Institute for HOMILETICS

PREACHING FOR ENCOUNTER PROGRAM

PREACHERS' PROGRESS REPORT
2024 COHORT

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Preaching for Encounter Program

Preachers' Progress Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Catholic preaching can improve. At the Institute for Homiletics, we have witnessed homiletic growth anecdotally and we have measured it statistically.

The 2024 cohort of the Preaching for Encounter Program worked on their preaching from the orientation sessions in April 2024 through the capstone retreat in February 2026. Forty-three priests and deacons came from these (arch)dioceses: Chicago, IL; Joliet, IL; Dallas, TX; San Antonio, TX; Gary, IN; and Los Angeles, CA (see group photo on page 27). Supporting their clergy were 429 lay people, the St. Joseph's Preachers, who learned to be homiletically-trained conversation partners. We are grateful to all of them, as well as to the large support system of bishops, abbot, directors of ongoing formation, donors, coaches, and staff who were the foundation for the 2024 cohort.

Catholic congregations in these represented dioceses are huge; we estimate that the words of these homiletic leaders impact at least 65,000 parishioners daily, weekly, and monthly, with more at funerals, weddings, quinceañera, Christmas and Easter. Incremental improvement in Catholic preaching has the potential to result in exponential renewal for the Church.

We have solid statistical evidence of that improvement from three sources of data: 1) coaches' pre- and post-evaluations; 2) preachers' pre- and post-self-evaluations; and 3) parish pre- and post-surveys. See the survey instruments in the Appendix, beginning on page 28.

This report reveals that the quality of Catholic preaching can improve. How to do that is not based on guesswork. Preaching quality is not simply that some are "talented" and some are not. There are standards to effectiveness. How to connect the gospel with the lives of our people can be learned. This is good news. It takes time, financial investment, energy and a commitment from church leadership. But it can be done. This report is evidence for that hope.

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Introduction

We have good news for the Church. Yes, Catholic homilies need to be improved. There are many quotes and much data to support that statement. The good news that we have for the Church is this: Catholic preaching *can* be improved. In this report, we have encouraging data from homiletic coaches, parishioners, and preachers themselves. Let us say that again: Catholic preaching can improve. We are figuring out "how" to make that happen.

At the Institute for Homiletics, we are not in the flashy business of gaining millions of followers on social media. We are, instead, in the painstakingly slow and vulnerable business of shepherding the shepherds of the Catholic flock, one preacher at a time. The event of liturgical preaching is a deeply human interaction between one man of faith and his people, in a live moment within a Catholic Mass. Our clergy hunger to connect with their people and bring them closer to God. For many, that is a key reason that they took up this vocation. Learning how to create that homiletic relationship cannot be rushed. Growth takes time. It takes an expenditure of effort and financial investment. The Preaching for Encounter program (PEP) is thus intentionally designed to work at a measured pace that overly busy clergy can handle. We devote twenty months to it, through monthly personal coaching, four preaching retreats, monthly peer support groups, and lay parish conversation groups. These four components weave together as the multi-dimensional "how" of a pedagogical method that results in clergy growth in preaching. It creates a lasting impact. We have seen it happen.

In the 2022 Preachers' Progress Report, we described the potential impact that the liturgical homily can make. The Catholic Church is large. We calculated that two hundred and eighty million people worldwide may listen to a homily at a Catholic Mass on any given Sunday. The opportunity is huge. The possibility for inspiration and an encounter with God is vast. Lay people often recognize that enormity: they see the possibilities that a 7–10–minute homily can have, both to impact their own faith life and the lives of those they love. Hopes for the homily are high. Sometimes, though, based on experience, expectations can be low.

Clergy are often surprised that the homily matters so much to the laity. It is only one among many things that a priest does in a week. For many, preaching is not their highest priority and there are so many other things to do! Sometimes, "good enough" just has to be "good enough."

There is a second piece of good news: Better preaching makes for happier priests; deacons are more fulfilled when they connect well with their people. In both cases, their ministerial life grows richer as a result of better preaching. When a parishioner offers the feedback that the homily touched her life, that feedback can motivate a preacher for a long time. Granted, the ordained life "isn't about me" and clergy are willing to sacrifice themselves without expecting a return. But to grow to become a more effective preacher is life-giving. The fraternity formed in peer groups with fellow priests and deacons is also life-giving. (To hear their words about their

experience, see their testimonials from our website.) When preachers leave our twenty-month program, they recognize that they are just beginning to see the blessings of a flourishing preaching life. There is always one more person whose life can be touched.

How to Improve How We Improve Preaching

The Institute for Homiletics launched on August 30, 2021. The 2022 cohort began the Preaching for Encounter Program (PEP) with orientations in April of 2022. We were "building the plane as we were flying the plane" in that first cohort. The first-year curriculum book *Remembering Why We Preach* was in draft form and published by Ave Maria Press in November of 2022. The listener book *Encountering the Living God, Together* was written and distributed chapter-by-chapter to the lay St. Joseph's Preachers groups month-by-month as an email attachment. The second-year curriculum *Drawing Water from the Well: The Interplay of Homiletics and Evangelization* was composed and sent to the preachers and the laity over a six-month period from August of 2023 to February 2024. The program ended with the capstone retreat in July of 2024. There was a lot of trust involved from that first group. We are grateful to all of those who participated in that first PEP iteration. From the 2022 Preachers' Progress Report, we documented growth. It "worked." But we also asked and listened: how could we make this better?

