

Preaching as Pastoring – University of Notre Dame

Good Morning, everyone. I'm Father Paul Turner, pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Missouri. I hold a doctorate in sacramental theology from Sant' Anselmo University in Rome. I've published numerous books and articles on liturgy and briefly taught here at Notre Dame as part of the Summer Song Institute in 2010 and 2011. It's an honor to return to the preaching conference of the John S. Marten Program in Homiletics and Liturgics, this year on the theme Mystic and Mystagogue: Preaching as Spiritual Leadership. A pdf of the slides I'll show you are temporarily available on my web site www.paulturner.org.

I've been asked to present Preaching as Pastoring. Here's the promotional description for my talk: "A pastor preaches the Word of God to a particular community in a given time and place. What makes preaching local? Beyond the liturgical year, what parochial themes does a pastor consider? How are they best presented? This talk will include sample homilies."

I will present three homilies that I delivered in the calendar year 2017. That summer I moved from St. Anthony parish to the diocesan cathedral. St. Anthony is in a section of town known as "Historic Northeast Kansas City" because back in the day it was home to some of the storied families in the city, including Robert Alexander Long, a lumber magnate and philanthropist, and the Ferdinand Heim family, who owned a brewery nearby and ultimately donated two houses to the parish to become the convent and rectory. A neighborhood of contrasts, Historic Northeast Kansas City was home to Italian immigrants who brought faith, family and customs to the neighborhood, but who eventually moved away to other parts of the metro area, leaving their inexpensive homes for other immigrants to buy. Today St. Anthony Church has two English and two Spanish masses every weekend, as well as refugee families from central Africa whose European language is French, and Vietnamese families who resettled after the Fall of Saigon in 1975.

The cathedral stands on ground where Catholics first worshiped in a Kansas City log cabin in the 1840s. The present building, begun in 1882, has been renovated several times, most recently in 2000. As with many cathedrals, its location draws those who live in the burgeoning downtown apartments and condominiums, people who live further but drivable distances and who love our liturgy and music, people who come occasionally for the convenience of our early Saturday afternoon and late Sunday night masses, as well as convention visitors passing through the city.

In my three most recent pastorates I have served rural, immigrant and downtown communities. In each case I remember feeling that my first homilies missed the mark because I had not yet come to know the people. It took a while for me to switch from preaching to stereotypes to addressing the actual people I was coming to know. In that regard, every parish homily is preaching as pastoring. The more we pastors come to know our people, the more targeted our preaching becomes.

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However, for the sake of this talk, I've selected three homilies that concern parish events unique to the local congregation. I did not choose to share a fundraising homily, though I could have. That also fits under the umbrella of what I consider "pastor's homilies." I use other umbrellas. Sometimes I preach "current events homilies." Just over the past few months I have addressed new legislation in the State of Missouri that restricts abortions to the first eight weeks of pregnancy, including pregnancies resulting from rape and incest; I've taken up the Vatican's document on gender theory; and the buzz among some Catholics that the change in the Italian-language Lord's Prayer might affect the English translation. Most often, though, I'm giving what I consider "generic homilies" - just preaching on the scriptures of the day in hopes of enhancing the spiritual lives of the congregation. I assign myself the same page count every week: one, single-spaced. I keep editing until every word I want to say fits on one page.

Let me explain something about my approach to the scriptures. As a young homilist, I noticed that by preaching on the gospel every week I was missing an opportunity to explore the other readings, and I didn't want to preach on all the readings every Sunday; I thought each one provided sufficient reflection for a complete homily. So I decided to put my preaching on a 9-year cycle: one year on the first readings, another year on the second readings, and then a third year on the gospels. Then I realized that I was omitting the psalm, so I added that to my matrix. Now it takes me 12 years to preach on the entire Sunday lectionary. I don't recommend this to everyone, but it has helped increase my appreciation for the many readings of the liturgical year.

