

# Experience Based Insights for Good Orthodox Preaching

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Recently we were contacted by a senior priest who we hardly knew. Upon retirement he regularly visited a variety of parishes and was surprised by what to him, was a generally low quality of preaching. He suggested we use our Parish Pulse newsletter to call attention to the issue. Our initial response was that few priests would take kindly to personal evaluation from a lay person who has not walked in his shoes.

After some reflection we felt the topic was, and is, important. We contacted four senior priests from three OCA Dioceses with preaching experience easily exceeding 100 years. We asked them to share tips and insights on preaching. We also solicited suggestions from two lay persons, with over ninety years of listening, and both with some speaking experience.

While slightly edited, the suggestions are, for the most part, as we received them. Our contributors agree on many things, and disagree on a few. Since it seemed useful to share each respondent's overall view, we have not tried to harmonize these inputs around various topics.

## Quick Summary:

◆ Preach the gospel ◆ Get into it quickly ◆ Use good rhetorical techniques ◆ Occasional self-deprecation ◆ Start preparation early and in earnest ◆ Have an exit strategy

## Archpriest 1

### Delivery

- Don't "preach". Speak in your normal voice as if you were conversing. You are.
- Be mindful of good speech making techniques - volume, articulation, eye contact, your own posture, etc.
- Speak at a normal pace. The style of talking slowly, even one word at a time, I find brutally distracting. Sentences have to flow to make sense.
- Have an exit strategy. Rambling serves no good end. When they clearly stop listening, then stop talking.

### Content

- Speak about something that you want to share because you found it enlightening, edifying, or valuable in some way.
- The sermon is an encounter with the Son of the Living God in Liturgy. Seek to reveal Him rather than yourself or something else.
- It is not the place to manipulate, control or beat up the congregation because of their real or perceived failings. Don't do that!



- Your sermon should have a "take away". Send your hearers away with a vision, a plan, an attitude adjustment, something to further consider toward their own growth in Faith and Life and Spiritual understanding.

### Preparation

- Any teaching I've ever heard about "How to Prepare a Sermon" I found intimidating, overwhelming and annoying. I don't do it that way.
- However, you cannot share what you have not received. Some sort of preparation will be involved, even if it is simply your own life in Christ.

### Other

- After I got over the pride of not wanting people to view a bad sermon and instead concluded that "If I said it and it was bad then I should try to do better", reviewing my sermon videos (regularly posted on parish website) became a valuable tool for correction and improvement. Quite honestly, I am often comforted that it went better than I thought it did.
- While I can usually tell you what my last sermon was about, (or was supposed to be about) I can rarely tell you what I said. When I deliver sermons I do not hear them.

## Archpriest 2

- **Time, time, time.** Those who preach must make time to study and prepare their sermons. Most crash and burn in their preaching because they either try for a last minute "Saturday night special" or simply try to "drop and punt" at the liturgy, speaking on whatever comes to mind, which isn't much. I have not used a text or an outline or notes when preaching for many years. But earlier in my priesthood I did because it was a way of applying myself to the text for that Sunday and not speaking "extemporaneously" in a disorganized and unintelligible "steam of consciousness." *I start working my Sunday sermon on the Monday before, of the previous week.* Sermons take time to leaven. One cannot microwave them.
- **Discernment** too, is important. We preach the word of Christ, not our own words, ideas, opinions, etc. This word is living and active, and it is always spoken (directed) to a particular parish community in their own unique setting and time. This is the international dimension of preaching. The Lord's word from the scriptures must be meaningful, and hence, pertinent, to where and when the parish community experiences life on a daily basis. In a way, this discernment is all about the gift of love, knowing as a "fathers" what our children need the most (and not what they may want). Many clergy, I feel, miss the mark here because their preaching, though doctrinally and scripturally accurate, does not reach all the way "from heaven to earth."
- This leads to the other problem, which is one of **simplicity**. Our preaching must never be so academic that it is somehow "above" the understanding of the people in the parish. This does not mean that we have to speak at a 3rd grade level, but that if we use more challenging vocabulary (which I like to do) we must make sure that we explain what these words may mean. For example, last Sunday I preached on "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. The Greek word for "dwell" is "oiketo" which means "to build a house" (from the Greek word "Oikos" for house). So here I quoted the actual Greek word "oiketo" and extrapolated the notion that the teachings of the Christ (His words) in the gospel

must become an "interior structure of mind and soul" that we build by faith. In short, everyone builds their own inner structure of meaning by which they live their lives, our structure of meaning is built not upon the philosophy of men but on the actual "red-letter" words of the Lord in the gospel.

