

HOMILY GIVEN BY BISHOP KEVIN C. RHOADES, BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF FORT WAYNE–SOUTH BEND, INDIANA, AT THE RED MASS HELD IN SAINT PATRICK’S CATHEDRAL, HARRISBURG, PA, ON OCTOBER 19, 2015, SPONSORED BY THE SAINT THOMAS MORE SOCIETY OF CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

It is a joy for me to be with you today. I wish to thank Bishop Gainer for his gracious invitation to preach at this Red Mass. It brings back many wonderful memories. 25 years ago, then-Bishop Keeler asked me to serve as his representative with the group of distinguished lawyers and judges who organized the Saint Thomas More Society here in Harrisburg. It was a task I gladly accepted. What a great experience it is to be with you today on this 25th anniversary! Again, thank you, Bishop Gainer!

Why was the St. Thomas More Society founded? Very simply, it has one purpose: the formation of its members in Christian holiness, after the example of Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers, statesmen, and politicians.

Saint Thomas More is indeed “a man for all seasons.” Though he lived 500 years ago, his example of Christian discipleship is as relevant today as it was then. You may recall the famous prediction made by G.K. Chesterton in 1929, six years before Thomas More as canonized. He said: “Thomas More is more important at

this moment than at any moment since his death, even perhaps the great moment of his dying. But he is not quite so important as he will be in about a hundred years time.” Here we are, 86 years since Chesterton made that prediction. It is true. Saint Thomas More’s life and witness speak to us today. I wish in this homily to present his life of Christian discipleship as a lawyer, a statesman, a spouse and parent, to all of you who strive to live your faith in your noble profession and not apart from it, a life of integrity, pursuing the holiness which is our common vocation.

The first thing I propose from the example of Saint Thomas More is keeping your priorities straight, in proper order. This is the order: God first, family and friendship second, profession third.

Thomas More’s life and his death by martyrdom cannot be understood apart from the priority he gave to God in his life. He put God before Caesar, his conscience before the state, and ethics before politics. Though he loved his family deeply, he couldn’t accept their pleas to save his life by signing the Oath of Supremacy, accepting thereby Henry VIII’s claim to be head of the Church in England. His faith always came first, even to the cost of his life. His great virtues,

which we so admire today, derived from his working out in his own life the implications of God's gift of faith to him.

If we wish to be holy, we must do the same. We must think deeply about our faith and how to live it in our life. We can be tempted for various reasons to push our faith to the side, for reasons of comfort, political success, wealth, whatever. But faith without works is dead. To be living, faith must not be limited to one hour of church on Sunday. If it is real, it is lived, put into practice, in our whole life, in relation to our family, our work, our politics, our economics.

For a politician to say that he or she is personally opposed to an evil, like the destruction of the innocent unborn or the killing of the disabled or those who are dying in the name of a false mercy, and then cooperate with the evil with the excuse of not imposing one's morality on others, is not only a weakness in courage, it is a betrayal of conscience, a denial of truth, and acquiescence to a false notion of freedom. It is the exact opposite of what Thomas More lived and died for. It is living a kind of moral and spiritual schizophrenia, to thus separate one's faith from one's actions, from one's politics. One becomes a counter witness to the Gospel. To be heedless to human dignity is to be heedless of God the Creator, no matter how one seeks to justify it.

Saint Thomas More exemplifies for us what should always be our first priority. The real malaise of contemporary politics, one author wrote, is consigning one's conscience to the bathroom. Our faith and our conscience, properly formed, must have priority over mere expediency or earthly success. The personal integrity of lawyers, judges, politicians, and statesmen depends on acting in accord with a properly formed conscience, and this requires moral courage, especially when this conflicts with the powers and principalities of this world, including the media and popular opinion.

The Church and our nation need more Thomas Mores. We need lawyers, judges, and public officials who will stand against the tyranny of relativism, stand upon the firm ground of moral truth and not contribute to a culture that is declining, sinking in the quicksand of relativism. Where do we find this moral truth and the values that stem from this truth, the values that maintain social cohesion and preserve our nation in justice and peace, the values that are God-given and basic to our very humanity, the values that transcend all positive law and all political and economic power? The same place Thomas More found it, on the wings of faith and reason. Through faith and reason, we discover in our conscience, the voice of God in our heart, the objective and universally valid

moral norms without which society flounders, tyranny abounds, and humanity is endangered.