That will explain to you why all three homilies I'm sharing with you from 2017 include a reflection on the first reading and only on the first reading. But as you'll quickly see, these are not "generic homilies." I had a specific pastor's message to share. But to avoid the charge of preaching "sermons" instead of "homilies", I use the reading as spice, usually near the end, to connect my message to the mass of the day.

Listen now to the homily I preached on the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 26, 2017, at St. Anthony Catholic Church in Kansas City, Missouri. It includes a reference to a crime at a bar in Olathe, Kansas, where a man shot and killed an engineer from India. I preached the same homily in Spanish. Here's the English version:

Two Sundays ago a rumor spread primarily through social media that officials from Immigration and Customs Enforcement were targeting churches in order to arrest undocumented immigrants. Of American Catholics age 35 and younger, 54% are hispanic, and they have older relatives. Two Sundays ago throughout the country church attendance dropped as people feared for themselves or members of their families. Here in Kansas City none of our churches witnessed a raid; ICE officials insisted that they had planned nothing unusual that day. Still, the incident revealed how much fear lies in the immigrant community at a time in American history when many of them feel unwelcome, and some fall victim to hate crimes as Olathe apparently had this week.

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An estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants live within the boundaries of the United States. The numbers have raised fears among Americans that our borders are not secure and that evil people from other countries have easy access to commit crimes and terrorism here.

Most immigrants come for other reasons. They go to school. They hold specialized jobs. Or they are fleeing life-threatening challenges at home, such as gang warfare, economic despair, and social oppression. Some suffer abuse at the hands of a family member. Many immigrants entered the United States legally, but found the process toward citizenship complex and expensive. It can cost thousands of dollars and take 20 years to pass through all the stages. Exceptions can be made for those seeking asylum, or those so athletically gifted that our sports teams need them now. Many ordinary immigrants overstayed their visa, found employment, are raising a family, and go to church. Because of their large network of families and friends, many of them have become complacent. Instead of pursuing the difficult process of legal documentation, they take their chances.

Some Americans criticize undocumented immigrants for breaking the law. But the immigrant is probably not focusing on that; the immigrant is trying to support a family, including children who were born in the United States, or who were brought here at a very young age, and now are active in schools and youth groups. Many citizens like the slogan “America first.” Many immigrants are thinking “Family first. God first.”

The Catholic bishops in the United States have been pleading for immigration reform and an openness to refugees. Reform should include alleviating the oppressive conditions in other countries that cause people to migrate, and it should seek other ways to regularize those without documents without sending them back to their countries of origin, dividing families, and breaking the social fabric that is essential to a healthy American society.

Today’s first reading is a short passage from Isaiah that offers great tenderness to a people in exile because of violence in their homeland. Zion was thinking, “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.” But then God speaks: “Can a mother forget her infant? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.” This is the message that Mother Church offers not just to immigrants, but to all those who are in exile from their homeland, their family, or people they can trust: “I will never forget you. Your church is also your home.”

Because this topic is politically charged, I kept my remarks couched in positions articulated by Catholic bishops in the United States. I did not directly quote them, but I frequently do, so that people know I’m not just giving my own opinion but the teaching of the conference.

I consider this a “pastor’s homily” rather than a “current events homily” because it directly concerned my community. Our attendance had indeed dropped on that particular Sunday two weeks earlier. Volunteers from a pro-immigrant organization arrived that morning on the lookout for ICE; I told them I doubted they were going to see anything unusual, and they didn’t. It was all hearsay. I don’t remember getting any feedback on this homily, but sometimes I

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say things so that people know where I stand. Then when they go into their own circle of family and friends, at work or at play, and some controversial topic comes up, if someone says to them, “Wait, you’re Catholic. What did your priest say about this?” Then, they’ll have an answer. They won’t have to say “Nothing.”

Just a few months later I announced to the parish that the bishop had asked me to take on a new assignment. I’m going to play for you now the last homily I preached at St. Anthony. You’ll hear a reference to my efforts to learn Vietnamese. I spent three years working on it in order to read prayers in a way that people could understand. I eventually could anoint the sick and offer absolution in Vietnamese. If I remember right, this audio is from the second English mass; when I neared the end the first time, I had to pause frequently to pull myself together because leaving this parish proved more emotionally difficult than I thought it would be. Here’s my farewell on Holy Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017.

