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Addresses

Homily: Red Mass

Diocese of Phoenix, AZ, January 23, 2008

First Reading: Is 11:1-4

Second Reading: 1 Cor 12:4-13

Gospel: Mt 25:14-30

There's a wonderful moment in the film Rudy that bears on our readings today. Rudy is a young man who wants to attend the University of Notre Dame. He has a big heart and a lot of desire, but not a lot of talent and even less money. So he prays and works very hard to qualify for admission. And he isn't discouraged by his first couple of rejections.

But finally, in desperation after getting turned down again and again, he speaks with the priest who serves as Notre Dame's vice president. Rudy asks if he's ever going to get into Notre Dame, and whether God is even listening to his prayers. The priest answers, "In 30 years of religious life, I've learned two things: There is a God, and I'm not Him."

Of course, Rudy eventually gets accepted and even plays football for Notre Dame. But that's a line worth remembering. There is a God, and we're not Him. Humility is the beginning of sanity. It's also the beginning of justice, because we can't see the needs and rights of others until we can see past our own self-importance.

In our first reading today, Isaiah is describing the marks of the "marked one," the Messiah. God's Anointed One will delight in the fear of the Lord and "judge the poor with justice." And of course, so will those who follow him; those who are "marked" at Baptism and Confirmation. What Isaiah means by "fear of the Lord" is not some kind of frightened anxiety about being punished, but rather a very sensible awe in the presence of glory; a sane sense of proportion; a reverence for the greatness of God and an understanding of our obligations as men and women created by God. And one of those obligations in the mind of Scripture is justice for the poor and afflicted.

The second reading takes that theme of obligation and speaks to each one of us directly. St. Paul writes that, "To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." But Paul doesn't mean that our gifts exist for our personal benefit; rather, they exist for the benefit of others: As Paul says, "There are different forms of service, but the same Lord" who calls us out of ourselves for the sake of helping someone else.

In other words, God gives us our resources and talents and authority in order to serve others. And He expects us to use them. In that light, the meaning of our Gospel reading today is pretty obvious. It doesn't matter what talents we have, or how talented we are. But it very much matters that we do something fertile with whatever talents we do have; that we use our talents to accomplish the most we can in our service to God and other people. God is merciful and loving to people who try and fail. But He has a very different attitude toward those who do nothing with the opportunities they receive.

Now, how does any of this relate to a Red Mass and to those of you here today who are attorneys or lawmakers or judges? All of you have a special dignity as servants of the law which -- at its best -- embodies and safeguards the common good. But in the end, your greatest duties are the same as every other Catholic citizen. Justice Louis Brandeis once said that the most important public office in America is that of private citizen. He also said that "the only title in our democracy higher than that of President is the title of citizen."

Personal witness is always the best proof of what we claim to believe. And this year, like every other year -- with or without an election and whether we hold a public office or not -- we need to apply the idea of Catholic witness in a special way to our public life as citizens. So let me suggest 10 simple points we might remember as we move toward November.

First, George Orwell said that one of the biggest dangers for modern democratic life is dishonest political language. Dishonest language leads to dishonest politics - which then leads to bad public policy and bad law. So we need to speak and act in a spirit of truth.

Second, "Catholic" is a word that has real meaning. We don't control or invent that meaning as individuals. We inherit it from the Gospel and the experience of the Church over the centuries. We can choose to be something else, but if we choose to call ourselves Catholic, then that word has consequences for what we believe and how we act. We can't truthfully claim to be Catholic and then act like we're not.

Third, being a Catholic is a bit like being married. We have a relationship with the Church and with Jesus Christ that's very similar to being a spouse. And that has consequences. If a man says he loves his wife, his wife will want to see the evidence in his love and fidelity. The same applies to our relationship with God. If we say we're Catholic, we need to show that by our love for the Church and our fidelity to what she teaches and believes. Otherwise we're just fooling ourselves, because God certainly won't be fooled.

Fourth, the Church is not a political organism. She has no interest in partisanship because getting power or running governments is not what she's about, and the more closely she identifies herself with any single party, the fewer people she can effectively reach.

Fifth, Scripture and Catholic teaching do however have public consequences because they guide us in how we should act in relation to one another. Loving God requires that we also love the people He created, which means we need to treat them with justice, charity and mercy. Being a Catholic involves solidarity with other people. The Catholic faith has social justice implications - and that means it also has cultural, economic and political implications. The Catholic faith is never primarily about politics; but Catholic social action - including political action - is a natural byproduct of the Church's moral message. We can't call ourselves Catholic, and then simply stand by while immigrants get mistreated, or the poor get robbed, or unborn children get killed. The Catholic faith is always personal, but never private. If our faith is real, then it will bear fruit in our public decisions and behaviors, including our political choices.

Sixth, each of us needs to follow his or her own properly formed conscience. But conscience doesn't emerge from a vacuum. It's not a matter of personal opinion or preference. If our conscience has the habit of telling us what we want to hear on difficult issues, then it's probably badly formed. A healthy conscience is the voice of God's truth in our hearts, and it should usually make us uncomfortable, because none of us is yet a saint. The way we get a healthy conscience is by submitting it and shaping it to the will of God; and the way we find God's will is by opening our hearts to the counsel and guidance of the Church that Jesus left us. If we find ourselves disagreeing as Catholics with the Catholic teaching of our Church on a serious matter, it's probably not the Church that's wrong. The problem is much more likely with us.

Seventh, how do we make good political choices when so many different issues are so important and complex? The first principle of Christian social thought is: Don't deliberately kill the innocent, and don't collude in allowing somebody else to do it. The right to life is the foundation of every other human right. The reason the abortion issue is so foundational is not because Catholics love little babies - although we certainly do - but because revoking the personhood of unborn children makes every other definition of personhood and human rights politically contingent.

Eighth, can a Catholic in good conscience support a "pro-choice" candidate? My personal answer is: I can't and I won't. But I do know some serious Catholics - people whom I admire - who will. I think their reasoning is mistaken. But at the very least they do sincerely struggle with the abortion issue, and it causes them real pain. And even more importantly: They don't keep quiet about it; they don't give up their efforts to end permissive abortion; they keep lobbying their party and their elected representatives to change their pro-abortion views and protect the unborn. Catholics can support "pro-choice" candidates if they support them despite - not because of - their "pro-choice" views. But they also need a compelling proportionate reason to justify it.

Ninth, what is a "proportionate" reason when it comes to the abortion issue? It's the kind of reason we will be able to explain, with a clean heart, to the victims of abortion when we meet them face to face in the next life - which we most certainly will. If we're confident that these victims will accept our

motives as something more than an alibi, then we can proceed.

Tenth and lastly, the heart of truly "faithful" citizenship is this: We're better citizens when we're more faithful Catholics. We're citizens of heaven first. Our time here is limited. This life passes. Eternity is forever. We need to act in this world accordingly, with lives of Christian service to the poor and afflicted - including the unborn child, the immigrant, the homeless and the elderly. The more authentically Catholic we are in our lives, our choices, our actions and our convictions, the more truly we will contribute to the moral and political life of our nation.