

# The Elephant in the Room: Catechetical Leaders Speak about the Sunday Homily

Karla Bellinger



*I think that many of us in the parishes were asking those very questions — and answering them — but our voices didn't carry any weight. It's nice that this now is an issue that's being discussed.*

The focus group filled the round table during the NCCL conference in May 2013. We were discussing the influence of the Sunday homily on the faith growth of a parish. From this particular group, some responses were positive: “They (the homilies) are usually very upbeat, creative... lively, [giving us] something meaty. ... The better the preaching, the more [those on the margins of faith] want to come back.” Some comments were not so optimistic: “They are dry, irrelevant. The teenagers walk out saying, ‘This is the most horrendous thing I’ve ever heard.’ People have left the parish. [On a scale of 1-10], if I could give it a negative number, I would give it a -2. It generally begins with chastisement. Sometimes there are jokes that are offensive... Just *poor*.”

Then I asked the group of catechetical leaders to talk about pre-homily give-and-take, post-homily feedback, and the discussion that surrounds the Sunday homily.<sup>1</sup> I asked each of the four groups, “What kind of conversation is happening?” One diocesan leader said, “There’s no conversation. It’s the elephant in the room. Everyone knows it’s a big problem, but no one is willing to talk about it.”

What is this elephant in the room? Lay catechetical leaders listen to homilies all the time. They have years and years of collective experience as receivers of Catholic preaching. Many sit in the pew with one foot in the theological world and the other foot in the everyday life of the laity. Thus, they have many thoughts that they could offer to preachers. There is an ache, a longing, a hunger to be heard. Why? Quality Sunday preaching makes a parish’s faith life flourish: it influences catechists, parents, youth, older adults, and all in parish ministry. Yet to date, each has asked the questions of homiletical effectiveness within his or her own head, in parking lots, and/or around the dinner table. Conversation about preaching between pulpit and pew is rare. As the catechetical leader in the opening quote states, “our voices don’t carry any weight.” Now those voices have gathered together. If the homily is an “elephant in the room,” members of NCCL have begun to talk about it.

## THE CATECHESIS IN PREACHING RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Why should catechetical leaders take an interest in the Sunday homily at this point in history? Three developments suggest that a change is in the air. First, the USCCB has published a new document on preaching, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*. That document uses the language of encounter with Jesus Christ as the goal of the Sunday homily within the Eucharistic liturgy.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudium Evangelii*, Pope Francis highlights the significance of the homily with “special importance due to its Eucharistic context: it surpasses all forms of catechesis as the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people.”<sup>3</sup> Francis is also concerned for the homily to be a moment of encounter with Jesus Christ: “The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people.”<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, the U.S. bishops’ preaching document advocates for a stronger catechetical element to Catholic Sunday preaching. This raises the questions: What is effective catechetical preaching? What does it look like? What does that direction mean for the content and the style of the homily?

Encounter, catechesis, and faith formation in the homily — these are questions that our bishops and teachers of homiletics are currently wrestling with.<sup>5</sup> Catechetical leaders have much experience here: the tug and pull between formation and information has been the topic of discussion for more than 30 years. Thus, as part of this larger homiletical conversation within the church, the voices of catechetical leaders can be a key source of wisdom at the parish, diocesan, and national levels. At the 2013 conference, Fr. Richard Fragomeni, himself a teacher of homiletics and the keynote speaker, commented to Lee Nagel how very visionary it is of NCCL to sponsor this study.

The remarks that follow are a sampling of the 131 responses of those who participated in focus groups, completed a paper survey at the May 2013 conference, and answered an online survey that was made available to NCCL members in June of 2013.<sup>6</sup> This is not an official statement or a nationally representative study, but a compilation of voices from the



Photo by James Emery

members of NCCL who responded. What do these catechetical leaders have to say about Sunday preaching?

