

## HOW'S THE PREACHING?

### YOUNG LISTENERS' RESPONSE TO THE HOMILY LAST HEARD

*Let no one despise you for your youth...*  
—I Timothy 4:12

We were halfway through the discussion in the focus group when a blond sixteen year old shifted his chair around the table to face me. He leaned forward and earnestly told the group that he planned to become a priest. This discussion on preaching interested him greatly. He declared:

You need to get this information to the younger priests. This input could help the ones who are learning how to preach. Go to a seminary. Tell them what we have said.<sup>1</sup>

A seventeen year old girl across the table added,

If we are going to be open to listening to their homilies every week, or more than once a week, they should be open to listening to our advice about it. If they're standing in for God at Mass because they're presiding, also seeing us as all being equal, hopefully, they will be open to listening to what we have to say.

This is a generation which is accustomed to interaction. As I write this, Super Bowl XLVI advertisers are preparing to invite viewers to interact with the commercials that they will see on the screen. No longer satisfied to let us lounge in a recliner and stare at the big screen, Audi will be prompting consumers to tweet about their commercials; Go-Daddy is enhancing ads with quick-response codes (QR) which will take people to a website to see more ad content and download coupons. We inhabit a two-way world. Young people ask questions and register their opinions. They grow up expecting to be heard.

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<sup>1</sup>The average age at which the ordained class of 2011 decided to enter the priesthood was also 16. Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), "The Class of 2011: Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood," CARA, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/ordination-class/upload/ordination-class-2011-report.pdf> [accessed July 12, 2011].

The opening query of this thesis was the question: God, if you are here, are you talking to me? Is there a word from the Lord for us this day? If preaching is the bread and butter of discipleship as postulated in chapter 1, the stories and illustrations from chapter 3 paint pictures of individual experiences of connection and growth in faith. It seems as though the Holy Spirit, the “Connector,” *is* at work in their lives. How many of them experience Sunday preaching as a locus of encounter and faith growth? As a group, how common is this—does it happen often?

This chapter will look at their collective quantitative responses to ask: what do these young disciples have to say to the Church about preaching? The first section will describe the demographics of both listeners and preachers. Statistics of response to the person of the preacher constitute the second part. The evaluation of the homily in the third subdivision of this chapter will be presented as short-term responses, long-term take-away, and relationships. The final segment will discuss key findings of the study. To begin, who are these young disciples who have so much to say about preaching?

## **Demographics of the Study**

### ***Self-Described Characteristics of Listeners***

In May and September of 2011, seven Catholic high schools: two from New York and one each from California, Maine, Ohio, Louisiana, and Indiana, participated in the paper survey *Are You Talking to Me? A Study of Young Listeners' Connection with Catholic Sunday Preaching*.<sup>2</sup> Of these schools, three were inner city schools, three were suburban, and one was rural. The focus groups from Ohio completed their discussions of preaching by also filling out the paper survey. The average age of the 561 respondents was 16.2 years old.

As a random cluster sample, in five of these schools, all of the students in a particular

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<sup>2</sup>A sample of the paper survey *Are You Talking to Me?* is found at <http://www.thecenterforpep.com/our-work/research-initiatives/are-you-talking-to-me-a-study-of-young-listeners-connection-with-sunday-preaching/>

teacher's theology classes responded to the questions of the survey. Two schools required permission slips of the students' parents, therefore only those with the proper paperwork answered the questions. Of these, 470 were baptized Catholics representing 203 Catholic parishes. Of that Catholic population, 294 (63%) attended Mass at least once a month (Group I),<sup>3</sup> which was the baseline for inclusion in the evaluation of the preacher that they last heard (table 4.1).

**Table 4.1. All Respondents Grouped by Faith Tradition and Attendance Response**

Grouping	Number	% of Total	% of Catholics Surveyed	Number of Males	% of Group that is Male	Number of Females	% of Group that is Female
Group I – Baptized Catholic, attends Mass at least once per month	294	52	63	184	63	110	37
Group II – Baptized Catholic, does not attend Mass at least once per month	176	31	37	89	51	87	49
Group III – Non-Catholic	91	16	---	51	56	40	44
<b>Total</b>	<b>561</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>42</b>

*Source: Are You Talking to Me?* questions 8 and 9

The other baptized Catholics (37%), those who did not attend once a month (Group II), answered a second bank of questions including “Why not?” Ninety-one of the respondents were non-Catholics who described themselves as atheist, agnostic, Orthodox, various kinds of Protestants, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Taoist, Rastafarian, animist, Deist, Wiccan, and nothing (Group III). The population was sought for its diversity of parishes and geography, clarity of articulation, and ease of administration.

In ethnicity, the make-up of the Group I sample population was broadly similar to the United States population of Catholic high school students. The African-American

<sup>3</sup>Coincidentally, 63% is the same percentage of Catholic adults who attended Mass at least once per month in 2005 as determined from the chart on page three of: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), “Self-reported Mass Attendance of U.S. Catholics Unchanged during Last Five Years,” CARA, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/AttendPR.pdf> [accessed 7-15-11].

**Table 4.2. Group I – Self-described student race**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>National Average for Catholic Secondary Schools<sup>4</sup></b>
White or European	223	75.8	68.6
Hispanic or South American	24	8.2	12.3
Asian or Asian-American	14	4.7	4.4
Black or African-American	8	2.8	8.2
Filipino/a	7	2.4	1
Creole	1	0.3	N/A
No Response	17	5.8	
<b>Total</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

*Source:* *Are You Talking to Me?* Question 5

population was considerably lower than the national average and the Hispanic population somewhat lower, perhaps due to regional differences (table 4.2). The Filipino population of the current study was higher than the national average. Catholic high school students come from more affluent and educated families than the broader U.S. teen population.<sup>5</sup> Economic data was not collected in this survey, but the characteristics of the particular schools as described by their respective websites would indicate that this may also hold true for the population sampled.

As discussed in chapter 1, in his nationally representative sample of U.S. teens, Smith found Catholic teenagers to be religiously lax in all of his measures of religiosity when compared to their counterparts in Protestant faiths.<sup>6</sup> As I designed this study, I wondered how (and/or if) the respondents' faith life would impact how he or she evaluated and responded to Sunday preaching. Therefore, questions 41-49 and 64-68 in the survey, "Your Way of Seeing the

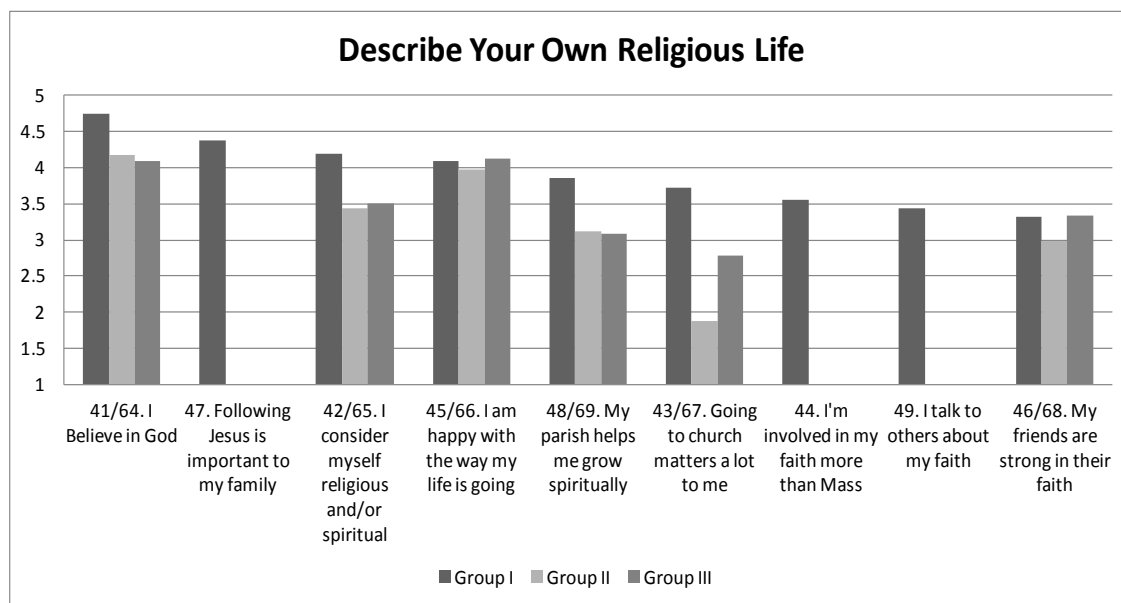
<sup>4</sup>National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), "Catholic School Data, *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2010-2011*, The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing," NCEA, <http://www.ncea.org/news/annualdatareport.asp#ethnicity> [accessed 1-17-12].

<sup>5</sup>Smith, 212.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, 209.

World,” inquire about personal faith life.

Their strongest reply about faith was belief in God (question 47): 87.4 % of students in these Catholic schools agreed in some way (combining “strongly agree” with “somewhat agree”) that they believed in God. Those who disagreed (combining strongly disagree and disagree) were 6.2 % and those who neither agreed nor disagreed that they believed in God were also 6.3 %. Most considered themselves to be spiritual and/or religious. They were generally pretty happy with their lives (see Figure 4.1). For the baptized Catholics who did not attend church (Group II), they disagreed that going to church matters to them. For the group who did go to Mass at least once a month (Group I), the agreement tended somewhat lackadaisically toward its importance. Group III was a combination of church-going Protestants and non-church-goers, so that mean is mixed by responses from both sides.



**Figure 4.1.** Mean values from questions 41-49 and 64-69; 5=strongly agree, 4=somewhat agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 2= somewhat disagree, 1=strongly disagree.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The average of Likert scale values does not represent a true mean since the distance between the intervals may not be perceived by the respondent as equidistant. These figures are an indication of central tendency; for the average response to hover around the value 3 demonstrates that about as many disagree as agree.

