — a new beginning. He explained why Christ's life and death and resurrection made him think of the Genesis stories of creation.

To him, Easter was the time of the new creation. It gave him a sense of why creation — this beautiful world — needs our care.

That parish priest, talking about life in the midst of the church's recollection of Christ's death, wanted listeners to see inside the events of Holy Week.

What's more, he wanted people to see that a homily isn't just for-listening. It aims toward some action they undertake in their own lives.

*(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)*

to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables."

Appointment of the seven men would allow the Twelve "to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word."

For the Twelve, preaching took precedence (Acts 6).

Another story helps to illustrate the importance of preaching God's word. It is Luke's story of the encounter some disciples had with the risen Lord along the road to Emmaus. The disciples — crushed because of the Crucifixion — did not recognize the Lord.

"Then he said to them, 'What little sense you have! How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have announced!'

"Beginning then with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted for them every passage of Scripture which referred to him" (Luke 24).

Later at supper, the risen Lord "took bread and began to distribute it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

A pattern is found in this account: First the Lord spoke with

the disciples and they heard his word; then they ate together, a meal in which the disciples recognized him.

The pattern is clear: word and sacrament. The obvious implication is this: For a full appreciation of the sacrament, the Lord's Supper, faith must be awakened by preaching the word.

The sixth chapter of John's Gospel is magnificent, and follows the same pattern. It contains two discourses on the bread of life.

—First, in verses 35-50, Jesus identifies himself as the true bread. It is clear from the context that the bread is an image of truth, the word. It evokes faith.

—But in verse 51 the bread becomes an image of the Eucharist: "The bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world."

First the faith-evoking word, then the life-giving Eucharist. They must go together.

And so it has always been.

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## FOOD...

### ...for thought

Various things can happen to people on Sunday morning while a priest or deacon preaches.

There is always the possibility that something the homilist says will turn the attention of listeners inward to focus for a moment on themselves, on fresh possibilities for their own Christian lives. In this case the homily furthers self-awareness and self-understanding.

But the homily may also turn the attention of listeners outward — toward the true potential of the world at large. What happens in this case? Listeners gain a sense that something must be done to enhance the way people live together in society; that life's value deserves to be protected and promoted.

It may happen during a homily that listeners hear something entirely new, something they had never heard before. In this case, the new information may enlighten listeners; it may stimulate their thinking.

But just as likely, listeners find they have been reminded of something they already knew but hadn't thought about for awhile. For the homily is a process of communication; one task of the communicator is to present old things in new ways.

It sometimes happens that a chuckle or a smile ripples

through a congregation after a homilist makes one of his points. Perhaps the homilist has just described a common situation found in people's homes — one involving parents and children; one involving relationships with friends — and many of those in the congregation see themselves in that situation. In this case the homilist has pulled at one of the unifying threads among the people.

But it may also happen that people hear in rather different ways what the homilist says. After the Mass ends, people who talk the homily over together may wonder if they heard the same homily. What has happened is that they adapted the homilist's words to their own situation in life, to their own special and unique needs.

It might seem that during a homily the one who preaches is active, while those who listen are passive. But how passive are they really?

Communication is a two-way street. Some listeners are much more actively involved in the communication process that is taking place than may meet the eye.

What happens within and among people during the homily?

### ...for discussion

1. Is listening a totally passive activity? If not, what makes a person who listens an active participant in a process of communication?

2. The people in church on Sunday are alike — and they are different. They are young and old, joyful and bereaved, worried and content. Why is this diversity a special challenge not only for the one who preaches, but for the whole community?

3. Dolores Leckey consulted a number of lay people as she prepared her article this week. All agreed that homilies are important to them, that preaching can make a difference. Why is preaching an important part of the Mass?

4. Think back to a time when something a homilist said made you think, or made you take action in your own life or in society. What did the homilist say?

#### SECOND HELPINGS

"Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly." This 48-page booklet from the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry opens with a discussion of the community that comes together on Sunday. The different needs of the different people in the community present the homilist with a special challenge, "for our words can all too easily be heard as excluding one or the other segment of the congregation." The homilist acts as a mediator by "making connections between the real lives of people who believe in Jesus Christ but are not always sure what difference faith can make in their lives, and the God who calls us into ever deeper communion with himself and with one another." (Publishing Services, 1312 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005. Publication No. 850. \$3.75 for single copy. Multiple copy rates on request.)