



CATECHETICAL SERMON ON THE DIVINE LITURGY # 6 . THE HOMILY: “THE PRESIDENT OF THE ASSEMBLY SPEAKS TO US.”



The Greek word used by the Jews to indicate their place of worship away from the Jerusalem Temple is synagogue, meaning “to bring together,” to gather. And it was customary, even at the time of Jesus, for people to address that gathering. Matthew (4:23) reports that Jesus “went around the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people.” Luke (4:16) tells the story of Jesus reading the lesson from the Prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth and preaching afterwards. Justin Martyr says the readings and homilies in the Christian assembly in second century Rome went on “for as long as there was time.” We should remember that, in the Rome of Justin’s time, Sunday was just another day of the week. The “weekend” had not yet been invented, and so the Christians were going to church before they went out to their work that day.

Justin says the “president of the assembly” speaks after the reader has finished. This tells us that in the middle of the second Christian century we already see what we would call today “pastors” and “lectors.” A pastor may have assistant priests working with him, and so they may take turns with fulfilling their duties toward the congregation. In every case today the local pastor receives his authority to preach from the bishop showing that—in essence—the bishop is the archpastor serving every congregation in his diocese. Besides the bishop and presbyters, deacons may also preach. One sees this in the Acts of the Apostles (6: & ff.) where St. Stephen preached in the streets and it eventually cost him his life. Many people think of a “homily” as simply another word for sermon, but that is not the case. The Greek term homily means “to have communion or hold verbal interaction with a person,” and in this case, with God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

The Church Father Origen distinguished between sermon (λόγος-which depends on reason and logical arguments to make its case) and homily (ὁμιλία-which may use an appeal to authority or even an appeal to the heart). If the reading of the Scriptures is the repetition of the word in a stable and concrete form, the homily is a fluid opportunity for the Holy Spirit to move the preacher to provide to the people several possibilities that the printed word might not have: to explain something not clear in the text, to apply the text to a concrete situation in the present, to move the listener to the spiritual implications of the text and—just as attending a play might be more engaging and interesting than reading a copy of the script—an opportunity to provide a measure of emotional tone to the text to elicit consolation, delight and inspiration from the Scripture through the Spirit.