

Themes for Homilies (Sermon Notes)

Themes for Homilies, or a brief work of encouragement:

For Pastors:

These sermon notes are provided so that pastors can continually remind their parishioners about the elements of a “Vibrant Parish”. These topics can be used in the Sunday homily, or in a short talk at the end of the Divine Liturgy. Please, DO NOT SIMPLY READ these notes, but rather put them in your OWN WORDS, emphasizing what is most important. Those words coming from your own heart, that which you personally believe, will have a greater influence than something written by another. Your main priority should be that the elements of a Vibrant Parish” should be important in the lives of your parishioners, and that the entire parish community grow in love, sanctity, and the knowledge of God’s truths.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER?

- We believe in a God Who has a profound love for us, and wants us to know Him. He has spoken to us through the prophets, and when the “fullness of time” had come, (see: Gal. 4: 4), He spoke to us through His Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ (see: Heb. 1: 1-4). This Son is the eternal Son of God, about Whom we preach on Easter Sunday – see Jn. 1: 1-17).
- In addition, God has left us the written Word of God, the Bible, the Sacred Scripture of the Old and New Testaments. The Holy Spirit inspired various people to write the sacred texts and inspired the Church to discern through which written texts the Lord speaks to us.
- For this reason, His Beatitude Sviatoslav asked us to pay particular attention that a copy of Sacred Scripture be in the home of every believer, that that the Bible be read often for the good of every Christian family.
- While the Bible plays a major role as a source of our faith, the holy Tradition of the Church has an even broader influence. The tradition of the Church, and our liturgical texts (as we pray, so do we believe), the canons of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Church fathers (fundamental truths of the catechism), the iconostas (theology in color), the Commandments, precepts of the Church, and the canons of the church (how we live, also reveals in what we believe).
- Our Church has produced a useful book for us to know the basic truths of the Christian faith – Catechism of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. This Catechism explains what we believe, how we are to pray, how we are to live, in order to truly be good practicing Christians. His Beatitude Sviatolav encourages every family to have a copy of the Catechism in their home, and learn it, in order to deepen their faith. Let us ensure that this Catechism is available to everyone in our parish, and by studying together, we will know all the truths it contains.
- If our parish community is called to be a “Vibrant Parish” we need to thoroughly know Sacred Scripture and the fundamental truths of the Christian way of life. Continually working both on ourselves as individuals, and also as a community of believers, we need to know and understand Who is Our Lord God, and how He is good to us.

Sermon

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another,
(Col. 3: 16)*

The apostle Paul was not the founder of the Christian community at Colossae nor did he ever visit it. The Church at Colossae, Laodicea, and Heiropolis, were founded by Epaphras, a co-worker of St. Paul “Epaphras our beloved fellow slave, ...” (Col. 1: 7). St. Paul through Epaphras, however was aware of the faith of the Colosians in Christ Jesus, and about their love for the saints... “because of the hope reserved for you in heaven” about which they heard “through the word of truth, the gospel,” through which they came “to know the grace of God in truth” (Col. 1: 4-6). That is why Paul thanks God and prays for them, but does not loose hope, but further asks God – *that they come to the full knowledge of God’s will, and live a life worthy of the Lord* - “bringing fruit in every good work and growth in knowing God. (Col. 1: 3). Most likely, the apostle Paul is probably writing this letter from prison, whether in Rome or Ephesus, - and that is why the entire letter is full of references to that which is most essential: the primacy of Christ, and our life in Him, through our participation in His death and resurrection.

The apostle Paul warns the Colossians against false teaching, and against those who propagated it. Among those in the community were many people who call their teaching “philosophy”, to be understood as a “secret doctrine” concerning the nature of God, “right teaching” natural revelation “the way” to attain God’s favor, and control over the forces of nature and be in communion with God in as far as this is possible, in regard to the fate of the world, and the fate of every person. The adherents of this doctrine do not reject Christ but consider redemption and forgiveness of sins as insufficient for protection against the forces of evil. It is not difficult to see in this teaching and in society today a synchronistic tendency, (new age mentality) how on one hand we go to church, to pray to God, and at the same time, we turn to fortunetellers, whether in cards or the horoscope to find out what what the future may bring. We turn to for various healers, fortunetellers, or physics, for healing, or protect us from harm.

St Paul explicitly rejects such practices. For him there is no other Savior, no other way to God, except through Christ. Only He is the image of the invisible God. (Col. 1: 15), the Lord of all creation (see Col. 1: 15-20). “For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in him.” (Col. 2: 9); He is the head, “of every principalities and power” (Col. 2: 10); He is also the head of the his body the Church (see: Col. 1: 18). One who is baptized, and buried with Christ, and with Him has risen in faith in the power of God which raises the dead (see: Col. 2: 12). He has received the fullness of Christ, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of new life (Col. 1: 12-14, 2: 13-15). That is why the Christian is free from the influence of every evil power, in so far as God the Father has “freed” them from the power of darkness and brought them into the kingdom of His beloved Son; they are rooted in Christ and founded on Him, worthy to share the fate of the saints in light. (see: Col. 1: 12).