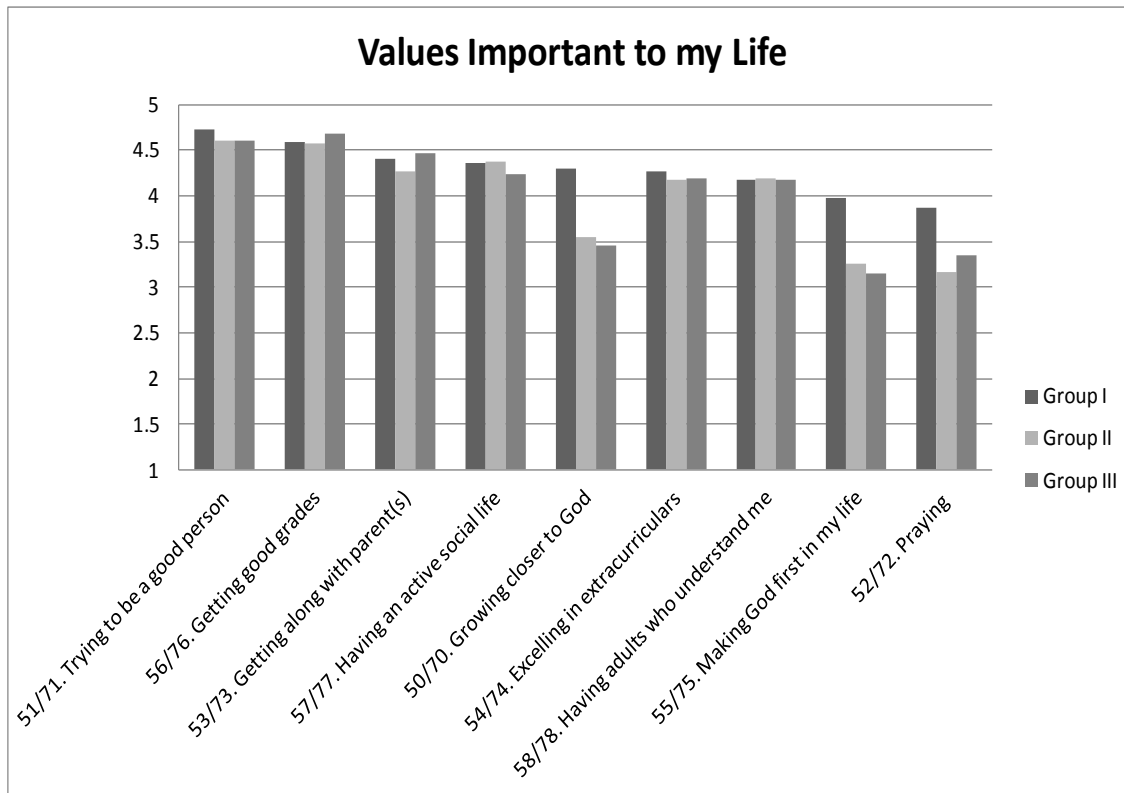
For parents who both pay Catholic school tuition *and* get their teenagers to Mass regularly, they can be reassured that their offspring know that following Jesus is important to their families. Support structures that undergird the faith of these young people (other than family) ranked lower.<sup>8</sup> Smith found that 11% of all Catholic youth in his 2002-2003 study participated in religious activities outside of Mass.<sup>9</sup> The responses to this study reflected similarly: there was a moderately low influence of parish, extra-liturgical involvement, and friendships in faith. In general, as an average, peer faith support seemed weak for these Catholic high school students even though they were surrounded daily by the accouterments of faith in a Catholic institution.

Initially, the set of questions 50-58 and 70-78, “The Person of the Listener,” was created to correlate response to the homily with values which the listener deemed important. Yet one discovery became immediately clear: the highest average value in all three groups was overwhelmingly “trying to be a good person.” The lowest two were “making God first in my life” followed by the rock bottom value: “praying.” Though the students merely rated each of these values as to their importance, when ranked, the order across each of the three populations was identical—the numerical values varied between attending and non-attending, but the sequence of values did not change (figure 4.2).

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<sup>8</sup>Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *A Faith of their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 143-170. Pearce and Denton describe interviews with adolescents about the sources of social scaffolding which impact their refinement of religious identity.

<sup>9</sup>Smith, 209.



**Figure 4.2.** Mean values from questions 50-58 and 70-78: 5=really important, 4=important, 3=somewhat important, 2= not important, 1=not at all important.

Trying to be a good person mattered. Being God's person was not as important—it ranked lower than good grades, an active social life, excelling in extracurriculars, and getting along with parents. This was a consistent finding between Catholic and non-Catholic youth. Smith described similar beliefs in his study of American youth—religion is only one element among the many other things that young people in our country value and are involved in. According to Smith, teenagers believe that there is a God; God is useful when life has problems, God wants people to get along amiably, be happy and feel good; and good people go to heaven.<sup>10</sup> The stated values of the studied population broadly fit with this mainstream cultural belief.

The baseline for inclusion into the evaluation of the Sunday homily was attending Mass at least once per month. Therefore, the student data henceforth described in this chapter will be

<sup>10</sup>Smith, 163.

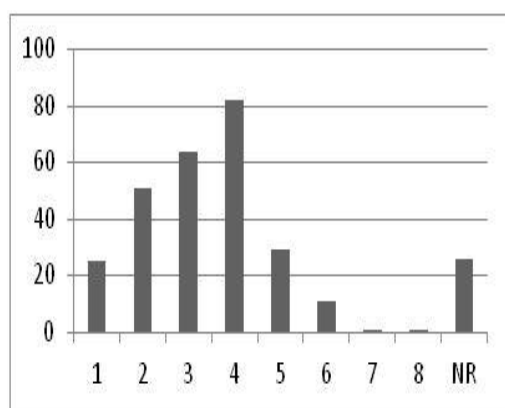
taken from Group I, those who self-described as regular Mass attendees.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 4.3. Why did you go to Mass this particular Sunday?**

Response	Number	Percentage
To worship God	134	41.3
I was required to	104	32.0
To be with friends and/or family	58	17.9
Other	15	4.7
To be entertained	2	0.6
No Response	11	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>99.9</b>

*Source:* *Are You Talking to Me?* question 37. More than 294 data points are recorded because respondents could pick more than one response.

Mass attendance in this group ranged from one to eight times per month with an average of 3.32 times (figure 4.3). They were asked, “What was the chief reason that you went to Mass this particular day?” As shown in table 4.3., the greatest number (41%) responded that they came to worship God. About a third (32%) admitted that they were there because they were required to be.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 4.3** Group I Mass attendances by number of weeks in the last month, question 9a.

<sup>11</sup>The data from non-attending Catholics and non-Catholics who attend Catholic schools are also interesting and will be used in a future publication.

<sup>12</sup>Only two ninth grade boys said that they came to Mass to be entertained, dispelling the shibboleth that “kids only come to be entertained.” They rated their preacher (the same one) highly.



To summarize, the average respondent in Group I is a 16 year old boy or girl who goes to Mass just under four times per month. He or she believes in God, tries to be a good person, and wants to get good grades. Praying and putting God first are not that important. As a Catholic school student, his or her parents can or choose to afford to pay tuition or he/she is there on a scholarship. He or she comes to Mass to worship God and/or because mom or dad says so. Following Jesus matters to their families. In short, these young respondents are the present and the future of the Catholic Church. What do they have to say about their preachers?

### ***Demographics of the Preachers***

On the day that the students took the paper survey in their theology classes, they were asked to evaluate the homily and the homilist that they had last heard. In this way, they did not get to select the preacher about which they wrote. Two hundred and two preachers were evaluated, determined by the first letter of the preacher's name, the age of the preacher and the name of the parish per geographical region. Ninety-one percent of those were priests (table 4.4). Four percent were deacons. One was a bishop:

**Table 4.4. Category of preacher evaluated**

Category	Number	Percentage
Priest	184	91.1
Deacon	8	4.0
Bishop	1	0.5
No Designation	9	4.4
Total	202	100

*Source: Are You Talking to Me?* questions 3, 10 and 10a

Based on the student's evaluation of the age of the preacher, the median category was 46-60 years old (table 4.5). This closely reflects national statistics of the age of Roman Catholic clergy in the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 4.5. Age of preachers evaluated**

Age Grouping	Student Response	Percentage
25-35 years old	27	9.2
36-45 years old	58	19.7
46-60 years old	125	42.5
61 – 79 years old	73	24.8
80 + years old	7	2.4
No Response	4	1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>99.9</b>

*Source: Are You Talking to Me? question 12*

The number of clergy assigned to a parish is a rough approximation of the size of a Catholic parish. The average number of priests in a U.S. parish was 1.8 in 2005.<sup>14</sup> To give a rough estimation of parish size, students were asked to record the total number of priests and deacons in their parish. The number of preachers (priests and deacons) ranged from 1 – 10 with an average for the sample population of 2.9 preachers per parish.

<sup>13</sup>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), "The Catholic Information Project," USCCB, <http://old.usccb.org/comm/cip.shtml#toc5> [accessed 1-31-12]. The average clergy age in 2006 was 60 with a median age of 56. In 2009, a third of all active diocesan priests was 65 or older. A 2008 survey of Catholic diocesan priests revealed that half of currently active diocesan priests plan to retire in the next 10 years.

<sup>14</sup>The National Institute for the Renewal of the Priesthood (NIRM), "The National Catholic Parish Survey," NIRM, <http://www.jknirp.com/castell.htm> [accessed 1-31-12].

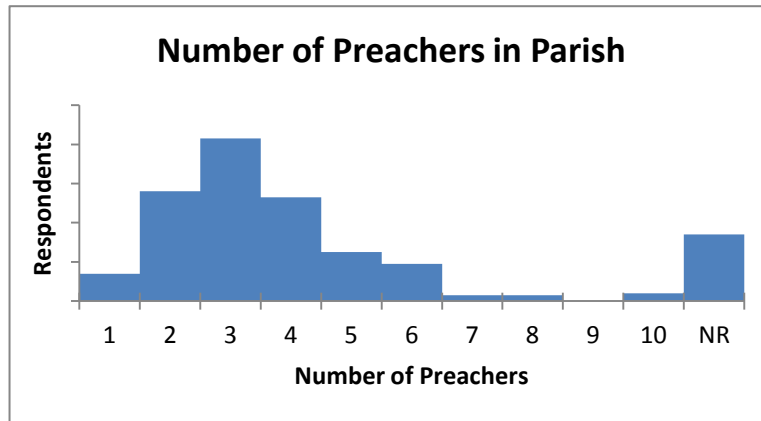


Figure 4.4. Number of preachers in the parish, question 11.

