



Red Mass Homily
A Mass offered for legislators, court officials and legal professionals

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Memorial of Pope St. Leo the Great

Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Thank you being with us as we celebrate this Red Mass at which we pray in a special way for the guidance of the Holy Spirit for those who serve in government and those who attend our legal system which is so essential to stability, justice and respect in society.

We pray not only for those publicly known, but for all those who behind the scenes keep the political and legal systems functioning in an often unpredictable even chaotic world. We do so recognizing that freedom is a gift of the Creator and that a society that does not respect the Creator is one that will not long endure.

We pray less than two days after an election campaign that reflected a divide deep among us. And yet how encouraging it is in these few hours since to see the beginnings of a civil transition among our elected and appointed leaders who, despite personal differences, are protective of the blessings of freedom which we have inherited.

When Solomon was assuming the powerful role of King in the line of David, he was asked what gift from God he would desire. His response was: “an understanding heart to judge people and to distinguish right from wrong¹.”

Solomon’s prayer is ours today. We, whatever our vocation, need to continue to pray for understanding hearts for ourselves and those we allow to govern us that they and we may distinguish right from wrong.

As many of you know, before I became a priest I was a civil lawyer and served in state government in Wisconsin. So I have some understanding of the pressures, the competing demands and the dilemmas those in government and the legal profession face. As I look back on those days one of the bemusing things for me was that once I became a priest, people came to me asking not for prayer or spiritual advice, but for free legal advice. As the old saying goes, “you get what you pay for.” I quickly retired my shingle and assumed inactive status for fear of leading others to error. I, now as a bishop, have also become sensitive to the view of some that the Church is simply another special interest. The only special interest of the Church is to continue the mission and ministry of Our Lord Jesus Christ and to seek the salvation of souls.

A question often asked is whether it is possible to be both a faithful Catholic and a faithful citizen. My response is yes and that in fact being a faithful citizen is part of being a faithful Catholic if we follow the counsel of Jesus to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s, remembering that His kingdom is not of this world. That is hard to do when in our day some of Caesar’s agents seek to assume the role of God.

The Church offers principles to guide us that we might distinguish between right and wrong. They are summarized as the Gospel of life and the biblical call to justice. These principles of Catholic social teaching include

concern for the life and dignity of each person from conception through natural death;
recognition of the importance of family as the most essential institution to assure a stable society;
the right for all persons to have access to those things necessary to lead decent and healthy lives, including education grounded in moral principle and ethics and affordable health care;
the right to productive and safe work grounded on a fair wage and economic opportunity;
recognition of the common responsibility to care about and when necessary care for one another especially the poor and vulnerable, and finally, good stewardship of what God has created.

My personal patron saint is Thomas More, who by the declaration of Saint John Paul II is also the patron saint of statesmen, lawyers and politicians. He was martyred for the faith by King Henry VIII after putting his faith in God and His Church before political expediency. He courageously gave to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's: his very life. He said, "what does it avail to know that there is a God, which you not only believe by faith, but also know by reason: what does it avail that you know Him if you think little of Him?"² By that he meant 'I think what good is our belief in God if we do not live it, especially in the hard times?' Or as St. Leo the Great bluntly put it, "Christian, remember your dignity."³ We are called to be intentional Catholics and Christians. I encourage those in public service and the legal professions, who we raise up today with grateful hearts, and who profess to be Catholics to live that faith every day in their public and private lives

St. Thomas wrote this Lawyer's Prayer²:

"Lord, grant that I may be able in argument, accurate in analysis, strict in study, candid with clients, and honest with adversaries. Sit with me at my desk, and listen with me to my client's complaints, read with me in my library and stand beside me in court, so that today I shall not, in order to win a point, lose my soul."

Public service is a noble profession. The legal system is an essential vehicle of preserving peace and stability. Thank you to those who serve us all in public and private ways to assure our freedoms and provide for the common good. We pray today that God will give you understanding hearts. May the Holy Spirit come down upon you and give you the courage to stand up for what is right and just, even if it means losing a legal, personal or electoral point. Salvation of souls is at stake.

¹ – 1 Kings 3:9

² – St Thomas More, 1477-1535

³ – CCC, 1691