

## **A poverty of the United States is its approach to life**

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

Bishop of Fargo

Oct. 2, 2005 – Respect Life Sunday

(Given at the Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo, ND)

Each year the bishops of the United States have set aside October as Respect Life Month in which we look at the dignity of human life. We live in a period in history in which human life is under attack. Our former Holy Father John Paul II referred to a great spiritual battle that is taking place between the culture of life and the culture of death. He called us to be a people who build up a civilization of love and life -- a civilization that is rooted in Christ himself, the very revelation of the love of the Father.

We have also been through natural disasters. During the course of this last month, we saw Hurricane Katrina and its destruction. We saw the poverty that exists within New Orleans. It certainly brought back memories for all of us of the great tsunami that hit after Christmas. The whole Asian area, in which over a quarter million lives were lost, was affected by the devastation of that tsunami.

This morning, as I was listening to the news on the radio when my alarm went off, there was a special on how New Orleans is coming back to life. That I thought was good. But, as I listened, my heart became heavy. They began speaking of Bourbon Street and the hotels around Bourbon Street. They spoke of how wonderful it is that life is coming back to those areas. They then went on to interview one of the persons at the bars, an "exotic" bar. Those of us who are adults know exactly what this means. The person interviewed was saying how wonderful it was that people were coming back into the bar. He said, "You know, it's primarily firefighters and National Guard members who, after everything they faced, need to come and relax and enjoy the dancing and everything else that happens here." My heart was heavy, for that bar reveals the lack of dignity society attributes to the human person. It reveals women who are being used as objects and allow themselves to be treated as objects. It reveals men who are treating women as objects. It reveals the true poverty of our country in its approach to life and its disregard for the dignity of human life.

When we look at our country, at society, and at the world, we see several attacks on the dignity of the human person. The gravest of the attacks is abortion itself. We see suicide bombers and terrorism. We see euthanasia and assisted suicide. We see the promotion and the use of drugs in some countries. We see poverty and capital punishment. All of these are attacks on the dignity of human life. They are attacks on the understanding of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God, as the very reflection of God. We are called to be a people who promote human life and the dignity of the human person. That is the desire of our God from the first moment of creation.

In the creation story, we read that God creates everything. He sees that it is good. He rejoices in the creation of man and woman. He blesses them and tells them to be fruitful and to multiply. The dignity of the human person is a gift given to every human person from the moment of his or her conception to natural death. That dignity is not bestowed by me as a bishop. It is not bestowed by the pope. It is not bestowed by the mother or the father of that child. It is bestowed by God, who has created every human being for himself. Even those people we would call "mistakes" -- the eye of God does not see those persons that way.

In our first reading today from the book of the prophet Isaiah is the beautiful imagery of the planting of a vineyard. The Lord speaks of how he desires to bring forth good grapes. He looked for the crop of grapes, but what the vineyard yielded was wild grapes. Then the Lord speaks, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?" (Is 5:4). One can almost taste the sadness in God's heart -- his desire to see good grapes produced and the wild grapes that are there. The more he could do is revealed in the Gospel. He sends forth the gift of his Son. What does humanity do with his Son? Crucifies him and rejects him.

Jesus reminds them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?'" (Mt 21:42). It is God's work by which this is done, by which salvation is given to us, by which you and I are created in the image and likeness of God. It is not our work; it is God's work. My sisters and brothers, if we were only receptive to this truth -- how much fruit we would truly bear; how much different life in our world would be! Our God asks us, "What more can I do?" He does the most that he can do. We see that every time we look upon the crucifix! We are reminded of a God who chose to become man, who chose to become one of us. We are reminded of a man and our God who died for us, who died for each one of us personally, so that we might have life and have life abundantly.

We can ask ourselves, then, "How do we build a culture of life, a civilization of love?" We build it by cooperating with God and putting God first within our lives, before anything else. We see that in the second reading from the Philippians. St. Paul urges the Philippians, and urges you and I today, to trust in our God. "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God" (Phil 4:6). The peace of God surpasses all understanding; it will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ. His peace is precisely having the heart and mind of Jesus Christ. It is being receptive to that Word that God has planted in our hearts, and living our lives according to that Word. It means that we think about these things -- what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious (Phil 4:8).

When we look at our history as a people in society, we can see that the primary battle has been between the culture of life and the culture of death. We live in a time in which we must speak more forcefully for the culture of life. We must have the courage to stand for the truth. In our own country alone there have been over 40 million lives wiped out by abortion!

My sisters and brothers, do we truly understand how just one abortion changes the course of history? Yes, changes the course of history. Think about it. Even if you do not believe in God, think about it. Think about if Rose Kennedy's mother had aborted her? There would have been no Robert Kennedy, no JFK, and no Ted Kennedy. How would the course of American History have been different? Or think about if Mother Teresa's mother had chosen to abort her. Would there ever have been the Missionaries of Charity, and the wondrous works they are doing? Or think about John Paul II's mother and if she had aborted him. How would the Church have been different?

Yes, even think about if your mother had aborted you, how different the world would be and history would be. Do we ever think about that? Do we ever ponder that? Every time an abortion is committed, we reject the truth of our God. We reject the dignity of human life. We reject the firm belief that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Justifying abortion, euthanasia, poverty, strip bars, capital punishment, sex before marriage, homosexual unions and acts -- all of these are attacks against life and the dignity of the human person.

My brothers and sisters, you and I may be the wild grapes in the times in which we live. If so, you and I are called to conversion by our God. You and I are called to be people who embrace the heart and mind of Christ, and live according to his plan and not ours.

In conclusion, I ask us to reflect upon these readings. During the course of this month, let us first examine our own lives as we stand before God. Let us ask ourselves, "How am I like the good grapes, and how am I like the wild grapes?" Most of us, if we are honest, will find elements of both that are within us. My sisters and brothers, take the wild grapes to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Take the darkness and the blindness to the light of Jesus Christ, and let his light shine there. God desires to be the vineyard owner. God desires to help you and to work with you. But each of us must cooperate. Each of us must be receptive to his grace and be honest as we face him.

Second, let us meditate upon St. Paul's words, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil 4:8). Where do we see these things? In the person of Jesus Christ; in he who is true God and true man; he, who is the Gospel. Pray that we may have the heart of Christ. Pray that we may have the mind of Christ, to more fully embrace the civilization of love and the culture of life that he offers to us.

Finally, my dearest sisters and brothers, during this month of October we will conclude the Year of the Eucharist. Today, as you receive the Eucharist, know that you are receiving the bread of life, Jesus Christ himself. As you receive the bread of life, pray that you may have the heart and mind of Christ. Pray that you may be receptive to communion with him who is true God and true man. In the Eucharist we encounter the great mystery of God's love and life for us. He is a God who did not leave us abandoned, but continues to make present his one sacrifice and transforms the simple gifts of bread and wine into the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ. Why? So that you and I may be transformed into Christ; so that we may become Christ. But that will only happen if we are truly receptive to his Word, and live according to his mind and heart, and not ours. Let us pray that his work will be done. Let us pray that we may imitate him, who has given us life, so that we may have life and have it abundantly.