



HOMILY TIPS FROM A LISTENER

By Susan Vogt
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It's taken me quite a few years to get the nerve to write this. First, my disclaimers:

- I have perhaps a dozen decent homilies in me. I'd hate to have to come up with fifty-two plus meaningful homilies a year. I have great sympathy for priests who have this challenge.
- Although I do a lot of public speaking, it's dangerous to hold oneself up as a model of a polished speaker. Not everyone is enamored with everything I have to say and anyone can have a bad day. Even if I come up with numerous spiritual insights, I can't guarantee they would be always be delivered with enough pizzazz to hold the attention of many ages including squirming toddlers and sulking teens.
- One advantage (disadvantage?) of my freelance work is that travel frequently takes me away from my home parish. The reflections that follow should not be attributed to any one priest or parish.
- I certainly have, on occasion, heard exceptionally inspiring homilies. Perhaps, that's how I've come to notice the difference.

With these concessions to my fallibility, I humbly offer one layperson's viewpoint on what has touched me, and what all too often hasn't.

1. **Apply scripture to today with stories and examples.**

I agree with the liturgists who emphasize that a homily should flow from the scriptures. This should not, however, be an excuse for a bland paraphrase of the readings. What I appreciate in a homily is for the priest to translate the message of the homily into today's world and real life situations. This requires:

- watching out for pious platitudes and
- knowing your congregation well enough to give plentiful examples of how hearing this scripture might influence and change their lives.

For instance, instead of saying merely, "We must love each other as Christ loved us," follow it with "and perhaps that means forgiving your spouse readily when offended," or "Kids, pull yourself back from matching insult for insult."

Of course, most Catholic clergy (with the exception of permanent deacons) have an occupational limitation in applying the scripture to many of their listeners. Since they are not married nor parents, it is more difficult to fully appreciate the issues and concerns with which many families struggle. I remember hearing a priest complaining in a homily that married couples seemed more selfish today, few of them choosing to have the large families of previous generations. My reaction was to challenge him to spend several days living at our home when at least one child was in diapers and all of them clamoring for attention at the same time. Since my own family has outgrown the active parenting stage, I recommend spending a few days with a family with young children (preferably on a hot summer day without air conditioning). This suggestion, however, is not for the fainthearted.

2. **Don't be afraid to challenge.**

The most disappointing homilies to me have been ones in which the scripture had just proclaimed particularly challenging words like the story of the rich young man or forgiving our enemies. Instead of addressing this theme, the priest skirted around the point or watered it down. I don't mean to suggest there is only one way of interpreting or responding to the scriptures, but I appreciate being inspired to take them seriously. Perhaps ending the homily with a self-evaluative question followed by one or two minutes of silence would be effective.

3. **Don't be afraid to be personal**

I know the priests' lifestyle is very different from mine and we can't always identify with each other's daily pressures, but that doesn't mean I can't learn from and be inspired by the priest. Human struggles, joys, and fears are universal. I yearn for the priest who will truly risk making himself vulnerable, letting the congregation know how he personally has struggled to live out the day's scripture. I'm much more likely to receive a hard message with openness if the priest shares how he's tried to live more simply and has fallen short, or continues to work at curbing his pride, etc.

4. **Be sensitive to diversity.**

Remember, you probably have divorced people, blended families, couples living together before marriage, couples married and living together but emotionally estranged, and on and on as your audience. References that apply always to traditional families only increase hurt.

Thanks for listening to a listener.