



## January 11, 2004 - Red Mass Homily of Archbishop Seán Patrick O'Malley, OFM Cap

The following homily was delivered by Archbishop Seán Patrick O'Malley, OFM Cap., at the annual Red Mass for lawyers Sunday, January 11, 2004 at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Boston.

It is a great joy to be able to celebrate this Red Mass with you today. I am grateful to the Catholic Lawyers Guild of the Archdiocese of Boston for organizing this important event in the life of the Church that represents a tradition that goes back so many centuries. As the son of a lawyer and from a family of many lawyers, I have always felt a great affinity to this celebration and I initiated the practice in both the Virgin Islands and in Fall River. In the Virgin Islands, the first Red Mass was a grand event. The choir was superb, the governor, his cabinet, the senators, diplomats, judges and lawyers and the wonderful parishioners of Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral – everyone came wearing red. I am disappointed in you people.

The local newscasters gave the running commentary as the Mass was simulcast on TV and radio. It began with his description of the entrance procession. The great solemnity broke down when the Catholic Women's Organization entered. He said: and following the Knights of Columbus are the Ladies of the Knights. It caused quite a commotion but the Mass was still a great success.

My Dad however, has warned me repeatedly to refrain from Lawyer's jokes on these solemn occasions. He himself has always complained to me saying: "The problem is 95% of the lawyers give the rest of us a bad name."

We are all pleased that the Honorable Robert Bork is joining us today and will address us as the featured speaker at this year's luncheon. Judge, you are one of those who give lawyers a good name. We all look forward to your words.

As a young seminarian I was in the West of Ireland when President John F. Kennedy visited the country. It was the same week that they celebrated the coronation of Pope Paul VI in Rome. Needless to say all Ireland was having a party to mark such momentous occasions. In the village where I was the people had arranged a solemn Te Deum in thanksgiving. The entire population of the place assembled in the village church, the men on one side, the women on the other. The chief magistrate and the parish priest made speeches during which they announced an amnesty in honor of the Pope's coronation and the visit of the first Irish Catholic president of the United States. We were told that at the end of the service as the bells rang out the doors of the jail would be opened. I was so impressed. It was only afterwards that I learned that there had not been any prisoners in that jail since the Easter Revolution 50 years ago. However, the local constable went out the night before to round up the town drunks and put them in jail so that there would be a group to participate in the amnesty. As a priest with a parish of undocumented refugees from Central America, with my people I lived in anxious hope for an amnesty that would allow so many refugees to live and work without fear. The spiritual truth is that we all stand in need of an amnesty.

The great Amnesty takes place on Calvary. Jesus has stepped in front of the bullet to save us. By His stripes we are healed. He has come to share our fate, to pay for our sins and to teach us how to live a truly human life as children of God.

Today's feast of the Baptism of the Lord harkens back to a very important mystery or event reported in Sacred Scriptures. John the Baptist is baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River. John himself has described the ritual as a Baptism of repentance. Sinners are lined up on the banks of the river. To everyone's shock and dismay, Jesus gets in line to be baptized. Matthew's Gospel tells us that John the Baptist tried to deter Jesus, saying: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

The sinless Lamb of God has come to take the place of sinners to save us. Jesus' submitting to the Baptism of John was a great act of humility. But as Jesus Himself would later say: "He who humbles himself shall be exalted."

At precisely that moment when Jesus associates Himself with sinners at the river's edge, we find one of the great theophanies of the Gospel. At that very moment we can glimpse the inner life and the majesty of the Blessed Trinity:



Jesus the eternal Word made flesh stands in the river, the Dove representing the Holy Spirit appears, and the voice of the Father is heard: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

Humility is the virtue of Jesus: Jesus the Suffering Servant "who neither breaks the bent reed nor extinguishes the smoldering wick", but who gave himself to "deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own eager to do what is good." This same Jesus tells us: "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart." His prophet and precursor, John the Baptist, practices the humility that Jesus lives. John declares: "I am not worthy to unfasten His sandal strap"... "He must increase, I must decrease." St. Augustine comments on the Church's calendar that we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist on June 24th as the days begin to grow shorter, and the feast of Christmas on December 25th as the days begin to grow alluding to John's wishes: "He must increase, I must decrease." Jesus is ever teaching us the Virtue of Humility. Indeed He even washes the feet of His apostles to show us that we are called to a discipleship of humility and service. Without the Virtue of Humility, no other virtue is possible and indeed even apparent virtues become a pretext for vice, for pride. Without doubt in the quest for the truth, great humility is necessary. Our pride can easily blind us to the truth and prevent us from discovering the truth that leads to true freedom and to real justice.

The great Tragedians of the ancient world Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides fulfilled an important social mission. In their powerful dramas they warned their fellow citizens that there were forces in life they were militantly ignoring, forces that could undo them and their whole political and social establishment.

We live in such an age where our hubris has made us blind to the madness around us, where our courts have undermined the value of life itself and now attempt to dilute the meaning of marriage.

In diluting the meaning of marriage we risk diminishing our own humanity. We need for our legal establishment to witness to the truth about marriage. True freedom is never freedom from the truth but is always and only freedom in the truth.

