



Suggestions for Homilists

PREPARING A HOMILY ON “WELCOMING THE STRANGER AMONG US”

Migrants and refugees who come to the United States, including undocumented workers, are clearly among the voiceless who need someone to speak on behalf of their human rights and dignity. When the scriptural or liturgical texts address this point, the homily can be an effective moment for such prophetic utterance, whether on a special occasion or on regular Sundays as you consistently enumerate “the least among us.” The homily provides an opportune moment to highlight our Church’s mandate and tradition of outreach and service, and to invite others to participate in this calling.

Following are suggestions for preparing a homily on “welcoming the stranger among us.”

1. Highlight Scripture, Church tradition, and the teaching of the bishops.

“For I was . . . a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mt 25:35)

Catholic outreach to migrants and refugees has a strong foundation in Scripture. The Bible poignantly depicts Moses and the Jewish people fleeing Egypt and the Holy Family as refugees. The obstacles to a hearty welcome (fear of the stranger, prejudice, competition, sense of loss) also find counterparts in the parables of Jesus and in his capacity to break through the taboos and restrictions of his contemporaries, especially in regard to tax collectors, sinners, Samaritans, and Gentiles. (See *Ideas for Liturgists and Prayer Leaders* for a list of scriptural references.)

These scriptural teachings call us to a deep compassion for the plight of the migrant. Inspired by this calling of our faith, the Church has developed a

rich body of teaching and a heritage of concern for immigrants, migrants, and refugees, particularly in the United States—a land of immigrants, a place heralded as a refuge for those fleeing persecution and those seeking a better life. In *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, the bishops remind us that as Catholics, we have an obligation to uphold this tradition of our faith and to welcome all of God’s culturally diverse children into the life of the Church. (See *Bulletin Quotes and Clip Art* for quotes from *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity* and other documents of Catholic social teaching that can be used for the homily.)



2. Highlight Catholic social teaching and challenge people’s presumptions.

Highlight interesting facts and statistics in your homily to challenge prejudices and inform people about important demographic changes taking place in our country. (See “Did you know?” box.) Teach people about what the Church’s rich body of social thought says about our Christian responsibility to “welcome the stranger among us.” (See *A Guide to Understanding Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples*.)

DID YOU KNOW?

- Long Beach, California, is home to more Cambodians than Phnom Penh.
- Los Angeles ranks just behind Mexico City and Guadalajara in the number of residents of Mexican origin.
- At times Chicago has had more persons of Polish extraction than Warsaw.

Source: *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, p. 14

- Most immigrants—about 75 percent—come to the United States legally.
- Most undocumented immigrants in the United States did not cross the border illegally. Four out of ten entered legally with student, tourist, or business visas and became “illegal” when they remained after their visas expired.
- By conservative estimates, immigrant households paid an estimated \$133 billion in direct taxes to federal, state, and local governments in 1997. The typical immigrant and his/her descendants pay an estimated \$80,000 more in taxes than they will receive in local, state, and federal benefits over their lifetimes.

Source: National Immigration Forum: www.immigrationforum.org/facts

3. Utilize all aspects of the liturgy to support the message of welcome preached in the homily.

The entire liturgy should convey the message of welcome. Liturgical ministers, greeters, lectors, eucharistic ministers, and altar servers should reflect the parish’s ethnic make-up, with special emphasis on newcomers. Music ministers have a special role in seeing that liturgical music speaks in the cultural language of all the parish’s ethnicities. One of the priest’s special roles is to acknowledge each group’s presence and contributions to the celebration, and to animate the spirit of welcome among parishioners. With the liturgy committee he needs to be creative in organizing processions, devotional traditions, and prayers of the faithful that include all ethnic groups of the parish and highlight their customs, such as native dress and use of bells, incense, flowers,

banners, and musical instruments. While care must be taken to faithfully observe all requirements for the liturgy, devotional prayer can be even more flexibly adapted to give voice to the prayer of many peoples!

