

Red Mass Homily; Archdiocese of St. Louis

I. Introduction: The Glue Is Missing

A. Archbishop Carlson, brother priests and deacons, distinguished civic officials, members of the bench and bar, members of the Thomas More Society, fellow Knights of Columbus, parishioners and all dear friends in Christ: Thank you for your kind invitation to serve as homilist for the annual Red Mass of the Archdiocese of St. Louis. I don't often give my homilies titles but I'd like to title this one "The Glue Is Missing."

B. It begins with a homework project assigned to each member of my 5th grade class. We were studying ancient Greece, so our teacher asked us to construct a cardboard replica of some example of Greek architecture, a very challenging task. Since I am all thumbs, I asked my talented Mom to help, and she willingly obliged. First she brought out several white cardboard boxes from a local department store. Then, with an artist's eye, she traced on them the outlines of a Greek temple and, with little help from me, cut out what she had traced, including columns. My admiration for her knew no bounds as I saw a small masterpiece in the making. But then came time to glue the pieces together: "Where's the glue?" Mom asked. "It's missing," I mumbled, and of course, Mom knew that I had absconded with the Elmer's glue (for reasons we've both long since forgotten). The last thing Mom needed to do that afternoon was to go out and buy more glue, but that's exactly what she did, and lo and behold, the masterpiece took shape. When I brought it to class the next day, my teacher knew that this replica of a Greek Temple exceeded my poor abilities, but she was gracious, and my classmates ranked it "best in class" (or at least better than my violin playing).

II. Missing Societal Glue

A. I would submit that, in these times, the "glue" seems to be missing from our society. Our forebears traced out all the pieces of great government and a healthy

society: foundational documents that guarantee fundamental liberties, three branches of federal and state government with checks and balances, religious & charitable institutions, strong families, a resilient economy & much more. The components of this masterpiece still exist in our societal institutions, but they no longer seem to hold together as well as they should, as divisive and uncivil campaign rhetoric substitutes for reasoned political speech and as society splinters on very fundamental questions such as the humanity of the unborn, the worth of the frail elderly and terminally ill, the definition of marriage and the role of the family in society, race relations, the plight of immigrants and refugees ... and even the pride of place that the fundamental freedoms of religion and speech should occupy in our culture. Rampant individualism without common moral foundations has led to a society that is more divided and less cohesive than perhaps ever before.

B. It's not that we've always agreed on hot button issues in the past, nor should we ever expect politics to be free of one-upmanship and bitter accusations. But now, it seems, we often lack the tools to have coherent discussions about things that really matter in our society. Indeed we seem to have lost the very framework for thoughtful discussion. We've forgotten how to think about the issues in ways that go beyond party politics, special interests, personal preferences, and sound bites. So what is the "glue" meant to hold together our very diverse and divisive society? How can we find at least a modicum of unity amid our differences? I would submit to you that the missing "glue" is nothing other than the natural law, that universal, in-born sense of objective right and wrong by which every person participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator.

C. I'll try to keep my description of natural law short, and I also ask your forbearance as I mix my metaphors ... so, for just a moment, I'd invite you to think of natural law, not as "glue", but rather as a "compass". A compass, as we know, points to the general direction in which we're headed. Natural law is like that - it's an inner moral compass with a tiny whispering voice. If we listen to that voice, it will tell us where "true north" is as we trudge through life's moral thickets. It will suggest, in general terms, that our lives should be aimed in a good direction and that any decision we might make is either a step in the right direction (i.e., towards God and human fulfillment) or in the wrong direction (i.e., away from our Creator and thus contra human happiness and dignity). This inner moral compass functions like an

early warning system alerting us to the fact that some moral decisions and views are bad and that others are good, and that still others are complicated and require careful and prudent consideration. It also reminds us that our actions have repercussions on others & on society at large. ...Yet, unlike a GPS that takes us an exact location, the natural law in-built compass doesn't give us the final answer to the moral decisions or dilemmas we may face. Rather, it prompts us to look at a course of action more closely and pushes us to arrive at a decision that is in accord with God's eternal law. The Church's social teachings and just civil laws—both rooted in the natural law— function more like a GPS that lead us to specific moral and social determinations. The Catechism of the Catholic Church sums up these ideas when it says: "The natural law, the Creator's very good work, provides the solid foundation on which man can build the structure of moral rules to guide his choices. It also provides the indispensable moral foundation for building the human community. Finally, it provides the necessary basis for the civil law with which is connected, whether by a reflection that draws conclusions from its principles, or by additions of a positive and juridical nature" (CCC, № 1959).

D. So back to the original metaphor: the natural law as the "glue" that gives our lives and our culture a necessary measure of cohesiveness. To be sure, this inbuilt moral voice, this inner intuition of right and wrong, is embedded in flawed and fallible human beings; we are prone to sin and error. Nonetheless, natural law can give moral unity to the competing demands in our lives and to our society in all its diversity by rooting them in basic truths, virtues, and values. Further, because the precepts of natural law are universal, they provide a framework in which people of differing views can work together to preserve fundamental human rights such as religious liberty, to protect the vulnerable and to extend compassionate care to those in need. In a phrase, natural law "...expresses the [transcendent] dignity of the person and determines the basis for [man's] fundamental rights and duties" (CCC, № 1956).

III. Retrieving the Glue

A. So, I would suggest that we need to retrieve this "glue" for the sake of our society. Where do we find it? I assure you, it will take more than a trip to Walmart. Instead, we must make a difficult journey through the mountains and valleys of our

human hearts. On our way we will pass through memories of our good deeds and accomplishments but also through the lingering effects of deception, pride, twisted motivations, and those secret thoughts we try to conceal from others. At length we arrive at the true inner core of our being, our conscience, where we find the “glue” that holds our lives and our societies together. For in this inner sanctuary, the conscience, the Author of our humanity quietly engages our powers of reason and our moral will, urging us to do good and avoid evil, to direct our actions toward that which is permanently good and true, no matter what the pundits may say.

B. When more of us pause from the incessant demands of public and professional life to make this journey into the depth of our hearts, to this secret sanctuary where we are alone with God, then the way we go about our daily work will be subtly or perhaps even dramatically transformed from within. It is not that we should try to inject Catholic doctrine into our filings and verdicts but rather that we infuse our professional work with those eternal truths and values which, even without the light of faith, can be known to human reason. Engaging our powers of reason and our will, natural law pulls us back from the precipice of imagining that there are no “self-evident” truths, nothing fixed, nothing objectively right and wrong.

IV. The Red Mass

A. We have gathered for the annual Red Mass during which we invoke the power of the Holy Spirit upon those of you who devote your lives to the practice of law and the administration of justice. We are here, so to speak, to make a collective journey to the source of this elusive “glue” that gives coherence and cohesion to our lives and to our culture. The surest path to the inner sanctuary of our hearts is the Holy Spirit who fills our inmost being with the light of Christ, elevating and purifying our powers of reason and strengthening our will, so that we may know more readily, in every circumstance, what is right and good and have the courage to carry it out, even when it demands of us personal and professional sacrifices. In this way, the Holy Spirit also enables us to become witnesses to the truth and love of Christ in society at large and amid our personal network of friends and colleagues.

B. Dear friends, if we find this “glue” and put it to good use, we will manage to construct, not a cardboard model of a great civilization, but a true civilization of love

and life, willed by Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Thank you for your service to our society. God bless you and God keep you always in his love!