

Interview with Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky

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LOUISVILLE, Kentucky — Archbishop Joseph Kurtz took the reins in Louisville a year ago after serving eight years as bishop of Knoxville, Tennessee. He replaced popular Archbishop Thomas Kelly, a Dominican who led the Louisville archdiocese for a quarter-century.

Kurtz, 62, is widely seen as a rising star in the American hierarchy. While he was still in Knoxville, the diocese topped a February 2007 ranking of American dioceses by *Crisis* magazine based on numerical criteria such as active priests, vocations, and adults received into the church. After just a year in Louisville, he's launched an aggressive stewardship campaign with a goal of raising \$66 million to foster what Kurtz calls "vibrant parishes." Kurtz also plays an important role on the national stage. He was elected treasurer of the U.S. bishops' conference at the November 2007 meeting (defeating Bishop Michael Bransfield of Wheeling-Charleston by a 2-to-1 margin), and also serves as chair of a subcommittee currently preparing a new, and mildly controversial, pastoral letter on marriage.

Following is the text of an interview, which took place in Kurtz's office at the chancery in Louisville.

NCR: You grew up in Pennsylvania, but your episcopal career has been in Tennessee and Kentucky. What have you learned about Catholicism in the American South?

Archbishop Kurtz: First of all, I think many people have a stereotype of Pennsylvania. I grew up in a little coal town where the Catholic church was quite predominant, with many ethnic groups. But most of my time as a priest was serving in the Lehigh Valley, Allentown, Bethlehem, which was not predominantly Catholic. I think that's counter-intuitive for most people who see Pennsylvania as pretty much all Catholic.

When I went to East Tennessee on the day my appointment as bishop was announced, it was the first time I was ever physically in the state of Tennessee. I had a sense of, 'What kind of world is this?' What I found is that much of East Tennessee has some of the fabric, especially in the rural areas, that I knew coming from the coal regions of Pennsylvania ... small towns, very family-driven, in many ways very neighborly. It was assumed that you'd say hello to someone whether you knew them or not, which was definitely not the case in Philadelphia! In some ways, it was more in keeping with what I was used to growing up than my days in the seminary, which were in Philadelphia.

What about the religious climate?

We Catholics were much more seen as a minority. In the cities, Chattanooga and Knoxville, there was also recognition of how much Catholicism was growing. In fact, quite often when someone from the local newspaper wanted a quote from a religious leader, they called me, even though we weren't the majority. In the very rural parts of Tennessee, on the other hand, there I saw what I had come in expecting to find. In some cases, I was the first Catholic someone had ever met. Some kids were saying to me, 'I'm the only Catholic in my classroom at school.' I remember when some of our kids went to Indianapolis for a youth conference, and they were

together with 24,000 young Catholics. It was a cultural shock, because they were so used to a very, very small setting.

Here in central Kentucky, in the Archdiocese of Louisville, there's really three worlds at work. I'd say the southern tier of the archdiocese, the part that borders Tennessee, you're talking about very small rural areas with Catholics a clear minority.

The majority would be various forms of Evangelical Protestantism?

Yes, and the farther you go down, the most common thing you find is Freewill Baptists. That's certainly the case in many of the rural areas. It's very congregational-driven. In a sense it's very homey, but not necessarily wanting to know what the rest of the world is thinking.

In the middle of the archdiocese is the Bardstown area, and you probably know that's the heart, if you will, of our 200th anniversary. It's very small, but extremely rooted in Catholicism. I was just down there yesterday to visit the Dominican mother house and St. Catherine's College. When I went in the gate, it said, "1822: The first Dominican community of sisters established in the United States." That's not at all atypical when you go down into what we call the 'Catholic holy land.'

Then you've got urban Louisville. We're having some clustering, but basically 65 of our parishes, more than half of the whole archdiocese, are in this county. It has deep Catholic roots in terms of numbers of parishes and institutions ... schools, orphanages, hospitals and so on.

Are the Catholic numbers in the archdiocese going up or down?

I think there's movement, but the net number is about the same. One thing that may be different between where I was in Tennessee and here in Louisville is that when people moved into Tennessee from the north to retire, they were moving into an area that was two to four percent Catholic, out of an area that was 20 or 30 percent Catholic. Naturally, when there was a much greater chance that the newcomers would be Catholic. Here, that's not the case. One thing I've observed is that people who are moving in to retire often grew up here. They moved away for a career, and then can't wait to get back. It's a very wholesome city, with a downtown that's upbeat and growing.

