

Preaching Isn't Easy

Preaching God's word effectively is not easy.

In the last 35 years the Catholic Church, once a church of immigrants, has evolved dramatically. Some of these settlers managed to put their children through college, they, in turn, did the same for their children. The average congregation today is more educated, more sophisticated and more accustomed to professionalism than at any time in history. Consequently, the challenge before any preacher is formidable.



As a priest, I have to keep reminding myself that I am not called by Christ to be pop-psychologist or an entertainer. I am called to convey the truths of our faith as reverently as possible. Reverence is basic. Before Mass I try to put myself in the proper mental disposition; I concentrate on the presence of God.

As Mass begins, I look out at the congregation and can't help being reminded of the human condition; there is joy, but also much pain, both mental and physical. I see the grief-stricken widow, the children of an alcoholic, the newly divorced mother of three, the man with cancer... so many faces, so much

suffering. I feel for them; in fact, most of the time my homily is aimed directly at one or another of them. I try to offer encouragement and instruction in the knowledge of God's unchanging love.

More than telling them what to do, when possible I try to tell them how to do it. Most of the time this comes down to a gentle warning, not to do too much on their own. Turning to the Lord from hour to hour is something most of us too easily forget to do.

When I prepare my homily well, I can manage to keep it within 10 minutes. However, sometimes I get carried away, inserting new ideas and rambling on for 15 or (God help us) 20 minutes. I'm still learning.

In preparing the thought-structure for my homily, I try to be sure about three things: 1) An opener — perhaps a story or an anecdote to get attention; 2) A middle — consisting of the main point, hopefully one that meets a real spiritual need of those present, which I try to back up with a few colorful examples; and 3) A closing — which restates the point and ends with something like a prayer or a quote from Scripture. Getting-off well is the sign of a polished sermon. Not knowing how to stop is the preacher's greatest sin.

Pray for those who preach. Write to them. Be constructive, but tell the truth. God knows, we need to hear the truth