The demographics from this study generally mirror national statistics of Catholic high school student life. The four hundred and seventy baptized Catholic high school students surveyed hold values not unlike the overall beliefs of U.S. Catholic teens. The 202 preachers evaluated come from parishes of average sizes and mirror the age range of U.S. Catholic priests. Therefore, the data of this study should be fairly indicative of the responses of the U.S. church-going teen population.

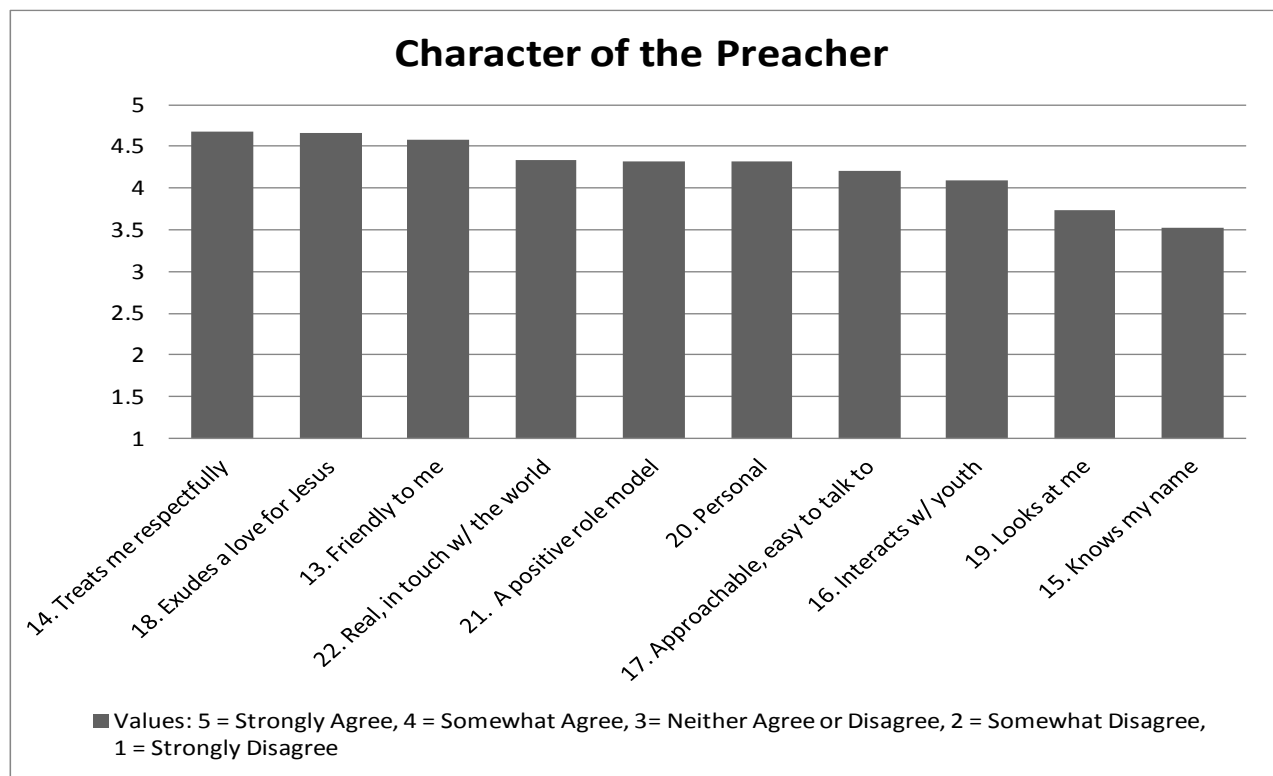
What, then, did these young people have to say about the preacher and the Catholic preaching that they last heard? Chapter 1 described Gorham's study in which factors of immediacy in connecting with a teacher correlated to better learning by students. Would this be true also in preaching? The next section looks at the person of the preacher in order to subsequently determine if the character of the homilist is a key to how Catholic youth relate to the homily.

### **The Person of the Preacher**

On page three of the survey, one sixteen year old sophomore boy, whom we will arbitrarily name Tony, circled that he strongly agreed that his preacher was friendly to him, treated him with respect and called him by name. He was ambivalent as to whether the preacher

was approachable, interacted with young people regularly or was real and in touch with the world. When he got to “exudes a love for Jesus,” he circled “strongly agree.” There he penned in a comment: “Yeah, he’s a priest?” It was a remark written to the author of the survey as though to say, “Duh...” His clergyman was *expected* to exude a love for Jesus. How could it be otherwise? For his own life, he wrote, “Uplifting to me does not entail more Christian-like acts, just generic good deeds.” Though more expressive than most, Tony captured the expectation of the majority of these church-goers (figure 4.5): they think highly of the person of their preacher and presume faith from him.

Young people who are actively going to church show remarkably low levels of disagreement with the statements of immediacy from questions 14-22. Their preachers are, in the words of a seventeen year old boy, “nice guys.” Table 4.6 gives the percentage of response per



**Figure 4.5.** Averaged Responses to the Person of the Preacher

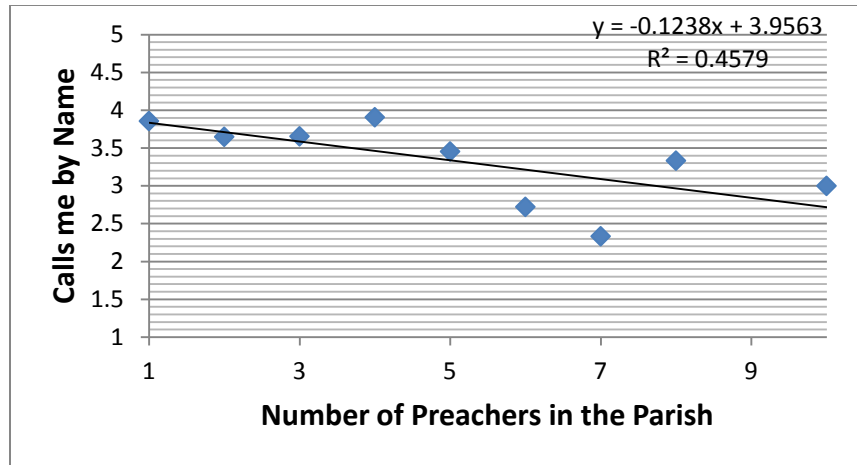
**Table 4.6. Percentage of Responses to “The Person of the Preacher”**

	14. Treats me with respect	18. Exudes a love for Jesus	13. Friendly to me	22. Real, in touch w/ world	21. A role model to me	20. Uses personal examples	17. Approach- able, easy to talk to	16, Interacts with young people	15. Calls me by name	19. Looks at me
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	79.1	76.1	70.5	57.3	56.9	54.9	52.7	46.0	45.2	33.8
<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	13.7	16.5	20.5	27.0	24.7	29.4	25.0	28.9	11.4	29.0
<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	4.8	6.0	6.5	9.6	13.8	10.2	13.4	17.2	16.2	24.5
<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	0.7	0.0	0.7	4.8	2.5	4.1	6.8	4.5	6.9	6.6
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	1.7	1.4	1.7	1.4	2.1	1.4	2.1	3.4	20.3	6.2

Source: *Are You Talking to Me*, questions 13 – 22

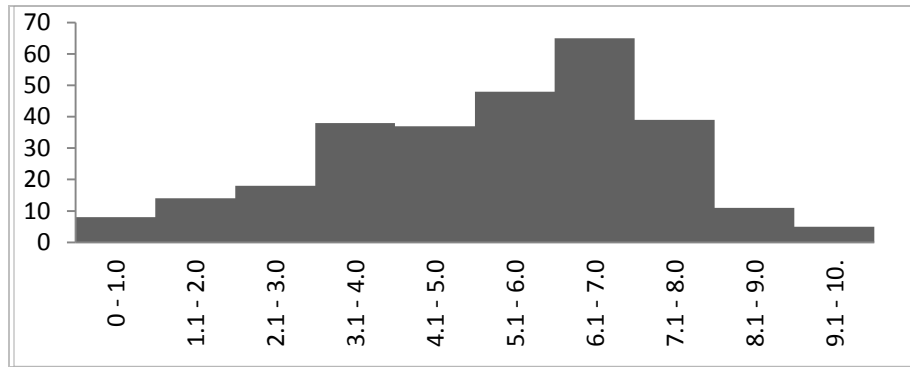
From all regions of the country, these young people who are regularly in the pews rated their preachers as treating them with respect, exuding a love for Jesus and friendly. Significantly, 82% of them agreed in some fashion that their preacher was a role model for them. As shown by the qualitative responses in chapter 3, they are obviously not disengaged. They are listening. They are observing what their priest or deacon does. They watch how he interacts with his people.

The lowest average value in figure 4.5, which resulted from the greatest level of disagreement (27%) in question 15, came from the preacher not calling the youth by name. This mildly negatively correlated ( $r^2=0.4579$ ) with the size of the parish as indicated by its number of preachers (Figure 4.5, 5=strongly agree that he calls me by name). Many preachers in a parish meant that the particular preacher who was being evaluated was less likely to call the young person by name.



**Figure 4.6.** Correlation between questions 11–“How many preachers are in the parish?” and 15– “Does this particular preacher call you by name?”

Central to this study is the concept of connection. Question 24 was an open-ended query of what it means for a preacher to “connect.” The responses to that question were categorized and described in the previous chapter. Question 25 then asked those surveyed to put a number value on that connection: “From your point of view, how well does this particular preacher connect with you?” On a gradient scale of one to ten, Tony the sophomore drew a broad circle around the numbers three through seven and scrawled in, “somewhere in here.” He again captured the heart of the responses (figure 4.7). Of the 283 young people who answered this question (11 left it blank), the mean was 5.6, slightly above “somewhat connected” with a standard deviation of 19.95 responses. The “nice guys” are “sort of” connected with the young people who sit in their pews.



