

“There is no such thing as ‘diaconal’ preaching, as distinct from presbyteral or lay preaching. But, as Cormier notes, there is a way in which the distinct experiences of the deacon—as a man of service among the marginalized—should shape his preaching. Using an abundance of clear and simple examples, mostly drawn from his own preaching, Cormier illuminates that way. Cormier shows how the deacon can ‘pass his life through the fire of thought’ in order to speak a relevant word for ordinary folk struggling to make sense of the Gospel in daily life.”

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

“What is abundantly clear in *The Deacon’s Ministry of the Word* is that its author, Jay Cormier, not only understands the art of communication but is a gifted communicator. With clarity and conciseness, with bundles of examples and engaging images, he lays out a vision of preaching that is spot on target. What a gift to the preaching community.”

—Robert F. Morneau  
Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of Green Bay  
Pastor of Resurrection Parish



# The Deacon's Ministry of the Word

*Jay Cormier*



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Cormier, Jay, author.

Title: The deacon’s ministry of the word / by Jay Cormier.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2016. | Series: The deacon’s ministry

Identifiers: LCCN 2016007174 (print) | LCCN 2016023780 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814648223 (pbk.) | ISBN 9780814648476 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Preaching. | Deacons.

Classification: LCC BV4211.3 .C67 2016 (print) | LCC BV4211.3 (ebook) | DDC 251—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016007174>

*For Ann*



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## Preface

When first presented with the idea of writing this book, I must confess a certain reluctance in taking it on.

A book for deacons on preaching?

Effective preaching is the result of the same reflection, planning, and plain hard work whether the homilist is a bishop, priest, or deacon. There is no such thing as “priest preaching” and “deacon preaching”—or even “lay preaching.” The homily is either inspiring or vacuous; it either reveals the love of God in our midst or befuddles or bores its hearers; it either works or it doesn’t. I was skeptical of trying to write a book on preaching designed specifically for deacons.

But after many years of teaching speech communications and giving workshops on preaching (as well as from my own work as a deacon), I’ve come to realize that ministers come to homiletics from very different backgrounds, experiences, and expectations. So, despite my initial reluctance, I was pushed on by the good folk at Liturgical Press, and so you now hold this book in your hands.

As advertised and titled, this book primarily has the deacon in mind, especially those who are taking their first tentative steps in preaching. But it is my hope that anyone who has the courage and generosity of heart and spirit to proclaim the Word of God will find some useful ideas and approaches in these pages. While the writing and delivery of the Sunday homily are front and center, the strategies here can be applied to any proclamation of the Word in any number of formats and venues (by ordained and non-ordained alike).

A word about the layout of this book: The material is presented in the form of eight chapters or “essays.” While there is a certain logic to the order in which they appear in the book, the essays do not have

to be read in sequence. Readers may find a particular essay especially helpful as they develop their own strengths or are working on a particular skill at a given time. Each chapter/essay has been written to stand alone; to that end, some ideas are repeated from chapter to chapter for context and continuity.

Each chapter ends with a section titled *Communicare* (pronounced co-mune-i-KAH-ray), the Latin word that is the root of *communications*: “to make common.” These sections offer practical suggestions and exercises for incorporating the ideas of that essay into your own preaching ministry.

This book is the latest of several projects I have been privileged to be a part of for Liturgical Press. My thanks to Barry Hudock and the skilled and conscientious editors in Collegeville for the invitation to contribute to this series of resources for deacons and for their encouragement and guidance in writing this book. I am grateful, as well, to my colleagues at Saint Anselm College—a special word of thanks to Dr. Sherry Shepler, coordinator of the college’s Communications Studies program, who generously provided her counsel along the way.

The material here has been honed over the years in courses and workshops I have led for priests, deacons, and ministers, both in my home Diocese of Manchester, New Hampshire, and around the country. I am grateful to all who participated in those sessions—I assure you all that I learned as much from you as you did from me, and this book reflects a great deal of what you taught me.

The homilies appearing in the book are mostly from sermons I have preached at Saints Mary and Joseph Parish in Salem, New Hampshire, where I serve as deacon. My thanks to Rev. John Michalowski, SJ, to the Jesuit priests who serve at our parish, and to our parish community for their encouragement and counsel.

