

Our actions and decisions must reflect the dignity of the human person

“New Earth” column by Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.
Bishop of Fargo

Edited version of the Jan. 18, 2007, homily delivered at the
Legislative Mass, Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, Bismarck

In the Responsorial Psalm, we prayed the words, “Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will.” We acknowledged the presence of God in our lives and we acknowledged that we are called as a Catholic people to do the will of God. We cried out with the psalmist, “To do your will, O my God, is my delight, and your law is within my heart” (Ps 40:9). These words speak to us of who we are as a people of faith - we are called to live our faith in the world, our hearts and our minds are truly to be formed by God, we recognize the presence of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, his only Son. Thus all of our decisions, all of our works, all of our actions flow from these truths.

Recently I saw the film “Blood Diamond”. It is not a film for the weak hearted, for it is violent and disturbing. Yet, the film asks important questions. The story tells of the trafficking of diamonds in and out of Africa and the brutality which takes place among the peoples. During the film, the question is asked, “What has happened to Africa?” One character replies “It seems as if God has abandoned Africa.” This is not the answer of faith, for it is not that God has abandoned Africa, but rather it is humanity who has abandoned God. Humanity does not wish to recognize God in their midst. Humanity wants to create God in its own image and likeness.

As a Church we are called to be a people who speak consistently to the dignity of the human person from the moment of his or her conception until natural death and to recognize that this reality is the lens through which we must look and the one that must guide all of our decisions -- that human life has dignity bestowed on it, not by man or woman, but by God. Each and every one of us is created in the image and likeness of God, every human being from the moment of his or her conception. It is precisely that dignity, that truth, which we must recognize as Catholics who are involved in politics, as Catholics who speak to society and to the world.

Catholics, no matter what field of life we work in, cannot abandon God. We cannot leave God at the door when we walk into the Legislature, but rather we must allow the truth of God and the truth of the dignity of the human person to guide us in every decision we make. With each law or bill we consider, we must be, first, a people who recognize that there is the inherent dignity of human life that is bestowed by God and that can never be violated.

Once we begin to be the ones who determine what is good or what is evil, once we begin to be the ones who determine which human person has dignity and which one doesn't, we will see, as shown in the film “Blood Diamond,” what happens to a society. In that society the lust for power, the lust for money, the lust for control overtakes and guides the human heart with the result that violence and murder govern the society.

Recently, there were raids on the Swift meat processing plants throughout our country. Archbishop Charles Chaput rightly spoke out against those raids as he addressed the whole question of immigration. He received an e-mail in response from one of the faithful. The e-mail read, “Sorry Bishop: No sympathy (from me) for the illegal alien criminals arrested by ICE. In fact, I hope their offspring starve to death. I do not pray for illegal aliens, I pray for their victims. I have no problem with God, and He has no problem with me. I hope their families starve to death, and it's crap like this that drives Catholics away from the Church.”

One is truly stunned, not only by the hardness of heart revealed in the crassness of his language,

but even more so that someone would have the presumption and the arrogance to say, "I have no problem with God and He has no problem with me." To say that "I hope that their offspring starve to death" shows that the one who wrote this e-mail has no concept of God or the dignity of the human person as revealed by Jesus Christ in the Gospels. The two great commandments do not guide his heart or conscience, and his conscience is either erroneous or dead.

We must ask ourselves what hardens the human heart so much that it refuses to recognize the dignity of the human person, whether it is the dignity of those in Africa, the dignity of illegal aliens, the dignity of the person on death row or the dignity of the unborn child. As Catholics and as Americans, we must discover once again what our forefathers knew in their hearts: The dignity of the human person is bestowed by God, and regardless of which side of the aisle we sit on in the Legislature, we must stand for that dignity and that truth! We must be a people who witness to it no matter what the cost. To deny or remove God from political discourse only opens the door to the destruction of the human person and to violence such as war, genocide, murder, abortion, and euthanasia as so evidenced throughout the last century and at the beginning of this new century.

We must ask ourselves, "What allows a person who believes in God to write about illegal immigrants in this manner and blithely go along thinking it is okay? Or to support the so-called right to abortion, even while possibly personally opposed, and blithely go along thinking it is okay? Or to cheer when a capital punishment sentence is given and blithely go along thinking it is okay?" Only a person who has rejected the basic premise of the dignity of the human person can take such stances. Only a person, whether consciously or unconsciously, who takes the position that "I will determine the dignity of human life" can speak about illegal immigrants in such a manner as we have seen above, support so-called abortion rights or cheer when capital punishment occurs. As faithful Catholics we acknowledge that the gravest attacks against the dignity of human life are those that destroy innocent human life as in abortion, euthanasia and genocide.

As a Catholic people we must be those who mean the words that we speak and pray, "Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will." Those words must form not only our hearts, but our words and our actions. We must embrace the meaning and act upon the words we pray in the Our Father, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Every act of violence that attacks an innocent human person from the moment of conception to natural death is against the will of God and rejects the inherent dignity of the human person. Every Catholic politician must recognize and act upon this truth to be a faithful Catholic. Our forefathers and foremothers, mostly Christians, recognized this truth in the founding documents of our country, and we have sorely lost this truth today because of our denial of God.

I encourage you, my brothers and sisters, as we continue with the celebration of the Eucharist this evening and throughout this session of the Legislature of North Dakota, to stand in faith before God. First of all, recognize the dignity of the human person. Then, in all of the questions that come before you, search your hearts and ask yourselves, "Do I truly mean the words of the psalmists which I prayed this evening, 'To do your will, O my God, is my delight, and your law is within my heart'?"

Second, know that we can be assured by the words given to us by the author of Hebrews in the first reading. My dearest sisters and brothers, when you open your hearts to the Lord, he will pray for you. Let the words of Hebrews speak to you. Jesus is always able to save those who approach God. He lives forever to make intercession for us. Jesus is praying for each and every one of us that we may do the will of the Father. When we pray the Our Father during this Eucharist and pray the words, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" let us mean those words and believe that Jesus intercedes for us.

Finally, let us be a people who stand with our God no matter what the cost. We too may, at times, share in the cross of Jesus Christ because of our Catholic faith. It was precisely Jesus'

faithfulness to the Father and his love for the Father that brought him to the cross. It was the hardness of hearts of men and women who rejected that message that led to his crucifixion. May we too have hearts like Jesus that are willing to say, "Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will."

During the upcoming season of Lent, I encourage all Catholics, and especially Catholic politicians and those in public service, to search their hearts on their obedience to the will of the Father. Let us pray that we may have the fortitude, not to follow the positions of some political party or some thought that wishes to deny God or remove God from all civil discourse in order to determine the dignity of the human person, but rather to be people who truly seek the common good in the light of the truths that our forefathers and foremothers held to be so evident and are reflected in both reason and faith. Let us pray that every person in our country and throughout the world who does not believe or act upon these truths may have a change of heart and mind. May every person come to recognize that the inherent dignity of human life is bestowed, not by man or woman, but by God alone. May we experience more fully the truth of God's love for us, receive his love and extend it to others.