

3rd Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2004 – Cathedral of St. Mary
Bishop Samuel J. Aquila
Bishop of Fargo

In our Gospel reading for this weekend we hear the threefold question, “Do you love me?” put to Peter – the apostle who denied that he knew Christ, the apostle who wept in repentance for that denial. In the threefold question, Jesus makes Peter His successor. He makes him the one who is first among the apostles. The Church ever since that time has had Peter serving her in the papacy. Each successor of Peter, and every bishop, is a Vicar of Christ. Jesus gives Peter the command to “Feed my lambs...tend my sheep... feed my sheep.” He reminds Peter that all of this must be rooted in love, in love and knowledge of who Jesus Christ is.

When we hear Jesus pose the question a third time, we are told that Peter was distressed that Jesus had questioned him yet again, and Peter replied, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” With those words, Peter reveals the depth of knowledge, trust and intimacy he had with Jesus Christ. Jesus knows everything about us, better than we ourselves know, and he calls us to the same knowledge, trust and intimacy.

We are called to be in an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, accepting Him as our Lord and Savior. Only then will our hearts and our minds, our words and our actions be truly formed by Jesus Christ. Only then will we have the courage to be like the apostles and the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles, in the first reading, who had the courage to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ at great cost. When they were brought before the Sanhedrin, Peter and the apostles said in reply to the accusations made against them, “We must obey God rather than men.”

In the light of the last few days and all of the media coverage regarding John Kerry’s unambiguous support of abortion rights, his personal opposition to abortion, and his insistence on the separation of his Catholic faith from his professional life, I, as a successor of the apostles, cannot remain silent. I, as an apostle, must speak with the apostles and obey God rather than man and present to you the teaching of the Church on the proper relationship between our faith and professional life. Neither the media nor the theologians who support the separation will present the clear teaching of the Church. I have the responsibility and duty before God to teach and to present to you the teaching of the Church on the matter of living one’s faith in the world.

In the words of the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers remind Christians that we are of two cities; and that we are to discharge our earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel. They state, “This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age (GS 43).” My sisters and brothers, it was in 1965 that the statement was made. The

seriousness of the error is far greater today. In 1965 it was not legal to destroy the most innocent human life, the most vulnerable, that is the unborn child in the womb. The destruction of the unborn is always evil. Science clearly supports that every one of our lives began the moment two cells came together to form one in our mother's womb. Human life, even for twins, begins at that moment.

This past week there was controversy over the photographs of coffins coming back from Iraq. They demonstrated the reality of the war, which is not a bad thing for people to see, for in any war evil is present as is death. Yet, as I looked at that photo with real sorrow for the men and women who sacrificed their lives for our country and for their families, I thought to myself, "Imagine if the media showed thirty-five hundred to four thousand coffins a day just in the United States of those who are aborted, of those who are denied a right to life." The outcry would be great, but because it is hidden, a so called "right," there is no outcry.

The Council Fathers went on to teach, "Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other. The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties towards his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation (GS 43)." My sisters and brothers, "pro-choice" Catholics, "Catholics for a free choice," must listen to those words, for they are the truth rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has taught us that we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are to proclaim His Gospel, the Gospel of Life, to the world. He entered the world that we might have life, and life abundantly (Jn 10, 10).

Furthermore, Jesus Christ has warned clearly within the Gospel that hell is a reality and that we are free to choose it. Catholics who separate their faith life from their professional and social activities are putting the salvation of their souls in jeopardy. They risk the possibility of hell. Any Catholic who stands for a law of man, most especially one which is objectively evil, before a law of God, puts his or her soul in jeopardy of salvation for they cooperate with a real evil. We must think about the seriousness of this. We are called to live the life of Jesus Christ. We are called by Him to be in the world, but not of the world. We are called to live our faith in the world. We cannot put the laws of man above the laws of God and remain faithful to God. When we do this we are more faithful to society than to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Council Fathers of Vatican II taught the great truth of the role that we are called to have in the world, in society, especially the laity. "What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature...the laity, by their very vocation, seeks the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs..." and listen closely, "...and by ordering them according to the plan of God (LG 31)." That is the responsibility of every Christian. That is the responsibility of every Catholic politician – to order all temporal affairs according to the plan of God, according to the way of God. The teaching is clear, based in Scripture and Tradition.

