

Homily of Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien
Annual Red Mass
St. John the Evangelist Church, White Plains, NY
26 October 2004

The Gospel we have just heard (Mt 10:34-42) is a challenging, sobering one. Contrary to most televangelists' messages, we hear that faith in Christ does not always bring about peace and harmony, but often deep division and disunity.

One week from this hour a campaign-weary Nation and the world itself will anxiously await the results of the final news of voting for the United States president and vice president, for most of the Congress and many other local offices. Rarely, if ever, has there been so much attention fixed on an election and with its sharp, daily divisions.

Religiously committed citizens as well as those who have no formal allegiance to an institutionalized faith should by now feel comfortable that they have been welcomed by their fellow countrymen in expressing their deeply held convictions on every issue of importance. Indeed all should do so without intimidation or defensiveness. A fair election system in a democratic society will always result in one side's "imposing its views on the other." And if my way does not win out, our Nation has never harbored illusions of democratic infallibility – there will be other ways and opportunities to revisit an issue. And, as we know, even the highest courts' decisions have been known to undergo review and reversal.

Once more this year, and it surely won't be the last, the status and rights of the unborn are high on the list of neuralgic topics and this year to the fore has appeared the very definition of marriage. Matters of such import go to the roots of every major religious tradition. They have also divided, and continue to, the world of secular thinkers. To welcome arguments for the latter group and ban or limit input from those of a religious background is surely unreasonable and patently discriminatory.

Then there is the further dispute over the conscience of the legislator.

Within our Catholic community, the debate continues over whether one who publicly supports what is seen as a seriously unjust law is committing a moral wrong – a sin – and therefore must be excluded from full participation in the life of the Church – that is, in the reception of Holy Communion, an outward, public sign of one's unity with the Church and her teachings. This is not simply a hot campaign 2004 distraction. In Roman Catholic practice and theology it has a profound resonance, echoes of which would be perceived throughout the 2,000-year history of our communion.

In the discussion on moral cooperation, none of the arguments leading to a conclusive opinion need be taken from theological principles. Such arguments are based upon reason: that there is a question of right and wrong here, good and evil. That it is never

a moral good to will something, or to promote or to bring about something, that is seen to be wrong. That to do so is an act of cooperation with the wrongful action and therefore unjust—in religious terms, an evil, sinful act.

I think that all would agree that one may never willfully perform an evil act so that good may come about. So, to take the lives of 5 innocent people in order to save 5 or 50 or 500 other innocent lives is simply immoral. But such decisions can become more complicated. For example, legislators may vote for the lesser of two morally unjust bills before them, tolerating the lesser of two evils in order to avoid a greater evil and, perhaps promote a greater good. A close corollary to this permits public officials for the sake of the common good to enforce laws which they see to be unjust or immoral because of a sworn office which they hold. (Such would be Judge Richard Conway Casey's recent decision favoring partial birth abortion which he affirms as barbaric but was forced to uphold because of his sworn allegiance to the Supreme Court's decision.)

There are many variations to these very basic and, I think reasonably self-evident principles, which need not depend upon religious truths. The sacred books of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are replete with variations of these commonly held principles, as have secular jurisprudence and the common opinion of many prudent people from earliest times. The fact that natural law implications have been developed and reasoned out over the course of many centuries by religious traditions or individual religious ethicists should not exclude them from public debate.

Western culture has repeatedly held that there is a law of the universe of good and evil which takes precedence over man-made law, and must be obeyed when perceived. In the words of our Catechism:

Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good. The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables the human person to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie. (CCC #1954)

Supported and driven by divine revelation in the Book of Genesis, that every human being is made to the image and likeness of God and so possesses an inherent, immutable dignity, it is natural law that arrives at the principle that “the direct and voluntary killing of a human being is always gravely immoral” (EV 57). A universal natural law principle complemented by western religious tradition, with which all but the tyrant must agree.

Were I a non-Catholic cleric speaking in a non-Catholic house of worship, I would be permitted freely and without threat or intimidation to apply these principles more specifically to today's public debate on abortion, citing legislation and legislators as I do so. Such, however, is not my desire or intention. I simply wish to plead that our reasoned position be studied, known, respected and be permitted to be applied in the public debate that will long be with us. Meanwhile, might fair minded people begin to ask why those

seeking public office are permitted freely to enter any house of worship other than Catholic, and speak of any topic they desire, without restraint or fear and without any hint of violating the principle of separation of Church and State. How long must Catholics be muzzled by such a double standard?

Finally, one in public office who freely chooses to belong to and embrace the Catholic Faith should, in good faith, seek to live up to the basic truths of that Faith as far as reasonable civil law permits. After serious and extensive counsel, should some of any political persuasion choose to disregard these tenets of their professed faith and, in fact actively promote opposite ones, should not honesty strongly dictate that they refrain from taking part in our most sacred and public proclamation of our unity with our Church and teachings, the reception of Holy Communion? Let other faith communities adhere to their own traditions and beliefs in the matter. We will respect them. And please, let all permit us to do so without that criticism and denunciation, that is too often commonplace.

The prayers, the very existence of a Red Mass, presumes that human minds and hearts, blown about by many pressures and emotions, can be soothed and moved by divine guidance.

Not all of you might agree with everything you have heard from this pulpit this evening. But may we all agree with the prayer that follows. As we offer this Mass for you good people committed to justice and order, we have every right to hope, and every obligation to pray for the light of that Holy Spirit to enlighten our judiciaries as the new year opens. And may God's Holy Spirit encourage the hearts of our legislators, law enforcers and attorneys in advancing the respect for and defense of all human life.

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