

**Homily for the Annual Third Circuit Red Mass  
St. Boniface Church, Edwardsville  
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle C**

**October 26, 2025**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here as we celebrate our Annual Third Circuit Red Mass for legal professionals. There are two statements that seem to be at odds with one another in today's First Reading and Responsorial Psalm. The first: "The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites." The second: "The Lord hears the cry of the poor." But these statements are understood more clearly in the light of today's Gospel. In Our Lord's parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee, under the pretense of giving thanks to God, delighted with pride in his virtue and good deeds. But the tax collector "would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'" This tax collector "went home justified," but not the Pharisee. This is because the Lord heard the cry of the tax collector, poor in spirit and humble before God with a contrite heart, but the Pharisee did not look at himself honestly and admit his shortcomings. The God of Justice,

then, heard the cry of the tax collector, but He did not play favorites with this Pharisee simply because of his virtue and good deeds.

When we look at the world around us, we can unfortunately see very clearly the effects of the dichotomy between pride and humility, central to today's readings. This is especially evident in public discourse, where we see less and less civility as time goes on. As rhetoric becomes increasingly violent, it is not entirely surprising that political violence is on the rise in equal measure. It is becoming more common for various groups to label their ideological opponents as "fascists" or "Nazis," sometimes explicitly calling for political assassinations. Just this happened only a little more than a month ago in Utah, when Charlie Kirk was assassinated while engaging in civil debate with an audience at a college campus.

As attorneys, we have a responsibility to uphold the law. It is no small task in such a polarized world, but it is one that God has called us to undertake in this time by reason of our vocation. Justice Neil Gorsuch, in his book, *A Republic, If You Can Keep It*, emphasizes civility in public discourse as necessary for retaining "a government of and by the people," which is an important part of this vocation. He goes so far as to say that, without civility, civilization itself cannot survive. This is certainly evident

from the etymology of the word “civility,” from the Latin word *civilitas*, a derivative from *civis*, the word for “citizen.” Civility has long been understood to be the manner of speech and behavior required for maintaining peace and harmony amid public debates.

In his book, Justice Gorsuch also speaks of the education of our first President, George Washington, who as a teenager hand copied the *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, a Jesuit work from 1595. He notes that Rule 86 of that work states, “In Disputes, be not So Desirous to Overcome as not to give Liberty to each one to deliver his Opinion.” This is a lesson we should all take to heart. St. Thomas Aquinas describes the sin of contention in his *Summa theologiae* as “to tend against someone,” or a “contrariety of speech,” which, when it denotes “a disclaimer of the truth and an inordinate manner,” is a grave sin. But even if it disavows that which is false, it can still be a venial sin if it is done in an inordinate manner. The rule of civility which the Jesuits put forward in their 16<sup>th</sup> century work follows this moral doctrine well in that it emphasizes the proper manner of debate, to which St. Thomas refers. It is only by listening to our interlocutors that we can understand their opinions

so as to be certain that they are, in fact, in error on a certain point that requires correction.

This is to say that we must have humility when we are engaged in public debates, knowing that we do not know everything about the person with whom we are arguing. It is quite a strong temptation to conclude that, because a person holds an opinion on abortion, contraception, immigration, or any other number of matters that might conflict with Church teaching, therefore they are evil. But we do not know the hearts of others. We are not called to revile and shun, but to correct fraternally, where the circumstances allow. Our Lord sharply rebuked the scribes and Pharisees of His day, but He knew the hearts of men and had authority over them by virtue of His Divinity. Moreover, even though He had this authority over them, Our Lord willingly handed Himself over to them to be killed, as a Sacrifice for the reconciliation of God and man. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, “[H]e humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

If we were to apply today’s Gospel message to this matter of civility in public discourse, we see that the Pharisee, though not engaged in public debate with the tax collector, proudly jumped to conclusions about the tax

collector in an uncivil manner. The tax collector, however, does not respond in anger towards the Pharisee. He simply asks for God's mercy and bears the insult patiently. For this, the God of justice saw to it that the tax collector went home justified.

