

# Preaching at School Masses:

## Six Tips for Sharing the Word of God with Children

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When comedians complain about tough crowds, preachers smile and think to themselves, “Hah! You should try preaching at an all-school Mass.” Picture pews filled with children ages anywhere from three to thirteen—some of whom are happy to be there, some of whom would prefer to be anywhere else. The rowdiest and those considered flight risks are seated on either side of the vastly outnumbered adults in the congregation—some of whom themselves are happy to be there and some of whom also would prefer to be elsewhere. Here is a generation accustomed to tablets and computer screens and iPhones. Their days are filled with fast-moving visuals and constant interaction. How can a lone voice in the sanctuary speaking about the Word of God possibly compete for their attention? Who wouldn’t be tempted to tell a good joke, perhaps a funny story, and then move on with the rest of the service?

But the Word of God is serious business. It speaks to the deepest hungers of the human heart, including the hungers of children. Lives find meaning in its light. Fears are cast out, sorrows healed, confusion dispelled. We cannot imagine our own lives without the Word of God, and children should not be asked to do so either. Like our Jewish sisters and brothers who kiss the Torah scroll each time it passes through the synagogue, we know the Word of God is to be savored. We do not want to waste away the opportunity that preaching in school Masses can provide. As Psalm 78 proclaims: “What we have heard and know; things our ancestors have recounted to us. We do not keep them from our children; we recount them to the next generation” (Psalm 78:3–4).

But how to make the most of this opportunity? Here are six tips to keep in mind:

### TIP 1: KNOW YOUR CONGREGATION

As preachers, have a responsibility to exegete the text, and many of us take that responsibility quite seriously. We realize that what the text says cannot always be taken at face value and requires study. Yet we often slack in our duty to exegete our congregation. We assume that because we are human and they are human we know all we need to know. While there are aspects of being human that weave through the whole of our lives, there

are aspects of childhood that are distinctive. Children meet different challenges and ask different questions at different stages of their journey toward maturity. Cultivating awareness of the planes of development that children pass through and the spiritual characteristics associated with each of those planes can be a



Effective preaching at school Masses requires the ability to connect with a variety of age groups.

great help to preachers in knowing what kinds of messages will connect with children. The challenge, of course, is that our days tend to be full, and ministry pulls us in many directions. It is hard to take the time necessary to sit with children, observe their interactions, and truly get to know them. Many preachers have found the insights of Maria Montessori—and in particular, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd movement—as a valuable primer on the physical, intellectual, social, and especially spiritual markers associated with various periods of child-

hood. Know that you can also ask their teachers for help: What are your third graders able to do now that they couldn’t do in second grade? What kinds of struggles do you see your middle schoolers wrestling with? What do I need to know about preschoolers that might surprise me? Great preachers live in a state of ongoing curiosity about their people.

### TIP 2: HONOR CHILDREN’S ESSENTIALITY

The first characteristic of childhood of which every preacher needs to be aware is “essentiality.” As adults we might think children are not yet ready for “the heavy stuff,” but Cavalletti’s insight was that the younger the child, the weightier their questions and the greater their concern to grasp “the essence.” Rather than starting with the peripheral, hoping that someday when they age, children might spiral inward toward what is truly important, she advocated starting with what is truly important and slowly moving outward toward its fuller expression. The mysteries our faith reveals as most core—those mysteries so deep that they can barely even be expressed in language but are best contemplated in silence—are exactly the mysteries that the youngest children are hungriest for: the incarnation, the paschal mystery, the kingdom of God, baptism, Eucharist. When children are offered content they consider peripheral, they are restless and unengaged. When children have the opportunity to engage what they consider essential, they become concentrated and still. We must not shy away from speaking about the greatest mysteries of our faith but explore them with

children in the fewest words possible. “We must give children rich food and not too much of it,” Cavalletti said.

