

**Catholic Men's Prayer Breakfast
St. Mary's Church
Alton, Illinois**

March 24, 2012

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Wake Up Call

Reverend [Monsignors and], Fathers, and Deacons, worthy Sir Knights, dear brothers in the Lord: it gives me great joy to be with you this morning for this seventh annual Catholic Men's Prayer Breakfast here in Alton.

I am especially grateful to the ladies for their gracious work in serving such a delicious breakfast and for their efforts at preparing the hall for us today. Our gratitude is also owed to Father Jim Walther and his confreres for hosting us here at St. Mary's. Thanks, too, to all those who had a part in organizing our time together, especially Zip Rzeppa for serving as a Master of Ceremonies this morning.

Speaking to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960 John F. Kennedy, then a candidate for the Presidency of the United States of America, said: "I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair, neither

imposed by him upon the nation or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office.” He went on to say:

I do not speak for my church on public matters--and the church does not speak for me. Whatever issue may come before me as President — on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling, or any other subject — I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.

With the utterance of these words it could be said that many Catholics in these United States began to fall asleep. In effect, he said he would become the one who judges what is right and what is wrong. Like many people today, he turned conscience into subjective opinion rather than what it is: a sacred place in our hearts where we listen to God’s word about the truth of what is right or wrong, spoken to us in light of the Sacred Scriptures and the teachings of the Church.

In this, Kennedy was not - and is not today - alone. To quote the late Father Richard John Neuhaus:

Each of us has been there when we, godlike, decided that we would determine what is good and what is evil – at least in our own lives. Perhaps we shied away from the godlike pretension of making a universal rule that applies to all. Modestly – or so we said – we limited ourselves to deciding “what is good for me” and “what is wrong for me.” “I can speak only for myself,” we say. We would not think of “imposing” our judgment upon others. Under the cover of modesty, we deny the truth about the good and the evil that does not require our permission to be true. Thus we would evade the truth of good and evil that brings us to judgment. The truth is that we do not judge the truth; the truth judges us.¹

When the Church speaks on matters of faith or morals, she does not speak for herself; she speaks for Jesus Christ, who is himself the truth (cf. John 14:6). How very often the words of Saint Thomas More ring true for us: “Alas, how different we are from Christ, though we call ourselves Christians!”²

Faith, of its very nature, is not merely a private affair. The Lord Jesus did not say to the Apostles, nor does he say to us, “Follow me in these matters only.” Rather, he said simply to Matthew as he says also to us, “Follow me” (Luke 5:27).

Faith cannot be compartmentalized, as if only to apply to our lives for certain periods of time or only in certain realms of life. If it is authentic, faith must inform, shape, and influence every aspect of our lives. Of its very nature, faith is public because it must be shared; faith cannot be kept just for me. The Lord told us quite clearly: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). These words are addressed not only to Deacons, Priests, and Bishops, but to every member of the baptized; they are addressed to you, my dear brothers.

When Kennedy spoke those words, a great many people within both Catholic and Protestant circles lauded them, seeing a way forward for American faith and politics. But this vision of Kennedy is neither a clear-sighted vision from the Catholic perspective nor

from the American perspective because it privatizes faith and disconnects religion from the world around us. Religion does not concern itself only with heavenly realities or life after death; religion is very much concerned that how we live in this world is indeed connected to how we will live for all eternity in the life to come.

Just before the Second Vatican Council, an American Jesuit, Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., published an important book titled, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. In its opening pages, he said:

It is classic American doctrine, immortally asserted by Lincoln, that the new nation that our Fathers brought forth on this continent was dedicated to a ‘proposition’ ... made clear by the Declaration of Independence in the famous phrase, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident’ Today, when the serene, and often naïve, certainties of the 18th century have crumbled, the self-evidence of these truths may legitimately be questioned.”³

In these words, our Founding Fathers made clear that, in Father Murray’s words, “There are truths, and we hold them, and we here

lay down as the basis and inspiration of the American project, this constitutional common-wealth.”⁴

Already in 1960 Father Murray identified two serious challenges to the consensus of this proposition, namely, pragmatism and pluralism. He explained, “For the pragmatist there are, properly speaking, no truths; there are only results. But the American proposition rests on the more traditional conviction that there are truths; that they can be known; that they must be held; for, if they are not held, assented to, consented to, worked into the texture of institutions, there can be no hope of founding a true City, in which men may dwell in dignity, peace, unity, justice, well-being, freedom.”⁵

