

“This book grew from the author’s national empirical study of Catholic young people who said ‘Preaching Matters.’ How to make preaching better is about ‘connecting.’ Whether pew-sitter or preacher, read and share this book if you want to open the conversation about how important preaching is to the spiritual life of your community.”

—Fred A. Baumer, Adjunct Professor of Preaching
St. John’s School of Theology
Collegeville, Minnesota

“With her passionate desire to connect pulpits with pews, Bellinger opens the dialogue by interviewing countless parishioners young and old and by giving voice as well to Catholic priests and deacons. Doing so she provides the models and sets the pace for what needs to happen to bridge the gap between parishioner and preacher long before they enter their churches. Her academic research, together with her pastoral understanding, contributes well to her suggested directives inviting others to enter the dialogue that may produce Catholic preaching that is truly conversational.”

—Msgr. James T. Telthorst, DMin
Archdiocese of St. Louis

“Bellinger has travelled the nation trying to crack the ‘loud silence’ that exists between Catholic preachers and their parishioners, with a special attentiveness to youth. In this book, she reports her discoveries, but perhaps even more important, she shows us how to continue the conversation in our own communities. The discussion questions posed at the end of the book are—alone—worth the price of the whole. They promise to provoke meaningful conversations at the local level that could substantially bolster the quality of preaching in the U.S.”

—Ann M. Garrido, Associate Professor of Homiletics
Aquinas Institute of Theology

“Feel like there is a huge cavernous divide between the pulpit and the pew? If you want to close the gap, this is the book. It’s historical and contemporary, it includes qualitative and quantitative research, you hear what preachers want and pew sitters desire. Gather a group of parishioners, share the questions in the back, become a listener who gives feedback, and feel the love grow. This is adult faith formation at its finest.”

—Leland Nagel, Executive Director
National Conference for Catechetical Leadership

Connecting Pulpit and Pew

Breaking Open the Conversation
about Catholic Preaching

Karla J. Bellinger



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*For Sophie and Samadhi,
who have blessed my life with joy.*

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God is good. Sunshine and warmth and the out-of-doors; the sandbox, the ravine, and the baseball field—my earliest memories are brightly lit and physically vital. God was there. God is here. My thankfulness rises from that foundation.

My life is full of people. So many have given me a leg up in life: my parents who raised a family of thinkers, my family who have supported me, washed the laundry and ate my oatmeal, and so many friends who have prayed for me and this work and asked for an update of “How is it going?” Thank you all.

As I began to research listening to listeners, the name of Ronald J. Allen popped up consistently. Ron responded promptly and graciously to each of my early questions and continues to support and further my explorations. Katherine Schmitt shared her prepublished insights into the NCEA study “Effective Preaching: What Catholics Want.” During my doctoral coursework in preaching at Aquinas Institute, each of my professors furthered my understanding. Ann Garrido was the first to believe, letting me know that it was not crazy to be a mother of five, working full time, and pursuing a doctoral degree—if I was called to it, it would work out. At times I had reservations about that wisdom but, in the end, she was right. In his course *Studying Congregations: Methods and Research*, Fr. Mark A. Latcovich at St. Mary’s Seminary persistently asked: “How do you measure ‘connection’; how can you operationalize that?” My thinking sharpened as a result. William Baker of the University of Akron opened my eyes to see how psychological insights into listener receptivity could apply to preaching. Fr. Daniel Harris, CM, had a sense of humor and a meticulous eye that furthered the quality of my doctoral thesis, “Are you Talking to Me? A Study of Young Listeners’ Connection with Catholic Sunday Preaching.”

As he prepared to travel to Rome for the synod on evangelization in 2012, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz and I conversed about preaching, the

“new evangelization,” and youth. His encouragement has continued to spur me on.

In the spring of 2013, Bill Miller, Lee Nagel, and Joanie McKeown of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL) opened the doors for the “Catechesis in Preaching Research Initiative.” Thus the voices of catechetical leaders joined with high school youth and clergy to enrich this study.

I am grateful to Bishop Richard G. Lennon for his episcopal blessing on me and my work. I am thankful for Mickey and Stephanie who have typed and transcribed. I am indebted to the theology teachers who made the paper survey happen as well as to so many who have shared with me their hopes and dreams for preaching. And though *Evangelii Gaudium* was released after I had submitted this manuscript for publication, I am grateful to Pope Francis for his fervor for the renewal of preaching. May this book further that vision through the words that follow.

