

Theology of the Body offers answers to 'hot-button issues'

Feminist. Pop culture critic. Movie reviewer. Catholic sister.

Sister Helena Burns is all of these, but it is her focus on *Theology of the Body* as a response to the often controversial issues of gender roles, sexual identity, and feminine identity that seems especially powerful today.

"It's the answer to all of our hot-button issues today which involve the body," said Burns, guest speaker at the Nov. 3-4 Women of Dignity conference in Spruce Grove. She is a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, a congregation founded on spreading God's word through the media.

"It's about women reclaiming who we are, and being a powerful strong force, but for the good: for the good of women, the good of children, for the good of men, the good of society, the good of family.

Theology of the Body is St. John Paul II's vision of the human person. It's a series of 129 lectures given at the Vatican between September 5, 1979, and November 28, 1984. It constitutes an analysis on human sexuality, and it's considered the first major teaching of his pontificate.

"Only the Catholic Church fully upholds women's full dignity," Burns said. "Why? Because of Jesus. Jesus is God. He came and restored the original equal relationship of men and women. Who is teaching us to how to grow up and become adult men and women of God? This is where *Theology of the Body* comes in."

More than 350 women and girls at the conference, sponsored by Catholic Family Ministries, heard that this teaching offers both a way of living and a way to counteract critics who call the Church patriarchal and oppressive.



Megan Taylor

"It's important as a woman and a mother to understand our role in society and loving your body so you can be an example to your kids," said Megan Taylor, a mother of two and member of Resurrection Parish in east Edmonton.

"We live in a society where just anything almost is acceptable," Taylor added. "There's a lot of pressure to live a life of faith. You're constantly being either questioned for your faith or it's being challenged because people don't always agree or just the faith isn't as it used to be."

Burns, who offers commentary and movie reviews at hellburns.blogspot.ca, stars in the EWTN show *Digital Catholics*, and has 29,800 followers on Twitter, was the overwhelming choice as guest speaker because of her ability to use the media to talk about her faith.



Conference organizer Kristen Schiller

“The world is leaning away from moral ways to live and leaning towards easy ways, and being Catholic isn’t easy,” said conference organizer Kristen Schiller. “There are lots of requirements and demands and sacrifices, which is part of what makes it so beautiful and fulfilling and rewarding, but also challenging.”

In Alberta, Catholic educators have been under fire over the inclusion of Catholic teachings in the health and wellness curriculum, and calls to scrap publicly funded Catholic schools have grown louder.

“At one point we may not have Catholic schools if [the provincial government] literally implores us to teach things that our faith shows us that we can’t teach,” said Judy Gerwatoski of Grande Prairie, who attended Women of Dignity to grow in her faith. “As a Catholic woman, that’s a problem.”

The response, Sister Burns said, is found in *Theology of the Body*, which addresses the current gender ideology by focusing instead on our reclaiming identity as children of God.

“We’re not claiming our own truth that’s been revealed to us from God. And our young people are hurting because of it. They’re suffering. They’re left to be confused and see what the latest trend is, what someone is giving them as an identity and they’re latching onto it,” said Burns.

“Science finds only two human genders. So whatever it is, you’re still included. It’s not exclusive, it’s inclusive. But our main identity is that we are beloved children of God. We are made in the image of God; the Bible says male and female, and nobody is left out by that. Whatever you’re experiencing, whether it’s gender dysphoria, maybe you were born intersex, you are experiencing same-sex attraction, it’s still a variation on a theme of male or female.”

Burns calls herself a “Theology of the Body feminist.”

“Now I believe in the complementarity of the sexes, that we’re different but equal. We’re meant to put our gifts together and work together in society, in the Church and marriage, certainly.”



More than 350 women and girls attended the conference in Spruce Grove, sponsored by Catholic Family Ministries

Misinterpretation of the Bible hasn't helped, she said.

"We've been taught to read the Bible with a radical feminist lens. We don't see Deborah the judge. We don't see Esther, these amazing biblical women," she said. "How could the Church be oppressing women if the Church is feminine? . . . It is woman, bride, and mother."

That extends further into the priesthood and the Mass itself, Burns explains.

"It doesn't make sense to have a bride and a bride. Bridegroom and bridegroom? The symbolism is off. The imagery is off. We are sacramental people, and for us, symbols are everything."

St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* is more than 30 years old, but Burns said few Catholics are fully conversant in it, even though it's needed now, perhaps more than ever.

"We're living in times where everything is up for grabs, even the most fundamental things, but in a sense that's good, because people are, 'I don't understand anymore. I want to know why. I want to know who I am,'" she said. "We have so much identity confusion today. Who am I, first of all as a woman, and then what's my dignity in Christ? What's my identity in Christ?"

An enthusiastic supporter of Catholic media, Burns called on women and girls to become more politically active and to apply *Theology of the Body* in their own lives and communities.

"It teaches us how to grow up with all of our sexual struggles and problems. God doesn't just love us when we were little kids. He loves us, with all of our sexual struggles, as we become adult men and women," Burns said.

The strength of Sister Burns, Schiller said, is her ability to teach the theology to women and girls of all ages and backgrounds.

"She can teach it in a way that I can learn it," Schiller said. "I can take it in and I can use it in my life. So she is able to deliver the message in a very understandable and relatable way. It renews your faith so you're stronger and you're not scared to live your faith."

At the end of the conference, as she prepared to head home to Grande Prairie, Judy Gerwatoski agreed: "If we don't gather together as a Christian community and to strengthen and learn how to apply this, then we're not going to go

anywhere.”

Resources from Sr. Helena Burns

Sr. Helena's *Theology of the Body* book: *What Does It Mean To Be Human: Life's Questions, Theology of the Body's Answers*

SR. HELENA'S 2- $\frac{1}{2}$ HR TALK *GENDER AND LGBTQ*

- *Gender & LGBTQ* – Part 1 – Sr. Helena.mp3
- *Gender & LGBTQ* – Part 2 – Sr. Helena.mp3

SR. HELENA'S TALK ON RADICAL FEMINISM:

- *Radical Feminist to Feminine Genius* – Part 1 – Sr. Helena
- *Radical Feminist to Feminine Genius* – Part 2 – Sr. Helena

Powerpoint used for the *Theology of the Body* presentations: TOB Training Orientation.pptx

The most comprehensive *TOB* resource depot: video links, free podcasts, etc.

Symposium on Human Sexuality podcasts: talk on NFP, talk by a woman with same-sex attraction who converted to Catholicism

Vatican Conference “*The Humanum Series*” of beautiful videos:

- Trailer
- YouTube playlist

PORNOGRAPHY EFFECTS AND ADDICTION

- PornPreventionResources (and recovery)
- ReclaimSexualHealth.com
- PornKillsLove.com

Sr. Helena talking about TOB and Women (5 hrs)

Sexuality Education for parents: www.tinyurl.com/TOBsexED

Book on masculine genius: *Priesthood, Manhood & the Theology of the Body*