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Touchstones for Preaching Transcript of Basic Touchstone 6: Preaching as Vocation

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Utilize the Weekly Process for Preparing the Sunday Homily – Rev. William T. Kelly

After preaching now for 23 years in a whole variety of situations, there are a few things that I’ve picked up for effective preaching. So we’re going to take a look at some of these, and this is going to include—maybe an easy process for throughout the week—how to prepare a homily. So, let’s look at that preparation first.

Now this is just a model. A lot of it is taken from the U.S. Bishops’ document, “Fulfilled In Your Hearing.” So we want to keep these things in mind: preparation for a homily always has to include time, prayer, study, organization, and completeness. Time, prayer, study, organization, and completeness.

Time. Plan when you’re going to work on your homily. We have to have it in our schedule so that the time doesn’t get away from us.

Prayer. You want to be praying even just when you sit down at your desk to begin to work on your homily so that you’re in the proper disposition for writing. Also, you then want to pray over the texts themselves that you’re going to be using, and the prayers of the Mass that will be accompanying the readings or in which the readings will find themselves. You also want to pray about your congregation’s needs. Ask the Lord, “What does my congregation need to hear from me this week?” So that’s time and prayer.

Study. You also want to take the opportunity to look at some different commentaries or resources that are going to give you some background. Again it’s not a lecture, but you want to have background to the Scriptures, and it will also perhaps give you a good jumpstart for an idea of where you want to go.

Organization. We all have different styles. You just have to determine what is the best style for you to organize, but do have a way that you do organize. Perfect it. Stick to it. The Holy Spirit isn’t going to do all the work. Sometimes you’ll hear a priest say, “Well I’ll let the Holy Spirit inspire me when I go up there.” I think the Holy Spirit wants to work with us and not in spite of us. So, have your organization in place.

Concreteness just means that you want to have good illustrations in mind. When you’re preparing a homily, keep maybe two questions in the front of your mind: **What? And so what?** What? And so what? Be sure as you’re crafting your homily that you can answer both, or more importantly, that you feel confident that if you went up to someone after you preached your homily that you’d be able to

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ask them, “What” and “So what,” and they’d be able to give you an answer. Then you might want to also include (and this is a kind of different topic just to have in the back of your mind) how might you some day go about getting decent and honest and thoughtful feedback from your congregation and from others.

The Weekly Process

So let’s just go through the week a little bit. On Monday, go through the readings and the liturgical texts for the upcoming Sunday and note the context. Is there any kind of special feast day that’s coming up? Are you in the middle of a liturgical season like Advent or Lent or Easter? And then, you might just want to—very simply—jot down immediate ideas, immediate images, or immediate themes that come to your mind.

Then in the middle of the week you want to fuel the pump a little bit more. We mentioned study. You want to check your resources. You want to talk with others. Talk about the readings with other people. See what their thoughts are. Talk to other people who are also going to be preparing homilies for that week. See what their ideas are. And then I’d say this is the time you want to begin to develop a topic sentence. I always have a topic sentence at the top of my sheet, and that always helps to give direction to everything else that I’m going to do from that point.

As you start to get a little bit more towards the end of the week, that’s when you want to go for it. That’s when you want to put the homily together. So remember, what is your main point? What stories or what illustrations are you going to use to give it life, to help to give it some resonance?

And then what ideas do you have to let go of? This is an important piece. What ideas do you have to let go of that maybe at one point seemed that they were going to be good for this homily, but as it develops it just kind of loses its connection and you just have to be strong and willing enough to say, “I’m not going to use it this time. I’m going to save it perhaps for another day.” You also want to make sure—because the homily is an integral part of the celebration, in this situation, of the Mass—you always want to make sure that the homily is in concert with the prayers, with the readings, that it ties to the Eucharist. Perhaps you want to make it tied to the hymns as well so that it becomes part of the organic whole. So keep the whole liturgy in mind as you go about the final construction of your homily.

And then just before preaching, maybe that morning that you’re going to give your homily, give it a good final run-over. Give it a good final edit. Make sure that you have a good clear opening. Make sure that the middle follows all the way through. Make sure that you have an end that concludes it well. And then also, by this time at the latest, you also will have wanted to have practiced it out loud—at least some of it—so that you have a good feel for it, so that you know exactly where it’s going.

You also may want to time it so that you have a sense that it is going in the direction and the length that you had anticipated. Most preachers, most of us, realize that we preach longer than we think we do. Most preachers are kind of shocked when you say, “No, that was 14 minutes,” when they thought it was nine. So have a good sense of the timing of your homily as well. That’s kind of taking us through the week of preparation. So, look at each week as an opportunity with different phases to get ready for the homily.

