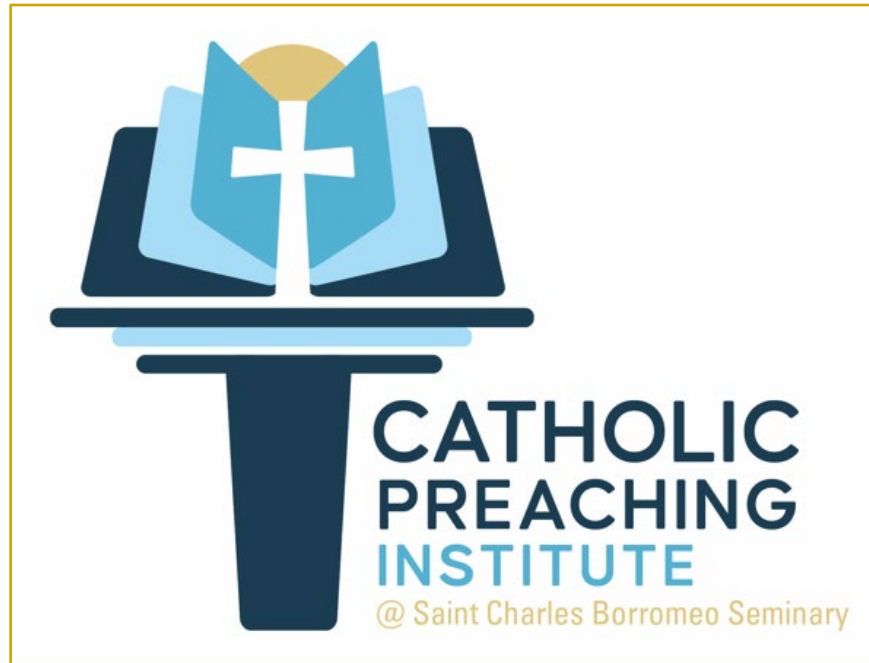


“Engaged by the Word”



FINAL REPORT

on the Study of Parishioners' Experience
of Preaching in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia

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1. Introduction

Established in January 2024, [the Catholic Preaching Institute at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary](#) (CPI) aims to transform the experience of preaching into a beneficial encounter with the Word of God, leading people closer to Christ through enhanced participation in parish liturgical life. In support of its mission, CPI solicited parishioner feedback about the homilies they have experienced while attending Mass at parishes within the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Information from this survey will assist CPI to create programs to help all clergy – priests and permanent deacons – improve at their craft. The hoped-for result will be a homiletic revival in the archdiocese, in which preachers better connect the faithful with the Word, who is Jesus Christ. Why?

The Word hasn't changed – He is our eternal constant of love, mercy and forgiveness – but new generations of Catholics require new approaches to meet Jesus in and through Sacred Scripture. As in any other "industry" looking to meet the needs of "consumers", adaptation is critical. This has been true since the early days of the Church, when the mission required disciples to evangelize on foot and write letters to outposts of new Christians, hungry for encouragement, instruction and clarification.

As the Church culture has changed since the creation of the archdiocese in 1808, so have the expectations for Philadelphia's clergy. The question is *How are they doing?* That's what CPI asked of Philadelphia Catholics; what follows is a detailed summary of their response.

It's not often that the Catholic Church of Philadelphia has a chance to provide feedback that potentially impacts the formation of its priests and deacons, but here is an opportunity to be heard AND potentially impactful. Please consider sharing your opinion!

from a re-posting of the Facebook promo

2. "Thanks for asking"

2.1 *design of the survey*

The online survey was offered in English and Spanish in a digital format to facilitate collection and comparison of data. The survey included three sections:

The first section sought **demographic** information, so that CPI could segment the analysis so as to appreciate how a wide variety of parishioners experience homilies in similar and/or different ways.

Respondents were asked to indicate (1) their age bracket, (2) the number of years they have been attending the parish where they regularly worship, and (3) the frequency with which they attended Mass and heard a homily at the parish where they worship.

The second section addressed **homiletic** experiences, so that CPI could understand more clearly how the different characteristics and features affect the impact of a homily. In turn, the data will enable CPI to create programs to improve preaching and, in turn, to benefit parishioners' encounter with the Word of God.

Twelve statements addressed particular features commonly considered to be characteristic of compelling preaching. For each statement, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement by way of a five-point Likert scale. Two additional statements addressed the "length" and "quality" of preaching. (See the tables below, pages 5-6.)

This section also included one comprehensive question, in which respondents were asked to name a "compelling preacher" in the archdiocese, from a drop-down list of all clergy with faculties in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

The final section addressed **geographic** facts. Respondents were asked to name the parish they frequented the most over the past year (for which a drop-down list of all archdiocesan parishes was provided), and to provide their zip code. This information allows CPI to observe the archdiocesan-wide distribution of responses and to prepare parish-specific summaries of the data.

