

Possible Homily Topics with Suggested Outlines

Although normally the homily for a particular Eucharistic celebration is to be drawn from the Sacred Scriptures in the Lectionary, there are times when the need of the assembly and the broad reach of the pulpit during the Sunday (and Vigil) celebrations of the Mass allow for the addressing of other topics of importance to the parish.

1.

Homily: “Our Need for Additional Space”

Why: To raise the issue of growth, crowding, and the need to build more worship space

When: After gathering head-count numbers, demographics, and future projections (see chap. 3)

Some elements to cover:

- Discuss the importance of being a welcoming community, integrating new members.
- Present Mass attendance numbers for each service time.
- Explore limitations (canonical and time of day) on the number of Masses and shortage of priests.
- Present the projected growth numbers for five, ten, and twenty years out (twenty years may be too far into the future and too many numbers to throw at people in a homily setting).
- Psychologists say that when people see a church 85 percent full, they perceive it as completely full (if you are that full now, you may be losing people at the Masses already).

NB: In the use of present attendance numbers and projected growth numbers, you might want to provide a visual (projection screen, paper handout, whatever) that people can follow as you talk.

2.

Homily: “How Our Building Process Will Work”

Why: To inform the parish about the steps of the process and their involvement in it (see chap. 4)

When: Shortly before (or immediately after) approaching the diocese to initiate the building process

Some elements to cover:

- Explain the process—assessment of needs, strategic planning for ministries and spaces needed, master planning of whole complex with architects, financial feasibility study, education and formation elements, capital campaign with need for sacrifices, building and furnishing, dedication.
- Speak to the necessity of consultation with and involvement by parishioners (“not my church, but your/our church”): about the need, about generosity, on building elements, on designs and reviews.

- Alert parishioners to the various diocesan reviews by building commission, finance boards, liturgy office, etc.
- Emphasize the importance of continuing, financially and communally, the regular ministries of the parish (no trading bricks and mortar for ministries, programs, and services).
- Address the ability to pay off loan in X years (diocesan policy? parish policy? bank policy?).

3.

Homily: “The Many Ministries, Programs, and Services of Our Parish Community”

Why: To remind parishioners of all the present ministries of the parish and to consider future ones

When: In preparation for (or as a follow-up to) the strategic planning process (see chap. 7)

Some elements to cover:

- A parish community is to be one of worship, education, and service—all three are important.
- Explain strategic planning as a very broad study of the services of the parish, present and future, and the spaces that will be needed to accommodate them.
- All building (form) is done to facilitate the mission and ministry (function) of the parish.
- Take the opportunity to look five, ten, and twenty years into the future and “dream” or speculate on our needs.
- Alert parishioners to a coming survey (or report the survey results).

[Homilies 4 through 7 were altered from the sequence of presentation in the adult education series to groups referred to in chapter 10 since here it would lack the ability to interact and clarify.]

4.

Homily: “Liturgical Education I: Vatican II’s General Principles”

Why: To reacquaint the parishioners unable to attend the adult education series with the key elements of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (see chap. 10)

When: As a follow-up to the liturgical education series (weekly or monthly after the presentation)

Some elements to catechize:

- Make the distinction between public (liturgy) and private (devotional) prayer, and the place of each in the life of the church.
- Emphasize the importance of understanding the general liturgical principles of Vatican II for the full and active participation in them by all.
- Explain the multiplicity of roles in the liturgy—priest, people, deacon, servers, lectors, cantor, choir, musicians, greeter-ushers, etc.
- Highlight the place of noble simplicity and centrality of focus for our worship of God (altar, ambo, presider’s chair, baptistry, tabernacle/chapel, etc.).

5.

Homily: “Liturgical Education II: Basic Elements of the Mass and Its Flow”

Why: To reacquaint the parishioners unable to attend the adult education series with the key elements of the structure of the Mass (the going forth and the return, exitus-reditus; see chap. 10)

When: As a follow-up to the liturgical education series (weekly or monthly after the presentation)

Some elements to catechize: (I suggest this be done with a visual aid such as an overhead projector or a handout if possible)

- Explain the dual centers of Word and sacrament.
- The Liturgy of the Word is entered into by gathering rites (procession, entry hymn, greeting, penitential rite, Gloria, opening prayer).
- The Liturgy of the Word is celebrated in “call and response” of readings and responsorial song (Old Testament reading, responsorial psalm, New Testament reading, Alleluia acclamation, gospel, homily, profession of faith, general intercessions).
- The Liturgy of the Eucharist is entered by preparatory rites (collection, presentation, blessing of gifts).
- The Liturgy of the Eucharist is celebrated (epiclesis, consecration, oblation with three great acclamations, communion preparation, Eucharist, concluding prayer, blessing, sending forth).

6.

