Chapter 8: Talks

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Guidelines for Talks

Characteristics found in the typical audience

- Pre-Vatican II
- Post-Vatican II
- Developed faith life
- Search for guidance
- Victims of domestic violence or troubled homes
- Angry at the Church or Church authority
- Various theological backgrounds
Purpose of the talk
- Inspire the retreatants
- Instruct the retreatants
- Give testimony to your faith
- Provide guidance for the faith development of the retreatants

Resources
- Refer in your talk to resources which have helped you in your faith development
- If you desire, provide a handout with pertinent references
- Examples:
  - Books
  - Articles
  - Biblical passages
  - Music

Lessons learned from hearing other talks
- What helped me the most when I heard others speak?
- Have I used those elements that were helpful to me?
- What was not helpful about other talks I have heard on retreats?
- Have I avoided those elements that were not helpful to me?

Critique of the talk
- The critique of the talk should be given at the team meeting immediately after each talk is given.
- Was the talk focused on the subject matter?
- Does the witness given pertain to the subject matter?
- See special notes next page...

Time of the talk
- Each talk should be written, rehearsed and planned to last a maximum of 30 minutes...no longer (including the song, etc).
- You do not need to tell your entire life story, nor should you try.
- Remember that much of what a retreatant gets out of the retreat is accomplished through sharing their stories with fellow retreatants.
- Therefore, a long talk takes time, not from the retreat or the other team members, but from the retreatants.

Writing the talk
- PRAY—and ask others to pray with you and for you as you move through this process. Pray always to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit as you prepare and present your talk.
- The talk should be a story of your journey with God and where He was as you traveled your journey.
  - How did you relate to or ignore Him?
  - How did you pray or not pray to Him?
  - How did you answer His call on your journey?
  - How did you fail to answer God’s call?
  - What blessings have grown in your life as a result of answering God’s call?
What desert passages have you endured when refusing to answer God’s call?
Where were you in your faith at the beginning of your journey and where are you today?
• Weave the topic of your talk and the theme of the retreat into your talk.
• Begin early and be prepared to make changes
• Include scripture references
• Seek help from a spiritual director/companion as you feel you need to.
• Use repetition...”tell them what you are going to say, say it, and then tell them what you said.”
• Use visuals if you would like.
• Practice, Practice...Practice your talk so you can give it without too much dependence on your notes. Don’t read it.

Don’t:
• Don’t emphasize how bad you used to be
• Don’t speak in glittering generalities
• Don’t give the impression that the Christian life is a “bed of roses”
• Don’t tell a story without giving hope, new life and new spirit
• Don’t ignore the topic of your talk and theme of the retreat; weave them throughout your story.
• Don’t tell a story where it appears that you feel sorry for yourself today. The story needs to be a Resurrection Story and your new life and new spirit should be celebrated.
• Don’t make derogatory remarks about other denominations, individuals or groups
• Don’t preach
• Don’t argue or use high pressure methods
• Don’t reveal identity of people in the witness talk
• Don’t use inappropriate language
• Don’t ignore the time restrictions for your talk (remember...no longer than 30 minutes)

8 Suggested Topics for Talks to Fulfill the Message of ACTS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADORATION/PRAYER</th>
<th>COMMUNITY</th>
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<tr>
<td>THEOLOGY</td>
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<td>SACRAMENTS</td>
<td>FORGIVENESS</td>
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<tr>
<td>VALUES (first talk of the weekend)</td>
<td>GO FORTH (last talk of the weekend)</td>
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</table>
### Order of the Talks:

|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|

**Special Notes:** The talk should not merely be a chronicle of one's life. Far from being primarily a rehearsal of dramatic or difficult life-experiences, the talk is meant to be a witness to a new birth of faith and commitment to one's life-responsibilities and relationships. The story of one's life “carries” the testimony, but it is not the actual witness. Therefore, the assigned topic should be researched and personal testimony should be used to support, enhance, explore or illustrate the issue. One’s life-story becomes witness and testimony to the life of the gospel as it describes a journey patterned on the Paschal Mystery of Christ. One way to think of that process would be:

Paschal Mystery can be summed up by John 12:24 “Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest.” The paschal mystery is about paschal death and resurrected life.

**Mystery of Jesus’ own Passover from death to life:**

1. Good Friday—“the loss of life—real death.”
2. Easter Sunday—“the reception of new life.”
3. The 40 Days—“a time for readjustment to the new and for grieving the old.”
4. Ascension—“letting go of the old and letting it bless you, the refusal to cling.”
5. Pentecost—“the reception of new spirit for the new life that one is already living.”

As a personal paschal challenge for each of us, the diagram may be recast this way:

1. “Name your deaths”
2. “Claim your births”
3. “Grieve what you have lost and adjust to the new reality”
4. “Do not cling to the old, let it ascend and give you its blessing”
5. “Accept the spirit of the life that you are in fact living”

There are many deaths, many risings, and many Pentecosts.


