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RED MASS HOMILY

CO-CATHEDRAL OF ST. THOMAS MORE, TALLAHASSEE

17 FEBRUARY 2016

Allow me to express how honored I am to have the privilege of sharing a few thoughts with you this evening. To Archbishop Wenski and the Bishops of Florida, thank you for entrusting me with this moment of preaching the homily at the annual Red Mass. Dear members of the Bench, the Bar, and all those elected and appointed to public office particularly Governor Scott, thank you all for being here and for desiring to grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ. Tonight we invoke the Holy Spirit of wisdom and guidance upon you and the important role that you play on our behalf of the common good of our society and in this great State of Florida. As we gather tonight, let us also pray for the repose of the soul of Justice Antonin Scalia - he is a loss to both his family and his country.

You have come here tonight because you are hungering and thirsting to be the finest judges, lawyers, legislators, and civil servants that you can be. Jesus says, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink!" (Jn. 7:37-39). Let us drink deeply of the Holy Spirit who has been poured into our hearts as we thirst for righteousness, justice, and truth. May we thirst to fulfill the words of the prophet Micah: "to act justly to love with mercy and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8). The Holy Spirit whom we have received in Baptism keeps our hearts supple, soft, and alive. It is so easy in our lives to have our hearts to grow hardened and allow plaque to build up in our arteries – there are probably a few of you here who have already had stents put in! The Holy Spirit keeps us from becoming numb to the other. Every person before us matters; they have a history, a family, a mother! Compassion is key to prevent us from becoming numb to the craziness and the messiness which we encounter on a daily basis. Each person is a human life before us and none of us can forget our role to treat them with the inherent dignity which is theirs.

We find ourselves in the Season of Lent and in the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Mercy and compassion for those of us who seek to serve the common good must be lived out in the public forum for the sake of civil society. This in a particular way is *your* mission in the world: to change the secular order for the good. Our faith should inform our decisions, the way we view others, the way we love, and the way *you* administer law and justice.

William Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice* (not Florida!):

"But mercy is above this sceptered sway.

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;

It is an attribute to God Himself;

And earthly power doth then show likest God's

When mercy seasons justice" (4.1.199-200).

Or in the words of St. James: "For judgment is merciless to one who has not shown mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). In a world where each of you has an important

role in administering justice how can this basic Christian axiom be applied? Mercy triumphs over justice when we start the day in prayer asking the Holy Spirit for guidance in each particular circumstance in which we will find ourselves. Mercy triumphs over justice when as civil servants you place the needs of others before your own need for power, prestige, and position. Mercy triumphs over justice when our state, nation, and world begin to see the needs of the most vulnerable and make their cause our cause.

Our first reading tonight (cf. Joel 3:1-5) reminds us that we are to be people of vision, that we are to dream dreams, of what our state, our nation, and our world should be. We invoke the Holy Spirit to be poured afresh into our hearts and so fill us with a spirit of courage, justice, and mercy that we may be “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Pope Francis challenged the joint session of our United States Congress last September:

Yours is a work which makes me reflect in two ways on the figure of Moses. On the one hand, the patriarch and lawgiver of the people of Israel symbolizes the need of peoples to keep alive their sense of unity by means of just legislation. On the other, the figure of Moses leads us directly to God and thus to the transcendent dignity of the human being. Moses provides us with a good synthesis of your work: you are asked to protect, by means of the law, the image and likeness fashioned by God on every human life (24 September 2015).

We need to have eyes and hearts that see and feel our work to be of indispensable service to the vulnerable; to find greater meaning behind the work we do as we build up *the* Kingdom and not empires of our own making. Remember Jesus came “to serve and not be served” (Mark 10:45). This must be the daily refrain of every public servant: “to serve and not be served” – this is when mercy triumphs over justice!

