

“You are called to be agents of good, service of justice and vessels of light for others.”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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*Legislative Mass with Bishop David Kagan
Cathedral of the Holy Spirit
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Bishop Kagan, thank you for welcoming and hosting us this evening, and thank you for inviting me to be the homilist for this occasion. I am honored to share a few thoughts with everyone here in these days of the legislative session, my first here in North Dakota as Bishop of Fargo. Allow me to also thank all of you who are present this evening. I know these are busy and demanding days for you in service of the people of our state, so I am grateful that you have taken some time to join together in prayer and to ask our Lord’s blessings on the important work you do.

A second-century author wrote that “Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body.” The function of the soul is to give life to the body, to give it identity and to elevate it to its highest purpose. The soul supports the body, and preserves it from denigration and decay. And thus, Christians have a mission from our Lord to be that soul, to support the society, the world in which we live, to give it life, to help it reach its highest identity and aspiration. The followers of Christ have the important mission of preserving our society and world from denigration and decay. And if this is true of the average disciple of Jesus, how much more so is it true of those who hold positions of public trust and authority.

In those early days of the Church, to openly show one’s Christian faith often had severe consequences, even imprisonment and death. These were the days of the Roman Empire: vast, diverse, all-powerful. As you know from history, at some point the law required worship of the emperor as a god. On certain days, everyone came to make a sacrificial offering before an image of the emperor. By doing so, you showed your political loyalty, you got a certificate of good standing, and then you could go to worship any other god you wanted. A Christian too, could go through the formal act of sacrifice, get the certificate, and be safe from penalty.

But as you know, thousands of Christians refused to do so, and they died rather than hide or compromise their Christian faith. They could easily have concealed their Christian identities and gone on believing in Jesus privately with no trouble at all. But they knew their faith in Christ could not be hidden. It had to be witnessed in the presence of others, and even shared! They knew they could not take the light of faith and hide it like a lamp under a basket. They needed to make this light visible, to make it known to others. After all, as Jesus tells us in today’s gospel, a lamp is not to be hidden but placed for all to see. And the same is true of our faith in Christ.

Christ Jesus has given us a gift, and he wants it to be shared freely with others. He has kindled a light, a fire within us, and he wishes that others will share in that light, and the warmth of that fire. So, out of gratitude for this gift, we do not hoard or hide that light. It is meant to be seen and known, and we are called upon to make it visible. Even though we’re limited and unworthy, we are given the privilege and the mission of making Christ known to others. And we

shouldn't be stingy with such a gift. As Jesus says, "The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you." In other words, as you give so you will receive, and as you have received so you should give.

Your very presence here this evening is a sign of your generosity with the gifts of God, and even your courage as witnesses of Christ. You are in various ways public servants, those called upon to advance the common good, those who support and defend the dignity and rights of God's people, the people of this state. You have been entrusted with a great privilege and a great responsibility, to do whatever can be done to set our state on a path towards goodness and virtue, towards prosperity and justice. It is apparent to me that your faith in Christ moves you in some way to this work, this service on behalf of others, and it should. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis has taught that "An authentic faith - which is never comfortable or completely personal - always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it."

And I pray that that would be your desire: by your position of service and authority to desire to change the world, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. Obviously, great authority, great power has been given to you, the capacity to decide and act in ways that will affect thousands of people, indeed all the people of our state. But, as we know in the light of our faith in Christ, power and authority are actually works of service. They are authentic only when exercised in service to others.

And as followers of Christ, we know too that our service in the public realm must always in some way lead others to their ultimate good, to goodness itself, to God. The Letter to the Hebrews in the first reading tells us, "We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works." As public servants, it seems to me that this describes beautifully the mission that you have received. Yes, to pass good laws, to make wise decisions, to advance the prosperity and well-being of our state. But also, to "rouse one another to love and good works." Some might scoff at the idea that love and good works have anything to do with politics and public policy, but in the light of our faith, we can say they have everything to do with politics and public policy. If we divorce public policy from love and goodness, from justice and truth, then we risk unhinging ourselves and our people from their highest purpose, which is union with God.

So, as holders of the public trust, and as followers of Christ, you have a unique and precious opportunity to be a leaven for good. Our Lord calls you to be a presence, maybe a quiet presence of faith and virtue among your colleagues in the service of others. And to use the words from Hebrews, you can be a leaven for love and good works in our dear state. Jesus obviously calls each one of us to be a lamp, a light for others, illuminating everyone we meet with the gift we have received, the gift of faith, the love of God in Christ. We are to be like that soul in the body, that gives life and identity, that preserves from decay.

Pope Francis recently said, "I ask God to give us more politicians capable of ...healing the deepest roots - and not simply the appearances - of the evils in our world! Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good." By your union with God and your service in the public arena, you are called to be agents of good, servants of justice, and vessels of light for others. You have our gratitude, and you have our prayers.