PART ONE

The Search for Connection

When you click on your internet start page, a little circle goes round and round and round. The word “Connecting . . .,” pops up next to the revolving circle. Suddenly, you are “connected” to every corner of the world. Do you want to buy a car? Do you want to chat with your classmates? Do you want to check if it will be sunny today? You can find that out in an instant. Remotely, your doctor can diagnose your diseases by looking at your data on her desktop. A student can graduate from an online university without ever dumping her backpack onto a chair in a classroom. You can read this as an e-book without ever turning a page. Connect . . . connect . . . connect. . . You and I live in a connected world. It is no longer news. It is reality. “Connection” is our life.

By contrast, a Christian preacher physically walks to a pulpit or a stage. In a live performance, that man or woman speaks on behalf of God. The words cannot be edited or tidied up or rewound before they are sent out. There is no wireless router. There is no cell tower. There is no coaxial cable. How, then, is a preacher supposed to “connect”? Does the homiletical human bond matter anymore? Does preaching make a difference?

To Encounter God, Together

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

“You Impact My Life”

We will call him “Michael.”¹ When he took my survey, he was a freshman who went to a Catholic high school on the east coast of the United States. The question ran through my head as I flipped through his answers on my paper survey: does preaching make a difference to Michael? At fourteen, he has grown up in a generation accustomed to the internet. He likely listens to music through his ear buds. If he is like the others in his generation, dinner may be fast food in the car on the way to soccer practice or to his sister’s ballet practice. I came to the question on page four, “Describe what happens when a person connects with you.” He drew a picture of a cross surrounded by little hearts. Love and care, sharing and talking, praying and worshipping, hovered about that cross.



His other answers also exuded warmth. When asked to describe what it meant for a preacher to “connect” with him, Michael said, “For a preacher to connect with me, he must be able to see in the eyes of a kid/teenager. [D] is very good at communicating with kids as much as he does with adults.”

At some point in the past year, that preaching has changed Michael’s life. He penciled in what that transformation was like:

This experience was a huge impact on my life. I was so done with my terrifying experiences and going to Sunday homilies made me finally let it all go.

What experiences can be so “terrifying” so as to almost crush a fourteen-year-old boy? Escaping a house fire? Surviving a school shooting? Having recurring nightmares? He doesn’t say. But he does describe the cause of his cure: “going to Sunday homilies made me finally let it all go.”

My doctoral study of 561 young listeners asked why they came to Mass. Michael skipped past the boxes marked “To worship God,” “To be entertained,” “I was required to,” or “To be with family and friends.” He circled the last choice, “Other.” Then on the blank line, he filled in why he was there: “to connect with God.” His final comment, when asked to tell his preacher anything, was: “Thank you so much, [D]. You’ve been a great friend and [you] impact my life.”

In this high-tech world, preaching *can* make a difference. It did for Michael. It still does all over the world. In the brilliant sunshine of Nigeria, a woman’s heart burns within her as she nods and sways and claps her arthritic hands as her preacher shouts out the good news of Jesus Christ. In an ancient church on the edge of the square in a small town in France, a Brazilian priest tells a joke, and in their laughter, the choir senses how good it is to be together in that space. In the American South, a young woman slides across to her seat, wanting to share with her boyfriend the experience of the man whose sermons have changed her life. Every weekend, words of encouragement and challenge and exhortation pass from the mouths of preachers to people who seek to encounter the living God. The connection is real.

How does preaching make a difference? What makes a message connect so well that people want to shout it out to the whole world? And how can we help that to happen more often? I have been on a quest to find out.

The Search for Connection

In summer 2009, I visited my daughter in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. She did not have room for me in her small house, so for three weeks I slept outside on the ground in a pop-up tent. Since my body was still on Eastern Time, each day I awoke at four o’clock in the morning with nothing to do in the silence and the darkness

but to bask in the radiance of the stars and the moon—and pray. In the daytime, I was reading a popular book that asked, “What gives you life?” My internal response was what gives me life is connecting people with God—and its corollary, connecting people with each other. Where was I to go with that? I did not know.

I had begun my doctoral program in preaching with no clear idea of where it would lead. Yet I had felt strongly called to it, as a call that burned like an ember within me. What was I, a married Catholic laywoman and mother, going to do with a doctorate in preaching? The call was not logical. Yet there it was: an unmistakable, irrational, smoldering compunction which would not go away even as I tried to make it go away. The first year of studies had passed. I had walked in with my hands open. Now what?

