



# What if priests fail to teach what the Church teaches?

by Father Thomas V. Berg, PhD

## DEAR FATHER BERG,

*Why are there so many priests who don't follow Church teaching and refuse to speak about the sanctity of life and other moral issues? This leads so many to believe the wrong things about social teachings and morality. Why are they still allowed to be priests?*

—A FAITHFUL CATHOLIC

I hear your frustration loud and clear. But can we take a step back and reflect on a few things? If I had to guess, your question is triggered by your experience of at least one, or a few, or maybe even several priests you've known throughout your life. Their homilies, comments in public or in private, guidance in the confessional, or teaching in the classroom have not been consistent with Church teaching—at least in your judgment. Or, as you say, perhaps it was their *omission*—their “refusal” to speak about such topics (abortion, contraception, the nature of marriage, etc.)—that prompts your frustration.

*Even a priest, who fails to deliver in his preaching, is still an instrument of sanctification*

suggesting that there are only a few (unfortunately), but I am personally convinced that the majority of priests in our parishes in the US today are offering their parishioners true teaching. And the recent generations of newly ordained priests are notably characterized by their doctrinal fidelity.

No doubt, historically any number of bishops have been far too hands off and tolerant of priest educators at Catholic colleges and universities who, in their teaching, openly dissent from the magisterium on issues such as abortion or contraception. Dr. Ann Hendershott,

a nationally known expert on the issue of Catholic identity in institutes of higher learning, has observed:

“Too often bishops have attempted to respond to such dissidence pastorally—believing that an authoritarian response would only make things worse. But, what

Let's assume that your assessment is correct: These priests, objectively speaking, are failing to teach (by commission or omission) in harmony with the Church's moral teaching. My first observation, however, is that such priests are *not* the majority. I am not

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has happened is that too many theologians—including dissident priests and women religious—now believe they comprise an alternative magisterium created to challenge authoritative Church teachings. It is time—actually, it is beyond the time—for the bishops to act.”

In Hendershott’s opinion (and I would agree), only a very few bishops have responded adequately to such dissidence. And that’s been tragic for the Church in many ways.

With regard to how priests perform (or fail to deliver) by way of catechesis (and particularly by way of homilies) at the parish level, I would suggest that there are sound reasons for you to be more judicious before pronouncing judgment.

Consider, for example, that the homily is *not* the silver bullet that can reverse broad Catholic rejection of the Church’s teaching on contraception. No single homily (nor dozens of homilies) will accomplish that. What is required today is years, not to say *decades*, of educating new generations of Catholics (and if possible re-educating adult Catholics) in the Church’s moral teachings. Homilies would only be a small part of such a monumental undertaking that would necessarily have to employ multiple—and highly creative—methods for reaching minds and hearts.

Consider, too, the complexity and delicacy of an issue such as contraception—which necessarily presupposes a reference to issues of human sexuality. It can hardly be adequately addressed these days in so brief a space as a homily provides (any attempts at which are further complicated by the presence of *children*).

I think many priests realize this, and prefer, for example, to arrange for adult faith formation in their parishes to address these hot-button issues. If you don’t see that happening in your parish, then you should continue to press the issue with your pastor and, if necessary, have recourse to your bishop.

Remember, too, that even a priest who fails to deliver—for whatever reason—in his preaching and teaching, is still an instrument of sanctification in your midst: He still brings you the sacraments, presuming that he is celebrating them with the mind of the Church and in accord with approved liturgical rites. Why doubt that, in untold ways, notwithstanding their own faults and omissions, these priests are instruments of God’s merciful and loving presence in the world?

Finally, may I simply ask that you persevere in praying for us priests? To do what you expect from us requires courage and supernatural fortitude. Addressing hot-button moral issues in any venue within the parish can elicit criticism, anger, and worse. (Take this from a priest who has been spat upon in the face—at Communion time, no less—by a young parishioner because, as he later explained to me, I had dared to suggest in my homily that *marriage* is between *one man and one woman!*)

Pray that we will have the courage “to speak the truth in love”—and not count the cost. 



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