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**Second Field Assignment**

## **Priest as Chief**

### *The Rite of Homily as Guidance Tool*

On Easter Sunday<sup>1</sup> 2004, I had the opportunity of attending a Catholic Mass at a church in the western suburbs of Boston. This visit, while admittedly pious in nature, allowed me to (in the metaphorical sense) kill two birds with one stone. Not only was I able to fulfill my religious obligation, but I also managed to perform fieldwork and observe a well-known ritual firsthand. Luckily for me, it also allowed me the opportunity of obtaining a transcript of the sermon, which will be used in this paper with his permission. In this short piece, I present an analysis of Catholic Mass liturgy, in particular of the rite of Homily, and I argue that through the Homily, the Catholic priest, as the ritual leader, plays a key role in the preservation and reassertion of the Faith.

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Ritual study – understanding the ritual form and its function – has become an increasingly important area in anthropology, and has served as a major analytical tool for the greatest minds in the field since its inception (Bell 1992: 3). Ritual is ubiquitous in all societies, and so, the study of rituals serves as a sort of spy-hole into the “cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds” (Bell 1992: 3). In the world of religion, in particular, ritual study has been especially useful, as ritual is considered (by some) to be “the ground from which religion grows” (Rappaport 1999: 26). I tend to agree with Anthony Wallace’s statement that, “it is ritual which accomplishes what religion sets out to do,” and is thus, the primary phenomenon of religion (1966: 102). Religion, then, is kept alive, not by the mere belief in the divine or the sacred, but by the performance of religious rituals. While these views of religion and ritual may not be universal, it is nonetheless my own belief that ritual, by any definition, is a fundamental feature of the religious experience. In fact, all studied religions have a defined system of rituals that serves to provide “an aura of facticity” to religious beliefs (Geertz, 1973:

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<sup>1</sup> The holy day of Easter marks the end of a 40-day period of Lent, and symbolizes the resurrection of the Christ after the third day of his death (See Elliott 1995).

90). It is important to note that while a number of definitions of ritual exist (Frits Staal defines it as “pure activity, without meaning or goal”, Lévi-Strauss as “a favored instance of a game”)<sup>2,3</sup>, I will adopt Roy Rappaport’s general statement, which is described in his book, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999: 27):

“[Ritual is] the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers [that] logically entails the establishment of convention, ... the construction of time and eternity, the representation of a paradigm of creation, the generation of the concept of the sacred and the sanctification of conventional order, the generation of theories of the occult, the evocation of numinous experience, the awareness of the divine, the grasp of the holy, and the construction of orders of meaning transcending the semantic.”

By this definition, the Catholic religion is filled with ritual. In fact, the Catholic Church has defined in great detail a set of rituals – a Sacramentary – that function to establish the religion’s “aura of facticity” that Geertz describes (Elliott 1995). The Sacraments – Baptism, Communion, Confirmation, Penance, Anointment of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony – are the principal rites of the Catholic faith, and function to define membership in much the same way as the rites of passage described by Turner (1967) and Van Gennep (1909). Communion, and to a lesser extent, Penance, are calendrical rites. That is, these sacraments are performed regularly and normally adhere to a defined schedule (Rappaport 1999). The remaining five are non-calendrical and occur only as responses to events in, or at different stages in life. For the sake of brevity and in the interest of focus, I choose to only address the ritual of Communion, or the Mass, and more specifically, the rite of the Homily (the sermon).

The modern Catholic Mass is itself divided into a series of minor rites. These rites are invariably repeated at every mass, with few exceptions not herein discussed. I shall only provide a brief review of these minor rites, as I am principally concerned with the Homily. The mass opens with the Introductory Rites: the entrance hymn, the greeting, the penitential rite, the *kyrie*

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<sup>2</sup> Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* **26**, 1976. (Obtained from Bell 1992)

<sup>3</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd., University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1966. (Obtained from Bell 1992)

*eleison* (congregation's prayer for forgiveness), the *Gloria* (a praise of God), and the opening prayer (a prayer that is peculiar to the day).<sup>4</sup> Following the Introductory Rites, the congregation engages in the Liturgy of the Word: the First Reading (from the Old Testament), the Second Reading (from the New Testament), the Gospel and Acclamations (from the Book of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John), the Homily (the priest's sermon), the Credo (usually a recital of the Nicene Creed, which restates the Faith), and the Intercessions (business of the Parish and special needs). The Liturgy of the Eucharist follows, and includes: the preparation of the altar and gifts, the *Sursum Corda* (prayer calling attention to the congregation to "lift up [their] hearts"), the Preface and Sanctus (prayer of the angels), the Eucharistic Prayer (which calls for transubstantiation of bread and wine), and the Mystery of the Faith (a proclamation of the mystery of Christ's resurrection). At this point in the Mass, the bread and wine are said to be transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ, respectively. The mass concludes with the rite of Communion (Lord's Prayer, Taking of the Bread, and Prayer after Eucharist) and the Dismissal (See Elliott 1995).