The assessment of talks is a particular responsibility and challenge for the director and/or spiritual director. When the talk fails to convey the intended message adequately, these persons should speak with the presenter privately in such a way as to help develop a more effective content or delivery. Occasionally, after the initial presentation to the team, a talk’s title and emphasis may be changed when it seems to respond well, but to a different topic. This review, clearly, needs to be based on the general guidelines for each topic and careful judgment as to the talk’s general effectiveness.
ACTS RETREAT

A place where our hearts feel safe and secure.

A place of trust where we can take off our masks and be ourselves without fear of criticism or ridicule.

We will hear and see things that are very personal, confidential and revealing.

We must maintain confidentiality and respect.

THE RIVER RULE

“What is said and done on this side of the river must stay on this side of the river.”
An ACTS Talk is different than any other kind of talk. While there are similarities, it is not a short story, nor is it a “witness” like you might hear at an AAA Meeting or a Religious Seminar. It is not your autobiography. It is definitely not a sermon, and so it should not be preachy. It is a highly personal sharing of a part of your spiritual journey, in order to deliver a message that the listeners need to hear. When considering whether or not a person is ready for an ACTS Talk, the primary question to ask is “What is the message you want the listeners to take with them?” What do you want them thinking about after you step down from the podium? How can your experience help them?

There is a basic structure to an ACTS Talk, and all good talks have each of the following parts:

- The Opening / Introduction / Icebreaker
- The Fall / “Death”
- The Recovery / “Resurrection”
- The Closing / “Going Forth”

While a story may make for great listening, an ACTS Talk must have all of these parts. In particular, there must be a Resurrection. If a person’s story has not reached that point, or if they are still “on the mend”, it is probably not a good choice for an ACTS Talk.

Experience in public speaking, and presentation skills – while helpful, are not necessary. The main ingredients for giving an ACTS Talk are sincerity, honesty, and reverence.

The talk is the speaker’s story – your story. This guide is not meant to put words in your mouth. It is your message. This guide is only to help you with organizing and presentation. It is written to help educate, and support you throughout the development and presentation of your talk.

The best advice throughout the process is to pray. Ask the Lord what message He wants you to share on the weekend. Ask Him to make your words – His words!

**The Opening / Introduction**

1) Often called the “Ice Breaker”, you need to grab the listener’s attention right away. A good “Opening” will start with something memorable and/or unique about yourself – or something that the audience can relate to. Not too long.

2) State your name and be sure to state the theme of your talk. EX. “My name is _____, and I’m here to talk to you about the “C” in ACTS-Community”.

3) You want them to be able to relate to you. Sometimes you can remind them of how that is, by using phrases like: “Have you ever had this happen to you?” or “Did you ever think...?”
4) Mentioning towns you grew up in. Organizations you belonged to. Schools you went to. Sports you played. Your ethnic background. These are all the types of things that help people relate. But keep it brief, not too many details.

5) Avoid using a lot of names of other people. Unless they appear later in the story, they are not needed, cause confusion, and are rarely if ever remembered.

6) The Opening should be about 5-6 minutes at most. There are exceptions, but longer then that tends to get boring quickly.

7) When deciding what is appropriate to place in an opening, it is suggested that everything you mention should do one of the following:
   a. Setup or relate to, what is to come later in the talk.
   b. Make the audience related to you, so that they understand that your journey (maybe) could have been theirs.

The Fall (Death):
1) Whether it was slow and gradual, or sudden and unexpected, make it as vivid and powerful as possible.

2) Get into the “gory details” if possible. Make the audience feel the pain and emotion. The mistake that is sometimes made here is to keep it too “high level”. The speaker may be afraid to relive the nightmare, or admit to something they did. This is a mistake as it will keep the audience from feeling the full impact on them. You must “go deep” for others to gain from your talk.

3) Take dramatic pauses. Don’t be afraid to stop and collect yourself if you need to.

4) What was going through your mind as “it” happened? What were you feeling?

5) Where was God in your life at this time?

6) Don’t be afraid to show your emotions.

7) One method is to visualize in your mind what you are talking about. The images that come to you will help you recall the details, and what emotions were going through your mind at the time. This can be difficult, but it truly works better than almost anything else.
The Resurrection:
1) The key here is to show how, with the help of our Lord, we were able to rise from the depths of our fall, and turn it into something positive.

2) What was the exact moment?

3) Where was God in your heart and mind at this time?

4) What happened that makes this so special?

5) What was going through your mind as it happened? What were you feeling?

6) Once again, don’t be afraid to show your emotions.

7) IMPORTANT: There needs to be a “REBIRTH”. ACTS Talks need to show how, by the grace of God, we were able to overcome and move forward. So these are not “works in progress”. Saying you have an addiction, and still slip from time to time, is not what an ACTS Talk is. Saying you have been “clean and sober for over a year” or “I have forgiven them” or even “I am not that person anymore” is what we need to hear.