What did we do differently the second time for the 2024 cohort?

1) Knowing our Audience
    a. We individually interviewed each of the preachers who had been offered to us by their dioceses. These one-on-one conversations built a solid relational foundation on which to begin the program: they met us, we met them.
    b. We also carefully evaluated their application homilies to better know what we were starting with. We analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of this particular cohort so that we could adapt the retreat curriculum to meet those needs.
2) Program Length
    a. The PEP was originally designed as a two-year program. This was based on comments from priests who had participated in the one-year (PEP's precursor) Notre Dame Preaching Academy program: they had said that one year was too short, especially in structuring ways to get feedback from the laity. But participants in the 2022 PEP cohort felt that two+ years was too long. Some felt program-fatigued by the end. Not one year. Not two years. What were we to do?
    b. We shortened the overall program. We took out the fifth retreat and cut the program back to twenty months. The orientations for this group were in April/May of 2024. The introductory retreat was in June of 2024. The second "year" felt a little rushed, but the preachers were still filled with enthusiasm when they finished at the capstone retreat in the first week of February, 2026.

c. We shortened book two. *Drawing Water from the Well: The Interplay of Homiletics and Evangelization,* the curriculum for the second year, was edited and reduced from six to four chapters to accommodate fewer peer group meetings. Those two chapters became available as auxiliary material through our online journal, the Homiletic Scholar Series (https://instituteforhomiletics.org/scholarseries/).

3) Front-Loading the Curriculum
   a. The 2022 Preachers' Progress Report data revealed that the priests didn't begin to grow homiletically until after their first winter retreat. There was an "I'm pretty good" attitude to overcome in the first six months of the program. The winter retreat content was described as a "fire-hosing," a wake-up call that revealed that there is a *lot to be learned* about homiletics. Post-retreat, they did start to grow.
   b. In analyzing that trend, we felt: "why hold the 'science of homiletics' until January?" Let's give them more content earlier." Thus, Karla Bellinger's book *Connecting Pulpit and Pew* was assigned at the orientation, to be read by June. The introductory retreat in June was more heavily loaded with the spirituality of the preacher, preaching the kerygma, attention to the listener, and input into each of the components of the evaluation tool.

Why We are Telling This Story

This report is primarily written for in-house use at the Institute for Homiletics. We continue to strengthen and adapt our programming according to its findings. It is a story of growth. It is also an internal story of joy, as priests and deacons and coaches and institute staff have flourished together. We enjoyed our time and we have grown to love each other. The data is more than numbers to us – they represent faces and lives and homilies agonized over and preached.

But this report may also be of interest to those who wonder *how* the Catholic Church might help its preachers and it's preaching to flourish. We are moving beyond guesswork. Careful research shows the strengths and weaknesses of Catholic preachers. We have a growing body of experience which undergirds our pedagogical methods. The four-prong method of peer groups, coaching, teaching retreats, and lay support groups creates a powerful experience for these men. Many describe that it has been life-changing. The Church needs this good news.

The Method

One area of expertise that we continue to hone as an institute is "how do we measure the effectiveness of preaching?" What are the standards? Which components matter the most? The assessments we use have been ten years in their development, based on research, interviews, and on-the-ground use. Many thanks go to all of the coaches, lay participants, clergy, and others who have given us this continual feedback. For copies of those assessments, see the Appendix, pages 28-36.

This report analyses three sources of data:

1) Coaches' pre- and post- comprehensive evaluations, completed through the viewing of a recorded homily and discussed via Zoom with the preacher himself.
2) The preachers' own initial and final self-evaluations, completed by hand, in person, at the orientation meeting and at the capstone retreat.
3) Parish pre- and post-surveys, completed by parishioners in the preacher's home parish as he was beginning and concluding the Preaching for Encounter program.

Key Findings

What did we find? Preaching improved. It improved more than it did in the 2022 cohort. Every cohort is different, which can cause variations in outcomes. However, we believe the changes to the curriculum may be at least partially responsible for the improvements we see.

Coaches' Evaluation Summary: Clergy started fast in the coaches' evaluations of September 2024, the first evaluation. On fourteen factors of effectiveness, preachers scored an average of .3 scale points higher on the five-point scale, 3.4, than the 2022 cohort. They ended the program in January of 2026 with an average evaluation of 4.2, a .2 scale point advantage over the 2022 cohort. Priests outperformed deacons by a small margin. At the outset, preachers were rated by the coaches highest in their personal spirituality and in their theological background. (This is good news for clergy formation programs: we have formed good men who are intellectual theologians.) The greatest weakness was pastoral: in speaking to the heart. Through the course of the program, evaluations improved the most where preachers were weakest (a deliberate programmatic decision). At the end, all fourteen points of evaluation were rated by the coaches as above 4.0. The overall letter grade equivalent improved from a C+ to just below a B+.