When I came to St. Anthony’s five years ago, I believed that you were going to help me more than I could ever help you. I wanted to experience how different cultures expressed their faith and to encounter the work of God in a variety of ways. I was hoping for a renewed spirit. You have given me this and more.

You have all been patient with me. When I arrived, I did not know the Spanish language or culture well enough to serve people here as they deserve. I’m better, but still not as fluent as I should be. Nonetheless, individuals and families from our hispanic community have opened their hearts to me.

My inability to communicate in Vietnamese was even more frustrating because our Vietnamese families are so faithful to this parish. I have learned only a little. I realize now - if it’s this hard for me to learn their language, how hard it is for them to learn mine. Their faith, humility, service and hospitality have made a deep impression on me.

Many longtime members of this community remain faithful to it in spite of many changes over the years. This parish was built on the soil of Italy and other European countries, and it continues to bear fruits of openness and creativity.

Most recently refugee families from Africa appeared on our doorstep, and the generous people of this parish have welcomed them. I hear people from other parts of the city say they want to raise their children to appreciate other languages and cultures. I tell them, there’s a simple way to do that: Move to northeast Kansas City. Worship at St. Anthony’s. Anyone can receive what people have given me: a broader view of the world and a more expansive heart.

Moses experienced this when he climbed Mount Sinai, as we hear in today’s first reading. He learned that God is “merciful, gracious, slow to anger, rich in kindness and fidelity.” Moses also saw his own people in contrast: “stiff-necked” and full of “wickedness and sins.” Yet God loved them and led them.

As you know, I too can be stiff-necked and full of wickedness and sins. I ask your pardon for the offenses I committed against any of you. And I thank you for showing me the qualities of God: You are “merciful, gracious, slow to anger, rich in kindness and fidelity.”

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Next weekend I will go to Conception Abbey to reflect on the past and prepare for the future. Fr. Macario will come here. Then you'll meet Father Andrés Moreno, your new priest. He is full of faith, anxious to serve, excited to meet you, and grateful for this opportunity. His English is better than my Spanish. When I told him I was trying to learn Vietnamese, he asked, "What have you done to me?" I know you will be as patient with him as you were with me.

I will become pastor at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. St. Anthony's is your parish, but the cathedral is also the home of every Catholic in the diocese. You are always welcome to worship there.

Finally, I wish to thank our staff: Deacon Tom Powell, Nora Vasquez, Cathy Hernández, and José Zamora. They serve this parish with a generous heart and a profound faith. To all of you who showed me the face of our merciful, gracious, kind and faithful God in all its vibrant color, thank you.

In preaching farewell to a congregation, I thank people for what they've done and apologize for mistakes I've made. I cannot heal every hurt, but I want to offer some words for the injured to remember as I walk away. At another parish I laid out an unfinished agenda in a similar homily. I attempted something prophetic about what I'd seen in the community and how it could develop. But that will all depend on the new pastor and how their lives will continue to unfold. Not every outgoing pastor can say something positive about the priest who replaces him. At times we priests do not agree on some fundamental theories of parish life - such as the forms of lay leadership, liturgical style, and architectural enhancements. I felt especially blessed that the young priest who replaced me in this case would be able to lead the parish in positive directions.

Again you see that I used the lectionary to drive home my point. But I probably could have found a line of scripture from almost any Sunday that I could mine for the same purpose. I made no reference to the Holy Trinity. I felt that my last homily should be a "pastor's homily" to sum up my years of service.