2.2 limitations of the survey

The intent of this brief survey is to glean information about the current state of preaching in the archdiocese as parishioners experience it. As a general overview, the survey was limited in focus and format.

In terms of focus, the survey acknowledged at the outset that people's experience involved listening to one or more preachers (pastors, vicars, residents, visitors, and deacons). However, it was impractical to focus on the assessment of individual preachers, of which there are 996 possibilities in the archdiocese! For this reason, the survey asked respondents to consider their experience over the past year wholistically – "in general, in common, ordinarily" – when considering how to respond.

In terms of format, the survey was deliberately quantitative in its use of Likert-scale choices, rather than open-ended responses. This allowed for the use of computational models and a comparison of variables that otherwise would not be possible.

At a later time, after implementation of its programs, CPI will engage in more specific assessments of individual preachers and more qualitative analysis by parishioners.

2.3 marketing of the survey

Prior to launch during Lent, CPI vigorously marketed the survey throughout the five-county archdiocese and to its 214 parishes. Available means, staggered over the course of two months, included:

- URL links, together with QR codes and digital buttons, in all promotions
- printed promotional cards and flyers provided to select parishes and archdiocesan offices
- news stories in [local](#) and [national](#) media
- social media posts on Facebook (3 posts, 5,261 impressions) and Twitter (2 posts, 233 views)
- email campaigns across multiple platforms, including
 - seminary newsletter (2 issues), sent to 3,918 addresses
 - seminary community email, sent to 214 addresses

- Constant Contact messaging reaching 2,147 recipients, with contacts exceeding national standards for faith-based industries (“open” rate at 68% vs. 46% nationally; “click” rate at 14% vs. 3% nationally).

2.4 participation in the survey

Parishioners were given a four-week window (from February 25 through March 23) to complete the survey.

5,970 surveys were submitted via the digital portal administered by the Catholic Leadership Institute. For reasons unknown, a large number of submissions (1,013) included responses only to the demographic items.

Surveys were completed by at least one person from 204 of the 214 parishes, a parish participation rate of 95% for the archdiocese as a whole. All twelve deaneries of the archdiocese were represented. The average number of surveys received was 21, with distribution of parish participation as follows:

- > 100 surveys were received from 5 parishes
- 75-99 surveys were received from 4 parishes
- 50-74 surveys were received from 37 parishes
- 10-24 surveys were received from 59 parishes
- < 10 surveys were received from 87 parishes, 12 of which had only 1 respondent

Highlights from the demographic data provided by respondents includes the following:

- 72% were older than 55, with 18% older than 75 ... which likely reflects the aging population of those regularly attending Mass;
- more than 50% have been attending their parish for at least 20 years ... which likely reflects the greater willingness of “veterans” in the parish to engage in parish activities;
- more than 93% frequent Mass at their parish weekly or more often ... which clearly reflects a seasoned assessment of preaching from the “regulars” in a parish, more so than a biased view from those with limited experience of listening to homilies.

The full distribution of the demographic data is given below:

AGE	under 18	18 - 25	26 - 35	36 - 45	46 - 55	56 - 65	66 - 75	Over 75	totals
<i>number</i>	45	98	271	525	729	1450	1758	1072	5948
<i>percent</i>	0.76%	1.65%	4.56%	8.83%	12.26%	24.38%	29.56%	18.02%	100.02%

Years in the Parish	<1	1 - 2	3 - 5	6 - 10	11 - 20	20+	totals
<i>number</i>	130	320	720	738	957	3043	5908
<i>percent</i>	2.20%	5.42%	12.19%	12.49%	16.20%	51.51%	100.01%

Frequency of Mass attendance	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Occasionally	totals
<i>number</i>	1079	4422	269	142	5912
<i>percent</i>	18.25%	74.80%	4.55%	2.40%	100.00%

I deeply appreciate the priests and deacons at my parish. They love our church and all of its members. I love them too, which is why I wanted to speak up about an opportunity to deepen and expand our faith and our understanding of that faith.

from an unsolicited email to CPI

3. The View from the Pew

3.1 what the survey says

The table below summarizes feedback on the specific characteristics of preaching.

- The **number of surveys** refers to the submissions that included a rating of that particular characteristic.
- The **average rating** is calculated on a numerical basis assigned to the Likert-scale responses, with "strongly agree" as highest (5) and "strongly disagree" as lowest (1).
- The percentages listed refer to the Likert-scale responses, categorized here in three groups:
 - The **pleased** are those who "strongly agreed" that they have experienced the characteristic in question.
 - The **contented** are those who "agreed," but not strongly.
 - The **discontented** are an amalgamation of those who could not bring themselves to decide ("neither") and those who actually "disagreed" (even "strongly") that the characteristic in question is evident in the homilies they hear.