One dark morning in the second week of prayer, I awoke from a sound sleep with a powerful awareness. I sensed a sorrow and a grief at the disconnection within the people of God. I do not know if God mourns, but in that flash of insight, my heart ached, not unlike a mother who weeps over the conflicts of her adult children. Jesus prayed that we all be one (John 17:21). Jesus prayed that we all be one, and we are not.

My first thought was, “What can *I* do about that?” Following closely was the enormity of the rift accompanied by a feeling of profound smallness as in “Who am I?” and “Whoa, wait a minute . . . , not me.” In that moment in the tent in the Sierras, I sensed a response: I was in a unique position. As a convert to Catholicism, a mother, and a theologically-trained laywoman, I could offer a fresh voice from the pew for those in the pulpit; I could speak with a voice of love and hands for healing; I could listen to both sides so that we better understand each other. Trusting in the Holy Spirit, I could do what I could do to connect the pulpit and the pew, so that together we could grow closer to God. The first Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs expresses that vision more eloquently: “Strengthen the bond of unity between the faithful and the pastors of your people . . . that in a world torn by strife your people may shine forth as a prophetic sign of unity and concord.” Fervor for this task took hold of me.

As a result, for the past four years, like a detective sifting through evidence, I have investigated “connection” in preaching. I have discussed this connection conundrum with anyone who would listen. I ran an empirical study of 561 Catholic high school students about how to connect with them in Sunday preaching.² I interviewed pastors. I surveyed catechetical leaders.³ I observed listeners. I dug through the research in listening and in preaching. What did I find out?

A Taste of Hope

I learned that preaching is a deeply sensitive subject. I discovered that listeners hunger for inspiration; they want to hear a message that gives them life. Clergy told me that they thirst for their people to encounter Jesus Christ; they want to inspire their people; they want to see the fruit of a Christian life. I also heard undercurrents of frustration on both sides. I came across stories of great goodness, deep hurt, and rich transformation. Most of all, I discovered hope. It is out of that hope that I write this book.

There is good news: there are pockets where Catholic preaching is done well. Where there are difficulties, they are usually readily identifiable. There are people of good intent on both sides. There are concrete ways to strengthen what we have.

The encounter of preaching is complex. The improvement of preaching is challenging. Strengthening listeners to understand theological talk is an uphill climb. Complex, challenging, and an uphill climb, yes, but the task before us is not insurmountable. Difficult? Perhaps. Impossible? No. If we have the determination and the courage to take it on, we can pull together to create a culture of listening.

Change can happen. It begins with vision. We pray to the Holy Spirit to renew the church. What is our role in bringing about that renewal? Where do we concentrate our energies to create the most impact? To renew the church, we model after what we know of Jesus to strengthen our preaching. To revitalize our preaching, we open the conversation about the Sunday homily. To launch that interaction, we need a tool to help us to move forward together. The objective of this book is to be a springboard for that discussion.

This book also introduces fresh voices to the conversation in preaching: Young people tell us how to connect with them. Pastors talk of their experience of preaching. Lay leaders offer their insights. Listeners cry out for a gospel message that connects them, inspires them, and spurs them to spread the good news to the world in which they live. These are folks that the homiletics world has not heard from before.

At the same time, this book is not just written for students and professors in seminaries. This conversation is for anybody and for everybody—for those who care that the message of the gospel transforms us; for those who care that the grieving are comforted; for those who care that the light of Christ is brightly burning in a “whatever” age. The responsibility for an encounter with the God of love through the medium of preaching is not just borne by the one who delivers the message. Those who listen are also accountable.⁴ As I was surrounded by charts and interview transcripts and

correlations and graphs of responses, one piece of evidence stood out like a trumpet blast from a mountaintop. I call it “The Loud Silence.”

The Loud Silence

Father [A] and I had talked for about an hour. We had squeezed our interview between the 7 a.m. Mass and his morning hospital visits. He grabbed his jacket and his granola bar and was dashing for the door when he turned and stopped. “Good luck,” he said. “These are important questions [about preaching and connection].” He held the door open. “And,” he looked at me with a puzzled look, “we never talk about it.”

A fifteen-year-old boy in my survey wrote to his preacher: “Thank you, Father, for how you guide me to be more faith-filled. I like how you are comforting and always there to help. I can’t thank you enough.” He described how he had learned to pray as a result of his priest’s preaching. As I read his comments, I thought to myself, “This is good stuff!” I flipped to an earlier page, to the question, “How often in fifty-two weeks do you give your preacher feedback (other than ‘Good homily, Father’)?” He had circled “Zero.” The priest who had so impacted the lad’s life had never heard a word about it.