The Homily, however, is of special interest to me. During this sermon, the priest normally addresses one, or a set of the readings presented during the Liturgy of the Word. I find this single rite particularly interesting, because it differs substantially from the others in the Mass. The Homily is the only non-scripted segment of the ceremony that is intended to have instructional meaning. That is, during the Homily, the priest is able to offer his personal interpretation of the readings, and more importantly, of the religious moral of these readings. This rite, then, provides the priest with a powerful window of opportunity in which to address the specific topics he deems important.

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<sup>4</sup> The actual order of mass can be found at: "The Order of Mass: Basic Text for the Roman Catholic Eucharist, <http://clawwww.lmu.edu/faculty/fjust/Mass.htm> (accessed April 20, 2004), and "Mass (liturgy)", [http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Mass+\(liturgy\)](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Mass+(liturgy)) (accessed April 20, 2004).

During my visit to the St. Julia Parish (Weston, MA), I had the fortune of obtaining a transcript of Father X's sermon. Just as Father X did on Easter Sunday, a Catholic priest can prepare a weekly "lesson" for his congregation. And with this weekly lesson, the priest plays a crucial role in maintaining the Catholic religion's "facticity") through three non-exhaustive, approaches: the use of easily understood vernacular and real-world examples, the selective elucidation or decoding of religious metaphors, and the use of rhetoric.

Looking at Father X's transcript, the utility of the first approach was immediately apparent. In his opening, the Father begins with two simple examples of what he considers to be the phenomenon of Easter.<sup>5</sup> The first example, that which suggests that feast of Easter is similar to winning a lottery, uses the lottery metaphor to convey to the audience that Easter is an unearned (thus universal) "change for the better." With this, the speakers suggests that Easter should evoke in a person the same excitement and pleasure felt when winning the lottery. As a result, the congregation is able to compare the abstract notion of inheriting new life from Christ to the more plausible (though admittedly not by much) lottery scenario. The Father repeats this exercise in the second example. He translates the abstract notion of the new life of Christ in the Pope to the real example of the Pope's blind forgiveness of the worst of sins.

Father X. uses the second approach of selectively deciphering and elucidating the meaning behind Catholic symbols when explaining the meaning of Baptism. Much like the Kuna chief (and his interpreter) described by Howe (1977), Catholic priests often choose to explain a concept rich in symbols, in terms of a smaller subset of these symbols, which they feel directly applies to the day's lesson. In his Easter sermon, when explaining the concept of Baptism and its ties to Easter, Father Evans only chose to decode the symbols of Baptism that

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<sup>5</sup> Though not necessary, the reader should know that the readings for Easter Sunday 2004 included: Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-9.

were directly relevant to the topic of Easter. So, in describing Baptism, he placed heavy emphasis on the idea of incorporation of the baptized into the Body of Christ – *an incorporation that is reinforced every Easter*. What is more, the Father cleverly maintains this line of thought throughout the entirety of the sermon, reinforcing specific characteristics of Easter and Baptism, so as to produce an extremely coherent lesson on the Church’s oneness with God.

Finally, Father X. illustrates the use of rhetoric as a tool for persuasion and guidance. A clear feature of his sermon is the use of a rhetorical question, which is quickly followed by his personal answer to that question. This technique, along with the persistent repetition of key concepts, allows for an extremely convincing lesson. By asking, “what is so special about Baptism...” and quickly providing a host of answers to the question, the priest was able to instill a great deal of knowledge on the congregation, without allowing for little questioning.

With this case study I have shown that the Homily is the vehicle with which the priest drives his audience toward the “right” direction. With the sermon, he is able to selectively reinforce a different aspect of the Faith, so as to rejuvenate the “aura of facticity” of areas that may be lacking. All in all, as the leader of the ritual, the priest is able to lead his congregation in the direction he deems appropriate. In this sense, the Catholic priest shares qualities with a tribal chief that uses sermon to lead his village along a certain path (as we see with Howe’s Kuna (1977)), or with a ritual leader that asserts the facticity of a faith through his sermon (as we see with Turner’s Ndembu doctors (1967)).

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