At the level of stereotypes, some people contrast Catholicism in the South with the East Coast, which can sometimes feel more formal, more institutional, perhaps a bit more rigid. Has that been your experience?

Remember, while I did go to seminary in Philadelphia from 1963 to 1972, there's been quite a lot of water under the bridge from 1972 to the present! I was on loan to the Scranton diocese for three years in the 1970s, and other than that I was in Allentown.

I would have to say that there's a couple of worlds going on here. There is a lot of change. Like most places these days, we're welcoming new immigrants. We have much more outreach to Latino families than would have been the case 20 years ago, though there's actually more of that in Tennessee than here. But side by side with that we have strong and deep roots. I mentioned at our bicentennial Mass that at St. Michael's Parish in Fairfield, I met a gentleman who pointed to his son and said, 'This young man is the tenth generation at St. Michael's.' You go down to visit Gethsemani, you look at the protocathedral in Bardstown, all the various

institutions that are in our area ... there's a much deeper sense of Catholic roots here, in many ways, than there was in the Diocese of Allentown where I grew up.

You have a reputation as someone who's been effective at generating vocations. This year, for example, Louisville has 14 seminarians, up from four just two years ago. What's the secret?

First of all, thank you for being among the group that gives me credit! Of course, God calls, and we try to stay out of the way. It's important to remember that it was Archbishop Kelly who last summer accepted six new candidates. What happened is that within the church of Louisville itself, there was sense that God is calling and we need to be more intentional about reaching out. That happened on many different levels, all before I came. The priests, for example, were working very hard. My coming probably added a little bit of confidence that the Lord is indeed calling. I try to be ... what's the word?

Bold?

Bold would be a good word ... bold about saying that I really do believe God is calling. I do believe that we need to be bold in speaking right across the board about vocations, that God has a plan for each of us.

How much of a difference does a bishop make in generating vocations?

That's a good question. How much of a difference does a coach make to a team?

Some seem to have better track records than others.

I think so, you're probably right. Setting priorities is certainly part of it. You have to be willing in a forthright way to encourage and really support those priests who are cultivating vocations within a parish. It has to be across the board ... talking about it at Serra Club meetings, or at things like our 'Dinner with the Archbishop.' That's actually a longtime tradition here. This year we had 400 people, so it's hardly an intimate dinner. That's been going on for 20-some years. It's been renewed, and it gets bigger every year. Probably more people came this year because I was new. Whenever there's a change in leadership, of course, there's always curiosity about what the new emphasis might be.

Do you carve time out to be with your seminarians?

I do. Just in these last few weeks, I did two talks and a Mass at St. Meinrad's for the Day of Recollection they have to start the year, over Labor Day weekend. That gave me the chance to visit with the seminarians we have there. I happen to be on a couple different committees of the bishops' conference, so I was in Washington and Baltimore a week and a half ago. I stay at the Theological College, so I saw the one seminarian we have there. We also went and had dinner with the seminarians that we have at St. Mary's in Roland Park, and said Mass there. I think there is something very intentional about that. This coming week, I'll have lunch with our vocations director. Giving time and priority to vocations does help, there's no question about it.

On the other hand, I'm a little reluctant to say that we can describe God's call in purely natural terms. We have to be careful that we aren't pulled in by the numbers game. In our church here, in the archdiocese, thirty years ago people were depending upon priests to do certain things that today are being done by lay people, women's religious and deacons ... things they're doing very well and very appropriately. We can't simply be looking at the replacement figures. I always resist that. I think it's much better to ask, 'What makes for a vibrant parish? To what extent is there a good match between the priest who's been assigned and the needs of that parish?' We're small enough we can do that. Maybe in big archdioceses they have to think more in terms of numbers, how many are retiring and how many are being ordained, but I resist that. Statistics can be as much an obstacle as they are a help.

In other words, we don't want to evaluate the church the same way we evaluate General Motors.

That's right, and I think even General Motors has moved beyond a strictly quantitative way of thinking. That's my point.

You stepped into an archdiocese recovering from the sexual abuse crisis. The settlement here was a little less than \$30 million. Has that resolved all the cases?

The ruling took into account all of those who had come forward. Obviously, God forbid, there could be new situations of abuse, or cases from the past that could still come forward.

You don't have any outstanding cases now?

No.

What impact has that payout had on operations?

