



## PODCAST #73

### *Interview with Father Frank Pavone (FFP) by Carma Spence (CS)*

*This transcript has been edited for readability.*

**CS:** Hello and welcome to *Public Speaking Super Powers*. This is your host, Carma Spence. Today I'm speaking with Father Frank Pavone. Father Frank is a prominent leader in the pro-life movement. He has spoken on life issues throughout the world, including addressing the pro-life caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives. He's the author of two books, [Ending Abortion: Not Just Fighting It](#) and [Pro-Life Reflections for Every Day](#). Welcome to *Public Speaking Super Powers*, Father Pavone.

**FFP:** Thank you so much, it's a pleasure to be with you.

**CS:** Just so listeners can get a feel for your unique expertise, could you tell us a little about your journey to success in public speaking?

**FFP:** Sure. Well I've always felt comfortable with public speaking all my life. I remember speaking to my classmates in grade school on various occasions and even being invited to speak on the radio when I entered some essay contests in grade school. When people, as the years went on, would talk about the fear that so many suffer from regarding public speaking, I never quite was able to identify with what they were talking about. I always felt in speaking to a group of people, I was basically doing the same thing as when speaking to somebody one on one. I always had, therefore, a facility for this. And, as the years went on, I was asked to more and more circumstances. I was chosen to be the valedictorian of my high school class. I was in a public schools. And I remember in giving that speech having such an excitement about it, such an eagerness to share my message with my classmates and their families.

As time went on, therefore, I always accepted invitations to speak. And found more and more opportunities to do that as I began my journey towards the priesthood, which of course, by definition, involves a lot of public speaking and preaching. In seminary, I of course took part in a lot of courses related to preaching and public speaking. But interestingly, I found in the midst of taking those courses, that I already knew a lot of the techniques that were being taught to us. I'm not sure how I acquired that knowledge, but then I was realizing that it was something that came to me very naturally. Once then, of course, when I was ordained and preaching in the parish, I continued to refine those skills.

I listen to myself and I think that this is one of the key elements in developing this gift, I remember both in the parish work that I did, as well as in the many adult education classes that I was asked to lead and to speak in, that I always recorded my presentation. When I

recorded them, then of course, I would take the time to listen to them afterwards. I was doing that, essentially, to put a check on myself to make sure that what I wanted to convey was being conveyed. And putting myself in the position of the listener was then able to make mental notes about how I would improve the presentation on subsequent occasions. That, I think, was a tremendous help to me as the years went on.

Now normally, a parish priest will be limited to speaking in his own parish, or if he has other opportunities, as I did, to perhaps give classes in different institutions, he can expand his speaking. But then I had a unique opportunity, because after serving for five years in parish work, I was invited to become the director of this national ministry, called Priests for Life. The invitation came at the same time that I was looking for the opportunity to work in pro-life ministry on a full-time basis. So, in 1993, I accepted the position of National Director of Priests for Life, a position I still hold now, and that position brought me onto that national speaking circuit.

I began traveling around meeting with different pro-life groups, and as they got to know me, they invited me to speak at their conferences, on their television and radio programs. And one thing led to another as each of those events went well, the people in attendance would give me additional invitations. Although I got to the point rather quickly that I was being invited to go to several states every week. And I kept up that high pace of traveling and speaking ever since then.

It's included finally, this was a key element to getting to the position I'm in now, and that was the EWTN, the Eternal Word Television Network. It is the largest religious cable network in the world. I was invited to appear on that network in the midst of my Priest for Life activities. And they asked me to begin producing a series for them, which I have been doing ever since. In fact, just this past week I concluded the taping our 18th season of episodes in this series called *Defending Life*. That work in television and in parallel work in radio, really helped me a lot, as well. And that brings me to where I am today.

**CS:** So, given your experience with public speaking, do you believe that it is a learned skill? Or something you're born being able to do? And why do you feel that way?

