

Blessed Gianna Fundraiser Dinner
February 17, 2004
Bishop Samuel Aquila

I first want to extend my very real gratitude to all of you for your support of the Blessed Gianna Maternity Home. Last year we celebrated the completion and dedication of the home. Mary Pat Jahner, Father Hils, the board and all of you are to be commended for your work to accomplish this great apostolate. Our hearts are filled with gratitude to God, too, as we received news on December 20, 2003, from the Congregation for Saints that another miracle had been attributed to the intercession of Blessed Gianna, thus opening the door for her canonization. In just two days, on February 19th, the Pope will confirm the miracle attributed to her and set the date for her canonization.

Blessed Gianna was a woman who lived her faith intensely. As a wife, mother, and physician, she gave herself totally to her family and medical practice, balancing well the two. She understood the importance of the integrity of faith and life. As a physician, she supported moral truths which cannot be violated. She taught natural family planning and the dignity of human life, especially for the unborn child. When it was suggested that she abort the child that she was carrying due to a tumor on her uterus, she refused, knowing in faith that she would have to answer to God for her actions. She chose the gift of life for her child and promoted a culture of life by her decision and lived faith in the world.

This evening I want to reflect with you on the importance of living one's faith in the world as is so well exemplified in the life of Blessed Gianna. In the Documents of

Vatican II, in the document on the Church in the World, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers spoke about the unity of the relationship between faith and life. The quote that I am about to state is lengthy and I will comment on it throughout the quote. Written in 1965, it is still important for us today.

“This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit.” The two cities that they are speaking of are taken from Augustine, the city of God and the earthly city. The Council Fathers call us to strive to live as citizens of both cities, always recognizing that we are called to that heavenly city first, but to live in the world as Christ lived in the world. We are to let our lives be guided by the Holy Spirit who keeps us faithful to the Gospel.

The quote continues, “They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.” On the one hand, the Council Fathers are challenging the laity to understand that even though they live on earth and seek the city of heaven, no one may shirk his or her earthly responsibilities and say they have only heaven to look towards. We must be responsible while we are here on earth. The Council Fathers remind us that every Catholic who professes the faith has the responsibility to live his or her faith in the world, building up the common good and the dignity of the human person.

The quote continues, pointing to a second group. “Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life.” The Fathers of the Council are pointing to another truth, that we cannot separate faith from our life here on earth. Faith and the living out of our lives here on earth must be coherent and integrated, not separated one from the other.

The document then continues with these strong words. “This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.” Note, it is a “serious error” to think that our faith and our daily life may be separated. This separation has only grown over the past four decades and the error is more serious today for it continues to move society down the slippery slope of the culture of death.

Gaudium et Spes continues, “Long since, the Prophets of the Old Testament fought vehemently against this scandal and even more so did Jesus Christ Himself in the New Testament threaten it with grave punishments.” The Council Fathers then make another strong statement and present a warning to all Christians. “The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, *and jeopardizes his eternal salvation* (emphasis added).”

The Council Fathers point to the great truth that those who separate and distinguish faith from their earthly life jeopardize their eternal salvation. This is a great problem for us today in 2004. We see Catholics participating in the political life of our country and throughout the world who do not recognize that, by their decisions and by their votes, their eternal salvation may be in jeopardy. This is something all of us need to recognize. We cannot be presumptuous with the gift of heaven. I am afraid that many Catholic politicians today fail to understand the responsibility that they carry in bringing the truth into the world and that in this failure the very salvation of their soul may be in danger.

Elsewhere in the Documents of Vatican II, they speak of the call to the laity to be leaven in the world and to the truth that the law of God is always above the law of man. In *Lumen Gentium*, the document on The Church, the Council Fathers remind us, “[The Laity] live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. ***They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as leaven*** (emphasis added). In this way they make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity.” Blessed Gianna, although she died before the completion of the Council, lived “a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity.”

