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RECTOR'S CONFERENCE ON PUBLIC SPEAKING

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“Fides ex Audito”

“I thirst” (Jn. 19:28). As we continue with our reflection on the last words of Christ, “I thirst” offers us the vision of Christ thirsting for soul and souls thirsting Christ. I want to invite us tonight to reflect upon the absolute importance of proclaiming the word of God well, both by our words and by our actions so that the people before us who are “thirsting like a dry weary land without water” (Ps. 63:3) might find springs welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14). *Fides ex audito* (Rm. 10:17). During this *Year of Faith* it is good to remember the words of St. Paul that “faith comes through hearing.” If the people of God cannot hear us then we are hindering their growth in faith.

In just two weeks our first year brothers will join us in the Ministry of Lector. Reflect upon Jesus as a public speaker. He must have had an incredible voice and an ability to project, articulate, and touch the hearts of his listeners. Think about him during the Sermon on the Mount, there must have been a tremendous amount of people whom he held at attention by not only his content but the way in which he delivered it. Remember he spoke with “authority” (Lk. 4:32 – Tuesday’s Gospel). We will be public speakers for the rest of our lives whether in homilies, in pronouncing the words of the Mass, in the other sacraments, and in leading the many meetings in our parishes and other daily opportunities for public speaking - by the way, if you do not like being a public speaker, then you need to take that up with your spiritual director and formation advisor. That being said, I know many good and holy priests who never thought they could do it, but eventually with time, practice, and prayer they had become extraordinary orators – so be not afraid.

However, if there is anything that causes more consternation in the pews, it is the poor proclamation and preaching to which our faithful are often subjected. As your rector, when I travel the State people ask me if #1 if you can speak English and #2 if you can preach. Surveys constantly show this to be a major point of concern for Catholics – they are thirsting for good homilies. If we cannot deliver the message of Christ they become either apathetic, or stop coming to church, or even leave the Church all together.

Occasionally you will hear your professors speak of our QEP (or even see it on a few tee-shirts still floating around). QEP stands for “Quality Enhancement Plan” – and this is verbiage used by our regional accrediting agency in reference to an area of one’s program that is focal and integral to the whole curriculum of study. In our case, we have designated preaching as our QEP which means that it is to be the interdisciplinary point of integration for your studies. We are to foster a “homiletic spirituality” or as Fr. Guerin would say, “the vocation of a preacher” so that whether we are learning scripture, history, systematics, morals, canon law, etc., we are always making the connection of how to effectively communicate the fullness of our learning of the Good News to the faithful.

The first step to being a good preacher is to first be a good proclaim-er of the Word as a public speaker, and so tonight I want to offer a “Letterman-style” top ten list for further reflection on how we should each be proclaiming the Word of God.

10) I wish to honor my father in this first point as today is the seventh anniversary of his death. From the very first time I read at Mass as a kindergartner, my father would practice with me for what seemed like hours when me or my siblings would have to read at the school Mass. He had a phrase that I will never forget, nor did I understand it at the time: “low and slow.” As I have matured through the years I realize that he was speaking of both pitch and pace. Maintain a low pitch and a slow pace. This allows the hearer of the word receive it. We have all had the experience of someone reading so fast that we cannot understand them. I find this point particularly important for us who will minister in the State of Florida. I cannot tell you how many times I have had the elderly stop me after Mass in order to thank me for the pace at which I prayed because as they noted, they finally could hear what was going on. I am of the opinion that 90% of the time 90% of us are speaking too fast. Our elder brothers and sisters deserve the very best from us and so we must always be conscious of keeping it “low and slow.”

9) So as not to confuse the point above, “low” does not refer to the volume with which we are to speak. To reference a Seinfeld episode, “don't be of low talker.” When you speak, realize that you should always speak to the last pew in the congregation. Speech teachers talk about the power of our voices coming from deep within – from the diaphragm – push out the words that you both preach and proclaim. Remember it is hard for microphones to pick up whispers. Speak up Sonny!

8) The Mic is your friend. Please learn how to adjust the microphone before Mass and use it well. If it is not in front of you, it is not working as it should. Often we use the lavalier microphone, become used to this device; it will be your ever constant companion as a priest. Now we all know that I have a big mouth and a loud voice, but I try to always use a microphone; again please do not forget the elderly person or the good Catholic in the last pew. By the time you get to your third Sunday Mass if you are trying to “go it alone” without the microphone, trust me you will begin to lose your voice – been there, done that!

