

My Preparation Preaching

Feedback to America Magazine Article

Feb 2023

I read with great interest your article *“Preachers’ progress: America Media launches a new effort to deliver better homilies.”* I felt I wish it had gone deeper into the subject.

Here’s what my preaching experience has been:

- I have learned through 21 years of preaching as a Deacon that you are lucky to get any feedback and when you do it will probably lack much substance beyond “I liked your homily.” Occasionally someone will come up after Mass and say my homily really connected with them. I have rarely had people complain or walk out while I was preaching. Most complaints have come to me through my pastor. Getting “called on the carpet” I have found to be a good experience because we deeply delved into the substance of what I said. That said, I have been greatly encouraged over the years meeting people outside of church telling me with sincerity that they always liked my homilies and wish they could hear me preach more often.
- I take about 1 hour of preparation for every minute I preach.
- I always pray “Come Holy Spirit” before I start preparing a homily. The answers come from numerous sources...snippets of personal stories I recall, from TV programs, a magazine I'm reading, conversations with other people, a podcast, songs, homilies from favorite preachers... you name it. I also read commentaries, particularly Preaching the New Lectionary by Dianne Bergant with Richard Fragomeni, and “The Sunday” website at St. Louis University. I invariably hear some insights from my small faith community which meets to do “Lectio Divina” on the upcoming Sunday readings.
- I always take to heart what I learned in a Homiletics class that there is only one theme of the readings at every Mass: “God loves us.” All we have to do is to explain why the readings tell us that.
- I also take to heart advice I received at my ordination retreat to keep the homily within 2 pages, 14 point type, 1.5 line spacing. Truth be told I do fudge by adjusting the margins and sometimes do flow over to a 3rd page.
- I always search for good homilies on the web. As Joshua J. Whitfield says in The Crisis of Bad Preaching, we are in a “communion of preachers.” Reading, listening to and imitating good preaching has from the beginning been a natural way of preparation for me. I don’t believe we plagiarize when we use another preacher’s ideas or even content to prepare a homily. I learned in 8th grade English class when we had to journal daily for a whole month that I couldn’t come up with good original ideas to write about...I discovered in Reader’s Digest the brief anecdotes, the one or two sentence interesting tidbits at the bottom of some pages. I copied the basic idea and wrote my thoughts on it to make it my own.

What's important for me is to determine what was the crux of a good homily that made some connection with me...that caught my attention and interest. Invariably it was story I could relate to. Most homilies I think are what I call "safe;" they are learned texts expounding on the theology of the Gospel and teachings of the Church...all true and well researched, but failing to make a connection with the audience...failing to go beyond the intellect to capture the heart. As Whitfield calls it, deductive preaching. He recommends Inductive preaching using relatable experiences to connect to, to relate to experiences of faith. Basically, that's what I do as I prepare a homily: research a wide variety of information, identify an interesting crux of the narrative, find a story to connect to the audience (many times from personal experience), and wrap it with my own words to make it my own. In a way, I use both deductive and inductive styles in my homilies.

- I always thank the Holy Spirit when I finish crafting a homily because I am amazed at what He revealed to me. That's what I take into Mass to connect with the people I am preaching to.