Two of the essays here began life as contributions to other publications. The chapter on preaching “visually” first appeared in *Worship* (“Preaching Visually: Helping Your Community ‘See’ God in Their Midst,” September 2012, vol. 86, no. 5). I will be forever grateful to the late Rev. R. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB, for shepherding the original piece, which has been updated for this book.

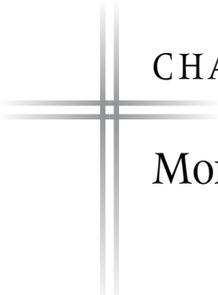
The final chapter on the spirituality of the preacher is an expanded version of an essay that was published in the journal *Church*, published by the National Pastoral Life Center (“Emerson’s Portrait of the Preacher,” Summer 2007, vol. 23, no. 2). The work of the late Msgr. Philip Murnion

was a prophetic gift to the American church; both he and the center he founded are sorely missed.

And my thanks, as always, to my most critical editor, my best friend, my beloved spouse, Ann. Her wisdom and skill made this manuscript a better book; her compassion and care make its author a better person.

May the pages that follow serve as a useful tool to you in your call to proclaim God's word of reconciling love in your midst.





## CHAPTER 1

### Morning Drive

It's 7:45 on a weekday morning. Thousands of cars, buses, and trains stream into the city of Boston from the Massachusetts North Shore, the Cape, and Southern New Hampshire, while another endless queue of vehicles heads to the technology companies along Route 128 that loops around the city to the north and west.

The commuters riding in all of these cars and buses and trains are plugged into any number of internet sites and radio stations. One of the most listened-to is Boston's all-news station, with its format of information, weather, and those all-important traffic reports.

On this particular morning, between the business news headlines and a report on another fender bender on a major thoroughfare, listeners to the all-news station hear this simple message, spoken by a warm, friendly female voice:

My ear surgeon at Mass. Eye and Ear used a new technique  
to restore Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto*.

He's also done wonders for the goldfinches in my backyard,  
and, using his skill and experience,  
he gave me back my husband's bad jokes.

The next hour, listeners heard the following, voiced by a middle-aged husband:

My eye surgeon at Mass. Eye and Ear  
completely restored my wife's beautiful smile.

## 2 *The Deacon's Ministry of the Word*

He also corrected our Friday nights  
with old black-and-white movies  
and gave me back the sunrise over Boston Harbor.

Two other spots were part of this radio campaign: one featured a mom telling the story of her daughter, a ballet student:

The pediatric specialists at Mass. Eye and Ear  
worked wonders for our daughter's recurring ear infection.  
They also restored her ballet rehearsals on Tuesday nights  
and gave her back her pink tutu she never wants to take off.

And, in the fourth spot, a little girl tells what the hospital did for her beloved grandmother:

The really good doctors at Mass. Eye and Ear helped my  
grandmother  
with the princesses and dragons in my storybook.  
They did something to fix her eyes  
so she could come visit us more often and read my favorite stories.

Mass. Eye and Ear is one of Boston's many world-class hospitals. The hospital recently expanded its number of clinics in the suburbs north and west of the city. As part of its communications campaign to increase its presence in the Boston area, Mass. Eye and Ear designed these commercials that aired on several Boston radio stations.

### **Plugging In**

The design, writing, and execution of these radio commercials do all the right things in terms of smart, effective communications strategizing.

First, the hospital focused on *a single, clear message*: Mass. Eye and Ear can help restore the quality of life of anyone experiencing vision and hearing problems. The point is not to sing the praises of the hospital; the expertise of the doctors, though impressive, and the state-of-the-art technology of the facility are not what matters to the listener. What matters is what that expertise and technology can do for *you*, how Mass. Eye and Ear can improve and enhance the quality of *your* life: enabling you to hear again the beauty of Mozart and the joy of

finches; correcting your clarity of vision to behold the beauty of your spouse's smile, your favorite movies, and a sunrise over the ocean; restoring your child's sense of balance so that she can dance again; improving your eyesight to enjoy those special moments of reading to your grandchild.