**Figure 4.7.** Question 25: How well does this preacher connect with you? (on a gradient scale of 1=completely disconnected, 5=somewhat connected, 10=very connected)

Secondly, the ten data points of “The Person of the Preacher” (questions 14-22) were averaged per respondent to form an overall “person of the preacher response value” (PPRV). A linear regression was run to correlate that statistic with that same respondent’s connection value in question 25. The two variables showed no correlation ( $r^2=0.173$ ).

How well the preacher personally connected with the young person did not affect the youth’s perception of that preacher. His friendliness, approachability, and love for Jesus were consistently perceived to be higher than the personal connection between them.

It might seem intuitive that younger clergy would be seen more positively by younger people. Statistically this did not correlate (age of preacher/PPRV:  $r^2=0.0255$ ). Older and younger clergy were almost equally well-respected. When asked to demarcate the age of her preacher, an eighteen year old girl from African immigrant parents, crossed off the survey’s words “really old” (for the 80+ category) and delightfully re-wrote the age designation as “wise and elderly.” These young people think well of their preachers. Does this benevolence transfer to the Sunday homily?

### **The Sunday Homily**

Sunday preaching is a source for jokes, laments, and conversations. A seventeen year old

retreat leader narrated the tale of her family dinner table discussion about her upcoming participation in one of the study's focus groups:

I told my family about this, because they're like, "What's up? What's up with you, what are you doing tomorrow?" (I've got a huge family.) And I was telling them, "Oh yeah, before (retreat meeting), I have this huge survey on, like, Catholic preaching," and then all my little brothers, they were just like, "Oh, my gosh, homilies..." (her voice dropped, deprecatingly in imitation) and my older brother was, like, "Yeah, homilies are awful" and we just started talking...

Anecdotes abound. Studies do not. Yet creating a homily is hard work and most homilists work hard at their preaching.<sup>15</sup> In their individual responses, young people describe times of faith growth through preaching. Can it be *that* bad? As seen in the chapter 2, anecdotal evidence arises from memory. Memory of negative experience lingers longer and forms stronger emotions than positive recall:<sup>16</sup> how many well-crafted homilies does it take to balance out one unforgettably bad one?

### ***Short-term Response***

What do young people collectively have to say about the Sunday preaching that they hear? Questions 26-35 asked them to evaluate the Sunday homily that they last heard. Because the survey was given in high school theology classes, their evaluation, too, was based on memory as the take-away from the homily—perceptions that lasted and remained with them days after hearing the preaching. Figure 4.8 reflects the average of those students' responses. Yet the percentages in each category paint a more accurate picture, since agreement, ambivalence and disagreement varied by characteristic. Eighty-four percent of the respondents agreed that the homily talked about God and/or Jesus (Table 4.7). The baseline for appropriation of a message is to put it in words and images that the audience knows: 73% agreed that the homily they heard was in language that they could "get."

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<sup>15</sup>Untener, 5.

<sup>16</sup>See footnote 57 in chapter 2.



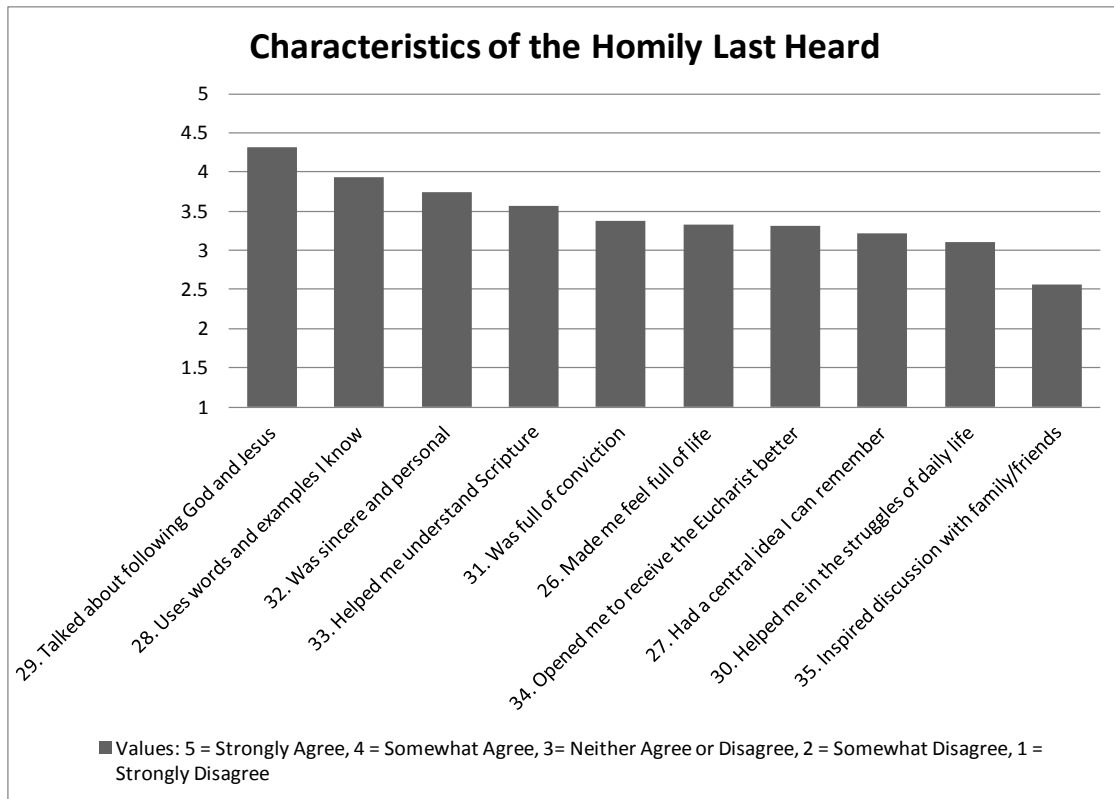
**Table 4.7. Percentage Responses to “The Sunday Homily”**

	29. Talked about following God/Jesus	28. Used words, images, or examples I know	32. Was sincere and person- al	33. Helped me to under- stand the Bible	31. Full of con- viction	27. Had a central idea	34. Opened me to better receive the Eucharist	30. Helped me in the struggles of daily life	35. Inspired discus- sion with family/ friends	26. Made me feel full of life
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	50.9	34.7	27.1	22.0	17.2	16.4	13.4	12.7	8.1	7.5
<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	33.1	38.5	33.7	30.9	22.1	30.4	30.8	22.7	15.8	38.4
<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	12.5	17.5	29.9	32.0	46.3	24.6	39.0	37.1	28.5	37.7
<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	3.2	6.9	7.9	12.0	9.8	17.1	10.6	18.6	20.1	12.7
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	0.4	2.4	1.4	3.1	4.6	11.6	6.2	8.9	27.5	3.8

Source: *Are You Talking to Me*, questions 26–35

The level of agreement drops from there and hesitancy begins to set in for the other eight homiletical characteristics. Sixty-one percent felt that the homily was sincere and personal; almost 30% did not agree or disagree. Ambivalence characterizes more than a third of the responses to the take-away of “opened me to better receive the Eucharist,” “helped me in the struggles of life,” and “made me feel full of life.” “Had a central idea that I can remember” had a mixed response. The lack of remembering may have contributed to the reply that garnered the strongest disagreement: “inspired discussion with family and friends.” They did not talk about it afterwards. In short, speaking as a group, for them the homily was not particularly memorable; its message did not spread like wildfire throughout the city or over the internet; its “stickiness” (as described in chapter 2) was weak.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> This will be one of the topics of discussion in the workshop designed in chapter 5. See appendix C1.7 for a check-list for homiletic “stickiness.”



**Figure 4.8.** Averaged responses (questions 26-35) to the characteristics of the homily last heard.

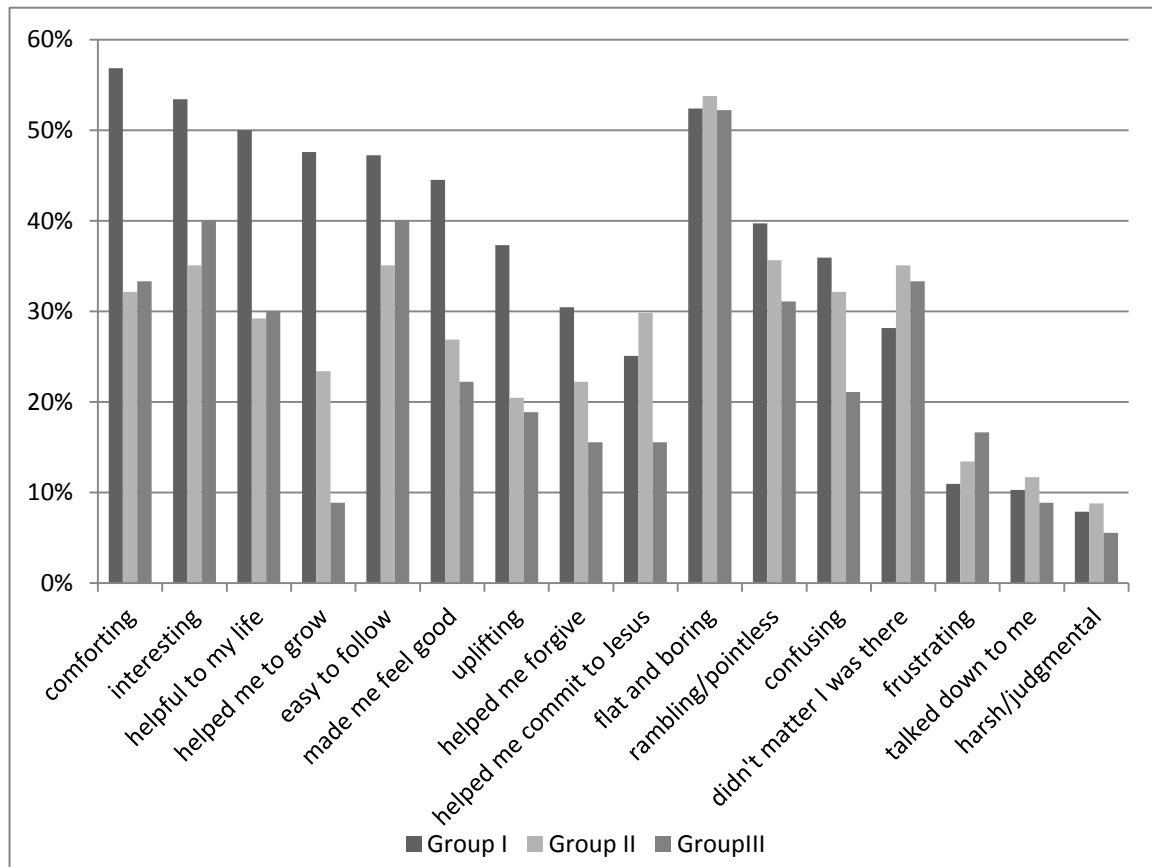
One of the clearest indications of brand loyalty in the field of consumer behavior is the willingness to recommend a product to a friend or family member. For that reason, question 36 asked, “If I had a video or a written copy of this homily, or a link to it on the web, I would recommend it or give it to a friend.” There are pockets in the Church where the preaching is sparking enthusiasm among young people. Fifteen percent of the high school youth surveyed *would* recommend their Sunday preaching to a friend.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Homiletical Take-away***