The Colossians knew this well. We realize this as well. Simply to know is not enough. It must be lived! The faith that we have received is in one Person – Jesus Christ, – and it is not based on various teachings or dogmas, as the apostle Paul writes, it is not some theoretical teaching, but about a real, living union with Christ.

Every culture, every religion has its temples, liturgical songs, prayers, ascetical practices, its founders and dogmas. Only Christianity differs from all other religions of the world because it is founded on the Person of Jesus Christ. The Person of Christ, and His revelation does not exist in other religions. In fact, in other religions a certain teaching or doctrine may become more important than the person who introduced them, but Christianity without Christ is meaningless, it can no longer exist. Christ is our life. (see: Col. 3: 4). There is still one more thing. When the apostle Paul was writing his letters to the Colossians, the New Testament had still not been written, there were no Gospels. In spite of this, the apostle writes how the Gospel of truth (the Good News) is proclaimed to all creation, and bears fruit and is spread throughout the world. This means that the Gospel is not a book, not a written text, but Christ Himself, He is the living Word, Who is proclaimed in preaching, and Who becomes visible in the lives of the faithful in those hearts reigns the peace of Christ, that is why believers are perfectly united to Christ and among one another in life, comprising one body – the Church. (see: Col. 3: 15).

The apostle Paul exclaims: *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”* (Col. 3: 16).

For the apostle Paul, the *“Word of Christ”* – is the same as Christ himself, the Life and the Light, the Resurrection and the Truth, the Beginning and the End, Alpha and Omega. Without Christ there is no life, no salvation; without Christ there is not Love, no Hope, without Christ we are estranged from God, far from Him, and His enemies, and in Christ we are holy and the beloved of God (see: Col. 3: 12), we are His neighbors, His family (see: Eph. 2: 13). Let us therefore follow the example of the first Christians, in order that the Word of God, Christ Himself – would be the foundation of our church, our parish, our family, and our personal self. Without Him we do not exist, a in Him we are partakers in the fullness of His Divinity! (Col. 2: 10).

This Word, Who is Christ Himself, should – as the apostle Paul continues – fully abide in us. *“Fully”* does not mean to have many copies of the Bible, it means to allow the Word of God – Christ – to enter our hearts, our family, every sphere of our existence. *“Fully”* means to totally fill every aspect of our lives with the presence of God, and in this way we can fulfill God’s commandment: *“Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.”* (Deut. 6: 6-9).

Concerning the benefit and importance of reading of Sacred Scripture every day, Metropolitan Andrew teaches us that: *‘every Christian should be convinced of the fact, and recognize the benefit which comes from the reading Sacred Scripture daily. The Holy Gospels are the means by which our home is blessed, and ensures God’s blessings, it is the source of faith and love of those who live in the home. The Gospels protect them from harm, and shows the way, uplifts the heart to heaven, cleanses their souls ... The reading of Sacred Scripture each day, even for a minute, should be the daily routine of every Christian family. This reading should be – a source of nourishment for the people. It is nourishment which is healthy, healing, and strengthening.’* (Metrop. Andrew, *“On the Veneration of the Cross.”*)

By means of Sacred Scripture we come to know the Word of God, and we come to know Christ, we encounter Him, we go through life in communion with Him. That is why St. Jerome taught that *“not to know scripture is not to know Christ.”* Unfortunately, many people today do not know what they believe in. They go to church, pray, even learn the instructions of the Catechism, they may even know some of the truths of the faith, dogmas of the church, but do not see the relationship between what they have learned and their daily life. In other words, they do not see, they do not feel, they do not experience the

presence of God, and the power of His Word! We cannot and do not have the right to know the secrets of God's will, through which Christ, the Word, became flesh, - in the Holy Spirit we have access to the Father and become partakers in the Divine nature." (DV 2)

That is why His Beatitude Sviatoslav promotes not only the daily reading of Sacred Scripture, but especially encourages participation in Bible study groups in the parish, and though a prayerful reading at home, but he reminds and states that "each believer has the obligation to deepen one's knowledge of the truths of the holy faith throughout one's lifetime." An indispensable means for our spiritual growth is the new Catechism of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church "*Christ is our Pascha*". This catechism is a book which needs to be in the home of every believer, as it is the foundation of our Christian life and a valuable aid to properly understanding of Sacred Scripture.

Our Lord Himself states: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you." (Jn. 15: 7). Accepting Christ into our life, and keeping His Word, we abide in Him and He abides in us. In this way we become able to produce tangible fruit of the Word in everyday life. The benefit of reading scripture is first of all an inner joy and peace, is a strong family, a community of solidarity, but especially it is holiness and unity of the people of God, who are able to pray and praise God "with one heart, and one voice: And thus become a means whereby all people are blessed. (Gen. 12:2-3)

Let us make ours the call of His Beatitude Sviatoslav from his Pastoral letter: "The Vibrant Parish a place to encounter with Christ" "let us open our hearts and homes to Christ" let the Holy Spirit abide in us cleanse us and strength us with God's Love."

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (Col. 3: 16)

Amen.