As the consultant, I sat at the center of the U-shaped table in the meeting room. The leadership team had exuded about the people who chose to come to this parish in spite of having many other local options. I asked, “If you are looking to build upon your strengths, what is it that brings people to this particular place?” They radiated about the reverence of their liturgies, and then they were silent for a moment. “I think it’s the preaching,” said the man on my left in the green polo shirt. The others silently nodded. I turned to the elderly pastor who had founded the parish forty years earlier. “Father [B], do you get feedback on your preaching?” I asked. “No,” he murmured and shook his head, “I never hear anything.”

Before doing my research, I had always assumed that the scuttlebutt about preaching somehow found its way to the pulpit. Surely somebody talked to “them” about it. That is not necessarily the case. Though comments can travel at lightning speed across the parking lot and through cyberspace, few parishioners sit down over a cup of coffee with their homilist and discuss ways that he (or she, in the Protestant world) could help them to grow closer to God through the preaching. What has surprised me, as I have moved from swaying babies in the pew to sharing homiletical method with the theologically educated, is how much clergy *do not* hear these kinds of comments. In a focus group, I asked, “What

kind of conversation about preaching is going on within the parishes?" One catechetical leader said, "There's no conversation. It's the elephant in the room. Everyone knows it's a big problem, but no one is willing to talk about it."

Clergy tell me they don't talk much about preaching among themselves either. It would be rare for a homilist to approach a group of parishioners to ask, "How can I help you to understand better?" or "How could my message lift you up? What would help to strengthen your commitment to your faith?" or "What most resonates for you (or doesn't) in my preaching?" This is not just a Catholic phenomenon. Lori Carrell, in *The Great American Sermon Survey*, found that only 9 percent of both Protestant and Catholic clergy got constructive feedback about their preaching (other than the random comment during the handshake at the door).⁵

Every tale worth telling contains a struggle. The "villain" in the "preaching story" is "The Loud Silence." There is little interaction. Collaboration is virtually nonexistent. There is almost no research.⁶ How are we to know what is actually happening? We can suppose. We can make assumptions. Each person will work out of his or her experience. Preaching books are almost all written by those who preach. They may make "sender-side" assumptions about effectiveness (and listeners) which may or may not hold. People who listen may make "receiver-side" presumptions about preaching (and preachers) which may or may not be valid. We could each be mistaken.

There is much that we do not see and even more that we do not know.

The Loud Silence

Comments travel across the parking lot at lightning speed.

"Father [B], do you get feedback on your preaching?" I asked.

"No," he murmured and shook his head.

"I never hear anything."

There is much conversation. There is little interaction.

There is much presumption about what the "other" is thinking.

There is almost no research.

We are not talking about preaching, together.

That is the Loud Silence.

The Search for Understanding

Stories abound. Studies do not. As a result, we really don't know how we are doing. I once ate lunch with a woman who had taught voice lessons for forty years. She described the throatiness in the voice of her twenty-eight-year-old ministry intern and how she could so easily

have helped him to fix it. “Did you ever tell him?” I asked. “Oh, no,” she shook her head, “I couldn’t do that.”

How much good do we miss if we do not help each other? How much could we learn if pulpit spoke with pew, young conversed with old, different cultures opened up to each other? Jesus prayed that we all be one. Why? Because “as one,” we are stronger together than we are alone. We have a lot of growing to do to meet Jesus’ goal. The discussion about preaching already occurs in the pews. How do we begin to talk about it as a community—pulpit and pew together?

The conversation about preaching has the characteristics of what the Harvard Negotiation Project calls “a difficult conversation”: It is a tough subject to talk about; we tend to avoid it; within it are issues of identity and deep feelings; objectivity is challenging. As in any thorny conversation, whether in a family or a parish, the temptation is to lob a hand grenade of feelings and then run away. That blast of opinion often does not bear positive fruit. Should we leave the topic alone because it is so sensitive? In the short run, will opening the discussion make things worse? In the long run, could a positive interchange about preaching outweigh the initial difficulties of opening this conversation?⁷

When we consider how to fulfill the mission of preaching, often we jump to ask: “What should we *do*? In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict XVI said, “the quality of homilies needs to be improved.”⁸ What approaches could we implement? What seminary courses should we change? What workshops should we design?” Unfortunately, because of the “Loud Silence,” our efforts would continue to be built upon our previously held presumptions. We could waste money and busy people’s valuable time. At this point in history, there is much that we do not know. There is also much that we are not talking about.

