



**2014**  
**LENTEN LETTER TO PRIESTS**  
**OF THE**  
**DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS**  
  
**From**  
  
**BISHOP MICHAEL W. WARFEL**



"Saint Peter Preaching in the Catacombs" by Jan Styka  
Paris, 1902



From the beginning of the Church, there has been inspired preaching. It has played a central role in ordinary Church life. Soon after the Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord and having been filled with the Holy Spirit, St. Peter addresses a crowd. His words move many who hear him and they respond accordingly by accepting Christ as Savior.

“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, “The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (*Acts of the Apostles 2:1, 17-24, 29-41*)

I’ve been spending a good deal of time reflecting on the writings of Pope Francis since he became Pope. On many occasions, he has spoken and written of the importance of good preaching. His emphasis has led me to consider my own preaching as well as the preaching of priests (and deacons) throughout eastern Montana. Preaching is central to our ministry so I decided to focus on the homily for my Lenten letter this year. In this letter, I want to sum up some of what the Council and recent popes have said about preaching as well as provide what I consider ten markers for good preaching. I hope that you will take the content of this letter to prayer with you through Lent. I also hope that it will help launch a conversation among us about how each of us can serve the people of God better through this ministry. I feel very much challenged to strive to be a better homilist. I hope you will too.

Obviously, preaching is not the sole means by which the Gospel is proclaimed. St. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as saying, “Preach always and, if necessary, use words.” Publicly demonstrating a lifestyle of discipleship provides authenticity to the words we speak to our people. In his own Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nunciandi)*, Pope Paul VI wrote, “Modern man [and woman] listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (EN#42). Personal witness to the faith helps to make what we say credible. A holy life and pastoral engagement with people, especially the poor and vulnerable, indicates to people that our faith is genuine and our words sincere.

The importance of actions notwithstanding, a central concern of Pope Francis has been the significance of good and inspiring homilies. I sense that many of our priests offer very good homilies and that our preaching is helpful for parishioners. I receive letters to support this. Of course, I have received other letters from parishioners clamoring for better homilies. I believe that each of us truly desires to be effective in our preaching. At the same time, I know that developing an effective homily and delivering it in a way that is inspiring can be a challenge. So, as we enter this Lenten season, I invite us all to work on providing excellent homilies, not just good homilies. Our parishioners desire and need homilies that will guide them to the Truth who is Christ.

I believe those who gather Sunday after Sunday want to be held accountable for their faith. They want to be led to a deeper relationship with Christ. Many may not be able to articulate this desire, but I believe it is in the heart of all who gather for worship. It is an insight that St. Augustine expressed in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” Our parishioners want to know what the Scriptures teach them for our modern age. As an ecclesial act, the homily is a valuable tool to do just this. Mostly, however, it is an opportunity to help our parishioners to perceive connections between their relationship with the Lord and day-to-day life.

Parishioners need to know what the Church teaches on matters of doctrine and morals that affect them day in and day out. Our parishioners likewise need a balanced exposition of the teachings of the Church and not merely what may be a personal ideology or a narrow vision of the Catholic faith. An effective homilist is one who preaches the Word of God faithfully and in fullness but in all charity, filled with a sense of God’s mercy. While not ignoring the challenges to fidelity that fill the Scriptures, he must provide a sense of hope and an appreciation of the joy that flows from the Gospel. The objective always is a deeper encounter with Christ.

I believe we are far more effective in our preaching when we are kind and persuasive than if we allow impatience and sternness to rule our speech. St. Francis de Sales is recounted to have said, "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." Of course, our parishioners need to hear more than nice platitudes. The Gospels are filled with challenge and the call to embrace the way of the cross without equivocation. It does no one any good just to be told what they may want to hear while ignoring aspects of faith that call us to embrace the cross of fidelity. In an age of relativism and individualism, people can easily believe they have an authentic relationship with the Lord when, in reality, they may be strangers to the Gospel. Jesus was very clear when he announced to the crowds, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). We need no better example than our Holy Father who has stayed consistent to Catholic teaching, yet has done so with a renewed and kind tone which seems to have had a great impact on the faithful.

