

Bishop Burbidge (00:00):

This is Bishop Michael Burbidge and you are listening to the Walk Humbly Podcast.

Billy Atwell (00:08):

Podcasting from the St. Clare Studios here in the Diocese of Arlington. Welcome to the Walk Humbly podcast. I'm Billy Atwell, chief communications officer for the diocese and your co-host. If you have any questions you would like to send into the podcast for Bishop Burbidge, email us at info@arlingtondiocese.org or you can send us a message on social media.

(00:27):

I welcome your host, Bishop Burbidge. Bishop, how have you been?

Bishop Burbidge (00:29):

Billy, I am doing well. It's a beautiful time of year, the sacred season of Advent, especially these final days as we try to remove all obstacles from our hearts so they're ready and prepared to celebrate the birth of our Lord and his returning again in glory. So I'm praying that these final days leading to Christmas are filled with many blessings for our listeners and that we are all keeping our focus on what is truly the most important aspect of these days, preparing ourselves to celebrate anew the birth of our Savior.

Billy Atwell (01:06):

Absolutely, and this is our last podcast for the year, which is kind of hard to believe. So we're going to spend some time looking back on this past year. We're going to look at some sneak peeks from our Annual Report, which is going to be published in the Herald and delivered to homes this Thursday, so we'll go through some of those numbers. But before we do that, I wanted to ask you, there was major international news yesterday, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith issued a document called *Fiducia Supplicans*, which addressed matters related to the pastoral meaning of blessings. The news that followed was singularly focused on one point — of the blessing of same-sex relationships and what some would call "unions." I thought this would be a good opportunity, even though we're going to focus on some other things, for you to lead off by providing some clarity as well as your thoughts on this recent document.

Bishop Burbidge (01:51):

No, I'm glad you raised it, because you're right, it has garnered some news and media coverage.

Billy Atwell (01:58):

You may have even gotten an email or two.

Bishop Burbidge (02:01):

I certainly have, but I think it's really important, again, as I always suggest to our listeners, not to just go with the headlines or the blogs or anything like that, but to actually, if you have a chance, to read the document, but also reliable resources that may help to explain the document and its purpose and its content, which hopefully we can do very briefly here today.

But most importantly, I think it's very important to say what was issued by the Doctrine of Faith yesterday. In this document, Pope Francis, this is what we have to be clear about right away, has not changed the Church's moral teaching on the sanctity of marriage and sexuality as Jesus taught. And the document itself emphasizes that it's not an attempt to change or alter what we know to be true. Marriage is a permanent union between one man and one woman who are open to life just as Jesus taught. And it's true, it's always true, will always be true.

(03:13):

All of us, in whatever vocation that God has given to us are called to chaste and pure living in accordance with that vocation. We know that homosexual acts are immoral, but people with same-sex attraction are our brothers and sisters who deserve our love and compassion at all times, and all people are called to live in the state of grace — to conversion. We're all called to examine our lives to make sure that they are in accordance with God's plan and God's will, and to continue that growth in holiness. And that's a lifelong call for all of us. So none of the teachings of our Church in this document in any way, shape, or form have been changed. What our Holy Father is saying is that there are pastoral settings where blessings can be given. A blessing is someone reaching out for an extension of God's love, of God's goodness, and of God's mercy. And all who approach with that desire, "I want to draw closer to the Lord, I want his help in doing what I know he's asking of me" can receive the blessing.

(04:27):

Now, when this document talks about blessings with those in same-sex unions, it's very, very clear that that blessing can never, in any way, be in the context of any formal liturgical ceremony or in any setting that even gives the appearance of that. So basically what the document does is reaffirm what priests know to be true. We preach the Gospel and the truth of the Gospel without compromise, especially as it is related to married love and to sexuality. We never ever compromise that. We encourage and try our best to uplift people to conversion and to holiness of life, but at all times we remain available to be instruments of the love and mercy of God. And if a blessing in a setting that is described well in this document is helpful to a person in that situation seeking holiness of life, then that's the meaning of that blessing.

Billy Atwell (05:31):

Yeah. Now, that's not the way the national media portrayed it.

Bishop Burbidge (05:34):

Right. Yeah, of course.

Billy Atwell (05:35):

That makes sense to me. That seems in accord with what I've always known to be true about the Church's teaching. And I was speaking with a canon lawyer yesterday — I didn't even realize that there were different types of blessings. There was spontaneous blessings, there's liturgical blessings, and the document is pretty thorough in explaining those. But when it's explained publicly, those are all mixed together as though we're going to create new ceremonies for

people in same-sex relationships to receive special blessings. The document does go on to say that's not true, but it's the most unquoted part of the entire thing.

