



**Prepared Remarks to the Downtown Rotary Club
January 17, 2011
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls**

It is a pleasure for me to be here this afternoon. I would like to briefly reflect on what may be the most underappreciated story of our day: where does moral truth and ethical conduct fit in our present day culture? The role of morality and ethics is an interesting topic for intellectual discussion; but more significantly, moral and ethical actions, or the lack thereof, define who we are as a society, as citizens, and as persons.

It is appropriate that we discuss this challenge to our society on this day when the nation honors Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is his birthday that is celebrated, but we cannot remember him without also recalling his death, by the violence of an assassin, an immoral act most would agree. It will not surprise you that I as a bishop bring to this discussion the perspective of faith. Dr. King in his courageous efforts to bring moral truth and justice through the civil rights movement did so as well. A Baptist minister, he was a man of faith who said: "If we are to go forward, we must go back and rediscover those precious values – that all reality hinges on moral foundations and that all reality has spiritual control." Dr. King called on us a nation and as individuals to become better than we were. That call continues; the need for our courageous response is perhaps even more important today.

Last week I was in Tucson, Arizona when the violence that killed six and injured others including a congresswoman took place. We pray for her recovery and for all those injured and for those who grieve. I had the opportunity to speak with Bishop Gerald Kicanas, Catholic Bishop of Tucson. He was between funerals, one for a nine year girl who coincidentally was born on 9-11-2001, another day of horrible memory, and one for a respected federal judge. His pastoral presence in the midst of horror reminds us of the great gift that is our Catholic faith.

In times such as these we inevitably ask, why, why such violence, why such hatred, why such disrespect for life? St. Augustine centuries ago wrote: "we ask from whence does evil come, and there is no reply." There is evil in the world; we know it and must protect against it. We also ask what we can do to insure that such evil action as in Tucson does not occur again. There is no reply, no easy answer to that question either. What we can do is expect that our institutions – government, education, business, health care, and more - and their leaders maintain high moral and ethical standards, and that those same standards apply in our families and our personal lives. One thing we can do to ward off evil acts is to live moral and ethical lives ourselves everyday.

These words from The Catechism of the Catholic Church guide my thinking:

Every institution is inspired, at least implicitly, by a vision of man and his destiny, from which it derives the point of reference for its judgment, its hierarchy of values, its line of conduct. Most societies have formed their institutions in the recognition of a certain pre-eminence of man over things. Only the divinely revealed religion has clearly recognized man's origin and destiny in God, the Creator and Redeemer. The Church invites political authorities, indeed all facets of

society public and personal, to measure their judgments and decisions against this inspired truth about God and man.

The mission of the Church is the salvation of souls, all souls, those who make decisions and those who must live with those decisions. Choices in life are often a complex balancing of legitimate interests with less noble ones, yet choices must be made. The question is on what basis they are made, what values guide them.

Without a sense of the spiritual, that our origin and destiny are in God, choices tend to be made for base reasons, such as power or personal advantage as recent history has highlighted.

I think you would agree with me that there is much restlessness in our society today, a sense that things are not quite right. As I have commented before, we sense it from the incivility in the public square where too many laugh at others rather than laugh with them and by the selfishness, greed and deceit that has resulted in financial ruin for some and economic angst for many. We sense it by the casualness of sexual relations and the viewing others as vehicles for or obstacles to personal pleasure reflected so tragically in addictions, abuse and loneliness. We sense it in the dumbing down of ideas into sound bites that oversimplify complex problems and minimize their impact on people. We sense it in the noisiness of the world, the technological control of daily schedules, the coarseness of language, and the extent to which violence is seen as an answer to problems. Core or common values seem to have eroded or are missing.

Why we ask? As Vatican Council II stated it clearly years ago, the separation of faith from daily life is one of the most serious errors of our day. The absence of the recognition that man's origin and destiny is in God and not the things of this world has resulted for too many in discouragement if not hopelessness.

These are seemingly chaotic times because we as a society and too many of our brothers and sister have lost our moral compass. Dr. King in the 1960s identified the disease when he remarked: our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.

Yet we are people of hope. There is an old proverb, if it were not for hope, the heart would break. My hope is grounded in the Judea-Christian tradition on which our country was formed. My hope is in the many gestures of kindness that are evidenced daily. Little nine years old Christina, so brutally killed in Tucson last week, is said to have had a zest for life and wished to give. Her faith filled parents have donated her organs so that other children might live and give. My hope is in the caring and sharing attitude of so many here in South Dakota where generosity and personal concern for those in need is legendary. My hope is in reaching out to others across arbitrary divides. That federal judge killed in Tucson was a Republican who was simply stopping by to greet the Democratic congresswoman. Together they had been working on ways to improve the legal system for the benefit of all people.

My hope is in you and those you represent to live up the call of Dr. King and others to be better than we are by what we say and do in our little corner of the world which will then ripple across the city, the state and the nation. My hope especially is in the generations to come. There is a poem that includes the lines: I saw tomorrow passing by in little children's eyes, and said how carefully we'd teach if we were truly wise. What we adults say and do teaches the children, for good or for ill.