In addition to the evaluation of the homily just heard from a particular preacher, the survey also asked the young people to think about all of the Sunday preaching that they had heard in the past year. They could mark as many characteristics as they felt appropriate (see

<sup>18</sup>Forty-six youth responded “yes,” representing 35 parishes.

figure 4.10), characterizing their overall impression of their take-away from the Catholic preaching that they had heard.



**Figure 4.9.** Overall attributes of homilies by percentage response from question 59

This bank of sixteen attributes was also repeated in the second half of the survey for those who attended Mass sporadically or at school; the chart illustrates all three group responses: For those attending Mass, the homily traits selected by more than 50% of Group I respondents were: comforting, interesting, and flat, boring delivery. The lowest responses were: frustrating, talked down to me, and harsh and judgmental. The variations between the three groups, though not the subject of this current study, were most striking in the positive take-away from the homilies. Further investigation among those who no longer attend Mass might uncover factors of preaching in the reasons why they are not there.

In accord with the qualitative responses which spoke of preaching as focused on the older folks, almost 30% of youth who regularly attend Mass asserted that it did not seem to matter that they were there. The literature review in chapter 2 pointed out similarly that preaching as a source of faith growth in young people is a blind spot for the Church. Though perhaps unseen, around 50% checked preaching both as “helpful to my life” and “helped me grow in faith” and almost 40% found it “uplifting.”

Four out of ten marked “rambling, pointless” as a characteristic of the homilies that they had heard in the last year. This was similar to those who would not agree that the homily “had a central idea,” in question 27 of table 4.7. The qualitative remarks also commented about preaching that wandered off on tangents. These three disparate sources confirm that digression from (or a lack of) a central point is a consistently found attribute.

Most young people marked both positive and negative attributes of preaching in the above question. Since they both hovered just above the fiftieth percentile, intuitively it would seem that those who marked “interesting” and those who marked “flat, boring” would represent two different populations—the interested and the bored. Yet 98% of those who checked “interesting” also marked “flat, boring” as characteristics of the preaching they had heard in the last year. Their written comments, some of which are recorded in chapter 3, also described the encounter of preaching as a mixed bag.

For those who regularly attend Mass, there *are* preachers who connect with them. They responded to this query:

As we look at preachers who connect well with young people, we would like to observe those whom you feel have really helped you to grow in faith. Would you be willing to recommend someone as a really fine example of what preaching to young people *should* be like?

Sixty-six percent of the young people who regularly attend Mass were willing to suggest a

preacher who connects well with young people, representing 8 deacons and 143 priests. No bishops were recommended.<sup>19</sup> Several names came up repeatedly, especially those who were affiliated with that particular high school. But many also contributed names of parish priests who they consider to be examples of fine preaching with young people. One offered Fr. Corapi, formerly of EWTN, as a preacher who connected well. This identification of best praxis offers a resource for future observational study.

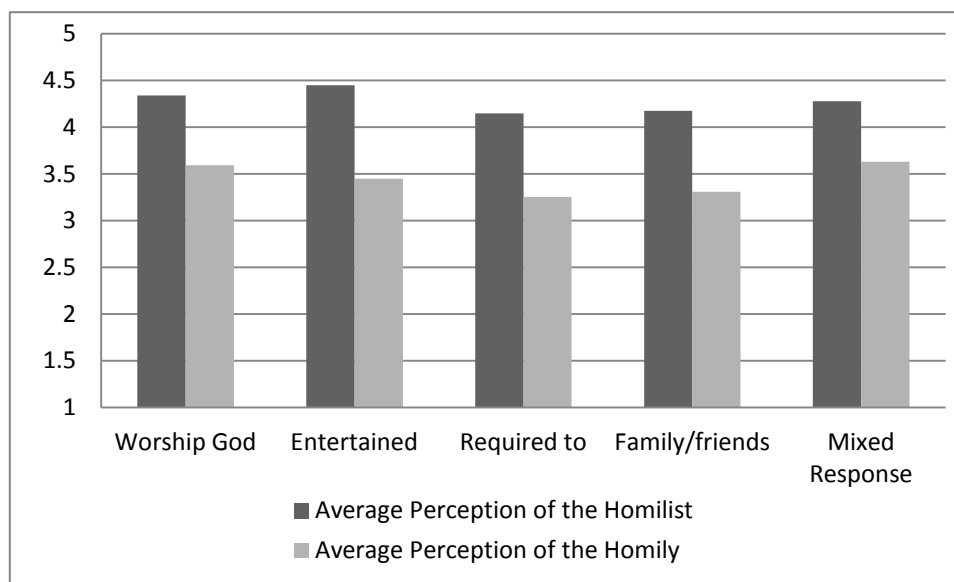
### ***Relationships between Listener, Preacher and Preaching***

Chapter 3 looked at the interaction of the preaching event as a relational encounter, a dance of the Holy Spirit. How does one measure a dance? In this chapter, numerical values only uncover a small piece of the complexities of preaching, yet they can offer clues to what is happening through the correlation of various elements of response. How do all of these factors of listener, preacher, and preaching interrelate? To begin to find out, the ten responses to the characteristics of the homily (questions 26-35) were averaged to create a linear “homiletical response value” (HRV) per respondent.

The first use of this value was to ask the question of the data: does the evaluation of the homily vary by the reason that the young person was attending that Mass (question 37)? Common wisdom might suggest that those who were “required to be there” would rate the homily more poorly. Figure 4.9 shows in bar graph form a small variation in response to both the homilist and the homily compared to the reason for attendance. Was this a random variation or was it statistically significant?

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<sup>19</sup>Exposure to a bishop’s preaching may be limited to a few times per year. In this study, since only one bishop was evaluated as the preacher who was last heard (at a confirmation Mass), the fact that none were recommended is not statistically significant.



**Figure 4.9.** Average responses to the homilist and the homily by the reason for attending Mass; average values toward 5 = greatest agreement to positive qualities of the homily; 1 = strongest disagreement

Because the number of responses in each of the categories about Mass attendance was so highly varied (ranging from 2 to 134), the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test of analysis of variance by ranks was used to best analyze that relationship (Table 4.9):<sup>20</sup>

**Table 4.9.** Non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test of analysis of variance between reason to attend Mass and perception of the homily

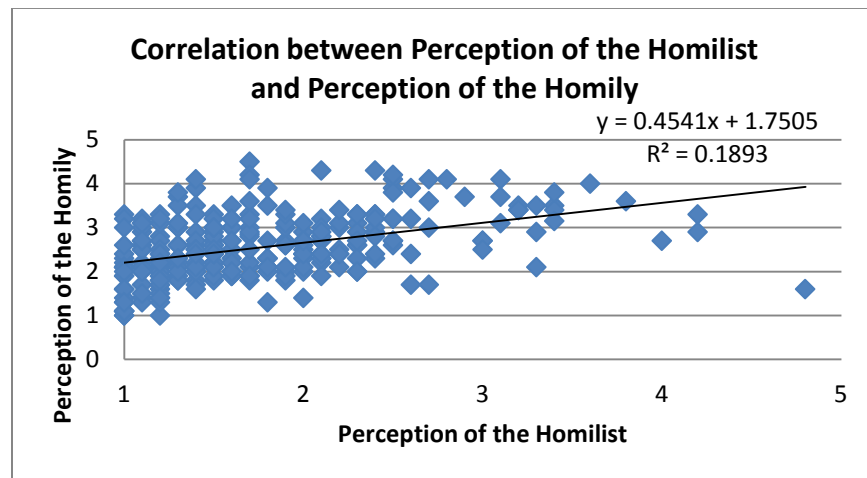
	Worship God	Entertained	Required to	Family/ Friends	Other
Sum of Ranks	1598	32	1614	774	661
Average of Ranks	14.66	16	18.13	17.59	14.06
Counts	108	2	89	44	47

The resulting H statistic of 8.77 closely approximates a chi-square statistic. For that value of H to be significant with 4 degrees of variance with an alpha of 0.05, it would have to be 9.49 or above. Therefore, by the Kruskal-Wallis test, the observed aggregate difference among the five types of responses is non-significant. Based on these 290 responses, the perception of the homily does *not* vary by the reason for attendance at Mass. Just because mom or dad said, “get in the

<sup>20</sup>Richard Lowry, “Subchapter 14a. The Kruskal-Wallis Test for 3 or More Independent Samples,” Vassar College, <http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/ch14a.html> [accessed 1-16-12].

car” did not mean that their offspring responded differently to the homily (either negatively or positively) than those who were willing to go.