Of course, I didn't see the changes that occurred five years ago when the settlement happened. I know a couple of things were done. There was an increase in the assessment, which puts more of a burden on the parishes. There was also some decrease in staffing. All that, of course, was five years ago. What I've seen since arriving here is great stability. I think we're probably leaner than we have been.

In your opinion, it hasn't affected your capacity to deliver services?

I don't think it has. Depending on who you talk to, you might find a particular person who says, 'I think we need to do more' in this or that area, but that was true in East Tennessee too. There's always going to be more that could be done.

The motivating factor for the stewardship campaign we've just launched was not the settlement, but rather trying to give parishes an opportunity to look at their own plans – with a certain sense of synergy, because the parish next door will be doing the same thing. We're not in what I would call a negative mindset ...

You're not in crisis mode?

That's right. That project has actually begun this fall. We're in the midst of a stewardship campaign that's parish-driven called "Building a Future of Hope."

How much do you hope to raise?

First of all, the primary goal isn't a dollar amount, it's vibrant parishes. I've said that my goal has to do with the number of families involved. My experience of East Tennessee is that what's important isn't the amount of money being raised, but the new leadership that's raised up, because that's more permanent. Unfortunately, money gets raised and spent.

In terms of dollars and cents, the goal is based on a general formula, and right now it's roughly \$66 million. That presumes a certain level being raised that's equivalent to roughly one and one-half percent of the annual giving within a parish. It's more of a benchmark.

Are you on target?

It's too early to know. I should add that although fifty percent or more stays in the parish, the amount that comes for archdiocesan use will be helping to fund the cost of our seminarians, retired priests, keeping assessments down, Catholic education ... all the things that make for a vibrant parish.

You must have some indication that \$66 million is achievable.

I think so.

Despite the crisis, people in the archdiocese are still willing to support the church?

There has been no stop in supporting the church. That's one thing I've been very happy to see. I'm told, though this is mostly anecdotal, that there are some people whose faith has grown tepid, or who have not gone to church. I'm hoping that in our strategic planning we can find ways of reaching out to these people through renewal and evangelization.

That brings me to the spiritual and pastoral fallout from the crisis, beyond the dollars and cents.

I have to say that what I've seen is an upbeat situation. We recently had Fr. Steve Rossetti [of St. Luke Institute] to speak at our assembly of priests in June. He does all kind of surveys, and I'm not always sure how valid this kind of polling is. But from a morale viewpoint, the results were very encouraging. Our priests, well over 90 percent, had a fundamentally positive view. Even after a year, the reception of me was still positive, which of course I'm grateful for. I'm not seeing a church in crisis, not at all.

One of the first things you did in Louisville was to call for greater fidelity to the directives of the General Instruction on the Roman Missal – things like the use of kneelers, for example. Why was that important to you?

The first thing I actually did was visit all twelve of our regions. It was there that I had some opportunity for listening. Out of that, I identified seven priorities, the sixth of which was embracing as fully as possible the General Instruction. I saw that as something all dioceses are going through, some at different levels from others. I didn't see that as the only important thing to do, but it was probably the most public.

The first theme I used in my homily here was 'Unity with Christ in Truth and Charity.' By the way, I'm happy that the title of the Holy Father's new encyclical will be 'Truth and Charity.' Truth, in this case, means seeking ways in which we embrace our Catholic faith. Liturgy is a very good starting point ... the way we pray is the way we believe. I'm hoping that it's not simply a question of installing kneelers, but continuing to deepen the experience of worship within our community, and to do so in a way in which we come closer each Sunday not only as a parish but as a local church.

Do you think we're in a moment when this sort of clarity about Catholic identity – in this case, in liturgy – is especially important?

I do. In the Archdiocese of Louisville, I see a call for us to clearly reaffirm the local church. I actually saw that as being even more important in Tennessee, because I saw that the atmosphere in the South is very much congregational-driven. The good news is that on Wednesday nights you can do whatever you want, because pretty much everybody else is going to something religious! I like that, I think there's a priority on religion. The difficult thing, however, is to help people understand and take pride in the fact that they're part of a local church, that it's not just their parish but the diocese too. That's why our Mass at Slugger's Field with 6,000 people [for the bicentennial] was important, or the Mass at which I was installed, which had about 5,000 people. We're going to have a Mass on Sunday in front of St. Joseph's Protocathedral in Bardstown. These events are all part of that sense. ... I began putting my calendar in the diocesan paper, precisely because usually wherever the bishop is, there's something celebratory going on. It's not always right here in Louisville. It might be down in Jamestown, or in the far reaches of our diocese. I wanted to create that sense that people ought to be as interested in what's happening in some other part of the church. I think that's an important part of reasserting the pride, maybe, in our Catholic faith, one that I hope is energizing, open and welcoming.