If humility is an indispensable virtue in seeking the truth, courage is the virtue needed to embrace the truth. John the Baptist did not lose sight of his mission because of his popularity or notoriety. He did not let some notion of self-importance seduce him into believing that he could be the messiah. He knew that his role was to lead people to the truth that is Jesus Christ.

We do not know much about John the Baptist's life. But we know he was a prophet and that his prophetic voice cost him his life. He died a martyr defending the sacredness of marriage. The Patron Saint of Lawyers, the Great Attorney and Judge, Thomas More was called by his contemporaries "the greatest lawyer in Europe." He lost his life defending the sacredness of marriage.

The institution of marriage is described in the marriage liturgy as the one blessing that was not destroyed by the great deluge. Today that institution is threatened as never before – threatened by the floodgates of political correctness!

Science and technology have made great strides in the last hundred years. But growth in information has not been accompanied by a commensurate growth in wisdom. Technology and science have been co-opted by a quest for power, for pleasure, for money.

Christ came so that we could have life and have it more abundantly. But life is threatened in a culture of death. We need to achieve a wisdom that will allow us to live a fully human life. Part of our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ must be to boldly defend human dignity, the sacredness of life and the sacredness of marriage. Marriage is the sanctuary of life. The more we separate the generation of life and the socialization of children from marriage the more we will weaken the family and society.

The prevalence of divorce and cohabitation in the last two decades have done great harm to the institution of marriage by taking the focus off children. Same sex marriages will only further the tendency to see marriage as simply for the good of the adult without taking into account children and their interests. Countless studies demonstrate what



common sense has always known namely: that what is optimal for children is to be raised by their parents who are married to each other in a stable and loving relationship. It is overly ingenuous to think that a redefinition of marriage will not have serious repercussions in the future. We as a society should be working to strengthen marriage and family not looking for ways to erode the connection between married life and having and raising children. The social cost of the breakdown of family life has been enormous.

The legal profession has a great influence on the development of laws and public policy. This point in history requires the diligent commitment of lawyers on behalf of marriage and family.

There are those who would try to dismiss the Church's position as thinly veiled "gay bashing", or the Church's interference in politics. The Church's position is not born out of any prejudice or from partisan policies but simply from a sense of obligation and mission to defend the institution of marriage which is crucial to the common good.

The Church has many enemies, but the Church can be enemy to none. Our stance against same sex marriage must not be motivated by hatred or prejudice. Indeed we appeal to all peoples regardless of their political or religious persuasion or their sexual orientation to reflect on the needs of society, the common good and to stand with us in defending the institution of marriage.

Our country is experiencing an illegitimacy rate of 30%, in many countries in Europe it is even higher. We need to teach young people that child rearing and marriage go together. The best venue for the rearing of children is in the context of a marriage of a man and woman. The begetting of children needs to be reattached to marriage. The State grants privileges and prerogatives to married couples precisely because of their important contribution of procreating and raising children which demands great sacrifices and commitment from the married couples.

The question needs to be asked if we are going to create a new kind of marriage even more detached from bringing children into the world and raising them, should the State rethink the privileges accorded to married couples? Should the rights now enjoyed by married couples be assigned simply on the basis of households sharing domiciles, something akin to carpooling? Perhaps that is the solution the State will choose, but it begs the question about the urgent need to strengthen marriage and family life for the good of society. Redefining marriage will only serve to weaken the most venerable and crucial social institutions we have. The stakes are very high. The law is a powerful teacher. What do we want to teach our young people about marriage and family? It is not a question of: "live and let live." It is a question of right and wrong. A question of what kind of society do we want to pass on to future generations.

Jesus begins his public life with His baptism in the Jordan. It is a great act of humility and at the same time a manifestation of His Divinity and the life of the Trinity.

At the end of the Gospel the risen Christ, before returning to the right hand of the Father, gathers his disciples for a farewell discourse. He tells them: Go therefore make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Because of that great commissioning we are here today gathered around this altar. That group of courageous fishermen went to the ends of the earth making disciples and baptizing in water and the Spirit. Of the original group almost all died as martyrs. Their faith and loyalty to Jesus Christ gave them the courage to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Those first generations of disciples were despised and persecuted for what they taught about God, about the Trinity, about the Incarnation of Christ, true God and true man. However, in our modern times so many faithful Catholics have been persecuted for announcing boldly what the Church teaches about human rights, human dignity, the human person.

Now it is our turn to take the heat, to stand up and witness to the truth. The Gospel is not about political correctness or the warm fuzzies. The Gospel is about the good news, about the truth that makes us free.

The grace of discipleship is a costly grace. In *Man for all Seasons*, Robert Bolt describes an argument between Thomas More and his friend the Duke of Norfolk. Thomas is railing against the Catholic nobility for their inaction. He



says: “The nobility of England, my lord, would have snored through the Sermon on the Mount. But you will labor like Thomas Aquinas over a rat-dog’s pedigree...”

It is good for us to recall what was the sermon they would have snored through. In that Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

We cannot afford to sleep at the switch. We cannot afford to run for cover. Today at this Red Mass I call on you our Catholic lawyers and jurist to live your baptismal commitment to be witnesses, to be prophets.

Your baptism and your profession invest you with a great responsibility. Use your wisdom and science to defend the truth, to defend marriage. Do it with humility, with love and with courage. Do it with a passion for what is right.

The Most Reverend Seán P. O'Malley, OFM Cap  
Archbishop of Boston

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