

Red Mass
St. Thomas Aquinas Cathedral
May 1, 2014

Homily by Bishop Randolph R. Calvo

Your honors, Governor Sandoval and Chief Justice Gibbons; honorable members of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government; State Bar President Alan Lefebvre and members of the bar; brothers and sisters in Christ: welcome. May it please God that we gather here for this Eucharist and to continue a tradition in the Church with this Red Mass. I am grateful for the committees, the St. Thomas More Society and all the other sponsors who have made this Mass possible.

First of all, I want to express my appreciation of your service. Last Sunday the Church celebrated the canonization of two popes, something unprecedented in the Church's history. One of those was St. John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council. That council said this about you: "The Church regards as worthy of praise and esteem the work of those who, as a service to others, dedicate themselves to the public good and undertake the burdens of this task" (*Gaudium et spes* n. 75). So, on behalf of the Church, in particular the Catholic Church in Northern Nevada, thank you.

The other pope who was canonized on Sunday was St. John Paul II. I met him a few times and there are probably a million others who could make a similar claim. I never thought I would live to see someone I met declared a saint during my lifetime. So, if you would indulge me for a moment, let me share with you an encounter I had with him. I was in Rome studying canon law—church law—and I had just completed the exams for my license. Three of my classmates and I had the good fortune of being invited to concelebrate a weekday morning Mass with Pope John Paul in his private chapel. After Mass, we were introduced to him—who we were, where we were from—all very pleasant and then I said to him, "Holy Father, we have just completed our exams for our license in canon law." Now, I was kind of hoping to hear a good word about the role of law in the Church, something I could write home about to my archbishop. Well, the pope's demeanor changed and he had this very serious look on his face and then said in a grave tone, "Hmm. Lawyers." That was it; it was as enigmatic as you can get. So I wrote home, the Holy Father takes lawyers very, very seriously.

Well, it is serious business; you know that. Lawmaking, upholding the law, judging are serious matters, with much at stake for the common good and a just society as well as for the life and wellbeing of individuals. Yours is a noble calling. It is also a

challenging one in a changing cultural landscape, where claims to rights compete and values clash.

The readings for this Mass are those for today, the Thursday of the Second Week of Easter. It just so happens that the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, is about a trial. Peter and the Apostles were hauled before the Sanhedrin and the council of the elders of Israel because of what they were saying about Jesus Christ, his claims, his death and his resurrection. In the course of their defense, Peter and the Apostles said this: "We must obey God rather than men." Now this was not the first time these words were uttered. Socrates said the same thing. So did the seven Macabee brothers, who in the second century before Christ chose to be killed rather than violate God's law (2 Mac 7:1-2). Nor was this the last time either, as witnessed by Christian martyrs throughout the centuries and even today.

There's a letter in the New Testament attributed to Peter, in which he counsels Christians to "be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king as supreme or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the approval of those who do good." In other words, Christians are to be law-abiding citizens; in fact, they are to be exemplary, so that non-believers may observe their good works and thus glorify God (1 Pet 2:12-14). St. Thomas More sought to be a good citizen and public servant, but up to a point. He would not violate what is most sacred to any human being: one's conscience. Thus he declared, "I die the king's faithful servant, but God's first."

In our nation we are very fortunate that the freedom to exercise religion is explicit in the Constitution. There are places in the world where this freedom is restricted or where people are persecuted because of their faith. This was the case in St. John Paul's native Poland under Nazi and Communist rule. That experience no doubt formed in him a deep conviction that religious freedom is inextricably connected to all other freedoms, as he said, "by reason of the very dignity which is the human person" (Letter to Kurt Waldheim 12/1/78). Pope John Paul was a champion of freedom and not only religious freedom. I remember in 1982 in Rome listening to him at the end of the canonization of St. Maximilian Kolbe when he vigorously denounced the Polish government's crackdown on the Solidarity labor movement, calling that action a violation of fundamental human rights. For him and for us as well, freedom and human rights are not conceded to people by the power or the pleasure of the state, but derive from a higher source. It is what our Declaration of Independence stated, that human beings "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."

We are fortunate to live in a country that upholds religious freedom. But freedom, whether it is of religion or speech or association, cannot be taken for granted. To me, the biggest threat to religious freedom often is not open hostility to faith but indifference or lack of respect for the religious sensibility of citizens. We all have to be vigilant in preserving the freedoms we cherish as a nation.

At this Red Mass we invoke the Holy Spirit to bestow on you the gifts of wisdom, right judgment and courage. Yours is a noble calling, a serious one, a challenging one. May your service of God and the public good bring blessings upon our cities, our state and our nation.