

# INTRODUCTION

## THE MESSAGE MATTERS



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . . And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

—JOHN 1:1–2, 14

Words. They're just words. That's all they are. And sometimes it can feel as if communicating—as a homilist during Mass, a youth minister at a lock-in, a religious educator during a parent's meeting, a business leader to colleagues, or a blogger blogging—is a big waste of time. If you have to make a presentation before your congregation, company, club, or class, it's hard to capture people's attention and harder still to keep it. Sometimes we communicators can feel jealous of chefs and carpenters, and medics and mechanics, who, at the end of the day, have created something they can see and enjoy. After all, we just have words. Like tiny bubbles, perhaps they shine a little in the light before disappearing into thin air, but all too often they seem to have no effect whatsoever.

Yet communication is fundamental to the human experience. It begins at birth. We struggle with it at first and eventually get better, sometimes quite good, but never as good as we want to be and often not as good as we could be.

The message matters, whether it's the infant's cry for food, a teacher's instruction to her students, or the deathbed wishes of a dying man. Even when it seems as if the message doesn't matter, when people are being silly or selfish, or maybe even hateful, they're trying to communicate something,

perhaps something profoundly important to them. Scripture says it best: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prv 18:21).

There is a kind of death that comes from negative or critical words. Recently we were undertaking an expansion of our parking capacity, to accommodate parish growth. We carefully pursued all the requisite approvals and permits with the county and the archdiocese, and we hosted neighborhood meetings. Then, just as the project got underway, one neighbor made a very emotional appeal to as wide an audience as she could reach, including some very influential leaders in the community. She was upset because the view of our property from her family room would be slightly altered. But small as it was, the proposed project led her to communicate in a way that only served to confuse a lot of people, leading to even further miscommunication all around. It felt very unfair to us, and it all happened just because of words.

Words can damage and destroy. They can hurt, and they can kill.

On the other hand, words can bring life and growth. We have been incredibly encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive reviews of our books *Rebuilt* and *Tools for Rebuilding*. Frankly, we were dreading what critics might write, given the strong stance both books take on several controversial topics. While there has certainly been some pushback, the vast majority of comments have been helpful and encouraging.

We have all had experiences wherein words have influenced an outcome, inspired a crowd, or won an election. Each of us has made different choices, set out on new routes, rethought our opinions, or perhaps even reinvented ourselves because of someone’s words.

**Tom:** Many of us have had a favorite teacher who keeps speaking into our lives long after we’ve left school. I remember one of my sophomore-year teachers describing the human person as a composite of the physical, intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional. He said that holiness was about continually growing in all of these aspects of our being. Years later, I still return to that definition and consistently use it to evaluate my life.

**Father Michael:** When it comes to money and giving, both of us have experienced changes of heart (and subsequently giving patterns) because of the preaching of pastors such as Rick Warren who helped us understand what the Bible teaches about money. After hearing God’s Word on the subject consistently preached by our evangelical friends, we began tithing and taking seriously the stewardship of our own finances. In turn, that message and those words have rebuilt the financial strength of our ministry as well as how we teach giving in our parish.

There are times when we want to give up but then someone’s words compel us to go on. We easily remember a remarkable evening attending a conference in Atlanta. We had traveled there amidst some difficult circumstances back home (*incredibly* difficult). We had almost canceled the trip, planned long before, but went anyway, almost as an escape from our troubles. As the conference started, an announcement was made that the promised keynote speaker would not be speaking, and a substitute would be talking on a completely different topic. We’ll never forget the message we heard that night from Dr. Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta. To our astonishment, he described a situation amazingly like our own and, step by step, he walked us through what he did in that circumstance. He recounted his own struggles, how he persevered and stayed true to his calling. In an instant, we knew what we had to do. It changed our course. It changed our direction. It changed our lives. And that was all because of words.

The message matters. It can change hearts, and it can change worlds. It’s Winston Churchill in the dark days of World War II insisting to the people of Britain, “We will never give up!” It’s Mahatma Gandhi teaching colonial India, “You must be the change you seek in the world.” It’s St. John Paul II announcing to Communist Poland, “Be not afraid.” Just words—words that changed everything.

This is a book about words, but it is also about more than words. Our words are shaped by the context in which they are presented. The environments we create and the actions we take are also forms of communication. If we fail to pay attention to the setting in which people hear our words,

our message will fall on deaf ears. To communicate well—to successfully deliver our messages—our words must work together with body language, environments, and the whole of our lives.

Unfortunately, in our Catholic culture, communication has sometimes been neglected. At least that's our impression. Somewhere along the way, a lot of church people bought the lie that good preaching and teaching are not worth our energy and effort, that no one expects or needs them. As a result, we've all seen lay leaders and ordained alike who never really develop their ability or grow as speakers. We're not criticizing anyone because time and again we've been guilty as charged. Hard to believe, but honestly, for longer than we care to share, we just didn't consider our parish communication all that important.