7) Speak with feeling. Speak like you believe what you are proclaiming. Remember faith comes through hearing and so we must speak as though we believe. Learn how to modulate your voice so that there is good inflection. However, beware that you do not modulate your voice so much that you garble or lose the end of your sentence. For example: “The Lord be with y...” Or “The Word of the L...” In our desire to show feeling we can lose the content. Learn how to enunciate clearly; or as Bishop Lessard would say “use your dentals.” Every word of God’s Word is important!

6) Stand firm and try not to fidget. There is nothing worse than watching someone preaching a homily as though they had “ants in their pants.” I have another quote from Bishop Lessard that might help those who get nervous: “I would add only one thing, especially for those who are a bit nervous....and they should be, as they undertake this awesome ministry: as a professional advised us back in the seminary - that takes us back to the 1950’s- before you utter a single sound or syllable, take two deep breaths. Amazing what it will do.” Stay calm and be still. Enough said!

5) Did you ever hear the phrase when you were a child: “look at me when I’m talking to you.” Well, it is a good phrase for us as well. Look at the people to whom we are speaking. Sometimes you see a public speaker who stares at the back wall or they never look up from the ambo - such a person is not connecting with the people in front of them. Look up!

4) As you know we are a bilingual institution. Our bishops have sent us here in support of this mission because they know the importance of each of us using our pastoral language. I am always trying to encourage us all, both priests and students, to grow in this practice. It is for the pastoral needs of the people entrusted to our care that we strive to improve in our speaking in a foreign language. After all, the new evangelization depends upon us sharing the word of God to all that we encounter regardless of where they come from. If a native English speaker has no desire to learn Spanish, then he is out of touch! If a native Spanish or Creole speaker thinks that he can ever stop working on perfecting his pronunciation ... go back and read the surveys!

3) Practice, practice, practice! We must always be prepared to proclaim the word of God, to preach, and to celebrate the sacraments, and that means we must practice. I know someone who never looks at the gospel before he stands up to proclaim it, and on Sunday night there is usually a list of all the ways in which the gospel was butchered. Now sometimes malapropisms are very funny, but not when it replaces the words inspired by the Holy Spirit. If we are to read what is on the sacred page, then we need to know ahead of time what tricks or twists of tongue might come.

2) If you want to one day be a good preacher, become a good listener. Practice in the pew by active listening. Trust me, as a priest it sure is nice to know that people are conscious while they are sitting in church. We can learn a lot by following and imitating the positive traits we see and we can certainly learn a great deal from the *via negativa*. Look, listen, and learn!

1) Ask the Holy Spirit to help you and inspire you every time you stand up to speak. Some may consider this to be simplistic or even juvenile, but we are to be fully reliant on God at every moment – rely upon His strength, wisdom, and grace. In addition, praying over the Scriptures beforehand allows the Word to take on entirely new meanings beyond our own natural capacity to understand. I cannot recommend more highly the daily practice of *lectio divina*. Nothing new here, this is a practice that the Church, our spiritual directors, and our preaching department regularly hold up for us as an essential component of our spiritual lives. The word is not only meant to transform the listener, but also the preacher. Thus the adage that whenever we preach, we preach first to ourselves. As Pope Paul VI wrote regarding the Ministry of Lector: “That he may more fittingly and perfectly fulfill these functions, he is to meditate assiduously on sacred Scripture. Aware of the office he has undertaken, the reader is to make every effort and employ suitable means to acquire that increasingly warm and living love and knowledge of Scripture that will make him a more perfect disciple of the Lord” (*Ministeria Quaedam*, 5).

As preachers and proclaimers of the Word, we must be ever more men of prayer. Pope Francis recently reminded us: “Take great care of your spiritual life which is the source of inner freedom. Without prayer inner freedom does not exist. You will be able to treasure the means of conformation to Christ that is proper to priestly spirituality by cultivating the life of prayer and by making your daily work the training ground for your sanctification” (6 June 2013). With our interior life strengthened and renewed, we will be able to speak with “authority” like Christ and truly slake the thirst of the faithful entrusted to our care.