Third, let me offer my homily from the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, on Sunday, November 26, 2017. I'd been at the cathedral fewer than six months. When I moved in, people asked me, "What are your biggest challenges?" One was the money, of course. We could not pay our bills each week, and we still have an outstanding debt from the renovation of the building, now almost 20 years later. A second challenge was the staff; some positions did not make sense to me. The third was the mass schedule. We have about 300 households who come regularly to worship on the weekends - mostly singles and couples, very few children. We were offering six masses every weekend: two on Saturday afternoon, two on Sunday morning, and two on Sunday night. On average, 200 people came to each mass. The building seats about 1200. That had been the schedule for decades. I started talking with staff and the leaders on the councils about reducing the number of masses. I also discussed it with the bishop. I told the people that I was considering eliminating three of the weekend masses, and that I would be available after each of the masses the following weekend to explain the pros and cons of the idea. I took

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note of everyone's comments for further reflection. I got more support than I expected, though some people told me they would walk out and never return, and several more begged me to eliminate only two masses instead of three. I ultimately agreed with that position, presented this plan to the bishop, and received his OK. So in November of 2017 we started announcing that the mass schedule would change on the First Sunday of Advent. I dedicated my homily the previous weekend to the theme. Here it is:

One trait of us Kansas Citians is that we hate to pay for parking. If I drive someplace for theater, a concert or dinner, I may spend a lot of money on my entertainment, but I don't want to pay for parking. I'll find free parking on some street, even if I have to walk an extra block or two.

One concern I have about launching a new mass schedule at the cathedral is that it will make parking even more difficult than it is now. We have a small parking lot. People already cram cars into it three or four deep, sometimes blocking access to emergency vehicles, those with disabilities, and even the priests' garages, as if to punish us for not providing a larger lot. But if you're like me, wherever you go in Kansas City, you want to park close, and you want to park free. I have the luxury of being able to walk to the cathedral, so I'm the last one with any right to comment on how we park here. But people have told me no matter how much space is available for worshipers inside the cathedral, if there isn't room for their cars outside the cathedral, they'll never come in to fill it.

Next weekend we begin a new mass schedule. On paper it only inconveniences two groups: those who have come to the Saturday 4:30 and those at the Sunday 6 pm. However, it could inconvenience everyone. I hope that those of you who have come regularly to the discontinued masses will still come to one of the others - even though, if you do, parking may be even more difficult than it already is. If you regularly attend a mass we are keeping, you could find it more inconvenient starting next week.

However, we stand to gain in many ways. Our frequent worshipers will see one another more regularly. We will add more warmth and spirit to each mass. Congregational singing will improve. The number of liturgical ministers will increase. We will give more dignity to this historic building and more robust glory to God. And if you accept the inconvenience in a spirit of patience and sacrifice, you will already be putting yourself in the proper frame of mind to participate in the mass. We call it the sacrifice of the mass not just because of the sacrifice of Christ, but because of the sacrifice we bring. Here we offer God the activities of the past week, in hopes that they have been pleasing.

In today's first reading from Ezekiel, God promises to tend his own sheep. Some of them "were scattered when it was cloudy and dark," but God will gather them back together into one fold. There they will find rest.

Starting next week we will gather the sheep scattered among six masses into four. It may take you a while to park and walk in here, but when you do, I hope you will find rest. Furthermore, I hope that you will seek out other scattered sheep and invite them to join you here. God promised Ezekiel, "The lost I will

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seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, shepherding them rightly.” On the last day, when Christ comes as judge to separate sheep from goats, he will place us on his right if we have done our part to help gather the straying members of the flock. Next week is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year. Let’s make it a new day for cathedral parish, a day when we invite others to join us. When they discover Christ in the people assembled here, they won’t care where they have to park.

In the aftermath, many of the goals I hoped to achieve were realized. We kept our core congregation, incredibly the weekly collection did not suffer, our ministers were no longer overworked every weekend, and the community started to feel closer. But people’s predictions about parking are still quite real. We are convinced that many people choose not to come because they have to leave their car so far away. We still have about 200 people at each mass.

These are examples of how at times I use the Sunday homily to handle a topic that pastors need to address. These are rare; my “generic homilies” are more frequent, and I love to preach the ones dealing with “current events.” But every so often we need to talk as a family, and for that I try to preach as a pastor.