

Spinning the Threads of the Kingdom

Red Mass
Chapel of St Ignatius,
October 7, 2009
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Welcome to the Red Mass of 2009, at the opening of the judicial season in our nation and state, with Archbishop Brunett presiding at our Mass. This is a renewed tradition here among us, following the many years it was sponsored by the local St Thomas More Society. It is a very long tradition in the Catholic Church and gets its name from that tradition.

The first Red Mass was celebrated in the Cathedral of Paris in 1245. 700 years ago, about 1310, it was celebrated in England at the opening of each term of the Court by all members of the Bench and Bar. The judges and doctors of law wore red robes or academic hoods. Hence the name “Red Mass”. It became associated in our Catholic tradition with red as the color for martyrs such as St Thomas More and with red as the liturgical color for the Holy Spirit. Thus we ask through St Thomas More, patron of statesmen, politicians, judges, and lawyers, that the Holy Spirit guide those with responsibility in the legal profession to seek justice. The Red Mass is the inspiration today of a new tradition of the “Blue Mass” for police officers and others engaged in public safety, and the “White Mass” for doctors, nurses, and other health-care professionals. So welcome to this Mass, which is for you and for God’s blessing of you in your professional and civic service.

The Red Mass is always convened, led, and made possible by the bishop or archbishop. So, thank you, Archbishop Brunett, for calling us together and leading us in our worship. Archbishop Brunett and I have agreed to alternate each year in giving the homily or sermon. Last year the Archbishop laid out some fundamental principles from Catholic Social Teaching applicable to the judicial, political, and legal profession. I would like to follow up on that from a Jesuit angle. We call Seattle University a “Jesuit Catholic” university, implying we are Jesuit and hence Catholic. Perhaps more adequately we should call ourselves a “Catholic Jesuit” university because our Jesuit mission is received from the Catholic Church as a particular, officially approved charism and ministry of the Catholic Church.

In the United States—whose judicial, legal and political persons and system we are looking at from a Catholic perspective—Jesuit has had a long history with a rather troubled start. Let me recall the famous correspondence between John Adams, the retired second president of the United States, writing from Quincy, Massachusetts, to Thomas Jefferson, the third president, also in retirement, residing at Monticello. They had been rivals; they became friends; and in one of the greatest coincidences in American history both died on July 4th, 1826, 50 years to the day from the signing of the Declaration of Independence in whose writing they had both had a hand. Writing to Jefferson ten years earlier, in 1816, Adams had something quite interesting to say about Jesuits:

“I do not like the late resurrection of the Jesuits. They have a general now in Russia, in correspondence with the Jesuits in the United States, who are more numerous than everybody knows. Shall we not have swarms of them here, in as many shapes and disguises as ever a king of the gypsies, Bampfylde Moore Carew himself, assumed? In the shape of printers, editors, writers, schoolmasters, &c.? I have lately read Pascal’s letters over again, and four volumes of the History of the Jesuits. If ever any congregation of men could merit eternal perdition on earth and in hell, according to these historians, though, like Pascal, true Catholics, it is this company of Loyola. Our system, however, of religious liberty must afford them an asylum; but if they do not put the purity of our elections to severe trial, it will be a wonder.”

John Adams, you had every reason to fear because Jesuits have indeed become “swarms” in your land, and not only “printers, editors, writers, and schoolmasters”, but they also run some 28 Jesuit universities and 60 Jesuit high schools across the nation, and in the state named Washington, for your predecessor, they now educate three-quarters of the law students. Thanks for the liberality of the “asylum”. The “wonder” of not putting the “purity of our elections to a severe trial” has, I believe, come about. We await to see whether your bit about “eternal perdition on earth and in hell” shall have its fulfillment too! So here are some thoughts for this Red Mass from one of the “company of Loyola”, not in the disguise of “a king of the gypsies” but in the shape of a Jesuit university president.

