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Bishop Aquila celebrates first Mass in Visitation Chapel

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From a third floor chapel with windows overlooking the state of North Dakota's only abortion facility, Bishop Samuel Aquila celebrated Mass the morning of June 1 at the newly established Visitation Chapel in downtown Fargo. The chapel opened on a Wednesday, the typical day of the week that abortions, taking the lives of 20 or more unborn babies each week, are performed at the Red River Women's Clinic in Fargo.

"As we look at it," Bishop Aquila said of the abortion facility, "we call down upon it the Holy Spirit to penetrate with his presence" all who enter the facility, that they may be "bathed in that truth, in that one sacrifice of Christ that brings salvation to the world, that can change hearts and minds."

He spoke of the fact that science reveals the truth that human life begins at conception. "It is absolutely wondrous when one meditates upon that truth," he said during his homily. And he encouraged those attending the Mass to pray for a conversion of heart for the doctors, nurses and others who assist in bringing about abortions, that "they will come to recognize the truth, not only that is revealed in science, but the deeper truth of the dignity of the human person."

"Hold up those doctors, those nurses and others . . . that the dew of the Holy Spirit will touch their hearts, their consciences, their minds," he said. He assured those present at the Mass that "it is possible for people to have a change of heart . . . but it does take fervent prayer on our part, interceding for them, being an advocate for them."

With 10 people filling the chairs in the small chapel and others sitting in a room just outside the chapel also participating in the Mass, Bishop Aquila reminded them that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit stand with them in their pro-life witness to the dignity of all human life.

He told them that their "first task is one of faith, of putting our faith in Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life." Their mission, he said, is "to be those who proclaim the truth. . . . All of us have the responsibility to proclaim the truth . . . that life belongs to God, that every human being, from the moment of conception, is created in the image and likeness of God."

He encouraged them to pray for the women who have had abortions, noting that there may be one or two women among them at the Mass who may have experienced abortion. He spoke of the Lord's mercy. "We are confident in that forgiveness, in that mercy, that the Lord can heal, once the woman receives that forgiveness and goes to the deeper level of forgiving herself," he said.

He used the example of Jesus' encounter with the woman who had committed adultery. The people were ready to stone her until Jesus spoke the words: "Has no one condemned you? Nor do I." Through these words, Bishop Aquila said, Jesus "reveals the mercy that he desires for others." He asked that they

also pray for the fathers of the babies killed through abortion, that they, too, may seek forgiveness and hear the words of Jesus.

A statement released to the media by the clinic, in response to the chapel's opening, was quoted in The Forum newspaper May 25. The statement said the clinic was "a safe haven for women to consider what they need to do with this pregnancy and for their lives." In his homily, however, Bishop Aquila said the clinic "is not a safe haven for women, it is not a safe haven for the unborn child. Abortion is the destruction of human life."

Eucharistic adoration began immediately after Mass ended. Mass will be celebrated every Wednesday at 8 a.m. in the chapel at 502 First Ave. N., Fargo, followed by eucharistic adoration until 4 p.m. Volunteers are needed for adoration, and may sign up for an hour of prayer by emailing pray@fargodiocese.org.

Those who wish to provide financial gifts that assist with rent and other costs associated with the chapel may call Rachele Sauvageau, director of the diocese's Respect Life Office, at (701)356-7910.

As people left the chapel after Mass, several of them walked next door to the sidewalk outside the abortion facility, where prayer and counseling take place every Wednesday. While an abortion facility escort led a couple into the facility, the volunteers prayed fervently.

Gregory Evinger, who prays outside the facility for several hours every abortion day, as well as on other days of the week, said the feeling outside the facility is different now since it became publicly known that the chapel would be located next door.

"Something changed. It's hard to explain," he said. Evinger participated in the Mass in the chapel and is grateful for its presence. He is discerning God's call for his life, whether it be to the priesthood, religious life, or married or single life, and feels called at this point to be involved in pro-life work. In his many hours of prayer outside the abortion facility, he has witnessed abortion workers who have left and not returned.

He does what he can to build a relationship with them, showing them God's love and mercy. He gestured toward the chapel next door as he said, "My mission is to be here on the sidewalk, but knowing we have prayer warriors in there is very, very great."