In other words, these four ads are *not* about Mass. Eye and Ear. They're about *you*.

And there are no secondary "messages" that distract from that primary message—nothing about the credentials of the hospital, no appeals to donate to the hospital foundation. True, focusing on one principal idea is also dictated by the fact that each ad is only thirty seconds in length. But the singular focus—how Mass. Eye and Ear can matter to *you*—makes the ads effective.

The hospital *engages the audience* in the spots by using images and language that listeners recognize from their own experience. The ads "speak" to their intended audience in words and ideas that they know and can comprehend, that evoke meaning to them, that matter to them. No ponderous medical jargon or forbidding technological wizardry is heard in these short messages. The writers of these commercials understand what the hospital services can mean to the everyday lives of patients—and subtly challenge them to move beyond their fears of doctors and hospitals in order to see the good that can result. The listeners *are* the wife, the husband, the mom, and the granddaughter telling their stories here. Their stories *are* the listeners' stories.

Note, too, that these ads are addressed to a specific, well-defined audience: parents of young children and middle-aged and late-middle-aged adults who are concerned about issues of health and quality of life. The ads' creators know when and how to reach these folks: Mass. Eye and Ear bought time on a radio station that their intended audience listens to—the all-news station. The ads' creators also realize that, although all-news stations may have smaller audience numbers than most music stations, listeners are actively engaged in listening to news programming: they're paying far more attention to what is being said on all-news stations than listeners to other radio formats. And they also bought time when that audience would most likely be listening: morning "drive time" when they're on their way to work.

The ads *engender the audience's trust*. Mass. Eye and Ear is one of many excellent hospitals in the northeast; its reputation is sterling. But it

can also be daunting for many people who have never been seriously ill or who only know Mass. Eye and Ear as one of those mammoth medical complexes in downtown Boston. So the hospital has to present itself as *approachable*. The voices in these commercials do that.

The “first” voice in each of the four commercials is the parent, the spouse, the granddaughter, and the woman who clearly appreciates life. Listeners “trust” these voices and come to like them—because these are the audience’s voices, telling the audience’s stories. They speak of hope and possibility beyond whatever medical issues the listener might be facing.

A second “voice” concludes each commercial: a professional announcer’s voice that possesses an appealing combination of warmth and authority. This voice invites listeners:

When hearing problems affect the way you experience life,  
experience the difference Mass. Eye and Ear can make.  
We offer a full range of truly world-class ear, eye, nose, face, and  
throat services  
at more than a dozen locations in the Boston area  
to help you experience life.  
Visit [MassEyeandEar.org](http://MassEyeandEar.org) for more information.

[Or:]

Vision problems don’t affect your eyes;  
they keep you from experiencing other parts of life that are  
important.  
At Mass. Eye and Ear,  
we offer a full range of truly world-class ear, eye, nose, face, and  
throat services  
at more than a dozen locations in the Boston area  
to help you experience life.  
Visit [MassEyeandEar.org](http://MassEyeandEar.org) for more information.<sup>1</sup>

The tone and content of the four spots establish Mass. Eye and Ear as more than an excellent medical facility: they make its services a real possibility for listeners to consider, a place that no longer seems distant or remote but welcoming and approachable.

Finally, each of the Mass. Eye and Ear spots invites *a clear and specific response from the listener*. Humans communicate in order to affect an-

other human being's behavior. We reach out to another person in words and pictures in order to get that other human being to *do* something: to buy, to support, to attend. Humans communicate in order to warn, to entice, to counsel, to reach agreement.

An effective message makes clear how the audience should respond—and how that response is in their best interests. Better, still, if the response sought is as easy as possible. The announcer's closing line in each of the four ads does exactly that: after encouraging listeners to imagine how the services of Mass. Eye and Ear might enhance the quality of their lives, the ads direct them to visit the hospital's (easy-to-remember) website for more information on how they can begin to realize those possibilities.

