

Priests must proclaim the truth received from God

Homily by Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.

Bishop of Fargo

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Today as we gather for the blessing of oils for baptism, confirmation, anointing of the sick and holy orders, we celebrate the ministerial priesthood of Jesus Christ. The priests of the diocese, the presbyterate, gather with their bishop to renew the promises made on the day of their ordination.

In the Sacrament of Holy Orders, there is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on every priest. The Holy Spirit configures the priest to Jesus Christ, the Head, Shepherd and Bridegroom of the Church. For a priest, his relationship with the Body of Christ is changed forever. He becomes the sacramental representation of Jesus Christ. As Head and Shepherd of the Church, the priest relates to the body of Christ in a whole new way. As the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, so too is every priest to lay down his life for the people he serves. The priest is to give himself as Christ gave Himself. This is observed especially in the third question posed during the renewal of priestly promises, in which the priest will be asked to imitate Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd of the Church. Priests are living icons of Christ for all of the faithful. They are a reminder to us that all depends on Christ. Without Jesus Christ, the body cannot exist; the body would never be.

The call to priesthood is rooted in love. This is made explicit in the second question of the renewal promises. A priest responds to the call out of love for Jesus Christ and the Church. The exercise of pastoral charity, the total gift of self to Jesus Christ and to the Church, is to imitate Jesus in His love for His people. The people are entrusted to each priest in his pastoral ministry. As a priest serves in the particular parish or ministry to which he is called, he is to be a living reflection of Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd of the Church.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus quotes the words of the prophet Isaiah which we heard in the first reading, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor....to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18). The Gospel concludes with the words of Jesus, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in

your hearing” (Lk 4:21). Jesus is the fulfillment and speaks those words to us on this April 10th day of 2006. Jesus is in our midst. “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” The priest, as a servant of Jesus Christ and the Church, must be able to speak those words with and in the Spirit that he received on the day of his ordination every time he preaches. The priest must proclaim these words in 2006. “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

As priests, we are called to preach and proclaim with Jesus Christ the truth we have received no matter what the cost. The Spirit we have received, as promised in the first reading, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, is no listless Spirit, but a glorious mantle. “...To give them oil of gladness in place of mourning, a glorious mantle instead of a listless spirit” (Is 61:3). My dearest brothers and sons in the priesthood, the glorious mantle we received on the day of our ordination is Jesus Christ. The mantle we received by the gift of the Holy Spirit is a configuring of our very beings to the headship and shepherding of Jesus Christ.

The times in which we live are rebellious times. Our times are little different from the times of the Old Testament, the New Testament, the early Church, or other periods in the 2000-year history of our Church. The hearts of people, the hearts of various cultures, of various societies, are rebellious to the Word of God, just as the hearts and cultures of Old Testament times -- the people, the priests and the prophets -- were rebellious to the Word of God. All one has to do is read Exodus and see the golden calf they bowed down to worship. All one has to do is to read Jeremiah and see the rebelliousness which he faced, or to read Ezekiel and see rebelliousness. True prophets, true law givers, whether they be Moses, Elijah, Ezekiel, or Jeremiah, proclaim the truth. They proclaim the truth received from God. The hearts of some people in the times of Jesus, the hearts of some of the scribes and the Pharisees, were rebellious to His teaching, yet He proclaimed the truth and was obedient to the will of the Father no matter what the cost. It was not His teaching that He proclaimed, but the will of the Father and the work of the Father.

In our own time, we are surrounded by rebellion -- by society, by some of the people of God, and yes, even by some priests and some bishops. But we must proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ. We are called to proclaim the truth to a world that does not desire to hear the truth. Our times are not all that different from the times of Jesus. The rebelliousness may appear somewhat different, but at the core it is the same. It is a rebelliousness that proclaims, “It is my will that I want done and not the will of God, the will of the Father.” We live in a culture, in a world, that is enslaved to the lies of the world, enslaved to the lies of the evil one.

Last Tuesday night (April 4) I was in Sioux Falls. I was to celebrate on Wednesday the Chrism Mass for

the Diocese of Sioux Falls. I was watching the news and I became riveted by the testimony of a young man who was 19 years old. Justin Berry was his name. He was testifying before Congress about how he became enslaved to pornography, how he was used in pornography. At the age of 13 he received a Web cam and innocently placed his image on line. What he experienced was horrifying. In his testimony before Congress he shared how he was used. He thought it was simple and easy. He thought that he was making friends. He presented the Department of Justice with 1,500 names of pedophiles who paid to watch child pornography on his site. The pedophiles encouraged him, with tremendous amounts of money and gifts, to continue providing pornographic images. What was most horrifying of all was that even his own father used him in pornography by hiring prostitutes in Mexico to be videotaped with him.

Believe me, my brothers, if one of the 1,500 had been a priest, there would have been an outcry in the media and prompt action by legal authorities. The pedophiles remain unprosecuted and the story has had little coverage. Where is the outrage? We live in a society of double standards, a society that wants to banish the truth.

We as priests must proclaim the truth. In preaching Jesus Christ, we preach to a world that is in slavery. We preach to a false image of the dignity of the human person that is held captive by the lies of the world. Our society does not want to hear the truth of the dignity of the human person, or of the unborn, the most innocent of all human life. Our society does not want to hear of the immigrant worker or of the person on death row. Our society does not want to hear the truth of the meaning and dignity of human sexuality. Our society does not want to hear the truth about premarital sex, adultery, same-sex acts, contraception, sterilization or even pornography. We live in a society that is deaf to the truth.

