

## Solemnity of Ss Peter & Paul, Apostles – Year A

*Acts 12:1-11; Psalms 34:2-3,4-5, 6-7, 8-9; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; Matthew 16:13-19*  
29 June 2008 at St Peter Chanel Catholic Church, Roswell, GA

*by Father Brian Higgins*

One time while in the seminary visiting St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, I sat within earshot of two women who, I presumed, met while on pilgrimage. As they sat together looking up at the two magnificent statues of St. Peter and St. Paul, they began to compare the sad state of affairs of their home parishes, namely their priests.

One woman said, "We can't even understand our priest, all he does is get up, mumble some trite, mundane homily, never smiles, never puts any energy into them and then goes and sits down." "You're lucky," said the other women, "we call our pastor 'ether breath' because when he starts speaking, the whole congregation falls asleep."

One of the women looked up again at the statues of St. Peter and St. Paul and said, almost wistfully, "Oh, if only our priest's homilies had the fire of St. Peter and the passion of St. Paul."

A few years ago, when I was Vocations Director, a young man who was interested in the seminary came to see me. When he walked into our rather posh looking rectory, he looked at me, looked around and said in total innocence, "Gosh, Father, if this is poverty, I can't wait to see chastity." The sobering truth is that we clergy preach as much by the way we live as by our sermons.

St. Francis once said to his brothers, "**Preach the gospel always...using words only if necessary.**"

However, the majority of Catholics only encounter their clergy in the pulpit or on the altar, so our most "**seen sermon**" is our Sunday homily. Yet in my nine years as a priest, what I have found most amazing is how many, and how often, people comment, criticize or email about what they hear from the pulpit. So this morning I would like to challenge their words and their criticism with a blunt statement once made by a famous preacher:

**"Poor preaching is God's curse on a congregation that does not pray."**

Now as difficult as that may be to hear, I believe it is an accurate statement for several reasons. For I think the constant complaints about sermons and liturgies reflect a deep spiritual malaise among most American Catholics. The problem is that many of us begin religion with ourselves and our own needs rather than with God and His glory.

In controversial matters, we critique the Church's teaching with our opinions such as "That isn't fair," "It's my body," or "Who is the Church to tell me what I can and cannot do?", rather than let Christ's Bride shape our opinions.

And when we come to Mass, it is so obvious by our body language and deep sighs and the reading of the bulletins that we think "This sermon stinks," or "I am so bored," or "Tell me something I don't know."

My friends, to worship starting with our own needs and wants rather than God's glory is like "picnicking in Gethsemane," Calvin Miller writes. "Delayed gratification has no part in our discipleship. We want our Godly goodies now."

Yes, air-conditioned churches, padded pews, inspiring sermons are nice, but the first and foremost reason we go to Mass is to surrender your heart to God in an awed thanksgiving for the sacrifices made by Christ.

And I will confess to you, some people are downright mean in their criticism of the homilist. The truth is that some clergy are gifted speakers but some are not. Some are gifted administrators and some are not. Some priests are most gifted in the confessional or counseling, but some are not.

You see, rare is the priest who is gifted in all areas. And so before you charge into criticism of the poor sermons you have heard, consider the weekly crucifixion it must be for the priest who knows he is not a gifted speaker or homilist and yet must preach week after week anyway.

And instead of our prayers and appreciation for giving his life to Christ for the good of our souls, rather he is mocked and written horrific emails because he is not as talented as we wished him to be; but my dear friends, it will do us all well to remember that Adolph Hitler and Jim Jones both were dazzling and dynamic speakers.

Yes, it is no surprise that Americans are dazzled by the outgoing personality of the dynamic speaker; after all, most people are looking for punch lines and not for substance when they are in Mass. But to be honest with you, there is only one gift, **one gift**, that you may in justice demand of your priests, and **that is holiness**. All other gifts are simply the gift of grace from the Holy Spirit.

So, if you find yourself chronically discontent with preaching and constantly complaining to others, then please ask yourself these questions:

\* Do you arrive at Mass early, do you pray before Mass, or do you rush in late and leave early, disgusted you have not received more from your monumental efforts?

\* Do you struggle to pay attention to the Scriptures read at Mass or do you ever bother to prepare for Mass by familiarizing yourself to the Sunday readings earlier in the week?

\* Do you pray for the priest as he begins his homily or do you sit there in cold arrogance daring him to either entertain you or mess up so you can continue your running tally week after week?

In the Old Testament, the young Samuel was awakened by God from a sound sleep. Confused, he went to Eli, who advised him to return to his room and say to God, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." I believe prayed in sincerity, you may be surprised what you hear.

In the Middle Ages, Catholics had the custom of running from church to church to gaze on the host elevated at Mass. Today Catholics rush from parish to parish in order to find the preacher and liturgy that inspires and entertains them the most. "Who's saying the Noon Mass?" is a frequent call in most rectories. This is a strange question since everyone knows that answer, which is, a Catholic priest will be celebrating all the Masses.

My friends... my question to you is: "Have we lost a sense of what, in all places, the Mass is? For the Mass, after all, is the renewal of Christ's loving sacrifice, the sacrament of His real presence, the wonder-working grace that shapes us all into the family of His Father. So I dare ask you, what more do you want?"

Let me tell you honestly, any parish, any personal faith based on the preaching or personality of a priest, rather than on Christ's Eucharistic Presence and His Sacrificial Love for us is bound to crumble and fall, for faith without substance is a lie.

Finally, for those of us who have been ordained and charged with the responsibility to preach the Word of God to the people, I will admit, it is a daunting task. And after nine years I can say with all sincerity, I am terrified of preaching. But the truth is, it is the greatest contact we have with

people. In most of our parishes, priests have more contact with people in one Mass than a month of appointments.

And I am well aware of the fact that the Sunday sermon is the only religious instruction that 80-90% of our people will receive for the week. I am also aware that at a large parish Mass there is possibly present a person who could die before the following Sunday, and more than likely there is a person here who has come back to the Church after years of being away, simply to test once again the waters of faith.

And so yes, we priests should be motivated and a more than a little intimidated. And we should study, and we should look for ways to improve our communication skills. Yes, we should follow the three "B's" of preaching: **Be brief, be brilliant and be gone**.

But first and foremost, priests must never speak of Christ unless we have first spoken to Christ, because I know that you people can tell the difference. So our challenge to preach is first a challenge to be holy. The Jesuit DiNobili once wrote in a letter to priests, "**Be careful that you preach nothing which is not by God's grace found doubly in you.**"

So, dear people, my dear friends in Christ, I ask you, let all of us turn our criticisms, our comments, and our emails into prayers, sacrifices and fasting for the holiness of the clergy, and then I believe you will get the fire of St. Paul and the passion of St. Peter in the homilies you are yearning for from the pulpit.