Self-Evaluations Summary: The preachers' self-evaluations were completed in April and May of 2024 at the orientation sessions. Their self-perception, on average, was significantly lower in the 2024 cohort than in the 2022 cohort. Interestingly, self-perceptions of *improvement* were much higher in the 2024 cohort. In the 2024 cohort, across all nine evaluated homily characteristics, 47% of preachers rated themselves 'good' or 'strong' at the start of the program vs. 57% of preachers in the 2022 cohort. At the end of the program, however, 69% of preachers in the 2024 cohort rated themselves as good or strong, an impressive 22 percent jump. The 2022 cohort improved 14 percentage points to 71%. So, both cohorts ended at around the same place overall, but the 2024 cohort saw themselves as more improved.

Deacons rated themselves well below priests both before the start of the program and at its end. However, their self-ratings improved slightly more than priests. On average across all measures, deacons 'good' and 'strong' self-ratings improved from 41% to 62%, while priests improved from 58% to 76%.

Interestingly, the coaches' assessments of the priests and the priests' own self-ratings were similar. But the deacons rated themselves significantly lower than the coaches rated them. Might this reflect self-doubt among the deacons?

Parish Survey Summary: In the parish survey, laity perceived a level of improvement almost identical to that as the 2022 cohort. Across the four measures, the percentage of parishioners rating the homily 'good' or 'strong' improved from 59% to 67%. Consistent with the last cohort and other research conducted by the Institute, ratings of 'the homily spoke to my life' were lower. Also, consistent with the last cohort and other research, evaluation of the homily improved with age. All age groups improved at the same rate except that the 25–49-year-old age group reported less improvement. The 12–25-year-old age group consistently rates the homily the lowest in speaking to their lives.

Conclusions: As with the 2022 cohort, this report reveals that an intensive, multi-directional preaching improvement program can help homilists to flourish in their preaching ministry. They learn to preach in such a way that helps their parishioners to come closer to God. Let us unpack those data sources one at a time.

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 also gave a comprehensive evaluation of the homilist.

What does that evaluation look like? There are fourteen descriptors 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 numbered evaluations.

Forty preachers, sixteen priests and twenty-four deacons, participated in all five coach evaluations and were included in the analysis. The others, for various reasons, did not submit one or more homilies to their coach. See Table One, below for the results. Results from the first, third and fifth evaluations are reported.

Overall Means

Starting Point - The first coaches' comprehensive evaluation was completed in the late summer/early fall of 2024, after the spring orientation and the introductory summer retreat. It assessed the cohort's coaching starting point. Overall, when all fourteen descriptors were averaged on a five-point scale, the mean rating for all preachers was 3.4. This is a significant improvement from the 3.1 mean rating earned by the program's 2022 cohort. The aforementioned change to the curriculum is likely responsible for this early improvement. The mean rating for priests jumped from 3.0 (in 2022) to 3.6 (in 2024). The mean rating for deacons was 3.2, the same as the 2022 cohort. A 3.2 rating indicates that the preaching is not that bad, not that good, a solid C grade. The 3.6 rating indicates a C+ grade.

Mid Program Evaluation - The second comprehensive evaluation took place after the first year in the early summer of 2025. The overall program average improved to 4.1. The deacons jumped an impressive +.8 scale points to a mean of 4.0. The priests also improved significantly, +.6 points, to 4.2. Both groups outperformed the 2022 cohort midpoint evaluation in which the deacons averaged 3.8 and the priests 3.7 at the program midpoint. So, while clergy in the middle of the 2022 cohort averaged a grade of C+ at the program midpoint, the 2024 cohort had achieved a solid B.

Also, the average mean score for all 14 performance measures exceeded 4.0, a solid across-the-board performance.

Ending Point - The final comprehensive evaluation in Jan/Feb of 2026 showed incremental improvement up to an overall average of 4.2. This is a +.2-scale improvement over the 2022 cohort average. Essentially, while the 2022 cohort ended with a B average, the 2024 cohort ended just below a B+ average. The final mean scores for priests and deacons, respectively, was 4.3 and 4.2.

Some individual preachers improved significantly, others not as much. But taken as a cohort, there was meaningful growth in their preaching.

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 two areas:

1) **Personal/Spirituality** (#3) – 3.8**:** 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) **Theology** (#8) – 3.7: The rich theology of our Paschal faith was translated into a message that was relevant and important to everyday life. The agency of God was presented as the One who acts here and now, in a fresh and relevant way.

These two top characteristics are focus areas for seminary and diaconal formation: 1) form good men who love God, 2) educate academically sound theologians. For many years, the time-honored pedagogy of preaching has been to form good men who are intellectual theologians who teach Scripture from the ambo in the context of the Mass. These initial diagnostic ratings illustrate the efficacy of that seminary and formational focus.

