

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Red Mass, Diocese of Kansas City

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Diocese of Kansas City

St. Joseph Parish

November 3, 2017

A few weeks ago, I visited St.-Omer, a small town in north-central France. Founded in the 9th century and built around existing monasteries, St.-Omer experienced the vicissitudes of history as the French, Flemish, English, and Dutch periodically laid siege to it. Yet proudly standing in the center of town is the Cathedral of Notre Dame, built in stages but with its oldest parts going back to the 11th century. Today it remains an active parish, outlasting wars, revolutions, and ideologies.

In the 17th century the Society of Jesus founded a college at St.-Omer to educate the sons of Catholic families in colonial America. Because of England's Penal Laws, those Catholic families could not send their sons to institutions such as Harvard or the College of William and Mary, nor could they send them to England to be educated. Prominent among those who sent their sons to St.-Omer was the Carroll family of Maryland.

Some 275 years ago, young Daniel Carroll arrived at St.-Omer, Daniel, who one day would sign both the Articles of Confederation & the Constitution. He was followed by John Carroll, the 1st Catholic Archbishop in the United States and by Charles Carroll, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence. At St.-Omer these young men received a splendid formation in the wisdom of the ancients, in literature and drama, and in scientific discovery, an education that harmoniously combined faith and reason. The students followed a rigorous schedule meant to form them in virtue and in the college chapel they went about their daily round of spiritual exercises. In a letter to his father, Charles Carroll, age 13, wrote: "I can easily see the great affection you have for me by sending me here, to a college

where I may be not only a learned man but also advanced in piety and devotion.”

We do not imagine that the founders of our country were in every respect “angels”. Like us, they were flawed human beings, with moral blind-spots, foibles, and failings. Yet there is a providential quality about their formation and their achievements that we should continue to cherish and to hand on to each successive generation, even amid the rush-to-judgment about historical figures currently in vogue. For although the founding fathers were formed in different schools and took differing approaches to religious faith, nonetheless, like the Carrolls, they came to embrace two convictions critical to a limited government that recognizes the God-given rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of its citizens: The first was that human nature, though flawed, is rational and open to moral reasoning and truth, not of the relativist variety and not dependent on any particular religious denomination. The second was that religion, with its stress on morality and virtue, is good, very good, both for human nature and for society in general. As George Washington said, “there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness.”

Both convictions were evident in how the founders framed our government, with checks and balances to ensure that power would not be concentrated in the hands of a few privileged individuals or groups. They were realists when it came to human nature and so they sought to build a system that would limit the human quest for power. They were intent on a form of political self-government that would require the consent of the governed and thereby protect the freedoms with which the Creator endowed each person. Yet, the founders also understood that limited self-government required citizens to govern themselves as individuals, families, and communities. Political self-government, they knew, would require moral self-government.

To put it another way, limited self-government opened for citizens a seemingly new and vast world of freedom but none of the founding fathers mistook this freedom for licentiousness. Rather, they opened the way for a society in which institutions such as families, schools, and churches would form citizens in those moral and civic virtues that would equip them for the responsibilities that come with limited self-government. The founders understood that when human passions are given free

reign – when human appetites and emotions are out of control, when avarice, greed, and indifference to the poor are the order of the day, when right thinking gives way to deep confusion about human nature and morality. The founders understood that when and if such things were to happen, the great experiment of limited self-government would be endangered. Among others, James Madison said if people are incapable of moral restraint, then “nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.” Liberty and limited government hinge on the human capacity for virtue and on the readiness of citizens to use their freedom in pursuit of goodness & truth.

I believe it was for this reason that the founders valued religious freedom and came to enshrine it in the First Amendment. In declining to adopt an established religion, the founders did not thereby seek to marginalize religious faith nor did they merely seek to neutralize religious disputes in society. What they did aim to do was to give citizens and their churches the freedom surely to worship as they saw fit, but also to engage in the work of forming character, of helping citizens harken to their “better angels” as Lincoln would come to say, a work carried out beyond church walls and beyond congregational boundaries, surely for the salvation of souls but also for the sake of human dignity and the common good.

Running through my mind and heart in these few historical reflections are the words of warning found in today’s readings from the Prophet Isaiah and the Letter of James as well as the aspirational words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. As we survey the current state of society, there are to be sure, many people quietly living heroic lives of virtue in a spirit of service and many families, schools, and institutions of service devoting themselves to the formation of moral character and the raising up of leaders for the future of church, state, and society itself.

Yet, do we not also see how the disordered thinking and living, which both Isaiah and James decry, has gained a foothold in our country, leading to deep divisions in society, to bitterness and violence, thus endangering our freedoms? Think of the ugly, even vicious, political rhetoric that assaults our culture and the inability of political leaders to find a basis on which to come together to deal with urgent problems confronting our country and our world. Think of those who manipulate the political process and our financial structures, such that power and money are

concentrated in the hands of a few. How sad that so many opinion leaders in our culture have so little appreciation for the wisdom of our founders and the genius of our form of government. Do we not look on with dismay as many intermediate institutions in society, such as the family, churches, and faith-based schools suffer declines and no longer perform their critical role of forming citizens capable of moral self-government and thus political self-government? The struggle to preserve religious freedom does not so much concern the survival of religious institutions for their own sake as it does the survival of a form of government deemed by Abraham Lincoln as “the last best hope of earth”.

Lincoln also said this: “Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.” Nor indeed, dear friends, can we escape mystery, the mystery of God’s call to us in our personal and professional life to be instruments of his providential care at this pivotal moment of history. How insistent we must be that those involved in the administration of justice deeply understand, appreciate, and love our history and heritage, and indeed our form of government designed to guarantee human freedom and dignity. How vital that those who practice law and administer justice have a keen sense of right and wrong, of goodness and evil, of what builds up people and communities and of what tears down people and communities and indeed culture itself. And how important that we be not only competent stewards of law and justice but also that we be disciples who are striving to live out our baptismal calling, to open our hearts and to model our lives on the Christ of the Beatitudes. For you are not only officers of the court but also agents of moral formation – for yourselves, your families, your colleagues, and for the wider society.

All of which brings me back to that little village in France, St.-Omer, where my predecessor, the 1st Archbishop of Baltimore was formed and where his brother and cousin, founders of our country, were formed. We are indebted to those Jesuit priests, many of whose names are lost to history, and we are also obligated to follow in their footsteps. For regaining confidence in human reason for unchanging moral truth and buttressing it with the light of biblical revelation are crucial to a future full of hope and peace, for us and those who will come after us.

Thank you for your heroic labors and witness. May the Spirit of God continue to enlighten, bless, and strengthen you so that you may bear witness to the God of

Jesus Christ, who is the source of those “blessings of liberty” we cherish as citizens of the United States of America and of the world.

May God bless us and keep us always in his love.