Communications—whether a radio commercial, a classroom lecture, a sales presentation, or a news report from the scene of some catastrophic event—is a *system*. Messages are successfully sent because the various elements in the system work together to elicit the intended response and action. The Mass. Eye and Ear radio commercials mirror that model:

- a clear, focused, believable message is sent to a specific target audience, appealing to their interests, needs, and problems;
- the message is articulated in a language (or “code”)—pictures, stories, music—that the audience will understand and respond to, and “transmitted” through a “channel” that this particular audience is plugged into and engaged with;
- the sender of the message presents himself or herself as worthy of trust: that he or she is empathetic, understanding, approachable, and *likable*; and
- the audience is made to understand how responding to the message is in their best interests.

### ***Communicare***

The same factors and realities that the writers and producers of the Mass. Eye and Ear radio commercials considered when they developed these spots are the same factors and realities that should be considered by any individual or group seeking to communicate a message that will be embraced by an intended audience.

In proclaiming the Word of God in whatever place or time, preachers and teachers are engaged, first, in a system of communications. The

word *communications* comes from the Latin word *communicare* (pronounced co-mune-i-KAH-ray)—to “make common.” It comes from the same root as another important word in our tradition: *communion*.

This book is about the deacon’s ministry of proclaiming the Word of God. In the deacon’s ministry, such proclamation takes place in a number of venues: the church, the classroom, the living room, sometimes even the local tavern. The deacon speaks that Word to the many different constituencies that make up a parish—parents, children, teenagers, young singles, seniors—and different groups with a myriad of special interests and concerns: baptismal catechesis for parents, gospel exegesis to RCIA groups, marriage preparation for engaged couples, reports to finance committees. As a minister of the Word, the deacon is sometimes the homilist, but different needs and times in every parish call the deacon to serve as the teacher, the guide, the counselor, the arbiter, the advocate. And most deacons have been called upon to speak God’s Word in places and circumstances they never imagined.

The pages that follow focus on what can best be described as *strategizing* the proclamation of God’s Word: planning, designing, and executing that proclamation before a given audience, in a particular setting, under a unique set of circumstances. As expected, a principal focus here will be the Sunday homily, the liturgical setting where deacons are most often called upon to proclaim the Word. But the communications strategies discussed here can be employed by deacons (and priests and laity as well) in any number of ministerial situations in which they help an individual or group encounter the Word of God: from a retreat day for dads in the parish to a budget presentation to the parish council.

The same intellectual and creative process that Mass. Eye and Ear employed to develop its radio ads to increase visibility in their community are the same strategies that deacons can employ in the Sunday homily or in any presentation. Each strategy will be developed in the essays that make up this book, but let’s begin with a quick overview of the strategies employed so effectively by Mass. Eye and Ear:

### ***Focus on One Central Point***

Every effective presentation has a focal point: a single, clear idea that the presenter wants the audience to “get.” It may be a particular response or action the presenter wants the audience to do; it may be to help the audience understand a situation in a new way; it may be

to obtain the audience's assent or approval for the first step in a complex process or on-going project.

As noted above, every communication seeks to affect another person's behavior:

"Be careful of the wet paint."

"Use the right sunscreen before going outside."

"You'll grow more beautiful, healthier plants if you use this fertilizer."

"Your support will help us find a cure."

"Begin by inserting piece A into slot B."

"God loves you even though you're not too crazy about yourself at the moment."

So what's the one idea you want your audience to take away from this Sunday's gospel? What's the most important concept you need to make the committee understand as they move forward? What single notion do you want the retreatants to take home with them from your conference?

The Mass. Eye and Ear radio spots focused on how the hospital's services could make better the everyday lives of the hearers of the message. The effective proclamation of God's Word in whatever format is similarly centered on a single idea.

### ***Engage the Audience***

"Engaging" the audience is not about entertaining them.

To engage the audience is to make them see how what you are talking about *matters* to them. Mass. Eye and Ear made listeners understand how their facility and the care it provides can and should *matter* to them.

What matters to us engages us. What we perceive as important, what we understand as in our interests, what we see as a clear benefit to us doesn't bore us.

So engaging the audience begins in the reality and experience of those you are talking with.

### ***Engender Trust***

Why should the community listen to *you*? Can you speak with credibility about this subject? Do you understand where the audience is coming from and why they think as they do regarding this issue—why

they are predisposed to your position and why they might be hostile? Are you perceived as competent, approachable, *likable*?

