



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

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Bishop of Sioux Falls

June 21, 2018

Vigil of the Memorial of St Thomas More and St John Fisher, martyrs
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 make possible our legal system which is so essential to stability in society.

We pray not only for those who are high profile, but also for all those who help keep the political and legal systems functioning in an often unpredictable, even chaotic, world.

By happy scheduling, we do so as the State Bar of South Dakota is gathered here in Sioux Falls. Welcome to all.

We also do so as the Catholic Church in the United States, by direction of the US Bishops, begins Religious Freedom Week which runs from the Memorial of Sts. Thomas More and John Fisher (tomorrow) and concludes on the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29. All four were martyred for their courage and faithfulness to Jesus Christ and the Church He instituted.

The theme for these days of focus on religious liberty is ‘Serving Others in God’s Love.’ Religious liberty is essential if the Church can continue to serve in education, adoption and foster care, health care, and, migration & refugee services without compromising moral and social justice truth.

When King Solomon was invited by the Lord in the Book of Kings to identify what is the greatest gift he desired as he assumed power, his answer was “an understanding heart to judge people and to distinguish right from wrong.” The Lord was pleased with that request and Solomon received such wisdom. To this day some pray for the wisdom of Solomon.

Many these days seek wisdom through polls or pressure groups or what is the least controversial for the moment. We, whatever our vocation, ought to ask the Lord for understanding hearts so that we may be wise in decision making and morally right in our actions.

As many of you know, I formerly practiced law and served in the governor’s office in Wisconsin. So I understand some of the pressures, the competing demands and the dilemmas for which there is no obvious answer. I also recall when the state Catholic bishops were urged to support certain legislation, which they did, were lauded as visionary, only to be attacked by the same people days later for seeking to impose religious beliefs (because of opposition to other legislation). This tension resounds within me now that I am a bishop and am regularly asked to take positions, often on issues for which I lack the wisdom of Solomon and are beyond my competence. This is one reason why Bishop Gruss of the Rapid City diocese and I established just last year the South Dakota Catholic Conference. It is a

resource for all, including those in public service and the legal profession to clarify, to inform and to advise based on Church teachings which are the teachings of Christ.

It is challenging for a person of faith to live it in so diverse a culture as is ours. The question is often asked, “is it possible to be both Catholic and American?” It is if we follow the counsel of Jesus: to 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.

The Church offers the Gospel of Life and the biblical call to justice 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

- respect for the life and dignity of each person, from conception to natural death, and the years in between;
- recognition of the importance of family and marriage as God intended and 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.

St. Thomas More was declared by Saint John Paul II as the patron saint of statesmen, lawyers and politicians. He once 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?” By that he meant what good is our belief in God if we do not live it? As Apostles James wrote in Letter recorded in Sacred Scripture: what good is it to profess faith without practicing it?

St. Thomas More wrote this familiar Lawyer’s Prayer which hangs on the wall of my office:

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 to assure peace and justice among peoples and lasting stability personal and public affairs. 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 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.