### MANY ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

One of the most consistent findings in this study was how very inconsistent are our Catholic homilies. If Sunday preaching is the “elephant in the room,” catechetical leaders describe a wide variety of elephants, from the majestic and the inspiring to the meek and the weak.

A prime indicator of satisfaction is the willingness to recommend a book, a speech, or a product to a friend. When asked if they would recommend the homily that they last heard, almost 41 percent (40.85 percent) of the catechetical leaders surveyed said, “No.”<sup>7</sup> This data point has significant implications for the “new evangelization” efforts which advise, “Just invite them in.” The hesitation of the church-employed faithful is, “If I invite them in, what are they going to get?” Since Catholics on the margins do not have a heart burning for the Eucharist (or they would be there), the homily is one of the significant elements in the decision for or against the church. One parish DRE described it this way: “The easiest and most obvious way to evangelize the marginalized is Sunday preaching. It is often the first impression of the church. Many judge the universal church based on the local parish.” A diocesan leader said, “Sunday Mass/homilies are an integral moment/opportunity to make positive connections with those who only come to the parish for Mass. They need to be fed well by everyone present, but the homilist has the key source for speaking directly to their spirituality/heart.”

In his opening remarks about the homily in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis addresses the significance of the Sunday homily: “... so many concerns have

been expressed about this important ministry and we cannot simply ignore them.”<sup>8</sup>

In some parishes, Sunday preaching resonates with the needs of the people. Elsewhere, it seems deaf to those connections. Why? One diocesan director diagnoses this discrepancy as a listening matter. He says,

I believe the greatest challenge is encouraging homilists to listen to the desires, hopes, thoughts, and challenges of the people in the pews. I have the privilege (and challenge) of being in dozens of parishes each year, and the quality of preaching and liturgical celebration runs the gamut. There are places of hope and inspiration, and some of poor quality, lackluster “celebration,” and faulty theology. One of the distinctions that I observe between those two extremes is that often the parishes with wonderful Sunday experiences are parishes in which the preachers listen to the people.

Preachers, who listen, form listeners who preach. Preachers, who are not listeners, may not form disciples who then go out and preach. Pope Francis puts it similarly: “The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people.”<sup>9</sup> The quality of conversation that surrounds the homily impacts its effectiveness. What is the current state of that interchange?

### GIVE AND TAKE?

One pastoral associate enjoys a rich interaction with the pastor of her parish who is also her boss. Their staff and pastoral council meetings use the upcoming lectionary readings for prayer and reflection. The homily and the efforts for adult

faith formation are deliberately integrated. Parishioners comment on the quality of the homilies; she often hears, “I felt like Father was talking right to me.” When asked how to actualize the vision of effective preaching, she responds, “Make sure that those who preach are themselves evangelized and understand their part in forming disciples. My role in making that happen is to be in the journey myself and affirm/challenge my pastor on his journey.”

From the responses of the catechetical leaders in this survey, this quality of relationship is a goal toward which they strive. It does not appear to be the norm in practice. About one out of three (35.3 percent) of those catechetical leaders who are employed in a parish<sup>10</sup> had some level of agreement that the Sunday homily is consciously integrated with their adult faith formation efforts. Integration with efforts to form youth in discipleship is lower (29 percent).

Do homilists regularly consult with parishioners to determine their needs for preaching? Only nine percent of parish catechetical leaders could say that happens in any way (8.82 percent somewhat agreed, zero percent strongly agreed); almost 56 percent working in a parish said “no” to that question. The fervent request for parish preaching consulting groups from the 1982 USCCB preaching document *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* has obviously not taken hold in American parish life, even though the few preachers who do incorporate that interaction find that it deeply enriches their preaching.

### TABLE ONE

In the last year, out of a possible 52 weeks, how many times have you given this particular homilist constructive feedback about or input into his homily (other than “Good homily, Father...” or “Nice homily, Deacon?”)