The homily forms the bridge between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist thus sending the members of the assembly out to witness to their faith. The proclamation of the sacred texts, especially the Gospel, and the illumination provided by the homily on the Word of God has an objective. Its purpose is to lead the assembly to an awareness of Christ's presence in their midst and in their personal lives. Filled with Christ, they recognize their role in the mission of the Church as *alter Christus*.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* from the Second Vatican Council (*Sancrosantum Concilium*) made frequent use of the phrase "full, conscious and active participation" to express what is expected of those who gather for the Eucharistic Liturgy. The intent of this phrase does not mean that all present should have specific duties at a liturgy, e.g., reading one of the Scriptural texts. The intent is that all members of the assembly should be engaged in the action of worship taking place. If the members of the assembly are truly engaged, they are more likely to engage their day-to-day worlds with their faith. They are more likely to fully, consciously and actively witness to the death and resurrection of Christ in their lives. Through word and deed, parishioners who have been energized and inspired with the Word of God and nurtured with the Eucharist will desire to share Christ. It is very much the responsibility of the homilist to foster this dynamic.

In many ways, I believe this is depicted wonderfully in Mark's Gospel in the first of two experiences of a multiplication of loaves to feed a vast crowd (Mark 6:34-43). We, who have been entrusted with the responsibility of preaching the homily, are a direct means by which the Lord feeds vast crowds. The text of this passage from Mark's Gospel definitely alludes to Eucharist, but I believe it is not much of a stretch to view it from a context of feeding people with solid preaching. A primary way to lead people to Eucharist and salvation in Christ comes through effective preaching. Recall the words of instruction that Jesus gives to the Twelve: "Give them something to eat yourselves" (6:6:37). The Twelve became the instruments of the Lord whereby the people were fed.

The homily is a primary means to call people to faith in Christ as well as nurture the faith in those who are fully on the journey. Responsibility for the homily falls primarily to whoever is presiding at a particular Eucharistic Liturgy though it may also be entrusted to a concelebrant or a deacon (GIRM #66). It is a role limited to an ordained minister and not to be confused with preaching done by a trained layperson like our Parish Life Coordinators who preach at a Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest, or other liturgies outside of Mass. It is a responsibility that must be taken utterly seriously, which is why I am focusing on the homily in my reflection for Lent for this year.

I would be the first to admit that I have not always taken this responsibility as seriously as I could have. As with you, there are many other pertinent matters to attend to in parochial or diocesan ministries that can distract our attention and lead us away from adequate preparation. Given the number of individuals that we address at Mass, it has to be a priority of our ministry. Consider what Pope Francis has to offer in the section on the homily in *The Joy of the Gospel*:

Preparation for preaching is so important a task that a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity should be devoted to it. With great affection I wish to stop for a moment and offer a method of preparing homilies. Some may find these suggestions self-evident, but I consider it helpful to offer them as a way of emphasizing the need to devote quality time to this precious ministry. Some pastors argue that such preparation is not possible given the vast number of tasks which they must perform; nonetheless, I presume to ask that each week a sufficient portion of personal and community time be dedicated to this task, even if less time has to be given to other important activities (EG #145).

It is a well-developed and well-delivered homily that, more often than not, will lead people to a deeper encounter with the Lord. As for myself, I strive to remember that the best homilies inform the mind, touch the heart and inspire the soul. I try to remember that somehow, I have to reach every person in the assembly: the young and the old, the liberal and the conservative, women and men, the deeply converted and the casual observer. I try to remember this even with some of the more routine or technical aspects of presiding and preaching. Last year when I asked you (and others) to complete an evaluation of my ministry of Bishop, preaching was a major component of the survey. While most people thought my own preaching was well received, the simple act of not speaking loud enough seemed to be a major barrier to those trying to receive my preaching. This was mentioned by multiple people, and is something I have tried to work on over this past year. Each of us likely has something we need to work on. It is essential to address weaknesses in preaching for our ultimate goal is to help the assembly to encounter the Lord and thus encourage them to respond to his invitation to salvation.

Pope Francis is hardly the first authoritative figure to address the importance of proclaiming the Word of God. In *The Decree on Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis)* from the Second Vatican Council, preaching is listed first among the responsibilities of priests.

In the measure in which they participate in the office of the apostles, God gives priests a special grace to be ministers of Christ among the people. They *perform the sacred duty of preaching the Gospel* (italics mine), so that the offering of the people can be made acceptable and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Through the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel, the people of God are called together and assembled (PO #2).

In every situation in which a priest (or deacon) is called to preach a homily, he must do his utmost to prepare. It is a key moment of evangelization! Again, as Pope Francis called attention to the homily in his Apostolic Exhortation, quoting Pope John Paul II, "...if the Church is to fulfill its providential destiny, evangelization as the joyful, patient and progressive preaching of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ must be your absolute priority" (E.G.#110).

