



Preaching for Encounter Program

Preachers' Progress - 2022 Cohort Report

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Executive Summary

If twenty percent of baptized Catholics worldwide attend Mass on any given Sunday, that means that approximately two hundred and eighty million people are listening to a liturgical homily on that day. Faith is born and/or strengthened in the Liturgy of the Word.¹ Arising from Scripture, through that homily, the People of God are fed. The homily has the potential to be a source of inspiration. It can empower the laity to meet life's challenges. The homily can evangelize. The homily can help the faithful to be properly disposed to enter into the Liturgy of the Eucharist.² It can strengthen them to go back out into mission to impact the world in which they live. The homily is a moment of tremendous opportunity for the faith of the Church. How are we doing on that?

The Problem Addressed: “The quality of homilies needs to be improved,” says Pope Benedict.³ Pope Francis says, “in general, the homilies are a disaster.”⁴ People in the pew complain about homilies. What makes for “better preaching” when rooted in Catholic liturgical theology? Many wonder “Can Catholic preaching be improved? And if so, how do we do it?” This is the conundrum that the Institute for Homiletics is working on. Through research, curriculum design of the Preaching for Encounter program, and continual adaptation from listening to preachers and listeners, we are finding preliminary answers to these questions.

How to Improve Preaching: The Preaching for Encounter curriculum has been in development for eight years. This clergy ongoing formation program consists of: 1) teaching retreats; 2) monthly diocesan peer groups; 3) monthly personal coaching, and 4) a homiletically-trained parish lay support group. How did this program form the 2022 cohort who just finished in the summer of 2024? Where did they grow the most and what areas still need work?

An intensive, multi-directional preaching improvement program can help homilists to flourish in their preaching ministry.

This report is primarily intended for internal use at the Institute for Homiletics as we strengthen and adapt our programming according to its findings. But it may also be of interest to those who wonder *how* the Church might help Catholic preaching to flourish.

The Method: This report analyses three sources of data – coaches pre- and post-evaluations, the preachers' own initial and final self-evaluations, and parish pre- and post-surveys. (See the Appendix, pages 23-31, for copies of those assessments.)

¹ Romans 10:17.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #56 and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* #28 - The two tables are closely interconnected so that they form a single act of worship.

³ Pope Benedict, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, #46.

⁴ <https://jerseycatholic.org/long-homilies-are-a-disaster-keep-it-under-10-minutes-pope-says>

Key Findings: What did we find? Preaching improved. Over thirteen factors of effectiveness, preaching improved in a statistically significant way, from a 3.1 to a 4.0 (on a five-point scale). At the outset, preachers rated highest in their personal spirituality and in their academic/scriptural background. This is good news for clergy formation programs: we have formed good men who are intellectual theologians. The greatest weaknesses were pastoral: in speaking to the heart, in stickiness/memorability, and in delivery. There is still room for growth. But from the coaches, the homilists themselves, and their parishioners, all report statistically significant improvement over the two-year program.

Conclusions: This report reveals that an intensive, multi-directional preaching improvement program can help homilists to flourish in their preaching ministry so that they learn to facilitate a way for their parishioners to come closer to God.

Yes, Catholic preaching can be improved. It takes work. But it is not hopeless. There are concrete ways to help homilists. We cannot give up on the potential of the liturgical homily as a source of nourishment as we revive the Eucharistic celebration to renew the Church.

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Introduction

All over the Catholic Church, cries go up for “better preaching!” But what does “better preaching” mean? What are the components? What is the goal? Opinions fly from trained homileticians and untrained (and sometimes well-funded) lay groups: Teach them what is right and what is wrong! Give them something concrete to do when they get home! Spur people to be missionary disciples! Thoughts are thrown all over the place. Do we know the overarching purpose of the liturgical homily? If we as a Church cannot come together on the *goal* of Catholic liturgical preaching, then how can we possibly determine *how* to get there? We wander around randomly whacking with a machete at the forest, but fail to give our homilists a clear path to follow.

The Sunday homily is integral to the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #52 says. The homily does not stand on its own as a motivational talk as some influencers have suggested. “The message” is not the centerpiece of the liturgy as it is in a Protestant worship service. It is not a moment to give a “takeaway” in the same way that evangelicals structure their sermons. From the celebration of the Word, the Catholic assembly heads to the Table of the Lord; they are not yet headed out into their everyday world. The Catholic homily, then, is to be integral to Catholic liturgy. What does that mean for Catholic preaching?

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The flow of the Catholic liturgy is to bring the people of God together, to encounter the living God through Word and Sacrament, where we give our “yes!” to the Lord; then strengthened by that encounter, we go out to live ordinary lives of discipleship and holiness. Within the liturgy, the homily fits squarely within the “encounter the living God” moment. Thus, as integral to liturgy, the overarching purpose of the liturgical homily is to bring people into an encounter with the God who is alive and active in our midst. From that encounter, we trust that God will build upon that relationship to form moral, educated, and fervent missionary disciples. But the encounter comes first.

Once the goal of encounter gives us a path to follow, how do we get to that destination? This is where the Institute for Homiletics is a thought leader. The Preaching for Encounter program is built upon the learnings from the Notre Dame Preaching Academy program, where Michael E. Connors, CSC and Dr. Karla J. Bellinger wrestled for five years with the “how” of improving preaching – what are the various components that go into effective preaching? What measures come together to capture the totality of what the homily should be? What methods of teaching can help priests and deacons to connect the riches of the faith for their people?

