

## **Preaching. Gender in Education. Real Presence.**

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

August 18, 2019

A bishop has the daunting task of surveying the horizon. Despite appearances, each of the following items invites serious reflection by both clergy and laity.

Ave Maria Press sent me Fr. Joshua Whitfield's, "The Crisis of Bad Preaching: Redeeming the Heart and Way of the Catholic Preacher." I recently spent a week with two homiletics professors who give high marks to this book. It makes for timely reading as it proposes that preaching requires a heartfelt, informed spirituality in both the speaker and the listener. In my own words, not the author's, too many Catholics cannot recognize a good homily. So I appreciate his bringing non-ordained people into the preaching preparation dynamic. A convert from another tradition, the author says that Catholic parish priests experience a more demanding load than we imagine. Still, they must bracket time for daily prayer and planning for each Sunday homily.

It so happens that Fr. Whitfield's book squares with our Uniting in Heart 2030 efforts. It helps us to appreciate what missionary discipleship asks from both clergy and laity. Accepting daily the work of the Holy Spirit, especially in prayer, and growing in God's Word, is what we aspire to. Pastoral planning can only bear fruit when we submit our wills to the Spirit's influence.

We can be grateful for a recent document from the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Educational Institutions. It is called, "Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education." Because the church speaks out of its experience in many countries and cultures, Americans will be reminded that we are not the sole repository of all wisdom. This subject matter has been part of our church and school conversations for many years. The document proposes a method for the ongoing dialogue: to listen, to reason, and to propose. The text runs for 31 pages and reminds us that we are talking to and about people, not bloodless academic assertions.

At deadline, I saw a report about a Pew Survey. It indicates that many Catholics define Christ's real presence in the Eucharist/Communion as "symbolic." This particular survey deserves to be sifted. I believe and teach that the Eucharist is Christ's presence, body and blood, soul and divinity (Catechism, no. 1374). At the same time, a true symbol is not nothing. Theology professors and philosophers teach us that symbols are not empty, inert. Tell members of a synagogue that a spray-painted swastika on their building is just a symbol. A couple's wedding bands are not 'just' symbols – they receive and reinforce meaning. In the technical language of the Church, the sign of the cross and the Nicene Creed are symbols. This might be a good moment to ask whether we know the content of individual words, much less the content of Sacraments.

How much of public discourse reveals that we have forgotten or never knew the meanings of things? Such is a threat both to the vitality of religion and the ongoing health of the republic. As for the Church, it is a small blessing that the survey was published at the beginning, not the end, of fall school and parish religious education classes.