When they do get there, did the young person’s perception of the homilist impact his or her evaluation of the homily? Qualitative studies have discussed the ethos of the preacher and its impact on the efficacy of preaching. From the quantitative data from this survey, how much of an impact does that have? Running a linear regression between the PPRV and the HRV shows some variation, but not enough to be mildly correlated ( $r^2=0.1893$ ):



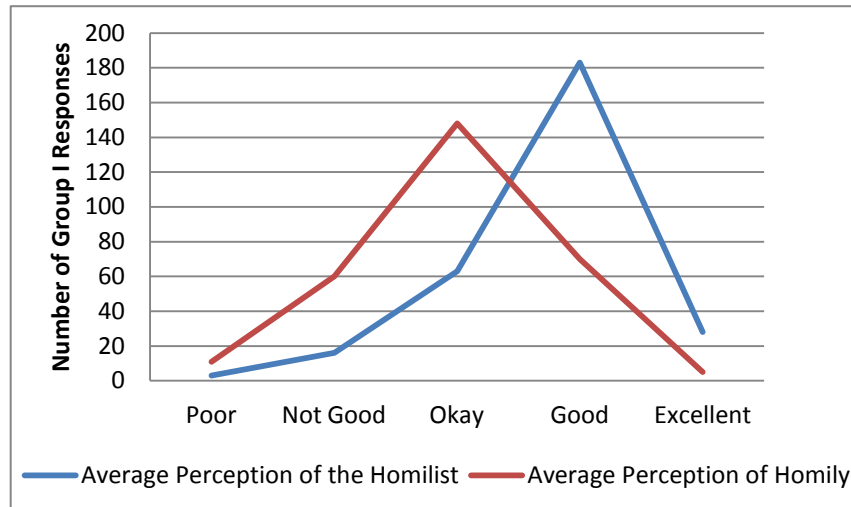
**Figure 4.10.** Regression analysis between PPRV and HRV

A seventeen year old young man described this lack of correlation:

I don’t really follow the older priest’s homilies as much as this younger priest at my parish. *The younger one can relate to teens, but he doesn’t have life changing homilies* (italics mine).

Though the younger clergyman “relates” to teens, his preaching is not as esteemed as his person.

This lag is most easily seen when the two averaged values of homilist (PPRV) and homily (HRV) are drawn together in figure 4.11:



**Figure 4.11.** Graph of response to the preacher (PPRV) and response to the homily (HRV). In question 40, when asked to “grade” the homily, the resulting average GPA was a 2.46/4.00, in the range of a C+. The left line (HRV) clearly tells the same story.

Are those who express a stronger connection with the preacher more responsive to the homily?

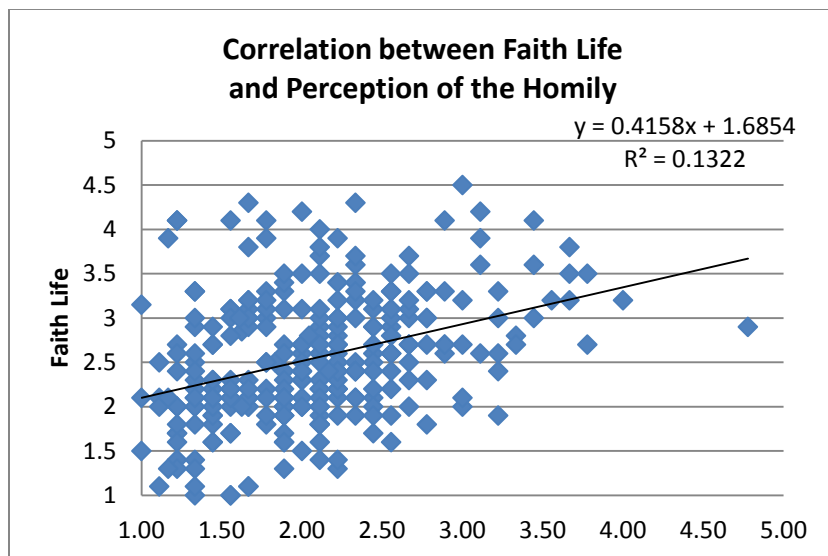
When correlating question 25 (the number value given to connection with the preacher) with HRV (the perception of the homily), there was slight variation but it was not statistically significant ( $r^2=.1731$ ).

In the above quote, the young man described a difference in his response to the older and younger preachers in his parish. Does age play a factor in how young people respond to the homily? Are the homilies of younger preachers perceived to be better than those of the “wise and experienced” ones? That was tested in two ways: a linear regression run between age and HRV yielded an  $r^2 = 0.0255$ , a non-significant correlation. Then, because the categories of age were so highly variable in numbers, I wondered if the middle age groupings might not be weighing too heavily in that analysis. Therefore I ran the Kruskal-Wallis test which takes those uneven category variations into account. The H statistic was strikingly low (.06). That number evaluated with a chi-square df of 4 and an alpha of 0.05 indicates that the age of homilist is totally not a source of the variation in the perception of the homily for this group of young people. One of the best rated homilists was one of the oldest.



If the faith life of a young person is strong, will he or she perceive the homily better?

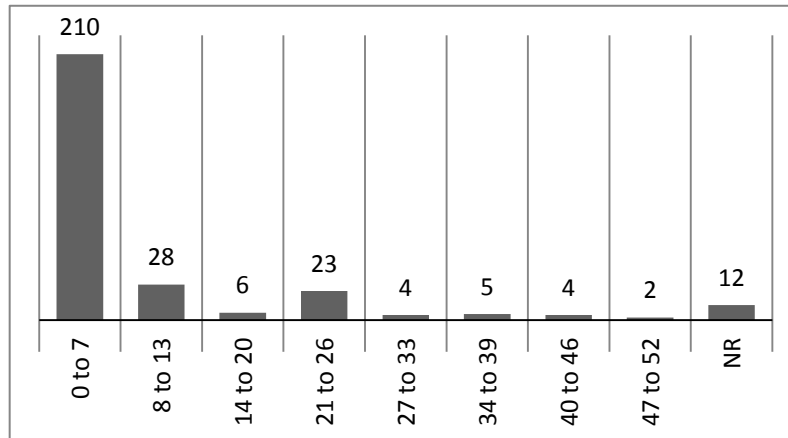
Even without running a regression line, it is apparent from the data scattered all over the graph below that just because a listener is a believer did not mean that the homily was perceived to be more effective. The reverse was also true—there were many young people without strong faith who rated the homily well.



**Figure 4.12.** Correlation between the respondent's faith life and his or her perception of the homily

There are innumerable questions that can be asked of this superabundance of data. With 86 questions and 561 respondents, there is much more that could be said and many potential relationships that could be tested. Some of that will have to wait for post-DMin analysis. From the relationships that were tested though, it seems that perceived connection did not impact how the homily was heard. A higher opinion of the clergyman did not give young people a positive slant toward rating his homily, nor were younger preachers considered to be better preachers. The faith life of the young person did not vary with how he or she rated the preaching. It would seem that the homily rises and falls on its own merits when evaluated by these youth. They believe their preachers to be good people whose homilies could improve.

How often do they tell their preachers these things? Almost never: question 62 asked, “In the last year, out of a possible 52 weeks, how many times have you given a preacher constructive feedback or input about his homily (other than...”Nice homily, Father...or Deacon...?”).



**Figure 4.13.** The number of weeks per year that they have given their preacher constructive feedback (by number of responses)

The median, mean and mode of feedback response all fall within the “0-7 weeks” category in figure 4.13. Of those who gave their preacher feedback for more than 0-7 weeks of the year, 93.1% of them gave that feedback to a preacher whom they had rated as very good or excellent. If young people do give constructive feedback on the Sunday preaching, this is an indicator that they have been engaged and the preacher is connecting well with them. The reverse was not true. Several preachers who were rated excellently got zero feedback from their young listeners. The vast majority said nothing either way.

## Key Findings of this Study

### *The Loud Silence*

The conversation about preaching is difficult. From the data on feedback, avoidance of the discussion reveals that it is hard to talk about, most especially when the preaching is not

going well.<sup>21</sup> Yet feelings on this subject burble like a geyser waiting to erupt. In my experience, pew-sitters talk about preaching all the time. They long for input into preaching. In their studies of listeners, Allen and Shea both found that listeners want to talk about it.<sup>22</sup> The depth with which the young people of this study were willing to engage the survey questions shows that their interest in preaching is strong. The focus group participants were passionate about it. Yet young people rarely share those thoughts in concrete, constructive ways with their preacher.

On the other side of this communication gap, the identity of a preacher is connected to his preaching and the response to it. Yet when I interviewed a half dozen clergymen for input into how to effectively promulgate the results of this study (as background for chapter 5), a common thread from these men of the cloth was that these questions of connection and the encounter of preaching were not being talked about in their world either. “When we get together, we never talk about preaching,” said one pastor of a mid-size parish. This lack of communication between pulpit and pew causes sorrow for some. An elderly priest from a small rural parish wondered about his preaching, lamenting, “People have walked away from my parish and they never come by to tell me why.” Transparency on both sides is lacking. “Good homily, Father” can mean anything.<sup>23</sup> Encouragement from the pulpit to initiate feedback is also rare in Catholic parishes.

Integral to broaching this challenging conversation is the question, “Does preaching matter?” The avoidance of the discussion and the lack of feedback might give the impression that it does not. There is a profound silence from our preaching documents, our writings on youth ministry, and our homiletical practice: the discipleship of Catholic young people via the Sunday

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<sup>21</sup>Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin Books), 1999.

<sup>22</sup>See footnotes 50 and 52 in chapter 1.

<sup>23</sup>Untener, 99, suggests these meanings: Have a nice day; I like you; I enjoyed your joke; I am a kind person. “They (these responses)... tell us nothing about whether we ministered the word of God.”

homily has been acutely overlooked. Yet the voices of 561 young people in this study shout out “Yes! Preaching *does* matter to us!”

A subset of this silence is that young people also do not talk about faith among themselves. The lowest values of teenage religiosity from questions 46 and 49 (figure 4.1) were “I talk to others about my faith” and “My friends are strong in their faith.” For these regular church-goers, faith may bubble, but it bubbles within. If one goal of preaching is to empower young disciples to be preachers who share their faith with their own generation, then we have much growing to do.

At this juncture in the Christian world, the stakes are high. Ho-hum preaching is good enough when there are cultural supports for faith. That is no longer the case: with cultural support dropping, we can continue to avoid this conversation about strengthening our preaching, but at what cost? This study has been an effort to step back from the feelings and the anecdotes about preaching to determine what is happening on the ground. It is only a beginning. There is still much to learn.