Thomas More was a servant of the truth, a man of faith and reason, authentic faith and right reason.

Some worry about the dangers of religion, the danger of bringing faith into politics. After all, we see the dangers of religious fanaticism, of beliefs that do harm. By reason, we know that such faith is a distortion of the true face of God. We must guard against those who make God into their own image and likeness in order to justify hate and violence, who even claim to kill in God's name. Terrorists are worshiping an idol, a god they have created in their own distorted and hateful image. The true God, known by authentic faith and right reason, has a will that conforms to His being and essence as pure goodness and perfect love. He is the Logos, the Word. His divine reason is inherent in the order of being itself. It's what we discover as the divine and natural law. It cannot be faith or reason, but always faith and reason.

While speaking of the dangers of religious fanaticism, of faith without reason, faith distorted, and bringing terrible results, it's important to look at the other side of the coin, more the situation we face in our country and other

Western nations: reason truncated, limited to what is empirical, the exaltation of science and technology without any moral constraints. When the mind is closed to God, when faith is excluded from public discourse, the existence of objective standards of morality is often denied. God is seen as irrelevant to public life. The state usurps power; religious liberty is eroded. But without God, society becomes disoriented, so disoriented it even redefines marriage.

The loss of transcendence and transcendent meaning in life evokes not only sadness, but escape, a flight into things like drugs and pornography, the pursuit of pleasure that doesn't bring happiness. Man becomes robbed of real greatness and caught up in illusory hopes. Pope Benedict XVI once said: "if there is not objective morality, law has the ground taken from under its feet."

Both religious terrorism and militant secularism fail to recognize the logos, the divine reason inherent in the order of being itself. Both lead to destruction. Saint Thomas More was a witness and servant of the truth, the truth known by faith and reason, in the interior of his conscience. He had a great intellect and a fervent faith. He put God first in his life, the true God who is love. This is our calling too: to take our faith seriously and to pursue truth on the wings of both faith and reason.

Saint Thomas More was a devoted husband and father. He lived his faith at home and made his family a domestic Church. He loved his wife and children with great devotion. They were more important to him than his work and his noble profession. He was a warm and affectionate husband and father. That warmth extended also to his children's spouses and his grandchildren, and then to his many friends. He was deeply involved in his children's religious, moral, and intellectual education. It was extraordinary at that time when women were not given a good education that he insisted on an excellent education for his daughters. Saint Thomas More is an example for all of you with important professional responsibilities to put family before work.

Despite his time-consuming professional commitments, Thomas More also put his prayer life before his work. He set definite hours in his daily schedule for prayer. He loved the Eucharist and attended Mass daily. He was devoted to the saints and the holy souls in purgatory. He spoke often about one day being merry in heaven with his friends. This hope undoubtedly sustained him in adversity and at his impending death. It was a joyful hope, manifest in his cheerful personality, even to the end.

Thomas More's faith was also lived in society and manifest in his love for the poor. Blessed with material wealth, he always remained detached from that wealth. He would invite the poor into his home to eat at his table. He set up a special house to care for the aged and infirm in the neighborhood. He practiced the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Mercy not only at home and in private, but also as a lawyer, judge, and statesman. As a judge, he was called "the best friend the poor ever had." He administered justice with mercy, especially toward those who were deprived not only of money, but of education and moral formation. He wrote in his book *Utopia*: "For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for their crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them." Strong words for us to ponder as we see the lives and upbringings of those who appear in our criminal courts and reside in our prisons.

There is so much we can learn from St. Thomas More's life of virtue, the unity and integration of his life, the living out of his vocation as a disciple of Jesus, as a husband and father, a lawyer, judge, and statesman: his fidelity to the truth, his mercy, his charity, his faith, and his courage. All of this reached its culmination in his death by martyrdom, the height of his sanctity. In those long months of

imprisonment in the Tower of London, he carried in his body the dying of Jesus, using Saint Paul's words in our first reading at this Mass. In his prison cell and at his trial, Thomas More must have felt what Saint Paul felt when he wrote: "we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

Saint Thomas More was beheaded. He died as the king's loyal servant, but God's servant first. He gave the supreme witness to Christ, to the truth of the faith, and to love. May he pray for us! Pope Francis revealed last December that he prays to Saint Thomas More every day. I invite you to do the same and to learn from him to be servants of the truth, witnesses of the beauty and joy of the Gospel, and to make his priorities your own in this proper order: God, family, profession. May God bless you!