



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



“Why I Don’t Preach Politics”
Homily
Sunday, October 26, 2008
Fr. Augustine Wetta, O.S.B.

About twenty years ago, back when I was working as a lifeguard on the beach in Galveston, I had to pull a body out of the water—it was the body of a man who had been dead for a very long time. The tower I was working that summer was several miles from Headquarters, so when I arrived at my tower and saw the crowd on the beach, I knew that help would be a long time coming. And I remember being in a kind of a daze that morning as I walked up to the edge of the water and I remember suddenly realizing that I was very very scared, because the folks on the beach, they knew the body was out there, but they didn’t know where, which meant I’d have to swim out and just keep swimming till I ran into the body. And I remember pretty clearly how warm the water was that day. And I remember calling into my radio for backup. And I remember looking around at the people in the crowd and realizing that I was going to have to find that corpse on my own. But most of vividly of all—and this is the part that I still have nightmares about—I remember thinking (realizing) that at any moment, I might just...lose it...in front of all those people—just break down and run away. And I remember saying to myself as I waded into the water that if I could just get one foot to go in front of the other, eventually it would all be over. And I remember looking out at the surf and considering the awful truth that I might not be able to do it.

Well, there have only been two times in my life when I’ve felt like that. That day on the beach was one. And last night when I reread this homily—that was the other.

I started writing this homily about a month ago. And back when I started it, I didn’t realize how difficult it would be to actually give it. At any rate, I felt at the time that it was the right thing to do, that it was, in fact, what I *needed* to do, that it was in fact what Mother Church was asking me to do. Well, then my friend Fr. Noah Waldman beat me to the punch. He gave a sermon in which he dared to ask his congregation, “When we go to the polls on November 4, why will so many Catholics not support the overturn of Roe vs. Wade?” Well, someone yelled at him in the middle of his sermon, and someone else walked out in the middle of it, and then he wound up in an article in the Saint Louis Post Dispatch under the heading “Church and politics get testy”. So be it. I don’t know what his parish is like, and I wasn’t there. But then our own Bishop Hermann gave a sermon in which he dared to suggest that Catholics “Pray their way into conformity with the teachings of ...[the] Church.” And he was treated similarly. He made it all the way to the Washington Post. And when Bishop Saretelli gave a homily entitled “No Right to Life! No Freedom!” he wasn’t just attacked in the press, he was brought under investigation by the IRS. Well, one thing is clear to me: that every time a Roman Catholic cleric implies that the issue of abortion should influence the way a Christian votes, that cleric is punished. I don’t know why this came as a surprise to me. Even a cursory look at the scriptures should have warned me. When a prophet faces off against a king, he always loses—and loses more than his tax exempt status. So the sum total of all



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



of this is that I don't really want to give the homily any more. Not because I don't believe it, but because I'm scared to give it.

But I will say this much. I understand that as your priest, it is not my job to tell you who to vote for. And I also understand that many good Catholics—good, loyal, loving, God-fearing, church-going, Catholics will weigh the issues and arguments of their parties and politicians and decide that the evil of abortion is outweighed by the evils at play in matters of immigration, health care, the economy...the War on Terror..." I understand that. Indeed, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops published a statement affirming that in fact "There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate's unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons." But "...voting in this way," they say, "would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons." So I can see how a serious Catholic might argue that a candidate or party that supports abortion may espouse policies so good that they outweigh that evil.

But I don't see how I can stand up here and preach on text which says, "love your neighbor as yourself." Stand up here at this pivotal juncture in our nation's history when so many Catholics find themselves so caught between so many weighty moral dilemmas—stand up here, preach on love of neighbor, and not point out that we as a nation have murdered 45 million children.

Now, when I told Fr. Ambrose that I'd be preaching on this, he said to me, "Well that's great. But just don't bring up the Nazis. I can't bear to hear another argument 'ad Hitlerum.' It's so obvious." But because it is obvious, it is unavoidable. Pius XII for all his efforts to protect and free the Jews, never published a direct attack on Hitler or his political party. And for that, history remembers him as "Hitler's Pope." So you see, if I and many of my brother priests have started to sound a little heavy-handed on this abortion issue, it's because we have inherited this burden of guilt. Many in the Catholic hierarchy failed to speak out in defense of those helpless millions. They failed. We failed. And now, it seems that we are failing again.

So you see, your priests and your bishops are in a really tight spot: if they speak out, they're politicking; if they keep silent, they're cowards.

Well, I'll tell you something I've never told anyone. That day when I walked out into the surf to get that body I never found it. Deliberately. I walked around in the shallows where I knew I'd never find it...and I kept shuffling in the shallows till my supervisors showed up. Then they went out and got the body while I pretended to help. So you see, I've thrown my lot in with the cowards once already. I've stood in the shallows while someone else swam deep and did my job. And I don't have the courage of Noah Waldman or Bishop Hermann or Bishop Saretelli, and I certainly do not have more courage than Pius XII. But I'll be damned (literally damned) if I do not stand by my brother priests and I will most certainly be damned if I do not stand definitively, resolutely, uncompromisingly for the forty five million children who cannot stand at all.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.