### ***Strengths Observed in the Findings of this Study***

I had asked the focus group this question: “Give me one word that describes the preacher in your parish.” The sun streamed in from behind one boy’s head. His eyes began to sparkle. The light gave him a glow. A smile spread across his face. “Inspiring,” the seventeen year old youth said, “inspiring.”

One of the strengths uncovered in the findings of this study was the consistently high status that church-going teenagers gave to their parish preacher. Friendliness, exuding a love for Jesus, respect and role modeling were unfailingly high across age groupings and geographical regions (figure 4.5 and table 4.6). One of the primary goals of a seminary education is to form

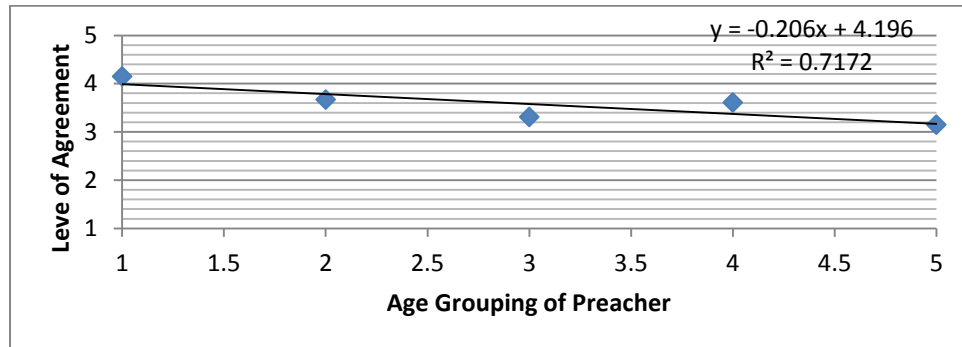
good men. On the average, these young people would say that the Church is succeeding in that formation.

Has preaching improved since the Second Vatican Council, the publication of the 1982 document *Fulfilled in Your Hearing (FIYH)*, and the increase in the number of preaching classes that a seminarian takes? Stories suggest that is the case. But we have no data. This study cannot statistically say that our seminary training is turning out better preachers. There was no correlation found between the age of the preacher and the overall rating of the quality of the homily. This study describes the situation of preaching in 2011. It is not a longitudinal study. Yet perhaps we have one potential clue: Since the Council in the 1960's, the Catholic Church has turned its focus toward Scripture. *FIYH* defined the purpose of the homily as a Scriptural interpretation of life. In 1995, a study from Chicago Theological Union focused on preaching and Scripture. That study found that 73% of the homilies studied did not show evidence of sound biblical exegetical preparation.<sup>24</sup> Has that changed? Question 33 asked about agreement on the statement, "This homily helped me to understand the Scriptures better." More than 50% of the respondents were able to agree with that statement (table 4.7). When the average response to question 33 was correlated with the age of the preacher, the relationship ( $r^2=0.7172$ ) was significant (figure 4.15). Though question 33 does not ask specifically about exegetical preparation, the take-away of Scriptural understanding may give an indication of two possibilities: 1) our younger preachers may be doing their theological reflection and exegetical "homework" in preparation for preaching; and/or 2) their training may have better prepared them to move effectively from biblical text to homily. As the correlation in the chart below demonstrates, a second strength was that the youngest of the preachers *were* more effective in

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<sup>24</sup>Barbara E. Reid, O.P. and Leslie J. Hope, O.F.M., *Preaching from Scriptures: New Directions for Preparing Preachers* (Chicago: Catholic Theological Union, 1998), 21.

helping their listeners understand the Scriptural text. This is good news for seminaries. For those who teach Scriptural exegesis and for those who form preachers, they can be assured that their efforts to flow the two disciplines together seem to be bearing fruit.



**Figure 4.14.** Averaged response to question 33 about the ability to unpack Scripture, when correlated with the age grouping of preacher (1=youngest, 5 = oldest)

In short, two strengths found in this study were the quality of clerical formation and the improved integration of Scripture into preaching. It may be surprising to hear these results from the collective pens of high school students. But they would come as no surprise to those who work in our seminaries: formation and Scripture have been two of the focal points for the last twenty years. If we can shine as bright a spotlight on the discipline of preaching for the next twenty years, who knows where that will take us? Where should we concentrate our energies in order to do that effectively?

### ***Unpacking Listener Satisfaction***

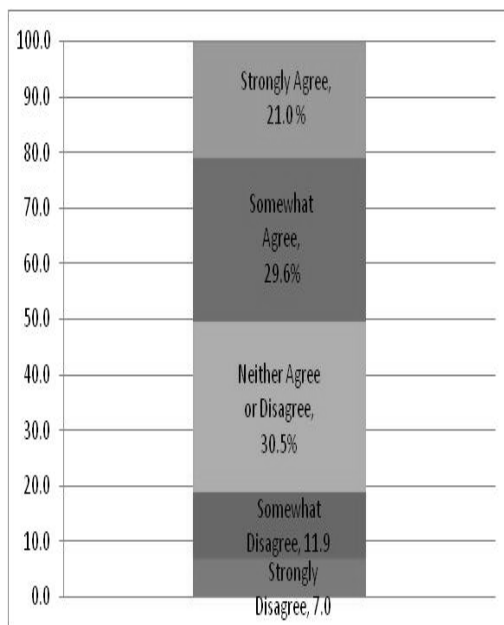
The discipline of consumer behavior has informed this study. An integral element to that sub-section of the field of marketing is the customer satisfaction survey. The analysis of data which expresses satisfaction and dissatisfaction can reveal strengths and weaknesses, thus suggesting strategies for “product” improvement. To analyze this study as though it were a customer satisfaction survey, two sets of data are most useful: First, question 36, summarized as

“Would you recommend this (product) to a friend?” gives a key indicator of loyalty.<sup>25</sup> Figure 4.17 is a visual representation of the response to that question. Second, the agreement levels from table 4.7 (“The Sunday Homily”) have been averaged for all of the homiletic factors of questions 26-35 in table 4.10 and visually displayed in figure 4.16. What can these two visuals tell us about the response of our population to Catholic Sunday preaching?

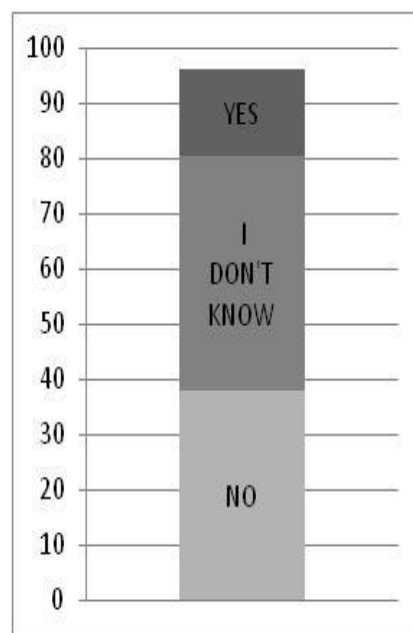
**Table 4.10.** Averaged Values of “The Sunday Homily”

Strongly Agree	21.0%
Somewhat Agree	29.6%
Neither Agree or Disagree	30.5%
Somewhat Disagree	11.9%
Strongly Disagree	7.0%

Source: Are You Talking to Me? questions 26-35



**Figure 4.16.** Averaged percentage response to “The Sunday Homily,” questions 26-35



**Figure 4.17.** Would you recommend?

To understand our listeners, we delineate the characteristics of each of the population segments separately. Starting from the top, “Promoters” are those who are enthusiastic and loyal,

<sup>25</sup>William Baker suggested this question and its subsequent analysis, spring of 2011.

who talk about the preaching that they hear and want to refer it to others (Figure 4.17: strongly agree-21%; Figure 4.9: Yes-15.6%). Commitment is strong among this group. Loyalty is solid. Preaching resonates for them. If the ordination class of 2011 made the decision to enter the priesthood at the average age of 16, then at that age, those men probably came from this “Promoter” pool.<sup>26</sup>

At the bottom end are the “Detractors”: those who would not recommend the preaching to anyone (Figure 4.17: strongly disagree + disagree-18.9%; Figure 4.9: No-38.1%) Detractors can create negative word-of-mouth. When a person complains, it means that the dissatisfied individual is still invested in the organization. Complainers can become supporters. Negative word-of-mouth, on the other hand, influences others—it tells stories and they are not good stories. Negative word-of-mouth is vivid; it is easily remembered and much more damaging than complaining. Those who do not complain are more likely to walk away (see the feedback data cited earlier, especially in relation to poor homilies).<sup>27</sup>

“Passives” are those who are somewhat satisfied but they are unenthusiastic. They have a low level of allegiance, so they are easily lost to the competition (Figure 4.17: neither disagree or agree-30.5%; Figure 4.9: I don’t know-42.5%).<sup>28</sup> “Satisfieds” (Figure 4.17, somewhat agree-29.6%) are somewhat content but not highly committed. Unlike the “Promoters,” they are not evangelistic or passionate about what they hear. Loyalty is not solid.

### ***Strategies for Increasing Satisfaction***

Why does this classification of satisfaction matter? These groups are categorized in order

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<sup>26</sup>An intriguing topic for a DMin thesis project would be to evaluate how much that positive decision toward ordination came through the impact of effective preaching. Such data, if positively correlated, might persuade toward preaching improvement.

<sup>27</sup>Hoyer and MacInnis, 291.

