

“Leadership Lessons from the Life of St. John Fisher”

**Keynote Address for the Alton Deanery Men’s Prayer Breakfast
St. Mary Church, Alton, Illinois**

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

My dear brothers in Christ:

It is good to be with you for this men’s morning of prayer. Let me begin by thanking Father Jeremy Paulin, for the invitation to be with you this morning and to talk with you. It is a great encouragement for me to see a group of men gathered together in faith for a morning of prayer, reflection and solidarity. As Catholic men, you are called to be leaders—leaders for Christ in your homes, parishes, and in the public square. **Each of us— not just those of us who are ordained clergy, but every one of you as well—is anointed priest, prophet and king in our baptism. That means we are called to leadership—a specific kind of leadership, Christian leadership—in our homes, families, and places of work. I would like to share with you today a reflection on St. John Fisher, the patron saint of my middle name, John, as an exemplary model of what authentic Christian leadership in the public square truly looks like.**

Leadership is something that has been near to my heart for many years. After I became a priest, I obtained a fellowship with a group named Leadership Greater Chicago. More recently I took several courses on the topic when I pursued my MBA at the University of Notre Dame. In my MBA classes, we had courses like leadership decision-making and leadership communication.

There are many schools of thought and different theories about the qualities of a good leader, often focusing, as they should, on virtues, values, character and integrity. But what I am often looking for, and rarely find, is a discussion of the relationship between leading and following.

By definition, leading implies that someone will be following. But how do you get someone to follow you? What if you try to lead, but no one follows? Are you still a leader? St. John Fisher was alone among the bishops of his time to remain faithful to the true Church rather than surrender to the order of the King demanding obeisance to his claim to be the supreme head of the Church of England. Yet, St. John Fisher did not persuade any of his

colleagues to follow him. Perhaps that was not his fault as much as it was the timidity and cowardice of his brother bishops.

Leaders sometimes need to be outliers, doing what is right, but taking the risk that no one will follow, and you will be left to stand alone. This was certainly the case with St. John Fisher.

John Fisher lived and died during England's changeover from Catholicism to Protestantism. He served as the Bishop of Rochester, where, coincidentally, I recently said Mass at his old Cathedral when I was in England this past summer. He, like Thomas More, 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. He joined the company of saints through the martyr's door. 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 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, entitled: "Canonized Leadership: A Contemporary Leadership Study of Saint John Fisher."¹ Please don't all rush out to read it right now!

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 five 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

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.

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.

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. His actions inspired many of his peers to follow his lead and denounce the evil practices of the day. Future reformers, including Saint Charles Borromeo in Italy, also looked to him for inspiration.

In the Old Testament, the Prophet Nehemiah wrote that “the favoring hand of my God was upon me.” There is no doubt that our Lord also steered Saint John Fisher. At a time when so many others backed away, Saint John Fisher resolutely modeled the way, in both word and deed. He showed that

true leadership exemplifies and explains in equal measure. It is a powerful lesson for the leaders of today.

Suffice it to say, John Fisher embodied the other four secular leadership traits, as well. Remember, these are the practices that are usually applied to the best members of your professions. They are the means to becoming the most effective lawyers, judges, lawmakers, executives, and public servants of all stripes. And yet, in John Fisher's life, we see that these means can also be applied to Christian ends. 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 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.

Once again, I could focus on all the dimensions of spiritual leadership discussed in the study, but for your sake, I will focus on just one: 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.

Considering the sinful opposite of heroic courage leads me to our vocabulary word for the day: pusillanimity. The noun, *pusillanimity*, means a lack of courage or determination; it refers to timidity. The adjective, *pusillanimous*, means lacking courage and resolution; marked by contemptible timidity. The Latin root of the word *pusillanimous* means “small souled” or “very little spirit.” It is the opposite of “magnanimity” or being “magnanimous,” which means “large souled” or “great in spirit.” Pusillanimity is a prideful shying away from challenge because a person thinks he’s good enough, strong enough, man enough, etc. It is essentially a fear of failure and embarrassment. It also indicates a lack of confidence in God’s providence to ensure our success when we are doing His will and

defending His truth. Fostering the virtue of heroic courage helps us to overcome the temptation to pusillanimity.

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?”

Saint John Fisher knew the answer to this question. He was a leader who led well -- who had the courage to point others toward the truth and to pursue it himself, inspiring others to do the same. As baptized Christian men, 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.

In closing, I’d like to share that we have started a new men’s Christian leadership group in our own diocese called “The Legion of Valor.” Its motto is “Virtue, Brotherhood, Mission.” The Legion of Valor is a group of Catholic men who are committed to growing in the faith, embracing their roles as Christian leaders, and supporting and holding each other accountable. The Legion meets quarterly for overnight events focused on formation and brotherhood, then they go back out to their

parishes, homes, and places of work to live out the fullness of their role as Christian disciples.

I had the privilege to join this group of men for their inaugural event in June. In September, Father Sebastian Walshe, a Norbertine priest of St. Michael's Abbey in California, talked about Spiritual Combat; and last month Dr. Christopher Blum of the Augustine Institute came and spoke about the life and witness of St. John Henry Newman. The next event is in March, and I encourage you all to discern participation in this group. You can learn more at valor.dio.org, and Mike Christie, who is one of the leaders and founders of this group, is here today to answer any questions.

Saint John Fisher once said, "A good man is not a perfect man; a good man is an honest man, faithful and unhesitatingly responsive to the voice of God in his life." These words describe what all of you can be. They are what all of you must be. And I trust that they are what all of you will be, as leaders in the community.

You carry a burden on your shoulders, but you do not carry it alone. Your burden is the cross, and you share it with the Lord. God and the Saints are there to guide you, and help you become the faithful leader you were born to be.

May God give us this grace. Amen.