

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Diocese of Toledo

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Red Mass

Diocese of Toledo

Oct. 5, 2019

Introduction

Bishop Thomas, members of the St. Thomas More Society, all dear friends in Christ: Baltimore, the City from which I hail, true to its history, has a burgeoning immigrant population, many from Central America and Mexico, but also from various parts of Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Recognizing the needs of those who are newly arrived on our shores, Catholic Charities strives to provide much-needed services through a ministry known as “The Esperanza Center”, “esperanza” being the word for hope.

Inside the Esperanza Center you will find doctors, dentists, and nurses volunteering their time and talent in service of the newly arrived, as well as instructors volunteering to teach English as a Second Language. You will also find a dedicated corps of lawyers helping those who are struggling with their immigration status and other baffling legal problems as they try to settle in a new country.

Such efforts are multiplied here in Toledo and throughout the nation. Many of you and many of your colleagues in the legal profession volunteer time and talent in the service of those in need, assisting those who otherwise could not afford competent legal assistance. Other members of bench and bar give of their time as members of Independent Review Boards that assist dioceses in living up to their commitments to protect children and to remove from our midst any representative of the Church who would harm a child or a young person. In these and in other ways you and your colleagues extend yourselves to in service others.

Stir into Flame

These examples of generous service prompt me, your Red Mass homilist, to speak of your profession, the practice of law and the administration of justice, not merely as a profession but, in a certain sense, as a vocation of service to others, ...service to individuals and families in need, ...service to those non-governmental institutions such as churches and charities that play such a vital role in any society that cherishes fundamental freedoms; ...and service to our nation at the local, state, and federal level, seeking to be a voice of reason and compassion in the administration of justice and in the protection of freedom and human rights in a rapidly changing society.

The examples of service I have cited prompt me and you to ask the Holy Spirit to pour forth into our hearts the love of God - that love which was revealed most fully in the Christ, "the Son of Man who came, not be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the many" (Mark 10:45). By invoking the Spirit who is the mutual love of God the Father and God the Son, and by welcoming the grace of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, we are enlightened and strengthened so as to reach new heights of service to those who need our help and depend on us to play our role in contributing to the soundness and vitality of our democracy. Indeed, by embracing a spirit of service, you take up anew the daily challenges of bench and bar, not merely as a matter of professional duty, but indeed as a way of contributing to the commonweal of our society.

Light from Sacred Scripture

What, then, does the Holy Spirit say to us in today's Scripture readings about our calling to serve others in the midst of our daily responsibilities? How does the Word of God prompt us to a greater spirit of service?

First, I would say, the prophet Habakkuk urges us to take a long hard look at the world in which we live and work - and it's not a pretty picture: "Destruction and violence are before me," he says, "there is strife and clamorous discord." This ancient prophecy strikes a surprisingly contemporary tone, for our society and our world are indeed beset by violence. And public discourse, if we can call it that, has become so contentious that it seems nearly impossible for political and ideological

opponents even to talk to one another and to search for common ground.

No doubt the violence in our streets, in our homes, even in our schools, shapes the issues that come before you in the practice of law and the administration of justice. No doubt the ideologically divided state of our nation with its zero-sum-gain mentality greatly complicates the always delicate process of attaining that justice which is impartial and objective, that justice in which all are equal in the eyes of the law. We say that we are a nation of laws and we strive so to be, yet justice can often be subverted by personal and political agendas. How easy it would be to be swept up into the discord or, conversely, to carve out a comfortable professional niche without concern for society's welfare or without concern for those who are caught in the crosshairs of violence and clamor.

To do so is to live without vision, to live for oneself, and to tarnish a profession meant to be at the service of our nation and its people, including the least of these.

In the end, the Lord's words to Habakkuk are encouraging; the Lord says: "Write down the vision clearly so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint." What is this vision that will not disappoint? What is this vision that lights our way? Is it not found in today's Gospel where the disciples say to Jesus, "increase our faith"? For we cannot clearly grasp the Lord's example of self-giving love nor imitate it without the vision that faith alone provides, faith which is a gift of the Spirit.

And it doesn't take much faith, only a kernel of living faith, the size of a mustard seed. If we have just a speck of faith, Jesus tells us, we can see to it that an enormous tree with deep roots is pulled up and cast into the sea. In other words, faith enables us to tap into the strength of God, so much so, that we uproot those intractable problems sunk deep into the ground of our hearts and our culture and cast them into the healing ocean of God's mercy. This is what happens, when you, with the eyes of faith, see a needy client not as a nuisance but rather as a person loved by God and endowed with dignity, or when you administer justice tempered with mercy, or volunteer your time in service of the poor and vulnerable or defend the religious freedom of believers and religious institutions.

Jesus addresses this very point further on in the Gospel where he specifies the kind

of service we will render if we have that vision which is afforded by faith. He compares us to servants who work all day, in your case, plowing and tending the field of the law. You come home tired but who nonetheless find it in your hearts to keep on serving others, even when no thanks is given, even when you are deemed 'unprofitable servants' - in spite of all the good you do. In a word, Jesus is teaching us not only to serve the needs of others but indeed to do so without any sense of entitlement or expectation of reward, except the joy of being loved by God, being fed at his table, and being chosen to act as the instruments of his truth and love in the world.

That said, it is important to remember that faith and its vision are not something that you and I conjure up or manufacture out of the goodness of our hearts. Rather faith and its vision are gifts of God, a gift of the Holy Spirit. That is why we should make our own words what St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God ... [that gift of God which is] not a spirit of cowardice but rather [a spirit] of power and love and self-control." Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who enables you to fulfill the responsibilities of bench and bar with that wisdom, courage, and right judgment that are so necessary if we would uphold justice, truth, and human dignity and to create a just society where human flourishing remains possible. It is the Holy Spirit who opens for you, in your daily work of heart and hand, opportunities to be at the service of your fellow citizens, but especially at the service of the poor, the defenseless, and the vulnerable.

St. Thomas More

In another time and place, also violent and clamorous, a man steeped in law and culture heard the voice of God amid the din, and though he was reluctant to do so, he laid down his life in service to his God and to his country...St. Thomas More. Amid the din and clamor of our times, may you hear each day the call of the Holy Spirit to place yourselves at the service of your God, your Church, and your fellow citizens.

St. Thomas More, pray for us!