

“Freedom, Law and the Pursuit of Holiness”

Homily Given on the Occasion of the Annual Red Mass for the Diocese of Dallas

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October 13, 2018

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year “B”

Introduction

Your Excellency Bishop Burns, Your Excellency Bishop Kelly, my brother priests, dear deacons, brothers and sisters in Christ: it is a pleasure and an honor for me to stand before you today to deliver this homily for your annual Red Mass, which is always such a significant moment in the life of a local Catholic community. Thank you for this invitation.

As I reflect on what brings us together this evening, my mind turns to a scene from that great classic of Hollywood that those of you my age and older will remember with fondness, “The Ten Commandments,” starring Charlton Heston in the role of Moses. In the scene in which he descends from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the Law in his hands, he comes upon the debauchery and lawlessness of the people, even having gone over to idolatry. He says to them: “Woe unto thee, O Israel! You have sinned a great sin in the sight of God. You are not worthy to receive these Ten Commandments!” They reply: “We’re gathered against you, Moses. You take too much upon yourself. We will not live by your commandments. We’re free!” To which Moses then retorts: “There is no freedom without the law!”

Freedom

The question of freedom and the law is certainly a very timely one for us. Indeed, I think the meaning of freedom is one of the greatest crises we are facing in our time. Sadly, a very superficial understanding of freedom seems to predominate in our culture, which is why it is seen as being in opposition to the law. But as Moses wisely affirms in Cecil B. DeMille’s epic film, freedom is the very purpose of the law: far from impeding freedom, the law is necessary precisely to preserve freedom.

The rich young man in today’s Gospel reading presents a helpful study. He appears to be a basically good man. Notice how St. Mark describes the scene: he *ran up* to Jesus, and he *knelt down* before him; he calls Jesus “good teacher.” He would seem to be a sincere and devout Jew. Indeed, he follows God’s commandments. But, like so many people in every generation, he is searching for something more. St. John Paul II, in his landmark Encyclical on moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor*, uses this scene as the point of departure for his reflections. He notes how Jesus begins with the basics: the Ten Commandments. He says that these represent the basic condition for love of neighbor: “These negative precepts express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage, private property, truthfulness and people’s good name” (n. 13). In other words, the point of putting commandments in the negative is that it provides a minimum standard for behavior.

This, though, is just the starting point. As St. John Paul says, there is more. He goes on to say: “They are the *first necessary step on the journey towards freedom*, its starting-point.” He then cites St. Augustine on this point: “The beginning of freedom is to be free from crimes ... such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege and so forth. When once one is without these crimes (and every Christian should be without them), one begins to lift up one’s head towards freedom. But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom ...”.

Jesus is always true to form, and so – no surprise – he calls the inquisitive rich man to a higher standard. Jesus is always asking more from us, because he knows we are capable of spiritual greatness. He calls the rich man out of his “comfort zone,” to move beyond what is familiar to him. The problem is, he had too many attachments. In our contemporary slang, we would say that he had too much baggage. His baggage was literally an impediment to him: that is, *impedimenta*, literally “baggage” in Latin. Contrast this to the Gospel reading for last Sunday’s Mass, which occurs in the Gospel of St. Mark right before the passage we just heard proclaimed: “whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.” A child is free of baggage; the freedom of childlike innocence knows no impediments to spiritual greatness. If you have ever known people who preserved that childlike innocence into their adulthood, you understand the sort of deep and pure happiness that they have attained in life.

Grounded in Higher Truth

This question of freedom and the law is most especially important for our own country, as it is such a great innovator and champion of democracy. The whole point of democracy is freedom, to guarantee freedom for its citizens. However, this cannot work unless the citizens of the democracy are virtuous, that is to say, they exercise freedom *responsibly*, for the common good, lest it degenerate into license. This, again, is the very purpose of the law. For this to work, though, freedom must be grounded in a higher truth, a higher truth to which the citizens must conform themselves. This is a truth of our human nature that the founders of our nation understood very well. And this is why our second president, John Adams, could say, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” And it is why even Thomas Jefferson – whose most distinctive mark, after all, was *not* his religious devotion – could say, “Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed the conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever.” These words are inscribed on his memorial in Washington, DC.

