

Young People on the Road: Emmaus as a Model for Preaching to Young People *Part One*

by Logan Edwards

As a lay divinity student, I had the privilege of being an assistant rector in a men's residence hall of about 270 students at a large Catholic university. Within weeks, I quickly came to realize the significance of Sunday Mass to the student experience of community. From the very first week of the school year, the hall chapel rapidly developed into a parish-esque community. Students eagerly served as liturgical ministers and musicians, taking great pride in the community and its liturgies. Then each week, 10-15 students gathered for a men's small group in my apartment. Every gathering began with sharing our "high-low-God moments" from the week. And, each week, one or more students shared a high or God moment that had something to do with the homily given by either our Rector or Priest-in-Residence. They would say "Father's homily really made me think" or "I just really needed to hear that this week."



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While working with the Institute for Homiletics this summer, I reviewed recordings of Lilly Endowment-sponsored small group discussions. A common thread of dialogue was that homilies are not inspiring young people today. This seemed contradictory to my anecdotal experience in the residence hall. So, I began to ask myself why it is that the priests on this college campus, in this residence hall, could connect with these young people. Why (at least according to our surveys) is this not the norm in our parishes, high schools, or even at colleges and universities? The priests, lay ministers, and homileticians who participated in these discussions, while reflecting on their own preaching and ministerial experience, shared why they thought this to be the case. The bottom line: homilies are missing the mark. They are rarely touching the faithful, let alone young people.

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According to these ministers, homilies are yet to be identified or utilized as a critical source of evangelization. One lay-minister stated:

So, it seems like it would be helpful if there was a shift in understanding for a homiletic of evangelization... from having all the answers and being able to share it in an apologetic way and towards something like an Emmaus sort of model... we're on the journey together, discerning the presence of the Holy Spirit and where God wants to lead us.

Upon hearing this, what I pictured immediately was the rector of that hall I served in, walking around campus with each and every individual first-year student (of which we had 90). I saw our priest-in-residence cooking tater tots in his apartment after a daily mass each week and sharing in fellowship with our students. Why was it that their homilies were resonating with these young people? Well, perhaps it is because they had already implemented an “Emmaus Model”: They walked with them; broke bread in a physical and spiritual sense with them; and, most importantly, saw Christ in them. They could preach on that, and the students were ready to listen! No longer were the preachers talking *at* them as if to have the antidote to all their experiences. Instead, their preaching bubbled up out of their journey with the students, at which point they could talk *to* them and *with* them, along the road. It wasn't rocket-science, but it was unique enough to produce a different outcome than the national trends suggest. Students found community through the homily. They saw God in the life they shared in the hall. Their eyes were opened, and their hearts burned within them.

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So, based on my ministerial experience and after listening over 1000 pages worth of recorded conversations among priests, lay ministers, and homileticians, over the course of three blog posts I hope to articulate an Emmaus Model for preaching. In praying with and meditating on the Emmaus story, I identified 3 major movements in it that serve as valuable reflections on how to approach homiletic preparation and proclamation:

- 1) Questioning and listening
- 2) Exploration and accompaniment
- 3) Identification and proclamation

I hope they can be useful to those who have the patience to read these three installments as we as a Church continue in our efforts to say something meaningful to young people who deeply desire a good word.

Part I- “What things?”: Questioning and Listening

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”

Luke 24:13-24, NRSV

Imagine what Cleopas and his companion are feeling when they first encounter Jesus. The world they had been hoping for because of Jesus’s preaching has just been shattered in a short couple of days. Meanwhile, this stranger has the nerve to ask them, “What things?” I imagine their festering frustration or annoyance to be like that of a parent of a toddler who just learned how to ask the question, “Why?” But even amidst their frustration a simple question during such

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a tumultuous time, the simplicity of the question elicits a profound and reflective response from the pair on the road.

In the following verses, Cleopas and his companion respond in a ranting story. Yet in their frustration, I detect a certain hunger, as if they had been interiorly begging for someone to ask what happened for the last three days. They seem eager to share their joys and hopes, their grief and anguishes with a complete stranger. A simple question invited the telling of their story.

As one minister who has experience leading a faith conference for high school students put it, *“our currency is stories.”* They are a currency that can be exchanged for the sake of intimate relationship and lay the foundation for authentic community. One priest described the stories of young people as *“mirrors”* that often reflect to us, not just our deepest desires and longings, but the true movements of our living God in the world today. Therefore, for preachers, it is critical that we are willing to ask questions and grow in relationship with those to whom we preach, through their stories. It is how we know who is in the pews and how we come to see that the Gospel is alive, not just for them, but for all the faithful!

Furthermore, the narrative irony in the story is comical. Jesus Himself is the stranger! He could have just as easily skipped the questioning. He could’ve said, “Here I am. I’m here. No need to be sad any longer.” Instead, he asks the question and stops. He listens without interruption. It is this question and listening that opens way to relationship.

As ministers and preachers, are we willing to let people answer the question “What things,” vulnerably and openly? Do we even ask the question in the first place? Do we know the

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‘things’ that mark the experience of young people? In our group discussions, one leader mentioned how at a recent conference, a study was shared that illustrated a perception problem in identifying the challenges facing young people. Ministry leaders who work with young people on a day-to-day basis say ‘a, b, and c’ are their biggest problems while the young people themselves

say they struggle with ‘x, y, and z.’ Wouldn’t Christ’s question to Cleopas and his companion remedy this disconnect. “What things?”

This was the disposition the Church hoped to foster with the Synod on Synodality. And, at least according to some of those in our discussion groups, it has yielded fruit. One diocesan employee recounted a synodal listening session he had with a former parish leader, who left the Church because she felt like she wasn’t being listened to on the parish council. He recounted his interaction with her during the session as such:

And at the end of it, she said, ‘Man, if somebody would have just asked me what happened in the way that you did and showed the care and kindness, I never would have left.’

From this experience, he reasoned:

Evangelization is rightly often described as proclaiming the gospel, but the value in the midst of this culture of terror and polarization and individualism and misunderstanding... [is] the power of listening and its healing capacity. I think it is a gem to be discovered. And if we do listen well, then we will better know how to proclaim in the end.

While not all preachers have the advantage (though some may see it as a curse) to live with their congregations, there are ways we can walk with the faithful, ways we can question and listen with great intentionality.

A few questions to think about: as a parish priest, am I willing to take the time to identify the young leaders in my youth group and ask them, “What ‘things’ are you facing? What do you need a good word on?” For some this seems challenging, especially at a time where the Church is rightfully hyper-aware about creating safe environments. But this is where true collaboration, true co-responsibility is practiced.

As a youth minister, am I willing to facilitate such an encounter between the youth of the parish and the pastor while ensuring a safe environment for these interactions? And then, when these listening encounters are had, are we actually listening to the answers? Do we offer a Catechism response in the meeting instead of inviting what the young people share into our prayer life and homily preparation? The opening up of such spaces and this humble disposition toward young people is a key to true encounter with them. It opens the door to deeper communal life and further accompaniment in their journey of discipleship. And, while the typical preacher may not have to remind their congregation to transfer their laundry in a timely manner, Christ might begin to reveal Himself to us in unexpected places if we are just willing to ask the simple question: “What things?”