

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

WAKE ME UP WHEN THE HOMILY IS OVER!

Recently (July 18th), I read an interesting letter in the Brooklyn Tablet, The Tablet is the weekly newspaper for the Diocese of Brooklyn. The letter, written by a Mr. Victor Enemuo is entitled, "Do Catholics Have Shorter Attention Spans?" An interesting title!

In his letter, Mr. Enemuo writes that Catholic homilies are really too brief these days. That is not such a common complaint. He cites one study that the average Catholic homily is just 14 minutes whereas the homily delivered by Protestant ministers averages 54 minutes. He asks this question: "Why our Catholic attention spans shorter?"

Maybe that's a valid question. However, we have to remember that the homily in the Catholic Church is just one part of the liturgy. In the Protestant service, the homily is often the entire thing! Mr. Enemuo is correct though in stating that the homily matters.

Believe it or not, most priests for example spend a good deal of time in preparing their homily. It's not such an easy task to come up with remarks that are interesting and appealing to everybody, not only on Sundays but also on other occasions as well. Of course, not every priest-homilist is Bishop Sheen! But most of us do try to do our best in presenting a clear, concise and spiritual message for the congregation.

How about the length of a homily? Well, it should not be too short neither should it be that long. Ronald Knox once said that a good sermon should be like a woman's skirt; short enough to arouse interest, but long enough to cover the essentials! Currently, as the letter to the Brooklyn Tablet referenced, with all our computers, I-Pads, flat screen TVs, and cell phones, attention spans are not as long as they once were.

If possible a good homilist should keep his remarks within fifteen minutes. The late Cardinal John O'Connor would often say that he could not see how a priest on Sunday could speak less than twenty minutes. Well, more people would want to listen to the Cardinal than the average parish priest!

Remember that the Liturgy of the Word of God is a central part of the Mass. We have readings from the Old Testament, the Epistle, and the Gospel. The job of the preacher really is to "break open" the word so that people can readily understand it. Vatican Two tells us: "By means of the homily the mysteries of faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the Liturgical Year."

The homily should be biblically based. Of course, that does not mean that the celebrant cannot bring up doctrinal or moral topics in his remarks, but he will reference them to the scriptures that are read each Sunday.

To give a good homily is really a great art. People are fairly critical of us priests who stand in the pulpit each Sunday. A young priest who writes a column on the Sunday readings for a local Catholic newspaper said that during his homily recently a woman in the front pew just kept reading the Catholic newspaper. Later on, she criticized this young priest for as she put it, "Stealing every single word from the article in the paper." She did not realize that it was this priest who had written the article in the first place!

Well, criticism is good and keeps us humble which we should all be. We are just the poor tools that God has chosen to do his work on earth. The best homily is one that is not spoken really but lived out in our daily witness to our divine teacher Jesus Christ!

God bless you...
Father Jerome