The grave error that has come about, the grave error that the Father of Lies has planted in the hearts of many is the lie of thinking that we can have one foot with God and one foot with the world. We are in the world, not of the world. We are in the world to transform the world. The only way that the world will ever have peace, the only way the world will ever live in the truth is if the world embraces Jesus Christ. While we may never impose the Gospel message or force someone to believe in Jesus Christ, we must always propose the truth. We cannot move into negotiation, ever, with evil. As citizens, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, teaches us that we "...are obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order. 'We must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29)' (CCC 2256)."

My sisters and brothers, we are called today to reflect upon how we live our lives in the world and who really forms our hearts and minds. As Jesus Christ posed the question to Peter, so, too, does He pose the question to each one of us, "Do you love Me?" If we respond with yes, then we must live that out no matter what the cost. We cannot separate our professional life from our faith life. We must always put the law of God above the law of man, especially as it concerns the dignity of the human person and the life of the unborn.

In regard to the question of sanctions for Catholics who are "pro-choice", who say that they are personally opposed to abortion but whose words and actions speak otherwise in their support of abortion rights, I would share with them the words from St. Justin Martyr in today's Office of Readings. This was in 165 A.D. They shared the same problems we do today. "No one may share the Eucharist with us unless he believes that what we teach is true, unless he is washed in the regenerating waters of baptism for the remission of his sins, and unless he lives in accordance with the principles given us by Christ." Those words are still valid for us today. We are called to live lives in accordance with the principles given us by Jesus Christ. I would remind Catholic politicians, clergy and all of the faithful of the words of St. Paul when he reminds the people who are not living their lives according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and yet still receive the Eucharist that they bring judgment on themselves (I Cor 11, 27-29). **They bring judgment on themselves.** Let those words sink in.

One day all of us will have to stand before the judgment seat of God. Our God will not be interested if we were a Republican, an independent, or a Democrat. He will not even be interested in what occupation we had in life. What He will be most interested in is our faithfulness to Him and our faithfulness to His Son. What He will be most interested in is if we loved Him, no matter what the cost, and if we obeyed His commandments. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments (Jn 14, 15)."

In the first reading, we are told after the disciples had left the Sanhedrin, "they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name." We, too, must be a people today who stand for the truth of the Gospel. Jesus Christ has taught us clearly that, "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free (Jn 8, 32)." He is the truth. He is the one who sets us free. He is the one who teaches us what it means to be human and live in the world. He is the one who

teaches us how to be in the world but not of the world. He is the one who teaches us obedience to the will of the Father, no matter what the cost. He is the one who teaches us about eternal things and how we can embrace heaven or how we can embrace hell by our actions. The Father of Lies has clouded the hearts and minds of many and he continues to cloud, yet the only person who will bring about the truth and the light of the Gospel is Jesus Christ. We must walk in that light in order to avoid the darkness of the error of separating one's faith from one's professional and social life.

In conclusion, my sisters and brothers, I urge you to pray first of all to our Lord. Listen to the question Jesus posed to Peter. Let that question, "Do you love me?" penetrate your heart and mind this week. Respond to the question from the depth of your heart, and let that love transform your heart and mind so that it may be formed by Jesus Christ and not the world.

Second, I urge you to reflect upon the teachings of Vatican II, especially those teachings contained in the Constitution on the Church and The Church in the Modern World, which point to the union of faith and one's professional and social life, of the need for the two to be cohesive. We cannot preach one Gospel and live another. We must be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and live that, no matter what the cost. Read the Catechism of the Catholic Church, especially the sections on Human Life, Participation in Social Life, Social Justice, and The Authorities in Civil Society (See CCC 1897-1948; 2234-2257; 2258-2330). Read, too, the Holy Father's encyclical, The Gospel of Life, which specifically addresses the questions of today on human life. These documents can be found on the internet or in books. Do not let the newspaper and media form your hearts when it comes to Church teaching. Go to the sources so that you may read them yourselves. Every adult Catholic, and most especially Catholics involved in society, has an obligation to read and study the documents. Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as you read.

Finally, I ask all of us to seek the intercession of Mary, the Mother of Truth, for she will lead us to the truth. She will always lead us to her Son, Jesus Christ, who is "the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14, 6)." Mary's intercession will grant to us every grace that we need to walk in Jesus' steps and to follow in His light, to bring the truth to the world which so needs it today. May each of us grow in obedience to the will of the Father, and may we, too, respond with Peter to the Risen Christ's question on love, with his words, "Lord, you know that I love you."