In working to connect with their listeners, what helps them to encounter God? This is a question that we have wrestled with and tried to design our curriculum offerings around. The first-year curriculum book *Remembering Why We Preach*⁵ suggests that preachers try new things in order to “reach” their people. There is no “one size fits all” style of preaching. The ideal is for a particular preacher to connect with his particular congregation from a set of Scripture readings on that particular Sunday in order to bring them closer to God.

The current Preaching for Encounter program is the fruit of years of experience. Further analysis and evaluation will continue to strengthen the “how” of effective preaching. As a Church, we seek to draw our people closer to God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How can clergy help that to happen through the homily? Which of the factors of preaching most influence a congregation’s encounter with the Lord? The study will continue. This report reveals where we are right now.

Method

In the spring of 2022, the first cohort of Catholic priests, deacons, an abbot and a bishop began with an orientation to the Preaching for Encounter program. At those orientations in their home dioceses, forty-seven preachers filled out an initial self-evaluation about their preaching. They came together for the introductory summer retreat in June and began monthly coaching in September of 2022. Their coaches filled out a comprehensive evaluation for that first coaching and submitted it to the Institute as a baseline for diagnostic assessment. The initial parish survey was conducted the following summer. The 2022 cohort completed the inaugural Preaching for Encounter program in the summer of 2024. Their coaches wrote up a final comprehensive evaluation. Forty-one preachers filled out a final self-evaluation. The parishes did a final survey of listener responses to the homily that they heard.

The result? From all three sources, it is evident that the preachers’ homiletic abilities grew. There was much success. Individually, some improved more than others. Homilists remark that better preaching makes them happy - to touch the life of another brings meaning to ministry. We also have anecdotes from parishioners who are grateful for a preacher who speaks to their life.

This report gives the numbers from those three data sources, a “proof of product” that the Preaching for Encounter program has made an impact. Anecdotal evidence will inform a future publication. The data has already sparked conversation and adaptation for the ongoing 2024 cohort of preachers. We are not done growing in helping clergy to bring their people closer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

⁵ *Remembering Why We Preach* by Karla J. Bellinger and Michael E. Connors, CSC was published by Ave Maria Press in the fall of 2022.

Part One – Coaches' Evaluations

One of the foundational components of the Preaching for Encounter program is individual monthly coaching. Preachers meet with their coaches and discuss their goals, converse about a recording of a homily, and determine what individual components of effectiveness to work on in the upcoming month. Homilists have found these personalized interchanges to be satisfying and helpful to their growth. Three times in the first year (with their first coach) and twice in the second year of the program (with their second coach), the coach does a comprehensive evaluation of the homilist.

What does that evaluation look like? There are thirteen characteristics of effective preaching which the coaches assess (see the rubric in Appendix One). The five-point scale consists of: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - neither agree or disagree, 4 - agree, and 5 - strongly agree. For the sake of program evaluation, the coach provides a numerical assessment. The preachers themselves do not see these numbers.

Thirty-four preachers completed the final comprehensive coaching session - seventeen priests (including one abbot and one bishop) and seventeen deacons. The others had either moved, dropped out of the program, or they did not submit a homily to their coach for the final evaluation. Thus, they are not included in this data. See Table One, below, for a chart of the pre- and post- data.

Overall Means

Starting Point - The first coaching comprehensive evaluation was in the late summer/early fall of 2022. This evaluation assessed the starting point for the cohort. Overall, when all thirteen descriptors were averaged, on a 5.0 scale, the mean rating for priests was 3.0. The mean rating for deacons was 3.2. A 3.0 to 3.2-point rating means that the preaching is not that bad, not that good, about a C to C+ grade. Other studies of clergy have revealed similar results when evaluating Catholic preaching.

First Year Growth - By the second comprehensive evaluation in January of 2023, the deacons had improved to a 3.8 score. The priests rated a 3.4 at that point. Following the winter retreat in January, by the summer of 2023, the priests rated a 3.7, almost catching up to the deacons' 3.8. The gap between priests and deacons was wide for the first six months, but the net improvement was almost identical by the conclusion of the first year.

In addition, there were also no large gaps in individual item scores between the two – both priests and deacons similarly improved across all of the descriptors.

Ending Point - The final comprehensive evaluation in May/June of 2024 showed growth across the spectrum. The mean for priests was 3.8, a statistically significant improvement of +.8 on a 5-point scale. The mean for deacons was 4.1, a statistically significant improvement of +.9. Overall, the mean rating for both priests and deacons was 4.0.

Some individual preachers improved significantly, others not as much. But taken as a cohort, there was meaningful growth in their preaching. Where did preachers grow the most, according to their coaches? We look at each of the descriptors: where the preachers started and where they ended.

Individual Descriptors

Starting Point

Strengths: At the beginning of the program, preachers were rated highest by their coaches in three areas:

- 1) **Personal/Spirituality** – 3.7: *In listening to this homily, I heard a man of God speaking. The preacher's own relationship with God and journey of faith gave glory to God as the source of his life and strength.*
- 2) **Scripture** – 3.4: *The interpretation of the scriptural text was exegetically sound, easily grasped, and functioned as a lens through which to interpret our lives today.*
- 3) **Left Brain** – 3.4: *The homily clarified something for me; the homily was theologically rich and preached something urgent and important to our faith. It had intellectual substance and invited me to further reflection.*

These three top characteristics are focus areas for seminary and diaconal formation: 1) form good men who love God, 2) delve into Scripture as the source of liturgical preaching, and 3) educate academically sound theologians. Many who come out of seminary or diaconal formation see that their purpose in preaching to be an intellectual theologian who teaches Scripture. These diagnostic ratings clearly illustrate that focus.

