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Archbishop of Denver

Homily

Homily: Episcopal Ordination of Most Rev. Fernando Isern, new bishop of Pueblo, Colorado

Pueblo, Colorado - December 10, 2009

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambini. As the delegate of Pope Benedict XVI, Archbishop Sambini brings to our Liturgy the blessing the Holy Father himself. His presence reminds us that the Church in Pueblo belongs to a single, universal family of faith guided by the Successor of Peter. So Your Excellency, we're very privileged to welcome you here today.

The weather in Colorado makes December a risky time to get ordained as a bishop. But actually this week of Advent is a wonderful time for any bishop to begin his ministry. On Monday we had the feast of St. Ambrose, one of the great bishops and teachers of the early Church -- and the mentor of St. Augustine, another very great bishop and saint. On Tuesday, we celebrated Mary's Immaculate Conception, through which she became the embodiment of a redeemed humanity that God desires for us all; a vessel worthy to be the mother of God's Son.

Tomorrow we remember St. Damasus, a holy deacon who became pope and defended the Catholic faith against very difficult heresies. And finally we celebrate two feasts that are especially dear to Coloradans: St. Juan Diego yesterday and Our Lady of Guadalupe on Saturday. I know that Bishop Isern already treasures these last two feasts in a special way, trusting in Mary who is always our mother, and seeking to be holy and simple in his service to the Gospel, as Juan Diego was. So now let's turn our hearts to today's Scripture readings.

Human beings love stories. That's why Jesus was such a powerful teacher. He used parables like the Prodigal Son to feed the mind of his listeners, but also to move their hearts. In fact, I mentioned St. Augustine a moment ago because even though he lived 1,600 years ago, Augustine is one of the great Prodigal Son conversion stories of history. He began as a great sinner. He ended as a great saint and a great model for bishops.

As a young man, before his conversion from paganism, Augustine loved and lived with a woman for many years. They never married, and later parted; but together they had a son, Adeodatus, whom Augustine treasured throughout his life. Augustine trained in grammar and rhetoric. In Fourth Century Rome, this was a fast track to social prestige. And since Augustine had a brilliant mind and a great command of language, he was very good at what he did. He loved words. In fact, one of the reasons he rejected Christianity as a young scholar was because he found the language of Scripture too simple and inelegant. Compared to an author like Cicero, the Gospels seemed vulgar.

It was only later, as the emptiness of his life became more and more painful, that Augustine saw what Scripture really is. The beauty of God's word doesn't come from the lips, but from the heart; it's not how the words sound, but what they mean. Scripture is a love story, and the Lover who speaks it is God.

Today's Scripture readings tell us three things. They tell us who we are. They tell us who God is. And they tell us what we need to do with the life we've been given. A married friend of mine once said that a husband and father never *fully* knows who he is, until he's loved by a wife and children. It's *their* love that makes the man real. It's *their* love that defines the man and anchors him in the world. I think that's true. But I also think the truth is broader than that. *Every* person needs to love and be loved, whether we're women or men, single or married, religious or priest, deacon or bishop. In loving another person, we prove that the other person is *worth* loving. And likewise, those who love us show us the good in ourselves that we can't see, and so often don't believe.

So who *are* we? God tells us, because God knows us better than we know ourselves. It's his love that made us. It's his love that sustains us. Today's first reading from Deuteronomy says that we are a "people sacred to the Lord." We're chosen from among the nations to be "peculiarly [God's] own." Like any loving father, God protects us with his strong hand. He's patient, faithful to his word and merciful in his covenants -- and with the *tenderness* of a father, He selects each one of us to be *uniquely his own*. God sets his heart not on the heavens but on *you and me*, even in our smallness, even in our unworthiness; not because we deserve it, but because He loves us as a father loves a child.

That radical love defines who *God is*. In the second reading today, St. Paul tells us that God yearns to reconcile the world to himself. He's eager to forgive and slow to anger. He will forget and *wash away* the sins of any heart that repents. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ becomes part of God's own righteousness. What God intends for each of us is glory and joy. He made us to share in his own dignity; to be his agents in the work of reconciling himself with the world; to be a living message of healing and salvation for sinners; to be what St. Paul calls "ambassadors of Christ." In other words, God invites us to love as radically and unselfishly as He does, and through that love, to help him remake the world.

The irony is that in giving ourselves to God, *we find ourselves in him*. In the great diary of his conversion, *The Confessions*, St. Augustine says to God that "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." This is the secret of our purpose and joy; this is what Jesus speaks of in the Gospel today, when he says to his Father: "for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to the childlike." We can't see the light of God if we live in the shadow of our own vanity, ambition and selfishness. When Jesus says, "Come to me all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest . . . for my yoke is easy and my burden light," he's calling us to the beauty and glory God intended us to be, through him.

I've used the memory of St. Augustine in today's homily today for a reason. Augustine was one of the greatest minds of Western civilization and all of human history. He was a brilliant scholar, and a tireless writer, preacher and defender of the Catholic faith against its enemies. But he became one of the greatest *bishops* in Christian history because he lived first and foremost as a father, moved by a father's love. When Augustine was baptized in A.D. 387, his son Adeodatus - the name means "gift of God" in Latin - was baptized with him. Father and son were inseparable friends. When Adeodatus died as a teenager, Augustine never lost his trust in God, but he still wept bitterly for months.

Later in life, in his ministry as a bishop, Augustine never forgot the lessons of a father's love. He never forgot that his first task was not to be a brilliant intellect, or a marvelous preacher, or a great administrator, or a good fund-raiser - although each of these things has a proper place in the life of a bishop. His *first task* was to love God as a son, and to love the people of God in his care as a father, with a father's heart. That kind of love is tireless. It's all-consuming. And without the grace of God in a man's life, it's overwhelming. Only when a man puts himself entirely in the arms of God; only when he abandons himself and his pride completely to God - *only* then, but *truly* then, the ministry of bishop is a joy and a liberation.

Augustine once wrote to his people that "Believe me, brothers and sisters, if what I am for you frightens me, what I am *with you* reassures me. *For* you I am the bishop; *with* you I am a Christian." The purpose of a bishop is to be a father to his people, a brother to his priests and deacons, and a witness of Jesus Christ to world. Augustine once said that any bishop unwilling to preach Jesus Christ zealously and without embarrassment; to defend the Catholic Church with his life; and to suffer for his people without counting the cost, is "a scarecrow standing in a vineyard." In words that sum up his whole life as a bishop and teacher, he said "it seems to me that one must bring men back . . . to the hope of finding the truth."

That's the vocation of a bishop in the Catholic Church. That's the mandate of every man called to be a successor of the apostles. For nearly 30 years, Bishop Arthur Tafoya shepherded this diocese with humility, charity, warmth, skill, patience, forgiveness, courage, self-sacrifice and unflinching good will. He'll be greatly missed. Now he can rest.

But the work of the Gospel goes on, and we can thank God and the Holy Father that another man of character, intelligence and zeal will build on what Bishop Tafoya leaves unfinished. Bishop Isern's episcopal motto is revealing: *Caritas Christi urget nos*. It translates as, "The love of Christ impels us." Ultimately, that's the rule of life for every bishop, and for every Christian. To the family of Bishop-elect Isern, thank you for the gift of this good man. To Bishop-elect Isern as a brother in the

ministry: Have confidence in the God who calls you to this altar, because He will give you the serenity and strength to do his will. And to all of us in this gathering: Pray for and support your bishop. There is no greater joy in the life of any bishop than to love and be loved by God's people.