

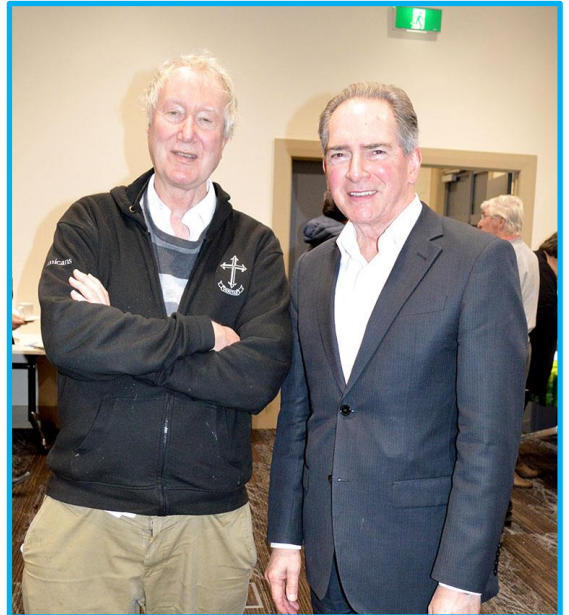
TOUCHING THE IMAGINATION: 'THE ADVENTURE OF FAITH AND TEACHING'

The Catholic Diocese of Ballarat was delighted to host Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, a world-renowned speaker in theology and spirituality, for a two-day workshop entitled 'Touching the Imagination: The Adventure of Faith and Teaching'. The workshop was held on Tuesday 30 and Wednesday 31 May in the Cathedral Parish Hall, Ballarat. Participants included clergy, principals, teachers and other diocesan and parish people. Sue Searls, Diocesan Director of Caritas and Catholic Mission gives the following reflection:

Thank you to the Ballarat Catholic Education Office and Council of Priests for enabling these two days of inspirational and motivational presentations by Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP. I have been asked to share a little with you from these days.

Fr Timothy kept his audience captured through his humour and storytelling of real life experiences and three segments from the movie "Of God and Men" as a segue into relevant points in his presentation.

He said that in today's society, being a Christian is an invitation to take the risk of falling in love with Christ, to know the joy of God as well as the sorrow and not be imprisoned by our timidity. To find ways to not only find meaning in the beauty of our faith, but also to find ways to communicate the romance of our religion to others, especially the young. He referred to thousands of young people in Europe including approximately "One hundred and ten young Australians being captivated by the mythology of ISIS, this mad death, because it asks everything. So how can we show that our Christianity asks of everybody what they can give?" He cited Tolkien's book *The Lord of the Rings* as having



captured the imagination of millions of people. Tolkien always having said it was a story of his faith, largely a story of the Eucharist. However, millions of people around the world have been captured by the story through romance.

Fr Timothy then asked, “How do we share the romance of our faith?” He stated that our faith is not a gentle spirituality and if presented this way falls short, because “it is the imperfection of the Body of Christ to the end, whatever it costs.”

He spoke of Imagination as being an adventure of seeking the truth. The challenge being the beauty and love of truth. He commented on teachers needing to know and love their subject and for students to see this. He referred to Thomas Merton “seeing God in all things”. Fr Timothy spoke of knowledge as being transformative and that teaching truth is more important than teaching facts. Teaching truth as being transformative of whom you are.

Christianity is rooted in faith. Christianity being a religion of the face. Christian Ministry having its roots in the face we present to others. In some sense the face of God. God’s delight, joy, sorrow. In life’s adventures whether one is a teacher, religious, missionary, married person with an ill partner, whatever, we are always being called beyond our comfort zone.

Fr Timothy also addressed the question of “How can we teach the young to engage with difference in the search for truth?” Valuing what they are good at and their strengths. Validating their concerns and providing opportunity to challenge in a safe environment, respecting their views and allowing them to have a voice. Trust being essential. Participants had time for group discussion and sharing.

Being a Priest in the 21st Century

On the second day, Fr Timothy addressed mostly priests with some lay attendees returning to hear his words of wisdom. He spoke of the challenges priests face today in their pastoral ministry as differs from previous years. He cited scriptural references such as Deuteronomy, giving reference to “choosing life” and the story of Emmaus as being a mirror story to the Visitation, the journey. A story that illuminates the challenges faced by priests today, including all the baptized. We are all God’s priests through our baptism, not just the ordained. That we have to transcend all that divides us from our personal boundaries.

