

**2013 Red Mass Homily
St. Thomas More Society, The Catholic Lawyers Guild
Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe
Diocese of Dallas, Texas**

**†Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

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Your Excellencies, Bishop Farrell and Bishop Deshotel; Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated Religious, civic officials, honored judges, fellow attorneys, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good for me to be back in Dallas to celebrate this Red Mass with you, and I am grateful to Bishop Farrell and to Ellen Eisenlohr Dorn, President of the St. Thomas More Society of the Diocese of Dallas, for their gracious invitation to be the homilist at this Mass with the members and guests of your Catholic Lawyers Guild. I have been a member of the Illinois bar now for thirty-two years and a canon lawyer for the past twenty-one years, so I share in your profession.

I say “back in Dallas” because I was blessed to have spent a semester of my seminary training doing a clinical pastoral internship as a hospital chaplain here in Dallas at Parkland Memorial Hospital. During those months of my stay in Dallas it was a privilege for me to reside with the

Jesuit community at Jesuit College Preparatory School of Dallas. Although both my time as a chaplain at Parkland Hospital and living with the Jesuits were good experiences from which I learned a great deal and still have many great memories and lasting friendships, I decided to become neither a hospital chaplain nor a Jesuit! Instead, I became a diocesan priest in Chicago and a lawyer of both civil law and canon law. I think I made the right choices!

The name “Red Mass” derives from the red vestments that are worn as the color symbolizing the Holy Spirit, whose wisdom we implore to guide the work and decisions of our legal professionals and government officials in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government at the federal, state and local levels.

The patron saint of your Catholic Lawyers Guild, Sir Thomas More, was a devoted husband, a loving father, a generous friend, a gifted writer, a renowned scholar, and a skilled lawyer and judge. He is also remembered as a devoted servant in the court of King Henry VIII in which he held a number of important posts, rising to become Lord Chancellor of the Realm, a position that would be roughly equivalent in our political system to being White House chief-of-staff, Secretary of State, and Chief

Justice of the Supreme Court all at once, a position second in power only to the King himself.

Of course most of all, and in a way that captures all the best qualities that he exhibited in life, Thomas More is remembered today as a *saint* – a man who was devoted to Christ and his Church, and who willingly sacrificed his power, his wealth and security, and ultimately his life out of love for God. Because he would not accede to the Act of Supremacy declaring Henry to be the supreme head of the church in England or take the Oath of Supremacy, renouncing Rome’s authority in ecclesial matters, More was beheaded on Tower Hill, July 6, 1535. As he stood on the scaffold before his execution, he briefly addressed the crowd gathered, telling them that he died “the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”¹

In this simple phrase – “the King’s good servant, but God’s first” – St. Thomas More summarizes the call of Christian discipleship and the proper perspective we must all bring to our daily work – *to be God’s servant first!* As such, in his life and in his death, St. Thomas More is a model for Christian engagement in the world. And this is precisely the vocation that most of us receive from God – to be *in* the world as the followers of Jesus Christ proclaiming the Good News – to be the leaven that makes the bread

rise. There are, of course, people who have vocations that are not active in the world – monastic men and women in contemplative communities who “pray without ceasing.”² While not *active* in the world in the temporal order, they are *engaged* with the world in the order of grace as they pray for the salvation of all humanity – men and women, living and dead. That is a special vocation for which we should all be grateful, one that bears witness to and reminds us of the *last things* – death, judgment, heaven and hell.

Most of us, however, are called to be *in* the world – to address *present things*, even as we keep our eyes fixed on heaven. Specifically, as Christians and as citizens, we are obliged to work for justice and promote the common good – an obligation that is especially meaningful in a democratic society like ours, where a government by, of, and for the people possesses limited constitutional authority to care for the common good, and where the balance is entrusted to the care of non-governmental institutions, including churches and other religious groups.

I recall that when I was a seminarian doing my hospital chaplaincy here several years ago, Catholics were in a distinct minority in the Dallas Metroplex, which was dominated by Southern Baptists and Methodists. The Catholic community has grown exponentially since then, but I believe

it is still as important as ever that we find common ground to work with our fellow brothers and sisters baptized in Christ. In this regard, I was pleased to see the recent interview in THE WALL STREET JOURNAL with Russell Moore, the incoming President of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. In that interview, Mr. Moore said that he wants to refocus the evangelical movement on serving as a religious example battling in the public square on "three core issues" - life, marriage and religious liberty.³

I wholeheartedly agree with this agenda and pray that there will be fruitful cooperation between Catholics and other Christians on these core issues of life, marriage and religious liberty. In fact, Mr. Moore last month joined Archbishop William Lori, the Archbishop of Baltimore and the Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty, of which I am a member, and over one hundred other religious leaders of various denominations in writing to President Obama, saying, "The HHS policy [mandating insurance coverage for contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs] is coercive and puts the administration in the position of defining – or casting aside – religious doctrine. This should trouble every American." Signers of the

open letter, entitled, “Standing Together for Religious Freedom,” include leaders from a broad spectrum of religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Orthodox Christian and Jewish leaders, as well as scholars and heads of faith-based institutions and civil rights organizations. The letter calls on HHS to, “at a minimum, expand conscience protections under the mandate to cover any organization or individual that has religious or moral objections to covering, providing or enabling access to the mandated drugs and services.” The letter also asks Congress to consider how it can act to prevent offenses to religious freedom.⁴

As I see it, the biggest obstacle in the way of promoting and protecting the three core issues of life, marriage and religious liberty is sin. In the secular context, we might simply call this *apathy*, that the agenda of promoting and protecting the three core issues of life, marriage and religious liberty would be more successful if people of faith were not so apathetic about these issues. But in the religious context, we must call this temptation by its more specific and theologically-precise terminology, namely, *acedia*.

