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Homily: The red mass.
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HOMILY

THE RED MASS

ST. MATTHEW'S CATHEDRAL
Washington, D.C.

MOST REV. JAMES S. RAUSCH

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HOMILY

THE RED MASS

It is common in life, when embarking upon a new and important mission, to think in terms of a theme which will give character to our actions. In line with that theme, a motto is chosen which expresses the hopes and aspirations of one's service. This is frequently done by people who enter a career in public life. It has become common among political leaders. It is a tradition among bishops in the Catholic community. Thus, the Archbishop of Washington chose as his theme that of reconciliation among Christians and all humankind with the motto, "Ministry of Reconciliation," a theme and motto of particular significance in our time and especially during this Holy Year of 1975.

When confronted with the challenge nearly two years ago, of choosing a theme and motto, myself, I instinctively thought of the prophet who, in his time, pointed out "the One who is to come," the Messiah, the Light of the World. This prophet came "to prepare the way of the Lord." He claimed nothing more for himself. He did nothing less.

The Gospel this morning alludes to his arrest and imprisonment. Given the political leadership of his time, this end is no surprise. For he was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: make straight the way of the Lord." His formula was doomed to unpopularity. His program was one of rigid self-sacrifice. His promises did not include immediate comfort or opportunities for self-indulgence.

We who are commissioned to a role of leadership in the world today, be it in the civil or ecclesiastical order, are asked to attempt nothing less than was asked of John the Baptist. We, too, are to prepare the way of the Lord. We are to make straight His paths. The challenge is formidable.

The formulas demanded by our time will be unpopular. The program for living in the period ahead will demand a high degree of self-sacrifice. No immediate relief or comfort, no opportunities for self-indulgence can be promised. It is my conviction, however, that a program has been developed, international in scope, which merits the serious attention of all of us who seek to bring the light of Hope into a confused, unstable and dangerous world. This program was not developed by politicians; it addresses itself to the civil order, however. Nor was it developed in this country, but by a group of men gathered together from all corners of the world, with a common interest and a common goal—the good of the human family.

Three months ago, in Rome, at the 1974 Synod, several hundred Catholic bishops from around the world, compelled by the realities surrounding them, examined the question of human rights. When they had drafted a statement, they shared it with Pope Paul. He was deeply impressed and asked that the statement be issued in his name, in union with the bishops of the Synod.

The statement is yet another milestone in the Church's association, at its highest levels, with human liberation and the struggle against injustices. It further elucidates the statement of the 1971 Synod: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of

the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."

To the Church this means that work for justice and human liberation is a part of the task—to prepare the way of the Lord. It is so for all people of good will.

Five principal human rights were highlighted in the Synod's statement, rights that are especially threatened in our time.

First, the Right to Life—our most fundamental and inalienable prerogative. One is reminded of Moses' final prayer to his people, "Choose Life"; this call which echoes through the centuries forms a cornerstone of western civilization and of decent civilization everywhere. Are we, as a society, committed deeply enough to this right? I think not!

Abortion directly attacks this right. Efforts to legalize euthanasia do violence to this right. A culture which is moving toward a commercialized fantasy where a person's life is thought to be exalted by the things he or she can own or consume degrades the meaning of this right. Violence in our country and tolerance of torture abroad, the continuing arms race threaten to negate this right—this *sacred right* to life. Let us recall the words of Simone Weil, "To regard another human being as such is to love."

A second vulnerable human right is the Right to Eat. To proclaim the right to live means we must also proclaim the right to eat, and we must be prepared to do something about it if we can. Should we not see the absurdity of the juxtaposition of a TV newscast which shows the agonized faces of children in the Sahel and Bangladesh, and then shows a pet food commercial about a house cat with a finicky appetite?

We in this country, blessed with the world's most fertile open plains, are the world's largest producers of food. This brings with it an awesome responsibility, one we dare not fail to meet by whatever means are available to us.

The third human right addressed by the Synod involves Socio-Economic Rights. In a world where global patterns of distribution are marked by massive disparities of power and wealth, reconciliation through an examination of the systems which bring about such great disparity is incumbent on all of us who are charged with leadership, for we share the responsibility in this day and time: "To clear Him a straight path. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be leveled. The windings shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth, and all mankind shall see the salvation of God."

The fourth category of human rights addressed by the bishops are those of a Politico-Cultural nature. Individuals have an innate right to take an effective role in shaping their own destinies. Two elements are essential for this—education and civil freedoms. The intellectual capacities of all must be engaged, nourished and developed so that true human growth is possible. I submit, however, that this cannot and will not take place in any society unless moral and ethical values, known to be founded upon good reason, are an essential element in the formation of the human person. This is not a matter of an imposition upon children; it is a matter of opening the doors of reason for them. Passing through these doors, they become richer human beings.

Civil liberties are critical as well. Citizens have a right to participate freely and responsibly in the political processes which are determinative of their lives. Significant progress has been made in this regard in the United States. We must, however, always be on guard against violations of

this right. History, even recent events in our country, proves all too often how fragile it is.

The fifth and final right addressed by the Synod is the Right of Religious Liberty. In the United States, while the right to exercise religious liberty enjoys a constitutional guarantee, the fact of its free exercise is less clear. Church buildings are plentiful across the country. Christian denominationalism, together with a wide spectrum of religious creeds and cultic forms, is a characteristic of American society. What is less obvious is how freely the message of religious groups is proclaimed and practiced in the land. What is almost totally missing today is the application of a religious critique to our society. John the Baptist did not fear condemning idolatrous practices and the unquestioning support of the culture's mores. Dare we, as believers in God, do less?

So much for the five areas of human rights which the Synod defined as the most threatened in the world today. I repeat that they merit the serious attention of all of us who are charged with leadership in our time.

In this regard, I would point to a danger, however. So often we bring good faith to the issues which confront us. As leaders, we appeal to people on the basis of our obligations of mercy and compassion. Today we need, more than ever, to examine the direction our society is taking in terms of justice. This demands that we examine not only our personal lives and how we, as individuals, respond to the needs and rights of our fellow human beings. It requires, as well, that we examine the structures and laws of our society in terms of their responsiveness to the needs and rights of people who live within and under them. There must be in each of us something of the reformer—one who constantly renews himself and, at the same time, brings his best insights into the processes of structural, legal and institutional reform.

We who seek to prepare the way of the Lord, we who claim to be followers of the Lord are reminded of the time Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. Two strands run through this story. We are challenged to perform the compassionate acts of the Samaritan. We must also share the indignation of the one who told the parable. By his selection of characters, Jesus placed relief measures in the context of social structures. He displayed keen critical awareness about the dehumanizing impact structures can have, citing the callous indifference of the cultic ministry toward human suffering. He displayed courage in publicly challenging ingrained prejudices, even suggesting that those considered religious-social “inferiors” are capable of good works. Two strands—mercy and justice—make up the classic Christian parable.

We who prepare the way; we who make straight His paths are called upon today to discover anew the implications of Jesus’ message and to find strategies that will, indeed, bring Light into the darkness of our time.



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