

## Homily Preparation

Good homilists are always aware of the people they are addressing and their needs in light of the sacred scriptures of the given day. When we consider the incidence of mental illness in our congregations, we know that our words can soothe, or they can cut.

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. Further, one family in five are impacted by a mental illness experienced by a loved one.

Thus, 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. Awareness of this will help the homilists to be realistic and concrete in their speaking.

First, language should always show respect for the persons dealing directly or indirectly with mental illness. [ Please refer to Section \_\_\_ of this book.]

Second, but no less important, is the difficult question of the application and interpretation of certain scripture passages that may be very problematic for some people with mental illness. For example, when most hear in Matthew 18 Jesus advising his listeners to pluck out their offending eye and cut off their offending hand rather than fall into sin, they realize that this is hyperbole. However, there actually has been an incident where a woman who struggled with a mental illness did indeed cut off her hand and her foot after hearing this admonishment. 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 he or she may actually be struggling with hearing internally. The scripture call to abandon everything and follow the Lord is also subject to literal interpretation. These are extreme cases, to be sure. But it is helpful to know that people in the congregation may be hearing things in ways homilists don't intend or expect. 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.

Discussion of demon possession in the scriptures can cause problems, as well. It is especially important to handle the stories of Jesus casting out demons with great discretion. It would be misleading and wrong to equate mental illness with being possessed by demons. Great damage can result in the misuse of such scriptures.

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.