Weaknesses: When they began, the homilists were rated the lowest in two areas, meaning that on average, the coaches found these needed the greatest improvement:

1) **Heart** – 3.1: The homily touched my heart deeply and stirred passion; it invited me to fall in love with Jesus.

2) **Liturgical** – 3.2: The homily was integral to the liturgical celebration; it brought people together in Thanksgiving to worship at the Table and instilled a sense of mission to go out to serve others in daily life.

How to touch the heart of a listener is rarely 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 both an ardent desire and a new learning for many of them.

Ending Point

Over the twenty months of ongoing formation, the overall characteristics of preaching effectiveness improved from a mean of 3.4 to 4.2. This was an almost identical rate of improvement as the 2022 cohort — .8 scale points versus .9. This is equivalent to almost a full grade of improvement. The 2024 cohort began with a higher base mean score than the 2022 cohort, which renders the 2024 cohort's improvement more impressive.

The most significant changes occurred in areas where preachers had originally been the weakest. As in the 2022 cohort, the scores that had originally been rated *lowest* changed the *most* and thus came into line with the other characteristics of effective preaching. This likely reflects the curriculum's emphasis on training the preachers' weaknesses, based on early diagnostic assessments. The chart below shows each descriptor and the change from the beginning to the end of the program.

The scores that had originally been rated lowest changed the most and thus came into line with the other characteristics of effective preaching. This likely reflects the curriculum's emphasis on training the preachers' weaknesses, based on early diagnostic assessments.

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

Descriptor |	Diagnostic Assessment (at the beginning)	Diagnostic Assessment (In the middle)	Summative Assessment (at the end with coach change)	Point change (listed from greatest to least change)
Heart	3.1	4.1	4.2	+1.0
Liturgical	3.2	4.0	4.2	+1.0
Right Brain	3.3	4.2	4.3	+1.0
Encounter	3.3	4.1	4.2	+0.9
Listener Orientation	3.5	4.1	4.3	+0.8
Stickiness	3.4	4.0	4.2	+0.8
Form/Structure	3.3	4.1	4.1	+0.8
Left Brain	3.5	4.1	4.3	+0.8
One Point	3.4	4.1	4.2	+0.8
Will	3.4	4.0	4.1	+0.7
Theology	3.7	4.1	4.4	+0.7
Delivery	3.5	4.3	4.2	+0.7
Scripture	3.6	4.1	4.2	+0.6
Personal/Spiritual	3.8	4.4	4.4	+0.6
Overall	**3.4**	**4.1**	**4.2**	**+0.8**

In summary, the coaches found that their coachees had grown as preachers. From the data, the priests grew a bit more, but in general, the improvement was consistent between the two groups both overall and in the individual measures.

Growth is hard. Twenty months 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, as with the first cohort, from the four-fold approach of peer-learning, teaching retreats, coaching, and lay support groups, the preachers worked hard and tried new things and grew. It is especially satisfying to report that both cohorts improved and that the 2024 cohort both began and ended the program with higher scores. The improvement at the beginning of the program is likely due to the changes made in the curriculum that

front loaded key material. The improvement at the end of the program is a function of the curriculum and the commitment of our coaches and preachers and lay supporters to pursue excellence.

The coaches would say that the fruit of that learning was that 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 as 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 2024 orientation session held immediately prior to the beginning of the twenty-month 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. At the capstone retreat in February of 2026, they were again asked to fill out the self-evaluation a second time. The preachers did not see their initial survey results before filling out the final self-evaluation.

Only cohort members who completed both evaluations are included in the analysis. Thirty-four preachers completed both evaluations, twelve priests and twenty-two deacons.

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 twenty months, the homilists' self-assessment improved on all nine factors. In the first evaluation, on average across the nine homily characteristics, 47% of preachers gave themselves either a '4' or '5' on their homiletic skills. In the final self-evaluation, this percentage improved to 69%, a strong positive indicator of program effectiveness.

Interestingly, although the coaches' initial evaluation of the 2024 cohort was significantly higher than the initial evaluations of the 2022 cohort, the opposite was true with the self-evaluations (which were filled out four to five months earlier than the coaches' evaluations.) The base average evaluation of 47% rating themselves as 'good' or 'strong' was ten percentage points lower than the 57% average evaluation of the 2022 cohort. The 2022 cohort improved 14% percentage points to an average 'good' or 'strong' rating of 71%, but the 2024 cohort increased 22 percentage points to 69%. So the two cohorts' self-evaluations started at different places but ended comparably.

As with the 2022 cohort, deacons rated themselves significantly lower than the priests. On average across all nine measures, 41% of deacons rated themselves as 'good' or 'strong'; 58% of priests so rated themselves. Much of the gap between priests and deacons was caused by three factors: Focused (36% vs. 14%), Relational (57% vs 27%) and Authentic (93% vs. 67%). (Focused refers to the homily making one clear point. Relational refers to connecting with the lives of the people in the parish. Authentic refers to the preachers being themselves when they preach.)