Pope Francis recently asked “Can mercy and justice be reconciled?” and then answered: “They may appear to be contradictory, but this is not the case, as it is precisely God’s mercy that leads us to achieve true justice” (Wednesday Audience, “God’s Justice is Mercy,” 3 February 2016). We must ask ourselves the question: Are our laws and their application aimed at the betterment of society as a whole? Your task is to come together for the good of those you serve. The greater good of society entails humility and self-sacrifice in governing. Divisions in our society demand vision and leadership that unites. The virtues of courage, humility, and prayerfulness are essential: the courage to bravely advance and espouse that which is vital but at times highly controversial and risky, the humility to approach with love and empathy those with whom who we disagree in order to listen and invite the other to reconsider our position, and the prayerfulness to seek the wisdom to say and do the things required to live in accordance with our Christian and Catholic convictions. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

In preparation for this Mass I have sought advice from some good friends on the bench, the bar, and in the legislature, so let’s make this theory real by offering three examples:

Firstly, as a way to live your faith in your professional lives, one member of the bench suggested that judges can take a little extra time to make sure *pro se* litigants understand what is happening in their case, and private attorneys can always take a couple of *pro bono* cases a year. Simple kindness and charity are mercy applied.

Secondly, a successful young attorney spoke of personal and financial pressures. He said: “Law is a jealous mistress. I sell my advice by the hour. That means, for all intents and purposes, I sell time. The only way to increase my revenue is to sell more of my time. In my business, I am punished for efficiency. That means, when I choose to use hours for non-work activities, I can literally quantify what it costs. For example, a two-hour softball practice with my daughter costs me billable hours. I am forever drawn into the temptation to outwork everyone else, and this makes it very difficult to put God and His plan where they belong in my life. I know this is true of other professions, but it seems particularly endemic for lawyers.” Thus I want to encourage each of you to keep your principles and your families as a priority.

Thirdly, another spoke of societal pressures and obligations: “We, as a society, are intensely interested in our ‘rights.’ Everyone, it seems, stands ready to tell you what you can and cannot do to them. And they are ready to fight about it. When I think of the debates about same sex unions, or abortion, or gender identity, I never ever see a discussion about which path is best for humanity as a whole.”

The public debate should pursue the path of what is best for individuals *and* our society; that is the path of mercy. What does mercy in the public forum look like? Mercy is supporting and implementing policies that strengthen family life and marriage as the nucleus upon which the fabric of our society is built. Mercy is working towards eliminating abortion while exhibiting compassion and providing support for women faced with the circumstances that have led to this decision, policies like the 24 hour waiting period that our legislature recently passed. Mercy is working to eliminate poverty through education and supporting organizations that work to assist the underprivileged. Mercy is welcoming the stranger and at the same time protecting our citizenry. Mercy is not achieved by vengeance, but rather when justice seeks rehabilitation, or in Christian terms, conversion. Mercy and justice meet when policies are implemented that protect religious liberty and freedom of conscience; policies that place people over politics and morality over money. Laws that protect and heal are, simply put, good for individuals and society as a whole.

For my “closing argument,” I want to acknowledge the fact that we don’t always get it right! Each of you are in very challenging positions and the choices you face must feel at times beyond what you can bear or achieve 100% of the time. None of us are perfect, even though many of us in this co-cathedral are perfectionists (self included!); we make mistakes even though our “type A personalities” hate to hear it. Thus in the Year of Mercy, please take advantage of the incredible gift of the sacrament of reconciliation. A good confession unburdens our hearts and sets us free. The Jubilee of Mercy is not just about dispensing mercy, but about *receiving* the Father’s mercy poured into our hearts which we so desperately need.

Again, thank *you* for participating in this annual Red Mass and for hungering and thirsting to be men and women of integrity. I pray that as you depart tonight, you do so with greater confidence that the Holy Spirit of wisdom and guidance will give you all that you need to fulfill your sacred duty to be men and women of both justice *and* mercy. Let us pray to have eyes of mercy and compassion for every person we encounter and in the words of your patron, St. Thomas More “to walk the narrow way that leads to life.” [pointing to the Cross] “To walk the narrow way that leads to life.” Come Holy Spirit, come!