II. Christianity

1. Terminology. The term homily is used in two ways: (1) in a broader sense as synonym for "sermon," i.e., as a term referring to the interpretation of one or more biblical texts in the light of present-day events; it is mostly delivered in a liturgical context and addressed to a congregation; (2) in a narrower sense as designation for a specific type of sermon that is oriented toward the biblical text, often imitating its structure and interpreting its wording verse by verse.

In this regard, it should be noted that the usage of the term varies significantly among Christian churches: in Protestant churches the liturgical interpretation is most often referred to by the term "sermon" (Lat. *sermo*), while the term "homily" is used in the narrower sense explained under (2). In the Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, the term "homily" largely appears in the more general sense mentioned above under (1) (cf., e.g., *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [1963] 24, 51, 52).

The term homily derives from the Greek word ὁμιλία that originally referred to a social gathering. It could also designate instruction or entertainment. The verb ὁμιλεῖν means "exchange of thoughts," to talk (cf. Luke 24:14–15; Acts 29:11). The term entered into religious terminology in the ancient church and gradually transformed into a designation for church talk in a general sense. In the 4th century, a distinction is attested between ὁμιλία as a plain written sermon, on the one hand ("schmucklose[ ] Schriftpredigt einerseits"), and the λόγος as a rhetorically composed speech, on the other hand ("λόγος als rhetorisch gestaltete[r] Vortrag andererseits"; Steiger: 1512).

2. History. The process of canonization of biblical texts refers to the recursive and circular interrelation of "text" and "sermon," since it was linked directly to the process of interpretative preaching (cf. Neh 8:1–12). From this perspective, various texts from the NT can be understood as homilies, esp. the Epistle to the Hebrews (cf. Heb 3:7–4:11 interpreting Ps 95:7–11; cf. also passages from the Pauline Epistles, such as 1 Cor 10:1–13; 2 Cor 2; Gal 3:15-18; Rom 9:6–13, etc.).

In the ancient church homilies in the narrower sense of a verse-by-verse interpretation of biblical texts are attested by numerous writings, authored e.g., by great preachers such as Origen or John Chrysostom in the East and Ambrose of Milan, Augustine, and Leo the Great in the West. During the service, the homily was delivered between the reading from Scripture and the prayer of the congregation. In the early Middle Ages, the importance of sermons decreased considerably. Attempts to revive the significance of sermons can be perceived during the Carolingian Renaissance and the monastic movements of the high Middle Ages. Around the same time, *homiliaria* emerged as collections of

homilies, serving primarily to enable priests, who were unable to write homilies themselves, to read from them. This tradition continued in the pre-Reformation and Reformation postils. The succession of this tradition can be seen in our contemporary reading sermons and internet sermons. However, a more scholastic-oriented sermon culture, i.e., mystical and edifying (public) sermons with rather loose references to biblical texts, gradually replaced the importance of homilies.

As a result of normatively centering all theology on the Bible, interpretative preaching was strongly emphasized during Reformation. The didactic task of instructing the people in the Protestant faith coalesced with the theological aim of explaining to the congregation through the "external word" the immediate and life-altering relevance of the biblical word. The manner of this explanation would take the form of the word, which would keep revealing itself as the "word of God." From a formal perspective, numerous sermons from the Reformation era can be considered homilies in the narrower sense – much more so in the Helvetian Reformation than in the Lutheran context. As a reaction to the Reformation and especially owing to the commitment of the Jesuits, the sermon/homily was rediscovered in the Roman Catholic context and called for during the Counter-Reformation.

In subsequent centuries, the form of homily in the narrower sense was chosen whenever the word of the Bible was emphasized in its concrete materiality as normative guideline for church speech and the existence of the church/congregation. Apart from tendencies in Pietism and Confessionalism, homilies gained special importance in dialectical theology (Word of God theology). Owing to increasing audience awareness it has become less and less common since the 1960s to use homilies as a form of preaching. However, homilies have more recently been recommended by some scholars (cf. Rudolf Bohren; Christian Möller; Martin Nicol, and Alexander Deeg) as a type of sermon that facilitates following the biblical movement of words. In the Roman Catholic Church homilies as a form of preaching gained new importance after the Second Vatican Council in the interplay between dogmatic principles and liturgical-practical guidelines. The normative importance of the Bible has since been related to a high esteem for interpretative preaching within the liturgical assembly.

3. Homiletical Hermeneutics. Homiletical hermeneutics always oscillates between the tension of an *explicatio* of the text – an explanation of what the text means within the context of Scripture – and an *applicatio* – the application of the text to a present situation. The application generally refers to different manners of *allegory*, as the respective texts are interpreted both in view of statements from different times and in view of different audiences (cf. the

medieval systematization of the fourfold sense of Scripture).

Homiletical hermeneutics – just as any hermeneutics – moves between an *intentio auctoris*, which can only be deduced hypothetically, an *intentio operis*, which likewise remains ambiguous, and contemporary reception. More recently, homiletical hermeneutics has adopted reception-aesthetical insights and acknowledged that both the biblical text and the homily interpreting it might be considered open works of art (cf. Umberto Eco) that need to be completed by the hearing or reading audience. With regard to homilies in the narrower sense, Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton have shown just how this enterprise might be achieved through strictly abiding by the biblical information as concerns form and content.

4. Homiletic Rhetoric. A homily is a rhetorical, rather than a literary category. It involves both the addressor and the concrete communicative context (even though written homilies for a reading audience have occasionally been composed). Thus the following aspects are constitutive regarding homilies: (1) the speaker and his/her role/function; (2) the audience and its reception capacity; and (3) the liturgical context in which the homily is integrated, which includes the embedding of the homily in the dramaturgy of the ritual as well as spatial aspects (relating to the church).

Debates in past and present have focused on whether the rhetoric of homilies can be classified among general rhetorics (cf. Gert Otto) or whether homiletical rhetoric can be distinguished clearly from the general rubric (cf. Eduard Thurneysen). In any case, it is true that it is impossible to speak un-rhetorically. Hence, it remains irrefutable that reference to general rhetorics is just as important as reference to particular Christian speech (cf. Grözinger).

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See also → Preaching; → Sermons