Weaknesses: When they began, the homilists were rated below 3.0 in three areas, meaning that on average, the coaches found that these things were not happening:

- 1) **Heart** – 2.8: *The homily touched my heart deeply and stirred passion; it invited me to fall in love with Jesus.*
- 2) **Stickiness** – 2.9: *I will remember this homily and share its content and images with others.*

- 3) **Delivery** – 2.9: *The homilist demonstrated effective communication skills in pace, tone, vocal inflection, volume, intensity, pause, vowel length, facial expression, gesture, and body. The homilist’s delivery was sincere, authentic, appropriately personal, and engaging.*

The pastoral component of how to touch the heart of a listener is seldom included in a seminary or diaconal homiletics formation curriculum; the Preaching for Encounter program may be a preacher’s first exposure on how to touch someone’s heart to bring them closer to God. This is new (and often foreign) to them.

Many elements go into a lack of stickiness or memory retention - boring content or delivery, abstract rather than concrete language, a lack of resonance with one’s life, etc. Nothing sticks. Sometimes even the preacher cannot remember what he said.

Delivery problems have long been a complaint of Catholic listeners. The preachers who began this program seemed to be no different.

In the middle: The characteristics that floated in the middle of the pack were, from weakest to strongest: Form and structure (3.0); Liturgical (3.0); Right brain (3.0); Will (3.0); Listener orientation (3.1); Making one point (3.1); Encounter (3.3). (See Appendix One for further description of those characteristics.)

Ending Point

Over the two years of ongoing formation, the overall characteristics of preaching effectiveness improved from a mean of 3.1 to 4.0. The most significant changes occurred in areas where preachers had originally been weak. Interestingly, a few of the scores that had originally been rated *highest* changed the *least* and thus came into line with the other characteristics of effective preaching. This may reflect the curriculum’s emphasis on training the preachers’ weaknesses, based on the early diagnostic assessments. The chart below shows each descriptor and the change from the beginning to the end of the program.

Table One: Coaches Evaluations (see Appendix One for full descriptions)

Descriptor	Diagnostic Assessment (at the beginning)	Summative Assessment (at the end)	Point change (listed from greatest to least change)
Liturgical	3.0	4.2	+1.2
Delivery	2.9	4.1	+1.2

Heart	2.8	4.0	+1.2
Right Brain	3.0	4.0	+1.0
Stickiness	2.9	3.9	+1.0
Form/Structure	3.0	3.9	+0.9
Encounter	3.3	4.1	+0.8
Scripture	3.4	4.2	+0.8
Listener Orientation	3.1	3.8	+0.7
Left Brain	3.4	4.1	+0.7
One Point	3.1	3.8	+0.7
Personal/Spiritual	3.7	4.1	+0.4
Overall	3.1	4.0	+0.9

In summary, the coaches found that their coachees had grown as preachers. From the data, the deacons grew a bit more, but overall, the improvement was consistent between the priests, the bishop, the abbot, and the deacons.

Growth is hard. Two years is a long time to spend on preaching improvement. As one preacher has said, when you have been preaching a long time, it is not easy to change habits. And yet, from the four-fold approach of peer-learning, teaching retreats, coaching, and lay support groups, the preachers worked hard and made changes and grew.

The coaches would say that the fruit of that learning was the homilists were flourishing better in their preaching. What do the preachers themselves have to say?

Part Two – Homilists’ Self Evaluations

The preachers’ self-evaluation survey (Appendix Two) asks different questions than the coaches evaluation form. Historically, this assessment has been for internal use to determine where the preachers see themselves as strong and weak. This information was helpful, both for program curriculum design and for background information for the coaches. Yet the before-and-after data also gauges the impact of the Preaching for Encounter program on the cohort’s self-perceived growth in homiletic skills, style, and content.

At the 2022 orientation session immediately prior to the beginning of the two-year Preaching for Encounter program, preachers were asked to assess their preaching across nine quantitative evaluative factors. They were also asked to report the stylistic and content elements they most frequently incorporate into their homilies. Immediately after the program ended in 2024, they filled out the self-evaluation a second time.

Only cohort members who completed both evaluations are included in the analysis. Forty-seven preachers completed the first self-evaluation. Thirty-four, 17 priests and 17 deacons, completed both the first and second evaluations.

Homiletic Skills

Overall Growth: Homilists evaluated themselves on nine characteristics of effective preaching (question 3). This question asked them to assess themselves on a five-point scale (1=struggle, 2= not great, 3 = Okay, 4= Good, 5=strong). After two years, the homilists' self-assessment improved on all nine factors. From the first evaluation, when averaged, 57% of preachers rated themselves well on their homiletic skills, giving themselves either a '4' or '5'. In the final self-evaluation, this percentage improved to 71%. This is a strong positive indicator of program effectiveness.

In the first self-evaluation, though the coaches rated the deacons higher, they themselves evaluated their homiletic skills well below priests in their homiletic skills - 48% of deacons rated themselves highly, an average of '4' or '5'. At the same time, 65% of priests so rated themselves. In their second self-evaluation, deacons improved dramatically in their self-perception of their homiletic skills; priests' improvement was relatively modest. On average across all nine factors, 71% of deacons and 73% of priests rated themselves highly.