Bishop Burbidge (06:02):

Right, exactly. And we can never bless anything that is not of God, right? That is not of God.

Billy Atwell (06:12):

Right. Yeah, and blessings are to help us grow closer to God. Any person that gets blessed has sinned and needs God desperately, and the blessing is intended to draw them closer to that, but to be drawn closer to God means we're going to have to turn away from things that are not good for us, that are immoral or sinful. You have to be humble about that.

Bishop Burbidge (06:30):

It's always beautiful. It's always inspiring. Whenever I am out with our parishioners or in the community itself even, it's very beautiful, inspiring. I say it myself sometimes, "Father, bless me." What are we asking for? We're asking, "Father, bless me." Ask the Lord our God to outstretch his hand to give me what I need in life to draw closer to him. And so the Holy Father is just putting into context what the Church has always believed about blessings.

Billy Atwell (07:04):

Thank you so much, Bishop. Bishop, I want to talk a little bit about this past year. We're going to talk about the Annual Report in a little bit, that's going to be in the Herald. But as you look back on this past year, so much has happened. I feel like it was just yesterday that we were doing this podcast and talking about the Vigil Mass for Life, where you were able to preach in front of such a huge crowd. Well, that was the very beginning of the year.

Bishop Burbidge (07:28):

I know.

Billy Atwell (07:29):

And so much has happened since then. And when I was looking through some of these events, I thought, what really stands out to you? What are some of the most memorable moments and look backs of this past year?

Bishop Burbidge (07:39):

Yeah, it's always great. You see a lot of people do this at the end of the year, kind of the end of year review, and you see the photos and different memories that have surfaced. I think it's great that we do that as a diocese too, because it does remind us that God is in our midst and God continues to shower his blessings upon us. Of course, as a diocese, we have some challenges, just as we do as individuals, as families. There's always challenges. We're going to take up our cross and follow Christ for sure. But in the midst of it, I think it's a good thing at the end of the year, not only as a diocese but in our own lives: Where did I see the hand of God?

Where was God's goodness and generosity revealed? Where did he at certain events show us his presence and inspire us? We certainly think — the burial of Pope Benedict began the year 2023.

Billy Atwell (08:39):

Isn't that wild?

Bishop Burbidge (08:40):

Yeah. It was early January. Again, to reflect on his life, all that he's taught us, to go back to his writings, which are so rich in content. I think of our year of rejoicing and the goodness of the Lord with so many beautiful events, honoring Our Blessed Mother. And of course, what really stands out to me — that pilgrimage to the National Shrine Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes and the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, to see so many people from our diocese, every region of our diocese, every age group and culture of our diocese, represented. How can I not think of a highlight being the ordination of nine new priests?

Billy Atwell (09:25):

Isn't that remarkable?

Bishop Burbidge (09:26):

That is remarkable. We were blessed to have ordained nine new priests for our diocese and two transitional deacons. We've ordained permanent deacons. We're completing the finalization of our Strategic Plan and moving into implementation.

Billy Atwell (09:46):

That's going to have ripple effects for years.

Bishop Burbidge (09:48):

I know.

Billy Atwell (09:49):

That was announced this year, but it's going to continue for so long.

Bishop Burbidge (09:51):

Yeah. I was really blessed. It's always a great joy to bless a new church. I also had a great joy of blessing Christendom Chapel, a real treasure and jewel in our diocese.

Billy Atwell (10:02):

Yeah, it's so beautiful.

Bishop Burbidge (10:03):

Porto Charities, that does so much work for those with disabilities, held a banquet where so many people supported that great effort. We had a huge conference for young adults, 400 young adults, all gathering together for spiritual and human formation and times of friendship and celebration. And then we just opened up year three of our Jubilee, beginning with the call to renew. And in the midst of all this, there's a renovation of our mother church, our Cathedral.

Billy Atwell (10:35):

That's right.

Bishop Burbidge (10:36):

As people were driving by and seeing, it's really taking shape and form. And I can see the momentum and the excitement building and suspense, I would say too. So it's exciting, Billy, and I'm just so grateful.

(10:49):

I guess when it's all said and done, all those are different kinds of developments and events for sure. And it's good to have those kind of memories, but through it all, and this is the greatest blessing — the faithfulness and the goodness of the people of God here in this diocese, and my brother priests and all who work so hard every day trying to do their best to be faithful to the Lord and helping others to call to him. There's signs of that every single day, and there's many ways that it is revealed. And for all that I'm very, very grateful.