HOMILIES FOR LITURGICAL FEASTS AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS

You can use the opportunity of a liturgical feast day to promote the themes of “welcoming the stranger” and “unity in diversity.” Here are some examples:

- On certain feast days, it may be appropriate to raise questions about laws that deny the children of immigrants the human rights of housing, education, and health care.
- On a day such as Thanksgiving, you can lift up farm workers to thank God for their efforts and to inform the congregation about the dehumanizing conditions in which they often find themselves.
- On feast days such as Epiphany, Pentecost, or the parish saint’s feast day, the gifts of newcomers, the unity of the diverse parish family, and the parish as a welcoming community can be highlighted.
- Feasts that are days of devotion to particular ethnic groups in the parish can be made occasions for total parish celebration.

The following homilies are intended to be inspirational to the homilist. They can be adapted and utilized for feast days and special occasions to promote the themes of “welcoming the stranger” and “unity in diversity.”

Feast of the Epiphany

- During the Offertory, have parishioners in native dress bring gifts of home-baked bread to offer the Christ child.
- Invite the parishioners to gather in the parish hall at the end of Mass to share the breads.
- Begin the homily by describing how the Offertory and the post-Mass gathering reflect the meaning of today’s feast of the Epiphany.

Let us rejoice in the fact that all of us, from different parts of the world, share a common faith in Jesus, the Light of the World. This is the meaning of today's feast of the Epiphany, the feast of the manifestation of Jesus as Savior to the World.

The Scriptures do not tell us where the Magi came from. But from early on in Christian art, these Magi were depicted as three men coming from Europe, Asia, and Africa; and through them, Jesus was depicted as the "Light of Nations." Though he was born in one particular place, in one particular culture, Jesus was born to save all people and lead them to the vision of the light.

The Church as a sacrament of communion with God and with all people is what we celebrate on this feast of the Epiphany. Our parish is made up of many peoples of different nations and cultures. Yet what joins us is our common faith in Jesus, the "Light of nations." In Jesus, we, different though we are, find a unity that is as deep as the unity in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we share the Eucharist here in the church, and as we afterwards share the breads from different countries, we are called to build up the spirit of community among ourselves. Often we come to Church and sit in the same pew every Sunday, in front of the same people, but we have not come to know them by name. This Sunday after Mass I encourage you to introduce yourself; each Sunday thereafter, introduce yourself to people whom you see each Sunday at Mass. We share a tremendous faith and are united in a mystery that can be a source of great strength and joy to us. As a community we are meant to be a sign to those around us of the presence of a loving Christ—a community willing to draw disparate groups of our neighborhood together, a community concerned with our weakest and most marginalized.

Besides being called to outreach as a community, we are called as individuals to bring to others the light of Christ. Our faith in Christ is the great gift given to us, a gift that is meant to be shared. Today at this Eucharist we renew our love for Jesus and we resolve to bring that love of Jesus to others. This feast of the Epiphany has a missionary thrust. The feast impels us to invite those who have turned away from Jesus' light or who have not experienced his light in their lives. We invite them to our parish—to a social event with our family or to a liturgy that can engage them in the love of God and the hospitality of our community. This missionary dimension is

meant to be part of our lives as followers of Jesus. Jesus has no hands but ours.

The feast of the Epiphany highlights for us our role in the Church and our missionary task. This was summed up in a beautiful way by Mother Teresa:

By blood and origin I am Albanian
My citizenship is Indian
I am a Catholic nun
As to my calling, I belong to the world
As to my heart, I belong entirely to the
heart of Christ.

Holy Thursday

- Begin the homily by recalling some of your own fond memories of family meals and the various celebrations that took place in your family dining room—graduation parties, sacramental parties, and family get-togethers.
- Reflect on how some of our best family moments are often centered around meals, when family stories were told, stories that helped us to understand who we were, what we stood for in the world, and what was expected of us.