The preachers also awarded themselves overall grades (question 3 J). At the beginning of the program, deacons gave themselves at 2.9 or C+/B-. Priests gave themselves an average of a 3.1 (B). Both deacons and priests, however, gave themselves the same grade of 3.3 (B+) in the final self-evaluation.

Similar to the coach evaluations as described above, the deacons and priests ended the program with comparable self-ratings. The priests did not recognize that they had improved all that much; they had begun with a higher self-perception of their preaching skills. The deacons rated themselves much lower at first and thus they perceived more improvement by the end of the program.

Individual Homiletic Skills: Where did the preachers perceive that they had grown the most? (See Table Two, below.)

- 1) Greatest growth: **Clarifying** (*My homilies help my people to better understand their faith and the world in which they live*) improved the most dramatically. The percentage of high self-ratings ('4' or '5') jumped from 53% to 82%. Preachers felt that they had become clearer in their message.
- 2) Second: **Content** (*My homilies are scripturally based and theologically sound*) Content strengthened from 65% to 85% with ratings of agree or strongly agree.

- 3) Third: **Focused** (*My homilies have one main point that my listeners readily pick up*) improved from 53% to 71%. Focus and clarity go together in creating a message that listeners hear well.
- 4) At the bottom: Three characteristics of effectiveness started low at the beginning of the program (less than 50% felt they did it well) and though they improved at the end (to more than half), these still remained the weakest elements that preachers saw in their own preaching:
 - a. **Actualizing** (*My homilies bring people into an encounter with God*) moved from 47% to 62% of those who rated themselves well.
 - b. **Inspiring/Transformational** (*My people find that my words move them to be more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.*) moved from 44% to 56%. The movement upward is very positive because encounter and transformation are challenging outcomes to achieve. But given that those two homiletic qualities are at the core of our programming, this is a future area for discussion about how to help preachers grow in these areas.
 - c. **Creative** (*My homilies use illustrations/images/examples that capture the hearts of my people*) is the third element of effectiveness that fills out the bottom tier, moving from 47% to 58%. Catholic clergy do not rate themselves as being very creative in their preaching.

Interestingly, evaluations on only two of the nine factors did not improve to a ‘4’ or ‘5’ among at least 10% of the preachers. These were vocal skills (*I speak clearly with variety and enthusiasm*) and relational (*My homilies connect with the lives of my people*). Why might this be? Prior to entering the program, few preachers watched themselves. As a result, they may have perceived themselves to be better speakers than they actually were. In front of their peer groups and with their coaches, they had to watch videos of themselves constantly. That can be humbling. Also, there was input from the lay listeners in their Saint Joseph’s Preachers support groups; those homiletically-trained conversation partners may have been a reality check for where the homilist was (or was not) connecting with them. The blasé, “Good homily, Father,” was no more.

This inflated self-perception accords with two other studies that found that Catholic priests self-rate their homiletic skills more highly than do their parishioners (Whapham) or their colleagues (Lovrick). The mindset of “I am already pretty good” is one of the most challenging hurdles to overcome in helping preachers to grow.

Table Two: Homilists’ Self-Evaluation, Homiletic Skills, question 3 A-I

Homiletic Skills	Initial Self-Evaluation n=34 Percent '4' agree or '5' strongly agree	Final Self-Evaluation n=34 Percent '4' agree or '5' strongly agree
Vocal Skills. I speak clearly with variety and enthusiasm	71%	76%
Content. My homilies are scripturally based and theologically sound	65%	85%
Authentic. When I preach, I am very much myself	68%	79%
Clarifying. My homilies help my people to better understand their faith and the world in which they live	53%	82%
Relational. My homilies connect with the lives of my people	65%	74%
Focused. My homilies have one main point that my listeners readily pick up	53%	71%
Actualizing. My homilies bring people into an encounter with God	47%	62%
Inspiring/Transformational. My people find that my words move them to be more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ	44%	56%
Creative. My homilies use illustrations/images/examples that capture the hearts of my people	47%	58%
Average (those who rate themselves a 4 or 5 across all nine elements)	57%	71%

Composition of Homilies

In working to connect with their listeners, what helps them to encounter God? This is a question that we have wrestled with and tried to design our curriculum offerings around. The first-year curriculum book *Remembering Why We Preach* suggests that preachers try new things in order to “reach” their people. There is no “one size fits all” style of preaching. The ideal is for a particular preacher to connect with his particular congregation from a set of Scripture readings on that particular Sunday in order to bring them closer to God. To be particular in preaching requires flexibility in method and style and an understanding of one’s congregation. Therefore, it is interesting to see how the preachers in the program have adapted in their use of the different elements of homiletic construction in order to better connect with their people.

The survey question 3. M. was “What is your customary Sunday homiletic style? On a scale of 1 to 10, the elements that I use in my preaching are (1= do not ever use, 5= sometimes use, 10 = always use).” See Table Three, below.

Similarly to the coaches’ evaluations, places where the homilists were already strong moved the least. Elements in which homilists were weak improved more. This may partly be attributed to the emphasis on designing the curriculum to train the diagnosed weaknesses that preachers described on their initial self-evaluations.

There were significant increases in the frequency with which the preachers use stories/narratives, structure homilies with moves and transitions, incorporate events of the day, lay out arguments as a progression of ideas and encourage specific actions/applications. These changes are consistent with the coach evaluation results.

