

Fargo bishop urges seminarians to exercise Christ's authority in priesthood

PHILADELPHIA – Seminarians must not be afraid to exercise the priestly authority of Christ upon their ordination to the priesthood, Bishop Samuel F. Aquila of Fargo, N.D., told an assembly of seminarians in Philadelphia.

“Jesus is the shepherd who teaches us, as bishops and priests and future priests, how to shepherd, how to live his own pastoral authority bestowed upon us by him and the Holy Spirit on the day of our ordinations,” Bishop Aquila said at 10th annual Symposium on the Spirituality and Identity of the Diocesan Priest.

He urged the seminarians to understand how direct Christ was in calling people “to change their way of acting and thinking” and learn his criteria “for correcting a brother or sister,” especially those who dissent from church teaching on abortion, contraception, same-sex unions and euthanasia. He also questioned why Catholic politicians who year after year vote to keep legal abortion continue to receive Communion.

In today’s secular society, “with its rejection of God” and his authority, exercising the office of governance is the most difficult for the church’s leaders, but they learn how to exercise that authority by turning to Christ.

The March 18 symposium was sponsored by the Institute for Priestly Formation and St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

Bishop Aquila delved into the Gospels to point out several examples of how Christ exercised that authority.

Quoting from the Gospel of Matthew, he noted that Jesus called his Twelve Apostles and “gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to heal every disease and every infirmity.”

From Luke's Gospel, Bishop Aquila said how Jesus shared his authority with "the 72" – the disciples he sent out – and they returned to him from their mission rejoicing that "even the demons are subject to us in your name" – although Jesus redirected them to keeping their eyes on the Father, "from whom all authority comes."

Jesus told the apostle Philip in the Gospel of John, "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." Jesus "is at the service of the Father," Bishop Aquila said.

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus declares, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." Bishop Aquila added, "The teaching authority of Jesus stems from his intimate union with the Father."

Bishop Aquila said there were four ways for seminarians to form "receptive hearts" to this authority.

One is to nourish intimacy with the Trinity through "lectio divina," a form of prayerful meditation on the word of God. Another is to "experience the school of Nazareth," according to Bishop Aquila, quoting Pope Paul VI's 1964 visit to Jesus' hometown: "Here we can observe and ponder the simple appeal of the way God's son came to be known, and profound and yet full of hidden meaning. And gradually we may even learn to imitate him."

The other two ways were closely linked: "regular celebration" of the sacrament of reconciliation and "daily celebration" of the Eucharist.

"Every seminarian must know himself as a sinner," Bishop Aquila said. "Conversion is constant in the life of the faithful priest," he continued, adding that he "recovered the practice" of weekly confession during his graduate studies in Rome more than 20 years ago.

"A deep love for the daily celebration of the Eucharist," he said, is the "most important way for the seminarian to grow in the desires of Jesus."

Jesus was clear and direct in calling people to "conversion" and to change "their way of acting and thinking," the bishop said, and he provides the criteria "for correcting

a brother or sister.”

“Jesus is teaching us, but do we listen and follow his example?” Bishop Aquila asked. “If this criteria had been followed with dissenting theologians, priests, religious and faithful in 1968 with the encyclical ‘*Humanae Vitae*,’ would we still be dealing with the problem today of those who dissent on contraception, abortion, same sex unions, euthanasia and so many other teachings of the church?”

He added, “One must honestly ask, how many times and years may a Catholic politician vote for the so-called ‘right to abortion,’ ‘murder’ in the words of (Pope) John Paul II in ‘*Evangelium Vitae*’ and still be able to receive holy Communion?”

“The continual reception of holy Communion by those who so visibly contradict and promote a grave evil, even more than simply dissent, only creates grave scandal, undermines the teaching and governing authority of the Church and can be interpreted by the faithful as indifference to the teaching of Christ and the church on the part of those who have the responsibility to govern,” he said.

Bishop Aquila outlined ways bishops and priests exercise the pastoral authority of Christ: teaching, sanctifying and governing the church.

“We as the servants of Christ and the church must teach boldly and without hesitancy. The ‘new evangelization’ means following the example of Jesus!” he said.

Bishop Aquila added, “We must remember to contemplate within our hearts the sanctifying authority that Jesus bestowed on his apostles and the 72 in the Gospels, and thus upon bishops and priests, to forgive sins, to preach, to heal the sick and to cast out demons. ... Every priest has the sanctifying authority bestowed by Christ to be victorious over the power of evil in the spiritual battle.”

Bishops and priests, he said, “must return to a full exercise of the governing authority of Christ witnessed in the Gospel. If we do not exercise that authority, are hesitant to exercise it, or doubt it, then it only leads to the ‘father of lies’ taking hold of the minds and hearts of the faithful.”