Today we are called to do no less. Yet, today the divorce continues – the great divorce between life and faith. The dignity of the human person is undermined in our world,

especially by the culture of death in which we live today. Some Catholic politicians are guilty of embracing this great divorce between faith and life in the positions they take, especially on the human life questions presented to them.

In January 2003 a very important document was presented to Catholics by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The title of the document was *A Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*. The document reiterated the teachings of Vatican II which I have just presented to you and further stated that Catholics in political life “who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a ‘grave and clear obligation to oppose’ any law that attacks human life.” It outlined various principles upon which Catholics are to act in the political process. I have gleaned four principles for our review, which as you will see are interrelated.

First, the dignity of the human person from the moment of conception to natural death is the essential principle for all questions concerning human life. The teaching of the Church recognizes a number of methods which are legitimate in approaching questions concerning society and political life. In recognizing this as a good, the Church also recognizes that these different approaches can never be used to advance unethical solutions to the question of the dignity of human life. The ethical solutions concerning human life are rooted in human nature and in the natural moral law. There are absolute truths about the dignity of the human person which may never be violated. This is especially true in the case of the most vulnerable, the unborn and the dying.

Secondly, there is a freedom of religious practice but not a freedom from moral norms. Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II has stated, "...the identification of religious law with civil law can stifle religious freedom, even going so far as to restrict or deny other inalienable human rights." We see these types of restrictions in radical Muslim countries where the practice of other faiths is outlawed, or in the communist regimes of the past century in which the practice of religion was prohibited. A second principle is that while there is legitimate autonomy concerning the participation of Catholics in politics especially in preserving the free practice of religion and recognition of fundamental rights of human beings, there is not autonomy concerning moral principles. Thus Catholics cannot act in opposition to moral principles established by God.

A third principle is that there is objective truth which binds all human beings no matter what faith they are, even if they are atheists. The Doctrinal Note states, "The right and duty of Catholics and all citizens is to seek the truth with sincerity and to promote and defend, by legitimate means, moral truths concerning society, justice, freedom, respect for human life and the other rights of the person." In seeking the truth we must remember that the truth is one and may be discovered by human reason. In our society there has been a clear rejection of objective truth in the present culture wars. There is a very real misunderstanding of truth and freedom and their relationship to one another. Our Holy Father has cited in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* that where truth and freedom are separated only anarchy can arise. Our society has embraced relativism and subjectivism promoting that the person alone determines his or her truth and there is no objective truth which binds every person.

I can remember a story about a philosophy professor who was making a point to his students about relativism. He began the class speaking about truth, and all of the students were saying, “Well, you know, she’s got her truth, he’s got his truth,” and they were going on and on, having this wonderful discussion about relativism and how there is no objective truth valid for every person. He said to the students, “You know, I have my truth and every male in this class is going to flunk because that’s my truth.” The students suddenly were in revolt, especially the men in the class. “This is unjust! This is unfair!” He looked at them and said, “So do you believe in objective truth or not?” We must remember that there is objective truth which binds all human beings no matter who they are, no matter what they believe.

A fourth principle is that lay Catholics have the responsibility to be “morally coherent” in their actions which includes the political and secular realms. The Church has the responsibility “to instruct and to illuminate the consciences of the faithful, particularly those involved in political life, so that their actions may always serve the integral promotion of the human person and the common good.” As noted by Vatican II and the constant teaching of the Church, there cannot be a separation between one’s life and one’s faith. The two must be cohesive and the one flow from the other. We see what happens when the two are separated. Some Catholic politicians today support the woman’s right to choose abortion even though they are personally opposed to it. Some have supported euthanasia even though they are personally opposed to it. Some Catholic politicians support same-sex unions even though they are personally opposed to them.

All are clear violations of the dignity of the human person and the objective truth of the human person. One cannot have a “spiritual life” and a “secular life.” The two must be one, especially when one is dealing with objective truths either discovered through human reason or through revelation.

