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

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“Touchstones for Preaching” is a resource of the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, produced in partnership with The Church in the 21st Century Center.

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. You're going to work on your homily, your congregation's need. Ask the Lord, "What do I need to preach on 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.

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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.

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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: e the tould (l)12(w)910(e-1(e)-5(co)-7b)2(e)2o4-2(m)17]TJ 09:t(y)9(l)st iest

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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 fe

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