Interestingly, in the final self-assessment, the preachers put less emphasis on always explaining scripture and infusing spirituality. Is this because other elements of preaching rose up to fill in for what had initially been an intellectual talk on Scripture? Or rather than simply *explaining* scripture, do the homilists now incorporate the Word of God in other ways, through stories, metaphors, or examples? Early in the two-year curriculum, there was strong emphasis on spirituality as a crucial component of effective Catholic liturgical preaching. Yet when form, focus, and function were introduced, there was a groundswell of interest in how to better structure and clarify one’s homily. This topic was new for almost all of the participants – it was not something that they had gotten in seminary or diaconal homiletic formation. Perhaps because of that, this is a temporary shift, so that when a preacher grows more comfortable in structuring and focusing his homily, he will then also deepen its scriptural and spiritual content in a new way? And thus, be even more effective at bringing people closer to God? Might that happen in the next three or five years as they continue to grow?

Table Three - Homily Content, question 3 M

What elements do preachers use in their homilies the most? (percentage that marked 8, 9, 10 = always use)	Initial Self-Evaluation Rating 8, 9 10 n=34	Final Self-Evaluation Rating 8, 9 10 n=34	Percent Change
Explain scripture	62%	53%	-9%
Infuse spirituality	50%	41%	-9%
Preach the Paschal Mystery	41%	47%	+6%
Name the Grace of God in peoples' lives	35%	35%	0%
Integrate Doctrine	32%	29%	-3%
Tell stories, narrative	32%	44%	+12%
Structure with moves/ transitions	29%	44%	+15%
Incorporate images/metaphors	29%	32%	+3%
Encourage specific actions/applications	29%	44%	+15%
Use examples from my own life	24%	29%	+5%
Use role models and/or lives of the saints	23%	18%	-5%
Use moral exhortation	18%	15%	-3%
Incorporate events of the day	15%	26%	+11%
Lay out an argument as a progression of ideas	15%	26%	+11%
Talk about social teachings	9%	18%	+9%
Speak on difficult topics	9%	9%	0%
Solve a mystery	6%	3%	-3%
Speak prophetically/ intentionally unsettle	6%	0%	-6%
Use jokes	0%	0%	0%
Talk about political issues	0%	0%	0%

Homilists' Perception of their Parish

Pope Francis says, “The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people.”⁶ The preacher must be in touch with the people he serves, else he is speaking to needs which no one has. More than “what shall I say?” is “what will be heard?” This is not to dumb down the Gospel, but to translate the rich teaching of the Church into words and images that people understand and connect with. Thus, listening to one’s people, getting to know them, interacting with them, and being supported by them, is at the heart of the Preaching for Encounter program. There are many learning opportunities to do just that. Many of the preachers’ open-ended responses to the final self-evaluation reflected an increased perception of closeness and appreciation for their people.

Quantitatively, this mindset shift shows up in question 1 D about the characteristics of the preacher’s parish. The question asked, “On a scale of 1 to 10, homilists were asked the characteristics that describe their parish (1 = does not describe my parish, 10 = very much characterizes my parish, or any number in between).” Like their open-ended responses, the preachers revealed a more positive perception of those they served at the end of the program than they did at the beginning.

Table Four - Homilists’ Perceptions of their Parish

Homilists’ Perception of their Parish	Initial Self- Evaluation Percent of Agreement (8.9.10) n=34	Final Self- Evaluation Percent of Agreement (8.9.10) n=34	Percentage Change
Respectful	82%	91%	+9%
Supportive	74%	91%	+17%
Faith-Filled	50%	65%	+15%
Open	45%	59%	+14%
Active in parish life	36%	45%	+9%
Fervent	21%	38%	+17%

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* #135

Interesting, mentally stimulating	32%	26%	-6%
Inflexible	6%	3%	-3%
Doctrinaire	3%	6%	+3%
Lax	3%	3%	0%
Judgmental	3%	9%	+6%
Confused	0%	3%	+3%
Spiritually Dead	3%	3%	0%
Conservative	36%	18%	-18%
Progressive	6%	9%	+3%

Part Three – Parish Survey

And what about the parishioners themselves? What do they think of the homilists’ growth in preaching?

Obtaining this data was more difficult than the previous two sets of data. The initial parish survey was implemented in the summer of 2023. The final parish survey was held after the program ended in the summer of 2024. The option of paper surveys and online surveys were offered at both times. For the basis of this pre- and post- comparison, only parishes that participated in both surveys were included in this analysis. That comprised ten parishes. In the initial survey, there are 619 parishioner responses. For the final survey, there are 555 parishioner responses.

Only the surveys completed online were included in this analysis. This creates a better apples-to-apples point of comparison and lessens the probable social desirability bias in pew-completed surveys. Additionally, voluntary surveys have a bias in the population of those who are willing to take the survey – those who are on the margins of the parish are much less likely to pick up a paper form, fill it out, and drop it in a basket on his or her way out the door. An online survey from a QR code may have less of that difficulty, but it still does not mean that the data comprises a representative sample of a parish. Nonetheless, there is much to be learned here.

Preacher Evaluation

The survey had four quantitative questions. They were completed on a seven-point rating scale anchored by, ‘No, not at all’ (1) and ‘Yes, very much so’ (7). The top two box percentages, those who responded with a ‘6’ or ‘7’ are reported in Table Five below. The results between the first and second surveys showed a fairly equal rate of improvement across all four measures of the impact of the homily, The increase is statistically significant – there is less than a 5% chance that the improvements were due to chance.