<sup>28</sup>Marketing Profs, “Net Promoter Scores,” Marketing Profs, <http://www.marketingprofs.com/charts/2011/5150/privacy-concerns-erode-social-media-user-satisfaction#ixzz1O8jF0B5K> [accessed 11-12-2011].



to develop strategies to move them “up” on the bar chart toward greater loyalty and commitment. In the experience of industry communicators, to move “Satisfieds” to become “Promoters” takes the soft skills of friendliness, using their name, empathy (“know what I am going through” was said over and over again), and letting them know that they matter. About 30% of the studied population falls in this “Satisfied” category in relation to preaching. The content of the homily can be strengthened by speaking to issues and topics that relate to them. The pastor and the parish community can collaborate to invite this sizeable group to deeper commitment. That call may be all that is needed to move them from a nebulous contentment to an enduring loyalty. An essential strategy for renewal of the church is to move this “vaguely favorable” group to become young “Promoters.”<sup>29</sup> Rubrics of excellence in preaching can be developed, taught and then routinely assessed to facilitate this. Empowering the congregation is integral to this process of excellence in the encounter of preaching. They can learn to: 1) support the preacher; 2) improve listening skills; and 3) learn to give constructive feedback. A “B” preacher is not far from an “A” preacher, but the impact on faith growth of that slight step “upward” is significant and can be long-lasting. How to make that happen will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

Another 30% of respondents from figure 4.16 fell into middling “Passive” category (40% by figure 4.17 “would you recommend?”). “Feeling the love” will not bring this group to dedication and loyalty. They seek competency. Improving the quality of the homiletic encounter will strengthen their commitment. This requires growth in the “hard” skills of preaching as the young people themselves described in chapter 3: put together a clear message that speaks to their world; use stories and images that they can relate to; have a compelling delivery; speak in concrete language that is memorable; strengthen content; and craft a homily that motivates by its

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<sup>29</sup>Pope John Paul II was especially effective in reaching this group through his World Youth Day messages that exalted heroism and sacrifice.

riskiness, to name a few. So many actively church-going young people express a “whatever-ism” about their experience of preaching. Three sets of statistics converge: The data in figure 4.13 (the high levels of ambivalence), figure 4.12 (the lack of correlation between the evaluation of homilist and homily), and the high number of responses that fall into the “Passives” category (figures 4.16 and 4.17). They all point to the same conclusion: to engage this group, homilies need to deliver a compelling message that not only connects, but also motivates. A high percentage of response in the ambivalence category is a robust indicator that what is fundamentally needed is training in the basics, the hard skills of how to preach. This suggests an agenda for training both within seminaries and in the continuing education of clergy.

What to do about the “Detractors?” Typically, customer dissatisfaction numbers are acceptable in the 5-10% range.<sup>30</sup> Those who are experienced in dealing with customers have found that when dissatisfaction levels creep up to 10-20%, this is a clear symptom that there are system and/or performance issues that need scrutiny.<sup>31</sup> From the data from this study, the dissatisfaction levels of regular church-going high-school listeners are higher than optimal (18.9 and 38.1%). From figure 4.10, the rating of “didn’t matter that I was there” at almost 30% of respondents should be of serious concern. The dearth of feedback for poorly rated homilies is an early symptom that church-going young people may simply walk away when they become independent and are no longer required to be at Mass. What can we do? Consultants in consumer satisfaction would strategize for bottom performers that: 1) individual preaching coaching and retraining may be needed and 2) homiletical preparation processes should be scrutinized. That which creates hindrance *must* be attended to.<sup>32</sup> The content of the preaching has to be solid.

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<sup>30</sup>Michael Clarkin, “5 Myths of Customer Satisfaction: Setting your Sights on the Right Targets,” Vovici Webinar, <http://marketingprofs.chool.com/a/hBN75NYAJaJZfB8bk1QNg1pwIPu/alrt27> [accessed June 16, 2011].

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Michael Clarkin, email correspondence, 6-20-2011.

Preparation has to become a priority. To observe and imitate the skill sets of those rated as excellent preachers would set a higher bar for those whose performance is marginal. If the emphasis on biblical preaching has made an impact in the training of preachers in the last fifteen years, then fundamental skills can similarly be taught. From the students' written comments from this "Detractor" group, what is missing are the oral communications skills that are taught in a beginning speech class (make one clear point, do not ramble, speak clearly). That would be a good place to start. If listener dissatisfaction levels drop under 10%, destructive negative word-of-mouth about preaching will abate. Retention will increase. The retention of young people has been and continues to be a concern for the Church.<sup>33</sup> It appears from this data, that preaching plays some part in that defection. There are hungers that we not feeding. The window into the face of God is a bit smudged. What are young people looking for?

### ***More, not Less***

In a summer 2011 focus group, a just-graduated senior offered a metaphor for the homily at the last Mass that she had been to:

A self-help book: He's up there going, "and your life is going to be like this and you're going to do this" and I'm like, "how do you know that?" It was like the going-off-to-college chapter (of the self-help book) and I have read a lot of self-help books, so I felt a lot like I had heard it before. He said what everyone knew he was going to say and everyone was "okay, he said what I knew that he was going to say, so we can carry on..." It was patronizing. He was making all these assumptions and then telling us how to handle what he thought that we needed to know. He had four main points... only... (The whole group laughs at her tone and facial expression)... I don't remember what they were.

To recap from chapter 2, motivation is enhanced when the listener hears something that is "1) personally relevant; 2) consistent with their values, goals, and needs; 3) risky; and /or 4)

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<sup>33</sup>This high percentage of "detractors" about preaching comes from Group I, the high school students who think highly of their clergy and are still regularly attending Mass. From their response to the preaching, they may be on the verge of joining Group II, the baptized Catholics who are no longer attending Mass.

moderately inconsistent with their prior attitudes.”<sup>34</sup> “He said what everyone knew he was going to say” did not stretch this listener. This was a common theme from the focus groups and in the qualitative responses to the paper survey. From page 36 of the results of his study, Shea’s listeners also consistently expressed the theme of “simply being too boring or repetitious.”<sup>35</sup> When asked “If you could tell the preachers in your parish anything about their preaching and how to make it more effective in connecting with you and other young people of your age, what would you tell them,” a fifteen year old boy said, “To stop giving stereotypical and clichéd homilies that a lot of other people who don’t really know anything about the gospel could give.” A ninth grade boy suggested: “Use inspirational quotes, or say something that most people haven’t heard before.” These “same-old-same-old” comments are representative of many others.

Young people want preaching to stretch them. Some adults might state that teenagers just want to be entertained. Those who responded to this survey did not ask for the homily to entertain: to engage, to maintain interest, to get my attention, and to motivate, were the words that they used. They were not looking for less. They were looking for more. They wanted more depth. They wanted more creativity. They wanted more passion.

Ironically, in table 4.7 of “The Sunday Homily,” the highest level of ambivalence toward the homily came from the response to question 31: “This homily was full of conviction.” Almost half (46.3%) circled “neither agree nor disagree.” Ironically, there was no conviction that the homily was full of conviction. Coming at it from a different direction tells the same story: a 2.46 grade point, averaged from the responses to question 40, tells a teacher that the student is working hard enough to pass but not really striving hard enough to excel at the subject.

Question 39 asked about motivation: “On a scale of 1 to 10, ten being the best, how

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<sup>34</sup>Hoyer and MacInnis, 55.

<sup>35</sup>See footnote 50 in chapter 1.

would you rate how well this particular homily motivated you to deepen your commitment to God?” (One = de-motivating, five = somewhat motivating, and ten = highly motivating.) The mean was 5.7—a somewhat “somewhat.” Looking at overall homily characteristics in table 4.10, the highest response was the amorphous “comforting.” The lowest two responses to the bank of positive attributes about homilies were the concretely Christian characteristics of “helped me to forgive” and “helped me to commit myself to following Jesus.”<sup>36</sup>

The *National Study of Youth and Religion* found that most U.S. teenagers tend to follow their parents when it comes to religion: religion is a nice thing to have but it does not claim them or concern them greatly.<sup>37</sup> Commitment is soft. The responses to “The Person of the Listener” (figures 4.1 and 4.2) in this study showed a similar shapelessness to their Christian belief. Catholic kids are at the bottom of all Christian denominations for knowing and committing to their faith.<sup>38</sup> Smith’s work identifies the parent’s faith life as a clear indicator of the faith life of a teen. Therefore initiatives to bolster the faith of parents and adolescents are being created in many Christian denominations. Is there something that we are not seeing in this picture? Where is the myopia?

The data from this study suggests that we take the progression one step further: teenagers’ faith is soft because their parents’ faith is soft, yes. Yet, as discussed in chapter 1, for the majority of high school and adult Catholics, Sunday liturgical preaching is their only source of input. Could it be that the faith of those in the pew is anemic because our preaching is also weak? Preaching is, of course, not the only factor in the system of faith growth, but its impact appears to be a substantial one, more important than most Catholic preachers realize. The current

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<sup>36</sup>Surprisingly, those baptized Catholics who do *not* regularly attend Mass had a higher response to “helped me to commit myself to following Jesus” than those who attended regularly.

<sup>37</sup>Dean, 202.

<sup>38</sup>Smith, 37.

state of Catholic Sunday preaching contributes to the vague “whatever” faith shown by U.S. Catholic teenagers (and their parents by extension). The young people who were surveyed asked for more from the pulpit. As his final comment, a twelfth-grade boy pleaded, “More life, more passion. Monotony kills interest.”

The homily is a key ingredient in the faith growth of a young disciple. We have pockets of preaching where it is being done wonderfully. Those listeners can respond to the question, “Are you talking to me?” with a vibrant “yes!” Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, that encounter with the face of God resonates within them. What do we need to do as a Church to help that to more commonly happen?

### ***Moving Forward***

To recap the road which we have walked thus far: 1) The introduction laid out a vision of the homily as revelation, a locus of encounter with God; 2) Chapter 1 pointed out the Church’s blind spot about the significance of the homily in growing the faith life of young disciples; 2) Chapter 2 enriched the field of homiletics with the characteristics of listening as discovered by the field of consumer behavior; 3) In chapter 3, the words of young disciples spoke of their experience of connection and faith growth through preaching. They also spoke of what it is like to listen to preaching that obscured the face of God for them; 4) This current chapter has pointed out strengths and weaknesses in the current state of preaching through quantitative analysis. Now what? Where do we go from here? How can we take what we have learned and fit it all together into a product which will build up the Church? How can this study concretely improve Catholic Sunday preaching?

“Connection” has been the foundational concept in this study. In that spirit, therefore, chapter 5 begins by recasting the conversation, moving from the analysis of the needs of listeners

to comprehend the needs of preachers: what would help *them* to preach more connectively?

Literature review and clergy interviews inform the design of the end product of this study. We ask Cleopas and his unnamed friend on that road to Emmaus to link arms with us on this final journey, traveling from connection to encounter to resonance in preaching.