

U.S. cardinal emphasizes how to listen to, proclaim Gospel

ROME – How to listen well to the word of God and how to proclaim it well have emerged as the key questions for the Synod of Bishops on the Bible, said Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago.

Both challenges call for improved individual preparation as well as a broader effort to shape culture in a way that recovers biblical literacy, he said.

Cardinal George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, spoke in an interview Oct. 13 with Catholic News Service in Rome, where he was attending the Oct. 5-26 synod.

After the synod heard more than 150 speeches during its first week, Cardinal George said one clear concern was improved training for the “world of proclaimers” – particularly in the preparation priests and seminarians receive on how to preach Scripture.

The reason preaching is on synod members’ minds, he said, is that they are wondering why biblical renewal hasn’t fostered “more dynamic homilies that bring people into the word of God,” especially during liturgical celebrations.

The question touches on homiletics courses, but also on the way Scripture is taught, and whether there is an adequate emphasis on all the levels of meaning contained in scriptural texts, Cardinal George said.

“There is a level of meaning that is purely human, if you like, in the mind of the inspired author, but nonetheless limited to his own context,” he said.

That’s an important aspect of biblical interpretation, but if homilies are reduced to this aspect, they’re not going to be very inspiring, the cardinal said.

“Then there is the meaning that God intends in the whole history of salvation, which can read Scripture as a whole and not just analyze parts of it,” he said.

Making that level of meaning accessible requires familiarity with such things as church commentary, doctrinal development, catechesis and the church fathers' understanding of the texts, he said.

One thing the synod has heard emphasized repeatedly is the importance of "lectio divina," the prayerful reading of Scripture, both in the preparation of priests and as a spiritual practice for lay faithful.

In the "world of the hearers," whether in developed countries or in places of oral tradition, the church has to help make sure that the word of God has a chance to be heard, Cardinal George said.

That can't be taken for granted today, he said. In the cardinal's own synod speech to the synod, he made the point that biblical language and imagery have largely disappeared from popular culture.

A century ago in the United States, he said, the Bible was read regularly in many homes. Today, even among fundamentalist Christians, that kind of familiarity with Scripture appears less strong, he said.

"You wouldn't have a literary figure like (William) Faulkner writing about Absalom, I think, in this generation, not even in the South. Who's Absalom? Faulkner knew, and so did his readers. Now you'd need a guide in order to tell you that," he said.

The late Mr. Faulkner's novel, "Absalom, Absalom!" is considered a literary masterpiece. Its title refers to the biblical story of Absalom, a son of David who rebelled against his father.

Cardinal George said it was important to reintroduce these images and figures into the popular culture, but to do that the church has to "be where the conversations that shape culture take place."

"You have to find people who shape that culture, or who are willing to do so, or who live it themselves, so that religiously inspired works of art and literature aren't automatically in the small categories rather than the mainstream of modern culture and art," he said.

“That means you’ve got to have agents, actors, artists, producers who want to do that,” he added.

Cardinal George said it’s a bit of an uphill battle in the United States because today’s culture tends to subscribe to the gnostic conviction that obtaining “hidden, secret knowledge is what it means to be saved.”

He said the idea is that “if you can get hold of this knowledge or if you can master it, then you’re OK and you don’t have to depend upon relations.”

For Catholics, however, he said, salvation is all about relations – the relationship to Christ and to those who know Christ and love him, and the conviction that love is more powerful than knowledge.