

“So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

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

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Legislative Mass
Holy Spirit Cathedral, Bismarck

“So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Bishop Kagan, dear fathers, dear friends, we come together this evening for prayer, and to place ourselves under the guiding power of God. And specifically now, as we begin this year’s legislative session, for you who are committed and engaged in the work of governance, we ask God’s blessing and grace. All of you are entrusted with a vital mission, one that requires great wisdom and fortitude, a task that begs for higher assistance from the One who calls all of us to holiness. Or, as we hear from Jesus, the call to “be perfect,” to be one with God and to do all things in accordance with his will. This isn’t easy, and some might say in the work of public service and politics it’s simply impossible. But with Christ, all things are possible—yes, even in the work of politics!

Right now it seems that we are immersed in an atmosphere of conflict and mistrust, and when we hear of government and politics, we often hear words like gridlock, shutdown, corruption, money, cover-up, and lots of others. Politics is often seen as something unseemly and kind of dark. Too often, governance is portrayed in a negative way, and perhaps there’s some truth to that image. But from God’s word this evening, we hear a different set of words: justice, light, peace, understanding, truth, honor, and the list goes on. Our Lord is calling us to a different way, a way that sets aside self-interest and works rather for the good of others. A way that respects and even reveres those most in need, those who are most fragile. A way that recognizes the sacred dignity of every person and strives to build rather than tear down.

We’re all aware that we live in a secular rather than a confessional state. Our laws and ordinances do not establish or favor any one specific religious creed. But that doesn’t mean that our faith, our beliefs, our sacred principles must be excised from the task that is given to us. On the contrary, we all serve God’s people, we are called to serve the common good. And whatever state in life we hold, we must do so in a way that reflects truth, that brings the very best to the challenges we must face. The wisdom of our faith, the truth of God’s Kingdom, has a place in these deliberations. If we leave this behind, then we shortchange ourselves and our people. And I would humbly propose to you who are public servants, that the more we distance ourselves from God’s truth and his Kingdom, the more intractable our problems will become. But when we intentionally seek his Kingdom and join our efforts to the One who is justice and wisdom itself, all things become possible. In other words, when we seek the perfection Jesus speaks of, the embrace of God’s Kingdom in our own lives, and in our lives of service, then we serve with the One who came not to be served but to serve.

Governance is certainly associated with the virtue of justice, giving to each person their due, striving for equality and fairness. But it’s not far-fetched to say that politics is a form of charity. Pope Francis says, “If exercised with basic respect for the life, freedom, and dignity of persons, political life can indeed become an outstanding form of charity.” And he doesn’t mean charity in the sense of a hand-out, but charity as a selfless act for the good of another, charity as selfless service, even as love. By your public service, you put your gifts at the disposal of the community. You offer what you have and make great sacrifices in order to bring about a more perfect society, to make life better for others. You confront the challenges that arise and give all that you have to address them. You deserve and you have our thanks for all that you give. And you deserve our prayers as well. I’m sure you know this, but I’ll mention it anyway. I hope you pray for each other too. I hope you pray for your colleagues who work next to you, even those who disagree with you. When we pray for our co-workers, we bring God’s grace to bear on a work that is bigger than ourselves. We invite him to broaden our vision, to see one another in a more

charitable way. And who knows, maybe our prayer will help to bring us together when unity seems far away.

Allow me to share a reflection with you from a Vietnamese bishop, Cardinal Francois Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. He suffered greatly at the hands of his own government, but he touched many hearts with his spirit of peace and reconciliation. You all know the Beatitudes of our Lord from the Sermon on the Mount, but Cardinal Van Thuan proposed the “Beatitudes of the Politician.”

Blessed be the politician with a lofty sense and deep understanding of his role.

Blessed be the politician who personally exemplifies credibility.

Blessed be the politician who works for the common good and not his or her own interest.

Blessed be the politician who remains consistent.

Blessed be the politician who works for unity.

Blessed be the politician who works for radical change.

Blessed be the politician who is capable of listening.

Blessed be the politician who is without fear.

You could probably add your own verses to these, but the point is this. The work of public service is difficult, but it’s noble and lofty, because in its best form it is centered on others. And it becomes even more noble when we strive for the perfection, the mercy, the selfless love of Jesus Christ.