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## “HOMILETIC PEDAGOGY AS FORMATION WORK”

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### Introduction

Of my thirty-five years working in higher education, the last six have been at St. Charles Seminary in Philadelphia. My thoughts today come from those later years, and specifically from teaching homiletics to seminarians at the Theology level. So, this presentation will leave out any reference to the formation of permanent deacon candidates or to the continuing formation of those already ordained, though both of those areas do need somewhere to be addressed.

My approach in this two-part talk takes into account the multi-“dimensional” approach to seminary formation – in areas human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral – while also recognizing that the new Program of Priestly Formation (sixth edition) conceives this work as a progress through stages rather than the completion of a degree.

### Part I – Formation “challenges”

To stir the proverbial pot, let me first mention four formation challenges, things I think we need to do in each of the four dimensions.

#1 - We need to get seminarians *off their knees!*

As a matter of spiritual formation, cultivating “holiness” is, indeed, necessary. It’s necessary for seminarians now and as future ministers. It’s necessary for the integrity of the message they will preach, as their personal example speaks to their witness of the Gospel, probably more loudly than will their words.

But personal holiness is not sufficient for compelling preaching. Every “professional” activity develops through knowledge and practice. So, too, preaching requires learning an art, with its associated skills, not least of which is how to think about what preaching is and how to speak in a way that communicates effectively.

#2 – We need to get seminarians *out of their heads!*

As a part of intellectual formation, homiletics is typically offered as a graduate-level course of study. Like every other course in the Master’s curriculum, it comes with grades to be earned and credits to be achieved.

But preaching is not an academic exercise. Granted, seminarians like to include in their practice homilies what they are learning in their courses on Sacred Scripture. But effective preaching needs

to communicate God's story and its meaning for peoples' lives more so than interesting insights from exegetical studies.

I might note that data from our Catholic Preaching Institute at the Seminary confirms the value of providing "insight" into the Scriptures but even more so the importance of proclaiming *from* the Scriptures a message that touches, inspires, and moves people to greater discipleship – that is, speaking to their hearts and souls more so than to their heads.

#3 - We need to get seminarians *away from a mirror*.

This one relates to human formation. Seminarians want to, and need to, "relate" to people. That's especially valuable, even desirable, when conveying a Gospel message.

But seminarians need to realize that their preaching is not about themselves. They enjoy being autobiographical, often including personal vignettes and/or spiritual testimony in their homilies. What they don't see is how their "I"-message takes attention away from the God-message that the congregation seeks for their own appropriation of the Gospel revelation.

And #4 – We need to get seminarians *out of the chapel*.

While homilies do need to begin there, in terms of preparation, the preacher's task of calling believers to ongoing conversion and greater discipleship should not dwell there where the seminarians, themselves, practice their faith.

As a matter of pastoral formation, these future preachers need to connect a call to apostolic action with the reality of people's lives – by helping them learn how to live virtuously rather than encouraging them to practice seminary-like piety. Besides being irrelevant, recommending spiritual practices not in accord with the vocational obligations of those who live in the world actually promotes a false idea of devotion.

Again, our recent CPI study confirms this. Archdiocesan pastors overwhelmingly emphasized the need for homilists to relate to people's ordinary lives, and the data from parishioners highlights relevance to real-life situations as a key driver to homilies they consider terrific.

## Part II ... **Pedagogical challenges**

Having bemoaned those four things (!), let me now try to spark some discussion around pedagogical challenges. One big question provides the framework for multiple considerations.

The overarching question is this: ***should we re-envision Homiletics as a formation experience rather than as an academic subject?***

Doing so might accord more fully with the newest Program of Priestly Formation – which situates learning to preach in the "configuration" stage, with benchmarks that include, among others, demonstrating the habit of exploring and internalizing the Word of God and the ability to speak articulately in a homily organized around a central point.

Homiletics as formation would still emphasize real learning, including public speaking skills and theological principles. This could help to correct the misperception that a “practicum” is of lesser value (or should require less work!) than academic courses. It could also counteract the presumption that the ability to preach well is an infused gift that comes with ordination.

Homiletics as formation would engage more people in the process. This could include pastors from parishes where seminarians might go to learn to listen critically and to benefit from the example of local preachers (both “good” and “bad”). It could include the laity, who might serve as council of advisors or even a “live” congregation for the practicum. It could even include diocesan personnel, who could weigh in on a seminarian’s progress after seeing a digital production of his pulpit preaching.

And homiletics as formation would convey a more widespread impression of the importance of preaching. This could happen in an immediate way, by sharing evaluations with other seminary administration, faculty and formators, so that progression through the stage can be more continuously tracked. And it could happen in a longer term, by turning what works at this stage of formation into a beneficial program of ongoing/continuing formation after ordination.

### Conclusion

Other forces do impact homiletic pedagogy in a broad sense. Academic arrogance may assume that what is “pastoral” does not involve intellectual study. Parish prejudice speaks of Mass as only the “liturgy of the Eucharist.” Even a liturgical lacuna exists in the universal Church, where the ordination of priests, unlike that of bishops and deacons, does not include any ritual focus on the Word!

But in the end, we all want to assist future priests in their primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel. Maybe homiletic pedagogy as formation work offers a way to make the Word matter more – for seminarians and for all who will have to listen to them.

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