But that's also distinctive?

Exactly, though one that also prides itself on being a good neighbor, in being civically involved and interested in the common good. That quality of giving back to the community is also distinctively Catholic.

There's a common diagnosis these days that the immediate post-Vatican II years marked a period of great reform, most of which was enormously positive, but that now there's a need to reconsolidate some aspects of Catholic identity that perhaps were played down a bit. Do you agree?

I would agree. I'm just now reading John O'Malley's book on the Second Vatican Council. I haven't finished it, but what I found interesting is that there is a framework that I find very helpful, a sense of continuity. ... On one of my visits around the archdiocese, someone said

to me, 'You know, we're a Vatican II parish.' I said, 'I hope every one of them is a Vatican II parish!' ... In the 1970s, one had the sense of something distinctively different than what the church had experienced in the centuries that came before.

You mean there's greater emphasis today on continuity?

The Holy Father has put his stamp of approval, so to speak, on this way of seeing things. He's asked us to look at the distinctive things about the Second Vatican Council, which we in no way want to lose, but without this sense that we found ourselves at a cliff, with some saying 'We're not going there,' and others happily jumping off to leave the past and enter into the future. That over-emphasis on discontinuity is the problem.

So fidelity to the GIRM is a small instance of this bigger movement?

Exactly. It's an area like many others – moral theology is another example – where we're look within ourselves ... How do we see ourselves as distinctively Catholic, not simply being pulled along by the culture but having an effect on it?

You serve as chair of the Subcommittee on Marriage and Family of the bishops' conference. In that role, you've been responsible for work toward a new pastoral letter on marriage. Where does that project stand?

First of all, we have to locate it within the conference's broader Pastoral Initiative on Marriage. That's very important, because otherwise it can look threadbare ... like there's just a pastoral letter, and it's either going forward or not. From the beginning, I have seen this as part of a bigger initiative we have already begun. The backgrounders we gave to the bishops, the 'What have you done for your marriage today?' campaign, the materials on the web site ... these are not things to overlook, because they are building a foundation.

On the pastoral letter, here's what I would envision. The fact that I envision it, of course, doesn't mean it's necessarily going to happen this way, but I always like to start out with a supposition. I suspect there will be multiple offerings given [by the committee to the full body of bishops]. One will be a pastoral letter. Our committee is meeting in three weeks in Chicago to look over a draft. My hope is that the draft will be ready, if not for the June meeting of the bishops, surely by November. As you well know, some say that November is actually a better time for fuller participation in something important, so there might be good reason, even if we were ready, to wait.

We're also moving forward with something we had wanted from the beginning, which is specific offshoots from the letter ... maybe things related to marriage preparation, in collaboration with other groups in the USCCB. You know that this whole "task force" movement in the conference took shape after work on this pastoral letter had already begun. There is a task force on strengthening marriage, chaired by Bishop Gabino Zavala, auxiliary from Los Angeles, who also sits on our subcommittee and who was on the Priorities and Planning committee. The task force's job is to help us think organically. For example, if we're dealing with marriage and family, should not someone from catechetics be there to talk about how we're presenting the gift of marriage in textbooks? That's the idea.

Is the draft you're working on now being prepared in concert with the Committee on Doctrine?

No, not in concert. We will certainly work in consultation with Doctrine. That was one of things we said early on, when we started the process two and a half years ago – not to work in isolation, but to have that collaboration. At the second colloquium we did [in preparing the draft], at Notre Dame two and a half years ago, we invited all the members of the Committee on Doctrine to come. In fact, Fr. Tom Weinandy [executive director of the Secretariat on Doctrine] was one of the participants. So this is not a new thing, we've been doing it all along. Maybe we were thinking organically earlier than we had to! At any rate, that's something with which I think we're going along well.

When you meet in three weeks, will somebody from the Committee on Doctrine be there?

No, I don't think so. They would be welcome, of course. The thing I'm more concerned with is that our subcommittee be connected with what is now the whole committee, meaning the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth. That's the more important connection now. Archbishop [Roger] Schweitz [of Anchorage, chair of the committee] and Bishop [Kevin] Vann [of Forth Worth] are not on our subcommittee, but they sit on the larger committee and they've agreed to take a special interest in marriage and family. That's really more important, that they are participants at the Chicago meeting. There's also going to be a conference call that will include Archbishop Schweitz. He's the key, because he's the one who is now the chair.

