

Red Mass Homily – Boston – (Cathedral)

September 2011

Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near, Isaiah urges us this morning. We gather here as seekers. Our life of faith is a quest. St. Paul tells us today: “conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ.”

Life as a disciple is not a solo flight; it is more like being on Noah’s Ark. Some passengers are getting seasick, part of the crew might be ready for a mutiny. Occasionally there is a man overboard. And yet we are all in the same boat, and it is infinitely better than being in a dingy by yourself. Faith is lived in a community of disciples who share a common vision and a common mission. One learns discipleship the way we learn a language by being part of a community that speaks that language. And although we are pilgrims in this world, God

expects us, as the Jews say, “to repair the world”. We must leave it a better place than the way we found it. As Catholic Jurists you have a unique responsibility and opportunity to advance this mission to repair the world, to build a civilization of love. Please see your own profession as a vocation, a calling to a life of service, a life of discipleship in Christ’s Church.

When Satan tempted Jesus in the desert he based his arguments on passages from the Old Testament, which has given rise to the saying that even the devil can quote Scripture.

Ironically those who advocate a strict separation of Church and State often quote Jesus words: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”. What they often mean by that is “Let’s lock God in the sacristy and let Caesar call all the shots.” That can be very

perilous, especially if Caesar happens to be a blood thirsty ideologue who likes to throw people to the lions.

A couple of months ago Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus came to give a speech at Faneuil Hall to mark the 50th anniversary of JFK's inaugural address. Carl Anderson eloquently demonstrates how Kennedy's inaugural address captures the convictions of our nation's founders that "the rights of man come not from the generosity of the State, but from the hand of God."

Our Country's democracy is based on the conviction that human rights come from God. The Declaration of Independence states that we are endowed by our Creator with the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In declaring this nation independence the signers of the Declaration stated that the rights cited in their claim were not simply a matter of opinion or even

of belief. Rather they were God given rights that could not be taken away by any person or any government. These rights are self evident and those words were unanimously adopted. On this moral foundation, America has staked its claim for liberty.

American Catholics seek neither theocracy nor secularism but a moral way forward for our country. Last year when Pope Benedict was in England he addressed an impressive group of intellectual leaders of Parliament and four prime ministers. In Westminster Hall, the very venue of St. Thomas More's trial and condemnation, the Holy Father stated: "if the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident, herein lies the real challenge for democracy. The inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems has been

illustrated all too clearly by the recent global financial crisis. There is widespread agreement that the lack of a solid ethical foundation for economic activity has contributed to the grave difficulties now being experienced by millions of people throughout the world. Just as every economic decision has a moral consequence, so too in the political field the ethical dimension of policy has far-reaching consequences that no government can fail to ignore.”

Pope Benedict asks: “Where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of Revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by nonbelievers, still less to propose concrete political

solutions which would lie altogether outside of the competence of religion, but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles. This corrective role of religion is not always welcome, partly because distorted forms of religion such as sectarianism and fundamentalism can be seen to create serious social problems themselves; but without the corrective supplied by religion, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person. The Holy Father goes on to say that the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue for the good of our civilization.

This month the Attorney General of Massachusetts has certified a petition in support of legalizing physician assisted suicide in our state. It is another attempt to undermine the sacredness of human life that demands an energetic response from Catholics and other citizens of good will.

Today, many people fear the prospect of a protracted period of decline at the end of life. They fear experiencing pain, losing control, lingering with dementia, fear of being abandoned, fear of becoming a burden on others.

We as a society will be judged by how we respond to these fears. We must devote more attention to those who might feel that their life is diminished in value or meaning, they need the love and care of others to assure them of their inherent worth.

Most people, regardless of religious affiliation know that suicide is a tragedy, one that a compassionate society should

work to prevent. They realize that allowing doctors to prescribe the means for their patients to kill themselves is a corruption of the medical profession. It even violates the Hippocratic Oath that has guided physicians for thousands of years. To quote from that foundational document: “I will not give a lethal drug to anyone even if I am asked, nor will I advise such a plan.”

By rescinding the legal protection for the lives of a category of people, the government sends a message that some persons are better off dead. This biased judgment about the diminished value of life for someone with a serious illness or disability is fueled by the excessively high premium our culture places on productivity and autonomy which tends to discount the lives of those who have a disability or who are suffering or dependent on others. If these people claim they want to die, others might be tempted to regard this not as a call for help, but

as a reasonable response to what they agree is a meaningless life. Those who choose to live may then be viewed as selfish or irrational, as a needless burden on others, and might even be encouraged to see themselves in that way. Many people with a disability who struggle for their genuine rights to adequate health care, housing and so forth, are understandably suspicious when the freedom society most eagerly offers them is the freedom to take their lives.

The notion that assisting a suicide shows compassion is misguided. It eliminates the person but causes suffering to those left behind and pushes vulnerable people to see death as an escape. According to the National Council on Disability: “As the experience in the Netherlands demonstrates there is little doubt that legalizing assisted suicide generates strong pressures

upon individuals and families to utilize the option, and leads very quickly to coercion and involuntary euthanasia.”

Legalizing assisted suicide leads to more suicides. This is the collateral damage of the assisted suicide agenda. The World Health Organization warns: “avoid language which normalizes suicide or presents it as a solution to problems.”

A decade after Oregon’s law allowing physician assisted suicide took effect, suicide had become the leading cause of “injury death” in Oregon and the second leading cause of death among those between 15 and 34 years of age. The suicide rate in Oregon was in decline until legalizing physician assisted suicide. The suicide rate has been rising since 2000 and by 2007 was already 35% higher than the national average –without counting physician assisted suicides of seriously ill patients

which Oregon law does not allow to be counted as suicides and without counting 1,000 failed attempted suicides each year.

We hope that the citizens of the commonwealth will not be seduced by the language: dignity, mercy and compassion which are used to disguise the sheer brutality of helping some kill themselves. A vote for physician assisted suicide is a vote for suicide.

A rabbi in Baltimore said: “The Jew must attend to those who are ill and reassure those who are dying of our presence. Part of attending them is reminding them of their worth and dignity when they lose all control over the end of life. Medicine and public policy will never be competent or adequate at defining or managing the meaning of life and death. Only we can do that. And the call for physician assisted suicide is a reminder to us we must do it better.”

In the Gospel the workmen are angry at the owner of the fields for this largess to those who only produced a little bit, only worked the last shift. God's logic is one of love. He does not just see what we deserve, but what we need. God's approach is expensive and the insurance companies would not be in favor.

In the eyes of the world those who are in the last stages of life are somehow diminished in their humanity and should be eliminated. We must see them through God's eyes and recognize that each and every person is created in his image and likeness and that we are all connected to God and to each other. We are our brothers keeper and our sister's helper. Cain who forgot he was his brother's keeper ended up becoming his executioner. "Thou shall not kill" is God's law and it is written in our hearts by our Creator.

We are call upon to defend the Gospel of life with courage and resolve. Your very profession invests all of you with an even greater responsibility to ensure that our laws are just and that they protect the weak.

And so in this Red Mass –whose color links blood of martyrdom with the robes of justice- we gather before this altar to invoke the power of God that the Holy Spirit might guide all of you in your work so that you too may be steadfast proponents of all that is right and good and true. Like St. Thomas More may you come to see your profession to be an opportunity to unite your natural talents with a vision of faith and the force of reason, not to serve the enticements of power but the supreme ideal of justice, and as a chance to put public activity at the service of the human person for a virtuous democracy.