- **Personal** - Preaching, though it is all about the word of God spoken "incarnationally," must also be personal to the preacher himself. What this means is that the preacher should not be afraid to be himself when he speaks: to develop his own style, to speak from the heart, and not imitate the speaking style's of others. People know, intuitively, whether or not a preacher is speaking a genuine word when he content being himself in the eyes of God, and believes in what he says. This means not falling into easy platitudes by parroting what other preachers like to say. This, at least from my perspective, is the single most difficult aspect of preaching. Not copycatting.
- **Difficulty of Walking the Talk** -One final note: the preacher must continually strive to resolve the inner contradiction that no matter what he says, his actual behavior will never be congruent with his words. Only Christ practiced what he preached. But the tension that exists between what we say and what we do must not be covered up. It's often good to carefully disclose in a sermon how foolish we are, i.e. how far we have missed the mark, the mistakes we have made, etc. This helps to build a solidarity between the priest and his flock, knowing that we are all in the process of being healed by sin. Even better sometimes is the opportunity for a bit of humorous self-deprecation in our preaching.... I like to speak often about an event in while I was on the seminary OCTET. While in Arizona on our way to Phoenix, we couldn't find the Grand Canyon. How can you NOT find the Grand Canyon!? Its' 300 miles long, 50 miles, wide. Astronauts see it in space.

Take home lesson: we all get lost so easily because we are not paying attention to what matters most....

### Archpriest 3

- **Begin preparing on Monday.** Read the next Sunday's readings and think about what themes you can preach on that are contained in them. Also think about what stories or things that happen to you or others that might be a good illustration to use.
- **Have your main points decided on by Wednesday.** Write out your main points and sub points in an outline. Only write out each word of your sermon for your first several years of preaching, then when you're more comfortable and skilled, ditch the script and use notes. But almost always use notes and stick to them. It keeps you from digressing.
- **Have one, two, or three (at most) main points.** You can introduce them at the beginning, talk about them and elaborate on them, and then summarize or restate them at the end.
- **Always preach to the Scripture readings.** If you're speaking on another topic that's not obvious from the readings, incorporate the readings anyway. Don't ever ignore them in the sermon as if you didn't read them. The sermon should be directly related to the readings.
- **Don't retell the story of the gospel reading in a lengthy way.** They just heard it. Only summarize it briefly if you must.
- **Don't be afraid to name the name of Jesus.** Do it often. Talk about our doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation in ways they can grasp, as far as possible.

- **Be attentive to what's happening in your parish** and look for opportunities to incorporate it in your sermon. Especially good things. But never use the sermon for personal agendas, score settling, or belittling people. Know your parish and parishioners. Know the mood and status of your Parish and use the sermon to mold them into something even better.
- **References.** Use and quote good Orthodox sources.
- **Be sincere, honest, and vulnerable** in your preaching. Show your love for God and your flock.
- **Don't preach over the heads of your parishioners.** Emphasize the foundational doctrines of our faith.

## Archpriest 4

- **Preparation** - There is no magic bullet, but preparation, first and foremost, is the most important ingredient. Don't be afraid to go to other sources to glean a good point or two.
- **Prayer:** As I am placing the gospel on the altar, I take one deep cleansing breathe to settle myself, and to settle my spirit and cleanse my mind. I offer a prayer that God will fill me with the Holy Spirit, and allow me to simply be a vehicle for God's grace. Without prayer, everything else is lost in meaning. Even as I am preaching, I feel the power of the Holy Spirit active in my heart. I feel that is because I have invited him in just moments prior.
- **Length:** I try to be in the 10-minute range. That means you absolutely cannot take three minutes to re-tell the day's reading. I am an active listener, so when I go somewhere else, I know I have a good eight minutes before my own mind wanders. If you don't get me in those first 3-4 minutes, you don't have much of a chance at all; I'll start thinking about other topics –the ballgame or what's for dinner. Read body language, and react accordingly.
- **Immediacy:** Get right into what your theme is going to be. They need to know within the first 90 seconds what the general theme is going to be. Don't fiddle around and be impressed with the sound of your own voice.
- **Good content:** In a certain respect, I am forced into this. As one of our high school students said to me many years ago, "we've got to have the smartest parish in the country." Our small parish has six Ph. Ds, countless others with Master's degrees, and most everyone else with college degrees. They come ready and eager to listen and be fed. I must bring the 'A' game each week.
- **Pace & Tone of Voice:** Perhaps the most critical elements to me. The years have allowed me to know when to quicken or slow the pace, and how to use the cadence of my voice to my advantage. An occasional hand gesture can impact a point as well.
- **Enunciate clearly:** Self-explanatory, but oh, so important.
- **Aids:** At age 64, I have recently begun to have notes on a card that I can reference. Go to [www.levenger.com](http://www.levenger.com). Shirt pocket briefcase. It holds a 3x5 card in a leather pocket case. Looks great. At some point, I knew I had to make this transition to having something in my hand that I can quickly reference to transition to another point.

