

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A WITNESS TALK

By Fr. Eamon Tobin

General guidelines for all witnesses are found in the *Handbook* (*Part 4, p.24–26 and Part 2, p. 35-37*). These guidelines are very beautiful. Be sure to not only read them, but also meditate on page 24, 25 and 26 of part four. Guidelines on *individual witnesses* are located in *Part 4, p. 27-36*. The following guidelines for individual witnesses are meant to supplement and clarify those in the book.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus says to his apostles, “*When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and you will be **witnesses** for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

A witness is *not* a homily or a teaching. Rather, it is a sharing of how God has touched your life in a personal way. It involves sharing with others the presence and activity of God in the events of your life. The *central focus* of each witness is Christ, not the speaker. The *Handbook* beautifully states:

‘What allows our witness to be effective is that its power is not ours, but Christ’s. Effective witnessing attests to the miracle of grace working in a weak, imperfect Christian. What appeals to the listener is discovering that an imperfect person with real problems, like himself, is not only coping, but also succeeding in the power of the Lord.’ (Part 4, p.26).

When writing your witness, keep the following in mind:

1. Constantly seek the inspiration and help of the Holy Spirit when thinking about and writing your witness.

You may already have many ideas of what you want to say in your witness. The Holy Spirit may change your mind, not just once, but several times. Be open to this. Pray before each time you sit down to write your witness. One sample prayer to the Holy Spirit is:

*Holy Spirit, guide and direct me in writing this witness.
Call to my mind experiences and events that I can use.
Help me to see how you were present in the events of my life.
Help me to know the “stuff” to share and to omit.
May my writing of this witness be a transforming event in my life.
And may my sharing of this witness touch the lives of all who hear it.
Amen*

2. Get in Touch with Your Story

The *Handbook* states, “*The best and most fruitful witnesses occur when we are most transparent to others.*” (*Handbook, Part 4, p. 26*). Each witness shares his/her story within the context of a particular theme, e.g., Renewal, Christian Awareness, Community, etc. The following may help you to draw experiences from your life’s journey that you can share.

- You may begin by briefly sharing your Christian (or lack of Christian) upbringing, keeping in mind your theme. For example, “I was raised by parents who were very strong (or weak, or one parent strong, one weak) in their Catholic or Christian faith. We often prayed (didn’t

- pray) as a family, went (or didn't go) to church on a regular basis, etc. Take about five minutes to paint a picture of your early *religious* formation, keeping in mind your theme. For example, if your theme is Christian community, you might say: "I had my first experience of Christian community in my own home." Or, "my first *awareness* of God's presence was in my home." Or, "I first received modeling on what it means to be a *disciple* of Jesus from my mother, even though we never used the term disciple." So, try to work in your theme to early childhood experiences. So the main focus of this first section is a description of the religious atmosphere (good, bad or indifferent) of your home life. Who influenced you and how?
- Then you might move onto teenage years and young adulthood. What were these years like for you *spiritually*? Did you have very positive or negative religious experiences in your teenage or young adulthood years? Perhaps you lost interest in God, religion and church during those years. Again, *keep in mind your theme*. For example, you might say: "In my teenage years, I got my first introduction to *scripture*." Or you might say, "My teenage years and young adult years were years when I lost touch with God. These were years of pulling away from God and church." In my teenage years, I experienced *community* in this way. Or I lost my childhood *awareness* of God and his *Loving Care* for me.
- Moving along to your 30s, 40s and beyond. What were important *spiritual* experiences during those years . . . if any? Perhaps you had a crisis that pushed you away from God and church or brought you closer. Maybe you had one or more *spiritual awakening* experiences. If so, share them and how they impacted your life. Again keep in mind your theme: for example, during these years I experienced community, renewal in the following way.