In their final self-evaluation, both deacons and priests improved dramatically. On average across all nine factors, 62% of deacons and 76% of priests rated themselves as 'good' or 'strong.' Priests improved an average of eighteen percentage points; deacons improved twenty-one percentage points. At the end of the program the deacons' largest deficit was creativity (40% vs. 82%) (which refers to the use of illustrations/images/examples that capture the hearts of the parish).

The preachers also graded themselves at the beginning and end of the program. Deacons improved from 2.6 to 3.0, a shift from just below a C+ to a solid B. Priests improved from 3.2 to 3.4, a shift from just below a B+ to just above a B+. (One priest quipped, "I thought that I was an 'A' preacher at the beginning; now I gave myself a B+. I now know that there is much that I still don't know!")

As with the 2022 cohort, the priests began the program with a higher self-evaluation than deacons but did not perceive as much improvement as the deacons. Unlike the 2022 cohort, deacons in the 2024 cohort did not end 'tied' with priests in their self-evaluation. They left the program with more improvement but a lower overall perceived self-evaluation, 3.0 vs 3.4.

Individual Homiletic Skills: Where did the preachers perceive that they had grown the most? (See Table Two, below.). Interestingly, the main areas of improvement align with the changes emphasized in the curriculum.

- **Focused** (*My homilies have one main point that my listeners readily picked up*) improved the most dramatically. The percentage of high self-ratings ('good or 'strong') jumped from 22% to 61%, a huge gain.

"Make one point" improved dramatically; those who rated themselves well on "focused" jumped from 22% to 61%, a huge gain.

- **Relational** (*My homilies connect with the lives of my people*) The perceived strength of this content surged from 39% to 68%.
- **Creative** (*My homilies use illustrations/images/examples that capture the hearts of my people*) improved from 53% to 71%. Focus and creativity go together in creating a message that listeners hear well.

The three homily characteristics that improved the least are (not surprisingly) those that were rated highly at the beginning of the program and reflect their formational training:

- **Vocal Skills** *(I speak clearly with variety and enthusiasm)* was unchanged at 74% of homilists rating themselves 'good' or 'strong.'.
- **Content (***My homilies are scripturally based and theologically sound)* moved from 67% to 84% rating themselves highly.
- **Authentic** *(When I preach I am very much myself)* improved from 77% to 94% rating themselves highly.

The mystery component of the encounter of preaching – how God touches one person and not another in the same pew – continues to be a mystery.

Self-ratings improved on all homily characteristics except vocal skills. Each improved to more than 50% of homilists rating themselves 'good' or 'strong', usually two thirds of homilists, except actualization (My homilies bring people into an encounter with God). Preachers continued to wrestle with how to bring their people into an encounter with God and how to assess when and how that may have happened. Some of the final retreat talks discussed this mystery component of preaching, where the Holy Spirit is internally at work within the listener. Homilists expressed a humble "I don't know" on that topic.

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	Percent Change
Focused. My homilies have one main point that my listeners readily pick up	22%	61%	+39%
Relational. My homilies connect with the lives of my people	39%	68%	+29%
Creative. My homilies use illustrations/images/examples that capture the hearts of my people	28%	55%	+27%
Clarifying. My homilies help my people to better understand their faith and the world in which they live	44%	68%	+24%
Actualizing. My homilies bring people into an encounter with God	29%	48%	+20%
Inspiring/Transformational. My people find that my words move them to be more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ	46%	65%	+19%
Authentic. When I preach, I am very much myself	77%	94%	+17%
Content. My homilies are scripturally based and theologically sound	67%	84%	+14%
Vocal Skills. I speak clearly with variety and enthusiasm	74%	74%	0%
Average (those who rate themselves a 4 or 5 across all nine elements)	**47%**	**69%**	**+21%**

Composition of Homilies

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.

Consistent with the coaches' evaluations and the overall program emphasis, the following content elements showed the greatest increase in use by the homilists: infuse spirituality (+46%), encourage specific actions/applications (+29%), incorporate images/metaphors (+28%), name the grace of God in people's lives (+27%) and tell stories, narrative (+20%).

There were several style elements that declined in usage from the beginning to the end of the program. These were explaining scripture (-16%), incorporate events of the day (-17%), integrate doctrine (-9%), use moral exhortation (-6%), talk about political issues (-3%). It may seem odd that explaining scripture declined given its importance. However, a key element of the program discuses that explaining scripture is a good start, but impelling the listener toward God requires more than just explanation. It must be accompanied by elements that relate the scripture to the grace of God in everyday life, encourage actions to internalize the homiletic message, and use techniques to maximize the salience of the message, e.g., incorporating imagery and telling stories.

