

Speaking Engagements: What Do I Say? (Part 2 of 2)

Issue #3 of “Promoting Your Courage Chapter in Your Diocese” series
by Karl M.

Following up on last month’s article about informational nights, we now want to shift the focus to how to present Courage/EnCourage in a public setting.

You’ve set up your informational night at a local parish or other gathering. You’ve mailed fliers to other parishes in the immediate area, advising them of the event. You’ve conveyed the message you plan to offer to the parish priest and/or lay director of religious education. It’s the night of your event, and a number of individuals have arrived looking forward to getting more information about Courage and Catholic teaching on the topic of same-sex attraction. So just what message will you present? Fortunately, a number of us have been in this position and are glad to share from our experience on how best to present Courage in a public setting.

Some basic tips:

1. As basic as it sounds, always **come prepared for the talk**. Practice with someone in your group, and plan to go no longer than 20-25 minutes with your testimony. People will want to engage in dialogue following your talk, and you want to give them the chance to ask questions or relate their experiences.
2. **Arrive early.** Whenever possible, always try to **have at least another member of your group present**. It’s always great to see a friendly face in the crowd, and another group member can be very helpful when question and answer or discussion time comes around.
3. **Bring literature.** If you have a brochure for your group, fantastic! Make sure everyone gets a copy. If you have business cards for your group, be sure to distribute them. If you do not have either of these items, print out brochures or other information from the Courage website, so that you have something with contact information to give everyone.
4. Pass around a **sign-in sheet** or have a sheet available where people can give their names and email addresses if they would like to be added to your contact list to receive more information. It’s a shame to do a presentation and then fail to be able to make follow-up contact with those who might be interested because you did not leave a way for the dialogue to continue after the meeting.
5. **Stay on point.** A presentation isn’t a time to engage in a greater debate on legalities of things like same-sex marriage or Church teaching. If an audience member wishes to discuss these items, invite them to speak with you after the presentation, and then provide them with resources or offer to put them in contact with the Courage Central office if you are not comfortable having the discussion.
6. Plan for your entire event to go **no longer than 90 minutes** or so, especially if it is held on a weeknight. You want to hold everyone’s interest, and this is the ideal length of time to present your information. Just make sure there is opportunity for follow-up, either through a priest, phone hotline, or email address.

I've asked a few of our more **experienced speakers to share some of their insights** on presenting a Courage Informational Night. Here are their thoughts on how to present Courage in a parish talk or other educational setting:

Daniel M.: I'd say that the most valuable thing I can contribute is my personal story of redemption. I think it's far more compelling when I tell my story, than when I try to make a strong case for Church teaching—but when I do talk about the latter (which we need to do), I find it good to talk about how the Church's teaching has helped me and how it's not onerous, when we look at it through the right angle. "God says no to us because he loves us" sort of thing. And I always avoid political stuff when I can—talking about same-sex marriage isn't really something I ever talk about. One of the worst moments of my speaking was when a high school student asked me what I thought about same-sex adoption, for example. I tried to explain the Church's teaching, and it ended up just being totally misconstrued by the child. Also, of course, getting too graphic isn't good—general details only. I remember hearing someone say, "When I saw him, I became aroused." No one wants to be thinking about that during a talk!

Jonah B.: I think it is very important to leave lots of time for Q&A—this is often what motivates people to show up. They have pressing questions and are not sure where to go, and this is where real ministry can occur. I have been at presentations where the Q&A was given short shrift while plenty of time was given to a movie and/or members going on and on. So keep in mind that we are there for the parishioners, not the other way around, and to answer lots of questions, remembering that what one person asks, probably everyone will be able to relate.

Garrett J.: I find that talking about the healthy chaste relationships with men that I've developed through the group, and that the group is not just a meeting but a community, has been very helpful. Also helping people understand that people do have a deep desire to know the truth even if they don't know they want it. This is more so for speaking with priests. Finally I would say explaining that we don't have to be perfect to be part of Courage. That we can still have questions about what the Church teaches and how we are to live it. That we can all disagree on hot button issues and politics and still come together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Tina N.: Try to avoid getting into extended discussions about where SSA comes from (nature vs nurture); instead, focus on the fact that one's behavior is still a matter of choice, and the moral decision of a well-formed conscience is what really matters. While sharing one's particular experiences and challenges related to SSA, keep the focus of the talk on ongoing conversion to Christ and the full teachings of His Church—something we're ALL called to do, no matter our particular struggles. Always share from the heart—make it personal and honest. You can speak about falls, but avoid going into explicit detail, so as not to be an occasion of sin for the audience. Always remember, the point of a Courage testimony is to share how you are finding God's grace and help in the midst of struggle—never feel that you have to end your testimony with an "I don't struggle any more" ending. If indeed a member has diminished SSA or even no longer feels those temptations, that's great, and you're free to share that! But never feel that your testimony MUST end that way, or that you should avoid giving a testimony just because you still have struggles and temptations. The point of any Christian testimony is to testify to God's grace helping each of us with all our weaknesses, on a daily basis, and we all need grace and strength our whole lives long.