

**Homily for the Annual Third Circuit Red Mass  
The Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C**

**October 30, 2022**

**Saint Boniface Church  
Edwardsville, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, members of the judiciary, fellow attorneys and practitioners of the legal profession, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good to be here as we gather to celebrate the Annual Third Circuit Red Mass here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. We call this a “Red Mass” because red is the color symbolizing the fire of the Holy Spirit, as we pray that our hearts may be inflamed by the desire to pursue justice and truth in our work as members of the legal profession with the inspiration, guidance, and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

In today’s Gospel, the evangelist St. Luke recounts a scene that takes place in Jericho, where Jesus encounters a man there named Zacchaeus, who is described as a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man. This initial description of Zacchaeus prepares the reader or hearer to dislike him. As a chief tax collector, he had other tax collectors working under him and paying

him part of what they collected from the rank and file. In this naturally corrupt system, the chief tax collectors were frequently very wealthy. Zacchaeus indeed was. For some reason he wants to see Jesus, but the crowd of people prohibits this because Zacchaeus is very short. In almost comic fashion, he runs ahead of the crowd, climbing a sycamore tree and peering down in hopes of seeing Jesus.

Although it was Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus, Jesus sees Zacchaeus first. Immediately, He summons Zacchaeus to come down because Jesus is going to be staying at his house. While this fills Zacchaeus with great joy, the crowd becomes angry and indignant. How could a devout Jew like Jesus even think of staying with a wealthy – and thereby apparently corrupt – chief tax collector? This catering to a public sinner renders Jesus no better than he is in their minds.

When Zacchaeus finally speaks to Jesus, what he says is shocking. He proclaims that he gives half of his possessions to the poor and pays back four times anything he has extorted. In Greek, these verbs, *give* and *repay*, are present active indicative. While they can have a futuristic aspect to them, that is a matter of interpretation. Zacchaeus is either claiming that he had already done these things – and thus is not a sinner – or he will begin to do

them as a sign of repentance. Either way, Jesus proclaims that today salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the chosen people. Jesus has come to save what was lost.

The story of the repentance and conversion of Zacchaeus challenges each of us to ask ourselves: how open am I to being transformed? Can I, like Zacchaeus, acknowledge my own vulnerability, mistakes, and imperfections? Am I willing to “climb a tree” – to go out of my comfort zone to seek out opportunities to be made whole and be reconciled? Am I humble enough to confess my sins to a priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Am I strong enough to admit my weakness? Am I big enough to own my shortcomings? When we can do that, our personal place of weakness becomes the means by which we can be restored to a right relationship with Our Lord and His Church.

In our first reading today, the Book of Wisdom urges everyone to turn to God for wisdom. God created this world for life and salvation. Those who offend God will display true wisdom by humbly repenting their sins and returning to God. As Saint Paul reminds us in his second Letter to the Thessalonians, it is God who brings to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith.

In his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, the Splendor of the Truth, Pope St. John Paul II beautifully expressed the relationship between Jesus and the Law. He wrote: “Jesus brings God’s commandments to fulfillment, particularly the commandment of love of neighbor, by interiorizing their demands and by bringing out their fullest meaning.”

The commandment is interiorized in that it is written on the heart through a new grace. I refer often to my episcopal motto, *Lex cordis caritas*, which means, “The law of the heart is love.” Of course, for the Christian, this love is not a merely human or natural love. It is rather the love of God which, as St. Paul says, “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

God is external to us in that he draws us out of our own ego and selfish desires, but he is internal to us in that he reveals and fulfills our deepest desires. He not only calls us beyond our current state, but also gives us the strength to do so. The ideal of love that He offers is himself, and we grow toward that ideal not by our own striving alone, but through a living relationship with Him.

Returning to the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope St. John Paul goes on to say:

Jesus himself is the living “fulfilment” of the Law inasmuch as he fulfils its authentic meaning by the total gift of himself: He himself becomes a living and personal Law, who invites people to follow him; through the Spirit, He gives the grace to share His own life and love and provides the strength to bear witness to that love in personal choices and actions (cf. *Jn* 13:34–35) (*VS* 15).

Some people today want a Christianity without demands, a Christ who requires nothing of them. But the beauty of Christianity is that God wants to heal and transform us, not merely accept and affirm us as we are.

As practitioners and defenders of the law, we are constantly trying to balance the individual case and the objective demands of the law. Christ himself was at once very demanding and compassionate. He said, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (*Mt* 5:48), and, “Love one another as I have loved you” (*Jn* 13:34). But He also said, “My yoke is easy and my burden light” (*Mt* 11:30). Outside of the context of a loving relationship with Jesus, His teaching sounds impossible and even absurd. But within the context of relationship and discipleship, of sharing Christ’s yoke and Christ’s perspective, the challenge of the Christian life is beautiful and exciting!

Every Eucharist is a foretaste of heaven, giving us a glimpse of what the heavenly banquet of God's love will be like. May this Red Mass strengthen us to take the next step on our faith journey, reaffirming that a good life awaits those who turn to the Lord, as Zacchaeus did.

May God give us this grace. Amen.