Survey of Parishioners in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia (2024) Specific ELEMENTS of Preaching	Number Surveys	AVERAGE rating	Pleased	Contented	Discontented
			5-rating <i>strongly agree</i>	4-rating <i>agree</i>	(3) <i>neither agree/disagree</i> + (2) <i>disagree</i> + (1) <i>strongly disagree</i>
Homilies are well-prepared, organized , and easy to follow	4,931	4.08	40.0%	39.9%	20.1%
Preachers use simple, clear, and understandable language	4,911	4.26	44.8%	42.8%	12.4%
Preachers demonstrate conviction and enthusiasm	4,871	4.02	46.6%	35.6%	17.8%
Homilies give insight from the Word of God to interpret life	4,903	3.84	34.3%	34.6%	31.1%
Homilies offer positive message of "Good News"	4,893	4.09	40.0%	39.2%	20.8%
Homilies speak to heart & soul more than to head or hands	4,888	3.60	26.8%	29.3%	43.9%
Homilies summon to ongoing conversion	4,902	3.68	29.5%	31.1%	39.4%
Homilies encourage a relationship with the Lord	4,893	3.98	37.0%	37.0%	26.0%
Homilies are relevant to real-life situations in today's world	4,888	3.66	31.6%	30.9%	37.5%
Homilies show preacher's "closeness" to the people	4,889	3.76	32.9%	31.0%	36.1%
Message of homily is connected to celebration of Mass	4,890	4.02	37.0%	39.1%	23.9%
Message of homily typically remains with me after Mass	4,882	3.52	25.9%	30.9%	43.2%

Summarized below are the responses to the two general characteristics:

Overall, the length of homilies is ...		much too short	too short	just right	too long	much too long
number = 4,921	avg. rating = 3.31	0.5%	3.1%	67.7%	22%	6.7%

Overall, the quality of homilies is ...		terrible	below average	average	above average	terrific
number = 4,919	avg. rating = 3.61	3.0%	11.0%	29.5%	34.8%	21.7%

3.2 what the survey means

The numbers above reflect raw data. With a more analytical look, the characteristics can be considered in relation to each other for the sake of posing questions and, where possible, drawing conclusions. This analysis is not exhaustive; instead, it simply highlights key observations from the data.

Looking at the characteristics tells both good and not-so-good news in their ranking relative to the entire set.

The good news comes in two areas related to how preachers preach:

First, a strong majority of parishioners rate the homilies they hear as understandable. The percentages are high for those who say that preachers use simple, clear **language** (88% agree or strongly agree) and that the content of homilies is **organized** and easy to follow (80%).

Second, that strong majority also believes the homilies to be presented favorably. That is, parishioners acknowledge that preachers speak with **conviction** (82%) and that they offer a **positive** message (79%).

The not-so-good news reflects two areas that more directly impact what people hear in homilies:

First, although not a majority, a fairly high number of respondents express that preaching does not speak to what really touches, inspires, and moves them. Many do not agree at all that homilies speak to their **hearts and souls** (44%) or that preaching calls them to ongoing **conversion** (39%).

Second, a high number of respondents seem to suggest that the preaching they hear is not in touch with their day-to-day lives. More than one in three do not agree at all that homilies are **relevant** to real life (38%) or that the preacher's message shows a "**closeness**" to them (36%).

These two data sets may explain why so many respondents (43%) claim that the message of the homily does not **remain** with them after Mass.

Looking between the characteristics exposes "gaps" that direct attention to where preaching needs to improve.

One gap exists between language and learning:

Respondents affirm that preachers speak in a way that listeners understand, with simple and clear **language**. This characteristic received the highest of all ratings (avg. = 4.26), with 88% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it is evident in the homilies they hear.

Nevertheless, respondents do not generally agree (ratings below 4.0) that the messages are meaningful in terms of offering **insight** (avg. = 3.8), speaking to the **heart and soul** (avg. = 3.6), or enduring (**remaining**) beyond the moment (avg. = 3.5).

Another gap appears between how a preacher conveys his faith in the Word and the extent to which his preaching instills that faith in listeners.

On the one hand, respondents recognize that preachers speak with **conviction** (82% agree or strongly agree), an enthusiasm suggesting the value of their own faith in the Word.

On the other hand, nearly 40% of respondents do not agree that the Word as preached is summoning them to their own **conversion**, with one-quarter (26%) not experiencing a call to develop their **relationship** with the Lord.

These gaps suggest the truth of the adage that communication happens not through what is said but in what is heard. Closing these gaps will make preaching more compelling.

Finally, looking into the characteristics discloses how they contribute to an experience of preaching that goes beyond mere contentment.

CPI examined all the responses that rated the **quality** of homilies as "terrific" (22%) to consider how those respondents rated each of the characteristics of preaching.