To put it more bluntly: Do you *walk the talk*?

Prayer is central here—spending time quietly discerning what God is calling you to do as a deacon as you struggle every day to fulfill your ordination call to be a “herald” of the Gospel of Christ: “Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.”

Trust begins with humility: humility that is centered in respect for those served. Such humility is communicated principally in the tone and attitude, the sincerity and empathy, that listeners perceive in the preacher/teacher.

### ***Inspire Action and Change***

There is no greater failure in communications than an audience saying at the end of a presentation, *What was that about?*

The goal of communications is action. What do you want the person or persons you are engaging to *do*? What response do you want from them? Sometimes the response you seek may be very specific and clear: support my cause, vote for my candidate, buy my product. Other times, an immediate reaction may be sought: to laugh, to cry, to applaud (when the expectation of the presentation is strictly to entertain). And sometimes the communicator has a more ambitious goal: to change the audience’s thinking about something in order to respond differently to a set of circumstances.

Each of these strategies will be explored in greater depth in the essays and examples to follow.

### ***Pulpit Notes #1: A First Communion Homily***

(Throughout the text, this book will include examples from homilies and presentations that illustrate the issues and challenges being discussed. A note about the layout of these homilies: These texts are purposely broken down into “sense lines.” Each line of text concludes at a natural “break” or pause point—the end of a sentence or clause, the conclusion of an idea, a place where the speaker would naturally stop or take a break [a similar layout is used in the current Lectionary]. This layout of the text makes it much easier to “hear” the text as you are writing it and to “speak” the text when you are preaching. As you rehearse with this layout, you come to “feel” the rhythm of the piece

and “hear” immediately what words need to be emphasized and grouped together. Practicing and working with text laid out this way helps you come to know the homily—and to make the words yours.)

The following two homilies respond to specific communications challenges.

This first homily was preached at a First Communion liturgy. The practice at this particular parish is having groups of eight to ten second-graders make their First Communion at one of the parish’s weekend Masses. Each student is seated with his or her family, with the First Communicant seated by the aisle.

The homilist realizes the uniqueness of this audience and the circumstances. What he wants to get across to the boys and girls is that to receive this bread is to receive the very love of Jesus. So he skips the pulpit and goes down to the center aisle where the students are seated and speaks directly to them. His full attention is on the children, not the adult members of the congregation.

He begins with a story about the hat he is holding:

I want to tell you about this cap.  
My nephew and godson Ben bought this for me  
when he was just a little older than you are.

It was Christmastime,  
and this particular Christmas,  
Ben wanted not only to get presents  
but he wanted to give them, as well.  
So he saved his allowance  
and did extra work to earn money to buy presents.

On Christmas morning, there was a box for me from Ben.  
And inside the box was this New England Patriots hat.  
Ben knew that I’m a big Patriots fan.

I’ve gotten a lot of great Christmas presents in my life—  
but this cap is one of the best.  
Why? It’s just a cap.  
But I know the hard work and sacrifice that went into buying this cap for me.

When I wear this cap,  
most people see just a neat Patriots cap.

But for me, it's a lot more than that.  
Every time I wear it,  
I feel Ben's love for me  
and remember all he did to get it for me.

It's the same with this piece of bread.

*[The homilist holds up an unconsecrated Communion wafer.]*

To most people, it looks like just a flat, not-terribly-tasty piece of bread.  
But we know it's more than that.

We know what Jesus did to give us this bread:

how he lived for us and died for us and rose from the dead for us.

And this bread is what he gave us to remember him by.

This is how he wanted us to remember him and be a part of our lives.

And so, when Father John asks God to send his Spirit down upon this bread,  
this bread *becomes* Jesus:

it *becomes* his love and care for us.

Just like that Patriots hat is, for me, the love of my nephew Ben,  
this bread and wine is, for you and me, the love of Jesus.

So why should this bread matter to these kids? The homilist continues:

But the best thing of all is this:

We can become what we receive.

*We can become what we receive.*

You can *become* the love you receive in Holy Communion.

When you do something good for someone else,

you've become what you've received in Holy Communion.

