In Evangelii Gaudium (EG), Pope Francis describes the homily as a matter that every ordained preacher needs to reflect on. He says: “We know that the faithful attach great importance to [the homily], and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God’s word, a constant source of renewal and growth” (EG, 135).

Last June, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued its Homiletic Directory (HD). This document aims to summarize the teaching about the homiletic ministry and the practical experience of homilists during the past fifty years, so it has two major parts. “The Homily and Its Liturgical Setting” describes magisterial teaching on the homily, beginning with the Second Vatican Council. The second part, “Ars Praedicandi,” draws on pastoral experience to offer practical suggestions on preaching for the major seasons, Sundays in Ordinary Time, and other occasions (weekday Mass, weddings, and funerals).

In this article, we want to look at the connection between the homily and the rest of the liturgical act, in particular, at the ways in which the homily connects with the sung aspects of the Sacred Liturgy.

We begin with a rather unexpected description of the homily found in the first section of the document: “Because the homily is an integral part of the Liturgy, it is not only an instruction, it is also an act of worship . . . . The homily is a hymn of gratitude for the magnalia Dei, which not only tells those assembled that God’s Word is fulfilled in their hearing, but praises God for this fulfillment” (HD, 4).

With their insistence that the homily is a liturgical act and, indeed, “an integral part of the Church’s worship” that has “a sacramental significance” (HD, 5, 4), it’s interesting that the document’s authors chose this aspect of the Liturgy as a metaphor for the homily. They are at pains (HD, 6) to describe what the homily is not: It is not a “sermon on an abstract topic” nor “the occasion for in-depth biblical exegesis.” It is not “catechetical instruction, even if catechesis is an important dimension of the homily.” And it is not a time for the “preacher’s personal witness.” These may all be effective elements of a good homily (HD, 7), but they are not exactly what the homily is supposed to be.

Drawing on the Introduction to the Lectionary (IL), the Directory names the purpose of a homily as a unifying act by which “the spoken word of God and the Liturgy of the Eucharist may together become ‘a proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ’” (IL, 24, quoting Sacrosanctum Concilium, 35§2). Suited to the particular needs of this unique liturgical
assembly, the homily proclaims God’s work in history and in this community of believers in such a way as to “lead the community of the faithful to celebrate the Eucharist actively” (HD, 11, quoting IL, 24). In summary, the homily “reflects on the meaning of the readings and prayers of a given celebration in light of the Paschal Mystery; and it leads the assembly to the Eucharistic celebration in which they have communion in the Paschal Mystery itself” (HD, 15). Finally, the homily “suggests how the members of the community, transformed by the Eucharist, can carry the Gospel into the world in their daily lives” (HD, 14).

What does this have to do, then, with that description of the homily as a “hymn of gratitude”? It has to do with the homily as “an organic part of the Mass” (HD, 16), as a speech act not unlike the proclamation of the readings and the prayers. It is a proclamation that must be much more than a dry presentation of doctrine. Referring to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Directory describes the homily as a proclamation of the “heart of Christ” which is found in the heart of the Church “rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God’s Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture” (HD, 17).

So in a sense, the homily is a participation in the whole purpose of the Liturgy. And it is not only the homily but the whole Liturgy that may be described in musical terms, as the U.S. Catholic Bishops point out in Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship (STL, 2007), when they quote Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) to point out that “the primordial song of the Liturgy is the canticle of victory over sin and death . . . . For Christians, the Resurrection of Christ is the true Exodus . . . . The definitive new song has been intoned . . . .” (STL, 7, quoting The Spirit of the Liturgy).

**THINK ON THESE THINGS**

Think about the homily when you reflect on what the bishops have to say about music’s function in ritual worship. Like the homily, sung worship is a speech event that is part of the sacramental action (STL, 2). Sacred music, the bishops point out, has a ritual dimension. It is connected to the liturgical action “so that it accords with the structure of the Liturgy and expresses the shape of the rite” (STL, 68), just as the homily proclaims the meaning of the readings and prayers in a way that brings worshipers into the Eucharist, leading them to communion in the Paschal Mystery (HD, 11). The spiritual dimension of music “adds greater depth to prayer, unity to the assembly, or dignity to the ritual. Sacred music is holy when it mediates the holiness of God and forms the Holy People of God more fully into communion with him and with each other in Christ” (STL, 69). Like the homily, then, music brings us into the “heart of Christ” via the “heart of the Church” (HD, 17).

This unified vision of sung worship and the homily as a “hymn of gratitude” suggests several practical applications. The first is that the ordained preacher and the parish director of music ministries should
work together on crafting the celebration (see General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 352), and they should both approach this task from the perspective of homily and music as part of the liturgical action (i.e., how all this works together to draw people into the Paschal Mystery).

The second practical application is a creative use of the principle of progressive solemnity (see STL, 110–114) in preparing both homily and music. If the nature of the occasion and of the gathered assembly affect “not only the nature and style of the music, but how many and which parts of the rite are to be sung” (STL, 112), cannot the same be said about the homily and the way the preacher approaches preparation for this part of the Liturgy? Preacher and musician, reflecting together, may prepare a celebration in which homily and sung prayer reinforce one another, expand the experience that each provides to the gathered assembly, and deepens the spiritual impact of the whole.

