

“Modeling the Path to Holiness in the Life of St. John Fisher”

**Homily for the Red Mass for the Nassau County Catholic Lawyers Guild
of the Diocese of Rockville Centre**

St. Joseph’s Church, Garden City, New York

October 5, 2021

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Your Excellency, my brother Bishop John Barres, Reverend Fathers and deacon, honorable judges, fellow attorneys, government officials, legal professionals, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you for this Red Mass for the bar and bench of Nassau County in the Diocese of Rockville Center. Let me begin by thanking my brother Bishop, John Barres, for the invitation to address this distinguished gathering. I have known Bishop Barres for several years now, attending meetings, workshops and retreats together, and even getting in an occasional major league baseball game! I am honored to be here with all of you.

We are here to celebrate the Red Mass. For over 800 years, this occasion has brought together government officials and legal professionals to implore

the Holy Spirit to guide your work. Its name derives from the red vestments worn by the celebrants, symbolizing how the Holy Spirit fills our hearts, just as a fire fills a hearth. My prayer today is that we leave here ablaze with the love of God.

Our prayers texts and scriptural readings today are taken from the Votive Mass for the Holy Spirit. Our first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah promises a Messiah upon whom “the spirit of the Lord shall rest, . . . a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord.” This Messiah, whom we are called to emulate, shall not judge by appearance nor decide by hearsay, but “He shall judge the poor with justice” (Is 11:1-4). In our second reading from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, we are told that “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit” (1 Cor. 12:4-13). We

pray in this Red Mass that the Holy Spirit will guide us with wisdom in the various roles and tasks that we exercise within the legal system.

Then, in the Gospel passage from Saint John, Jesus says that He “will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you” (Jn 14:15-17). I find it fascinating that Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as an “Advocate . . . the Spirit of truth.” In contrast, the Book of Revelation refers to the Devil as “the accuser of our brothers . . . who accuses them before our God day and night. They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (Revelation 12:10-11). An Advocate . . . an accuser . . . testimony that ascertains the truth: all of this sounds very applicable to our courtroom proceedings – and of course it is!

This is what we pray for in our Red Mass: for the Holy Spirit to be our Advocate and guide to the truth, sorting through the muddle of accusations that entangle our litigious culture.

I would also like to recall the reading from the Gospel of Saint Mark that we heard just this past Sunday, which describes a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees about a question of the law, specifically, “Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?” Jesus has a stricter interpretation than that accepted by Judaism then and articulated in the Book of Deuteronomy (24:1-4), where one reads that a husband can divorce his wife simply by issuing her a bill of divorce. Note that divorce is permitted but not commanded. Jesus says that Moses conceded to human weakness, namely, hardness of heart, in allowing divorce. Jesus’ position is that the plan of God does not allow for divorce, basing his understanding of marriage on the Book of Genesis (1:27 and 2:24). In those texts Jesus understands marriage to be a covenant commitment wherein God’s plan stresses permanence from the very beginning. The permanence is the result of the two people becoming one flesh. This means that they are no longer two and, therefore, can no longer be separated.

In other words, Jesus does not concede to weakness or humankind’s hardness of heart. He returns to “in the beginning” where the original intent

of God's plan can be discovered. One might say that, as a jurist, Jesus was an originalist. He is describing how things were originally intended to be in the kingdom of God. That is why to this day the Catholic Church does not recognize divorce, which terminates a valid marriage, but speaks only of the invalidity of marriage for which true marital consent was never given. Such declarations of invalidity of marriage issued by our ecclesiastical tribunals are commonly referred to as annulments, recognizing the nullity of such attempted marriages from the very beginning of the purported marriage.

Since I have a degrees in both civil law and canon law, it is not unusual for me to be invited to speak at Red Masses in various parts of our country. I suspect this is not the first Red Mass for many, if not all, of you as well. For those of you who are not attending such a Mass for the first time, you very likely have heard Red Mass homilies about Saint Thomas More.

This makes sense. Thomas More is the easy choice for a Red Mass because he is the patron saint of lawyers and politicians, and a model of Christian leadership for every public servant. I am sure that each of you is familiar with his story. If you are not, I urge you sometime to watch the

Oscar award winning movie, *A Man for All Seasons*, which tells the story of his life and martyrdom.

In my homily this evening, however, rather than talk about Saint Thomas More, I will focus on my other patron saint, and the second half of my baptismal name, Thomas John. He was a contemporary of Thomas More, and like his more famous counterpart, this man is also a model for every Catholic public servant. His name is Saint John Fisher.

John Fisher may seem like less relevant to you at first glance. After all, unlike Thomas More, he was a cleric, not a statesman or lawyer. Yet in his life, we nonetheless see lessons worth learning for everyone in a position of authority. Saint John Fisher models for us the path to holiness in a very special way. He is therefore worth studying and imitating in our own day and age.

