

Understanding the Mass

Part 12 in a series

The Homily

In the Gospel reading last week (3rd Sunday of Easter, Year B, Luke 24: 35 -48), verse 45 we heard, "Then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." This is exactly what the homily we hear each week at the Mass is intended to do! The goal of the deacon, priest or bishop who is preaching to us is to help us to understand how what we read or heard applies to our particular lives today, here in the 21st century. This is a very daunting task because each and every one of the several hundred people in the pews on any given Sunday can approach the scripture readings that they just heard from a different perspective!

Sometimes we just don't relate to what the homilist is trying to convey in his message on that particular day. In some instances we may say, "I didn't get much out of the homily that I heard today." Why is that? How could the homilist be so far off the mark with his preaching? This is not to say that anyone is necessarily at fault, but there are several things we can do to better prepare ourselves for the homily we are going to hear. As I said earlier in this series we must become participates, not just observers. We have a responsibility to come prepared and this requires an effort on our part.

One of the most important things for us to do is pray for God to speak to our hearts and open our minds in the homily. A good time for this prayer is during our quiet time with the Lord prior to the start of Mass (Homework! Go back and read Part 3 in this series about preparing for the Mass).

Another way to bring the homily to life for us is to take the time to read the scripture readings beforehand, ideally early enough so that we have time to really think and meditate on what they mean. (See Part 2 of this series). I do much better if I read scripture quietly as opposed to just hearing it read to me. For some it is just the opposite, they do better hearing it read out loud. Either way, if we spend time with the scripture readings prior to Mass we will be better prepared to benefit from the homily.

Sometimes the homilist will focus in on the major theme of the readings while other times he may take just a few passages and build his message around them. This is why it is important for us to be prepared by having read the scripture beforehand and be familiar with it so we can truly seek to relate to what is being preached.

One of the most impactful homilies I ever heard given by a priest focused on only one verse that had been read. That particular verse contained only three words: "And Jesus wept." This was from John's gospel and the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This Gospel reading was 45 verses long (rather long for a Sunday Gospel reading), yet the homilist chose to focus on those three simple words and build his homily around them. That, my brothers and sisters, is the beauty of Scripture. We can read it over and over and still come away each time with a new perspective. I think the reason it meant so much to me was because I had spent a lot of time reflecting on the reading the previous week.

So, here is your homework for this week. On Thursday, take the time to say a quick prayer and then pre-read the scripture readings for the coming Sunday. On Friday, read them again. Read them one more time before the start of Mass. And then, after the homily, ask yourself, "Did I find this homily more enriching?" I think you will, because you are now actively participating in the Mass, not just observing. You will be eager to listen and hear what aspect of the readings the homilist will focus on.