As you know, the draft has drawn mixed reactions. There seems to be a tension between those who want to see a letter on a topic such as marriage use a universally human language, drawing on the social sciences, and those who want a more specifically Catholic language rooted in sacramental theology. Obviously it's not an either/or, but how do you strike the right balance?

The first colloquium we did was at Creighton University in Omaha, where we brought together social scientists and theologians. The subcommittee made a decision not to proceed by just doing everything internally, and then when we finally have the pastoral letter we'll roll out a red carpet. There was some discussion [about whether to circulate early results outside the subcommittee], and I tended to favor not waiting ... I guess I come from a social work background, which is that since we kind of already know the answer – I mean, we're not going to change the theology of marriage – let's get on with it. What we ended up doing is issuing ten documents, two sides of a page each, specifically taking the insights of social science, the church's teaching on marriage, and some conclusions. They were given to the bishops over a ten-week period some time ago. That's been out there, and I think it helped to shape what the conference adopted in its Pastoral Initiative on Marriage.

With regard to the document itself, and by that I mean the final version of the pastoral letter, there's only so much ink you can put into a document. You're right, there's a tension there about the proper balance [between social science and theology.] That's not just occurring externally to the committee ... the committee itself felt that press. Should we have simply the theological presentation, and perhaps treat subjects such as growth in marriage over time, or

advocacy and public policy concerning marriage, as stand-alone and separate items – though obviously consistent with the document? I think that’s the direction we will end up with.

It may be a bad analogy, but I compare it to the packet put together by the Committee on Pro-Life Activities. Over the years, we’ve fashioned a packet for “Respect Life Month” that I think is extremely helpful. That packet doesn’t have just one document. It might have something very theological, but also ripples of that in very practical and specific areas. I see that as more in keeping with the metaphor we’re moving towards.

So the pastoral letter itself will be mostly sacramental theology?

That would be my hunch. We already have agreed that we have a web site that offers different things, so spinning out some elements [from the draft into separate documents] isn’t a new idea. It’s simply making use of what we already have. Not everything has to be in one text, and in today’s age, it may well be desirable not to have everything in one text.

This is an election year, and coincidentally Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe Biden, the lone Catholic on either national ticket, is visiting Louisville today. Once again, you’re faced with questions about how to deal with Catholic politicians whose public positions are at odds with church teaching. What approach have you adopted on that question?

The first thing to say is that I have participated in conversations at the national level with the bishops, and that has helped form my thinking. On the one hand, it’s very important for the bishops, including myself, to clearly enunciate church teachings. I think the primary work we ought to be doing is becoming increasingly sophisticated in the way we do that. I believe that the document on ‘Faithful Citizenship,’ even though it was a bear of a document to get through, was worth it. Different bishops might have different opinions, but it has been a great gift to me in my first year here – in working with Catholic charities, in working with our Catholic Conference of Kentucky, to develop a common language to understand how there is just one church and one church teaching. That’s the number one thing. To me, the most recent flaps that have occurred on a national level have drawn the bishops, I think rightly, into clarifying what the church teaches. I think it’s very important to enunciate clearly the teachings of the church, though in a way that does not show partisanship.

If Joe Biden is campaigning in Louisville one Sunday and goes to Mass, will he get communion?

I don’t know. I haven’t prepared either way for that event, because he’s not a parishioner here and he’s not actually come here. There was nothing that I know of, like a convention, which required me to deal with it. I really have not given any specific instruction with regard to communion.

So it’s up to the individual minister of communion?

No, that’s giving a direction. I said we haven’t given a direction. My primary approach has been that if there is a politician who is Catholic within the archdiocese, and whose positions

are counter to church teachings, I believe the proper moment – as many bishops do, in fact as I think all bishops do – to deal with that is in personal conversation, giving that particular politician the opportunity to help shape his or her conscience. That’s the direction I would take. So far as I’m aware, we have not had any situation like that, either in Tennessee or in Kentucky. Certainly, we have to be concerned about anything related to giving honors to someone taking public positions contrary to key teachings of the church, or somebody who articulates something publicly as if it’s Catholic doctrine.

You’re talking about the recent comments from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Biden on church teaching regard when life begins?

Yes. They misspoke in terms of Catholic teaching, and that can create, and has created, confusion in the minds of many people.