<b>0-13 weeks (rarely)</b>	71.4%
<b>14-26 weeks (occasionally)</b>	17.1%
<b>27-39 weeks (frequently)</b>	11.4%
<b>40-52 weeks (regularly)</b>	0%

How about input and feedback between lay leaders and parish homilists? Table one shows how parish leaders relate: Seventy-one percent give feedback or input rarely. None could say that they *always* give feedback. Breaking down that feedback into its component parts reveals interesting trends (table two): When the homily is well done (row one), something is said (an average of four out of five, connoting frequently or always). When the homily is poorly done (row 8), 97 percent of respondents will rarely or never comment. The perception of the homilist’s responsiveness to feedback was also not high (row four), averaging around “occasionally responsive.” Seventy-six percent said that there are few structures in place through which to give input/feedback (table three).

Parishioners share comments with their lay leaders frequently (table two, row two). Those comments are passed on to “Father” less often than they are received (row three). Some in the pew may assume that “because you work in the parish, your job is to set Father straight.” Yet positive comments are more likely to make it through the pipeline than the negative ones. Therefore, lay leaders may shoulder more of their people’s burden from poor preaching than do the preachers themselves, resulting in the heaviness of the “elephant in the room.”

The unevenness of homiletic input/feedback parallels the inconsistency of Catholic homilies.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, transparency from listeners is lacking, even from those in the inner circle of the parish; on the other hand, two studies have shown that Catholic preachers have an unrealistically rosy view of their own preaching: 82 percent consider themselves above average or excellent.<sup>12</sup> It would seem that the two walk hand in hand. What are we to do about that?

### WE COULD HELP

Simmering beneath the surface of the words from parish, diocesan, and national catechetical leaders, is a hope to be heard and a hunger to help. Concurrently, there is a sense that help has to be invited from above. An archdiocesan director of catechesis said, “I can’t do much unless invited. If invited, I will dive in — working with seminarians and homilists to help train, coach, and resource.”<sup>13</sup> A young woman suggests that both the culture of the parish and the formation of catecheti-

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**TABLE TWO**

Parish catechetical leader responses in percentages; ranked in descending order of occurrence	Never 1	Rarely 2	Occasionally 3	Frequently 4	Always 5	Average Rating
1. When I consider a homily to be well done, I say so.	3	3	15	48.5	30.3	4.0
2. I listen to comments from other parishioners.	9	6	21	45.5	18	3.58
3. I pass parishioners' comments on to the preacher.	6	30	42	15	6	2.85
4. The homilist is responsive to feedback from me and others.	9	33	27	24	6	2.85
5. We discuss the upcoming lectionary readings at staff meetings.	60.6	6	12	9	12	2.06
6. When the homily is theologically inaccurate, I talk to the homilist about it.	48.5	24	18	0	9	1.97
7. The homilist invites my input and feedback.	51.5	15	24	9	0	1.91
8. I give feedback to a homilist when his preaching is poor.	51.5	45.5	3	0	0	1.52
9. The homilist and I discuss the message and goal of the upcoming homily.	78.8	12	9	0	0	1.30

cal leaders has to adapt to open the conversation and make it fruitful. “On a parish level there has to be a sense of trust, respect, and relationship so that staff and congregation feel free and are encouraged to critique the preaching...on a wider level, catechists need some pedagogical formation so that they can [help] preachers to preach.”

Diocesan and national catechetical leaders also offer suggestions to the broader church: 1) Initiatives are most effective when initiated by the bishops;<sup>14</sup> 2) Require (as in all other professions) ongoing formation of clergy; 3) Encourage conversation to determine the mind of the listeners; 4) Help preachers grow more fervent in their own faith life; 5) Invest time and resources into preaching improvement, with carefully crafted initiatives based on good data; 6) Create diocesan structures for continual assessment and accountability, evaluate all homilists;<sup>15</sup> 7) Bishops can be a role model by strengthening their own homilies so that the people encounter Jesus Christ through their words.

