

Priests should prepare carefully before they preach

By Father Paul Cuddy
Courier columnist

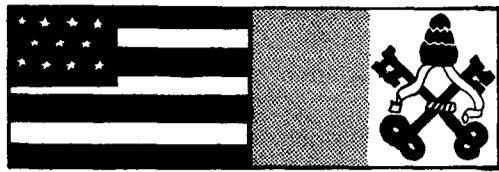
The Aug. 16 *On The Right Side* column offered excerpts from the Rev. Ralph Walker's fine sermon on "The Roman Catholic Mass" in 1926. He had probably attended that Mass at St. Mary's Church in Auburn.

Few of my columns have provoked such broad attention. It probably drew so much interest because it was captioned "short sermons." The idea of a seven-minute sermon struck the hearts of many. A man stopped me and said: "Great article. Why don't you give it to my pastor? He keeps going long after he should have stopped."

"Why don't you give the article to him yourself?" I replied.

"Oh, I don't want to hurt his feelings," he said.

The good of the congregation should be more important than that of the priest. By vocation we priests should be humble and grateful for any tips to make our shepherding more effective.



ON THE RIGHT SIDE

A professional man from a Rochester suburb sent a thoughtful letter. Here are some excerpts: "Thank you for recognizing us as 'the captive audience with no opportunity to respond.' Some sermons by their length, aimlessness and lack of insight have proven to me conclusively that purgatory does exist."

Comment: Well that was one good result of bad sermons. There are some today who wish to deny purgatory, which is to deny Catholic doctrine. I have great sympathy for the people in the pews. I have often wondered what William F. Buckley thinks as he listens to Sunday sermons.

More from the letter: "Preparation is

essential. Preparation, good posture, together with sincerity and true love of God's Word would result in an actual impact on people's lives, and not have them leave the church in a zombie state, with no one remembering the content of the sermon, even a minute after it is given."

Comment: No one leaves the church in a zombie state. What's worse is that they leave in a state of indifference, and sometimes even a state of resentment. The key to a sermon or homily lies in illustrations, stories, parables, history, local events, newspaper reports and the like. Archbishop Fulton Sheen had the skill of marrying an abstract concept to a concrete example so his listeners remembered the point.

A favorite author years ago for seminarians and priests was the Irish Canon Sheehan. His novels were humane, edifying and often funny descriptions of clerical life in Ireland.

In his story, "Luke Delmage," which

deals with a fervent young priest trying to save the world, Canon Sheehan wrote: "Fill your sermons with the Sacred Scriptures. The Word of God hovers over the minds of our people like a holy perfume." Another time he described two Irish women leaving the church where the priest had given a strong sermon on marriage. One said to the other: "Father gave an elegant sermon, but I wish I knew as little about marriage as he does." At least she did remember what he said.

Back to the man's letter: "What should be preached about? 1. The permanence of marriage, and the importance of choosing a suitable Catholic partner; 2. Drugs and abuse of alcohol as included in the fifth commandment. 3. The living presence of Our Lord in the Church. 4. Why the TV kills the spirit and is dangerous as killing the soul and is therefore a bigger threat than mugging. 5. The responsibility of children to their parents and vice versa. 6. How materialism is in opposition to the 'poverty of spirit' Christ calls for."

Preaching fails when people choose not to listen

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) Matthew 18:15-20; (R1) Ezekiel 33:7-9; (R2) Rom. 13:8-10.

Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel is the fourth discourse of Jesus. Remember Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses. He divides the sayings of Jesus into five discourses, reflecting the five books of Moses. This fourth discourse represents the fourth book of Moses, the book of Numbers. That is why numbers play so big a part in this discourse: two hands, two feet, 100 sheep, 99, two or three gathered in my name, 70 times seven, and so on.

This Sunday's Gospel deals with brotherly love and praying together. They are linked by the numbers "two" and "three."

I am sure you have heard the story of the Irishman — fresh from the old sod — standing on a busy street corner in New York City. As a burly Irish cop was directing

traffic, numerous trucks, cars and people were swirling around him.

Suddenly, the Irish immigrant started to cross the street on a red light. The police officer stopped him and explained, "Red is not your color. Green is. Wait for the green light, then start across." With a sheepish grin, the Irishman stepped back on to the curb, watched the red light change to amber or orange, and then started out as the green light appeared. Instead of walking straight across the street, however, the Irishman swung near the Irish cop and muttered, "You sure don't give those darned orange men much time to get across."

Our Lord in the Gospel tells us that to correct others is the duty of people such as the policeman in the story, parents, priests and teachers. The problem is how to do it.

Jesus said that, at first, correction should be private and positive. The cop didn't bawl the man out. He told him what to do as well as what not to do.

If a brother does not listen, Jesus said you are to go to him with two or three others, both as a protection for the sinner against arbitrary accusations and as a sign that sin affects the entire community.

Should this step fail, then the church itself should get involved. Why? Because sin in a churchgoer is such a scandal, and because God's people should be a holy people.

So some of the power Jesus gave to Peter in Matthew 16:19, He extended to the local church in Matthew 18:18 — the power to "bind and to loose." He gave Peter the power to teach and solve problems of faith and morals for the whole church. He gave a share of that power to the local church to correct a sinning member — but only after praying together. The purpose of correction is not to condemn, but to save; not to reject, but to reconcile.

A woman came to me recently because some Baptists were trying to "convert"



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

her. During our conversation, she said, "Father, do you know that about one third of their congregation is made up of fallen-away Catholics?" I mentioned that fact to a fellow priest and said, "We've got to preach more effectively."

"That's not the problem," he said. "The problem is that many Catholics won't listen. They won't listen to the church's teachings, especially on artificial contraception, homosexuality, ordination of women, etc. They want a green light to do their own thing. So they follow the line of least resistance."

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