The Closing/Finish:
1) Bring it all together. That is the message? Very Important!

2) What did you learn? You need to answer the “questions” that started your talk. You need to show spiritual growth.

3) Where do you go from there? (As it relates to the story.)

4) Where is God in your heart and mind now?

5) Was the message consistent with the topic of your talk?

6) Leave the audience thinking! What are they going to take away from the talk?

7) Finish strong. The last thing you say needs to stay with them.

8) If you finish with a song, or a poem, or music – have it all ready to go immediately after you have finished.

9) If you have handouts, let the designated person hand them out for you after the talk.

10) Quickly thank everyone for listening.
Keys to a Successful ACTS Talk

- Everything in your talk needs to contribute to the message of your talk. If it does not, then take it out. No matter how interesting it is. It wastes time, and sends the audience off on a tangent. You want to keep them focused.

- You want to get the audience to relate to you. Find common ground. Put them in the frame of mind that this could have happened to them.

- Have your talk written out. Number the pages, and put them in a binder if you can.

- If you don’t want to read it, have cue-cards written – and practice a lot. You don’t want to loop back because you forgot something.

- Use plenty of eye-contact if possible.

- Take dramatic pauses. Even take a minute to collect yourself if you feel the need.

- Add 2-4 selections of scripture. Choose for effect – and relevance – not just for the sake of putting them in there. A few well-placed lines of scripture can have a great impact and be extremely meaningful, while too many long or confusing passages can disrupt the flow of a talk.

- Somewhere, at least once, the theme of the retreat should be in the talk.

- Practice.....Practice.....Practice!!

- As you prepare – pray. Listen to what the Lord wants you to say and do.

When you present:

- Dress up when you present your Talk during the Retreat. Sunday best.

- Let your talk prayer partner know whatever you want up at the podium. It will be set up and ready for you.

- If you have music to be played, make sure that you have coordinated with the Music Ministry so it will be setup ahead of time and ready to go.

- Carry your Talk into the presentation room with you.

- After your talk is over, and you have had a chance to wind down, come back in to the Presentation Room and rejoin the group.
Chapter 8: Talks

Critique of the Talk

The critique of the talk is done at the team meetings after each talk is given. The purpose of the critique is to keep each speaker on point, on topic, on time and on track, which helps to maintain a timely weekend schedule also.

Length of talk is critical, since if speakers go over the time limit for their talk they shorten the time available for table discussion.

Prior to the Practice Talk, hand out a Feedback Form to each member of the Team and instruct them on how to use it. The Feedback Form on the following page lists the main points to consider in evaluating each talk. The team should review these points before the talk to direct the helpful dialogue after the talk:

1) Was the talk focused on the subject matter or did the talk wander into other areas or other talks?
2) Personal testimony or witness is always encouraged because it adds so much to the talk. But the witness must pertain to the subject matter. Did the speaker's witness pertain to the subject matter?
3) Did the talk adhere to our Catholic teachings and Doctrines, and avoid the use of inappropriate language?
4) Finally, did the talk stay within the 30-minute time limit including opening prayer and song?

These are the challenges for every speaker; just remember to ask the Holy Spirit to help you and you will be fine.

Immediately after the Talk (as soon as the room is quieted) the Speaker will be seated at a table in front of the Team along with the Retreat Director, Co-Director(s) and Spiritual Director/Companion. The Director will review again the purpose and procedure for how these Feedback Sessions will work:

• What makes a good ACTS talk? (see “Giving an ACTS Talk”)
• The Speakers want honest criticism – but given in a loving way.
• They are not professionals. Remember that. Content, structure, and the message is more important than the delivery.
• Raise your hand – we need to keep this orderly. Be respectful and polite to the other members of the team.
• The Facilitator will call on each person, and keep the session moving.
• When called, please ask your questions, or give feedback quickly and concisely.
• Try to limit comments to new insights or questions.
• Try to limit comments to one turn. We have a limited amount of time.

At the end of the session, the Feedback Forms should all be turned in. The team’s challenge is to help the speaker with their suggestions and is not intended to be merely a back slapping process, but rather is the speaker and team working together for the benefit of the retreatants.
ACTS Talk Feedback Form

THEME: ____________________________ SPEAKER: ____________________________

1. Did you know and clearly understand the Theme of the Talk?

2. Was the opening engaging? Did it grab your interest?

3. Did you understand what/when the “Death” or “Fall” was?

4. Did you understand what/when the “Resurrection” was?

5. Did you understand what the message/lesson was that the speaker was trying to convey?
   • What was it?

6. Did you learn about the faith journey of the speaker?

7. How well was the theme of the retreat (“put theme here”) incorporated into the Talk?

8. How well was scripture incorporated into the Talk?
   • Too little / too much / just right amount?
   • Good choices of scripture?

9. Did you find the talk motivating / challenging / interesting?
   • In what ways?

10. Do you have any suggestions for the speaker?

Feel free to write on the back of this page.