The rating for every characteristic was, as expected, notably higher, with the highest percentage (95%) strongly agreeing that "terrific" homilies demonstrate the preacher's **conviction** and enthusiasm.

What seems to drive the affirmation of homilies as "terrific" is their being **relevant** to real-life situations in today's world. While the overall average rating for that characteristic was below the level of agreement (3.7), among those who rated the quality of homilies as "terrific", that rating jumped by 32% (to 4.8), an increase greater than that of any other characteristic.

This simplified regression analysis seems to confirm a truth of interpretation theory, namely, that the meaning of a text comes not with its explanation but with its appropriation by readers, or in this case by listeners who desire that the Word of God be made applicable to their lives today.

3.3 what the survey suggests

By looking at, between, and into the rated characteristics of preaching, CPI is now better informed about what areas can be improved. CPI will translate this data into programs and activities that provide formative experiences for preachers and parishioners alike (as introduced below).

To facilitate this work, CPI will enlist the collaboration of experts in homiletics. For the purpose of identifying local experts, the survey concluded by asking respondents to name a **compelling preacher**. From a list of all clergy with faculties in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 539 names were given! They included 8 bishops, 322 archdiocesan priests, 100 priests from religious congregations or consecrated institutes, and 109 permanent deacons.

Your initiative is a splendid idea and long overdue. I personally know fallen away Catholics who stopped attending Mass due to the poor quality of the sermons. Sad, but true.

from an unsolicited email to CPI

4. What's Next?

Based on its analysis of the survey data, CPI is creating interrelated programs to respond to the identified needs. Together these series look to engage preachers and parishioners alike to bring about a more compelling experience of the Word of God for all.

4.1 "Hearing the Word" – commentary series

To make preaching more relevant, CPI will offer a weekly commentary series to support homilists and congregants in preparing to hear the Word.

By way of email and/or podcasts, each week's message will offer two annotations that provide scholarly and "real world" insights on the Lectionary. Clergy, seminary faculty, and laity will share their thoughts, impressions and applications about what the Sunday readings mean as sacred texts and what that Word means for disciples in today's world.

Because the Word speaks to each of us individually, to reach us where we are in the moment – in the time, place and circumstances of our lives – this series aims to facilitate that "dialogue" between God and people that helps us to be converted and transformed by the Good News "and therefore capable of changing ourselves and the world."¹

4.2 "The Word from the Pulpit" – video series

To make preaching more impactful, CPI will create a series of instructional workshops that address expressed concerns about the form and content of homilies.

In brief video segments, master educators will explore best practices in the preparation and delivery of homilies that inform, inspire and move listeners. Experienced evangelists will consider the features of powerful Gospel messaging, experts in communications will delve into new forms of proclaiming the Word, and contemporary authors will share insights on the theology of preaching.

Because the Gospel is a "living" Word, this series aims to teach preachers how to convey "a thought brimming with Good News that will," if we say yes to it, "change [our] life for the better because of a Love that has come to claim [us]."²

4.3 "Disciples of the Word" – mentoring series

To bridge the communication gap between what is said and what is heard, and to provide desired feedback, CPI will support an intensive, year-long mentoring experience for preachers who desire to improve their craft.

Cohorts comprised of clergy mentors and lay coaches will review videos of a homilist and get together with him to provide constructive feedback and helpful recommendations for making homilies more meaningful and inspirational ... and to create a circle of valued advisors that can assist each preacher in bringing the Word to his parish community.

Because the Word speaks to and nourishes our most valued relationships, this series aims to help preachers fulfill their "wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people."³

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1. Pope Francis, general audience, 7 February 2018.
 2. Peter John Cameron, O.P., *Evangelii Gaudium and Pope Francis' Revolution in Preaching*, p. 36.
 3. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Apostolic Exhortation on "The Joy of the Gospel"), no. 143.
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If you feel a calling to become a collaborator at CPI – as a commentator, a preaching fellow, a clergy mentor, a lay coach, and/or a video presenter – [contact us](#) for more information.

5. Conclusion

As we journey through the new apostolic age of the twenty-first century, the Catholic Preaching Institute at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary seeks to benefit everyone who professes that faith in Christ that comes through hearing the Word, a hearing that depends on the preaching of the Gospel (Romans 10:17).

This initial research study gives CPI a clear "view from the pew" that will inform its programs and activities. We invite your feedback on this report and any viewpoints about preaching that you would like to share with us for the sake of improving this essential ministry.

By engaging exemplary clergy, seminary faculty, and lay faithful, and by leveraging new forms of digital communications, CPI hopes to engage everyone in the local church of Philadelphia in this initiative to make preaching more compelling, so as to bring God's saving Word to a world always in need of it.

www.scs.edu/preaching