The question I ask you today, and which I ask myself every day, is: “With what spirit of joy can we go about our work—as professionals in law, statecraft, service, ministry, or education—within a Catholic vision of what we are ultimately about?” Not so much a question of “What do we do?” as “How are we helped by our religion to do what we do?” With what spirit, what vision, what joy which releases our energy and commitment and love of what we do. Faith and religion make a difference not only in the “what” but also in the “how” of our professional work and our lives.

Consider for a moment Thomas More, who, by the way, in a poll of the Law Society was rated as the “Lawyer of the Millennium” by a wide margin. He served King Henry VIII, and after Cardinal Wolsey, became Henry VIII’s Chancellor of England, the first layman to hold that post. His chancellorship was most memorable for how quickly as a judge he dispatched all suits brought to the court, with the unheard of result that he ran out of cases on the docket to judge. For that alone I think all of you would agree he should indeed have been canonized as a saint! This dispatch of cases is commemorated in an English rhyme:

When More some time had Chancellor been
 No more suits did remain.
 The like will never more be seen,
 Till More be there again.

This capacity for work, to get things done in an almost jaunty way, corresponds to a most noted characteristic of Thomas More’s way of acting. He lived and acted with joy. The famous Erasmus of Rotterdam, the humanist and friend of More, described him in the following way:

“His countenance is in harmony with his character, being always expressive of an amiable joyousness, and even an incipient laughter and, to speak candidly, it is better framed for gladness than gravity or dignity, though without any approach to folly or buffoonery. He seems born and framed for friendship, and is a most faithful and enduring friend...When he finds any sincere and according to his heart, he so delights in their society and conversation as to place in it the principal charm of life...In human affairs there is nothing from which he does not extract enjoyment, even from things that are most serious. If he converses with the learned and judicious, he delights in their talent, if with the ignorant and foolish, he enjoys their stupidity. He is not even offended by professional jesters. With a wonderful dexterity he accommodates himself to every disposition. As a rule, in talking with women, even with his own wife, he is full of jokes and banter.”

More was executed because out of loyalty to his faith he would not attend Anne Boleyn's coronation as Queen of England even though he wrote to Henry acknowledging her queenship and wishing the king and new queen happiness and health. Neither would he sign the Act of Succession because it's anti-papal preface, nor the Act of Supremacy because it made the king head of the Church of England. Though loyal to his king and friend, he was judged a traitor and sentenced to the torturous, brutal, extendedly painful death of being hung, drawn, and quartered. Henry commuted this sentence to swift decapitation by axe. More maintained his joyful spirit to the very end. As one contemporary wrote:

“that innocent mirth which had been so conspicuous in his life, did not forsake him to the last... his death was of a piece with his life. There was nothing in it new, forced or affected. He did not look upon the severing of his head from his body as a circumstance that ought to produce any change in the disposition of his mind”.

Not bad not to have your mind changed while losing your head! Some trick!

This spirit of joy to the very end even came out in his last words and acts. As he climbed the scaffold on Tower Hill, he said to the executioner: “I pray you, I pray you, Mr. Lieutenant, see me safe up and for my coming down, I can shift for myself.” While on the scaffold he declared that he died “the king's good servant, and God's first”. Because he thought his beard was completely innocent of the crime for which he was accused and did not deserve the axe he asked the execution to hold up till he positioned his beard so that it would not be trimmed when the axe severed his neck.

Thomas More did not get this joy, this friendliness with all, this marvelous “how” he went about doing what he did, simply because he was jolly or had a big English breakfast each day or a good pint now and then. His joy came from his religion, bubbled up from the wellspring of his faith, was shaped into a spirit of joy by the vision with which he was filled by the Holy Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. This author of the novel Utopia, which is about how society is structured in an ideal land, based his vision on the scriptures, on belief in God and in an afterlife, on the promise of the Kingdom of God. It is one thing to have joy in the good times of life; it is another to have it in the hard times of rejection. More had it in both. Joy may be easy when you are young and healthy and the road of life stretches out invitingly in front of you; it is another to have joy when death is at the door. More had both. His true joy, his deeper joy, the foundational joy of his life

