

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Red Mass, "Beyond Civility"

*Red Mass*

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*St. Mary's Seminary and University*

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Like many people, I watch television when I'm working out. The thought here is that by distracting myself the time spent in unpleasant exertion will seem to pass more quickly. Unfortunately, my very smart TV is not equipped either with Hulu or YouTube with the sad result that, during my workout, I'm sometimes reduced to watching C-Span.

Such was the case last Sunday afternoon. I found myself watching footage of Candidate Richard Nixon fielding questions posed by Southern journalists during the 1968 presidential campaign. That was followed by a documentary in which Candidate Hubert Humphrey discussed with his staff his political philosophy, his values, and his experience, as well as the positions he espoused during that very difficult year in our history.

Believe it or not, that campaign took place fifty years ago, but as I watched Nixon & Humphrey, & listened to how they spoke about the issues, it seemed like a tableau from an epoch far removed from current experience. Then as now, of course, politics was a blood sport and the polite and reasoned rhetoric of yore often masked invective and ruthlessness. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but be impressed by the cogency and civility with which both candidates fielded questions and addressed the issues of the day.

## **Hope for a Better Day**

In the bruising aftermath of the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings, people from various quarters are calling for civility in political discourse. And truth to tell, the theme of civility is favored among Red Mass homilists sometimes, I think, because

that theme seems to place the preacher on an Olympian height, far removed from the rough and tumble of politics. It is as if he becomes an oracle from on high announcing, “Be nice! Be nice!” Meanwhile, political rivals – undeterred – pursue the tactics of mutually assured destruction.

Please don’t misunderstand: I’m not opposed to niceness, let alone civility in politics. But in the midst of a year, different from 1968, yet still very difficult both for the Church and for the Nation, an extra dollop of niceness would quickly melt in the heat of political bluster, and the voice of civility would soon be drowned out by roaring voices on all sides, including those that roar in the all-pervasive social media.

What, then, should we do? Should we throw up our hands and hope for a better day? Or do you not, as believing men and women of bench and bar, have some role to play in bringing about that better day for which many of our fellow citizens are longing? If so, what can I say to offer you some meagre help in embracing that role? Only, I think, a speck of borrowed wisdom: a brief reflection on civility and an exhortation on our imperative as Christians to go *beyond* civility if we hope to *achieve* civility.

## **What Is Civility?**

So first a word about civility, beginning with this observation: If we want to have civility in society, then let us beware of reducing everything to partisan politics. For the places where civility is fostered are in fact pre-political institutions, like the home, the family, the school, church, sports, and other free associations. It is in these settings that a person is formed in the truths and virtues that will enable him or her to live well and interact well with fellow citizens in society. A cohesive, respectful, reasonable, and compassionate society doesn’t happen just because we wish it to be so or because we passed a new law or enacted a new policy. A society will be marked by civility to the degree that its citizens are formed for it in settings where there is freedom to step back from the partisan fray so as to focus on what really matters to our humanity and to our society. To the extent that we politicize family life, schools, and even churches we make harder the task of forming new generations of citizens for the responsibilities and blessings of living well with others in a free society.

What are these truths and virtues upon which civility hinges? There probably is no list of truths and virtues about which everyone agrees but let's face it, there can be no real civility in society so long as the fundamental human dignity of each person is not respected, including those who are the most voiceless and vulnerable. And even as public monuments to the Ten Commandments disappear from view, the Commandments remain, as Pope Benedict XVI taught, a privileged expression of the natural law, that inner sense of right and wrong that guides us to do the right thing even when no one is compelling us to do the right thing, surely a key ingredient of civility. What's more, our society needs to recoup a more profound notion of freedom. As St. John Paul II famously taught (here in Baltimore in 1995!), "Freedom consists not in doing what we like but in having the right to do what we ought." If we want civility in our society and civility in our politics, this is how we must form the generations that will take our place!

## **Beyond Civility**

Yet, if St. Paul's words in tonight's reading from Ephesians are to be believed, mere civility is not enough; it is inadequate to the task of forming us into citizens and leaders who reflect what is most noble in our common humanity. For civility survives, not in shallow soil of mere social convention, but rather in the deeper soil of the human heart when it is made fertile and fruitful by the living Word of God. Yes, as men and women of bench and bar—who are followers of Christ as well as members of his household, the Church—you are called to go *beyond* civility if you wish to foster civility in our culture. In a word, you are called to holiness, as am I, a stumbling pilgrim along the way.

We can see this if we attend to St. Paul's prayer for us in our excerpt from Ephesians. What did St. Paul ask God to grant to the Ephesians and to us? St. Paul is really calling for the transformation of inmost self, that inner sanctuary where we hear the call to love God and others, that inner chamber where we think, feel, and make decisions. St. Paul is asking that we would be strengthened interiorly by the Spirit and even more so, that Christ would dwell in our hearts with ever greater intensity so that, living in us, Christ might shape how we relate to the world around us. But St. Paul's prayer for us does not end there! No, he prays that would comprehend with all the saints of God's wise and loving plan of redemption,

culminating in Jesus' Cross and Resurrection, his Paschal Mystery. But even this is not enough, so Paul prays that we would actually experience Christ's love, a love that surpasses knowledge. Once that happens we won't be content to love the Lord in some impersonal fashion. No, we'll find ourselves loving the Lord at a wholly new level, much as one might love "an irreplaceable person to whom one is bound through thick and thin" (Guardini, *The Lord*, p. 222). St. Paul's prayer exceeds itself in asking, finally, that we might "be filled with the fullness of God" – filled with God's love not merely to the brim of our being but rather filled with God's fullness as God measures it – beyond our capacities. He prays not merely that you and I would be holy but rather that we might be "divinized" as the Eastern Church would say, immersed in God's own life, the very goal of our existence, here and hereafter.

## **Conclusion**

The upshot of all this is not that you will suddenly find yourselves spouting the doctrines of the Virgin Birth or the Real Presence in your closing arguments, legal briefs, and opinions. Rather, because you are touched – body, mind, and spirit – with divinity you will do your jobs better than ever – more fully human because of the Christ who lives in you, imparting to you through the Spirit the fullness of his love.

In this way, when civility wears thin all around you, as inevitably it will, you will have in your hearts a hidden storehouse, a treasure trove of love, and precisely because of that love within you which transcends civility, you will be civility's attractive proponents and practitioners in the world today! Thank you for your service to our nation, our community, and the Church! May God bless you with ever greater wisdom and love!

St. Thomas More, pray for us!