Yet reason, revelation, and our own experience tell us otherwise. Words have power, and we know from scripture that God's Word has ultimate power. When *spoken*, his Word does not return to him void. That is also true for us: When we use God's Word and do it with skill and conviction and certainly with prayer—in a way that honors and serves the Word—it will not return to us empty or without effect.

The communication that is the fundamental work of our programs and parishes, schools and services can introduce us to God's will, God's plan, and God himself. It can inspire and equip us to conform our lives to Christ. In other words, our preaching and teaching are the primary ways in which the Church reaches the lost and grows disciples.

We respectively present this material in the context of, indeed at the dawn of, what St. John Paul II proclaimed as the "New Evangelization" or the reintroduction of the Gospel into our contemporary culture.

The New Evangelization, by the way, is profoundly countercultural. And you know what? Because it's countercultural, it's a war.

You know what else?

It's a war of words.

Part I

# ABOUT YOUR ROLE

# 1

## YOU ARE THE MESSAGE

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When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive [words of] wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit.

—1 CORINTHIANS 2:1–4

Not so long ago, we witnessed the colossal event of World Youth Day in Brazil, featuring the first foreign trip of Pope Francis. As with everything about this pope's approach, the event turned out to be unexpected and unparalleled. As he began his tour of Rio de Janeiro, thousands of well-wishers, taking advantage of a distinct lack of security, ran beside the small, silver Fiat the pope was riding in, many attempting to shake hands with the pontiff through the open car windows. Officials appeared to lose control of the increasingly chaotic crowd that inadvertently created a massive traffic jam.

Note that this whole encounter happened before World Youth Day actually began. But from the perspective of the worldwide audience that was watching, a powerful message had already been sent. It was a message of God's fondness for us, of his closeness and care. How did the pope manage to do that?

Well, for all his obviously sincere and even delightful expressions of simplicity and humility, the pope understands something many seasoned and sophisticated communicators miss: when it comes to speaking and

preaching, *you are the message*. Before you say a single thing, you are already communicating to your audience. And the communication is you. So you should know what *you* are saying.

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St. Paul understood that he *himself* was the initial (not the ultimate, not the primary, but the *initial*) message he was communicating. While Paul certainly gave us some of the wisest words ever expressed, he knew words were not where his message started. His message started with a “demonstration of the Spirit,” a wordless revealing of some way in which God was working in his life, usually called the fruit of the Spirit. It’s the same for us: maybe it’s your goodness, your kindness, your gentleness, or your joy. What is it you are telling us about you, and hopefully the Spirit’s work in you, before you say a word?

If you’re a communicator, what is the message that is *you*?

# SERIES ARE SIMPLER

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Jacob called his sons and said: “Gather around, that I may tell you what is to happen to you in days to come.”

—GENESIS 49:1

When we began studying healthy, growing churches, we learned that the message, what Catholics call the homily, was an important part of their weekend services—very important. We also learned they organized their messages into series—also very important.

A message series is about taking a specific topic and, over a number of weeks, developing it, going deeper. The churches we’ve studied also packaged or branded each of their series with a specific look and style that communicated the tone and theme of the series with the aim of stimulating interest. The brand is subsequently promoted on their website and through social media. In other words, each series has its own mini-marketing campaign.

**Father Michael:** One Advent a few years back, we finally gave the idea a try. I preached all of the weekend Masses, regardless of who was celebrating Mass. We also made sure the Children’s Liturgy of the Word was aligned with the series theme. And I’ve got to tell you, I loved it.

For one thing, a message series actually makes it easier to put together a homily from week to week. When you’re in a series, you don’t have to come up with all new material every week, neither do you have to constantly start from a blank slate. You’ve already determined your topic as well as the general direction in which you’re headed. For anyone who has

the responsibility to preach week after week, the advantage this provides cannot be overstated. It also makes so much sense when it comes to the lectionary cycles and the liturgical seasons, which beautifully, perfectly lend themselves to series; they *are* series in themselves, of course.

Here's another reason we like message series: we think one of the main goals of a message is simply to start a conversation. If we get people talking about the message on the car ride home, around the dinner table, or at sporting events, those are huge wins for us. If a single message can get the conversation started, a series will keep it going. In turn, the conversation has the potential to change and transform people's thinking, which eventually leads to changed lives.

For instance, although a stand-alone, single Sunday message on stewardship is probably not going to change many people's minds about giving, a series definitely has that potential.

Message series also help move the parish in a disciplined direction. If you are clear and consistent through a series, and it is reflected in the children's and student programs as well as your small group curriculum, there will be outcomes that impact and change your whole parish. (See pages 163–165.) We've seen that over and over again when it comes to what we want people to do: giving, serving, small groups, daily prayer, and confession. Now, in our planning, we'll ask the questions: how do we want *people* to change, and how do we want the *parish* to change as a result of a series?

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When it came time, Jacob gathered his family and shared with them the plan, the master plan. It was a plan charting the course forward for a family that would become a tribe, that would become a nation, and that would change the world.

The simplest and entirely cost-free thing you can do to unite your parish and powerfully move your mission forward to the future God has in view for you is to preach messages in a series. Think of it as your master plan.