Table Five – Parish Responses

Impact of the Homily on Parishioners’ Lives	Initial Survey Percent ‘6’ or ‘7’ n=619	Final Survey Percent ‘6’ or ‘7’ n=555	Percent change
The homily spoke to my life	59%	65%	+6%
The homily inspired me to want to live my life better in some way	60%	68%	+8%
The homily gave me something meaningful to think about	64%	71%	+7%
The preacher’s authentic spirituality showed through, I heard a man of God speaking	64%	74%	+10%

Differences in Evaluation by Age

Parishioners responding to the parish survey were asked, if they were willing, to record their age. Analyzing by age, the lowest ratings to the four questions came from the youngest parishioners. The highest evaluations came from those who were above fifty years old. Above fifty, there was a leveling out of response and therefore there were not significant differences between the population that was 50-64 and those who were 65+. The least improvement was seen by the youngest survey participants. The greatest improvement was experienced among 26-49 year olds, from 8-14% increases among those who rated the homilist highly on those characteristics.

Table 6a 12 – 25 year olds, percentage with a ‘6’ or ‘7’ rating

Age – 12-25	Initial Survey	Final Survey	Percent Change
The Homily Spoke to My Life	33%	31%	-2%
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	39%	44%	+5%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	45%	52%	+7%
The Preacher’s Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	51%	56%	+5%

Table 6b – 26–49 years old, percentage with a ‘6’ or ‘7’ rating

Age – 26-49	Initial Survey	Final Survey	Percent Change
The Homily Spoke to My Life	52%	61%	+9%
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	54%	65%	+11%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	59%	67%	+8%
The Preacher’s Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	57%	71%	+14%

Table 6c – 50-64 years old, percentage with a ‘6’ or ‘7’ rating

Age – 50-64	Initial Survey	Final Survey	Percent Change
The Homily Spoke to My Life	69%	74%	+5%
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	69%	75%	+6%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	71%	75%	+4%
The Preacher’s Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	70%	79%	+9%

Table 6d – 65+ year olds, percentage with a ‘6’ or ‘7’ rating

Age – 65+	Initial Survey	Final Survey	Percent Change
The Homily Spoke to My Life	67%	72%	+5%
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	65%	71%	+6%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	70%	75%	+5%
The Preacher’s Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	72%	78%	+6%

Conclusions

What do we conclude from these three sources of data? The Preaching for Encounter program has made an impact on the ongoing formation of Catholic preachers. The intensive formation that combines teaching retreats, coaching, peer group learning, and lay support groups – they all come together to help preachers to flourish in their preaching. The numbers tell the story of preachers who are clearer in their message and closer to their people.

And yet, data does not tell the whole story. How do we measure the joy that a deacon feels when a parishioner comes up to him after Mass and tells him that he touched her whole family at the funeral that he preached that past week? How do we analyze the change in a congregation when the pastor connects with his people and the parish attendance grows because “Father can preach!”? Is there a number that can be put on the value of one person who encounters Jesus for the first time through the words of a preacher who has learned to bring his people closer to God? Does that happen every time? From the voices of our preachers, they admit that they are still learning to be inspiring and transformational. Preaching for an encounter with God is a lifetime pursuit. And we know that only the Holy Spirit can make that happen. But there are ways to help that encounter to happen.

We have many quotes from happy preachers. It is enriching for a minister of the gospel to see the fruit of his preaching in the changed lives of his parishioners: It encourages. It gives meaning. It gives purpose. Effective preachers are pleased to minister the gospel and help someone find Jesus as Lord - what an internal motivational fire that can enliven! Did every preacher grow in this program? No. But those who worked diligently on their homilies and were faithful to their coaching, attentive to the teaching, worked with their peers, and interacted with their lay supporters - they found growth.

The Catholic Church struggles to improve liturgical preaching because it does not know how to improve that preaching. The Preaching for Encounter program at the Institute for Homiletics continues to work on the “how.” The 2022 cohort has given us good insight. We have many areas identified in which to grow.⁷ We hope that the preachers themselves continue to learn and grow and that this program has given them the tools to do so. We all have much to be grateful for.

In all things, we rely on God. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and renew the face of the earth!

Acknowledgements

⁷ The 2024 cohort will notice that the coaches’ evaluation form has already been simplified, re-ordered from our research, and adapted for their use.

It takes more than a village to support a preacher. Many people have made this first cohort of the Preaching for Encounter program possible. From the beginning, many thanks to Bishop Greg Kelly for his vision in bringing this program to the Dallas diocese and to Bishop Edward Burns for his “yes” to the launching of the institute. So many continuing blessings have come out of that! Much gratitude to Bishop Brenden Cahill for introducing us to Victoria, TX, and to Fr. Luke Ferris for helping to gather a peer learning group in Green Bay, WI. Recruiting clergy to throw their hearts and souls into improving their preaching is not easy, but your belief in the program, even though it was new and still in process, was uplifting.

Many donors have supported this endeavor in Dallas, Green Bay, and Victoria. Jim Moroney and Kris Kramer worked hard to ensure that the Dallas clergy were funded. Matt Kramer and the Catholic Foundation (Dallas) and others have generously supported the operations end of the institute. Thank you! We could not do it without you!