This idea, though, goes back way further than the founders of our country. St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of knowledge of the truth as being a participation in eternal law, which is unchangeable. He then develops this idea as applied to the effect of law. He tells us:

... it is evident that the proper effect of law is to lead its subjects to their proper virtue; and since virtue is that which makes its subject good, it follows that the proper effect of law is to make those to whom it is given, good For if the intention of the law-giver is fixed on true good, which is the common good regulated according to Divine justice, it follows that the effect of law is to make people good
....¹

¹ *ST IaIIae* q. 92 art. 1.

Law, then, is necessary so that society may be ordered in accordance with divine justice. Only in this way will the law be effective in providing for the common good, in that such law will help to make the people of the society good, it will encourage their growth in virtue. Such a society will be one in which people have a special concern the poor, the marginalized and the vulnerable, a society which will make sure to vindicate the rights of those who cannot speak for themselves.

Faith and Public Life

Actually, we do not need divine revelation to understand this. Many ancient philosophers, unassisted by the light of faith, understood it. The great Roman poet Cicero, for example, said the following: “It is insatiable desires which overturn not only individual persons, but whole families, and which even bring down the state. From desires there spring hatred, schisms, discords, seditions and wars.”² Such “insatiable desires” destroy not only the individuals they consume and those around them, but can “even bring down the state.”

All the more so, then, do we, who have faith, need to order our society in this proper, higher way. We need to take heed of the New Testament teaching of putting our inner, spiritual disposition in proper order, so that our actions will be righteous, that is, “regulated according to divine justice.”

This is a truth we need to be reminded of frequently, the truth that we cannot separate the demands of faith from how we live our life in public, that we cannot separate morality from policy, or conscience from action. It is no surprise, then, that the Church frequently gives us such reminders, such as the “Instruction for Catholics Involved in Political Life” issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith back in 2002. The Instruction points out how the atrocities which were witnessed in the twentieth century resulted from that very separation, and how the twentieth century proves the falsehood of what it calls “the notion that there is no moral law rooted in the nature of the human person, which must govern our understanding of man, the common good and the state” (n. 2). We may think that we are far from such regimes and

² Quoted in William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, from The Daily Study Bible Series, p. 99.

ideologies, but the Instruction cautions us against this, even those of us who live in a democratic society. It tells us, “democracy must be based on the true and solid foundation of *non-negotiable ethical principles*, which are the underpinning of life in society” (n. 3, emphasis added).

What happens when democracy is no longer based on this true and solid foundation? The powerful few take over, uninhibited in imposing their will on the masses. If there can be any doubts about what happens when we take faith and God out of the social picture and violate those ethical non-negotiables, a cursory review of the history of the last century should be enough to teach us about the horrendous consequences of doing so. Disordered societies breed reigns of terror.

This is a matter of divorcing positive law from divine justice, that is, from the law written on the human heart. Thus, society is no longer correctly ordered, it becomes unhinged from any objective standard, and so everything descends into chaos: the sense of social cohesion becomes unraveled, and the inevitable result is violence and turmoil. Is it any surprise, then, that we are seeing this very thing being played out in our very midst? Sharp partisan divides and bitter and insulting rhetoric is just the start. We see the vulnerable preyed upon by the more powerful and used to satisfy their own deranged desires; we see the most despicable and blatant attacks on human life and dignity, on even the most innocent of human life; we see the continual erosion of the most fundamental good of society, the very institution designed to protect and nurture the most vulnerable in any community – children – by the continual demolition of marriage and the family, with much of this even being aided and abetted by the institutions of government and the wider culture. This is all the bitter fruit of what the then Cardinal Ratzinger, in the now famous homily he preached before entering the Conclave that would elect him Pope, called the “dictatorship of relativism.” As in every dictatorship, it is the poor and lowly who suffer the most. Most alarming of all, we are now learning of how this moral corruption in the wider society has even affected leaders within our own Church.

