

# WHAT'S THE *difference* BETWEEN A HOMILY AND A SERMON?



“This text draws our attention toward the ‘real presence’ of Christ *within the homily*. As such, the homily is a true and necessary liturgical act. Sermons are not.”

still sees large, elevated pulpits situated far away from the sanctuary, even in the church's center. This arrangement points to the liturgical independence of the sermon.

While some believe that these medieval customs were “traditional,” the early Church had always regarded the homily as an *indispensable* element of the eucharistic sacrifice. Just as most Catholics today would be horrified if the priest skipped the consecration at Mass, ancient Christians would have been very perplexed if their priest skipped the homily. Indeed, current rubrics *mandate* the homily on every Sunday and holy day unless a “serious reason” prevents it.

Father Joseph Jungmann, perhaps the Church's greatest liturgical historian, repeatedly emphasized the homily's sacred nature and absolute importance. In his masterpiece, *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (1951), he wrote:

“The homily was the living word of the Church taken up into the liturgy as proof of the higher world in which it lives and into which it enters after being renewed by the sacred mysteries.”

Father Jungmann used the word “was” instead of “is” because he wrote this in the early 1950s. Back then, sermons had gradually replaced the classical homily almost everywhere, including the United States. Father Jungmann — and other theologians like him — hoped to revive the homily as one means toward unifying the eucharistic sacrifice, which consists of *word* and sacrament.

Let's explore Father Jungmann's statement more closely.

First, he asserted that the homily is “the living word of the Church.” Here he shockingly establishes a complete union of the homilist and the “living Word,” who is Christ.

Long after Father Jungmann's death in 1975, the Church, through the *General Instruction*, beautifully echoed his basic position:

“For in the readings, as explained by the homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering them spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present in the midst of the faithful through his word.” (*GIRM* 55)

This text reminds us that God *truly* dwells within sacred Scripture, the homily's focal point. As such, the homily is a true and essential liturgical act. Sermons are not.

In light of this, we begin to understand why the homily must be “purified” of personal opinions, comedy, scolding, sports talk, trendy slang, and so on.

Second, “the living word of the Church” primarily refers to the whole of sacred Scripture. The homily, then, must have a strong connection with the biblical readings assigned for each day in the lectionary. This prevents the homilist from picking and choosing his own favorites, thereby depriving people of the fullness of the Word.

Because sacred Scripture has puzzling and obscure passages, the homily serves as a “bridge” — a conversation — between the word of God and the hearts of people who hear him. This conversation, sparked and supported by the homily, should become a continuous *spiritual* experience, as well as an *intellectual* one.

Before moving on, please allow one blunt statement. If the priest or deacon speaks about anything totally disconnected from the biblical readings, you have *not* heard a homily. Maybe you got a sermon, theology lesson or some good jokes. But not a homily.

Third, Father Jungmann noted that the homily gets “taken up into the liturgy.” This means that the homily itself is sacred, an event deeply immersed in three forms of prayer — the prayer of the people engaged in the Mass; the prayer of the preacher himself, whose preparation and delivery emerge from prayer; and the prayer of Christ, whose living presence penetrates the Church through word and sacrament.

By contrast, the sermon stands on its own. Even when elegant and fruitful, it lacks the sacramental power of the homily, which has a deep organic connection with the Eucharist.

As to your comment about the wide range of preaching by priests you've encountered, much can be said. I'll limit myself to two factors.

First, the priesthood embraces several generations, currently spanning more than 60 years of age. Priestly formation that occurred, say, before 1962, stressed dogmatics and liturgical precision. It prepared seminarians to give sermons, not homilies. Priests educated in the 1980s — my own era — received much training in biblical studies and some in homiletics, but not very much. As to priestly formation today, I honestly can't speak to this.

Second, beginning with the apostles, priests come in all sizes, shapes and backgrounds. Some have natural oratorical talents that make them good homilists. Others do not. Because every homily, especially within Mass, is a sacred and grace-filled mystery, the Lord can cause it to bear abundant fruit.

Homily or sermon? I hope that this theological explanation of how the two differ will enhance your experience of hearing the word. Much more happens at Mass than meets the eyes — and the ears.

And please pray for those ordained men who have the duty and privilege of offering you the homily, the Lord's voice at Mass. ■

**DEAR FATHER KERPER:** What's the difference between a homily and a sermon? I've been going to Mass for a long time and I notice that some priests give homilies, some preach sermons, some tell stories and some say nothing at all. Why does this happen?

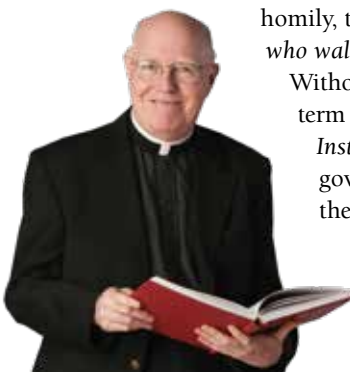
At one time the words homily and sermon meant essentially the same thing. Today they differ enormously. We discover the key differences by studying the words themselves.

The word sermon comes directly from the Latin word *sermo* while homily comes directly from the Greek word *homilia*. The Latin and Greek words mean the same thing: conversation.

Homily, however, has a second root — *homilein*, which means “to consort with a crowd.” The word homily, then, designates a conversation *among people who walk together*.

Without doubt, the Church clearly prefers the term homily. We see proof of this in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the preeminent governing document of the sacred liturgy. It uses the word homily 16 times; it never uses sermon.

Why? Because sermon usually means a *speech* about a religious topic delivered *apart from* the sacred liturgy. This separation of preaching from the Mass began in the Middle Ages and continues even today in certain parishes. In some ancient Roman churches, for example, one



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