An essential element of homily preparation is prayer. It is quite possible that a homilist may write up a wonderful and inspiring talk, but without prayer, it really would not be much of a homily. It is also quite possible that a priest may develop some nice and comforting thoughts, but if these thoughts do not flow from the Scriptures in some way, they really do not meet the expectations of the assembly. A homilist needs to be a man who prays as well as studies and reflects upon the Word of God. And the homily needs to lead into the celebration of the Eucharist forming an intimate connection between the Word of God and the Bread of Life. It is an occasion of sacramental encounter with Christ.

As I continue to reflect upon what makes an effective homilist, I would like to offer some suggestions I believe are important for effective and fruitful homilies. Homilies that are ill-prepared do little to lead people to Christ; nor do homilies that are mostly moralizing or ideologically based (either from the left or the right). And definitely, preaching that is used as if striking the assembly with a club over the head is ineffective. Preaching about the mercy and joy of the Lord is far more effective in leading people to God. This is not to say that a homilist should avoid addressing difficult matters. A good homilist must present challenging teachings. The message, however, should

fundamentally be positive and provide hope.

Reflecting on a number of the specifics for what I believe makes an effective homilist, the following ten points came to mind. I do not present them as a comprehensive list. Likewise, they are not in any particular order of importance. I do offer them for your reflection and personal assessment. I invite you to reflect upon them and decide what you judge to be the criteria for the making of an effective homilist.

First, an effective homilist is a man who takes his priesthood utterly seriously and as a calling filled with the joy of the Lord. When we were ordained, we were sealed with an indelible character. The role we assumed within the Church was a sacred one. As ordained ministers, we were entrusted with great responsibility. Our ordinations were in response to a call from God and for a definite purpose. Our sacred vocation as priests involves serving the people of God. It is why we were ordained. While we share in one the priesthood of the baptized, ordination charges us to use our gifts and abilities, our time and energy – all gifts from God – for the purpose of building up the Church (i.e., the people of God). This also applies to those with a vocation to the permanent diaconate.

Second, an effective homilist is a priest (or deacon) committed to prayer and spiritual development. In previous Lenten Letters I have highlighted some specific practices that are required of ordained ministers. Prayer is at the top of the list. There are some general expectations for the prayer life of an ordained minister (e.g., regular celebration of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours and regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance). At the same time, I recognize that each priest has a particular way of praying that is more fruitful to him than other ways. It is important to follow through with the promises made at ordination with regard to prayer, but it is also vital to remember that the most important thing is to pray. Ordained ministry requires quality time spent in prayer as well as some quantity of time in prayer. Unless we do so, it is unlikely that we will have much of a relationship with the Lord. As a man called to lead people in prayer and to lead them to the Lord, a personal relationship with the Lord is vital. The reason is simple, “We cannot give what we ourselves do not have.”

Third, an effective homilist strives to grow in his personal knowledge of Scripture and Church teaching. He is a man who devotes time and energy to study and ongoing formation. It is likely that each of us would have had a solid course of studies in both Sacred Scripture and in the various theological disciplines during our seminary days. Some of us may have had advanced studies in any of a number of these theological disciplines or Scripture studies. Some ordained ministers, however, discontinue their pursuit of knowledge after ordination thinking what they know is sufficient. Ongoing study helps keep the homilist up-to-date just as it does in a secular occupation. A physician, a nurse, an engineer, a lawyer or a teacher all have to regularly do some kind of ongoing study for their particular occupations. Ordained ministers also need to keep fresh and current. And it is important to read and study, not only what is popular, but material that has theological depth or provides insight into human nature.

Fourth, an effective homilist knows his parishioners and their concerns, their struggles and joys, their hopes and disappointments. He does not concentrate on but one segment of his parish, but has concern for all his parishioners. In order to know their needs and concerns, he has to be engaged with his parishioners and involved in their lives. This requires interacting with them regularly and being involved in activities outside of those that occur solely at the parish, such as school football and basketball games or choir concerts, a Rotary Club meeting, various civic events, etc. It is important to know our parishioners and to be present where our parishioners gather. As Pope Francis is frequently quoted, “The shepherd needs to smell like the sheep.”

Fifth, an effective homilist is aware of local, national and international issues. As Catholics, we have a universal vision and are united with sisters and brothers around the globe. What happens among us in our local setting is never truly isolated from what is happening in places like California and Kansas or the Southern Sudan or Syria. Obviously, what affects us most occurs in our local situations, but it is important to factor in newsworthy events into our reflections given that these events are certainly on the mind of our parishioners and affects them.

