
Homily Preparations

Homilies are powerful opportunities to transform perceptions of the reality of mental illness by revealing or communicating the impact on the individual or their family. Good homilists are always aware of the people they are addressing and their needs in light of the sacred scriptures of the given day. It is important to remember that some of the people addressed in a Sunday homily may either have a mental illness or be in close relationship with someone who does. Approximately one in four people have a diagnosable mental illness in a given year, and one in seventeen live with a persistent and severe condition. And, one family in five is impacted by the mental illness of a loved one.

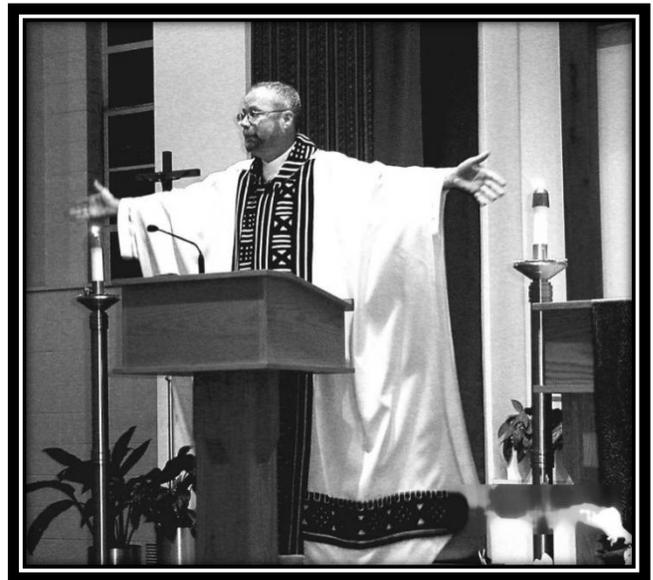
Several considerations are important in homily preparation when addressing issues related to mental illness.

First, as outlined in Section One, *Understanding the Reality: The Power of Language*, language should be carefully chosen because it can either reflect a respect for the dignity of the person or alienate and perpetuate negative stereotypes.

Second is the application and interpretation of certain scripture passages which may be problematic for people with mental illness because in some real circumstances they have been interpreted literally and acted upon. Thus it is helpful to know that people in the congregation may be hearing things in ways that homilists don't intend or expect. Some examples of such scripture:

Jesus advising his listeners to pluck out their offending eye and cut off their offending hand rather than fall into sin.

Another example is the scripture of Abraham taking his son Isaac to be sacrificed, which can be heard by a parent with a mental illness as confirmation of voices heard internally with which he or she may actually be struggling.



The scripture call to abandon everything and follow the Lord is also subject to literal interpretation.

Homilists need to be aware of how they speak about these scriptures and to take reasonable precautions with their interpretations. When referring to these scriptures, or others like them, it is very important to make a clear point of what the Gospels are promoting, especially in the face of words that can lead to unfortunate consequences. To presume that the hearers know better than to pluck out an eye, for example, may not be wise. It may also be advisable, in rare instances, to substitute one reading for another if the homilist is aware of potential trouble due to circumstances surrounding the people being addressed.

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Third, discussion of demon possession can be equally problematic. It is important to use discretion when relating the stories of Jesus casting out demons. In most cases, challenging behavior is not explained by demon possession, but rather is understood as resulting from biological or psychological conditions. The important point to consider and raise is the concern of Jesus for each person, and his desire to relieve them of their suffering.

As always, good pastoral judgment calls for a common sense approach to presenting the Word of God to hearers who have a variety of needs and burdens. The more homilists know their congregation, the better equipped they will be to help the people who are thirsting for the word of God. A worthy prayer before preparing a homily is to ask the Holy Spirit to guide the homilist in saying what the people really need to hear, in a way that they can hear the Word clearly and as it was meant to be understood.



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