When you help Mom and Dad,

when you're kind to your brothers and sisters,

when you give your time to someone who needs you,

when you do the best you can,

you've *become* what you've received:

you've become the love of Jesus that you've received in Holy Communion.

So this is a big day. It's a happy day.

We all hope that this First Communion is the first of many, many times

you come to receive Jesus in Communion.

And our best wish for you is this:

that you may become what you receive here;

that you may become the love and care of Jesus himself . . .

Congratulations—and welcome to Jesus' table . . .

The homilist knows his audience. He realizes the limits of their comprehension (and attention span) and the limits of their experience. There is no talk about transubstantiation or *epiclesis* this morning. The *one* point he wants to make: in receiving this bread, we receive Jesus—and the love of Jesus that we receive we can also become.

The story about the football cap engages the second-graders because it is something they can see and understand on several levels: they have all received gifts like that themselves, and maybe they've even given gifts like that. At this stage of their young lives, they are beginning to appreciate the value and meaning of signs in their lives: things that mean more than just what they are. While the concept of the Eucharist as mystery may still be beyond their grasp, they know that this "bread" is indeed special. The homilist understands the limits of their understanding and works within those limits.

In making the connections between the Eucharist (what we receive) and the good that we do in our everyday lives (what we become), the homilist makes the homily *matter* to these children. He shows them that this altar table is an extension of their family table, that the love they receive here is part of the love they give and receive every day of their lives.

Simple, to-the-point—and sound—sacramental theology.

### ***Pulpit Notes #2: Funeral Homily for Fred the Printer***

Preaching at funerals is a challenge for every homilist. Often funeral homilies have to be written with very little lead time—and, more and more often, priests and deacons are called to preside at funerals for souls with little or no connection with the parish.

A funeral homily is not intended to serve as a eulogy. It is not a tribute or memorial to the deceased, but, like any good homily, it is the proclamation of the Word of God: the grace and hope of the resurrection that is the inheritance of all who are baptized in Christ.

That said, it is important to realize that the homily is addressed to a grieving community, a circle of family and friends who are saying good-bye to a loved one. An important part of the ministry of such a proclamation is helping this community of mourners behold the presence of God in this life that ends and begins.

The following homily was preached at the funeral for Fred, a printer respected throughout the community. The homilist is a deacon who knew Fred from his own work in publishing.

He begins by inviting family and friends to see Fred and his work in a new and different light:

I suspect that, if he had lived a few hundred years later,  
Saint Paul would have been a printer.  
As it was, Paul was a craftsman.  
He made his living as a tentmaker.  
He was skilled in working with leather, cloth, and animal skins.  
But in one of his letters to the church he founded in Corinth,  
Paul writes this to the Christians there:  
"You are a letter of Christ,  
a letter not written in ink but of the Spirit of God,  
letters not etched on tablets of stone  
but letters written on tablets of heart and flesh."

*(see 2 Corinthians 3:2-3)*

The perfect image for this day when we commend Fred to God.

One of the best parts of the work I do has been working with printers—  
especially master printers who know what it's like to be up to their elbows  
in gooeey ink,  
printers who know the precision required to work with small pieces of lead,  
printers who know the intricate gears of a Mergenthaler press.

There aren't many great printers left.

Fred was a great printer.

While most congregations would not understand many of the above references, this gathering of Fred's family and friends—including other printers in the area—knows exactly what the homilist is talking about.

You always sensed that Fred not only loved what he did  
but that he respected the art of printing  
and that he was grateful for what he had learned and the skill he was blessed  
with.

And Fred readily gave back what he received:  
Fred mentored many young journeymen printers over the years,  
who came to share both his respect for the craft and the excellence it  
required.

Fred's own standards transcended whatever the spec sheet said.  
Whatever his clients' expectations,  
Fred, first, had to satisfy himself.  
Fred was his own toughest client.  
And when it came to quality, Fred took no prisoners.

Fred also understood and respected the power of letters, of words, of color,  
of images.

