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Bishop Aquila addresses responsibility of exercising pastoral authority of Christ

In place of Bishop Samuel Aquila's regular New Earth column, we share with you this story about his recent keynote address. In his March 18 keynote address at the 10th Annual Symposium on the Spirituality and Identity of the Diocesan Priest in Philadelphia, Bishop Aquila spoke on the topic of "Good Shepherd: Living Christ's Own Pastoral Authority." The symposium was co-sponsored by The Institute for Priestly Formation and Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary.

Bishop Aquila began by addressing Christ's authority in the Gospels. "The New Testament uses the word *exousia* to indicate that the authority of Jesus is one received rather than inherent," he said. "His authority is not simply a self-sufficient authority but rather one which recognizes the sovereignty of the Father. While Jesus has the authority of God to lay down his life and to take it up (John 10:18), in humility and obedience, he recognizes that the power is from the Father. In his death and resurrection, his ultimate act of love and obedience, all authority in heaven and on earth is bestowed on him (Matthew 28:18). Jesus recognizes that authority is a received gift from the Father in the Spirit."

Speaking to the seminarians and clergy present, Bishop Aquila said, "Just as Jesus, in exercising his authority, has the desires of the Father in both his divine will and human will, we, as Jesus' disciples, are called to have Jesus' desires in our human wills in order to exercise his authority. The source for the desires of Jesus comes through contemplative prayer, where, in loving surrender, we enter into the heart of the Trinity. Intimate prayer with our eyes on our beloved leads us to obedience."

He then discussed four ways to develop receptive hearts in seminarians to exercise the authority of Christ: through *lectio divina*, focusing on "the school of Nazareth," regularly celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation, and having "a deep love for the daily celebration of the Eucharist."

Speaking about reconciliation, he said, "When I did my graduate studies in Rome from 1987 to 1990 I recovered the practice of celebrating Confession once a week. I discovered the beauty of the sacrament, not as a place of judgment, guilt or shame, but rather as the personal encounter with the merciful, loving, forgiving Jesus. Seminarians, I urge you to learn, too, about mercy and forgiveness from the encounters of Jesus with Peter."

Regarding the Eucharist, he added, "In the Eucharist we learn to lay down our lives with Jesus and offer them to the Father."

Bishop Aquila turned to the subject of "how bishops and priests exercise the pastoral authority of Christ" especially through teaching, sanctifying and governing. "Today, there is skepticism, doubt, dissent and challenges which continue to go against the exercise of authority," Bishop Aquila said. "Within the Church, this proves especially difficult as the secular culture undermines any authority attributed to God, and makes man into god."

Regarding teaching, Bishop Aquila spoke of the clarity of Jesus' message. "Jesus always used clear, direct language in presenting his teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount one can have no doubt about what Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes, in the fulfillment of the law, and

in the cost of discipleship. Jesus was patient and compassionate with the sinner, those who were sick, and those who were troubled by demons. Jesus certainly teaches the primacy of love by word and example, yet he also teaches obedience and the truth. Jesus never backed away from answering questions, nor did he back away from giving an answer that may have been difficult to hear."

Bishop Aquila said "there is never a reason to apologize or make excuses" for the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. "Our world today is in urgent need of Jesus Christ, and while the world sees Jesus as 'out of season,' we as the servants of Christ and the Church must teach boldly and without hesitancy. The 'new evangelization' means following the example of Jesus! With personal conviction we need to rediscover the vigor and boldness of the teaching authority of Christ exhibited by St. Paul, the Fathers of the Church, and the saints and martyrs who have gone before us."

He spoke of the authority of sanctifying. "As a faithful instrument, the priest, in exercising the authority of sanctifying, like St. Paul, must hand on what he has received (1 Corinthians 11:23). This means that the ordained must be faithful to the liturgical books of the Church and the proper celebration of the sacraments, most especially in the offering of the one Sacrifice of Christ. The motive for a priest's faithfulness is not slavish attachment to rules or rubrics, but love for his bride, and his desire to offer his bride, the Church, not his own personality, but the person of Christ. The sacraments do not exclusively belong to any individual priest or bishop, but are Christ's and the Church's."

Addressing governance, Bishop Aquila quoted from the Gospel of Matthew 18:16-17, through which Jesus provides instruction on correcting a brother or sister. "The steps in this passage are clear and Jesus is teaching us, but do we listen and follow his example? If this criteria had been followed with dissenting theologians, priests, religious and faithful in 1968 with the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, would we still be dealing with the problem today of those who dissent on contraception, abortion, same sex unions, euthanasia and so many other teachings of the Church?

"One must honestly ask, how many times and years may a Catholic politician vote for the so called 'right to abortion,' 'murder' in the words of John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (58), and still be able to receive Holy Communion? The continual reception of Holy Communion by those who so visibly contradict and promote a grave evil, even more than simply dissent, only creates grave scandal, undermines the teaching and governing authority of the Church and can be interpreted by the faithful as indifference to the teaching of Christ and the Church on the part of those who have the responsibility to govern. If we honestly pray with the Gospel we can see that hesitancy and non-accountability is not the way of Jesus Christ, but rather it is a failure in the exercise of governance."

He added, "Bishops and priests, as an act of loving obedience to Christ, must return to a full exercise of the governing authority of Christ witnessed in the Gospel. If we do not exercise that authority, are hesitant to exercise it, or doubt it, then it only leads to the 'father of lies' taking hold of the minds and hearts of the faithful."

A link to the full text of the address can be found at www.fargodiocese.org. The direct link is: www.fargodiocese.org/bishop/Homilies/GoodShepherdIPF2011.pdf.