Tiptoeing into this conversation is a first step.<sup>16</sup> There are pockets where Catholic preaching is done well. There is much hope. Catechetical leaders describe the ideal for preaching as life-giving, engaging, connecting to everyday life, enthusiastic; it brings people into the church. When asked her vision for the Sunday homily, an archdiocesan director of evangelization

and catechesis said, “WOW!! Life changing, enriching faith, disciples on mission in the world.” The opportunity for the impact of Sunday preaching is tremendous. The untapped resources among the laity are vast.

Pope Francis writes that a concern for the quality of the Sunday homily is a profoundly spiritual matter — it will require all of our talents and creativity to further this mission. “At the same time, it shows a fine, active love of neighbor by refusing to offer to others a [homily] of poor quality.”<sup>17</sup> His zeal is a call to catechetical leaders as well as to preachers. Let us gently nudge the elephant out of the room and, in love, open up the

**TABLE THREE**

There are structures in place for parish staff to offer their insights into preaching.

<b>Strongly agree</b>	3%
<b>Somewhat agree</b>	9%
<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	12%
<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	29%
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	47%

conversation about preaching. There is no effort too good for the faith of our people. ■

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 From my doctoral thesis study of 561 Catholic high school youth, I unearthed a statistically significant correlation between the quality of the homily and the quantity of substantive discussion between the preacher and his Mass-attending youth. This focus group question sought to ascertain if this correlation also holds true for catechetical leaders at the parish, diocesan, and national levels. Source: *Are You Talking to Me? A Study of Young Listeners' Connection with Catholic Sunday Preaching*, DMin thesis, Aquinas Institute, May 2012.
- 2 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, November, 2012, 17.
- 3 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)*, #137.
- 4 Ibid. # 143.
- 5 Catechetical preaching has been the topic of conversation for the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics (CATH), both in an evening session at the US Catholic Bishops' conference for teachers of homiletics at the University of Notre Dame in June, 2013, and at the CATH annual meeting in Louisville in December, 2013.
- 6 A complete report of survey results can be found at: <http://www.thecenterforpep.com/our-work/research-initiatives/the-catechesis-in-preaching-initiative/>. The words of catechetical leaders are also peppered throughout the author's book *Connecting Pulpit and Pew: Breaking Open the Conversation about Catholic Preaching*, published by Liturgical Press in the spring of 2014.
- 7 Though only indicative of those surveyed and not to be extrapolated as a nationally representative statistic, this data point parallels the study of young listeners who regularly attend Mass: 38% similarly said, "No, I would not recommend" the homily last heard. In any other interchange with those who are "regulars" and have bought into the "product", that would be an unacceptably high level of dissatisfaction. The target for an acceptable dissatisfaction rate is to be below 10-12%, for negative word-of-mouth is costly to any organization.
- 8 *EG* #135.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 From the 62 dioceses represented, 56.8% of the respondents were parish leaders; 39.5% ministered at the national and diocesan levels (3.7% marked other). To paint a picture of what is happening on the ground, this particular set of results was filtered to include parish leaders only.
- 11 The youth study revealed a similar trend; see endnote 1.
- 12 See Peter Lovrick, "A Pedagogical Model for Homiletics at St. Augustine's Seminary: They Must Increase, and I Must Decrease," DMin thesis, Aquinas Institute, 2009, 35: 81.8% of those in his Toronto diocese considered themselves good to excellent; and David J. Shea, "Self-Understanding in Catholic Preaching: How the Identity of the Priest Shapes his Approach to Preaching," DMin thesis, Aquinas Institute, 2006, 72: 82% in his Cincinnati diocese considered themselves above average or better: a remarkable consistency.
- 13 The smiley face was drawn in the original.
- 14 The publishing of the 2012 preaching statement, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* was a collaboration of seven national offices, a healthy step in highlighting the importance of the Sunday homily.
- 15 Inconsistency (in any field) arises from a lack of accountability.
- 16 Many thanks to Lee Nagel, Bill Miller, and Joanie McKewon for making this study possible.
- 17 *EG* # 156.



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