Yes, my brothers, we are called to proclaim the truth in a world that is rebellious. We are called to preach the truth with conviction, with hearts on fire with love for Jesus Christ and His truth. We can ask the question, "How is this possible? How can this be?" First, we ourselves must be convinced in Jesus' love for us. Each of us must be personally convinced and have experienced in our hearts the love of the Father for us.

This morning as I was praying to the Father, I asked Him to grant me a greater capacity to receive His love. As I listened in prayer, I heard the words spoken to my heart, "My son, pray to Jesus. Ask Jesus to grant you the same confidence in the Father's love for you as He has in the Father's love for Him." The prayer of my heart became, "Jesus, grant to me the same confidence in the Father's love for me as You have in the Father's love for You." That is the confidence that the Father desires for every priest. That is the confidence that Jesus desires for us when He says to us, "As the Father has loved Me, so have I

loved you; abide in My love” (John 15:9). My dearest sons and brothers, I encourage you to personally pray the prayer, “Jesus, grant to me the same confidence in the Father's love for me as You have in the Father's love for You.” Abide in the love of the Father! May each one of you know in your hearts the burning love of the Father for you, and live it. Remember the glorious mantle you have received. With St. Paul, you must be able to say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Only with that conviction of love, that conviction of love that Paul himself experienced, will we be able to preach the good news.

Second, we must remember that it is Jesus who we preach. It is not our message, or our self, but Jesus who is to be proclaimed. In a conversation with a priest, he told me of a person, a parishioner, who had gone through the RCIA, who told him that he converted because of him. The convert was now upset with the priest and was no longer going to Mass. The priest said that he suddenly realized, and was convicted, that he did not proclaim Jesus Christ well enough because the person chose to become Catholic because of him and not because of Jesus. My dearest brothers, it is not our message that we proclaim. We lead people to Jesus Christ. He is the one who sets people free. He is the truth. He is the way and the life. It is to Jesus that we must lead people.

As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “I am only a pencil in God's hands.” So too are we called to be that pencil. We are called to lead others to Jesus and not to ourselves. We must bring others to the experience of Christ and His love for them, not to ourselves. We can only be instruments and servants of our God.

Finally, we must also remember the words of St. John in his letters in which he reminds us that “perfect love casts out fear” (1Jn 4:18). My brothers, too often we as priests and bishops have been fearful to proclaim to a rebellious world and society the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus Christ. I speak to you today the words of Jesus Himself to His apostles, “Be not afraid” (Mt 14:27). Be not afraid to proclaim Jesus Christ in your preaching. Yes, you will experience the cross. Yes, you will experience rejection. But Jesus suffered no less. We as priests and bishops can expect no less than what Jesus Himself experienced.

Sometimes during meetings among priests and bishops the question arises, “How well will the people receive this message?” Decisions at times are made from the response to that question. It is not the proper question. Imagine if Jesus asked that question: “I wonder how the scribes and Pharisees are going to receive this message? How are the people going to receive this message of ‘love your enemies’? How will they receive the message of ‘turn the other cheek’?” I ask you, my brothers, would

He have ever gone to the cross? Would He have ever done the will of the Father?

Yes, we must proclaim the truth, always with charity. We must proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ and propose it to our people, and call our people to live it. We ourselves must live it each day. Too often we have remained silent. We would do well to listen to the words of St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, "We drew courage from our God to preach his good tidings to you in the face of great opposition. The exhortation we deliver does not spring from deceit or trickery; rather, having met the test imposed on us by God, as men entrusted with the good tidings, we speak like those who strive to please God rather than men" (I Thes 2:2b-3, 4) -- "To please God rather than men." It is Jesus' message that we are called to proclaim in truth. We must turn to His love and allow His love to cast out all fear from our hearts. We must allow Him to cast out even the fear of rejection. We do not choose to suffer for the sake of suffering. Jesus did not choose the cross for the sake of suffering. He chose the cross out of obedient love to the Father. We can do no less out of obedient love.

In conclusion, my dearest brothers and sons, as you renew your promises today, I pray for you as your bishop. I ask the faithful to pray with me for you and for me, that we may be faithful servants of Jesus Christ and the Church. I ask for prayers that our love for Jesus, the Church and the people be deepened each day. I ask for prayers that we may recognize more clearly the glorious mantle that was bestowed on each one of us on the day of our ordination. It is a mantle of love. It is a mantle of the Spirit of Jesus. It is a mantle of the total gift of self to Jesus and to the Church, to the embracing of the cross of Jesus Christ Himself. The mantle is our configuration to the Head and Shepherd of the Church!

Finally, I pray for you, my beloved sons and brothers, that you may know and experience in your hearts the fullness of Jesus' love for you personally and, most especially, the Father's love for you. I pray that you know this so that you may be His faithful priests, sharing in the ministry entrusted to the apostles. I pray that you may be His true witnesses to the faithful of the Church of Fargo and to the world. I pray that you will be men who are truly conformed to the Head, Shepherd, and Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ.