

**Keynote Address at the Luncheon following the
Red Mass of the Catholic Diocese of Tulsa**

October 2, 2016

Holy Family Cathedral, Tulsa, Oklahoma

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

S.S.P.: “Striving for *Arête* in the Practice of Law”

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you here for this Red Mass and Luncheon for the legal community of the Diocese of Tulsa as we pray for the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit to guide the work and decisions of our legal professionals and civic officials in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government in your community.

It’s hard for me to believe, but this month marks fifty years since I entered high school seminary. It was a classical education, which included four years of Latin, Greek and Roman mythology, English literature, history, music, math, science and, of course, religion. To show how much times have changed in half a century, one of the worst insults we would use back then against a classmate was to call him a philistine!

The dictionary defines a “philistine” as “a person who is hostile or indifferent to culture and the arts, or who has no understanding of them.” In the Bible, the term “Philistine” means simply a “non-Israelite of the Promised Land” when used in the context of Samson, Saul and David. The most famous Philistine in the Bible was the giant Goliath, whom David slew with slingshot and stone (1 Samuel 17).

In contrast to the derogatory insult, “philistine,” a very positive term that we learned in high school was the word *arête*. *Arête* is a word from the ancient Greeks that expresses the idea of being the best that one can possibly be – in a word: *excellence*. The theme of my homily today is how attorneys and other legal professionals can strive for *arête* – excellence – being the best that they can be in the practice of law. In other words: do not be a philistine, but strive for *arête* – excellence – as ministers of justice.

Greek literature provides us with excellent examples of *arête*, the virtue of excellence in being the best that it is possible to be.

In the *Iliad*, an epic tale emerging from the distant Greek past, it is a term associated with warriors who exemplify bravery, fierceness and physical skill. Characters like Achilles or Hector

represent a nearly perfect realization of humanity in a war-like, tribal society.

In *The Odyssey*, a slightly later epic, *arête* is used to describe Odysseus, who combines the warrior-hero's courage with wit, cunning and resourcefulness. *Arête* is also used to describe Odysseus's wife, Penelope, who demonstrates that even misfortune and sorrow can be suffered with excellence.

And lastly, the Greeks provide us with still another manifestation of *arête*: Socrates, a very new and different kind of Greek hero. Socrates was a real person, a Fifth Century BCE Athenian who has come to symbolize for us the life dedicated to the pursuit of moral and intellectual excellence.¹

Although the Greek notion of *arête* precedes Christianity, we can also say that *arête* pertains to the vocation of all Christians. The goal of Christianity is not excellence in and of itself, but salvation. While we Christians do not seek excellence for its own sake, we are called to excellence in striving for holiness, so that we can reap the fruits of the salvation that Christ has won for us.

In his encyclical letter of December 11, 1925, entitled, *Quas Primas*, Pope Pius XI established the Feast of Christ the King as an annual observance throughout the world with these words, which are still very instructive for us today:

If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth;
if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right

subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, *as instruments of justice unto God.*²

In other words, the Pope was saying that we must let God sanctify all aspects of our lives by letting Him reign in our minds, our wills, our hearts and our bodies. This sanctification must extend to all areas of our lives, including our work. In this regard, St. Josemaria Escrivá wrote about the sanctification of work, saying, “Sanctifying one’s work is no fantastic dream, but the mission of every Christian – yours and mine.”³ The spirituality of the sanctification of work focuses on three areas: sanctifying the work itself, sanctifying ourselves and sanctifying others.

Sanctifying the work itself means that we pay close attention to the quality of our work. We sanctify our work by doing it well. If we cut corners thinking that we can get away with something that no one will notice, we forget that God sees and knows all that we think and say and

do. We may fool others, but we can't fool God. St. Josemaria would ask, "What use is it telling me that so and so is a good son of mine — a good Christian — but a bad shoemaker? If he doesn't try to learn his trade well, or doesn't give his full attention to it, he won't be able to sanctify it or offer it to Our Lord. The sanctification of ordinary work is, as it were, the hinge of true spirituality for people who, like us, have decided to come close to God while being at the same time fully involved in temporal affairs."⁴

When talking about sanctifying ourselves, we recognize, of course, that we do not make ourselves holy by our own efforts, since only God can make us holy. But we can cooperate with God's grace by making room for Him in our lives as we go about our work. Prayer is not limited only to churches, as St. Paul wrote in his Letter to Timothy, "It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument' (1 Timothy: 2:8). We can put this into practice by placing a crucifix or a picture of the Blessed Mother on our desk. Litigators can say a prayer privately or with their clients, if they are so inclined, before arguing a case in court. Judges can ask for divine guidance when faced with a difficult decision. We can thank the Lord when a task is completed.

We also must look at the motivation for what we do. Do we work primarily for fame, calling attention to ourselves through our achievements? Do we work primarily for monetary success or for some higher form of compensation? In the Old Testament, the prophet Amos condemns those who make money at the price of cheating others. Amos scorns those who pretend to be interested in religion while, in reality, all they want to do is make money. Their real interest was in enriching themselves by shortchanging customers, boosting prices or selling inferior merchandise at higher prices. We might ask: do we take Sundays and holydays as a special time to worship God, or is making money more important to us? Are our hearts centered in worship, or do we use religion as a front for another purpose? In giving time to God, are our hearts in our worship or are they centered elsewhere? St. Luke tells us in his Gospel, "You cannot serve both God and money" (Luke 16:13). St. Josemaria reminds us, "You must be careful: don't let your professional success or failure – which will certainly come – make you forget, even for a moment, what the true aim of your work is: the glory of God!"⁵ This is the same motto used by St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Society of Jesus: *Ad*

Maiorem Dei Gloria: for the greater glory of God. This should be the aim of our work.

We are also called to sanctify others through our work. Once again, St. Josemaria said it well: “We have reminded Christians of the wonderful words of Genesis which tell us that God created man so that he might work, and we have concentrated on the example of Christ, who spent most of His life on earth working as a craftsman in a village. We love human work which He chose as His state in life, which He cultivated and sanctified. We see in work, in men’s noble creative toil, not only one of the highest human values, an indispensable means to social progress and to greater justice in the relations between men, but also a sign of God’s Love for His creatures, and of men’s love for each other and for God: we see in work a means of perfection, a way to sanctity.”⁶

The way of sanctity is the path to heaven. By striving for *arête* – excellence – in our everyday work, we grow in grace and reap the fruits of the salvation that Christ has won for us. The test of sanctity is how we live out the word of God that we hear in the Scriptures and how we manifest in our daily lives His loving presence which comes to us in this Eucharist. By putting our words and good intentions into action, through God’s grace we

can indeed reach the highest aspiration of our souls, for the “The Law of the Heart is Love.”

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ S. Snyder, “Arête: The Greek Idea of Excellence” (Des Moines, Iowa: Grand View University), accessed September 17, 2016 at <http://faculty.grandview.edu/ssnyder/470/Arête.html>.

² Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quas Primas*, accessed September 17, 2016, at http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html.

³ St. Josemaria Escrivá, *The Furrow*, 517.

⁴ St. Josemaria Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 61.

⁵ St. Josemaria Escrivá, *The Forge*, 704.

⁶ St. Josemaria Escrivá, *Conversations*, 10.