The challenge of pluralism means “the coexistence within the one political community of groups who hold divergent and incompatible views with regard to religious questions — those ultimate questions that concern the nature and destiny of man within a universe that stands under the reign of God. Pluralism therefore implies disagreement and dissension within the community. But it also implies a community within which there

must be agreement and consensus. There is no small political problem here. If society is to be at all a rational process, some set of principles must motivate the general participation of all religious groups, despite their dissensions, in the oneness of the community. On the other hand, these common principles must not hinder the maintenance by each group of its own different identity.”⁶

The first truth of the American proposition is the sovereignty of God over nations as well as over individual men and women; this is also the first truth of Christianity. And it is this truth that Kennedy neglected, and many politicians and citizens have neglected since that speech in Houston. Since then, many people who once adhered to the Gospel have now simply fallen asleep to the teachings of Christ and demands of discipleship.

As such, our own day is not too unlike that of Saint Thomas More. Our society, like much of his own, has forgotten virtue, which he said “is understated, underappreciated, under-valued, and misunderstood.”⁷

Our theme today, then, is very timely: “Wake-up Call.” Those of you who are fathers know well the importance of a wake-up call

from the many times you have had to wake your children to catch the bus for school. Those of you who are sons remember well such awakenings: sometimes they were pleasant and sometimes they were not. So it is also in our spiritual lives.

Such a wake-up call has now been sounded, loudly and clearly, and none too late. The words of Saint Paul resonate deeply within us: “It is the hour now for you to awake from sleep” (Romans 13:11).

When the Administration of President Obama announced its intention to push forward the Freedom of Choice Act a couple of years ago, some Catholic commentators spoke of the slow awakening of the sleeping giant that is the so-called Catholic vote, a gentle rousing we might say.

More recently here in Illinois, with the passage of the so-called “Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act” the second rousing was not so gentle. When we said that the State’s insistence on making placements with civil union couples would push our Catholic Charities out of foster care and adoption services, our critics said we were bluffing. Obviously, we were not. Unfortunately,

because of the State's intransigence in all three branches of government, Catholic Charities no longer provides foster care or adoption services anywhere in the State of Illinois.

And now across the nation the federal mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services requiring medical insurance policies to provide contraception, abortion-inducing drugs, and surgical sterilizations in violation of individual and collective consciences needs, we pray, to fully awaken the sleeping giant of the Catholic faithful. If you don't believe that this HHS mandate has the potential to put Catholic hospitals, Catholic colleges and universities, and Catholic Charities out of business in a relatively short time, you are fast asleep and deluding yourself with pleasant dreams.

If you, dear brothers, have not yet awakened to the reality of the grave threat to our religious freedom that is now present before us, let my presence among you today be your wake-up call.

We can be certain that the challenge to our religious freedom will not stop here, but will carry through in other areas of both public and private life.

In Australia, legislators recently proposed a new bill – the Mental Health Bill 2011 - that would allow doctors to sterilize mentally ill minors if they “consent” to the sterilization, even without parental consent.⁸

Last October in Boston, a court ordered a 32-year old mentally ill woman who is five months pregnant not only to be sterilized, but also to have an abortion. In her decision, the judge wrote that the woman could be “coaxed, bribed or even enticed ... by ruse” into a hospital and then, unknowingly, be given an abortion. Her decision has been appealed.⁹

A recent article published in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* by two medical “ethicists” claims that infants who have been born are not really persons, so they argue that “post-birth abortion” – known by the rest of the world as infanticide – is perfectly moral.¹⁰

These are only some of the great challenges facing our nation and the world as more and more people view their faith as a merely private affair and ignore the truth of Jesus Christ. These challenges will only mount unless we stop them soon.

Saint Anthony of Padua, the Doctor of the Gospels, said in one of his Lenten homilies:

Christ is called “a rod watching” because, like a thief who stays awake at night and steals things from the houses of sleepers, using a rod with a hook on it, Christ with the rod of his humanity and the hook of his holy Cross steals souls from the devil.¹¹

With his Cross, the Lord Jesus Christ often awakens us from our slumber in order that he might call us to an ever more faithful discipleship. For this reason Saint Paul urges us, “Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” (Ephesians 5:14).