Homily: “Liturgical Education III: Brief History of Church Buildings”

Why: To reacquaint the parishioners unable to attend the adult education series with the key elements of the evolution of Christian worship spaces (see chap. 12)

When: As a follow-up to the liturgical education series (weekly or monthly after the presentation)

Some elements to catechize:

- Explain the major points in worship space development: home churches, hall-shaped, monastic, medieval cruciform cathedrals, small and large parish churches, Reformation changes, up to modern churches (a projector slide show of examples—exterior and interior—can be especially helpful if possible).
- Emphasize here the interplay among the following: size of community, influence of culture, and understanding of church and history.

7.

Homily: “Liturgical Education IV: Present Guidelines for New Churches”

Why: To reacquaint the parishioners unable to attend the adult education series with the key elements of church architecture in light of Vatican II (see chaps. 10 and 12)

When: As a follow-up to the liturgical education series (weekly or monthly after the presentation)

Some elements to catechize:

- Explain the exterior elements: the importance of a church building as a symbol of the presence of the sacred in the world; simplicity with beauty; more than just form and function; a sacramental of the place where God’s people gather to worship.

- Explain the interior elements: the prominence of the altar, ambo, presider's chair, baptistry; visibility for the participation of all; the transition (narthex) from the busy world to the community prayer space; also vestibule/narthex space for processional gathering before Mass and fellowship after Mass; the secondary but important devotional spaces (chapel, tabernacle, Stations of the Cross, statue area, etc.); generally good and balanced (between word and song) acoustics; a visible music space for leading the congregation; adaptations for special needs (wheelchairs, hearing impaired, fussy infants, etc.).
- More input and reaction will be requested from the parish as the design develops.

8.

Homily: "A Brief History of Church Buildings" [This could be given as two homilies].

Why: To present a brief explanatory history of church architecture to introduce the people to the diversity of designs through the eras (see chap. 12)

When: During the committee's design development phase and before the presentation of the design itself

Some elements to cover: (follows the highlights of the history of church buildings; chap. 12)

- There are two basic reasons for church buildings: (1) the practical need to shelter the gathering of the Christian community, and (2) to be a symbolic presence of the sacred in the world.
- Architecture is a way to physically capture the symbolic or spiritual meaning of buildings and the groups that use them. We are a sacrament people, a people of signs and symbols.
- *What* and *How* churches have embodied this have been influenced through the ages by history, culture, and theology.
- Until the fourth century Christian groups were small and at times persecuted. They gathered in each others' homes (the domestic church era). They rarely owned real estate collectively. They were accused of being atheists because they had no temples.
- In the fourth century Christianity was legitimated by the emperor Constantine (313 AD), and the community grew. Domestic gathering places were replaced by public halls (basilica, royal courts of law, or municipal halls) for the practical necessity of housing the community. These halls were rectangular, simple, and box-like. Central was the common table—the table of the Lord—around which the community gathered, and a chair for the presider (in civic use, the judge or magistrate). On either side of the judge were lecterns for the Roman law books (for Christians, a pulpit for the Scriptures).
- By the eleventh century, with advances in architecture and engineering, churches began to take on an increasingly vertical dimension. The society of the Middle Ages was very stratified and hierarchical; church buildings reflected this social structure with their impressive height. It is here that the second element of Western church architecture begins to emerge in even greater prominence, the symbolic element.
- The symbolic elements of the church building began to embody more than the community as the Body of Christ; they came to symbolize the kingdom of heaven (lofty ceilings, gold appointments, brightness and light, art glass windows). Towers and steeples became symbols of fingers pointing toward heaven, a visual reminder of God and his presence.

- Styles in the West moved through the Romanesque, the Gothic, the baroque, etc.
- In the sixteenth century with the Protestant Reformation, the style of Christian churches split. Catholic churches maintained a more complex and symbolic style (stained glass, statues, images of the saints, frescoes, ornate altars, standing and watching the rituals of sacraments) while Protestants favored a more simple and uncomplicated style (clear glass windows, no statues or images, a simple table in place of an altar, emphasis on the pulpit and the Scriptures, pews for sitting and listening).
- There were more architectural style movements such as colonial, neoclassical, modern, etc.
- The nineteenth and twentieth centuries introduced new materials that changed the look of churches, both Protestant and Catholic: structural iron first and then steel; reinforced and prestressed concrete; curtain walls, glass, and composites.
- Thus there is no one single style for a church building. (From the Vatican II document on the Sacred Liturgy: “The church has not adopted any particular style of art as its own. . . . The art of our own times from every race and country should also be given free scope in the church, provided it bring to the task the reverence and honor due to the sacred buildings and rites” [The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 123]).

9.