St. Gregory the Great and St. John Cassian described seven deadly or capital sins that often deal more with attitudes of the heart than with our actual conduct or behaviors. These seven deadly sins are **pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth**. They are called *capital sins* because they lead to other sins, and *deadly* because their repetition clouds the conscience, corrupts the concrete judgment of good and evil, and deadens our sense of right and wrong.

Just as in the list of the seven deadly sins that I have just given, **sloth** is usually mentioned last, but I wish to deal with it primarily because I believe that sloth, properly understood, is at the root of many other sins. Sloth is often mistakenly understood simply to mean laziness. Actually sloth is more than being a “couch potato” who is too lazy to get up and do some chores around the house. It is also more than the lethargy or inertia that a person may experience who would rather just stay home than go to church. The capital sin of sloth refers to a spiritual sluggishness also known as *acedia*, which refuses the joy that comes from God and is repelled by divine goodness. Since *acedia* captures the more profound meaning of the spiritual reality than the commonly-used word *sloth*, I will use the word *acedia* in my spiritual analysis of this capital sin.

According to the description of *acedia* in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The spiritual writers understood by this a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart.” (#2733).

In his article, “Pornography and Acedia” in the journal *FIRST THINGS*, Reinhard Hütter, Professor of Christian Theology at Duke Divinity School, says that *acedia* “is the very foregoing of friendship with God, that there never was and never will be friendship with God, that there never was and never will be a transcendent calling and dignity of the human person. Nothing matters much, because the one thing that really matters, God’s love and friendship, does not exist and therefore cannot be attained.” In contemporary conversation, *acedia* is best exemplified in the response you receive when you’re trying to explain something that you think is really important and the only reaction you get is a dismissive one-word reply, “Whatever.”

The reason *acedia* is so deadly is that this capital sin creates a void at the center of our being that we try to fill with transitory rushes of pleasure—primarily sexual—hence, its connection to other deadly sins such as lust and vices such as pornography. But these pleasures can never

fill the void created by the loss of our transcendent calling to the love and friendship of God. That is why such vices are so addictive, because they never leave us satisfied, and this vicious circle of unfulfilled compulsion ultimately leads to acedia's most dangerous offshoot: despair. As Professor Hütter puts it, "This vice's post-Christian secular offshoot, an unthematic despair posing as boredom, covers—like a fungus—the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional life of many, if not most, who inhabit the affluent segments of the Western secular world."⁵

As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put it, "Man is a relational being. And if his first, fundamental relationship is disturbed—his relationship with God—then nothing else can be truly in order."⁶

If we wish to grow in holiness and in our commitment to the Christian life, we must first acknowledge, confront and overcome the sin of acedia. A good starting point in this process of conversion would be to deal with the reality of acedia that the devil will undoubtedly use to try to deter us from our spiritual goal of friendship with God.

Another obstacle in the way of promoting and protecting the three core issues of life, marriage and religious liberty is that too many Catholics have justified their rejection of Catholic teaching on human sexuality,

marriage and family life as a matter of following their “conscience,” but apparently without properly understanding what “conscience” means. The word “conscience” comes from two Latin words, “co-” (which means “together” or “with”) and “science” (which means to have knowledge about something). Conscience means to share knowledge with someone else about what is right or wrong. Conscience does not act in isolation on some sort of personal or individual intuition disconnected from someone or something else. For a Catholic, a properly formed conscience means to share God’s knowledge and the Church’s teaching about right or wrong. So those who invoke “conscience” to justify their rejection of divine law as taught by the Catholic Church are saying that they have chosen to follow the thinking, knowledge and values of someone or something other than the Pope or the Catholic Church.

For example, when Saint Thomas More invoked his conscience in refusing to sign Henry VIII’s Oath of Supremacy declaring the King to be the Head of the Church of England, Thomas was not just following a personal preference, but was declaring that he was thinking with the Pope and would follow him, not the King. Others chose instead to think with the King, and follow him.

In his book published last year on the infancy narratives of Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI commented on the fact that Jesus was born in a stable because “there was no room for them in the inn” (*Luke* 2:6f). Later in life, Jesus himself would say, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (*Matthew* 8:20). The Holy Father observed in this regard, “This should cause us to reflect—it points toward the reversal of values found in the figure of Jesus Christ and his message. From the moment of his birth, he belongs outside the realm of what is important and powerful in worldly terms. . . . So one aspect of becoming a Christian is having to leave behind what everyone else thinks and wants, the prevailing standards, in order to enter the light of the truth of our being, and aided by that light to find the right path.”⁷

It was St. Augustine who drew out the meaning of Jesus being born in a manger, observing that the manger is the place where animals find their food. But the manger itself becomes a kind of altar. For now, lying in the manger, is Jesus, “who called himself the true bread come down from heaven, the true nourishment that we need to be fully ourselves. This is the true bread that gives true life, eternal life. Thus the manger becomes a

reference to the table of God, to which we are invited so as to receive the bread of God.”⁸

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ E.E. REYNOLDS, ST. THOMAS MORE 299 (1958).

² 1*Thessalonians* 5:17.

³ Naomi Schaefer Riley, “From Moral Majority to ‘Prophetic Minority,’ The Weekend Interview with Russell Moore, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, August 17-18, 2013, p. A11.

⁴ “Standing Together for Religious Freedom: An Open Letter to All Americans,” <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/upload/standing-together-for-religious-freedom.pdf>.

⁵ Reinhard Hütter, “Pornography and Acedia,” FIRST THINGS, April 2012.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Random House, Image Books, 2012), p. 44.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, pp. 66-67.

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, p. 68.