The task ahead of us is certainly daunting and difficult, but it is not impossible for Our Lord has promised us when he told us to make disciples of all peoples, “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

We must always remember, my brothers, that Jesus “wished His followers to be brave and prudent soldiers, not senseless and foolish.”¹²

In J. R. R. Tolkien's great work, *The Lord of the Rings*, the hero of the tale, Frodo Baggins, a seemingly small and insignificant Hobbit, brought about the end of the Dark Lord Sauron. He did so not only through his own courage, but also through his fear which led him to be not foolish, but prudent. To be courageous in our efforts does not mean that we have no fear or concern for our safety and well-being; such a man would be reckless, he would be foolish. To be courageous, rather, means not to be paralyzed by our fear.

Frodo accomplished his task with the help of the Fellowship of the Ring and, when that fellowship broke apart, with the help of his faithful servant and friend, Samwise Gamgee. We, like Frodo, must remember that we are not in this struggle alone; we fight it together.

Frodo brought with him certain treasures to help in his fight, the Elven blade Sting – given him by his Uncle Bilbo Baggins – and the Light of Eärendil – given him by the Lady Galadriel who said to him, “It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out.”¹³ When at last it was held up before the giant spider Shelob, its light held back the arachnid in fear.

This Light of Eärendil can be seen as a symbol of the Cross of Lord, the light of which also shines more brightly when the night is about us. The Cross stands ever before us beckoning us forward as a great beacon pointing the way to Christ and his salvation.

The Cross, because it entails pain, can be terrifying, but it brings with it always a profound beauty because it is a sharing in the sufferings of our Lord, through which our salvation was won. We, then, must heed the words Jesus spoke to my patron saint, Saint Thomas More: "...take heart and use the sign of my cross to drive away this dread, this sadness, fear, and weariness like vain specters of the darkness."¹⁴ We must each take up the Cross and hold it aloft, allowing its light to illuminate the world around us in the light of truth, which is the light of life.

By keeping near the Cross and holding it ever higher, in humility and gentleness, we can transform our society again by God's grace, making it a society truly founded on the self-evident truth that God is sovereign over both nations and individuals.

As we set out to do so, with Saint Thomas More, let us pray the Lord to

“...teach us to bear patiently and gently all injuries and snares treacherously set for us; not to smolder with anger, not to seek revenge, not to give vent to our feelings by hurling back insults, not to find an empty pleasure in tripping up an enemy through some clever trick, but rather to set ourselves against deceitful injury with genuine courage, to conquer evil with good...”¹⁵

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 13-14.

² Saint Thomas More, *The Sadness, the Weariness, the Fear and the Prayer of Christ Before He Was Taken Prisoner: A Commentary on Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 18*. In *The Sadness of Christ and Final Prayers and Benedictions*. Gerard Wegemer, ed. Clarence Miller, trans. (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 1993), 1.

³ In Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki, “Lex Cordis Caritas: American ‘Proposition’ Presumes Sovereignty of God,” *Catholic Times* [September 26, 2010].

⁴ In *ibid.*

⁵ In *ibid.*

⁶ In *ibid.*

⁷ Donald DeMarco, “On Being Virtuous in a Not-So-Virtuous World,” *Lay Witness* [March/April 2012], 14.

⁸ Matthew Cullinan Hoffman, “Australian legislators propose sterilizing mentally ill children without parental consent,” *Life Site News* (March 16, 2012). Available at http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/australian-legislators-propose-sterilizing-disabled-children-without-parent?utm_source=LifeSiteNews.com+Daily+Newsletter&utm_campaign=4809e8cfc2-LifeSiteNews_com_US_Headlines_03_12_2012&utm_medium=email Accessed March 21, 2012. See also Mental Health Bill 2011, 209. Available at http://www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au/Libraries/pdf_docs/Discussion_Draft_for_Mental_Health_Bill_2011_v3.sflb.ashx Accessed March 21, 2012.

⁹ Christine M. Williams, “Mentally Ill Woman Fights Court Ordered Abortion and Sterilization,” *National Catholic Register* (January 31, 2012). Available at <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/mentally-ill-woman-fights-court-ordered-abortion-and-sterilization> Accessed March 21, 2012.

¹⁰ Stephen Adams, “Killing babies no different from abortion, experts say,” *The Telegraph* (February 29, 2012). Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/9113394/Killing-babies-no-different-from-abortion-experts-say.html> Accessed March 21, 2012.

¹¹ Saint Anthony of Padua, Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 6.

¹² Saint Thomas More, *The Sadness of Christ*, 9.

¹³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings* (New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 367.

¹⁴ Saint Thomas More, *The Sadness of Christ*, 16-17.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 72.