**FFP:** I'm convinced that it's a combination of both. There has to be some certain natural skills. There's got to be a certain disposition in one's personality to be able to do this. People who are excessively shy, people who find it difficult to express themselves, a certain amount of that can be overcome with training. But at the same time, there are dispositions of the personality that are going to be there from pretty early on in life that are either going to make it very much easier or very much more difficult to be successful in public speaking.

Having said that, the learning part of it goes a long way. But I'm convinced that the learning happens before a person consciously sets about the task of learning public speaking. And I think of my own case for example, my brother, I have a younger brother, two years younger than I, he and I from the time we were about 8 years old, we used a cassette tape recorder. My mom bought us some tape recorders one Christmas and we began using these cassette tape recorders as a hobby. And the two of us would be speaking in to these recorders on occasions like Christmas, or when we would have our friends over to play. And it was almost

like we were doing this imaginary radio station, where we would make these tapes, dozens upon dozens of tapes, just talking about the, for example, if we went on vacation let's make a tape about our vacation. And we would be narrating the events that were unfolding. What that meant was that we were also then listening back to ourselves on the tape. And we developed the facility for speaking about things that were happening as if to a large audience. Now, there was no thought in my mind at that time of, oh I'm going to do public speaking when I get older. Or I should prepare for this. None of that whatsoever. It was just something that was a fun activity that my brother and I were engaged in. As I look back on it, of course, doing that was really, really a substantial amount of training, especially as we listened back to ourselves and learned how we were coming across.

Beyond that also for instance there were key people that I listened to a lot. Archbishop Fulton Sheen<sup>1</sup>, for example, and a number of other preachers who are not only good at what they do, but who have produced their own audiotapes and CDs. And as the years went on, I listened so much to them, that again without consciously or deliberately working to develop, you know, I was by a certain osmosis, learning their patterns and their ways of presenting a particular idea.

I consider all of that essential to whatever natural gifts or inclinations a person has. There's got to be that training, within a large part, maybe happening without one being conscious of it, but which is essential. I think the formal training, that I had some of, as I mentioned, to the seminary, is in the end just a small fraction of the final formula for being a good public speaker. It's a refinement, certain tweaks and certain refinements that come as a result of the formal training, but I think it's really, by that point, something that you're building upon. The substance is already there, you're just building upon it. When people ask me sometimes after I've given a talk that they really liked, "How long did it take you to prepare that?" And my answer, maybe something like, "Well, it took about for 45 years." And I'm really serious when I say that, because the actual, immediate preparation for a talk I give, might only be 10 minutes. But if I had not had the experiences which I'm going to draw in speaking about that topic or the years of study that go into understanding the material, it would not be the final product. So how long does it take to prepare these talks? It takes a lifetime. Because the good speaker is drawing on that lifetime and not just on any immediate preparation that he or she might do.

**CS:** Very well put. Well, now imagine, if you will, that you are a public speaking super hero. What do you believe would be your main superpower?

**FFP:** I would say that it's passion. You know there's an old saying for preachers that preaching means you're handing on to others the things that you have contemplated in secret, in private, in silence, in stillness. When I prepare a talk, the main thing I'm looking for is whether I am getting excited about delivering the message I'm about to deliver. And it comes to a certain point where I feel it physically. I think about. I organize my thoughts. And what does this audience need to know? Of course, we have to know as much about the audience as possible. And when it finally comes together, when I know I'm ready to give that

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<sup>1</sup> Venerable Fulton John Sheen was an American archbishop of the Catholic Church known for his preaching and especially his work on television and radio.

talk, one of the ways I know is that I actually feel the excitement. Now it may be something that I said a thousand times before. So, what's exciting about it is not only that the message is still as meaningful as it was the very first time I gave it, but because I also know now I am proclaiming this message to a group of people that has not heard it before. For them this is going to be the very first time.

And parenthetically, we should we should say that this is one of the temptations for speakers is that because they may have said something a thousand times, they're less enthusiastic about it because to them it seems like oh this is old news. This is something that is monotonous, or boring, or repetitive. And constantly reminding ourselves, no, these people are hearing this for the first time. That should get us excited. And that does get me excited.