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**
Infuse spirituality	19%	65%	+46%
Encourage specific actions/applications	42%	71%	+29%
Incorporate images/metaphors	17%	45%	+28%
Name the Grace of God in peoples' lives	25%	52%	+27%
Tell stories, narrative	28%	48%	+20%
Use examples from my own life	28%	45%	+17%
Structure with moves/ transitions	29%	45%	+16%
Preach the Paschal Mystery	34%	42%	+8%

Use role models and/or lives of the saints	22%	26%	+4%
Lay out an argument as a progression of ideas	6%	10%	+4%
Speak prophetically/ intentionally unsettle	3%	6%	+3%
Talk about social teachings	8%	10%	+2%
Solve a mystery	3%	3%	0%
Use jokes	0%	0%	0%
Speak on difficult topics	11%	10%	-1%
Talk about political issues	3%	0%	-3%
Use moral exhortation	9%	3%	-6%
Integrate Doctrine	19%	10%	-9%
Incorporate events of the day	17%	10%	-7%
Explain scripture	61%	45%	-16%

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." [1] 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 can 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. Each preacher has a lay support group, the St. Joseph's Preachers. These good people pray for them and learn to be homiletically-trained conversation partners. There is much interaction with these people and thus the clergy's perception of his parishioners may change. Many of the preachers' open-ended responses to

[1] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* #135

the final self-evaluation reflected an increased perception of closeness and appreciation for their people.

Question1 D asks 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)."

On the surface, there is no apparent reason why a course to improve the impact of the homily on a parish should impact homilist's perception of their parish. However, it did. The course emphasis on connecting with one's parishioners centers the homilist on better considering their needs and challenges. They learn to look at parish life more through their eyes. As such, the good news is that homilists left the program with a significantly improved perception of the people they serve. At the end of the program, homilists had significantly higher regard for the respectfulness, fervor, involvement and openness of their parish. This can only improve an already meaningful relationship between clergy and laity.

Table Four - Homilists' Perception 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	77%	97%	+20%
Fervent	21%	38%	+17%
Active in parish life	35%	48%	+13%
Open	31%	42%	+11%
Interesting, mentally stimulating	23%	32%	+9%
Inflexible	3%	10%	+7%
Judgmental	3%	10%	+7%
Supportive	83%	87%	+4%

Faith-Filled	77%	81%	+4%
Progressive	6%	10%	+4%
Lax	0%	0%	0%
Confused	3%	3%	0%
Spiritually Dead	0%	0%	0%
Conservative	32%	32%	0%
Doctrinaire	9%	3%	-6%

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 surveys were implemented in the fall of 2024. The final parish survey was held after the program ended in the winter of 2026. The primary method of collecting the data was through an online survey. However, a paper and pencil option was also made available. Data was collected at 37 parishes. In the initial survey, there were 2,061 parishioner responses. For the final survey, there were 3,049 parishioner responses.

The number of responses per parish varied widely from under 40 to over 700. The number of pre- and post- surveys from the same parish also varied significantly. To minimize bias, only parishes that had at least twenty pre- and twenty post- responses were used in this analysis. This led to a final sample of 1,432 initial responses and 2,818 final responses. Also, rather than average all survey responses together, averages were taken from each parish and then those averages were averaged.

It's also important to recognize that voluntary surveys have a bias in the population of those who are willing to take the survey – those who are on the margins of parish life 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 from these surveys.

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 Tables Five and Six below.

As with the 2022 cohort, parishes in the 2024 cohort reported a significant increase in scores from the start to the end of the program. On average, across all four measures, both the 2022 and the 2024 cohorts improved eight percentage points. However, in the current survey, priests' scores remained flat from the pre- to the post- evaluation while deacons surged.

Deacons outperformed priests both in their amount of improvement and in their final rating. On average across the four measures, in the first evaluation, priests outperformed deacons by ten percentage points; 64% versus 54% were evaluated a '6' or '7'. However, in the second evaluation, deacons surged sixteen percentage points to an average of 70% '6' or '7' scores on the summary measures while priests remained essentially flat at 65%.

Table Five – Parish Responses

Impact of the Homily on Parishioners' Lives	**Initial Survey** **Percent '6' or '7'** **n=1,432**	**Final Survey** **Percent '6' or '7'** **n=2,818**	**Percent change**
The homily inspired me to want to live my life better in some way	57%	68%	+9%
The homily spoke to my life	55%	64%	+9%
The homily gave me something meaningful to think about	61%	69%	+8%
The preacher's authentic spirituality showed through, I heard a man of God speaking	63%	70%	+7%

Differences in Evaluation by Age

Parishioners responding to the parish survey were asked if they were willing to record their age. Four parishioner age groups were created: 12-25-year-olds, 26–49-year-olds, 50-64-year olds and 65 and older.

The evaluation of the homily was a positive function of age. As people age, their evaluation of the homily improves or the homilist knows better how to speak to older people. The greatest difference across age groups is the percentage of parishioners rating "The homily spoke to my life." All age groups improved to from the first to the second evaluation at about the same rate except 26–49-year-olds, who improved at a significantly lower rate. This improved homily evaluation by age is consistently found in research, both ours and other sources. From two cohorts of data, Catholic preaching consistently connects better with older people than it does with younger people.