At this point in history, there is much that we do not know.

There is also much that we are not talking about.

The Harvard negotiators offer an alternate initial step in a difficult conversation: first create a “learning stance.” Before

we jump into the “action” questions of “What should we *do*?” we inquire, “What do we not know?” and “What do we need to understand?” This paints a broader picture of the current situation. Then the action plans that we create will correspond to the actual needs of those involved.

This book begins that search for understanding. It is only a beginning. Unless we formulate our questions carefully, we will not get the answers

we need. So this book asks key questions: Why does Sunday preaching matter and to whom? How can we connect the gospel message with our young people? Why is Catholic preaching such an uphill climb? What are the struggles of clergy-on-the-ground in preaching? What is going on in the listener's head during the Sunday homily? And finally, what can each

The goal of this book is to break open the conversation in Catholic preaching as you would break open the Scriptures—with reverence, with love, with the will for the long-term good of the other.

of us do to help “connection” in preaching become more common?

The U.S. Catholic bishops published a recent preaching statement, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*. Building upon the teach-

ings of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and Benedict XVI's *Verbum Domini*, the bishops suggest that the purpose of preaching is to bring people into an encounter with God as an integral element within the overall purpose of the liturgy: “One of the most important teachings of Vatican II in regard to preaching is the insistence that the homily is an integral part of the Eucharist itself (SC 31). As part of the entire liturgical act, the homily is meant to set hearts on fire with praise and thanksgiving. It is to be a feature of the intense and privileged encounter with Jesus Christ that takes place in the liturgy.”⁹

To foster an encounter with God is a lofty goal for a seven-minute talk at a Sunday liturgy. Thus this book also asks, “How do we implement the bishops' goal?” and “What are the complexities that surround the homiletic encounter?” At this pivotal point in Catholic preaching, a common effort from both clergy and laity is needed to determine how to bring that encounter about. We have to talk. The desired fruit of the conversation is that preaching itself would become an act of love within a community of caring. Harris says that “the true test of good preaching is the effect it produces in the lives of believers.”¹⁰ When our people have encountered God through the Sunday preaching as an interchange of love, this will bear fruit and fire the faithful to glorify the Lord by their lives.

How do we open the conversation so as to help our people toward encounter? The final chapters will focus on how to build a culture of listening; how to give and take feedback; how to measure the impact of preaching; and how to set attainable goals for improvement.

This is a communal effort. Read this book by yourself if you must. Then share it with a clergy study group, a parish discussion group, or an adult faith formation group. Questions are at the end of each chapter to

encourage discussion. Use these words as a launch pad. Then begin to talk and listen to each other.

We are not done learning. There is much research still to be done. The doctoral thesis that undergirds this book was only a preliminary study that looked at how to connect with high school youth in Roman Catholic Sunday homilies in the United States.¹¹ Yet breaking open this conversation involves all age groups and other nations and can be applied to the Protestant and Orthodox preaching worlds as well.¹²

The encounter with God through Sunday preaching: it matters. One boy got over his nightmares. A parish in Ohio was a magnet for folks from the surrounding area. A lad of fifteen learned how to pray. If it can happen in these situations, it can happen for you. The human touch of preaching can make a difference.

This book is a springboard for discussion, yes, but the focused effort is yours. You are the one who cares that the light of the gospel burns brightly in the particular world in which you live. Each parish or congregation is unique in its needs. Whether you are a sender or a receiver of preaching; whether you are Protestant or Catholic or Orthodox; whether you are conservative, middle-of-the-road, or progressive; whether you are young or you are old, I say to you: gather with your people to carefully break open this conversation in your place and in your time. Speak to each other with care, with forgiveness, with reverence. Take the long-term approach of “Here’s where we are” and “Here’s where we would like to be.” As one young priest described it, “This is a culture change. Cultural changes are hard.” Be sensitive to feelings and be gentle with identities, but take one small step and get started. Then let me know how it goes. Shall we begin?

Workshop in Your Pocket

- “Connection” is everywhere.
- Preaching can make a difference.
- The situation that surrounds preaching is complex.
- We are not studying it empirically, and we are not talking about it together.
- When there is no conversation, there is only presumption.
- Assumptions can be wrong.
- How much good we miss when we do not help each other.
- The discussion of preaching fits the criteria of a “difficult conversation.”
- Let us look at this together.