So, this is the passion that counts. Many people say to me, when I heard you talk, I could tell that you believe what you were saying. You spoke from the heart. We can't be fired up about it ourselves, it's going to be impossible to fire up or inspire other people about whatever the topic is that we are addressing. So, the main superpower, if we have passion, then the message we're conveying is going to be effective.

**CS:** So, what advice would you give someone if they wanted to develop that particular superpower, as well?

**FFP:** Well, my key advice would be that they that they really give themselves to the topic that they're going to be speaking about. I consider one of my greatest advantages the fact that I'm in a position, professionally, where all my time, all of my energy, and all my focus are directed to the topic that I that I'm speaking about. And so, for example, because the circles I travel in this movement, are circles that I'm always traveling in. It's not something that I'm doing on the side. It's not something that's part time. But because I'm fully immersed in it, I'm often in situations where, I mean aside from developing the knowledge and being able to think about all the different angles of the of the issues I'm speaking on, I end up being also in situations where I have some unique experiences that then become part of the talks.

For example, with this with this whole pro-life issue, I've been in situations where for example I was with Mother Teresa and she asked me to speak to various groups out in India, and she and I had had personal conversations about this issue because she knew I was playing a special role in this movement. Likewise, when the brain injured woman in Florida, Terri Schaivo, died five years ago, because of the circles in which I traveled and my visibility on these on these issues, I was on the very short visitors list and was able to be in her room.

The experience I had ministering to her directly, seeing what was going on firsthand, and witnessing things that only a handful of people witnessed, then becomes, later on, an element in my talks that makes them particularly powerful and persuasive. Because people always want to get that inside track. They want to hear from the eyewitnesses. Those things would not have happened if I had not immersed myself completely in the topic and the movement related to that topic.

So, my advice to someone who wants to really become a super power speaker on a particular topic is give yourself to it completely. And to the extent that it can be your full-time passion, well then to that extent, you're almost guaranteed to have an impact on people when you speak about it. Like few other people will be able to do.

The other thing I'd say to the public speakers, again, as I go back to that that definition of preaching, and I say to them, if you haven't contemplated these things in private, if you haven't spent a lot of time in silence, in solitude, really processing within yourself, really digesting what you want to hand on to others, then it's not going to come out so clearly. And certainly, if you can't summarize it in one sentence, a very clear statement of what it is you want to convey for each topic you're going to give, then again, the people are not going to be able to come away with a very clear statement of what they've just learned. It's got to be so clear to you that it's second nature to bring it across to your audience.

**CS:** Right. Now there was something sort of in between the words of what you were saying that I also got out of what you're saying, and that is be observant in your life so that you will know when the stories or life experiences happen to you that you can use in your speaking.

**FFP:** Yes. And that is that is that is so key, because what you're speaking about. Well when we think of speaking what's really happening is that it's an interpersonal connection. OK so we're speaking to people. And so, it's an extension of yourself. And service is an extension of yourself. If you're constantly giving yourself to others in a positive way, in relation to whatever the topic is you're talking about, then you know that topic from the inside. There's a big difference between, you know, we could speak, for example, if someone to give it eloquent talk for example about how noble it is to feed the poor, if they have never touched the poor, or seen their eyes as they long for food, or see their smile when you give them that food or embrace them, It's such a difference. I mean, you can have all the right ideas and concepts, but if you've actually served, your words are actually going to come out different. There is going to be a passion shaping those words. And this is what people who are listening to you are going to do to a sense when they say, "Oh this came from your heart. We could tell that you were really convinced of this and passionate about it.

**CS:** It's really about walking your talk.

**FFP:** Exactly. If you're walking the talk you're going to be able to talk a whole lot better.

**CS:** Yes. Definitely. Well thank you so much for sharing your insights on public speaking with us today, Father Frank.

**FFP:** It is my pleasure to do so and I wish the best to you and all our listeners.

**CS:** Wonderful. Well this is the end of today's session of *Public Speaking Super Powers*. This is your host, Carma Spence. signing off.

If you would like to learn more about Father Frank Pavone, visit his profile page at:  
<http://publicspeakingpowers.com/featuredspeakers/father-frank-pavone/>