

Home-schooling the homilist

Tips for the back-to-basics preacher

by
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How does one preach to listeners with limited exposure to basic theological concepts such as the Trinity, sacraments, and the virgin birth?

A need for “back-to-basics” preaching leads some homilists to adopt a delivery style akin to that of a classroom lecture, complete with an outline of abstract propositions. This approach provides clear information but fails to reflect the vibrant chaos of everyday life where God’s Spirit swirls within whirlwinds of day care, school, work, and household budgets.

An academic approach to preaching can easily overlook the pull-and-tug of being “in the world but not of it.” When this happens, the preacher’s focus shifts from faith formation to indoctrination.

An alternate model

The homeschooling movement can provide a different, more inclusive model. While the motivation of its proponents are multiple and varied, in rural areas one home school advantage is found in the linkage between organized knowledge and practical experience. For a farm family, for instance, daily lessons draw on practical knowledge connected to the power of nature itself. The result is contextualized learning, one that is conducive to wisdom as well as knowledge.

Like a home schooler in a rural setting, a pastoral preacher works to inculcate a system of knowledge (theology) into the vibrant life of a particular family (the local parish). This endeavor requires clarity in presentation *and* a sharp focus on the day-to-day life of the community—its needs, struggles, hopes and potential.

For the back-to-basics preacher, this means that community context gets equal billing with theological input. For the listener this means that social justice begins to feel as right as sticking up for the underdog, skipping Sunday Mass starts to feel like missing Christmas dinner, and going to confession feels as good as scrubbing one’s hands. Sexual morality begins with self-respect and the sacraments are explained in easy-to-grasp terms (see accompanying example).

Context is paramount

The bishops’ document on preaching, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, reminds us that the homilist interprets the life of the community in light of God’s revelation. This is a two-in-one package: God’s Word interacting infusing human experience and transforming it. Preaching that fails to connect with lived experience is a waste of time.

In all walks of life, successful leaders strive for close connections with the object of their work: managers who take the time to walk the factory floor, teachers who speak the students’

lingo and doctors who combine the practice of medicine with sincere compassion.

In a similar way, homilists who know the day-to-day struggles of their listeners will succeed in preaching the Word of God. More than communicate basic teachings, such preachers will convey truth in a way that rings true in the lives of those they serve.

When words aren't enough

Sometimes words aren't enough.

When our world turns upside down,
when someone we love is moving away,
when someone in the family gets sick,
when the future is uncertain,
when we lose our job,
when the storms of life keep us awake at night...
words of reassurance are nice.

But what we ache for, what we really want
is a shoulder to lean on,
a strong back to steady us.

Words are helpful but human touch
can accomplish things
words alone cannot.

That's the way God made us.
It's also the reason God gave us sacraments:
sometimes, a touch is required.

Like a mother's kiss on a scraped-up knee,
like a father's hand on the shoulder of his son,
like the embrace of a friend,

Christ, our Savior, reaches out to us

not just spiritually, but physically,

through the sacraments...
most especially in the sacrament of his Body and Blood.

Why?

Because, when it comes to something as important as salvation,
words alone just aren't enough.