

**Homily for the Annual Third Circuit Red Mass
The Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B**

October 10, 2021

**Saint Boniface Church
Edwardsville, Illinois**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, Deacons, consecrated religious, members of the judiciary, fellow attorneys and practitioners of the legal profession, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good to be here as we gather to celebrate the Annual Third Circuit Red Mass for the St. Thomas More Lawyers Guild of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. We call this a “Red Mass” because red is the color symbolizing the fire of the Holy Spirit, whose wisdom we implore to guide the work and decisions of our legal professionals and civic officials in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government.

As we pray in this Red Mass for wisdom to guide our thinking, our reasoning, our speaking, our writing, and our decision-making, it is fitting that today’s first reading is from the Book of Wisdom (Wis 7:7-11). This reading belongs to the book’s central chapters that emphasize how this superior wisdom cannot be attained by any human initiative alone. This

wisdom can be gained only through a sincere relationship with God. It is, therefore, a gift granted by God to those who humbly ask for it. In this reading a person of royal status, someone very much like the traditionally wise King Solomon, speaks about the inner convictions that lead to this moving and eloquent prayer for wisdom.

This monarch recognizes that no earthly treasure can match the kind of wisdom he seeks from God. Like the youthful King Solomon who knew exactly what to request from God (1 Kings 3:5-14), this king sets aside all worldly interests in his pursuit of spiritual gains. The vocabulary of the reading exhibits the standard desires associated with power: scepter, throne, riches, gems, gold, and silver. But the king whose thoughts are revealed here has no interest in these things because he regards them as nothing more than sand and sludge. This king prefers true wisdom even to health and physical appearance.

The wisdom sought by this king is preferable to the light of day. Created light is limited; it reveals only the material things of this world. By contrast, true wisdom has a splendor surpassing all created lights because it emanates from God. In this divine light, the king will be able to recognize

spiritual treasures. As the final verse states, through such true wisdom all other good things are accessible.

This wisdom from the Old Testament is the context for us to understand Our Lord's teaching in today's passage from the Gospel of Saint Mark (Mk 10:17-30), in which Jesus warns that wealth can be an obstacle for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as King Solomon knew that worldly interests would interfere in his pursuit of spiritual gains if he did not give his relationship with God first place in his priorities in life, Jesus is clear throughout the Gospel that money and possessions can hinder our relationship with God. Jesus insists that you cannot love both God and money (Matthew 6:24), and your life must be at the service of one another.

The place where we most closely encounter the wisdom of God is in the sacred sphere of conscience where the law of God is written upon our hearts. It is for this reason that I chose as my episcopal motto the Latin phrase "*Lex Cordis Caritas*," which in English is translated as "the Law of the Heart is Love." This phrase is based on the texts from the Prophet Jeremiah, who tells us that the Lord will write the law of the new covenant upon our hearts (Jer. 31:33), and Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where we read that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

It should be noted that even the United States Supreme Court recognizes that rights of conscience pertain to an individual's personal beliefs and are not dependent on verification by any external authority, whether ecclesiastical or secular. In a case that emanated here in Illinois, *Frazee v. Illinois*, 489 U.S. 829 (1989), which reversed a lower court's decision that when a refusal is based on religious convictions, the refusal must be based upon some tenets or dogma accepted by the individual of some church, sect, or denomination, and such a refusal based solely on an individual's personal belief is personal and non-compelling. In its opinion, the Supreme Court explained, "we reject the notion that to claim the protection of the Free Exercise Clause, one must be responding to the commands of a particular religious organization. Here, Frazee's refusal was based on a sincerely held religious belief. Under our cases, he was entitled to invoke First Amendment protection."

That said, it is important that we have an accurate understanding of what conscience is and how it functions. There are some who would reduce conscience to a mere feeling, basing their ethical and moral decisions on personal preferences that are driven by their emotions. On the other hand, there are those who deny the right of conscience and would force everyone

to do what the majority says or what those in authority have the power to enforce.

We can learn a great deal about conscience from the 1966 classic movie, "A Man for All Seasons," which won the Academy Award for Best Picture, about the life of Saint Thomas More, played by the British actor Paul Scofield. In one particular pertinent scene as it relates to conscience, Thomas More is having a conversation with his predecessor as Lord High Chancellor, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, the Archbishop of York. Cardinal Wolsey is seeking More's help in drafting a letter to the Holy See regarding the desire of King Henry VIII to divorce the Queen, Catherine of Aragon, so that he could marry Anne Boleyn.

Challenging More's reluctance to help, Wolsey says, "You're a constant regret to me, Thomas. If you could just see facts flat on, without that horrible moral squint, with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman. . . . Now explain how you as Councilor of England can obstruct those measures for the sake of your own, private, conscience."

Thomas responds, "Well . . . I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties . . . they lead their

country by a short route to chaos.”¹ The implication is that conscience, by contrast, will save the world!

In another scene from “A Man for All Seasons,” Sir Thomas More describes of the inviolability of one’s personal conscience by telling the Duke of Norfolk, “What matters is not that it’s true, but that I believe it; or no, not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it.”

Particularly compelling is this dialogue in which the Duke of Norfolk is trying to persuade Sir Thomas More to sign the Succession to the Crown Act of 1534:

Norfolk says, “Oh, confound all this. ... I’m not a scholar, as Master Cromwell never tires of pointing out, and frankly, I don’t know whether the [King’s] marriage was lawful or not. But damn it, Thomas, look at those names. ... You know those men! Can’t you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?”

More responds pointedly: “And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me – for ‘fellowship’?”

“Conscience” is a word that means different things to different people. To some, following one’s conscience means to do as one pleases, as one sees fit; to others, following one’s conscience is to have the moral and political freedom to please God by what he or she does in life, to oneself and one’s neighbors, not simply as one might like or as one would prefer, but as one ought to do.

Conscience means to share knowledge with someone else about what is right or wrong. It is to think with God and with His Church. Conscience does not act in isolation, based on some sort of personal or individual intuition, disconnected from other people and from the truth. For a Catholic, a properly formed conscience means to share God’s knowledge and the Church’s teaching about right or wrong.

I connect conscience to freedom and obligation by quoting Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, who said, “Conscience has rights because it has duties.” Similarly, in his homily at Baltimore during his 1995 visit to the United States, Pope St. John Paul II challenged all of us to a nobler notion of freedom when he said (echoing Lord Acton), that “freedom is not a matter of doing what we like, but having the right to do what we ought.”

As we pray for the gift of wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist, we ask God for the grace to discern clearly the law of love that He has written upon our hearts and to have the courage to do what is right.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1960), pp. 11 and 13.