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Tips for preaching 1,000 times a year

Knowing one's congregation is key

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EPWORTH — Call it a homily, sermon, or appropriate comments during a prayer service, it's preaching, and priests are expected to deliver something inspirational every time. Counting daily Mass, weddings, funerals and a host of other occasions, it can add up to a thousand fresh messages a year — each one a priority for the people in the pews.

"If you ask any congregation what they want from their pastor, one of the very first things they say is they want preaching that speaks to their lives," said Father Gregory Heille, OP, academic dean, vice president and professor of Homiletics at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis. He was the featured presenter at the annual Archdiocese of Dubuque Priests' Convocation, June 16-18, at Divine Word College.

"It's not about fancy public speaking," he said. "It's about having a relationship to the people and to their lives and having something to say that relates to them."

Tapping into the preaching practices of Pope Francis, Father Heille said that effective preaching isn't about the length of time, but the richness of the message. He tells a story about then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio before he became Pope Francis.

"Before electing a new pope, all the cardinals had five minutes where they could stand up and speak. He took three-and-a-half minutes," said Father Heille, the author of a forthcoming book on the preaching of Pope Francis. "Some people think that those three-and-a-half minutes got him elected."

Today, Pope Francis lives in a Vatican hotel in Rome and preaches at the morning Mass in its chapel to perhaps 50 people. Once a month, he does the same at different local parishes.

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Father Gregory Heille, OP, presented six sessions over three days of the convocation, relating to preaching. (Photo by Rob Kundert)

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"His preachings are brief, not scripted, but they're grounded in prayer and a deep pastoral experience," Father Heille said. "That's what people are relating to — he's connecting to their lives with a simple, but essential Christian message."

Effective preaching that can be sustained over the long term is based on three principles, according to Father Heille: understanding the lives of parishioners; prayer and study; and knowledge of the liturgical cycles of the church.

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Father Donald Hertges

Preaching is a dynamic practice, constantly changing with life in the parish. Good preaching stems from being connected with the people — how they live their lives as Catholics. How they treat each other, their children, their spouses, friends, strangers and especially the poor. Part of it is how teachers and catechists convey the joy of the Gospels to young people and those that are new to the church.

In what Father Heille calls a "Gospel-actuated parish," parishioners spread the Good News of the Bible every day by treating others with care and compassion. As Pope Francis stated in his recent letter, "The Joy of the Gospel," the baptized need to be "'missionary disciples." The way parishioners lead their lives fuels the preaching, especially when it comes to the Eucharist.

Archbishop Michael Jackels shares a lighter moment with Fathers Dennis Miller, Donald Hertges and Richmond Dzekoe. Near the conclusion of the convocation, the archbishop brought the priests up to date regarding issues facing the archdiocese. (Photo by Rob Kundert)

"After Vatican II, our documents say that the liturgy — including the preaching — is the 'summit and the source' of that entire ministry," he said. "Preaching is the summit of a life being well lived in the parish community and preaching is a source that inspires that life."

An effective, inspirational message involves reflection and study of the Scriptures and how they pertain to the congregation. According to Father Heille, a good priest is a "reflective practitioner," who is immersed in prayer and study and consciously thinking about the day-to-day experiences in his parish. This reflective element, the ability to make connections between the people and the Gospels, allows the priest to respond with clear, concise and timely preaching.

Including the themes of the liturgical year helps connect the parish with the universal church. This is another element of a priest being a reflective practitioner.

"This heavy load of day-in, day-out preaching requires having a sense of where we are in the liturgical year and the broad themes in the Scriptures and in the liturgy," Father Heille said.

Father Donald Hertges, pastor of Sacred Heart, Maquoketa and parishes in Otter Creek and Preston, said the presentations affirmed and fortified his training at St. Paul's Seminary while underscoring the importance of preparation. He also agreed that today, clear and concise are critical.

"Where people had the attention span for a 10-or-12-minute homily 30 or 40 years ago, now you're lucky to get five or six minutes," he said. "You can tell by looking at your assembly if they're listening or not."

Father John Haugen, pastor of St. Patrick, Epworth, said that preaching is a craft and a skill that needs practice.

"I think we realize that preaching is something we can get more information on and there are a lot more resources available now," he said. "But we also need to study more, so when we have someone come in who can give us a more academic perspective, it helps us to do that."

Father Heille presented six sessions to the priests of the archdiocese, but built in some practicum as well. Seven of the priests preached at Eucharist and prayer services during the convocation, which offered him a chance to provide both examples of different preaching styles and a chance to give constructive feedback.

"I heard some simply superb preaching and I heard some very excellent, what I call, 'daily bread-and-butter preaching," he said. "Preaching always takes me into prayer and there was preaching here that I will remember for a long time."