

**Homily for the Red Mass of the
Saint Thomas More Lawyers Guild of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois**

**Wednesday of the Seventh Week of Ordinary Time
May 18, 2016**

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Springfield, Illinois

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In October of 1993, when I served as Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago, I was blessed with the happy privilege of accompanying Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, then Archbishop of Chicago, to Washington, D.C., where he delivered the Red Mass homily for a packed house at Saint Matthew's Cathedral. The congregation in attendance included the President of the United States, the First Lady, the U.S. Attorney General, six Justices of the United States Supreme Court and scores of federal and local judges and members of the legal profession — Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

In his homily at that Red Mass, Cardinal Bernardin said:

As we look out across the nation . . . we see a valuable community of people with a wealth of talents and resources. But it is threatened with destruction and ruin by the forces of

violence and narrow self-interest. . . . May I suggest a way to address this threat, a way which will entail no new government programs, no new laws and best of all no new expenditures of funds! That is because the means I suggest are not political, legal or financial, but spiritual. My suggestion is that, as a nation, we embark on a concerted effort to promote the common good through the practice of virtues. Although not requiring any new government programs, new laws or new expenditures of funds, the promotion of the common good in this way does call for a change of focus, a change of emphasis, a change of direction, a change of attitudes and, most of all, a change of heart.¹

As described by the Second Vatican Council in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, "The common good ... is the sum total of all conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."² Thus, there is a dynamic relationship between the individual and the rest of society in promoting the common good.

Cardinal Bernardin's advice, which remains valid for us today, suggests that the common good is effectively promoted by acting consistently in accord with the virtues. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, reflecting our Catholic tradition, defines virtue as "a habitual and firm disposition to do good. It permits a person not only to do good deeds, but also to give the best of himself or herself."³

Human virtues are attitudes, dispositions and understandings by which we regulate our actions, control our passions and guide our conduct in accord with reason and faith.⁴ Examples of human virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. The human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. They are called theological virtues because their reference point is God himself, leading human beings to a participation in God's divine nature.⁵

When the virtuous life is the hallmark of any given community or society, the common good is then served by the members of that community or society being habitually and firmly disposed to do good and to give the best of themselves. This can be done regardless of one's faith.

Just a few months before Cardinal Bernardin's 1993 Red Mass homily, a joint statement issued by the United States Catholic Conference,

the National Council of Churches and the Synagogue Council of America, three organizations representing some 100 million American Christians and Jews, said:

The common good is an old idea with a new urgency. It is an imperative to put the welfare of the whole ahead of our own narrow interests. It is an imperative which we fervently hope will guide our people and leaders at this new moment. It is an imperative for a national embrace of responsibility and sacrifice, of compassion and caring as building blocks for meaningful lives and for a healthy society. We believe we can and must do better.⁶

Our world, our nation and our state face some serious challenges marked by various conflicts and divisions characteristic of our time. But other ages over the centuries also faced and overcame the conflicts and divisions of their times. The scriptural passage that we just heard from the Gospel of Saint Mark describes an “us versus them” mentality even among the disciples of Jesus. In response, Jesus seeks to minimize such differences, saying that “whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40).

In his Second Inaugural Address, Springfield's most famous citizen, Abraham Lincoln said with regard to the two sides embroiled in the Civil War in the 1860's, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully."⁷

Reflecting on this attitude of Mr. Lincoln, the Reverend Matthew Simpson, one of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in his *Funeral Address Delivered at the Burial of President Lincoln, May 4, 1865*, at the Methodist Episcopal Church here in Springfield, related the following conversation between President Lincoln and a minister who said he hoped the Lord was on our side during the Civil War. Mr. Lincoln was said to have replied "that it gave him no concern whether the Lord was on our side or not, 'For,' he added, 'I know the Lord is always on the side of right;' and with deep feeling added, 'But God is my witness that it is my constant anxiety and prayer that both myself and this nation should be on the Lord's side.'"⁸

Thus it is fitting that we approach the Lord in this Red Mass, praying that our all of actions be in accord with the divine will. The name "Red Mass" derives from the red vestments that are worn as the color

symbolizing the Holy Spirit, whose wisdom we implore to guide the work and decisions of our legal professionals and government officials in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government at the federal, state and local levels. The Holy Spirit shows no partiality, distributing His graces to everyone who seeks them with sincerity and an open heart.

The fourth century bishop, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, explained this very well in his catechetical instruction on the Holy Spirit. Starting with a quote from Jesus in the Gospel of Saint John (4:14), he wrote:

The water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of living water, welling up into eternal life. This is a new kind of water, a living, leaping water, welling up for those who are worthy. But why did Christ call the grace of the Spirit water? Because all things are dependent on water; plants and animals have their origin in water. Water comes down from heaven as rain, and although it is always the same in itself, it produces many different effects, one in the palm tree, another in the vine, and so on throughout the whole of creation. It does not come down, now as one thing, now as another, but while remaining essentially the same, it adapts itself to the needs of every

creature that receives it. In the same way the Holy Spirit, whose nature is always the same, simple and indivisible, apportions grace to each man as he wills. Like a dry tree which puts forth shoots when watered, the soul bears the fruit of holiness when repentance has made it worthy of receiving the Holy Spirit. Although the Spirit never changes, the effects of this action, by the will of God and in the name of Christ, are both many and marvelous.⁹

In the same way, regardless of our political affiliation, our specific duties or personal philosophies, the Holy Spirit brings about marvelous effects to those who cooperate with God's grace. By seeking to do what the Lord wills¹⁰ and by putting our words and good intentions into action through lives of virtue, the greatest of which is love,¹¹ we can indeed serve the common good, for "The Law of the Heart is Love."

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, "Why Virtues Are Basic to the Common Good," *Origins* 23 (October 21, 1993), p. 339.

² Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1803.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 1804.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 1812.

⁶ "The Common Good: Old Idea, New Urgency," *Origins* 23 (June 24, 1993), p. 83.

⁷ Abraham Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln's Speeches and Writings*, vol. II (New York: The Library of America, 1991), p. 687.

⁸ Reverend Matthew Simpson, D.D., *Funeral Address Delivered at the Burial of President Lincoln*, May 4, 1865 (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865), p. 16; retrieved May 17, 2016 at <http://beck.library.emory.edu/lincoln/sermon.php?id=simpson.001>.

⁹ From a catechetical instruction by Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, bishop (Cat. 16, De Spiritu Sancto 1, 11-12.16: PG 33, 931-935. 939-942); reprinted in the "Office of Readings" of the *Liturgy of the Hours*, Monday of the Seventh Week of Easter.

¹⁰ Cf. James 4:15.

¹¹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13