



Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota
Homily of Bishop Paul J. Swain

Legislative Day Mass
Ss. Peter & Paul Parish, Pierre
January 29, 2007

For those who do not know me, I am Bishop Paul Swain, now three months Bishop of the Diocese of Sioux Falls, East River. Before I began studying for the priesthood 25 years ago, I was involved in politics and served as legal counsel to one of the governors of Wisconsin. I like to joke that I am still doing penance for that period of my life. I tell you that because in a way I have been on both sides of the street and can empathize somewhat with the challenges you face as Catholics and government officials.

While I have always believed it to be true, now from the outside I can see even more clearly that public service is truly a noble profession. While there are some who are filled with ego and driven by personal advantage, as there is in any profession including my own, most are dedicated men and women who try to represent their constituents well, and who have the public good as an overarching principle. In a day of personal attacks and citizen cynicism about government, we should thank our public servants, elected and appointed, for the sacrifices they, you, make. I do so tonight.

One challenge we face as Catholics is to assure that Gospel values and the teachings of the Church are part of the public dialogue, not just in the halls of the legislature but in all public and private decision making. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: *every institution is inspired, at least implicitly, by a vision of man and his destiny, from which it derives the point of reference for its judgment, its hierarchy of values, its line of conduct. Most societies have formed their institutions in the recognition of a certain pre-eminence of man over things. Only the divinely revealed religion has clearly recognized man's origin and destiny in God, the Creator and Redeemer. The Church invites political authorities to measure their judgments and decisions against this inspired truth about God and man.*

Note it says the Church invites; it does not force, or impose, but rather through bishops and priests as teachers and through the laity who exercise their baptismal call in the public square, the truth that our origin and destiny is in God must be raised and guide our conduct.

The interest of the Church in proclaiming this truth is not to achieve political victory. The interest of the Church is in the salvation of souls, all souls, those who decide political issues and those who must live with the decisions of those who decide. Decisions in government are often a complex balancing of legitimate interests with less noble ones, choices must be made. The question is on what basis they are made, what values guide them.

Without a sense of the spiritual, that our origin and destiny are in God, choices tend to be made for base reasons, such as power or personal advantage. In the Gospel reading Jesus freed a man from life controlling demons, surely a good thing to do. When the town's people found out about it, they begged him to leave out of fear. Fear of what? Some speculate that the loss of the swineherd threatened the economy, they feared for their known livelihood. Others suggest it was fear of change or the unknown. The good done for a person in need perhaps was lost in self focused concern for themselves. They missed that God was among them, their origin and destiny present to them. May that not be us.

There is much restlessness in our society today, a sense that something is not quite right. We sense it from the incivility in the public square and inadequacy of sound bite policy that oversimplifies complex issues. We sense it in the noisiness of the world, the technological control of daily schedules, the coarseness of language, and the extent to which violence is seen as an answer to problems. There is a core or common value that seems to have eroded or be missing. I think it comes with our separation from God, the loss of this innate sense that man's

origin and destiny is in God and not the things of this world. We believers are called to do what we can to offer the antidote to such restlessness, our Lord Jesus Christ and his teaching. We must do so always respectfully, always offered with love. But it is often hard to do so.

In politics and government the roar is great and it is often hard for us to hear the whispering sound of the spiritual that can lift our sights and our expectations. I experienced it personally when I was in government. The sad lives revealed in the pardon files I reviewed, the tough implications that necessary budget restraint had on families and children, the sometimes unfair criticism based on inadequate or wrong information, the personal attacks of those who play gotcha politics revealed how shallow were my spiritual roots. I needed something, someone, more to guide the choices I had to make. It led me to becoming a Catholic and eventually a priest.

It is when we admit our need for God and accept with humility that our origin and destiny is in God that the churning which is inevitably part of the political process can be put into perspective. The governor I served told me that one of the greatest lessons he learned from his father was to ask when he got worked up about something, will this be important 20 years from now? Few issues we consider today will be. The salvation of souls, ours and others, however, will.

When policy decisions are made, there are a number of factors involved: financial ones, is it affordable; bureaucratic ones, how will it be done; political ones, can it be done; and moral ones, should it be done. To answer the latter, should it be done requires a grounding in one's life that reveals a sense of right, of the ought. Pope John Paul the Great reminded us that true freedom is not license, the freedom to do what we want to do, but the freedom to do what we ought to do, what is the right thing to do. People of good will can differ about the financial, bureaucratic and political choices, but what is right should bind us together for the good of all.

The Church offers principles to guide us to the right in her social teachings. They begin with respect for life and the dignity of all persons, summarized as the Gospel of life and the biblical call to justice. These include concern about life and dignity of each person from conception to natural death and the years in between; recognition of the family as the most essential social institution; the right for all persons to have those things necessary to lead decent and healthy lives; the right to productive work, a fair wage and economic opportunity; recognition of the common responsibility to care about and when necessary care for one another especially the poor and vulnerable, to protect families and to build and preserve a just society; and good stewardship of what God has created.

While there may be legitimate debate over how these social teachings are applied in concrete situations, they are guiding principles that can lift us above the base political. They can allow us to assess how well we are living out the commandment to love our neighbor and to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength in whatever walk of life we are privileged to live.

Among my favorite saints is St. Thomas More, declared by Pope John Paul the Great as the patron saint of statesmen and politicians. He was martyred for the faith by King Henry VIII for putting his faith in God and His Church before political expediency. He said, *what does it avail to know that there is a God, which you not only believe by faith, but also know by reason: what does it avail that you know Him if you think little of Him?* By that he meant what good is our belief in God if we do not live it, especially in the hard times. He summarized his view of public service in this way: *my king's servant, but my God's servant first.* May that be us.

Thank you for the sacrifices you make. Know of our prayers as you deal with tough choices. May God give you strength of mind and heart to seek the common good guided by the Gospel of life and the biblical call to justice, always mindful that our origin and destiny are in God.

May Mary, our Mother, and St. Thomas More, patron of statesmen and politicians, pray for us.