What then can we do as Catholics? First, I believe Catholics have a very real responsibility to learn about their faith and the truths of the faith. I would say most Catholic politicians, listening to the way they speak, obtain their understanding of Catholic truth from the secular media. I doubt that they have read *Evangelium Vitae, the Gospel of Life*. I doubt that they have read the Documents of Vatican II. I doubt that they have read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. And the Catholic politicians who so roundly criticize the 2003 document on their role in political life, I doubt that they even read it.

My sisters and brothers, all of us have the responsibility to prayerfully read and study. As I have shared in my homilies during Confirmation, we can spend hours in front of our television sets watching sports. We can spend hours in front of our computers playing games. We can spend hours reading novels and entertaining ourselves. Can we not also spend time reading and learning about the truths of our faith, to prayerfully study these documents so that we can live them out in our daily lives, so that we can be leaven in the world?

Second, we need to form our consciences and have informed consciences. Conscience is not just what I personally believe. The Documents of Vatican II teach clearly that conscience is the voice of God and the voice of God can never contradict truth. The voice of God leads to the truth and to freedom. Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, "...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (Jn 8, 32)." The voice of God cannot tell one woman, "It's okay for you to have an abortion" while the voice of God tells another woman it is not okay. The voice of God cannot tell one person, "It is okay for you to use contraception, or to steal, or to be sterilized, or to lie" while the voice of God tells another that it is not. The voice of God must be understood and must inform our decisions. Too often consciences can be misinformed, consciences can be deadened, because of our secular world. People listen more to the voice of the culture of death than to the voice of God. We must inform our consciences and they must be formed. They are formed by Sacred Scripture and by the teachings of the Church especially those in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which are based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All of us have the responsibility to form our consciences.

Third, and probably one of the most challenging, is that we must become involved in the political process and be that leaven in the world. I am afraid that too often, we as Catholics have sat back. I am afraid that, too often, we as bishops, not to rock the boat, have kept our voices silent. One day, we will have to answer to God for that. But today we are called to be those people who stand for the truth in the midst of the political process and be that leaven in the world. We need Catholic politicians who will not be molded by what the Republican or Democratic Parties say, but who will be molded by the

truths of faith, who will be molded by the voice of God, and who will have the fortitude and integrity to live that out no matter what the cost. Our society is in need of people who have the courage to live their faith as Blessed Gianna did.

Finally, we as Catholics must also pray. We must pray for the conversion of Catholic politicians. Today we are in the battle between the culture of life and the culture of death that our Holy Father has articulated so well. It is a spiritual battle for the very soul of the world. We as people must follow the teachings of Jesus. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us. How often have we prayed for Catholic politicians, for their conversions, for their change of heart, giving them over to the Lord, consecrating them to the Blessed Mother, seeking her intercession to change their hardened hearts? We as Catholics have the responsibility to pray for their conversion, to pray for the respect and the dignity of human life, to pray for our country and all political leaders, to pray that they may have the courage to live the truth and to proclaim the truth to the world.

In conclusion, the Blessed Gianna Maternity Home is a wonderful witness to the role of the Catholic laity in society. The witness of the home began with the example of Blessed Gianna and has continued through the work of many Catholics like her, including the staff, the board, and all of you who are supporters of the Blessed Gianna Home. Each of us here tonight must continue our commitment to be leaven in the world, in our various professions and vocations in life. Even though we may get tired, discouraged, or frightened by the battle, we have only to look at Jesus Christ and at His cross and what

He did and accomplished for you and me. We must hear His words to His disciples, “Be not afraid.” We must hear His words from the Cross, “Father, forgive them.” We must hear His words to the repentant thief, “This day you will be with Me in paradise.” Jesus teaches us to love one another as He has loved us, to lay down our lives as He laid down His life for us. As Blessed Gianna imitated Jesus Christ in her lifetime, so may we today.

May the Lord grant to each one of us the faith and the courage to live our faith in the world. May Blessed Gianna intercede for us that we may be leaven as she was, and continues to be, even from heaven. Thank you.