Tips from the Trenches

What I’d like to offer now is just kind of a loose list, a variety of tips that you might want to keep in mind. These aren’t in any kind of order, and I probably won’t even enumerate them for you. I’m just

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going to throw them out, just so you can kind of get a little bit of a taste of ideas that can help to make for a good homily preparation.

Keep a Copy of the Sunday readings and a notebook handy to document insights as they occur.

I would suggest keeping a copy of the readings in your briefcase or whatever you use to carry around, maybe on your desk. So, you have a copy of the readings there available, and you read them if you're waiting for an appointment, if you're standing in line at the coffee shop, because you never know when an insight is going to strike you. I often just take very quick notes in the margin, or sometimes I'll circle a word or underline a sentence or a phrase. If you keep a copy of the readings close by, it gives you a lot more time and opportunity to have good interaction with them.

Along with that you might want to consider keeping a designated piece of paper or a notebook where you might write down quick ideas, an opportunity to capture an insight. You might think, "Oh, what a great idea that is," rather than say, "Oh, where should I write that down?" If you know that there's a place to go to—I use this notebook for that purpose—I think that that can often be a very helpful thing.

Draw from a Wide Variety of Sources

It's also worthwhile that you always want to keep in mind: "What kind of illustrations am I going to use? Where am I going to find these ideas?" And just throw these out to you. Use books and novels that you might be able to use as examples for people. Movies are always good for us to throw out. Plays, musicals, sports are often things that people can connect with. Tell things from your own family background. And again, it's not your autobiography hour at all, but it does help sometimes to give a little story from your own life; people often will connect with that. Draw from news events. If there's something happening in the world that everybody is aware of and talking about, then make that a natural part of your homily as well.

On top of this, not only to draw illustrations from those places that I just mentioned, but even just for your own growth, it can be very worthwhile to read out loud sacred Scripture (perhaps the Psalms because of their lyrical nature), to read sacred Scripture, to read poetry out loud. This gives you a good sense of language. Even to read hymns out loud—that can be a very useful way of growing in different kinds of understanding of theology and phrases that are very well known to people.

Listen to Other Preachers' Homilies

Something else that you might consider, because for many of us we don't get to hear other people preach that often, because we're always the ones doing the preaching. So what I would recommend is listening to other people's homilies online, especially for people who are well-known for their skill in this area. You may just listen to recordings and pop those in if you're driving somewhere or have a minute just to rest and listen. Or if you're present at other liturgical events where other people are preaching, just make it an intention: "I want to listen to this person."

The priest who was my pastor when I was growing up, he had such skill as a preacher, and I just used to listen and say, "How does he do it? How does he do it? What does he do that makes him such an effective preacher?" And that's something we want to be doing whenever we have that opportunity. It also gives you a chance to notice things that you want to emulate yourself. Or of course, some people aren't great preachers so it gives us things that we want to avoid. If you hear another preacher doing something which you find to be distracting or unhelpful, obviously it's going to be distracting or unhelpful if you do it to other people as well.

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Be able to Put into One Sentence what Your Homily is About

I already mentioned, but just to repeat, that it's always important to have a thesis statement. You have to be able to put into one sentence what your homily is about. And then you just have to be ready to jettison everything else that's superfluous to that one sentence—it can always be used somewhere else. But this is my main point and everything I say in some way or another is going to help to point back to that.

Do Not be Predictable

Also another thing that you might want to keep in mind, especially if you preach regularly to the same congregation, is don't be predictable. You don't want every homily to begin, "In the newspaper the other day I was reading that..." I remember one priest he used to begin every homily by saying, "I read last month in the Catholic Digest..." Every single homily began with that phrase, to the point that people who liked him, but they joked about it. The predictability I don't think helped his preaching. Or sometimes preachers will have the technique of ending every sentence with a question. OK, it could be effective from time to time, but if you do it *every* single time it becomes predictable and I think that it begins to lose its punch for your congregation. So that would just be one recommendation I would make: don't be predictable, don't do things exactly the same way every time.

You'll also want to practice your gestures. You want to be comfortable with your body language. You *do* want to use gestures when you preach because it does help to engage the congregation more, but maybe it's something that you will want to practice just so that you could do it comfortably and well.