Our gathering tonight is somewhat like a gathering for family meals. The symbols of the evening remind us who we are, what Jesus expects of us, and how Jesus sends us into the world.

The first symbol is the table. In his lifetime Jesus shared the table with many people: with family and friends; with a bride and groom at their wedding in Cana; with upright Pharisees; with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. The table for him is—as for people of most cultures—a meeting place where the sharing of food and drink and friendly conversations can break down divisions and hostilities and help people experience their common humanity. And so this evening we gather as brothers and sisters from different cultures around a common table. The table is the same as the table around which Jesus reclined for the last time with his Apostles. In St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "With great desire have I desired to eat this meal with you." It is with the same loving graciousness that Jesus gathers us around the table this evening: desiring to break open with us the Scriptures and the sacrament that draws us closer to him and to each other.

The second symbol is the washing of the feet. Jesus reminds us that the way to unity is through service. Imagine how Jesus felt washing all the feet of the Apostles, even Judas! Yet he did not hesitate to wash Judas' feet. Jesus stretched himself to get beyond his own feelings about Judas' betrayal and to lovingly wash his feet. Jesus was living out his own command to love even the enemy. This action of Jesus encourages us to stretch ourselves to wash others' feet, to figure out ways in which we as a community can be of greater service to the people around us. How is the Lord calling us as a community to stretch ourselves to serve others?



The third symbol is the bread and wine that becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. This is Christ's great gift to help us keep alive the struggle to live as brothers and sisters, and to not let our selfishness, our sense of ethnic superiority, or our stubbornness take over. Jesus knew from experience how hard it was for the Apostles to live together as a family. By ourselves, we can easily end up in squabbles and divisions. We need the power of the Lord in the Eucharist to help us work toward the goal of unity. As the bread is made of many grains of wheat ground into one bread, and as the wine is made of many grapes pressed into one wine, so we, through the power of Christ, become one body by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ.

In his epistle, St. Paul reminds us that our parish family members make up the Body of Christ. Though we are very diverse, coming from many different cultures, we are brought together in a profound unity through the power of the Risen Christ. It is particularly in the Eucharist we share on this evening that our unity is more profoundly realized.

Tonight we return to the "upper room" and let the memories flow over us. In very natural ways, through story and song, through the interconnection of family members, we learn again that we are the Body of Christ, revitalized by feeding on the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. We are renewed in our service to the Lord and the world. We pray to live up to Jesus' expectation of us.

Pentecost

- Refer to a symbol (or practice) with a universal dimension (e.g., hospitality, kindness) and show how it can unite people regardless of language.

- Explain how miracles happen when we suspend judgment, draw closer, and listen to each other (e.g., when the bystanders suspended their belief that the Apostles were drunk and moved closer, they actually heard the Apostles proclaim Christ's message in their own languages).
- Remind the congregation how, when we include others in our circle or enter into theirs, we often, to our astonishment, find similarities.
- Ask the congregation to consider ways they can promote inclusiveness within the church community and live out Pentecost every day.
- Encourage the congregation at Mass to say the "Our Father" in their respective first languages.

Pentecost was an important annual feast in the Jewish calendar, celebrated fifty days after Passover, primarily as a harvest festival and also to commemorate the giving of God's Law to Moses. The feast brought together to Jerusalem Jews from within and outside Palestine, and peoples of different languages. At Pentecost, Jerusalem was a multilingual city. The mention in Scripture of the different nations indicates that all peoples under heaven (known at the time) were represented in Jerusalem. It is significant that this festival was chosen by God to manifest the outpouring of the Spirit and the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Apostles, who were all Galileans, were enabled by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News in different languages. Those who gathered thought the Apostles were drunk (Acts 2:13). But as they drew closer to the Apostles, to their bewilderment each heard the Good News proclaimed in his/her own tongue. Thus from the very beginning, the Church is "catholic," meaning "universal."