Table 6a 12–25-year-olds, percentage with a '6' or '7' rating

Age – 12-25	**Initial Survey** **N=95**	**Final Survey** **N=281**	**Percent Change**
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	47%	59%	+12%
The Homily Spoke to My Life	41%	53%	+12%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	48%	61%	+13%
The Preacher's Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	59%	63%	+14%

Table 6b 26–49-year-olds, percentage with a '6' or '7' rating

Age – 26-49	Initial Survey N=320	Final Survey N=749	Percent Change
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	59%	63%	+4%
The Homily Spoke to My Life	57%	59%	+2%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	63%	64%	+1%
The Preacher's Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	66%	66%	+0%

Table 6c 50–64-year-olds, percentage with a '6' or '7' rating

Age – 50-64	Initial Survey N=462	Final Survey N=646	Percent Change
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	59%	71%	+12%
The Homily Spoke to My Life	59%	68%	+9%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	62%	72%	+10%
The Preacher's Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	64%	74%	+10%

Table 6d 65+ year olds, percentage with a '6' or '7' rating

Age – 65+	Initial Survey N=427	Final Survey N=609	Percent Change
The Homily Inspired Me to Want to Live My Life Better in Some Way	59%	73%	+14%
The Homily Spoke to My Life	56%	70%	+14%
The Homily Gave Me Something Meaningful to Think About	62%	74%	+11%
The Preacher's Authentic Spirituality Showed Through, I Heard a Man of God Speaking	67%	77%	+10%

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 lives and in their preaching. The numbers tell the story of preachers who are clearer in their message and closer to their people. The photo (right) shows a group of men who are happy to be with us, even when departing on the bus to the airport after the February 2025 mid-program winter retreat.

Growing Edges

From the preachers' own evaluations, the practical application of "preaching for encounter" continues to be elusive. Those who speak recognize that they cannot control the inner workings of those who listen. That is the Holy Spirit's work to do as the listener is receptive to that divine encounter. Yet we continue to pursue that possibility of encounter – that when a preacher connects the message of the gospel with the lives of his people in a clear and authentic way, their receptivity will grow and God will open a pathway for that encounter to happen. This is especially true for those who come to a Catholic Mass at marginal times – when invited for Christmas, for a friend or relative's funeral, for a wedding, etc. This is why, in the second year of our programming, we focus on the interplay of homiletics and evangelization. We plow forward with what we are doing based on that hope and belief in the Lord's agency and abundant grace.

We have a young priest advisory group who share their wisdom of the priesthood with us three times per year, funded by our Lilly grant. At our last conversation, one of the priests suggested that priests really appreciate the sacrament of reconciliation on retreat. For the 2026 cohort of priests, we will implement that on day two of the winter retreat, whose focus is the spirituality of the preacher.

Additionally, the priest advisory group requested a discussion on catechesis in preaching for our next session. They find the understanding of the faith to be abysmally low among their parishioners. This is where the data from the self-evaluations is intriguing. First, integrating doctrine is low on the list of things that these preachers used in their preaching when they began (19%). But doctrine also dropped nine percentage points to 10% by the final self-evaluation. Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the homily is a "heart-to-heart communication" and not a lecture (#142). But is there a way to integrate doctrine in a way that

strengthens faith as a valuable component within the homily? This is a growing edge for discussion with the next cohort.

Similarly, explaining scripture started at a usage of 61% and dropped sixteen percentage points to 45%. This is in line with Pope Francis' vision for the homily not to be a scriptural lecture, but to have a quasi-sacramental character to it, more like prayer and conversation than intellectual explaining. But similar to incorporating doctrine, there may be places in the homily where scriptural clarity necessitates a few words of explanation, otherwise people may be confused by difficult passages and walk away with erroneous notions of God. Speaking from the heart and from the rich revelation of the Church is not an either/or, for truth goes hand in hand with beauty and goodness (*EG* #142). We will address this more explicitly in the retreat curricula for the 2026 cohort.

From the parish survey results by age, we see that we have work to do to equip our preachers to connect with younger parishioners. For the next cohort, we will intentionally put more focus on connecting with this population. It begins by reading Bellinger's book, *Connecting Pulpit and Pew*, which is based on her doctoral survey of high school youth and how to connect with them. But we need to do more to highlight how to meet the needs of Catholic youth and young adults.

Needs of Priests and Deacons

Another growing edge for us is the population of clergy that we work with: how do the needs of priests and deacons differ? Should the ongoing formation of the two groups be the same? The data suggests that both have grown through the pedagogical method and the content of the Preaching for Encounter program. They have studied together for both the 2022 and 2024 cohorts. But this has also limited the number of deacons that we have been able to take, for as a policy, we have opened two peer groups to deacons and four peer groups for priests. Deacons are eager to grow. We have asked ourselves, could we manage (people and energy-wise) to handle a deacon-specific cohort? At this point in August of 2026, we are going to try to do just that. One structural change will be the timing of the retreats – priest retreats work well during the week, so pastors and parochial vicars can be home on the weekends to say Mass and be with their people. The deacon retreats are scheduled to lap around a weekend, for many deacons continue to work their other jobs during the week. Also, content-wise, because deacons' preaching is frequently once per month at a Sunday Mass, but sometimes more often at weddings, funerals, and baptisms, we will provide additional resources for deacon preaching on those occasions. The interplay of homiletics and evangelization is key to the effectiveness of a deacon and his preaching.

