

FROM THE PASTOR

Fr. Mike Jones

“Fr. Mike, how do you come up with your homilies?”

I’ve been asked this a lot over the past six years. For anyone interested, let me ‘pull back the curtain’ on how it happens.

HOW IT BEGAN

In March of 2013 our parish staff attended the Mid Atlantic Conference in Baltimore; a gathering of more than 1,000 parish leaders. We heard a talk by Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran from Nativity Catholic Church in Timonium, Maryland. They had just published a book titled, Rebuilt, describing their journey bringing renewal to their parish. They spent years studying successful, growing churches (including Protestant churches) to see how they might bring new life to their dying parish. One idea they hit upon was preaching in series.

Message series allow a church to focus on a key idea for 4 or 5 weeks. It also helps move all the members of a congregation in the same direction as everyone hears the same ‘big ideas’ regardless of which Mass he/she attends. We refer to this concept as “one church, one message’. I really liked this idea so preaching in series began at St. Pius.

THE TEAM

The messages you hear on the weekend are created by a team. St. Pius’ message team currently consists of myself, Katie Skerpon, Jen Buter and Deacon Jim Doyle. In past years our associate pastors were also part of the message team. Katie and Jen coordinate and create the curriculum for KidMin, Middle School & High School Ministry and adult small groups. Their voice input ensures that our messages are relatable to the whole parish. We meet regularly as a team to map out and create each series, working from a plan that covers the entire year. Since each series lasts an average of 4 weeks, we end up with about 10 series a year (our summer series goes longer).

THE IDEAS

The most common question I hear is where we get the ideas for our series. We start and return often to prayer, asking the Holy Spirit for guidance. In our meetings we discuss the challenges our congregation, our Church, and the world are facing and how we can address them in our preaching.

We go to the lectionary (the Church's book of Scripture readings for Mass). We read, pray and reflect on the readings discussing what God is saying to us through Scripture. I've found that within the Catholic Church's liturgical year there are some built in topics that lend themselves really well to message series ideas. For example, in Advent we prepare, in Lent we're called to grow and change, and at Easter we celebrate new life and discipleship. In the Fall we begin with a series that recognizes summer has ended and it's time to get back to work and routine. After New Year's we want a more challenging series, which in recent years has ended with an invitation to make a personal commitment (or recommitment) to Christ. Like Nativity we're always looking at message series other churches have done. We sometimes find a topic we like (and sometimes great graphics). While we get ideas from other churches, we always adapt it to fit with the weekend readings and our parishioners' circumstances.

THE PROCESS

So taking all this into consideration we create a guide for each series (we like using Google docs so every member of the message team can add ideas). Taking the ideas in the guide I start drafting the homilies and Katie begins working on the adult small group curriculum which accompanies the series.

By Wednesday or Thursday each week I have my first draft of the homily which I share with the team. They give me great feedback on ways to clarify or expound on certain points. Their input at this stage strengthens the homily immensely. By Friday evening I need to have my homily finished. I email our tech coordinator with the images and verses I plan to have on the screens while I preach (tech creates and runs the screens for Mass). I also share the text of my homily so the tech volunteers in the balcony can follow along. On Friday I also email my homily to the visiting priest. This is so we can both stress the same main points (though Fr. Rich likes to stay close to my text at his

Mass). Once I've finalized my homily I begin practicing it. On Saturday morning I practice it out loud several times both in the residence and in church. The more I practice my homily, the more comfortable I am with both the text and my delivery. And I pray (and pray) that God uses my preaching to touch those who will hear it.

LAY TESTIMONIES

I am deeply committed to bringing the voices of lay people into our messages whenever appropriate. The attitude of "*Father knows everything*" is a myth. Despite my years of pastoral experience, my perspective as a 60 year old celibate male can be limited. So hearing from the faithful, from individuals of all ages and backgrounds helps everyone grow in faith.

Since 2013 we've had lay testimonies within the homily several times. We most recently did this one weekend in Advent. You'll continue to hear lay testimonies within the Mass a few times each year.

OTHER POINTS

Two months before a message series starts the plan is shared with our choir directors so they can select music which supports the series. You'll also hear a reference to the series in the Prayer of the Faithful.

If you are away from St. Pius and miss a message, you can always find the text and audio on our website. Just click on the Experience tab to find current and past messages. Each weekend's message is usually uploaded to the website on Monday afternoon.

In my ten years as pastor, St. Pius X Church has had six different associate pastors, two permanent deacons and several weekend assistants. To ensure a consistency in our approach to preaching, I created "*Ten Rules for Preaching at St. Pius*", which I borrowed from another church's website and adapted for our parish. Here they are:

TEN RULES OF PREACHING AT ST. PIUS X

Every message...

1. **IS POSITIVE.** Our Masses are filled with parishioners struggling with so much in their daily lives. We should aim to comfort and up lift them. The message can be challenging (*and should be*) without beating people over the head.
2. **HAS A SET TIME LIMIT.** Our goal is 13-15 minutes. Keeping to this provides our children's worship (SLAM) with a consistent length of time for their liturgy.
3. **IS WELL PREPARED.** The preacher has spent time in prayer, preparation, and rehearsing the weekend message.
4. **AUTHENTICALLY REFLECTS THE PREACHER.** Often the best messages come out of our own struggles and journeys. People sense authenticity as well as a lack of it. No matter how professional or eloquent you are, you won't build anything into people's lives if you lack authenticity.
5. **AFFECTS PEOPLE'S MONDAYS, NOT JUST SUNDAY.** In other words, your message needs to be applicable to people's daily lives after Mass. A great compliment is when someone doing well in their walk of faith says, *"All I've ever done is to take the principles that have been taught in church and put them into practice."* This is the best testimony of great preaching!
6. **REFLECTING WHAT WE ARE FOR, NOT AGAINST.** Preaching that focuses heavily against things leaves people feeling downcast. We avoid the 'hot button', divisive topics of the day that only tend to comfort the smug. Every person knows where the Catholic Church stands on abortion, contraception, gay marriage, etc. Our goal in preaching is to challenge the comfortable and comfort the challenged.
7. **TELLS NOT JUST WHAT, BUT HOW.** It's easy to tell people what they should do, but it is more challenging to tell them how. Every message should be practical with the 'how'; always give explicit mention if there is a take-away for the series and provide concrete 'next steps'.

8. **TOUCHES OUTSIDERS.** At every Mass we have visitors, guests, those returning after time away from the Church, or those seeking a spiritual home. Will the message they hear lead them to return next week or not?
9. **AWARE OF A GREATER AUDIENCE THAN THE ONE IN CHURCH.** Remember that our messages are posted online for folks to find after Mass. Even though you may think you are only speaking to the parish, your message will go beyond St Pius - which is a great thing. But filter what you say through this reality.
10. **LEADS OTHERS TO DISCIPLESHIP.** The ultimate goal in preaching is faithfulness to Christ's Great Commission: "*Go make disciples.*" Preaching that makes disciples who then go and make other disciples is the goal.

AND IN CONCLUSION...

Hopefully you now have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the preaching process at St. Pius. It's a lot of work requiring a great deal of coordination. But we've discovered that the power of the message at the weekend Mass is invaluable for St. Pius X's vision statement to become reality: *to form disciples who joyfully live out the mission of Jesus Christ in Bowie.*