

Catholics need solid preaching, not fluff

ROME - Catholics need solid preaching about Jesus, the cross and the church, and not “feel-good” spiritual advice that demands no sacrifice, said U.S. Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of Milwaukee.

Preaching well means challenging people’s complacency and, like Christ, occasionally “shaking things up,” Archbishop Dolan said in Rome Jan. 14. That cannot happen if preachers soft-pedal the cross, he said.

“Maybe the greatest threat to the church is not heresy, not dissent, not secularism, not even moral relativism, but this sanitized, feel-good, boutique, therapeutic spirituality that makes no demands, calls for no sacrifice, asks for no conversion, entails no battle against sin, but only soothes and affirms,” he said.

“Our preaching can then become cotton candyish: a lot of fluff, air and sugar, but no substance,” he said.

Archbishop Dolan made the remarks at the Pontifical North American College, where he lectured on “Preaching: An Ecclesial Vocation.” While noting that preaching the Gospel is a mandate shared by all Christians, he focused on the preaching of ordained ministers.

The archbishop said priests should first of all understand preaching as an ecclesial, not a personal, vocation. That doesn’t mean a preacher doesn’t bring his own personality to a sermon, but “the substance must be Christ,” he said.

“I am afraid that too often today the ‘accident’ of our own person, our own agenda, trumps the substance of the person of Christ and the message of his church,” he said.

Priests should also remember that when they are preaching it is imperative that they “speak lovingly, tenderly of the church,” he said.

“For some preachers it seems obligatory to criticize the church in their homilies. They claim she is hopelessly outmoded, patriarchal, oppressive, insensitive, corrupt, unenlightened – all (of) which really translates: unwilling to do what they want,” he said.

Archbishop Dolan said that does not mean turning a blind eye to the flaws and imperfections in the church. But the attempt to be a prophetic critic of the church in the pulpit is misguided, he said.

“We are in the pulpit not to speak against the church but to speak about her, for her, with her, from her,” he said.

That’s sometimes a tough assignment, he said, because many priests today hear from their own faithful: “I believe in God. I just don’t need the church.”

“The folks have trouble with the church. They want the king without the kingdom, Christ without his church, and for us Catholics it’s a package deal,” the archbishop said.

Ordained ministers, he said, are unequivocally “men of the church” as preachers, and their duty is to “teach what she does, not preach what we like.”

Archbishop Dolan, who was rector at the North American College from 1994 to 2001, recalled that the college chapel’s high altar is inscribed with eight episodes: the seven sacraments and “almost an eighth one, preaching.”