Stop and think for a moment about the number of people  
who read something Fred printed over  
his more than half-century in the business—  
all the people who learned something,  
whose lives were made more productive,  
whose businesses prospered,  
whose dreams were realized,  
whose spirits were lifted and inspired,  
by some piece Fred printed.  
Quite a legacy, when you think about it.

But Fred's life was more than "letters of ink."  
Fred was about "letters of spirit" and "words written on the heart."  
His family was his joy.  
He took care of everyone.  
The same hard work and sense of gratitude that made Fred a great printer  
made him a great husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather,  
a great brother, cousin, and uncle,  
a great colleague, neighbor, and friend.

"Letters not of ink but of spirit,  
words not written on stone but on the heart."

Now the homilist comes to the point—why this particular moment *matters*:

When our Catholic tribe gathers for the funeral of one of our own, the funeral celebration focuses on two themes.

The first is thanksgiving.

We come here to give *thanks*.

The word *Eucharist*—

the sacrament we are about to celebrate around this table—

comes from the Greek word meaning *thanksgiving*.

Every time we celebrate the Mass, the Eucharist, we are giving thanks—

we thank God for the gift of life itself;

we thank God for the gift of Jesus,

the very Word of God made human for us,

who shows us how to create heaven in our own place and time;

we thank God for his Spirit of love that unites us

as family and friends and church

in compassion, forgiveness, justice, and peace.

And, at this altar today, we also give thanks for the gift of Fred.

In Fred's generosity of spirit and greatness of heart,

we came to know the love of God in our midst.

And the second theme of our gathering this morning is *commendation*.

At the end of this Mass, we will pray the Rite of Commendation.

We *commend* Fred to God:

commend, from the Latin word *commendare*, to entrust.

We *entrust* to God the soul of Fred, whom God lovingly takes into his care.

We give back to God what God has given us.

In entrusting Fred to God for eternity,

we place our faith and trust in God's continuing circle of life:

God creating us and re-creating us,

God sustaining us and redeeming us,

God lifting us up when we stumble,

God healing us when we break,

God calling us back to him again and again and again.

It is a circle formed of that mysterious, unfathomable, limitless, unconditional love of God—

and in that love, we are bound to God and to one another.  
We become sources of comfort and support for one another  
as we struggle to say our good-byes to Fred.

That circle of life was what Fred was all about:  
complete, unconditional love.  
Whenever you were in Fred's presence,  
he made sure you were part of that circle—  
whether you were in Fred's home, on his beloved boat, in his shop.

So, despite our grief, despite the big empty place that Fred so joyfully filled  
in our hearts,  
let us give thanks to God that Fred was a part of our lives;  
let us commend Fred to God with the prayer that we may embrace the spirit  
of God that drove Fred's life and work:  
to become ourselves what Fred was:  
"Letters not of ink but of spirit,  
words not written on stone but on the heart."

A good funeral homily cannot be a boilerplate. Every funeral homily (and wedding homily, as well) is a unique moment in an individual's life and in the history of a family. It *matters* to them in a very intimate, loving way. The challenge for the homilist is to reveal to them the presence of God's love in that moment.

### *Communicaré*

(Each chapter of this book will conclude with a section titled *Communicaré* [pronounced in Latin: co-mune-i-KAH-ray]. These end-of-the-chapter sections will include questions to consider as you go about the ministry of communicating the Word of God or offer practices and techniques to help improve your writing or delivery. These *Communicaré* sections will also challenge you to consider how you might deal with a particular pastoral situation that requires a more unique, "outside-the-box" strategy for articulating the Word of God. The hope is that these *Communicaré* questions may be a source of both effective strategizing and focused prayer in your ministry of proclamation.)

Take a look at this Sunday's gospel. What one single word strikes you as important on this particular day or time in your life or the life of

the parish? What one sentence or description resonates with you? What does this gospel inspire you to do or respond?

How do you imagine this gospel being heard by a young parent? A teenager or college student? A First Communion class? The resident of an assisted-living facility? How would you explain your “take” on this gospel to an unbeliever? How does this gospel make you uncomfortable?

Have any radio, television, or print ads struck you of late, that “worked” on you? Where do you see each of the four strategies discussed in this chapter: *focusing on one central idea, engaging your interest, winning your trust, compelling you to act?*