Good News

The 2024 cohort numbers offer good news about the "how" of improving preaching in the Catholic church. The pedagogy works. At the same time, we continue to seek to strengthen the way that we do things. We hope that the 2024 cohort preachers themselves will be lifelong learners of preaching and that this program has given them the tools to do so. One priest recently prayed for us who are "shepherding the shepherds." This is a high calling. We pray for the grace to live up to it.

In all things, we rely on the living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, we ask:

Come, Lord God of Hosts, fill the hearts of your faithful, kindle in us your love, and through our preachers and our preaching, renew the face of the earth!

Many thanks to the 2024 Preaching for Encounter cohort, to the priests and deacons from the Dioceses of Dallas (TX), Joliet (IL), Gary (IN), and the Archdioceses of Chicago (IL), San Antonio (TX), and Los Angeles (CA).

Appendices

Appendix One – Coaches' Evaluation Form for the 2024 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 nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1. **ENCOUNTER THE LIVING GOD:** Pulling all of the following elements (below) together. The homily evoked 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. **LISTENER ORIENTATION/SPEAKS TO MY LIFE**: The homily evinced a sound understanding of the audience, culture, listener context; the homily spoke to me and the struggles and joys of my life.	1	2	3	4	5
3. LEFT BRAIN/COGNITION: The homily clarified something for me; it appealed to my mind, had intellectual substance, and invited me to further reflection.	1	2	3	4	5
4. **RIGHT BRAIN/IMAGINATION:** The homily awakened my imagination in a way that invited me to transformation, to see God, myself, and/or the world with new eyes; the homilist made effective use of story, image, and metaphor.	1	2	3	4	5
5. HEART TO HEART: The homily touched my heart deeply and stirred me; the homilist inspired me to fall in love with Jesus.	1	2	3	4	5
6. PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY: In listening to this homily, I heard a preacher who was real and authentic. His/her spirituality showed through as someone who is deeply in love with God.	1	2	3	4	5
7. **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
8. **THEOLOGY**: The rich theology of our Paschal faith was translated into a message that was relevant and important to everyday life. The agency of God was presented as the One who acts here and now, in a fresh and relevant way.	1	2	3	4	5

Please circle the number that reflects your most accurate response as a listener.	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
9. **ONE POINT:** The homily had a clear and simple unity, was coherent, and made one point. The focus that I heard was (what the homily said): The function that I heard was (what the homily wanted to do): This was the Good News about God who is actively at work in our lives:	1	2	3	4	5
10. **FORM/ STRUCTURE:** The homily was easy to follow with a clear progression of thought. The opening was engaging. It flowed from move to move with effective transitions. At the end, it concluded.	1	2	3	4	5
11. **DELIVERY:** The homilist demonstrated effective communication skills in pace, tone, vocal inflection, volume, intensity, pause, vowel length, facial expression, gesture, and body. His/her delivery was sincere, authentic, and engaging.	1	2	3	4	5
12. **LITURGICAL**: The homily was integral to the liturgical celebration; it brought people together in thanksgiving to worship at the Table and instilled a sense of mission to go out to serve others in daily life.	1	2	3	4	5
13. **WILL:** The homily stirred me to want to *do* or *be* something *more*; it moved me to want to respond to the grace of God in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
14. **STICKINESS:** This is what I will remember from this homily:	1	2	3	4	5

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Appendix Two – Homilists' Initial Self-Evaluation Form

1. The Context of Your Preaching

Because each homilist preaches to different people, please describe the context of your preaching as richly as you can.

A. The location of my congregation is (mark an "X" on the line above the word that most closely describes your location (if you serve more than one parish, mark the initials of each parish rather than an "X"):

_____

Rural **Suburban** **Urban** **College Campus**

B. The educational level of the majority of the adults in my congregation is:

_____

Did not Complete HS **High school graduates** **Some college** **College-educated** **Professional and Graduate**

C. The average age of my congregation is:

_____

Under 20 **30** **40** **50** **60** **70** **80**

D. On a scale of 1 to 10, the characteristics that describe my parish (1 = does not characterize my parish, 10 = very much characterizes my parish, or any number in between):

___ Supportive	___ Faith-filled	___ Inflexible	___ Respectful
___ Active in parish life	___ Judgmental	___ Progressive	___ Spiritually dead
___ Doctrinaire	___ Interesting, mentally stimulating	___ Confused	___ Open

___ Lax ___ Conservative ___ Fervent _____Other?

E. What makes your congregation(s) unique?

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):

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

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**

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 (below) 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 (somewhat) 5 6 7 (Yes, very much so)

5. The homily spoke to my life. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. The homily inspired me to want to live my life better in some way. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. The homily gave me something meaningful to think about. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. The preacher's authentic spirituality showed through; I heard a man of God speaking. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. Would this homily be one that you would want to share with a friend? Yes/No

10. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us about this homily or homilist? _____

_____

_____

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 for your help in supporting him to preach better!

Please return this form as you exit the church.