Homily: “Imagine a Church”

Why: To present to the people an imagined tour of the new church to stir up excitement as the capital campaign kicks off (see chap. 13)

When: One to two weeks before the solicitation of pledges in the capital campaign

Some elements to emphasize:

- To be in on the ground floor of building a new church is a once-in-a-lifetime event to participate in.
- Special sacrifice and generosity are called for just as previous generations sacrificed for their church buildings that were handed down to us.

[Theme is the “Imagine” song from the 1971 John Lennon album of the same name.]

[*You will have to adapt this to your own church and its design, but here is an example of the style and elements that we used for our church.*]

- Imagine the following: On Christmas Eve you drive up to the church and you see a 100-foot tall lighted steeple with a 16-foot gold cross shining forth. You park and walk through the columned arches of the ambulatory, past the warm glow of the stained glass windows that draw you in. The large oak doors, each with a stained glass panel, give way to the narthex. The entryway rises into a tall vestibule with a 25-foot Christmas tree near the front entry apse. You greet friends and perhaps meet family. Walking by a glass wall on the main body of the church, you enter the nave. The lights are dimmed and it is quiet as some kneel and pray; others are sitting on upholstered pews reflecting or reading prayer books. The choir is singing Christmas hymns accompanied by organ, piano, trumpets, a violin, and a harp. You genuflect and kneel focusing on the altar and the natural rock reredos wall behind it with the huge crucifix on top. The priest and servers process down a gently sloped aisle to the tiled altar platform that rests in the center of the cruciform upper story of the church. The pews are fanned out around the platform in 225 degrees. Looking up as the priest greets the congregation, you admire the heavily beamed ceiling that creates an open expanse of almost 200 feet diagonally. Seventy-five feet above the altar is a twelve-windowed domed

steeple. The opening prayer draws you back. As the choir leads in singing the responsorial psalm, you marvel at the wonderful acoustics, reverberant music and clear readings. As Mass proceeds, during the consecration you have a close and direct view of the elevated host and chalice due to the slight sloping of the floor. For Communion there are spaces for eight host and cup stations all around the altar, providing a special moment of encounter with Christ in the eucharistic species. After Communion, the blessing, and the final hymn, some people stay to pray in the church; some move to the statue area in the north apse to light a candle by the Mary or Joseph statues. The vestibule fills with parishioners buzzing about the upcoming week's events, ministries, meetings, and programs. Sign-ups are at a narthex desk. Posters are on movable kiosk bulletin boards. A few people are paging through the wall-mounted brass memorial book of donors. As you exit by the colonnade, returning to the work-a-day world, you are refreshed once more by the Word and sacrament of the Son who was born to be our Savior.

- That vision is possible for us, but that vision requires sacrifice—personal and family financial sacrifice. We are the beneficiaries of the sacrifices of our parents and grandparents, sacrifices that passed the Catholic faith on to us, to you and me. Now it is our turn to make the sacrifices for this church building so as to pass the faith on to our children and grandchildren. Now is the time for our sacrifice to make that future vision of our parish a reality, for those future baptisms, weddings, confirmations, First Communions, and, yes, even funerals for those of us who fall asleep in the Lord.
- [*Here briefly note the specifics of the pledge drive:*] Brochures with interior floor plans and the building profiles (elevation drawings) have been mailed. Please read, study, and pray over them. Copies are available if you did not receive one. Pledge cards will be mailed to you this week. We are asking you to make an X-year (three-, four-, five-year) gift, a truly sacrificial gift. Return the pledge cards (as indicated on the card). We need all of you for this vision to be realized. After all our work together, *now* is the time!

10.

Homily: “Sculpture, Art, and Images”

Why: To introduce and explain the various works of art in the new church (see chap. 16)

When: Six to eight weeks prior to the opening of the church or the installation of the artwork

Some elements to emphasize: (we had some nontraditional statues that we wanted to explain)

[This presentation could or should include explanations of the following: the crucifix, the Stations of the Cross, statues of Mary, Joseph, and/or a patron saint, stained glass windows, and any other works needing some introduction to the people.]

- Two- and three-dimensional representations of persons or scenes with persons, events, symbols, or signs are to be of a noble beauty; they are to be worthy and becoming, as they are reminders of those sacred persons or events.
- Unique works by artists are to be encouraged by the church as they embody for us the very creativity of God. One-of-a-kind commissioned artwork is to be especially commended.
- In Christian art those works are usually of Jesus the Crucified, the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and the saints. These are objects of veneration (not worship or adoration) that are dedicated or set apart for religious purposes.
- Statues (whether of traditional poses or more dynamic depictions) are both visual (shape, color, depth, and action or pose depicted) and tactile (texture, temperature, material quality—wood, stone, marble, metal).

- Point out any treasured objects from the former church that have been kept, refurbished, and to be installed in the new worship space.
- Explain (theologize on) any new pieces that are planned or anticipated, their what, why, and wherefore; issues or problems of scale-size; compatibility or complementarity.

11.