Become Comfortable with Your Preaching Space

And you also to be able to make sure that when you get into the pulpit where you preach that it's a comfortable space. You want to make sure that you can see your notes clearly, you want to be able to know where you fit in terms of the overall space itself, and you want to be able to make sure that you know how much space you have behind you, before you, so that that whole part of preaching doesn't become distraction. You want to take a certain possession of the pulpit. You want people to know that you're comfortable there. You want to be able to, when you get up to preach, you want to give them a couple of minutes—not a couple minutes, but about 10 to 15 seconds—just to settle down so that you're quiet—when you begin people are ready to be there with you.

Name the Good Things, But Don't Be Afraid to Say the Hard Things

When you are getting ready to preach, just something to keep in mind: never be afraid to talk about the good things, and also say the hard things that might be necessary. In part of my own parish experience, I remember there was a terrible situation. There was a murder, and so the person that we were burying had been killed by a family member. Obviously in that situation you have to say it, you have to name the tragedy, you have to name the horror of what has brought us to the moment of this funeral. To ignore that would not be to serve your congregation well.

On a happier note, if your local high school just won the state championship, bring it in, talk about the things that matter to the people there in the congregation. So name the good things, and don't be afraid to say the hard things. Say it well, say it carefully and respectfully, but you do have to say the hard things.

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Speak of God's Saving Word in the Present Tense

Also, just another little thing to keep in mind. Whenever we're talking about Jesus, whenever we're talking about the Father or the Holy Spirit, always be sure to speak of them in the present tense and not in the past. And I would even say the same thing about St. Paul, just as an example. Sometimes we say, "St. Paul said that..." Now, it's technically correct, but it's much more powerful and accurate to say, "St. Paul says." Not, "Jesus said," but "Jesus says," because Jesus' words, because they're enlivened by the Holy Spirit, are still at work present, even in our own day. And I think that it communicates something of the *life* of Christ when we speak of his actions, his words, in the present tense, and the same with St. Paul, St. Peter, or any other of the Scripture writers.

Make Sure Your Microphone is Working

This is a more practical thing, but very important nonetheless: make sure that your microphone is working. How many times have preachers been at the microphone and maybe the battery died, or maybe the microphone hasn't been adjusted well? It can be the best prepared homily in Christendom, if people can't hear it—because homilies are meant to be heard—if the people can't hear it, then it really is just falling to the ground and losing its effectiveness. So make sure that the microphone is working, make sure that you're comfortable with how it stands at the podium.

Take Care of Your Voice

And with that, you also might want to just remember to take care of your voice. If you know that you're going to be preaching on a certain day, then you don't want to be screaming at a football game the night before because you're not going to be able to use your voice in the way it's meant to be used. And one of the best ways we can take care of our voices well is just to get some good rest, to keep it well hydrated—so drinking a lot of water, even just doing some simple neck stretches or rolling our shoulders forwards and backwards, and then sometimes even just vocalizing—just humming for a couple of minutes before you have to preach. It just helps to warm up the vocal mechanism.

Keep a Spirit of Humility, Service, Faith, Hope, and Love

Finally, when we're preaching—and again, this is just tips from the trenches—when we are preaching or preachers, we always want to keep a spirit of humility, we always want to keep a spirit of service, of faith, of hope, of love. These always have to be the foundation to the work in which we engage when we are going to preach.

Preparation for preaching really does happen at every moment of our lives. Everything about our daily life is a way that we can help to get our preaching prepared. And so what I've just offered now are just some tips to help us to focus that process, a process that will yield a fruitful and an effective homily.

Receiving Feedback From the Listeners – Rev. James A. Mongelluzzo

When you and I think about improving our preaching, what most often comes to mind is subscribing to a new homily aid or attending [a] preaching workshop or reading a book on preaching. While these are all helpful strategies to improve our preaching, one of the most reliable resources for improving preaching is right at our own fingertips—our own congregation who listens to us preach every single week. Our own congregation is one of the most reliable consultative bodies to help us become better preachers. All we have to do is ask our parishioners, to learn their expectations, to learn how we're coming across to them, if we really are mediators of God's Word. And once we hear the feedback, simply modify our preaching accordingly. We can become better preachers by listening to our listeners.

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In 1975, the late Bishop Kenneth Untener, bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, and a former homiletics professor, individually interviewed hundreds of people in his diocese about preaching. And he simply asked one question: “What do you most like and dislike about homilies?” Then he formulated the results of his interviews into a book called *Better Preaching*. That book has become one of the most well-received resources for preaching, both for preaching students and for experienced preachers. Almost every preaching course bibliography I’ve seen, including my own, features Bishop Untener’s book *Better Preaching*. Just like Bishop Untener, you and I can grow in our vocation as preachers by soliciting feedback from our listeners.