and death was the joy of knowing he was about what Jesus preached and God was bringing about, the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the view of this Jesuit this is the lamp we are given which is meant to shine from Christ to us and from us to others, and not to be put under a vessel or under a bed—smothered by anything we live, work on, struggle with, or are surrounded by. The vision Thomas More had and that we too can have in our Christian faith is that God gives a future to justice, a future to peace, a future to unity among peoples, a future to love, a future to life, and a future to this earth. We can have a spirit of joy in our work for justice, for the sanctity of life from beginning to end, for human dignity, for an ordered society of human flourishing, for the common good, for equality, for reconciliation, for peace—which is the work of all of us here in this Red Mass—because what we are doing is spinning the threads of which God is weaving the Kingdom.

Jesus was passionate about the Kingdom of God; the Church is for the sake of the Kingdom. The Christian and Catholic vision which can inspire and give joy to all we do is God’s creation of the kingdom on this earth, that it is guaranteed and already glimpsed in the resurrection of Jesus, and that we contribute to it by what we do. God’s Kingdom is, in short, the re-creation of us in our final fullest identity beyond death in a re-created earth where God reigns and we reign with God. It is God’s doing, God’s fashioning, but a fashioning from who we are and what we do in our work.

Again I say, in and through what we do in our daily lives and work we are spinning the threads of which God is weaving the Kingdom. Only God can weave the new creation, only God knows the pattern. We provide the stuff. It will be made up of the stuff of our earth, our world, our work. Forget an ethereal “heaven” somewhere else, somewhere beyond, unearthly, unconnected with what we struggle to bring about here and now. The “heaven” we so often hear about or whose images fill us is but a waystation to the true promise of God, the Kingdom of God on earth, the passionate concern of Jesus, what we are asked to be about, what God will bring about, and the ultimate, undimmable joy of our lives, our faith, and our loves.

It is not just the martyr Thomas More, or this Jesuit who has this vision or this Archbishop who has always acted with such noticeable joy. It is the clear teaching of our Catholic Church. Listen to what the Second Vatican Council says authoritatively (adjusted only for the sake of today’s more inclusive language):

“We know neither the moment of the consummation of the earth and of (humanity) nor the way the universe will be transformed. The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away and we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, whose happiness will fill and surpass all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men (and women). Then with death conquered the sons (and daughters) of God will be raised in Christ and what was sown in weakness and dishonor will put on the imperishable: charity and its works will remain and all of creation, which God made for (us), will be set free from its bondage to decay.

“We have been warned, of course, that it profits (us) nothing if (we) gain the whole world and lose or forfeit (ourselves). Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come. That is why,

although we must be careful to distinguish earthy progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society.

“When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise—human dignity, brotherly (and sisterly) communion, and freedom—according to the command of the Lord and in his Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom ‘of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace’. Here on earth the kingdom is mysteriously present; when the Lord comes it will enter into its perfection.”

Can you and I and the Archbishop, can all of us, see the very hard work we do in offices, in courtrooms, in legislative halls, in parishes, in our communities, in our schools as spinning the threads, providing the stuff, of which God is even now weaving the Kingdom we all so desire. Can this fundamental Christian and Catholic vision of both where everything is ultimately headed and of how God is gratefully taking up even now all of our efforts on behalf of the common human good... can this faith vision suffuse our daily dedication and daily grind with the kind of joy St Thomas More showed in life and in dying?

I wish I myself all my life had held clearly and passionately this vision rather than a weaker vision. As I hold it in heart now firmly in my more mature faith, I find it suffuses everything I try to do with an invincible joy. It brings together all work for justice and peace, for humanity, for a sustainable world, all service of community, all education, with faith. I pray we all may find joy in spinning the threads of which God weaves the Kingdom. May this vision and the joy which flows from it be the gift of the Holy Spirit to you in this Red Mass.