Permit me to offer some guides that I have learned, mostly from the school of hard knocks, which may help us live good moral and ethical lives and therefore teach wisely and live personally with peace and hope:

1. Periodically ask why do I do what I do, why do I do it in this way. It is an examination of conscience to be sure the lens through which we view life is noble and that our motives, our intentions, and our goals are worthy. I remember being warned to be able to explain what I do to a group of twelve peers, a jury. Someone more wisely suggested that I should ask whether I can explain what I do and say to my grandmother. A tougher judge.

2. Remember that we are part of something greater than ourselves, that there is the common good and that we are responsible not only for ourselves but for others, especially those with special needs.. While personal responsibility is a must, we all have been helped along the way by others – teachers, mentors, friends, government perhaps. I remember one English teacher who made us stand at the blackboard and diagram sentences for what seemed like hours at a time. She instilled in me patience, precision and love for language. Unfortunately I worry that tweeting and twittering is undermining our beautiful language. We are part of something more than ourselves.
3. Respect tradition and learn from history. It was G.K. Chesterton who I believe said: tradition grants a vote to those who went before us, in whose legacy we live and in whose debt we are. From their experiences good and not so good we can learn much and be both cautioned and be inspired. Those who had the vision and will to build St. Joseph Cathedral in the small town of Sioux Falls in the early 1900s during World War I and a recession while scattered throughout Eastern South Dakota mostly on farms inspire me today. We owe them our gratitude and prayers.
4. Discover and respect the facts, accepting how things are, not how we wish they were. There is a Peanuts cartoon in which Peppermint Patty and Marcie are taking a test in school. Peppermint Patty leans back and asks Marcie, what did you put down for number three, true or false. Marcie responds, true sir, true blue, as true as I live, true as stars above. More true than love to me, Oh, tis true, tis true, tender and true. Peppermint Patty turns around and says, I think I'll skip that one. The facts are often harsh and not what we might prefer, but they are real and what we must deal with. One of the hardest things for us in our day of 24 hour media where so-called spin and rumor are presented as fact often anonymously is that the facts are misrepresented or if awkward distorted for less than worthy purposes. Let us not be such messengers and let us be on guard.
5. Pray for healthy humility. I suppose it is human nature but we tend to think this is the most important time in the history of the world. Today is important to us of course because it is our time and we are called to use it for good. But it is healthy I think to recall that time passes and so do people, including us. At the Bishops House there is one room with the portraits of the eight bishops of Sioux Falls beginning with the Benedictine Abbot Martin Marty in 1889 who came as a missionary. The second bishop was Thomas O'Gorman after whom the school is named and who had the vision and tenacity to build St. Joseph Cathedral. Each bishop made an impression in his time in their own ways. As people come to the House and view the portraits, the question inevitably is asked, who is that? So whenever I am tempted to get puffed up about my important role today, I am reminded that some day some one will look at my portrait and ask, who is that. I hope someone knows.
6. Own up to errors and mistakes and be forgiving of others and also of oneself. When I was in political life there was a common expression used when someone went against us on some issue: forgive and remember. We must work with them, but the time will come when we can get revenge. I am doing penance for those days. Dr. King said: we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.
7. Have courage of our convictions. There is the story of the non-violence Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi and an English minister in South Africa. The law required that if white persons were walking on the sidewalk, blacks had to get off. Gandhi was considered black. As the two walked they encountered some teenagers who appeared ready to fight them. The minister sensing the confrontation suggested they take another route. I paraphrase here, but Gandhi said I thought your Jesus said to turn the other cheek. Well said the minister clearly scared, I think he meant it metaphorically; I'm not so arrogant as to think he meant it for me personally. I don't think so,

replied Gandhi, I think he meant that we need to show courage, to stand up for what is right, good and just even, or especially when it is unpopular or hard.

8. Respect life, all life. Someone said to respect life is simply to love, to will the good of others. Dr. King in one of his sermons discussed the parable of the Good Samaritan. You will recall that a man was beaten, robbed and left along the side of the road. A priest went by and did not stop to help, then a Levite went by and did not stop to help. Then a Samaritan, a foreigner, perhaps an immigrant legal or not, came along and did help, at some risk to himself. Dr. King noted that the first question the priest and the Levite likely asked was: if I stop to help this man, what will happen to me. But the Good Samaritan reversed the question, if I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him. When I attended public schools each student was given a ruler with the inscription: do unto others as you would have them do unto you, the Golden Rule. Sadly because it is biblical it would not be permitted today in many public schools. Yet it remains Golden..
9. Laugh often and keep perspective. I read somewhere that children laugh 500 times a day on average while adults laugh 15 times on average. I don't know whether that is true. But as some sage wrote, no wonder Jesus said let the children come to me. St. Theresa of Avila reportedly prayed: from somber, serious, sullen saints, save us O Lord. The governor I worked for told me that the most important piece of advice his father gave him was when he was anxious or worried about something to ask: twenty years from now will this be important. Few things are, but our moral integrity is one of them.
10. Finally Give Praise to the Lord for the gift of life, of family and of friends, of all our blessings. Thankful hearts are content hearts filled with love and hope even in the midst of challenge and loss.

Let me close with these words from Dr. King: Every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark, confused world the Kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men. Let each of us do what we can to assure our society and ourselves are worthy of the words we say in the Pledge of Allegiance, one nation under God.