Responsibility of Those Entrusted with Spiritual and Temporal Order

This, then, all points to the grave responsibility entrusted to those who create, apply and interpret the law in a society: to do so in accordance with divine justice and eternal truth, to reflect the very justice of God. This is always difficult because of the inner struggle it involves, the spiritual discipline needed to renounce those selfish tendencies in order to grow in virtue and righteousness. But I believe it is even more difficult nowadays when the social and cultural institutions of our society no longer support this principle as they once did.

It is noteworthy that St. John Paul II, in the Apostolic Letter by which he proclaimed St. Thomas More the patron saint of statesmen and politicians, holds St. Thomas More up as an example for our time. He says that he was a man who never compromised despite being subjected to various forms of psychological pressure, asserting, “This harmony between the natural and the supernatural is perhaps the element which more than any other defines the personality of this great English statesman: he lived his intense public life with a simple humility marked by good humor, even at the moment of his execution.”³ Saint Thomas More – lawyer, statesman, politician – was canonized alongside a member of clergy, Bishop John Fisher, the only member of the hierarchy in England to resist the pressure of the king to violate the communion of the Church for his own personal motives.

A lawyer and a priest were canonized together, in 1935, exactly 400 years after their death. That may seem like a long time, yet the timing was not lost on Pope Pius XI, who realized what was happening in the world at his time. That is why, during the ceremony of canonization, he referred to them as “grand lighthouses set up to shine and enlighten in the ways of God.”⁴ He asserted, moreover, that everyone can imitate their martyrdom because there are ways to do so other than by blood, for example, fidelity to conscience and fulfilling one’s duty exactly and faithfully, no matter how difficult. But if the example of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher was timely and necessary back then, let us listen to what G.K. Chesterton said about the lawyer-saint even before his canonization, in 1929: “Blessed Thomas More is more important

³ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio* Proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron Of Statesmen And Politicians, October 31, 200, n. 5.

⁴ Quoted in Gerard B. Wegemer, *Thomas More: a Portrait in Courage*, p. 226; original source: *The Tablet*, March 16, 1935, pp. 337-338

at this moment than at any moment since his death, even perhaps the great moment of his dying, but he is not quite so important as he will be in about a hundred years’ time.”⁵ We are now only eleven years away from that moment, and I would say that Chesterton’s prophecy was right on the mark!

A lawyer and a priest were canonized together: all of us here in this church, priests and lawyers, need to take heed. It will take both – the transforming power of faith and the teaching force of the law – to call our nation back to the founding principles that made it great, to a renewed purity and purpose and fidelity to the One Who has endowed us with the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the basis of those non-negotiable ethical principles which underpin life in society. It will take courage to resist, and there will be a price to be paid, in some form or another, such as in one’s economic status, career advancement, or good name due to calumny and character assassination.

This means that we, lawyers and priests, must prize this divine wisdom above all else if we are to fulfill our God-given vocation. We must have the insight and fortitude of the author of the prayer we heard proclaimed in our first reading: to prefer God’s wisdom “to scepter and throne,” to deem “riches nothing in comparison with her,” to live by the conviction that “all gold, in view of [wisdom], is a little sand, and before her, silver is to be accounted mire,” to value her even more than “health and comeliness.”

Conclusion

A lawyer and a priest were canonized together. We each have a patron saint to help us in living our vocation faithfully and well so that, like them, we, too, may attain holiness of life, and after this life enter into the contemplation of God face-to-face; a patron saint for each of us to emulate and who now prays for us from that vantage point of worshipping God face-to-face. May this be our true aspiration in life, the goal always before our eyes and deep in our hearts, so that the prayer of the psalmist which we made our own in this Mass may always be on our lips and witnessed with our lives: “Fill us with your love, O Lord, and we will sing for joy!”

⁵ Quoted in Wegemer, p. 227; original source: G. K. Chesterton, *The Fame of Blessed Thomas More, Being Addresses Delivered in His Honour in Chelsea, July 1929*, p. 63