The third application is that what’s good for the homilist is good for the musician, and vice versa. So the music director should study the Homiletic Directory, especially the second part, which reflects on the meaning and images of the seasons and celebrations, and the ordained preacher should study Sing to the Lord as well as the texts of hymns, which are themselves often homiletic. Both should study the texts of the prayers for Mass, determining which might best be sung on a given occasion to enrich their meaning, impel that meaning deeper into the minds and hearts of worshipers, and offer a stronger invitation into the Paschal Mystery.

And all involved in ministry should remember this invitation and admonition from St. Paul: “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

**More on the Homily from Pope Francis**

On Sunday morning, April 26, Pope Francis ordained nineteen new priests, exhorting them to serve the flock rather than manage it and to feed the people of God with heartfelt homilies rather than boring sermons. “Let this be the nourishment of the People of God,” Francis said during the ceremony in Saint Peter’s Basilica, “that your sermons are not boring, that your homilies reach people’s hearts because they come from your heart, because what you say to them is what you carry in your heart.”

The Pope also urged the new priests to practice what they preach, so that their good example will bear witness to the truth of their words. A good example builds people up, Francis said, “but words without actions are empty words, they are ideas that never make it to the heart, and they can even do harm rather than good!”

He continued, drawing on the sample homily provided in the rite: “Share with all the Word of God that you yourselves have received with joy. Read and meditate assiduously on the Word of the Lord so you may believe what you read, teach...”

“Sacred music is holy when it mediates the holiness of God and forms the Holy People of God more fully into communion with him and with each other in Christ.”
what you have learned in faith, and live out what you have taught.”

The Pope also gave this practical advice to the new priests: “When you celebrate Mass, be aware of what you are doing. Do not rush through it!”

(This report is drawn in part from Thomas D. Williams’s article in Breitbart, April 26, 2015.)

MEET THE SECTION LEADER

My name is Jim Bessert, and I’m honored to accept the post of chair for the Steering Committee of the NPM Clergy Section. I’m a presbyter of the Diocese of Saginaw (I’ll be celebrating my thirty-fifth anniversary of ordination with Pope Francis on September 27 in Philadelphia). After varied parochial and diocesan assignments, I presently serve as the director of the Office of Liturgy for the Diocese and as sacramental minister of Saint John Paul II Parish in Carrollton, Michigan. I’ve actually been a member of NPM even prior to my diaconate ordination in 1979. I’ve served the Association in a variety of ways over the years, from convention liturgy and musical preparations to workshop presentations, hospitality, etc. in collaborative leadership (and friendship) with Virgil Funk, Michael McMahon, and Gordon Truitt. And, now I’m very pleased to offer the same willing service to Rick Hilgartner, given his kind invitation to serve as your section leader.

This year’s Annual NPM Convention in Grand Rapids, Michigan (our neighboring diocese to the immediate west) sets the tenor (no pun intended) for what I see as creative avenues to envision future NPM gatherings. I encourage you to register—sooner rather than later—along with your pastoral musician (if possible) to attend this year’s Annual Convention, “Called to Joy and Hope: Let the Servant Church Arise!” In addition to the designated “Clergy Track,” this year’s convention offers us countless opportunities, through workshops, exchanges, prayer, events, concerts, and service projects, to find time for spiritual enrichment, celebration, reflection, and (yes!) even relaxation. I’m particularly happy to invite you to Wednesday’s Breakout D-04 with Karl Pung, a presbyter and gifted spiritual guide and presenter from of the Diocese of Lansing (also here in Michigan). He will offer a reflection on “Gold Tested in Fire: A New Pentecost for the Priesthood.”

And please don’t forget our NPM Interest Section for Clergy Meeting on Monday July 6 (4:00–5:00 pm), at which we hope to brainstorm future convention presentations as well as identify new approaches in building up membership among our brother priests and deacons (and seminarians).

I look forward to seeing you in Grand Rapids. Until then, all peace and good!
CONVENTION DISCOUNTS

NPM offers special discounts so that more staff and parishioners might attend the convention. Be sure to consider them as you make your plans for Grand Rapids.

Advance Registration. If you register for the convention by June 5, you can save $50 off the regular rate. And don’t forget: If you have a current NPM parish membership, anyone in the parish can register at the members’ rate. If you have a current individual membership, the members’ rate is available only to you.

Clergy/Musician Duo Discount. One clergy member and one musician from a parish with a current parish membership, who register for the convention together and in advance, can receive even greater discounts. Registration by June 5 costs just $320 each (a savings of $25 each off the advance fee). Please note: This discount is not available online or onsite.

Youth Discount. NPM member youth (twenty-one and younger) attending the full convention receive a discounted rate ($235 if registered by June 5; $285 regular rate). Remember that a parent or chaperone must accompany youth attendees under eighteen; the chaperone must be at least twenty-one years old and registered either for the full convention or as a companion. Signed copies of the Code of Conduct for Youth Participating in NPM Conventions, Code of Conduct for Chaperones and Parents Acting as Chaperones, and the Parental or Guardian Permission Form and Release must be on file with NPM before anyone under the age of eighteen will be admitted to the convention. For more information, visit Code of Conduct.

Seminarian/Religious in Formation. While the normal convention registration fee for seminarians and religious who are in formation programs is the same as that for youth, through the generosity of an anonymous donor we are able to offer a discounted fee of just $135 for registrations that arrive by June 5, and $185 after June 5.

Group Discounts. NPM chapters and parishes with a current NPM parish membership who register in groups receive a discount. Chapter directors have the information about chapter discounts; the rates for parish group discounts are in the May issue of Pastoral Music.