

Red Mass

I. Introduction

Bishop Farrell, brother priests and deacons, Ellen Dorn and the members of the St. Thomas More Society, members of the judiciary and members of the bar, professors of law, seminarians, Knights of Columbus, parishioners, honored guests, all dear friends in Christ:

I sincerely thank you for inviting me to offer the homily at this year's Red Mass and for carrying out the critically important mission of the St. Thomas More Society in these challenging days for our culture, our nation, and the Church's mission. Among these challenges is the defense and promotion of religious liberty against an encroaching secularism & overreach on the part of government at all levels. Thus have we gathered to pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to assist us all in this work which, in God's grace, will contribute toward the building of an authentic civilization of love. Let us allow the living Word of God to guide us in reflecting how we might do this.

II. Joshua's Question

We begin with the prophet Joshua, who, as the successor of Moses, offers a description of how the Chosen People, delivered from the slavery of Egypt, took possession of the land of Canaan, divided its territory among the twelve tribes of Israel, settled the land and became a dominant presence in the region.

In the passage we heard this morning, Joshua, now advanced in years, is preparing for his death. He gathers the people for his farewell address and challenges them with regard to their fidelity to the Lord. As Moses' successor, one might say that Joshua was a "founding Father" of Israel and that he was calling the people of Israel to fidelity with that which constituted their nation: not only the might of the Lord's

outstretched arm and courage of its warriors, but above all the covenant which the people of Israel entered into at Sinai.

So Joshua puts the pivotal question to the leaders of the tribes of Israel, “If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now living ...” Yet the gods to which Joshua referred were no gods at all but rather creatures of the human mind and will. At best these false gods represent the drive of the human spirit to transcend itself, and its search for the very ground of its existence. But these false gods never deliver; as the Psalmist remarks: “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but speak not; they have eyes but see not. They have ears but hear not; no breath is in their mouths. Their makers shall be like them, all who trust in them” (Psalm 135: 15-18).

III. The Dangers of an Increasingly Secular Society

Even though Joshua’s challenge was issued long ago and in a context very different from our own, it nonetheless resonates. Our times are marked not by the construction of altars and temples to false gods but rather by a militant, godless secularism that seeks not only to exclude the role of religion in public life but also to construct a culture characterized by the absence of God. It is marked by the desire to live as if God did not exist or, at the very least, to live independently of God and the law of truth and love inscribed upon our frail human hearts. Citing excesses carried out in the name of religious fervor, secularists portray all religion not as a source of truth, goodness, and love, but rather as a dangerous and destructive force which should not have a place in shaping values, laws, or policies, and instead be confined solely to private sphere. In place of God and true religion they substitute (and worship) their own opinions, ideologies, pleasures, and attainments. These are the false idols at whose altars all too many worship in our times.

Thus, in place of the truth that can be known by revelation and reason, more and more people are giving up the search for truth. Opinion makers often claim that human beings are not capable of attaining truth and in denying man's capacity for truth, they also undermine ethical values. What is true or false, right or wrong, it is said, depends on the will of the majority. Yet, as Pope Benedict XVI has wisely stated, "History ... has sufficiently demonstrated how destructive majorities can be ... in systems such as Nazism and Marxism, all of which...stood against truth. Further, majorities can also be manipulated by powerful social forces, so that, at the end of the day, those truths and values that have shaped our culture and bound us together as a people are evacuated, and in their place is the will of the powerful against the weak and vulnerable. Thus does our Holy Father speak of a "dictatorship of relativism."

As if to illustrate this point, St. Paul speaks to us today in the reading from Ephesians about the sanctity of marriage. He portrays marriage, clearly understood as between one man and one woman, as a powerful symbol of the relationship between Christ and the Church. "Husbands," he says, "love your wives even as Christ loved the Church!" St. Paul goes on to reference what the Book of Genesis teaches regarding marriage, "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh ..." In portraying the relationship of Christ and the Church, St. Paul appeals to a bedrock truth in the development of civilization itself, namely, that marriage is a mutual relationship of love and respect between one man and one woman expressive of their unique love and open to the possibility of begetting children. Yet, in a secular culture where truth and ethical values have been undermined, many are passionate about redefining marriage, about having the law treat same-sex couples as though they were actually married. Untold resources are being poured into that effort and those who hold fast to the truth about marriage and family are being demonized.

Pope John Paul II warned of such things when he visited Baltimore in 1995. He said: “The challenge facing you, dear friends, is to increase people’s awareness of the importance of religious freedom for society; to defend that freedom from those who would take religion out of the public domain and establish secularism as America’s religious faith” (October 8, 1995). This is how you and I are to understand the challenge Joshua put to his people: “If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve ...” Will we remain “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all”? or will we become a nation that divorces itself from the Creator who is the source of our life, liberty, and happiness?

Professor Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard has pointed out that religious freedom is in danger of becoming a second class freedom, compromised by newly created freedoms unreferenced in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, such as a right of privacy in choosing to take the life of the unborn or a nearly unfettered right to abortion-inducing drugs and sterilizations provided for even by private employers with conscientious objections. But she warns that the many incursions against religious freedom we face today are, in the first instance, not the result of bad laws or court decisions but rather the bad fruit of a secularism made bold by the timidity and lukewarm faith of believers

who no longer practice their faith or witness to it in public life.

Professor John Garvey, President of The Catholic University of America, said this: “Our society won’t care about religious freedom if it doesn’t care about God ... ” He added, “The mechanisms to preserve religious liberty only work when people care about their religion” (Address to US Bishops, June, 2012).

IV. To Whom Shall We Go?

When the Lord Jesus taught both his disciples and the apostles about the Eucharist in the Bread of Life discourse found in the Gospel of St. John, many who heard him were deeply disturbed. When Jesus told them that He was the Bread of Life and that

he would give himself to them as food and drink, many said, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” Jesus did not compromise or abandon his teaching in order to please them but instead told them that his teaching were the words of “Spirit and life.” Jesus who would die on the Cross, rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven, would also bestow on them the Holy Spirit, if they would but open their minds and hearts. Yet, as we see in today’s Gospel, many chose instead to return to their former way of life. ... How often that Gospel scene repeats itself when people hear the Church’s teaching or a caricature of it that seems out of step with contemporary culture. “It’s too hard to be Catholic!” they sometimes say, and, either they seek a faith that is watered down or abandon faithful living altogether. For example, how many times have opinion makers told us how roundly the Church’s teaching is rejected on the sanctity of life at its origins.

Faced with such rejection and facing a host of challenges to religious freedom, we may be tempted to change our teaching, to compromise, to weaken. We may even be tempted to follow those disciples who broke away from the Lord. But are we not challenged this morning, to answer Joshua’s challenge with Peter’s question: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life!” We have gathered this morning at the banquet of Christ’s sacrifice to eat the Bread of Life, to drink the chalice of salvation, so that we may be strengthened in that wisdom that strength which comes from the crucified and risen Lord, whose love is stronger than the sum of our weakness and sinfulness.

Nourished by the Bread of Life and filled with the Holy Spirit, may we be given the strength boldly to bear witness to the Gospel, boldly and lovingly to evangelize our culture, such that we might indeed help overcome the split between faith and culture and be active participants in building a true civilization of truth and love.

May God bless and keep us in his love!