Billy Atwell (11:24):

Absolutely. So that really brings us to the Annual Report. We've got some amazing numbers, but the Church, particularly in the West, it's been struggling for some time with decreasing Mass attendance. We see these numbers across the country. In North America, ordinations to the priesthood are down in many places. We're very blessed — to ordain nine is really an exception. Marriages and Baptisms, those kinds of things, we're seeing a decrease.

(11:51):

Some of those issues exist in our diocese, some of them we're saved from, or at least it's more stable, so we have a lot of reasons to be hopeful. But we also — because of those numbers — have reasons to re-commit to evangelization, to evangelizing, not just those who have fallen away from the Church, but even re-evangelizing ourselves and those who are actively engaged in the Church to be disciples and to go forward. I was curious of your thoughts, when you see the national trends and even what's happening here in the diocese, what is your motivation next? What do you immediately go to when you think, "How do we fix this and go forward?"

Bishop Burbidge (12:22):

Yeah. There are indicators, which give us an idea of "How are we doing in the work of evangelization and leading others back to the Church and to full active participation in the life of the Church, including weekly attendance and participation at the Mass?" So there are some good indicators, especially after Covid, we can't underestimate the impact that that had even in the life of the church in our community. So there's some positive signs as we look at the

statistics that we see from our parishes and the October count and things like that. As you mentioned, there are some increases in Baptisms and First Holy Communions and the Sacrament of Marriage being celebrated, people coming into the Church. We saw an increase of that through the RCIA. So there's some really good signs. But the bottom line is we still have a lot of work to do. As far as full active participation with daily, weekly attendance at Mass, we're not too far ahead of the national average. We're looking at 27, 28%.

Billy Atwell (13:34):

Right.

Bishop Burbidge (13:36):

That's a great concern to me, because if we are being truly effective in teaching that the greatest gift that God has given us is the gift of his son in the Holy Eucharist, whose body and blood we get to receive every week as we listen to his word as well. If we were penetrating the hearts of people with that truth, who wouldn't be at Mass, right?

Billy Atwell (14:06):

Right.

Bishop Burbidge (14:06):

I get to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ in a setting of a community of brothers and sisters lifting up. So if 70% of those in a diocese are not doing that every week, then this year of renewal of the New Evangelization of "Okay, well what are we doing to not only teach the truth, but what are we doing to reach out, to inspire and to invite?" Many of our parishes and pastors are not afraid to get out of the routine. This is what we always do. Okay, maybe it's good to continue some of those things because they're working.

Billy Atwell (14:56):

Right.

Bishop Burbidge (14:56):

But maybe there are some things that we can look at as a parish. I always encourage our pastors to do that with the help of their parishioners, listening, pastoral counsels. What are some of the new, effective ways that there are to evangelize? Because there are a lot of people with expertise who are out there sharing some really good best practices.

Billy Atwell (15:16):

Exactly right.

Bishop Burbidge (15:17):

We want to share best practices here within the diocese. This parish may be having great success in this area, and this parish may be having wonderful victories in a sense in this area. Well, let's share them together. That's part of our Strategic Plan.

Billy Atwell (15:31):

I was just going to say, that's built in as a goal.

Bishop Burbidge (15:32):

It's very, very clear it's in the Strategic Plan. Even recently, as we gathered with leaders throughout the diocese recently, and also with our own colleagues here, we invited speakers who were talking about the New Evangelization. There are new ways. There are new means to creatively invite and inspire people of all ages with the truth that we are so proud to profess. Even as a diocese, we have to be able to ask — even me in my own ministry, there's some things I do every year. Well, maybe that's important that I continue those things, but maybe there's another way that might be a better use of my time or commitment or presence that might have a more lasting impact of touching hearts of people we're inviting back to the Lord and his Church.

(16:25):

So I don't see this as a, "Oh, this is this overwhelming challenge." I see this as a beautiful opportunity. And St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict, Pope Francis, continue to speak along these same lines. I just want to make sure in my own life, in my own ministry, as a diocese and in our parishes, we're embracing that call to the New Evangelization.