- **Numbering:** On my card, I usually have about six Roman numerals. These are my key talking points, and I will fill in with other content. I am able to visualize what is on the note card, and what I-VI are.
- **Ending:** Have a solid ending. If you are circling airport and try to land plane, people will know and it will impact everything that came before it. We often ignore the ending and think it will materialize, but at least have some general thought in mind
- **Personal Experiences:** I refrained from using the pronoun "I" for the first 10 years of priesthood. It seemed I would be preaching myself instead of Christ crucified and resurrected. I have learned that people really like to hear of my personal experiences, and how it relates to the reading & sermon that day. I limit my own experiences, but I do acknowledge the impact they can produce.
- **Results May Vary** - There are no guarantees. Some Sundays I feel well prepared and deliver an absolute dud. Other times I feel totally unprepared, then walk back into the altar and ask myself, "Where in the world did that come from?" You just never know.

## Seminary Grad -- Layperson

*...who hears various preachers and occasionally is asked to preach*

- **Pick ONE** of the assigned readings for the day and preach on it. We do a lot of "teaching" in our sermons about icons and fasting and saints. That's not preaching.
- Find **concrete and specific examples** from anecdotes, lives of the saints, stories, movies to make your point.
- **Time Yourself** - Ten minutes should be the limit of your preaching time.
- **Discipline** - Write out what you are going to say. It needn't be grammatically correct, but rather oratorically correct -- punctuation to help emphasize points. You don't need to use notes to deliver it, but you do need to be disciplined and actually prepare something. Unprepared sermons are common in our Church and you can tell because they are rambling and undisciplined and stream of consciousness. What is more important than preparing to preach to your people?
- **Good news-** The gospel is GOOD NEWS! Many sermons are down beats....

## From a Layperson...

*...who speaks publically & hears a variety of sermons*

- **Watch others** –but don't copy. There are accessible examples of good *and bad* Orthodox preachers available on the web.
- **Write -- Don't Read** - If you find it helpful to write it out – do not *read* it. If you must read it... inflection, eye contact, occasional departure from text.
- **Practice** by actually saying the words aloud. It is amazingly helpful even for accomplished speakers.

- **Land the plane once** – Don't keep repeating the ending. Stop at the end! Then stop. No touch and goes.
- **Talk a ½ to a full 'step' above the audience.** Language, concepts, assumed knowledge, demeanor. Make them reach *–but don't be out of reach*. Most of us can grasp above Readers' Digest level.
- **Emphasis Tools** - Spoken words are only a part of what/how we communicate and the "task" is communication. Posture, movement, smiling or not, and much more helps your point to land with your parishioners. Pause occasionally. Not dramatically, but for emphasis. Occasionally moving around can be helpful to keep people's focus – but done on a regular basis movements can seem to be a crutch for weak content and over dramatization.
- **Review** – To help with above listen or view a recording of yourself.
- **Mic** - If you cannot be heard get some sort of effective amplification/microphone. Nobody prefers it. Some need it based on their voice strength, acoustics, and ambient noise.
- **Avoid too much "local" reference.** Referencing inside info can make guests feel like outsiders. At an *[ethnic label]* parish we visited the priest referred to various old country customs that he *thought* amplified the homily. His point, if there was one, was hidden since we lacked 'the code' – and felt like we didn't belong.
- **Make Fewer Points** – Too many takeaways --or no takeaways but many "points"-- loses listeners.
- **Wheat from Chaff** – Afterward pick out what you said that you did not intend to say.
- **Questions** - Too few sermons use questions. Intriguing questions help people to engage with the topic. Perhaps to help them see the barriers and obstacles they have between themselves and God; between their, perhaps secular, worldview and a more transcendent Gospel centered worldview.
- **Stories** – Tell stories. Stories are powerful because [our brains become active when hearing stories](#). We heard a sermon last spring with five (that's 5!) illustrative stories. We still recall three. Stories get shared.
- **Generosity** - Preach about generosity, gratitude and stewardship at least once per year. Use the word *money*. You probably dislike this topic and many will squirm -- but it needs to happen. (*"People need to be reminded more than they need to be instructed."* C.S. Lewis)