This looks like a strategic blunder, because what Pelosi and Biden managed to do is to change the subject from the role of a Catholic politician in a pluralistic culture, where some bishops might feel some sympathy, to the question of who has the right to teach publicly in the name of the church. Few bishops are likely to give ground on that second point.

That’s probably true, though I should say I’m not at all unhappy when a baptized person takes seriously his or her right, and responsibility, to learn about the faith and even to communicate it to others. When anyone does that inaccurately, however, the bishop has a special responsibility as the chief teacher to point that out. Of course, all baptized people have a responsibility to teach ... we hope every parent, for example, teaches the faith to their kids. But there’s special responsibility on the part of the bishop if confusion is created because of a public statement that aspires to express church teaching, but is just blatantly inaccurate. ... It’s not the question of who has the mantle to speak for the church that I’m most concerned about, but doing it accurately.

On a purely tactical level, do you have the sense that this flap could affect the Catholic vote in November?

It’s hard to know, and frankly it’s not my primary concern. The whole thrust of ‘Faithful Citizenship’ is to be a little more nuanced in our analysis of church teachings. You know that the bishops are very much aware of our strong teachings with regard to respect for human life, but over time, especially under John Paul II, we’ve also developed a very nuanced approach to how you deal with imperfect legislation. ... Archbishop [Charles] Chaput [of Denver] has put it well, that there has to be a grave reason to vote for someone who otherwise takes positions contrary to the protection of human life. One would need to be able to look people in the eye in Heaven, who might have lost their lives because of it, and explain it to them. ... As you know, the idea behind ‘Faithful Citizenship’ was never that it would be announced right before an election. I’m not looking only at the effect of moral teaching at election time. I’ll leave to the political analysts the job of reading the tea leaves about what electoral effect this may have. I’m really concentrating more on how I can use this occasion, and occasions well after the election, to teach the faith.

The Administrative Committee has placed a discussion of abortion and politics on the agenda for the November meeting. What do you expect to come out of that?

Certainly, sharing best practices. I always like to hear from other bishops, in a very free way, about the situations that have confronted them pastorally. The primary thrust needs to be, even in canon law, not something that's punitive but something that really is remedial, that reaches out and helps people to form their conscience. I'll be listening for very solid pastoral approaches. I always begin with the assumption that all people have the potential of being moved by grace to learn ... I certainly hope I do!

You're looking to share experiences, as opposed to crafting some new document or policy?

That would be my sense. This year I'm not on the Administrative Committee, though I'll be going back on in November with the treasurer's role. I have the benefit of reading the minutes, as everybody does, but you know as well as I do that it's not the same as being in the room. I don't know if there are specific nuances somebody may be looking for.

But from your own point of view, you don't feel there's a policy vacuum?

I don't, though if there are policy questions, I'm ready to discuss them.

Finally, you're preaching to the Catholic Coalition on Preaching this week, which has to be a bit daunting. Any hot tips on effective preaching?

Well, one of the things I always think about is the question of reception. Quite often I've had the experience that someone will come up to me to say, 'That was a great homily,' and then when they explain why they thought it was great, it turns out it wasn't the point I was making at all! So a good preacher has to be open to thinking about not just what's being said, but how it's likely to be received.

Walter Burghardt said one time that the gift of dynamic, zealous preaching is rarely given to the lazy. Preparation, becoming a student of the word in order to be a preacher of the word, is essential. On the other hand, I also got some great advice when I entered the seminary, which was, 'never let a retreat director ruin a perfectly good retreat.' There's something in that tension that's good for a preacher to know. Yes, we should prepare, we should take it seriously, but we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously that we're not aware the Word of God itself is effective. That confidence is a real consolation to me. It also allows me, when I preach to preachers, to have fun with it and not get so uptight.

Who's the best preacher you ever heard?

I don't have a ready answer to that. In many ways, I think the context is as important as the preacher. The times I've been most moved by preaching have come on retreats, when I had settled myself in prayer and preparing for the readings. I remember that in tenth grade a mission was given in the little Slovak parish where I went to Mass ... you remember how they used to come in from the outside to give a retreat in the evenings for a week. I don't remember anything the preacher said or even who he was, but I felt especially close to Christ and wanting to follow

him. I think it was instrumental in my applying for the seminary. The Holy Father talks about the joining of word and sacrament, so the Eucharist is the wider context. It's never preaching the word in isolation.

So if you want to preach well, be attentive to the whole liturgical context?

Exactly. Don't think that the only variable is your words ... don't make yourself more important than you really are.