Sixth, an effective homilist spends adequate time to prepare his homily. This point almost goes without saying. Given demands that often come with a busy parish, however, we may be pulled away from the time we need to construct a well thought out message. Given its importance, real preparation is needed to provide a homily that will truly be of benefit to our parishioners. Ann Garrido recently provided me some advice in this regard by citing a formula from a professor she once had: “One hour of preparation for one minute of speaking in the pulpit.” It may sound daunting but we must also consider that our preaching has such a direct impact on our parishioners. This was the rationale I was provided by Ann: “You’d think nothing of giving one hour to one person during the week for spiritual direction or a hospital visit, but on Sunday, that is the major pastoral encounter you are going to have with all those people each week. So, if you think of it like you are giving 5 minutes to each of those people and then it doesn’t seem so exorbitant, does it?” Preparing the homily should be a priority for anyone entrusted with preaching because it is a sacred responsibility.

Seventh, an effective homilist balances the issues he addresses. He is not an ideologue bent on promoting a single agenda or a narrow vision of the Church. Nor is he a man who loses sight of other issues that may not particularly concern him. With particular regard to issues associated with human life and development, he embraces a consistent life ethic. Over the course of a liturgical year, he addresses issues associated with human dignity such as concern for the environment, abortion, capital punishment, poverty, assisted suicide and the violence of war. Likewise, he keeps in mind that there are other pertinent issues to address that are on the mind of his parishioners such as same-sex unions and homosexuality, contraception, illicit business practices, consumerism and materialism, disintegration of the family, etc.

Eighth, an effective homilist is a man of the Church and faithful to its teaching. He is informed about the faith proposed by the Magisterium. He realizes he must propose the teaching of the Church faithfully. He knows that his role, as a minister of the Church, is not to determine which teaching his assembly ought to hear and which they ought to ignore. Rather, he responsibly presents the fullness of Church teaching in a balanced and forthright manner. He does so in a pastoral manner with a recognition that many of his parishioners may not be at a level of faith development that he would like them to be. Because of his pastoral sensitivity he never uses the pulpit to bully his parishioners, in a sense, using the homily as a club. His words are comforting while at the same time challenging and he always embodies hope through his words.

Ninth, the effective homilist strives to develop and deliver a homily that is clear, understandable and not overly long. There certainly are occasions in which a longer homily may be required in order to fully address the occasion being celebrated. As a rule of thumb, however, a homily should not be longer than 10 to 15 minutes with an optimum length being more like 8 minutes. Pope Francis noted in his Apostolic Exhortation that lengthy homilies diminish the sacramental dynamic of the Mass. There are definite times and occasions for teaching which may require much time, but these occasions are better left to the classroom.

Tenth, an effective homilist always strives to offer an essentially positive and hope-filled message. It takes effort to craft such a homily. Msgr. Stephen Rossetti said it this way in the book I gave the priests for Christmas:

We ask ourselves, ‘What is the good news that Jesus is offering today to the people of God?’ This is a more challenging homily to write. It is easy to make people feel bad. But how can we inspire people to the good, helping them to see the beauty of our God and their own beauty? Will people walk out of church today with their heads up or their head down? The latter is easier, the former more difficult (*Letters to My Brothers*, p. 136).

As we journey through this season of Lent, I urge you to take time to use Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation as a part of your Lenten reading, especially the section on the homily. What he has written in the Exhortation reflects the proposals offered by the bishops who participated in the Extraordinary Synod on the new Evangelization. Given that these proposals came from bishops from around the

globe, what he proposes is universal in thought.

It is my hope that you will find this Lenten Letter to be helpful. In any case, do pray about it! Reflect upon the serious obligation we share to prepare and preach solid and inspirational homilies. Our parishioners want and deserve them. A homily well developed and delivered and that proposes the fullness of Church teaching has the power to lead people to Christ. Lest we miss the importance, it is a matter associated with eternal salvation! Sadly, poorly developed and delivered homilies or those that are not faithful to the Gospel, often end up sending people away or leading people astray.

As we enter into the Lenten season, know you are all in my prayers. I appreciate the work that you do as collaborators with me in the ordained ministry. Our ministry is never about any one of us but solely about Christ. May we effectively proclaim him and the salvation he offers to us through his dying and rising from the dead.

When St. Peter preached to the crowd, many were inspired by his words. His message was not fluff nor his words but pious platitudes. He offered a message of substance from conviction. He preached about the Paschal Mystery and the need to turn away from sin and turn instead toward Christ. Those who received his words in their heart, accepted his words and were baptized. Our own preaching may not be like St. Peter's, but the significance of our preaching is no less important for ultimately our preaching must be about the salvation of souls.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael W. Warfel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Michael W. Warfel  
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