### **TIP 3: SELECT TEXTS CAREFULLY**

Honoring children’s essentiality begins with selecting the text on which one will focus. School Masses are generally celebrated during the school week, meaning that the lectionary usually offers the preacher three scripture passages to preach from (the first reading, the responsorial psalm, and the Gospel). With children it is best to choose just one reading rather than trying to find a connection between them. The weekday lectionary was not constructed with a typological reading of the texts in mind, and younger children are not yet ready for that kind of synthesis developmentally. Readings from the Old Testament can offer wonderfully rich material to explore from the pulpit, but because Jesus Christ is the center of the Christian faith, given the essentiality of children, it tends to make the most sense to focus on the Gospel. As children get older—after the age of nine—one might begin to explore some of the great stories of the Old Testament with them (Creation, Noah, Abraham, Moses), but often these will require more context than time allows during a school Mass. One caveat: sometimes the Gospel of the day will seem inappropriate for children or too difficult to open without lots of historical context. In this case, don’t be afraid to look at the responsorial psalm as an option. The psalms contain the most ancient prayers we have in our tradition and offer the kind of language children often find beautiful and meaningful when trying to express their own prayers to God.

### **TIP 4: HAVE A SINGLE POINT**

After exegeting the congregation and exegeting the chosen text, every preacher must wrestle with what each has to say to the other. In the case of a school Mass: What would children find interesting about this text? Are there ways that this text speaks to the questions they are asking in their lives? Does it offer guidance in the struggles they face? Is there something here that they would find good news? It can take a while to get clear for ourselves: What is the point that I want to lift up in this preaching event? Every preacher should be able to summarize what their point is in thirty words or less. A good point has substance to it. It illumines something essential—not peripheral—to our Christian faith. At the same time, it does not have too much substance. If what you intend to communicate in your preaching cannot be summarized in thirty words, you are trying to say too much in too small a space of time. Every preaching worth its salt only has one point. If you find yourself wanting to make multiple points in the same preaching event, you will lose any congregation, but especially one comprised predominantly of children.

### **TIP 5: USE STORIES AND HUMOR WISELY**

Saying that one has to be able to summarize one’s message in thirty words or less does not mean that one’s sermon is only thirty words. Once we know what we want to say we must figure out how to communicate it in a way that will stick in peoples’ minds past the end of Mass. We want the message to linger with

them at least all week, if not for the rest of their lives. We know that some “forms” of speech linger longer than other. Lists work well in writing but for listening, keep it to three bullet points or less. Stories are a particularly effective way of embedding a point. Indeed, neuroscience is showing our minds are wired to hold onto narrative. Humor also lingers in memory. In fact, stories and humor are so memorable that we have to be careful with them when preaching because if the story or punchline do not directly communicate the point of our sermon, the congregation will remember them but totally miss the point. In preaching school Masses, this is a particular hazard because preachers have long realized children love stories and laughing.

### **TIP 6: COUNT YOUR WORDS AND LEAVE THEM WONDERING**

As hinted already, the essentiality of children mandates that every word we speak counts. In the consideration of Jesus’ preaching, scholars often point out there is not one sentence that could be excised without losing something of substance. There are details that might add vividness to the scene he was painting, but no extraneous details. The younger the child, the greater brevity required. A general rule of thumb might be “one minute per year.” If you are speaking with a group of kindergartners, no more than five minutes. If you are speaking with a group of middle schoolers, no more than twelve minutes. Of course, at a school Mass, you are often speaking with children anywhere from three to thirteen, so you might shoot for an average of seven minutes. Remember that you don’t have to say all that needs to be said about a subject in one homily. Jesus’ preaching often consisted of a story (or even a single metaphor) and a question. He did not explain how the Kingdom of God was like a mustard seed or how his death was like a grain of wheat. He simply planted the picture in their mind and left them wondering: How is this true? What does this mean? If we find the right questions, the questions will continue to be discussed in the classroom and the cafeteria and around the dinner table at home. Preaching intends to initiate a conversation; it does not need to end it.

Preaching school Masses can certainly be challenging. These six tips can give our preaching a better chance of having a lasting effect. In the end, we must believe that the Word of God has a power of its own. In the words of evangelical preacher J.I. Packer, “Read yourself full, think yourself clear, pray yourself hot, and then let yourself go.” God will take it from here. ♦

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