

**Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez for the  
31 Sunday of Ordinary Time – The Eve of Election 2012  
November 4, 2012**

**Dt. 6, 2-6; He 7, 23-28; Mk 12, 28-34**

The servant of God, Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen said: **The decline of patriotism in America is due to a decline in religion. As men cease to love God, they also cease to love their neighbor (Feb 5, 1939).**

Scriptures today remind us of the fundamental truth of the first people of God expressed in Det, 6, 5: listen (Sh'ma) Israel, "the Lord our God is only One." The wise of Israel repeated again and again: there is no other. Jesus would insist: The Lord our God is Lord alone. God is almighty and supreme; His teachings command respect and obedience. Obedience is rooted in listening and openness.

For Jesus: One cannot love God mildly or lightly. One is to love God **with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.**

Our present culture needs profound healing, for it fosters an antireligious streak with a particular anti-Catholic bias. Blessed Archbishop Fulton Sheen's warning that a decline of religion goes along with a decline of love for country is easily visible.

In a recent speech in Ft. Wayne, Ind., Cardinal Francis George of Chicago said: "Secularism is just Communism's better scrubbed bedfellow." When believers face hostility in the practice of their faith and morals, the common good of society, peace and conviviality are damaged. Can we stand silent when an agency of the federal government imposes policies that violate our religious principles?

Whatever the outcome of the elections next Tuesday, there is a lot of work to do in the future to strengthen our trust in God, in renewing our obedience to God's Commandments, especially the most important ones: the first and the second: love of God and neighbor in a free and just society. As the Holy Father, Benedict XVI has said: "Why is there that fear of God when God is love?" In fact, to borrow from Irenaeus of Lyons, God's glory shines when the human person is fully alive. You are fully alive when you are in communion with God.

Loving our neighbor as we love ourselves summons us to embrace a way of compassion and mercy on behalf of others.

The International Synod on the new evangelization gave a final message to the people of God. Let us hear what it says on recognizing the face of the poor: “placing ourselves side by side with those who are wounded by life is not only a social exercise, but above all a spiritual act because it is Christ’s face that shines in the face of the poor: Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” Mt. 25:40. (#12) The message is very clear on how the love of neighbor involves a political responsibility:

“A field in which the light of the Gospel can and most shine in order to illuminate humanity’s footsteps is politics. Politics requires a commitment of selfless and sincere care for the common good by fully respecting the dignity of the human person from conception to natural end, honoring the family founded by the marriage of a man and a woman, and protecting academic freedom; by removing the causes of injustice, inequality, discrimination, violence, racism, hunger and war. Christians are asked to give a clear witness to the precept of charity in the exercise of politics” (#10)

As Benedict XVI has taught us in his first Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*. (#16): “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jon 4:20). The unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor is emphasized. One is so closely connected to the other that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbor or hate him altogether. Love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God.”

This call to love our neighbors is a personal one which challenges us day by day. But it is most effective when we do it together as a community of faith. Most Catholics are not aware of the monumental service of the church to provide help to the poor and needy both nationally and internationally.

I celebrate the immediate assistance given by Society of St. Vincent de Paul to provide food and shelter and rent to thousands of people each year. I celebrate the network of Catholic Charities in four centers of the diocese using more than 90 percent of the funds to assist the poor regardless of religious, social or economic background.

Education is one of the most effective ways to help people. In our country more than 2.5 million students are educated by our church with a very large number of scholarships for students in poor neighborhoods. In our diocese, 29 schools and 10, 350 students show the magnificent and unique contribution of Catholic education.

The care of the sick is a major priority for our church. We are blessed to have St. Vincent’s Hospital, one of 615 hospitals in the country and St. Catherine Labouré, and All Saints Nursing

and Rehabilitation Center, two of 404 health care centers, plus 1,509 specialized homes caring for the elders.

In his address to the entire body of bishops, “Religious Freedom and the love of God,” John Garvey, president of the Catholic University of America, said, “we are not the kind of violence in society Tudor England was. But in recent years, the landscape of religious freedom has changed. Its purview has narrowed considerably. Garvey gave six recent examples of that recent decline and concluded his address saying this to us:

“Preserving religious liberty may not be a job for lawyers like me. It may be a job for lawyers like Thomas More. Our society won’t care about religious freedom if it doesn’t care about God. That’s where reform is needed. We won’t have — and we probably won’t need — religious exemptions for nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers if no one is practicing their religion. The best way to protect religious freedom might be to remind people that they should love God. This is, after all, why we have a first amendment. And why in better times we have not needed to rely on the Constitution at all, because we could depend on our elected representatives to respect our liberty.

The tragedy of Thomas More was that he had to die because he loved God. He could not be both a good subject and a faithful Catholic. Our tragedy is different, though it is no less about the protection of religious liberty. The mechanisms to preserve religious liberty only work when people care about their religion. Religious liberty will expand or contract accordingly. Saving religious liberty means reminding people that they should love God. Thomas More taught us that we need religious liberty. More importantly, he taught us that loving God is worth dying for. If that is so, then the freedom to love God is worth the fight...”

I do not take for granted the blessings of this great country where human rights are respected in a framework of freedom and respect for law. I do not take for granted a society where all citizens can participate in the choosing of its leaders who are held accountable to the people at large. That is the reason I called for an entire vigil of prayer here in this historical Cathedral- Basilica of St. Augustine – the first parish of our entire country. There is not a greater power than prayer. God is our first beginning and as the recent celebration of All Souls reminded us, our last end. May God’s power protect our country for the good of all citizens and for the entire world.