Behind the scenes, parish lay coordinators gathered 323 parishioners to study how to become homiletically trained conversation partners through our St. Joseph’s Preachers program. Many thanks to those coordinators who ran meetings, did parish surveys, and loved and supported their priests and deacons. Also, to all of those St. Joseph’s Preachers who now know enough about Catholic liturgical preaching to be dangerous to the laissez-faire “Good homily, Father or Deacon.” Now that you know better what to say, may you be heard! And thanks for your patience as the chapters came to you one by one each month. God bless you as you move forward with your new understanding!

There is not enough ink to express how much our coaches have made a difference to this program. For the launch of this first 2022 cohort, Fr. Ed Griswold, Dr. Deborah Wilhelm, Fr. Mike Kueber, Dr. Cindy Bernardin, Msgr. Steve Bosso, and Dr. Suzanne Nawrocki, were amazing. They coached the preachers. They filled out their evaluations. They presented at the retreats. They continually helped to tweak and hone the program as it developed, through their feedback at our lively coaches’ meetings. Their friendship and support for each other and for the institute staff have made all the difference in the success of this program. As a team, they have furthered the field of Catholic homiletics with their wisdom, experience, and input.

Thanks to the peer group conveners, Fr. Wade Bass, Fr. Alan McDonald, Fr. Gabriel Bentil, Fr. Luke Ferris, Deacon Mike Seibold and Deacon John Carlisle, who supported and gathered their priests and deacons monthly and kept them on track. It was a lot of work, but it was worth it to see our preachers grow!

Many thanks to Dr. Bill Baker who has been so much more than our Lilly-funded researcher. He is a man who asks questions! Coming as a non-Catholic into this very Catholic milieu, he has probed and asked for clarification, he has studied and analyzed and sought for answers to this “how” of improving Catholic preaching. His curiosity is unbounded. He is

always three or four steps ahead of the rest of us. Our conversations have been rich and his contributions irreplaceable.

Thanks go to the Marten program at the University of Notre Dame and to Fr. Michael Connors, CSC, for the work that we did together to lay the foundation for this program – the book *Remembering Why We Preach*, the self-evaluations that carried over into this endeavor, and the many conversations about effectiveness and how to construct a 360-degree homily evaluation tool. You didn't want this program to die when the ND Preaching Academy ended and thus far, it has not – it was dug up, replanted, fertilized, and is showing new growth.

This acknowledgement would not be complete without thanking those people who held all of this massive enterprise together. What preachers and donors see is only a small tip of a large iceberg. Much gratitude goes to Claudia Beltran, our inaugural executive assistant, who helped us to structure a path forward. She trusted that this program would succeed and her smile encouraged us each day. Many thanks also to Emily Lugo, who stepped confidently into the middle of the two-year program and adapted as though she had always been here. As executive assistant and coordinator of lay programming, she has capably juggled many roles. It is good to have her aboard! And to Deacon John O'Leary, who would not want a lot of public thanks, what can I say? Wow. We walked together through a doorway into a wide-open space where there was nothing and it was there that we built an institute and an ongoing formation program that works. Go, God!

Most of all to the forty-one preachers who completed the 2022 cohort, thank you: for being courageous in looking honestly at your own preaching, for being vulnerable with your coaches, for listening carefully to your people to find out what they needed. We were grateful to have Bishop Greg Kelly and Abbot Peter Verhalen O.Cist. among us. Thanks to all of you for participating in the two winter retreats in Jacksonville, FL in the cold of January. Thank you for being patient while (metaphorically) flying in a plane that was still being built as we flew it. Thank you for your preaching. Sunday after Sunday, you have the opportunity to touch hundreds and (for some of you) thousands of people. Your words matter. Thank you for those words that bring us to faith and hope in the midst of an oftentimes discouraging world. Thank you for what you do. God bless you and your homilies!

Most of all, praise be to the Almighty God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - who absolutely believes in preaching. What could possibly be better than that?

Karla Bellinger, November 4th, 2024

Appendices

Appendix One – Coaches' Evaluation Form for the 2022 cohort

THE HOMILY JUST HEARD					
Please circle the number that reflects your most accurate response as a listener.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1. ENCOUNTER: Pulling all of the following elements together, this homily evoked in me an encounter with the living God; it brought me into a closer relationship with one of the Persons of the Holy Trinity.	1	2	3	4	5
2. ONE POINT: The homily itself was unified, coherent and had a central theme. This is the Good News that I heard: The focus and the function that I heard were these:	1	2	3	4	5
3. PERSONAL: In listening to this homily, I heard a man/woman of God speaking. The preacher's own relationship with God and journey of faith gave glory to God as the source of her/his life and strength.	1	2	3	4	5
4. DELIVERY: The homilist demonstrated effective communication skills in pace, tone, vocal inflection, volume, intensity, pause, vowel length, facial expression, gesture, and body. The homilist's delivery was sincere, authentic, appropriately personal, and engaging.	1	2	3	4	5
5. FORM/ STRUCTURE: The homily had a clear progression of thoughts and was easy to follow. It had an engaging opening, a sensible structure/form that maintained focus and developed interest, effective transitions, and memorable closing.	1	2	3	4	5
6. SCRIPTURE: The interpretation of the scriptural text was exegetically sound, easily grasped, and functioned as a lens through which to interpret our lives today.	1	2	3	4	5

