

Should a priest [or a deacon] deliver the homily at Mass or can anyone?

The Second Vatican Council in *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* saw the need to renew the Mass, especially in the area of what is known today as “The Liturgy of the Word.” The Council Fathers taught, “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s Word” (#51).

Part of this “opening up” of the Word of God is linked with the homily. In his homily, the priest has the opportunity to explain the mysteries of the faith and their relevance for today’s life. He should exhort the people to live the fullness of the gospel message, presenting Christian moral principles and their application. A good homily should involve the explanation of the Sacred Scriptures, the catechesis of Christian doctrine, and the exhortation to live the faith. Consequently, the priest must not shy away from his duty to challenge his people to embrace the word of God and to live an authentic Christian life. The homily is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word. (Note: the term *sermon* refers to a talk on a religious subject, whereas *homily* refers specifically to the explanation and application of Sacred Scripture.)

This duty of the **priest** to give a homily has been emphasized repeatedly. Keep in mind that the privilege of preaching the homily is reserved to the priest, because through the Sacrament of Holy Orders [to the Presbyterate] he receives a special charism to preach. Vatican II’s *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* stated, “The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God, which is quite rightly sought from the mouth of priests. For since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men” (#4).

Preaching is integral not only to the office of the priest but also to his offering of the Mass. According to the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, which provides the norms for the offering of Mass, a homily is to be given on Sundays and holy days of obligation at Masses celebrated with people. A homily is also recommended for daily Masses or other Masses with a congregation, especially during Advent, Lent, and Easter season. (#42.) ... The Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship issued its *Third Instruction on the Correct Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1970) and clearly asserted, “The homily is the task of the priest.” Ten years later, the same congregation, now named The Sacred Congregation for Sacraments and Divine Worship, repeated the regulation: “The Homily is to be given by the priest or deacon” (#3).

These principles have been incorporated into the *Code of Canon Law*, again asserting the duty of the priest (or deacon) to preach the homily during Mass but also restricting the privilege to him alone (Canon 767).

Most recently, in 1997, eight Vatican offices issued an instruction entitled *Some Questions Regarding Collaboration of Nonordained Faithful in Priests’ Sacred Ministry*. Here again, the point is clearly made: “The homily, therefore, during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, must be reserved to the sacred minister, priest or deacon ... (Article 3.)

In cases where a special appeal is made at Mass, such as if the Little Sisters of the Poor visit the parish to appeal for donations, a talk may be given after the homily or better yet, after Holy Communion. Again, in no way should a priest relinquish his duty to preach the Gospel, and in no way should the talk be confused with the homily.

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