Like Thomas More, John Fisher lived and died during England's changeover from Catholicism to Protestantism. He served as the Bishop of Rochester, where I celebrated Mass two years ago at his old Cathedral during a trip to England for some lectures that I was asked to give at the

University of Oxford. Also like Thomas More, John Fisher refused to assent to Henry VIII's divorce and declaration of himself as the head of the Church. He stayed true to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. And finally, like Thomas More, John Fisher lost his life for holding fast to the truth. They joined the company of saints through the martyr's door because they remained steadfast in the truth that Our Lord taught about the indissolubility of marriage. Fortunately for you, the lessons that I hope to impart today stem more from John Fisher's life than his death.

When it comes to this Saint, the most interesting source that I have ever encountered is one that none of you most likely have ever heard of -- hopefully. I say hopefully because it is nothing like the accessible, enjoyable movie that tells the story of Thomas More's life. In fact, it is the polar opposite of *A Man For All Seasons*. It's an article I found in a little-known

periodical, *The Catholic Social Science Review*, entitled: “Canonized Leadership: A Contemporary Leadership Study of Saint John Fisher.”¹

The article’s authors undertook a unique study of John Fisher’s life. They analyzed his actions in light of the most prominent secular leadership model, which is generally known as the “Five Exemplary Practices.” They also looked at his life through the prism of four Catholic leadership principles. This approach led them to an important conclusion: Saint John Fisher is an exemplar of both secular *and* spiritual leadership.

Consider the secular side of things. While I could focus on all of the practices discussed in the study, let me focus on the first, and perhaps the most important. It is to “Model the Way” -- which is precisely what Saint John Fisher did. Throughout his life, he showed the path for others to follow. And not only did he set the example; he also clarified the values that guided his actions -- the values taught by the Catholic Church.

¹ Fr. Ross Chamberland, O.F.M. and Guillermo Montes, “Canonized Leadership: A Contemporary Leadership Study of Saint John Fisher, Scholar, Bishop, and Martyr,” *The Catholic Social Science Review* 23 (2018): 237-249.

In his day, John Fisher was renowned as a man of “holiness, learning, prudence, and ... zeal.” He stood strong in the face of challenge and controversy, especially when King Henry VIII undercut the authority of the Church and its teaching on marriage. He also worked tirelessly to sway others to see the truth of the matter. He knew that he had to do the hard work of rallying others to see the truth, even though it would have been easier to stay silent. Future reformers, including Saint Charles Borromeo in Italy, also looked to him for inspiration.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that “authority is exercised legitimately if it is committed to the common good of society” (CCC 1921). Saint John Fisher proved the truth of these words before they were ever written.

It is worth asking why. Why, like Saint Thomas More, was John Fisher able to pursue the common good, and to lead others toward it, when so many other so-called leaders failed? The answer lies not in the secular definition of leadership, but rather in the spiritual.

The analysis of John Fisher's life also showed that his life was infused with the defining characteristics of *Christian* leadership. He stood strong against the winds of his day because he stood on a rock that could not be moved. This is called heroic courage.

The truth of the matter is that leadership is tough. It confronts you with hard choices and often leads to harsh consequences. John Fisher certainly knew this. He faced a King and a culture that rejected the truth and all who adhered to it. And yet, he refused to back down from what he knew was right. It would have been easier to give up the fight and go along with the flow -- but that is not the nature of leadership. In Psalm 137, we hear the words, "let my tongue be silenced if I ever forget you." John Fisher never forgot the teachings of Christ and His Church. He courageously proclaimed the truth in all that he did, knowing full well what it could cost him. So do all true leaders: They take a stand, regardless of the consequences.

Now, I admit: Heroic courage is not something we can easily summon. But God, in his infinite mercy, has offered us help. The Sacraments, especially Penance and Holy Communion, are a bottomless well of grace

that constantly brings forth courage. They re-align us and remind us of who we are and what we aspire to be, giving us the strength to choose right over wrong and good over evil. Frequent contact with the Sacraments, therefore, is essential for all Catholic lawyers and public servants who wish to hold fast to the faith amidst the storms of our time.

In John Fisher's life, we see that secular leadership and spiritual leadership are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. It is a lesson for all who hold elected office, shape public policy, or practice law. You are called to be leaders in your fields. So, too, are you called to be leaders of faith. Indeed, when faith fills your daily work, it gives a new and fuller meaning to everything you do. Leadership, after all, is meant to have a destination -- a place where you, and those who follow you, intend to go. Imagine if that destination is informed by the truth and infused by the Holy Spirit.

This is not something that our culture counsels you to do. Modern society demands that you choose either the secular or the spiritual, and never mix the two. Yet we should not see this as a question of either/or. It is both/and. By living out your faith in your daily work, how much better will

you be able to pursue the common good? Conversely, what kind of leader will you be if you ignore your faith and rely on your own strength alone? As Holy Scripture reminds us: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).

Saint John Fisher knew the answer to this question. So did Saint Thomas More. They were leaders who led well -- who had the courage to point others toward the truth and to pursue it themselves, inspiring others to do the same. As members of government and as legal professionals, you are called to walk in their footsteps, no matter your roles or responsibilities. This will look different for each and every one of you, but the ultimate effects will be the same. The common good will be promoted. The dignity of the human person will be respected. And you will lead for the benefit of society, and to the glory of God.

May God give us this grace. Amen.