



Red Mass Homily

A Mass offered for legislators, court officials and legal professionals

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November 8, 2013

Friday of the Thirty-First Week in Ordinary Time

Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Thank you for 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 public office and those who attend our legal system which is so essential to stability 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 pray for them to receive as Solomon asked the Lord for in the Book of Kings, “an understanding heart to judge people and to distinguish right from wrong.” The Lord was pleased with that request and Solomon received such wisdom.

Too often in our day many seek wisdom through polls or pressure groups. We, whatever our vocation, need to ask the Lord for understanding hearts that we may distinguish right from wrong.

As many of you know, I formerly practiced law and served in the governor’s office in Wisconsin. So I understand some of the pressure, the competing demands and the dilemmas for which there is no obvious answer. 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 had to soon take down my shingle for fear of misleading others to error, something a priest ought not to do. I also recall when the bishops were called upon to support certain legislation for which they were lauded as visionary. Then to be accused by the same people only days later of imposing religious beliefs on others because of opposition to other legislation. This tension resounds within me as a bishop.

It is a reminder of the tension that comes in public life. How to be a person of faith in diverse culture is not easy. Catholic and American is it possible? I believe it is if we follow the counsel of Jesus in our Gospel reading – give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. That is hard to do when in our day Caesar seeks to assume the role of God.

A current example is the threat to religious liberty and freedom of conscience incorporated into the Affordable Care Act that requires religious institutions such as hospitals, educational institutions and charitable outreach agencies to subsidize and offer coverage for abortion inducing drugs among other known and unknown practices that violate our Catholic beliefs, or face fines so large that they would essentially force the closing of these important works. Private individuals in their personal businesses are also threatened in this way. It is in the political and legal processes that these issues are being debated and will be adjudicated.

The Church offers principles to guide us to know the difference 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 to natural death and the years in between;
- 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;
- the right to productive and safe work, a fair wage and economic opportunity;
- access to basic and affordable health care;
- recognition of the common responsibility to care about and when necessary care for one another especially the poor and vulnerable, and
- good stewardship of what God has created.

While there may be legitimate debate over how these social teachings are applied in concrete situations, they are guiding principles that can lift us above the base political, selfish and often angry debate which sadly is so much with us in our secular culture. Catholic teachings can allow us to assess how well we are living out the commandment to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength in whatever walk of life we are privileged to live and to love neighbor as ourselves in both our personal and public life.

Among my favorite saints is St. Thomas More, declared by soon to be Saint Pope John Paul the Great as the patron saint of statesmen, lawyers and politicians. He was martyred for the faith by King Henry VIII for 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 Gods. He said,

“(w)hat 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?”

By that he meant what good is our belief in God if we do not live it, especially in the hard times? As St. James put it: what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? We are called to be intentional Catholics. I encourage those in public service and the legal profession to be Catholics who are servants and not servants who just happen to be Catholics.

Therefore we must be active, especially the laity, in public affairs to live out our faith fully. In the movie A Man for All Seasons, a dramatization of his life, St. Thomas ponders:” if we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us saintly, but since we see that avarice, pride and stupidity common but profitable far beyond charity, modesty and justice, perhaps we must stay fast a little.” Stay faithful.

St. Thomas wrote this Lawyer's Prayer:

“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 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 and knowledge between right and wrong. May the Holy Spirit come down upon you and give you the courage to give 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 – A Man for All Seasons, 1966