Homily: “The Rite of Dedication”

Why: To prepare the parishioners for a symbol-packed liturgy and to inform those unable to be present (see chap. 19)

When: Three to four weeks prior to the actual dedication liturgy to have time for a newsletter about the dedication to be sent and read prior to the dedication

Some elements to catechize:

- Dedication of a church is the ancient custom of setting aside a building for the exclusive and permanent use of the people of God in their sacred functions of worship. The rite is led by the bishop with the pastor, other priests, and the parish community. This rite is a once-in-a-lifetime event; many parishioners have never seen a dedication liturgy. Although about two hours long, it is packed with symbols. Let me point out some of them for you.

[Explain a vigil and/or evening prayer if this is being used: a prayerful anticipation of the coming day.]

[Tell them what entry rite is being used: with procession, without procession, in the church.]

- The handing over: a sign of setting the new church aside for God and God’s people by the presentation of documents, plans, permits, worker log, and especially the keys to the bishop by architect, contractor, and building committee members.
- The opening of doors: the first entry into the building by the people, a sign of the church’s role as the doorway to salvation, a baptismal image.
- Sprinkling rite: a reminder of baptism for the people, and a blessing and purification for the walls and altar, marking them for sacred use.
- Litany of the Saints: invoking the prayerful union of the faithful on earth with the saints in heaven, our understanding of the communion of saints.

[Explain the significance of relics if they are being used: the sacrifice of martyrs and saints is founded on the sacrifice of Christ to be made present on this altar.]

- The prayer of dedication: unpack the many images of the church (house of prayer, temple of worship, home in which we are nourished by the Word and the sacrament; the church as a mystery, made fruitful and holy by the blood of Christ; the church a bride, a virgin, a mother; a vineyard whose branches envelop the whole earth; God’s dwelling, a temple of living stones founded on the apostles with Jesus as the cornerstone; a city on a mountain, a beacon of light for the world, the resounding echoes of prayer; invoking the Holy Spirit to make this place holy, the altar a table for the sacrifice of Christ; here in baptism sin is overcome and we live as God’s children; here we are fed by the Word and with the Body and Blood of the Lord; here we plea for the salvation of the world; here the poor find justice, the oppressed freedom; here all God’s children are united in peace).

[Note the parallels with baptism: holy water, Litany of Saints, anointing with chrism, clothing with a festive, white garment, candles symbolizing the light of Christ—almost as if we were baptizing a building.]

- Anointing of the altar and the walls with chrism: a church is the only *thing* anointed (*persons* in baptism, confirmation, ordination), to be filled with the power of God's Spirit; four places or twelve (the four directions? the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles).
- Incense as the symbol of sacrificial prayers pleasing to God arising from God's people, this building, the altar.
- Clothing the altar: for the sacrificial banquet, the feast of divine food for God's people.
- Lighting the altar and the building: with candles and lamps, a sign of the light of Christ.
- The preface of dedication: another treasury of images of the church and its worship.
- The eucharistic celebration: the end and purpose for which the church and altar were built, to sanctify and nourish the hearts of God's people.
- The inauguration of the chapel [if there is one; if not, then the tabernacle itself]: the ever-present availability of the Lord for prayer and adoration.

12.

Homily: "New Church Etiquette I"

Why: To assist with everyone adjusting to a new space and to explain the use of any new spaces (see chap. 19)

When: One to two weeks prior to the dedication and moving in

Some elements we had to discuss (yours may differ, so adjust as needed):

- Expect lots of confusion for a while (the "somebody moved the dog's dish" syndrome).
- Ask people for additional time ("come earlier for a while until we all settle in").
- Ask people to be patient with finding new parking spaces (part of our old lot was used for construction staging then reopened; also new driveway for added traffic flow patterns).
- Request patience with finding a comfortable new seating area (our Mass schedules remained the same; it will be more disruptive if there is a new Mass schedule).
- Ask for patience with visitors coming to see and worship in the new church (complicating parking and seating locations).
- Remind people to allow quiet for prayer in the nave of the new church before and after Mass; socializing in the vestibule (the old church had no sound-separate vestibule so people had visited after Mass in the main body of the old church).
- Explain a cry room philosophy. We introduced a dedicated cry room in the new church; emphasis was placed on children beginning and being in the congregation, then being walked in vestibule if fussy, and then going to the cry room only if they could not be settled down. Otherwise no one else is to use this space ("If I see you in the cry room during Mass, somebody better be crying!").

13.

Homily: “New Church Etiquette II” (after settling in)

Why: To address any particular housekeeping items that have arisen after occupying the new church and/or reemphasize any previous elements if need be (see chap. 19)

When: Three to four months after occupancy

Some elements to discuss (you have to write this yourself based on what you see/hear):

- Address any old items from initial occupancy that need reinforcing or readjusting.
- Address any new unforeseen items that may have arisen since occupying the new church.