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Bishops to consider new document on preaching at fall meeting

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Oct. 24, 2012
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"My dad used to say, 'I know what happened 2,000 years ago. I need to know how to live my life today.'"

These words, from Archbishop Robert J. Carlson of St. Louis, get to the heart of a new proposed document on preaching to be considered by the U.S. bishops at the fall general meeting in November.

The document, "Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily," encourages preachers to connect the Sunday homily with people's daily lives.

Carlson, as head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, shepherded the writing of the document, which he said had reviews by eight other USCCB committees. "Everyone gets a chance to put their oar in the water. That's what makes it a better document," he told Catholic News Service in an Oct. 18 telephone interview from St. Louis.

Although the full text of the proposed document has not yet been made public, an Oct. 10 USCCB press release highlighted excerpts from it.

"The homily is intended to establish a 'dialogue' between the sacred biblical text and the Christian life of the hearer," the proposed document says.

"Preachers should be aware, in an appropriate way, of what their people are watching on television, what kind of music they are listening to, which websites they find appealing, and which films they find compelling," it adds. "References to the most popular cultural expressions -- which at times can be surprisingly replete with religious motifs -- can be an effective way to engage the interest of those on the edge of faith."

It has been 30 years since the bishops last addressed preaching, in a document called "Fulfilled in Your Hearing." Carlson said the intent to write a new document first surfaced six years ago, although the work of drafting "Preaching the Mystery of Faith" took place over the past year and a half. New traction on the document after Pope Benedict XVI issued the apostolic exhortation "Verbum Domini" ("The Word of the Lord") two years ago, and "Preaching the Mystery of Faith," the archbishop said, is rooted in "Verbum Domini."

With so much time between documents, "I think we really had to take a look at preaching in this country and to the students in the seminary who are preparing to become priests," Archbishop Carlson said, adding bishops were concerned over "the whole question of catechetical preaching."

"Following the Second Vatican Council and 'Fulfilled in Your Hearing,' there is a whole focus on being faithful to the Scripture. At the same time we have to pass on the deposit of the faith," he said.

Catholics in the pews, according to Carlson, deliver a mixed verdict on the effectiveness of their own preachers. "There are places where the preaching is considered excellent," he said, and there are others who "wish their

homilies were not presented better necessarily, but (that) they were more in touch with their lives."

With fewer priests, is there more pressure on them? "Yes, priests are stretched, but this is a significant opportunity for priests to meet the people of their parish on a regular basis. So this is very important," Carlson told CNS. "If you just look at it as I have to get this task done and that task done, it can be challenging for the priest and the people," he added. "It's not something you can do just on Saturday afternoon and expect it to last a week."

Homily aids get a mixed review from Carlson. "The most important word is homily 'aid," because it is not meant "to supplant the preparation of the homily," he said. "I think homily aids can be as good as the person who uses them." He recalled a pastor he had years ago who "took the homily aid into the pulpit" and would tell the joke it included, "even if the joke was set in New York."

Jokes and ideas may have their place, he added, but the most effective homilies allow the hearer to "experience the Word in the context of my own faith experience, relate it to the faith experience of the people."

The draft of "Preaching the Mystery of Faith" says: "The ultimate goal of proclaiming the Gospel is to lead people into a loving and intimate relationship with the Lord, a relationship that forms the character of their persons and guides them in living out their faith. ... By highlighting his humanity, his poverty, his compassion, his forthrightness, and his suffering and death, an effective homily would show the faithful just how much the Son of God loved them in taking our human flesh upon himself."

In his own ministry, "I always used to say, 'I can drink coffee and talk,' so that was a beginning," the archbishop said. He added he used to save the homilies he had written for repeated use when those Lectionary readings cycled through again, but "the homilies I used my first years a priest, I threw them away. I was embarrassed. We have to constantly be growing in our relationship with the Lord."

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