Priesthood, he says, involves profound listening, opening our being to all that one has to help the people, to support them. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to feelings of disappointment, of anger and betrayal. People today look at priests as strangers. The challenge for priests today include living with media, religious fundamentalism and other challenges of being a priest in the 21st century, challenges not thought of fifty years ago. Priesthood also requires giving recognition that we cannot do everything. An ordained priest acts in the service of Christ but is not the whole Christ. He suggested that the ordained priests find those in their community who can realise the Body of Christ and the presence of Christ within the whole community and enlist their support.



He spoke of the need to walk with people, as an essential part of being a priest, even when they are walking in the wrong direction.

The art of listening was emphasized over the two days. Listening to people's voices, their disappointments, anger, accusations, fears and hopes - "a priest listens to all". He recognised that this is one of the most difficult things to do and that to enable one to do this, it is important to find time to sit in peace. It is through the quiet and the stillness in the peace of Christ that one is able to listen.

Many challenges that priests face today in their daily lives were raised, including that of living with the tension between the convictions of the Church and the questions raised today. He acknowledged the courage it takes to walk with people and to transcend all party politics that divide people while emphasizing the importance of profound listening, being open and learning to listen as Christ listened.

Fr Timothy also suggested learning to teach and reach out to the youth that are hungering to make some meaning of the lives that they are living. Teach an expression of our great hope. He said, "Let's open the door to all the suffering and disillusion. No questions are forbidden. Hope is the desperate desire but that it would all make sense in the end."

To rest – take Sabbath – embody freedom of Christ.

Our Conscience

In the second session of day two, Fr Timothy addressed the question of "What is a conscience?" He shared his individual perspective that it is "profoundly related to how we understand what it means to be human". For many people he commented, it is what we define as "I am me", essentially seeing conscience as being a guided instinct. A view he remarked has some truth. Fr Timothy also referred to a document titled "Faithful understanding of the Faith" and quoted St John's letter saying, "All you have knowledge" and "the anointing you have received from Christ abides in you so you do not need anyone to teach you". He cited *Gaudem Es Spes* from Second Vatican Council quoting "conscience is the most secret call and sanctuary of a human being". Why? He asked, because "he or she is alone with God, whose voice echoes in their depths".

Fr Timothy also referred to *Sensus Fidei* (Sense of Faith) in the life of the Church and to Cardinal Newman, known as the Doctor of Conscience, as having had impact on Pope Benedict in his days as a priest.

He named individual voices in the Church over the centuries who raised questions within the Church, for example Catherine of Sienna, Dorothy Day, St Mary Mackillop, and in more recent times, Yves Congar. (Yves Marie-Joseph Congar, OP was a French Dominican friar, Catholic priest and theologian. He is perhaps best known for his influence at the Second Vatican Council).

Fr Timothy stated that today's Church differs from old as it makes room for the consciousness of the laity. It endeavours to listen to the people of God, to listen outwards to all authority of what it carries. Fr Timothy also spoke of the make-up of our Church today as we know it. Gay people, divorced, abused, remarried and the invitation to us to go deeper into our faith and what it means, complimented with, and being respectful of, the nuances of human lives. There were many questions and answers. One response to a query was,

"The Church does not change its teaching but goes to a deeper understanding of the consequences of the teaching. Paul wrote to Timothy – God is always faithful to us. This is crucial! Look at individual cases. Look at how people live".

Talking about The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family (19 March 2016), *Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family*, Fr Timothy stated, "life is not static, get into the journey of where it is, into the mess of people's real lives. That it is important to engage respectfully with people. The triumph of hope", he said. In relation to divorce, he remarked, "Let us rejoice that after one great fail they did not suppress their desire to love again. Mercy triumphs over everything else."

I have endeavoured to condense 19 pages of notes into what I have shared, hopefully presenting a true context of what Fr. Timothy shared with us. I personally was stuck by two comments I have heard him say, "Beauty is the door to let people in" and "Christianity is in your face, to look at people with the compassion of God"