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A plea from a mother of souls

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

Yesterday, a large part of the world celebrated Mothers Day and the church celebrated World Communication Day.

Usually the pope announces the theme on January 24, the feast of St. Francis de Sales and the vigil of the Conversion of St. Paul, both patrons of the Catholic press. Pope Benedict XVI, perhaps with some foresight, announced this year's theme last September: "Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization."

It's interesting that Facebook, as a prime social networking site, has become a place where people past the first flush of youth, like a lot of mothers and grandmothers, hang out. They continue to create and reinforce those strong bonds of family and friendship while carrying out surveillance on their kids, or trying to, while herding all the cats that dwell there.

Mothers are communicators par excellence on Facebook, and I love Facebook.

I am not a mother in the normal sense of the word. Ever since I entered my Daughters of St. Paul community, whenever one of the aspirants would get homesick, we were told that as women religious we were, or would be once professed, "mothers of souls." After 45 years I am actually more at grandmother status.

Today I would like to claim my convent birthright as a mother of souls, but of the clerical variety. As the mother of your souls, of anyone who preaches a homily, I plead with you to keep it short. Archbishop Nikola Eterovic, secretary for the Synod of Bishops, wrote in 2008 that the perfect length is eight minutes. I think you can do it in less. I plead with you, as my spiritual children, to do it in less.

Last week I went to the Sunday vigil mass where a priest new to the parish was preaching. The church ticks off all the boxes, good sound, beautiful liturgical environment, and good music. All was going well until Father started speaking.

I checked my watch. I could tell from the first sentences that he was going to take us on a stroll in familiar territory: "God only asks of us one hour a week! Or 45 minutes for those who come late." This got a laugh, but it was the only one in a homily that went on to just under a half hour.

Why does participating at mass have to be a test of endurance? The peculiar thing that stood out to me was that father was speaking to people who were at mass as if they never showed up -- ever. Could he not take us into the ethos of the Gospel and the love and peace that John wrote about (Jn 14: 23-29)? Did we really need to hear the one-hour thing again when mass went way over that time anyway?

Here's an example of a sermon that a homilist got right.

Yesterday, Saturday morning, a Jesuit friend celebrated the mass for our community in our chapel. We asked him at the last moment to fill in for the priest who usually comes, so he didn't have time to prepare a homily. We are actually quite ok with that so we all smiled at him and nodded our understanding when he announced this.

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"But," he continued (I am paraphrasing), "this Gospel (Jn 16: 23-28) is the one that taught me how to pray. In the novitiate, when we had classes on spirituality and prayer, well, we were just learning and we were taught to pray very specifically, just as Jesus says here: "Amen Amen I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give it to you" ask and you shall receive, so that your joy may be complete." When prayer is difficult, this is what I always come back to, and prayer becomes possible. It can be for all of us when we pray to God - in specifics."

I recalled one line from a half hour homily and remembered the entirety of maybe a three-minute sermon. After all these years of homily hearing, this one went straight to my soul.

My plea as a mother of souls to homilists and sermon-givers is very explicit: Be specific and keep it short because 45 minutes a week can be tempting.

Signed,

One of the many mothers of your homiletic souls

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