

Freedom to Serve

Over the weekend, I celebrated Confirmation with 48 students at St. Matthew in Gillette, 24 students at St. John the Baptist in Buffalo, and 18 students at Holy Name in Sheridan. The homily from Sheridan is below.

In a class on preaching, we were told, “Hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” That is, apply the faith to reality of daily life. Help people see how the Gospel relates to contemporary issues. How does the resurrection of Christ speak to our battle with evil?

Covid-19 has been a trial on many levels. This week we were disturbed by more violence and unrest in Minneapolis. There have been mass shootings in Boulder, Atlanta, and Indianapolis. Young people have written to me about all the violence and division. We not only see political division but people in our Church are divided. Then we constantly deal with personal sin: family division and grudges, struggles with bad language, impurity, or porn, domestic violence. How does the resurrection of Christ speak to our battle with evil?

Four confirmation students chose St. Michael the Archangel as their saint because of his power over evil. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is a witness of Christ’s power over evil. He proclaims that Christ was victorious over Peter’s personal sins, and over the evil in society. Peter stung the hearts of fellow Jews by saying, ***“You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. The author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead”*** (Acts 3:14).

Talk about the pot calling the kettle black! How can Peter talk to others about their denial of Christ? Yet, Peter’s main message is not merely about their denial of Jesus, but about God’s power despite their sinful denial. Christ was victorious over Peter’s denial and the people’s denial. The Risen Lord is more powerful than our sins too. Despite our worst sins, God forgives us. Peter is a primary example of the Lord’s forgiveness. His main message is this: ***“Repent ... that your sins may be wiped away”*** (Acts 3:19).

To repent is to receive forgiveness like Peter. To repent is to be moved by Christ’s example of forgiving love. It means to turn from being selfish to being other-centered, like Christ. Students, if you have repented in this way, then you are ready to be confirmed. If you desire to become less self-centered and more other-centered, then you are ready for Confirmation.

Our primary sin is to be selfish, to use my freedom for my benefit, instead of using freedom for the good of others. For example, on Thursday, a congressman kept asking Dr. Anthony Fauci when Americans will get their liberties back. Again, and again, his question was, “When will Americans get their liberties back?” My impression was that the congressman understands liberties as doing what each person wants. It is an individual right to do what I want.

He never once mentioned how personal liberties might affect others. How one might harm others, or how he might use his freedom to help others. He never expressed any concern for the health of the public. Dr. Fauci repeated several times that the public health was his focus, while the congressman was seeing it as a “personal” thing. The congressman never mentioned how medical personnel have been overwhelmed because people just do what they want.

As Catholics, we speak against those promoting the pro-choice agenda because the woman’s freedom to choose should be balanced with the child’s right to life. But some people who speak against the pro-choice issue are blind to their own selfish interests. When it comes to limiting on

their own freedom for the safety and health of others due to Covid-19, they are blind. The congressman seemed to be pro-choice, not for the right to abortion, but for the rights of Americans to do what they want with their liberties, even if it means endangering the lives of others.

St. John Paul II said, *“Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.”* Human freedom is a gift from God so that we can choose to do what God commands. Humans do not have absolute freedom. God gave us freedom to serve God and our neighbor.

Jesus used his freedom for the good of others. He said, ***“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father”*** (Jn. 10:18). Jesus used his freedom to obey the Father who sent him to give his life for us. This is what a mature disciple does.

The first stage of repentance is to receive forgiveness like Peter. The second stage is to be moved by Christ’s example of forgiving love. It means to turn from being selfish to being other-centered, like Christ. It means to use my freedom to live for others.

The Saints are models of living for others. They show us how Christ’s gracious love ought to be shared with others. One student chose St. Gianna Berretta Molla because of her selflessness. She wrote: *“I chose Saint Gianna for my confirmation saint because of her pro-life stance, even when HER life hung in the balance. This inspires me ... to choose life in all my endeavors and all circumstances even when I personally may not profit. Whether that means being kind to someone or helping a friend who has gotten pregnant to choose to keep her baby. Saint Gianna is a person I can look up to and remind me to always put others first and choose the culture of ‘life’ rather than the world’s culture of ‘death’.”*

That young person is at the second stage of repentance. She rightly understands the culture of life as a culture of selflessness. It is a culture of always thinking of the other person. It means to make simple sacrifices like wearing a mask because someone else has health conditions and could easily die from COVID-19.

The pro-life culture does not only apply to defending the life of the unborn. It applies equally to providing for pregnant women, not judging them so harshly, and to forgiving those who committed abortion. It means to give our lives for others, to graciously show forgiveness and love. Jesus modeled it best by dying for us and graciously forgiving us.

When Peter invites us to repent, he calls us to be other-centered. Not only to accept God’s gracious forgiveness, but also to live for others. When you are confirmed tonight, I will anoint your forehead with Holy Chrism. The Chrism is a combination of olive oil and balsam, a perfume. St. Paul said, ***“We are the fragrance of Christ”*** (2 Cor. 2:15). The Holy Spirit makes you smell beautiful like Christ. St. Gianna was the fragrance of Christ.

As you are anointed with Chrism ask for the grace to be selfless like Christ. To be with kids who are lonely. To stand up for kids who are being bullied. To forgive others the way Jesus forgave his disciples. To volunteer to serve your families at home.

Ask for the grace to be filled with the gracious love of Christ. Even if you do not deserve it, just ask. Ask for the grace to be selfless. The Holy Spirit will give you the power to be saints, to be other centered like Christ.