



THE MOST SACRED OF ALL PROPERTY: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE PEOPLE OF MARYLAND

SAMPLE HOMILY

November 2011

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October 13, 2011

RED MASS

St. Thomas More Church (Baltimore, Maryland)

Archbishop O'Brien, Bishop Malooly, Msgr. Farmer, Father Zielinski, brother priests, members of the judiciary, fellow attorneys, officers and members of the St. Thomas More Society of Maryland and friends all—

It is a high honor for me to offer the homily at this annual Red Mass sponsored by the St. Thomas More Society at Baltimore. The first Red Mass celebrated in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, our Premier See, took place 55 years ago this very month. This Mass of the Holy Spirit tonight continues that noble tradition. Originating centuries ago in Rome, Paris and London, the Red Mass has a rich tradition of invoking God's blessing on judges, lawyers, professors of law, governmental officials and all people involved in the administration of justice.

Most of my priestly life has been spent at St. Patrick's Church in downtown Washington, not far from the National Archives of the United States. The National Archives is an important Washington edifice and a wonderful place to visit. It is always a profound experience, at each and every visit, to read and ponder anew the great documents of America's past--the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. At this annual Red Mass, it is a most appropriate time to reflect on certain "self evident" "truths" mentioned in the Declaration of Independence.

And we do this as we call upon the Holy Spirit to enlighten us, to enlighten in a special way each of you who serves the cause of justice and the common good. Yes, we call again and again for that "new spirit" to be placed within us, the same spirit prophesized by that great Jewish prophet Ezekiel in our first reading where he promised that the Lord God would give us "a new heart and place a new spirit within" us. It is the same Holy Spirit who came upon the Church on Pentecost "like a strong driving wind which was heard all through the house where the [apostles] were seated."

The Holy Spirit is referred to in tonight's gospel as "the spirit of truth." With the yearning for the "spirit of truth," then, we read this night at Baltimore the moving words of our 235 year old Declaration of Independence unanimously passed on July 4, 1776.

That foundational document of our democracy speaks of the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" and "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Included in these "truths," the document--protected and enshrined under secure green glass-- speaks of "rights," "certain unalienable rights" endowed to each of us by our Creator: "that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

These are memorable words. These “truths” helped bring our great democratic experiment into existence and have sustained us as a Nation. And we know from that fifth century father of the church, Ambroiafter, that “anything true by no matter whom said is from the Holy Spirit.” So we call upon the Holy Spirit to help us deepen our understanding of these “truths” referred to in our Declaration of Independence.

In our land today, however, there are some who regrettably interpret these "truths," truths whose origin is the Holy Spirit, in varying ways—almost and sometimes denying them. At a minimum, they are not seen by all as self-evident--these truths which from the beginning of our national experiment helped define us as Americans--these truths of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness--once the basis of a clear American consensus.

Liberty, for example, cannot for long exist without truth, especially the transcendent truth of the human person. Nor is pursuit of happiness for any one of us furthered if the life of each of us--including the weakest in our midst-- is not protected. I speak of life from the womb until natural death and every aspect of life in between.

As our late Holy Father Blessed John Paul II beautifully stated in his 10th encyclical letter, *Veritatis Splendor*, " the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate--no individual, group, class, nation or state" (V.S. 99).

Or as the late Father Richard John Neuhaus has eloquently written:

"When truth itself is democratized--when truth is no more than the will of each individual or a majority of individuals--democracy, deprived of the claim to truth, stands naked to its enemies. Thus does freedom, when it is not 'ordered to truth' undo freedom" (Wall Street Journal, October 8, 1993).

Our Catholic tradition is a tradition of natural law, aided by reason, revealed by God. It is a living Catholic tradition older and certainly tested by time. Our perennial challenge, a challenge for this Red Mass, is to help this Nation see again more clearly that certain unalienable truths do exist--the truths of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These truths are immutable and universal, not values created by the passing electoral plebiscite of any particular moment in time and history.

They include most importantly freedom of religion, religious liberty, (began in the New World with the founding of our own state of Maryland), a certain cherished liberty at risk in some quarters today. The right to exercise our faith and follow our conscience in all aspects of our lives, privately and publicly, and not just in our places of worship, are viewed with hostility by some in our society today and have experienced a steady erosion. And yet there could be no more important self-evident right than that of religious liberty, for it is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution and included in the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence.

“Life, liberty and pursuit of happiness,” truths upon which this Nation was born 235 years ago, are truths not man made or changeable but truths endowed by our Creator. They are the truths which will help this wonderful Nation continue to grow as our forebearers envisioned -- if only we do not grow weak, if we, especially as Catholics, continue to speak, and not give up hope, when the life of the weakest among us is

imperiled, when our religious liberty, ever so subtly is threatened and when our happiness and its pursuit, especially the happiness to live lives of faith is made more difficult or impossible to embrace because of those efforts which impinge that pursuit.

At this solemn Red Mass, we rededicate ourselves to insuring that our freedoms and liberty--in a special way our religious freedom--are never taken for granted. Only through constant study and vigilance then will the vision of our forebearers remain a reality today and in the years to follow.

As we have called upon “the spirit of truth” this night to enlighten us in the truth, those self-evident truths upon which our country has been formed, we pray now as we return to the altar of this holy Mass that that same Holy Spirit will transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Strengthened with this gift from heaven, then, we go forth to love and serve the Lord and each other, and so guided, serve our Nation that we might be instruments of renewal in the service of justice and the common good.

AMEN