This forms a sharp contrast to a noteworthy and uncivil exchange in our Nation's history: the Caning of Charles Sumner. In the leadup to the Civil War, tensions rose between the North and the South over the expansion of slavery into colonial territories. Senator Charles Sumner, a lawyer from Massachusetts, had made a particularly inflammatory speech mocking Senator Andrew Butler, a lawyer from South Carolina, for his support of the institution of slavery. Senator Preston Brooks, also a lawyer from South Carolina, and Butler's cousin, confronted Sumner for his speech on the Senate floor and then proceeded to beat Sumner with his cane until unconscious. All of these men, senators and lawyers, fell short of their especially high calling in their respective offices to uphold that civility required for our democratic republic, finally escalating into brutal political violence on the Senate floor.

It is inevitable in public discourse that our honor may be impugned, that we will be subject to suspicions about our motives, harsh criticisms, or

outright attacks on our character. But to retain civility in these times, we must be willing to turn the other cheek at such attacks. As St. Teresa of Kolkata, more popularly known as Mother Teresa, once said, "If you do good, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway." We must be witnesses to the truth, state with sincerity our intentions, and not fixate on the cost to our reputation.

One might ask, though, how does this relate to upholding the law as attorneys? St. Thomas Aquinas defines law as an ordinance of reason for the common good, which is promulgated by one with authority. Two key elements of law, which are commonly missed by positivistic accounts of law, are its form and its end, that is, reason and the common good. Understanding human nature according to the teaching of the Catholic Church, we know that the human person is made in the image and likeness of God, that he is endowed with intelligence and will, which animate his body. Each human person, then, is endowed with a fundamental dignity that naturally demands respect. It is, therefore, reasonable to say that the natural law, that is, the rational creature's participation in the eternal law, demands a minimum level of civility based on these truths. As pertains to the common good, or the good of the political community, this mutual

respect is evidently beneficial for the flourishing of a nation because it encourages the exchange of ideas, which is essential in the process of self-governance.

As attorneys, we have certain professional standards that we are bound to meet concerning civility in the legal profession. Outside of the legal context, these standards may be seen as merely optional courtesies. But this is an inadequate understanding. This law of mutual respect is not just written in the Rules of Professional Conduct, but also written on our hearts, since we are endowed with a human nature, in the image and likeness of God. Following this law written on our hearts is not just beneficial to us on an individual level, but also in our ecclesial and political communities. We cannot hope to have a community where there is respect only for our faction. St. Paul warns the Church at Rome “to watch out for those who create dissensions and obstacles in opposition to the teaching that you learned . . . For such people do not serve our Lord Christ but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the innocent.” The Lord, the God of justice, knows no favorites, and He judges justly and affirms the right. In imitating our Heavenly Father, Who is perfect, we should strive to do likewise, judging justly on the merits of

each argument fully drawn out, affirming what is true, denying what is false, and always with civility.

As I have said before, this is no small task in our circumstances. Since Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden, the whole human race has been inclined towards selfishness and sin, and it is difficult to forgive those who offend us. In the more immediate circumstances, rhetoric is becoming increasingly more violent, even in the wake of the assassination of Charlie Kirk, and notwithstanding calls from politicians to tone down the rhetoric. But this is what we are called to do as Christians and attorneys. In just a few minutes, we will pray together the Our Father, the perfect prayer taught by Our Lord. In this prayer we ask for forgiveness of our sins, on the condition that we have already forgiven those who have sinned against us. Charlie Kirk's widow, Erika Kirk, admirably forgave her husband's assassin at his memorial service, illustrating precisely this point. This does not mean that we should not pursue justice when grave injustice is done. But it does mean that we cannot, as Christians, harbor resentment and hatred for those who persecute us.

Civility is integral to that often forgotten virtue of humility, and without it, we are easily puffed up with pride, like the Pharisee from

today's Gospel. As part of our vocation as attorneys, let us remember that those we disagree with, even those who hate us, are human persons with a natural dignity. Practicing this, when we ourselves finally at the end of our lives go to the God of justice, Who knows no favorites, we will be able to say, with St. Paul, "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith." May we, with the tax collector, have the humility to ask the Lord for mercy.

May God give us this grace. Amen.