7. LISTENER ORIENTATION: The homily evinced a sound understanding of the audience, culture, context; the homily spoke to the people gathered for this specific occasion.	1	2	3	4	5
8. LEFT BRAIN/COGNITION: The homily clarified something for me; the homily was theologically rich and preached something urgent and important to our faith. It had intellectual substance, and invited me to further reflection.	1	2	3	4	5
9. RIGHT BRAIN: The homily awakened my imagination in a way that invited me toward transformation, to see God, myself, and/or the world with new eyes; he made effective use of story, image, and metaphor.	1	2	3	4	5
10. HEART: The homily touched my heart deeply and stirred passion; it invited me to fall in love with Jesus.	1	2	3	4	5
11. WILL: The homily persuaded me to want to do or be something more; it moved my will to action.	1	2	3	4	5
12. LITURGICAL: The homily was appropriately embedded in the liturgy; it nurtured thanksgiving and worship at the Eucharistic Table, and a sense of mission or service to others in daily life.	1	2	3	4	5
13. STICKINESS: I will remember this homily and share its content and images with others.	1	2	3	4	5

COMMENTS

Appendix Two – Homilists’ Initial Self-Evaluation Form

I. The Context of Your Preaching

2. Preparation for Preaching

A. What resources do you find most helpful in preparing to preach)?

B. What is your customary timeframe for preaching preparation? Describe your preaching preparation process – when do you start, what do you do in the middle, when are you satisfied?

C. If you could create a metaphor or an image that describes your preparation process, what would that be?

D. What would you most like help with in preaching preparation?

3. Your Homiletic Starting Point

Check the box that best describes your Sunday preaching	Struggle (1)	Not Great (2)	Okay (3)	Good (4)	Strong (5)
A. Vocal skills – I speak clearly, with variety and enthusiasm					

B. Content – my homilies are scripturally based and theologically sound					
C. Focused – my homilies have one main point that my listeners readily pick up					
D. Relational – my homilies connect with the lives of my people					
E. Creative – my homilies use illustrations/images/examples that capture the hearts of my people					
F. Authentic – when I preach, I am very much myself					
G. Inspiring/Transformational – my people find that my words move them to be more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ					
H. Clarifying – my homilies help my people to better understand their faith and the world in which they live					
I. Actualizing – my homilies bring people into an encounter with God					

J. On a grading scale of A+ to F, how would you rate your overall preaching abilities?

K. What do you see as your unique particular strength in preaching?

L. Where do you most struggle in preaching?

M. 1. Your customary Sunday homiletic style: On a scale of 1 to 10, the elements that I use in my preaching (1 = do not ever use, 10 = always use, 5 = sometimes, or any number in between):

<input type="checkbox"/> Explain Scripture	<input type="checkbox"/> Integrate doctrine	<input type="checkbox"/> Name the grace of God in peoples' lives	<input type="checkbox"/> Talk about social teachings
<input type="checkbox"/> Tell stories, narrative	<input type="checkbox"/> Lay out an argument as a progression of ideas	<input type="checkbox"/> Use moral exhortation	<input type="checkbox"/> Solve a mystery
<input type="checkbox"/> Use examples from my own life	<input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate Images/Metaphors	<input type="checkbox"/> Encourage specific actions/applications	<input type="checkbox"/> Talk about political issues
<input type="checkbox"/> Speak prophetically/intentionally unsettle	<input type="checkbox"/> Speak on difficult topics	<input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate events of "the day"	<input type="checkbox"/> Use role models and/or lives of the saints
<input type="checkbox"/> Use jokes	<input type="checkbox"/> Preach the Paschal Mystery	<input type="checkbox"/> Structure with moves and transitions	<input type="checkbox"/> Infuse spirituality

M.2. Are there any other homiletic elements that you use that are not mentioned above?

N. Is there a customary pattern to your Sunday preaching? If so, please describe it.

4. Connecting with Your Congregation

A. What are five key values for your people (what fires them up)?

B. What are five significant concerns for your people (what worries them)?

C. How much constructive homily feedback do you receive from the people who hear you preach (other than “Good homily, Father, Deacon, Bishop, Abbot..”)?

None	Rarely	Occasionally	Fairly often	Every week or more
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D. How would you describe your current relationship with your congregation? How does that impact your preaching?

E. Describe a homily that a hearer received especially well.

Appendix Three – Parish Survey

Your Response to the Homily Today

The homilist/preacher at this Mass would like your feedback on his homily today. Please take a few minutes to answer some questions. Ideally, please use the QR Code or follow this link: <https://forms.gle/G7ZyS7LF3BcLcHt99> to fill out the online version. Thank you!

1. Name of Homilist/Preacher: _____
2. Name of Parish, with City and State: _____
3. Time of Mass: _____
4. This is what I heard as the main point of the homily (*if you cannot remember or could not hear or understand the homily, please write that instead*):

Please use this scale for questions 5-8. Use the blank at the end of each question to record your answer:

No, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Yes, very much so

5. The homily spoke to my life. _____
6. The homily inspired me to want to live my life better in some way. _____
7. The homily gave me something meaningful to think about. _____
8. The preacher's authentic spirituality showed through; I heard a man of God speaking. _____

Finally, with 1 = Not at All Important, 2 = Somewhat, 3 = Only a Little and 4 = Very or Very Much Important, [to align with the data that we received from CARA]

9. How important is the homily at Mass being related to how to live your faith in your daily life? _____

If you are willing, please share with us your age (we are looking for parishioners of all ages, from the young to the elderly who are at this Mass). _____

Thank you! Please place the written form in the basket(s) at the door(s) of the church.