3. Spiritual Awakening Events

- Luke 15 describes how the Prodigal Son "came to his senses" and decided to return to his father's home. Sin is "leaving the father's home, forgetting or neglecting our relationship with God and/or church. Was there a period(s) in your life when you did this? What happened to help you "come to your senses", to see again the importance of your relationship with God and church? Did you have a spiritual awakening event? If so, how did it impact your life and relationship with God? The spiritual awakening may have occurred overnight (as with St. Paul on the road to Damascus, Acts 9) or it may have been a *gradual* experience in which your relationship with God and/or church was restored and renewed. Perhaps you never left the "Father's house" or church. For you, spiritual awakening events will have involved *deepening* what was already there. If so, describe how certain events deepened and/or impacted your life.
- As you describe events that may have been very painful, remember that the focus of sharing that experience is on how *Christ* or *Christian friends* helped you to cope. *Avoid detailed, blow-by-blow accounts of particular experiences*. Provide enough detail so that the retreatants will know what the experience was and how it impacted you spiritually (e.g., caused you to move to or away from God, church, praying, hurt your self-image, etc.). Then share how your spirituality or faith or friends helped you to deal with the situation.

- Again, keep in mind the theme. Perhaps you had a *spiritual renewal* experience in the process of dealing with a painful experience. Perhaps you had a strong sense of the *Father's Loving Care* for you during a crisis time. The aim is to evoke faith and conversion in the participants hearts. Ideally, they will be led by your witness to reflect on their own lives in the light of the topic.
- So, choose some experiences that impacted your spiritual development and share them in the light of your theme. Share how your experience:
 1. led to **renewal** in your life.
 2. led you to experience the **new life of Christ**.
 3. led you to develop **spiritually** and helped you grow in prayer.
 4. led to experiencing **Christian community**.
 5. led you to grow in **Christian awareness**.
 6. led you to grow in your sense of the **Father's Loving Care**.
 7. led you to grow in what it means to be a **disciple** of Jesus.
 8. led you to grow in your appreciation of **Scripture**.
 9. came to grow in your appreciation for the **Sacrament of Reconciliation** .
 10. showed you the importance of the **Eucharist** for your ongoing spiritual growth.

4. **Be Current**

Your witness is a sharing about how Christ touched your life in the *past* and how he is touching your life *now*. It is very important that you give several minutes to how Christ is working in your life **right now!** This may include sharing how your original CRHP weekend touched you. ***Epecially, you should speak to how the team formation process has touched your life.*** If you share your witness early in the formation process, be sure to leave some space to add elements about the formation period. You may have some very beautiful, spiritual experiences between now and the next weekend. It is very important that the participants hear how God is working in your life **now**. When *every* witness shares about the profound impact of the *formation* period in their life, the participants are inspired and motivated to continue the process *after* their weekend.

5. **Use of Scripture**

Each witness should include at least three Scripture quotes. You will find some suggestions for each witness in the handbook in Part 4, p. 27-36. Do not feel tied to those references. If you find other Scriptures that fit in better with your topic, use them. Ideally, the Scriptures should be connected with what you have said or with what you are going to say. Feel free to ask the Spiritual Director for help in selecting scriptures that fit your theme and story.

6. Song

Each witness on the weekend ends with a *Christian* song. The song should enhance the theme of your witness, so keep the following things in mind when selecting a song.

1. Tie it to the theme (for example, Carey Landry's song on *Abba Father* perfectly fits in with the *Father's Loving Care* theme).
2. The words of the song should be easy to understand (if not easy to detect, provide handout with words of song).
3. Make sure the song conveys the proper mood (a raucous, "rockin" song would be inappropriate for the reconciliation witness, as opposed to a more contemplative piece).
4. If you can't find an appropriate song, ask your Spiritual Director and team members for help.

7. Final Thoughts

While writing your witness talk, ask yourself the following *four questions*:

1. Is my witness sufficiently Christ-centered? Am I using the details of my life to illuminate the power and goodness of God, or is it *overly autobiographical*?
2. Is the theme clearly brought out? For example, if the theme is *Christian Community*, is it clear to the listener that belonging to a Christian community is a blessing in your life and has helped you grow in your relationship with Christ? If the theme is *Christian Awareness*, does the witness clearly demonstrate how you have grown in your awareness of Christ in your life?
3. Is the witness *current*? Does it deal with my *present* relationship with Christ?
4. Do I talk about the impact of the weekend and *Formation Period* on my life?