

The Deacon

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- Preaching the Same Homily in Multiple Parishes

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The challenges presented in telling the same message more than one time

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Ask five deacons what their preaching schedules are like and the answers will fluctuate widely. After my ordination in 1994, I typically preached once a month at one Mass. Occasionally, I preached at two Masses on a specific Sunday. It was rare to be scheduled to deliver the homily on two different weekends in any given month. Although there were plenty of opportunities to preach — weddings, baptisms, wake/funeral services — the Sunday homily was typically reserved for the pastor or a weekend visiting priest.

In 2010 my wife and I moved out of state. We went from a large Catholic suburban population to an area that was quite rural and had a small Catholic population. Leaving my former profession behind, I accepted a position as the director of pastoral care at a large (125-plus-bed) nursing facility. We had daily Mass at the nursing home, as well as one Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Additionally, I served a parish that consisted of “three worship sites.” Three former stand-alone parishes (in a 40-mile radius) were now clustered together. The pastor did an outstanding job of bringing together three distinctly different communities. Father had years of experience in South America serving four parishes and a dozen mission churches.

The pastor and I worked out a schedule where he would preach all four Masses at the three parishes on any given weekend and on the following weekend I would do the same. Suddenly, my preaching schedule

increased to three times a week at daily Mass, and every other or every third weekend preaching four or five Masses. How does one maintain the energy needed to finish Mass, drive 40 miles and preach again? Furthermore, those parish communities are distinctly different — different economic, housing, devotional and family situations. Could I tailor one message that could apply to each of the three communities plus the residents and staff at the nursing facility? Would it be possible to preach effectively by the third or fourth time the same homily was delivered?

Telling the same story, anecdote or homily three times in the span of several hours is a challenge. Anyone who has been in sales or marketing knows this all too well. If you see five customers in a day and you are able to pitch your product to three potential clients, the first presentation is exciting. Someone is ready to listen to you and the presentation is bright and engaging. Later in the day, you remember what you shared earlier and have made some modifications to make your pitch clearer and more succinct. By the third time you meet a customer you are tired and the sales presentation just doesn't seem fresh. You've been sharing it all day, and afterward you realize that you've left out a critical piece of information that may have cost you a sale.

The challenge for anyone making a presentation, and especially for homilists, is to understand that although you have heard the story multiple times, these listeners are hearing it for the first time.

Preachers who deliver multiple homilies on the same readings on any given Sunday will agree on these two points: First, the biggest challenge is to capture the flow of adrenaline and continue that feeling each Mass you preach. Second, knowing the idiosyncrasies of one's congregation (especially communities separated by long distances) is essential. While the basic bones of the homily remain the same, it is imperative to tweak the message so that it will relate to the group of people who are hearing the message for the first time.

Don't worry about reproducing your homily verbatim each time. Recall the important/main point(s). Remember, you are preaching to a different congregation. Pray, prepare and listen. God will use your words to change his people each time you preach.

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