How do you go about getting feedback from your congregation? In my own practice, I circulate a feedback sheet among parishioners several times a year when I feel my preaching is getting dry. I pass out a feedback sheet to approximately 15 parishioners before Mass, and I ask them to simply fill it out and leave it in the sacristy after Mass. The feedback sheet is simple and direct. Here’s a few examples.

Just think about what you want to know about your preaching, and then formulate those into easy questions and ask your parishioners. For example, here is a questionnaire I circulated to about 15 people on Trinity Sunday, 2009 [Diagram One]. I wanted to know four things, so I asked them:

1. Were you able to hear what I was saying, now that the parish has improved the sound system?
2. Did the homily offer you a deeper appreciation of the mystery of the Trinity?
3. Did the homily challenge you to change anything in your life?
4. Do you have any recommendations for helping me improve my homily?

That’s a very simple form. It only took me a few minutes to prepare it, and I received very helpful feedback from these four questions.

Now you can also try to be more formal in structuring a feedback sheet [Diagram Two]. And as you can see on this questionnaire, I actually put a longer series of questions together in the form of declarative sentences, and then I asked people to respond to those sentences by using a scale from one to five, number one being “strongly agree,” all the way through to number five, “strongly disagree.”

So, these were simply the things I wanted to know about my preaching. I asked them to respond to the following:

- The homily was easy to follow from beginning to end.
- The homily contained points that were easy to remember.
- The homily offered me a spiritual message to take home.
- The homily gave me a new insight.
- The homily brought me closer to God.
- The homily gave me hope.

[Diagram One]

Homily Feedback Sheet

Sunday, June 19, 2011 - Trinity Sunday, 11:30am Mass

Dear Friends,

Please help me improve my preaching skills by providing feedback for today's homily. Please reply to the questions below and leave the feedback sheet in my mailbox in the sacristy. Thank you for your valuable help.

1. Were you able to hear what I was saying, now that the parish has improved the sound system?
2. Did the homily offer you a deeper appreciation for the mystery of the Trinity?
3. Did the homily challenge you to change something in your life?
4. Do you have any recommendations for helping me improve my preaching?

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- The homily addressed a personal need for me.
- The homilist could be easily heard from where I was sitting.
- The homilist used words I could understand.
- The homilist spoke with enthusiasm.
- The homilist spoke with self-confidence.
- The homilist spoke with calmness.
- The homilist's own faith was evident in the homily. And finally,
- The homilist projected respect for listeners.

Then, you note, I gave people opportunity to complete this sentence: "The main compliment I wish to offer the homilist is..." Then at the other end of the spectrum: "The main suggestion I wish to offer the homilist is..." And then there's simply a space for "additional comments," and the directions "Thank you for completing this homily response form. Please return it to the homilist."

[Diagram Two]

HOMILY RESPONSE SHEET

Homilist _____
 Date _____
 Location _____

Please respond to the statements below using the following scale.

1 *Strongly agree*
 2 *Agree*
 3 *Uncertain*
 4 *Disagree*
 5 *Strongly disagree*

The homily was easy to follow from beginning to end.	1 2 3 4 5
The homily contained points that were easy to remember.	1 2 3 4 5
The homily offered me a spiritual message to take home.	1 2 3 4 5
The homily gave me a new insight.	1 2 3 4 5
The homily brought me closer to God.	1 2 3 4 5
The homily gave me hope.	1 2 3 4 5
The homily addressed a personal need for me.	1 2 3 4 5
The homilist could be easily heard from where I was sitting.	1 2 3 4 5
The homilist used words I could understand.	1 2 3 4 5
The homilist spoke with enthusiasm.	1 2 3 4 5
The homilist spoke with self-confidence.	1 2 3 4 5
The homilist spoke with calmness.	1 2 3 4 5

The main compliment I wish to offer the homilist is...

The main suggestion I wish to offer the homilist is...

Additional comments...

Thank you for completing this homily response form. Please return it to the sacristy.

You and I can become better preachers by listening to our listeners.

Now, spend a few moments reflecting on the questions at the bottom of the page.

[Questions on web page]

- What insights stand out for you in "Tips from the Trenches?"
- What benefits do you see for your preaching in "The Weekly Process?"
- How does the practice of soliciting feedback on your homilies from parishioners strike you? Is it a practice you would consider?