

The Deacon
Column for July/August 2021 Issue
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“Preaching to a Masked Assembly”

In March of 2020 one of my favorite music artists, Kenny Rogers, died in Sandy Springs, Georgia. He had a very distinctive raspy voice that was easily recognizable. Rogers’ unique talent was to employ words that could conjure up vivid images. One of my favorite songs is “The Gambler”. You can close your eyes and picture this man sitting on a train staring out the window. A particular verse in the song speaks to all of us in pastoral ministry and preaching, especially as we look back on 2020 and embrace 2021. “He said son, I’ve made my livin’, out of readin’ people’s faces, knowin’ what the cards were, by the way they held their eyes. So, if you don’t mind my sayin’, I can see you’re out of aces.”

In ministry, teaching, counseling, medicine, and in relationships we have come to rely on reading people’s faces. This is evident when we observe the total joy on the faces of a couple as they stand in front of the assembly exchanging vows on their wedding day, or when we see the smile and love radiating from a woman as her great-granddaughter is being baptized, or when we watch pain on a man’s face as he receives the devastating news from the doctor that he has a terminal disease. How often have you greeted people as they leave Mass on Sunday and you notice a parishioner who looks deeply troubled and sense that there is a great weight on their heart.

We’ve often heard the expression that the eyes are the window to the soul. William Shakespeare and others throughout history have shared that insight in varied ways. However, it has also been said that the face tells all! Cicero, the great Roman philosopher stated that “the face is a picture of the mind with the eyes as its interpreter.” In his latest encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis notes (in paragraph 87) that “No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love”.

For over a year now we have been wearing face masks while in public to help slow the spread of the coronavirus. However, this has only negatively impacted our communication with others. In the realm of preaching, mask wearing affects both the preacher *and* the congregation. Appendix A of *Preaching in the Sunday Assembly* (paragraph 105) reminds us that in any type of communication “it is the whole person who communicates. Facial expression, the tone of voice, the posture of the body are all powerful factors in determining whether a congregation will be receptive to what we have to say”. On the preacher’s side of the ambo, it is a little easier because generally, we are far enough away from the faithful so that we can remove our masks while preaching. The people can see *our* faces and read *our* expressions. However, it is more difficult for the preacher to ascertain whether or not the community is receiving the message being delivered.

Without the ability to fully read people's faces we need to rely on other nonverbal communication cues. Body language helps us. Are people leaning forward as if to enter into your message? Can you see engagement in their eyes? Recently a story was published in Religion News Service, from a Presbyterian pastor in Georgia, who had a request for his masked congregants: "Give me all you can through your eyebrows!" Right now, we take what we can get! Hopefully, we will soon be able to return to "reading people's faces" and joyfully see that God's Word is achieving the end for which it was sent (Isaiah 55: 11).