

How to Listen to a Homily

I bet you are reading this during the homily! Do not worry. You are probably not alone. Many Catholics choose homily time to catch up on their bulletin reading. No, browsing the bulletin while Father preaches is not a sin, but it might prove beneficial to your growth in holiness to give the preacher a closer listen.

The homily is an odd sort of composition. Part essay, part speech, part reflection, and part lecture, so figuring out how to listen to one can be daunting. The distinctive nature of the homily demands a set of listening tools unique to both its *occasion* and *purpose*. We know that the *occasion* of a homily is a public liturgy of the Church (Mass, baptism, funeral, wedding, etc.). We know that its *purpose* is to unpack the Word of God in a way that shines His wisdom on our lives in this world and in the world to come. Knowing what a homily is helps us to know how to listen to one.

Homilies are preached during the public liturgies of the Church. This means that we are called upon to listen to the preacher preach in the context of the Church's public prayer. If we are in the season of Advent, we are praying in expectation of the coming of the Messiah. If we are in Lent, we are praying for the strength to endure temptation with Christ at our side. During Easter, we pray in the hope of the resurrection and look forward to the heavenly feast.

The lectionary readings are chosen to reflect the liturgical season and the homily will reflect both the liturgical season and the readings. Homilies at baptisms, weddings, and funerals have their own themes and readings. Baptisms welcome the death of sin and membership in the Body of Christ. Weddings bond a man and woman in the life-long sacramental witness of Christ's love for his Church. Funerals commend the souls of our loved ones to God and urge us to pray for their entrance into heaven.

While listening to the homily, listen especially for references to the theme of the season or the liturgy. Do you hear mentioned – waiting, repenting, rising up, going out, adoption as a child of God, perfection in Christ? All of these and similar phrases point to the underlying themes of our prayer during a given season or liturgical occasion. Also, take to heart our response to close of the Gospel reading, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ!" This exclamation of praise



opens our hearts and minds to receive the message of the homily as a piece of wisdom for our growth in holiness.

The purpose of the homily also offers us a set of tools with which to listen better. Since the homily is usually rooted in the lectionary readings for the liturgy to be celebrated, we can better listen to the preacher if we prepare the readings by carefully following their proclamation from the ambo. Hear each word when spoken. Listen to each phrase. Note the images (sheep, seeds, water, sand, etc.). Pay attention to who's speaking and who's listening. Listen to the ordering of events in the Gospel reading. Jesus loves parables – did you catch what the actors in his parable are doing and saying?

After you have praised the Lord for his Good News, send up a quick prayer for the grace of attentive listening. Then listen for the preacher to mention the words, phrase, images, and events you noted during the proclamation. How does he arrange these to shed Christ's light on your life? How does Christ's message strengthen you? Encourage you? Convict you? What does the preacher exhort you to do or not to do in the pursuit of holiness and charitable service? Be open to what the preacher has to say. Take what you need to follow Christ, and save the bulletin reading for the drive home!

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