

“Humbly regard others as more important than yourselves”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

Oct. 1, 2017

26th Sunday – Respect Life Sunday
Cathedral of St. Mary
Fargo, ND

“Humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.” With these words, Paul explains the attitude we must all have, following in the footsteps of Christ himself, who came to give his life for the salvation of the world.

Twenty years ago, the world lost a great witness of faith and life: Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Maybe I should correct that. Mother Teresa died, but we didn't lose her. She is still with us, and her witness is just as powerful as it ever was. It was recently said that Mother Teresa was the greatest evangelist of the twentieth century, the greatest witness of Christ to the world. By her selfless love for the most abandoned of this world, and by her unabashed faith in Jesus, she showed the world what true compassion looks like. Mother Teresa once said, “If a mother cannot keep her child, if a mother wants to abort her child, give the child to me, I will take the child.” And she meant it. She and her sisters took in a vast number of unwanted children, and gave them love and a chance at life. They took in poor women who were pregnant and had nowhere else to turn, and gave them the care they needed.

Even now twenty years later, the image of Mother Teresa is still fresh in our minds. We can still see her leaning down to bathe a dying man. We can still see her holding a baby in her arms with a huge smile on her face. We can still see her welcoming the homeless into the shelters that she established around the world. Pope Francis has said that we live in a throwaway culture, where people are cast off because they seem not to be useful. This is what Pope John Paul II called the “culture of death.” But Mother Teresa is still today a champion of the culture of life. She showed the world that every life has value, every person is loved by God, and every person should be loved by us too. She lived what Paul was teaching: she humbly regarded others as more important; she looked not to her own interests but to the need of others. This is Christian love.

It might seem at times that this throwaway culture, this culture of death is here to stay. But that's really not true at all. Sure, there are still those who are entrenched in this mindset. Abortion is still happening. Euthanasia and assisted suicide have gained ground in some places. And hatred of others because of race has raised its ugly head again in our nation, and even in our community.

But the culture of life is very much alive and active in our midst. Wonderful, selfless people are helping women to bring their children into the world, and then helping them care for those children. I think of the First Choice Clinic, and the St. Gianna Maternity Home. Generous people are reaching out to those in material need. I think of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the St. Francis Store. Courageous people are standing up for life. I think of those fearless witnesses who stand and pray at the local abortion clinic, and those who dare to speak up for life in the media and among their own co-workers and acquaintances. I think of the huge number of young people who travel every year to the March for Life and joyfully proclaim that they are the pro-life generation. They can see what some others can't: every life matters, every life is sacred, even the smallest and most insignificant, and we have to stand up for those who can't speak for themselves.

As long as there are people who recognize the dignity of every human person, no matter how small and helpless, the culture of life will endure. As long as there are those who will go out of their way to help the helpless, the little ones, the forgotten ones, the culture of life will flourish. As long as there are young people and old people who will pray and stand up together for the defenseless and the needy, the culture of life will grow. As long as we put our faith in Christ, who emptied himself and died for us on the cross, the culture of life cannot lose.

But this is where we have to ask the hard questions: what can I do to build this culture of life? What am I doing, how can I be a part of it? It begins with Christ and a conversion of our hearts. Jesus shows us in the Gospel that we have to match our words with deeds. The son in the parable who said he would work in the vineyard but then didn't will lose out, because his words were hollow, he didn't mean what he said. Our Lord teaches us that we must live what we believe, we must put into action what we profess.

And this is absolutely true of the Gospel of Life. When we encounter Christ, when we experience his love, and deepen our relationship with him, we become more aware of our own worth and the worth of others. Each of us, in our own way, must participate in building the culture of life that Jesus inaugurated. As Paul teaches us, we all must humbly acknowledge the dignity and importance of others, and look to their needs rather than only looking out for ourselves. Rather than remaining indifferent, we must be involved in the lives of those around us and show by our actions that we care, and that they are loved. Before the loud voices that deny the dignity of life, we must be willing to speak calmly and clearly in favor of life. And working through us as his witnesses, God will build a culture of life in our midst, one soul at a time.

Watching the news and reading the headlines, we may feel helpless seeing the heartbreaking lack of respect for human life. But we don't take our cue from news headlines. We take our cue from Jesus. We look to him upon the cross, and we know that he has taken all the world's sins upon himself. We see him exalted as Lord, giving glory to the Father in every life that is cherished, loved, and protected. And we know, in Christ, life will win.