

Homily for the Red Mass of the Catholic Diocese of Wichita

**Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit
September 28, 2016**

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Wichita, Kansas

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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. With the general election coming up in just a few weeks, people are pondering and praying over their choices. Although candidates are also running for state and local offices, the presidential election this year is unprecedented and most challenging. Those who are concerned with protecting human life from conception until natural death, promoting marriage and family life, and defending religious liberty point to the Democrats' aggressive pro-abortion stance and activist agenda expanding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, while restricting religious liberty, as expressed at the Democratic National Convention this past summer and reflected in the

2016 Democratic Party Platform. On the other hand, Republicans historically have not fared very well in these same areas in practice, as Supreme Court Justices appointed by Republican presidents in the past have rendered decisions advancing abortion rights, recognizing same-sex marriage and restricting religious freedom. Conversely, Democrats articulate strong concern for the poor, but half a century of the War on Poverty has yielded little progress in this regard.

Both candidates for president are seen as having such serious flaws as to lead some people to wonder if they can vote for either candidate of the two major parties or if they should skip voting in this year's election. In the end, people must follow their consciences, but they should also take care to form their consciences properly and make informed decisions.

In this regard, the Catholic Bishops of the United States provide guidance in their document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, saying, "In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation" (no. 13). This reflects the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which reminds us, "It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of

the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life" (nos. 1913-1915).

The phrase "as far as possible" indicates that there may be legitimate limits to our active participation in public life. For example, priests do not normally hold public offices in the civic sphere. Voters may also legitimately conclude in conscience that they cannot vote for either candidate of the two major political parties. In such cases, voters in most jurisdictions can write in the name of a candidate of their choosing. In all cases, voters can skip voting for a particular office, but still vote for other offices on the ballot.

A phrase that has been coined to describe those who opt out of participation in political life is the "Benedict Option," named not after Pope Benedict XVI, but St. Benedict of Nursia, who lived from about 480 to 537. Saint Benedict was an educated young Christian who left Rome, the city of the recently fallen Empire, out of disgust with its decadence. He went south, into the forest near Subiaco, to live as a hermit and to pray. Eventually, he gathered around him some like-minded men, and formed monasteries. Benedict wrote his famous Rule, which became the guiding constitution of most monasteries in western Europe in the Middle Ages.

The monasteries were incubators of Christian and classical culture, and outposts of evangelization in the barbarian kingdoms.

The idea of the Benedict Option was suggested by Alasdair MacIntyre, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame in his book *After Virtue*, in which he drew certain parallels between our own age in Western Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages, writing that a “crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark

ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.”

While the Benedict Option should not be understood simply as a withdrawal from the world, others have suggested something more engaged with the world, such as a Dominican Option, a Franciscan Option or a Norbertine Option. In the end, however, we really do not need to choose Benedict, Dominic, Francis, Norbert or any other saint after which to name a new option. These are all wonderful saints who point us to a more compelling person. Heaven is full of saints who found different ways to imitate Christ. The real figure to whom we should configure ourselves is Jesus Christ. Moreover, Jesus Christ is not an option in the sense of being optional. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are called to live lives of ordinary virtue and heroic, saintly holiness in

imitation of Christ, as intentional, dedicated and faithful disciples of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In this regard, Abraham Lincoln, the most famous citizen of my diocese and Bishop Kemme's home diocese, Springfield, Illinois, said in his Second Inaugural Address, 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 in Springfield, Illinois, 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. In our Gospel today from Saint John, we are told that Jesus will send the Holy Spirit, also called the Advocate, from His Father. This Holy Spirit of truth, will guide us to all truth. The Holy Spirit shows no partiality, distributing His graces to everyone who seeks them with sincerity and an open heart.

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 wills⁹ and by putting our words and good intentions into action through lives of virtue, the greatest of which is love,¹⁰ 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 Cf. James 4:15.

¹⁰ Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13