

“To the Next Level” Men’s Conference
Bishop Felipe J. Estévez’ Mass Homily
May 19, 2012

Acts: 18, 23, and 28 John 16: 23b-28

St Augustine, the patron of this diocese was a brilliant young man who led a pagan life of intensive unregulated sex; he was active in endless parties, rather orgies. A life of vices, a wasted life, but like the prodigal in the parable of St. Luke: 15, he finally came to his senses and Augustine discovered that only God could satisfy his thirst. He coined it in a magnificent phrase *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."* The greatest urgency, the most important need today is for us all to know our origin and our destination. The *Catechism* has the basic question of why we are created, what is the purpose of our lives and only in God can we find the full meaning of our lives.

There is such confusion in the present dominant culture. This confusion is quite related to three fundamental life issues. As Father Felix Varela of St. Augustine taught, right reason *"la buena logica"* is the best antidote in preventing social ills.

1. All those who are unborn are not protected by our laws. It is a misfortune to be unborn. It is simply sad that mothers and fathers claim their *"reproductive rights"* against their own son or daughter. Vatican II calls abortion a crime, but it is a word we do not want to hear...since it is not politically correct. How prophetic for that tiny woman dressed in white with lines of blue on her habit, Mother Therese, standing in receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and saying to the world: give me the children who are in danger of being aborted and I will take care of all of them! That is the courage of love which ultimately overcomes a deadly blindness toward the natural, the created order.
2. God’s plan on love and marriage. It seems we have lost the ability to keep marriage happy and fulfilling. The threats to marriage are 1) the easiness of getting a divorce; 2) the increasing numbers of the cohabitation of couples; 3) the redefinition of marriage on the part of those who in contrast to the teachings of the book of Genesis, they promote multiple types of marriages. How can a society sustain itself when traditional marriage and the family are unsettled and undermined by those who should be the first to defend it? This hostile secularism is threatening our most basic values!
3. Religious Freedom – It is the most treasured first defined freedom of our Bill of Rights yet the Federal Government under the present administration wants the church to provide its insured workers the option to have abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, and the practice of contraception, which violates our most clear teachings. In our country, well known in the entire world as the greatest champion of freedom, today it is the church that must lead the fight of protecting the religious freedom of all its citizens. As Cardinal Tim Dolan of New York said, he thought it was the President who should be the first to protect this constitutional value.

The Vatican Council stated that Jesus the Christ reveals man to himself. For St. Paul, he is the new Adam. That is why for St. Paul those who follow his way become a new creature. As the Gospel today states: I came from the Father, I am going back to the Father. Jesus is perfectly aware of his origin and of his destiny.

Because God is the creator, we are His creatures. He is also our destiny and our destiny is glorious, it is to be with the Eternal Father, it is to live forever in the light of the Risen Lord. As stated in what is called the universal prayer of Clement XI, "I worship you as my first beginning, I long for you as my last end, I praise you as my constant helper and I invoke you as my precious protector. This is the grace that as your bishop, I pray for you, that you worship God as your first beginning, and that you truly hope, that you're ending is a happy one being with God. That you recognize Him as the One that wants to help you reach the next level, the one who you can always rely and trust. Why should we be so afraid of God, of the truth?"

While St. Paul was in Corinth, he received a revelation: be not afraid, speak up. We need to make a difference and we need mentors in our community to lead us all, to embrace fundamental values for the common good for our families, for our community, and for our parishes. The reading of Holy Scripture today shows the example of Aquila and Priscilla, this Italian couple, friends of St. Paul, who like him, were tent builders, they were workers. Apollos was a professor of scriptures, a great preacher, and a man of knowledge and yet as the scriptures tell us Aquila and Priscilla took Apollos aside to tell him the full truth that the Messiah is Jesus. And they succeeded as Apollos goes to the missions preaching the same Gospel St. Paul was preaching. This magnificent story of the Acts of the Apostle, I see it modeled especially in Cursillo, as you are aware after each talk; the participants around the tables discuss the application of the Rollo. I have always been very impressed how at that table there might be an important government official, or a physician, a wealthy person of the business community and also a worker, an immigrant, etc. And around that table having these different classes, different cultures, different ethnic backgrounds, they are able to apply the faith to their lives with the help of one another recognizing thus the richness of the Body of Christ.

Be not afraid to speak up; be not afraid to make a difference in spite of so many adversities in the way.

When St. Vincent de Paul was dying, those around his sick bed asked him to leave a message for them to keep always as a living legacy. St. Vincent did not give them a message but simply a word *davantage*, which means in French *always more*. I think he meant reach to the next level, I think he meant raise the bar, *davantage* means to go deeper and deeper in the way of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Davantage* means to put aside mediocrity or narrow minded interests, or a life of passivity. *Davantage* means to reach the next level which I am potentially able to reach because God is worthy of my best.

The beginning is the end; the end is the beginning says, T.S. Elliott, the poet. Listening to his remarkable insight, our origin and our destiny are but one. The same God that created us in the image of his beloved Son is the same God who is our fulfillment and our deepest satisfaction.

There is not a greater happiness than when God is all in all. That is when the city becomes as St. Augustine dreamed the city of God.