Billy Atwell (16:49):

Absolutely. I feel like the worse the culture gets, the more attractive the truth of the Gospel is. So if we do the basics, we're going to see success. If we really lean into it, how much more will we see? You had mentioned certain statistics about Baptisms are up. Holy Communion were up by a thousand. I know on the Catholic Charities side as well, there have been some increases. I didn't know if you wanted to highlight a couple of these. And again, for those listening, the full Annual Report is in the Arlington Catholic Herald, which is delivered to most homes this Thursday — we're recording on the 19th, so two days from now — which has a lot more details and a lot more updates than what you're going to hear today. But we wanted to give you a little sneak peek because some of these numbers are too good to hold on to.

Bishop Burbidge (17:29):

Yeah, I know, and I hope that people do really take a good look at the Annual Report. It's pretty user-friendly. We just don't want text, right? Who's just going to read text? So we have great charts that highlight really essential points. We have great photos that show the life and the vibrancy of our diocese. We have great reports about our financial stewardship, because part of the Annual Report is to be transparent. I think that's one of the reasons the faithful of our diocese are so generous, because we are transparent with our resources and we are good stewards. I am surrounded by great pastors and great staff here in the Finance Office and all,

we are good stewards. We assure people, if these are the funds that you give us with this intention, this is exactly how they're going to be used. And this report shows that very clearly. Also, with the invitation to ask questions if there are any follow-up that's needed.

(18:29):

But I would like everyone to take a look at that report, because it just shows you the grace of God is at work in the Diocese of Arlington, and you have responded to that grace. Because everything that is in that report is through God's grace and the goodness and generosity of the response of the people of God. So this report, I think, is a way to say, "Congratulations, Diocese of Arlington, for all that you're doing and accomplishing." And this diocese has always been committed to helping the poor and the needy.

Bishop Burbidge (19:01):

Mother of Mercy Clinics served over 1,500 patients this year, over 300 more than last year. Free meals at Christ House jumped 42%.

Billy Atwell (19:11):

That's one location. That's just one location where we distribute food, and it jumped 42%.

Bishop Burbidge (19:17):

So while that is good news, there's also sad news, right?

Billy Atwell (19:20):

That the need is there.

Bishop Burbidge (19:21):

Yeah, the need is there. That's one thing about Catholic Charities. There's good news that we're responding, but the reality is that the needs are increasing, and that's very sad to see. We continue to help those dealing — mothers and fathers welcoming children into the world who need some financial assistance or even housing or counseling, anything, to support life and to support mothers in need for sure. And we continue to help our brothers and sisters with immigration assistance, embracing them as brothers and sisters, with legal consultations and representation. So the news goes on. It's all in the report. Again, it's just by the grace of God and through the generosity of the people of God.

Billy Atwell (20:08):

You mentioned before the stewardship of funds. Everything you're mentioning was done. The reason we could support a 42% increase at Christ House is because the faithful have been generous to Catholic Charities, through the Christmas collection, through the charity ball, and all those fundraisers. The Bishop's Lenten Appeal is how we're able to serve so many people. That's how we're able to provide faith formation and assist Catholic schools and provide communications and vocations. It's expensive to have so many priests ordained, the education

and all that. You have provided for that. The people who have contributed and sacrificed, you've made it possible. We're very aware at the Chancery and in the parishes that we don't spend money on these things. We spend gifts on these things.

Bishop Burbidge (20:51):

Right. Exactly.

Billy Atwell (20:52):

This money is here because you gifted it, and we take that so seriously.

Bishop Burbidge (20:56):

You're talking to the people of God out there, right?

Billy Atwell (20:57):

Yes, yes, yes, the people of God. So I'm speaking to the listeners here, that your generosity is how we're able to do this. And so as we conclude a year, thank you. Thank you for what you've done, because these numbers are a reflection of your goodness and your willingness to assist.

Bishop Burbidge (21:13):

And dear friends, I echo Billy's thanks to all of you for your goodness, for your generosity, not only at this time of year, but throughout the year, that allows us to do so much good in the name of our Lord Jesus, for his greater honor and glory, and in service to our brothers and sisters in need.

Billy Atwell (21:30):

Bishop, any final thoughts as we close out 2023? I can't believe I'm saying it.

Bishop Burbidge (21:34):

I know. Billy, that's for sure, not really final thoughts, Billy, but just prayers, prayers to all of our listeners and to your families, that this Christmas will be filled with many blessings for you. That the peace that only Christ can give, our Savior, will fill your hearts and your homes, and that you'll be instruments of that peace and love to all those you meet. So I do wish all of you, dear friends, a blessed, blessed merry Christmas, a new year filled with Our Lord's abundant blessings, and I will remember you at the Masses that I will celebrate at Christmas and praying that together we will continue, especially as we begin a new year, to walk humbly with our God.

(22:22):

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