

HOMILY – 28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – 2025 (CYCLE C)

RED MASS, TOLEDO, OHIO

Readings of the Day

Bishop Thomas, thank you for inviting me to be with you this morning as both principal celebrant and homilist at this Red Mass. I deeply value our canon and civil lawyers, judges, St. Thomas More Society members, any law students, and all those who serve us through the legal profession who gather with us today. I thank you for what you do. Your work is demanding, often un or underappreciated, yet vital to the ordering of a just and peaceful society in which all people should be afforded the ability to work out their salvation.

Many years ago, when I was still a priest of the Diocese of Harrisburg, my bishop asked me to go and study canon law. I was apprehensive. I didn't think I would care do to that. But I went, out of obedience. After taking a few courses at Catholic University of America in the mid-1990's, I began to understand that the purpose of the law wasn't to throw bricks at people. Rather the law can and should have a much more pastoral side, to teach, to guide, sometimes to chide and reform, and ultimately always to be administered with charity, being as lenient as possible and as strict as necessary.

With that understanding, I found the law to be attractive to me and the others I studied with, and now work with, people such as you. Together, we seek to secure the common good and hope to imitate the saints and be among the saints someday, St. Thomas More coming most immediately to mind.

Today's readings remind us of the first and greatest commandment. God must be loved above all else. In fact, loved with all our heart, soul, and mind.

In the Old Testament reading, Naaman came to the prophet of Israel to be healed of leprosy. Elisha told him to plunge seven times into the Jordan River. Not understanding why, and reluctantly at best, Naaman did as he was told. Coming out of the river the last time Naaman was healed. He was restored to serving his king and the community which would have rejected him because of his contagious disease.

Naaman said, “. . . I will no longer offer holocaust or sacrifice to any other god except the LORD.” He had come to know the true God that he would worship from that day forward. Justice demanded that he give God what was due for his cure – his worship and devotion.

In the Gospel, ten lepers begged Jesus for healing. Instead of curing them on the spot, Jesus sent these ten men to the priests—the priests who, by Jewish law, could declare them clean. Their healing came on the way, delayed but not denied.

Nine of them never noticed that they had been healed as they walked along and they did not return to give thanks – one even wonders if they ever made it to the priests to be declared clean. But one did realize that he had been healed along the way and that one returned to fall before Jesus, glorify God, and give thanks. In short, one out of the ten came back with what is proper to an act of reverence, giving the LORD what is true right and just. He fell in worship of Jesus with great devotion, because Jesus was the source of the man's healing.

Like Naaman and the grateful leper of the Gospel, we gather here to worship the God who has healed us by forgiving us and saving us from ultimate death as we believe that we shall be lifted up with him someday. In response, he asks us to be like leaven that makes the dough rise up, like salt that preserves all that is good, and like light that shines in the darkness. Practitioners of the law are asked to make our world more peaceful through the administration of justice tempered with mercy, and the formation and application of laws done with charity.

Because we know that we come under a law that is greater than human laws coming from God who is love itself. We submit ourselves to his law, to which all other laws must conform. Our laws must reflect the greatest laws, love of God first and then, as Jesus said, love of neighbor, its close second.

When I speak to confirmation students, usually in the eighth grade, I tell them that I once owned a powerful diesel car. The owner's manual warned: "*Never put gasoline in this engine.*" If I ignored that rule, disaster would follow. In the same way, when we ignore the Creator's law, which orders our lives to him and one another, then life breaks down. When we forget who the author of our rights and our freedoms is, and replace God with government and other human institutions, we begin to break down and fall apart. Government is not the source of our inalienable rights; our creator is their source. We forget truth that to our peril, because as important as government is, it cannot be our God.

That is why we worship here in this beautiful cathedral: to acknowledge God as the source of every blessing, and to anchor our work of justice in His law of love.

Love, at its highest pitch, is not a passing feeling but a choice—to live in the image of God that is stamped into our very being. That love must shape not only our personal relationships but also our laws, policies, and institutions. At times, love requires discipline or punishment, but always with a view to reconciliation and hope.

Justice Samuel Alito recently noted at the Vatican's Jubilee of Justice: “Even human systems must make room for clemency, lest law itself become oppressive.” And St. Thomas More said that “Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution,” adding that, “justice without mercy is cruelty.”

Friends, there is a spiritual disease in our contemporary culture that does not seek reconciliation and mercy. It is a disease that causes an unbridgeable division fomented by hatred. Its symptoms include a refusal to dialogue and find common ground. And we will never find this common ground if we fail to recognize God as our Father. If God is not our Father, we will never see each other as brothers and sisters. We cannot fall into that dangerous trap ourselves – even when dealing with the most hardened criminal, and certainly not when in the presence of the most vulnerable child, like the one inside its mother's womb.

This failure to see the good in the other is the result of the rejection of God in whose image we have all been created. And this national malaise is caused by the rejection of God's law that gives us the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

With this rejection of the love of God above all and our neighbor as ourself, it becomes all too easy for us to devolve into a tribal mentality of us against them and me

against you in a wicked and a most violent form of our childhood game of king of the hill. We see that being played out today in too many places as individuals and communities oppressively attempt to violently silence the voices and lives of those, they find personally objectionable.

For you who serve in the legal profession, your work is cut out for you. Your noble calling is to echo God's law and counter the evil that makes it more difficult for us to work out our salvation and seek the unity for which Jesus prayed. Place your service of the law at the service of the higher law. Take to heart the words found in Micah, chapter six: where we read, "You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God."

And that is why it is good for us to come together to remember who we are and whose we are. We ask for healing for ourselves and our society as we walk forward in faith. We fall at the feet of Christ and give him our devotion and thanks for his hope of salvation and the promise of peace. We worship the one, true and living God, who is our Father. And we remember the famous words of St. Thomas More as he faced execution for striving to follow both human and divine law, putting one first before the other as he said, "I die the King's servant, but God's first."

St. Thomas More, Pray for us.

May God bless you and those you love. Amen.