

Red Mass
September 30, 2007

Readings from Scripture:

Genesis 1:26-31

1 John 4: 11-16

John 14: 23-29

Summer, 2002, and I have the joy of being with over a million young people from around the globe, and with Pope John Paul II, at *World Youth Day* in Toronto.

These *World Youth Days* are glorious events, filled with prayer, song, religious formation, sharing of faith, the Eucharist, the sacrament of penance, a lot of just plain fun . . . and, of course, the presence of the Pope.

It's the last full day, and, as other bishops, I gather at a parish church in suburban Toronto with about four hundred young people from English-speaking countries, to give my teaching. We bishops were encouraged to then "open-the-floor" and allow any of our young people to give public testimony about any graces they may have received during the *World Youth Days*. After a pause, a young woman from the back-corner approaches the microphone.

"*World Youth Day* saved my life," she begins. She sure has our attention. "I am twenty-four years old, and have been living on the streets since I was fifteen. I've become an alcoholic, and a heroin addict" -- here she rolls up the sleeves of her blouse to reveal bruises and scabs from the needles -- "and a prostitute to support my habit. I'm dying, and I was about ready to end it all.

The kids from my parish youth group, who have always been nice to me, took me in and cleaned me up, and invited me to come to Toronto with them for *World Youth Day*.

And here I've met an old man who has changed my life. This old man told me he loved me. Oh, a lot of old men tell me they love me, for fifteen minutes. This old man meant it. He told me God loved me, and that I'm actually God's work of art. He told me that the God who made all the stars actually knows my name. He told me God enjoys me so much He wants me to spend eternity with Him, and that He sent His Son, Jesus, to help me get there. This old man told me I actually share God's own life deep inside of me. This old man makes sense. This old man got through to me. I now want to live."

The "old man" of course, was the Venerable Servant of God, John Paul the Great.

Ideas have consequences, don't they? Convictions have corollaries. And God's Word today, from Genesis and St. John, enchants us with one of the most profound ideas, one of the most noble convictions, of all: that we are made in God's image and likeness, that God actually abides in us, and we in Him, that deep in our being is the very breath of the divine.

I suggest that anyone who thinks this grand idea, this conviction, this doctrine, to be of no consequence might get in touch with that young woman from Toronto.

This stunning belief -- that we actually hold in our heart the spark of the divine -- while dramatic in Jewish and Christian revelation, is also part of other great world creeds.

As a matter of fact, this gripping conviction, while explicit in revealed religion, is really evident in the very nature of man. So we have the towering intellects of civilization, philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Cicero, themselves unaware of the God of Abraham, the Father of Jesus, still write convincingly that human beings hold within them the light of eternity, a destiny beyond this life, a supernatural brand-mark, an exalted identity which elevates them qualitatively above the rest of creation. True, they never viewed Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, depicting creation, but they would surely nod in agreement at the inspired words of Genesis in this morning's first Scripture reading,

"God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God He created man, male and female He created them . . . and God saw that this was good."

And they would beam at the chant of the psalmist,

"What is man that you should spare even a thought for him,
the son of Man that you should care for him?
Yet, you have made him little less than a god,
You have crowned him with glory and splendor."

This noble tenet -- that human nature reflects God's own nature, that God looks at us and smiles with delight, that a human being shares in God's own life and is destined for eternity -- this soaring conviction which resonates in the human heart, that was made explicit in God's Word, which animated the thinking of our most normative philosophers, and is a constant of Judeo-Christian humanism, this grand idea has particularly cogent consequences for the Republic we call home, for the country we love.

We citizens of the United States of America are so gratefully and humbly aware that our country was founded on this very conviction, that part of our birthright, as Ronald Reagan would often quote John Winthrop, is "to be a city set on a hill," where respect for the pinnacle of God's creation, the human being, would be the premier characteristic.

Without arrogance, but with more a sense of challenge, John Adams would write, "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence," or, as he penned on the eve of the revolution, "Let us see delineated before us the true *map of man*. Let us hear the dignity of his nature, and the noble rank he holds among the works of God."

Yes, our second president expressed it well: "The true *map of man*," a map engraved in human reason and natural law, a map showing the terrain of a person reflecting the divine, hosting the indwelling of God, possessing by his very nature certain rights our *Declaration of Independence* calls inalienable, a map whose paths can only be walked with a reverence for life, a respect for others, a grasp of virtue, and a responsible civility. It is a cherished part of our American heritage, then, to rejoice in a mutually enriching alliance between religion, morality, and democracy, since, as de Tocqueville observed, "Respect for the laws of God and

man is the best way of remaining free, and liberty is the best means of remaining upright and religious." No wonder the bishops of the Catholic Church of the United States, meeting in council in Baltimore in 1884, could write, "We consider the establishment of our nation, the shaping of its liberties and laws, as a work of special Providence, its framers building better than they knew, the Almighty's hand guiding them."

Listen to what Pope John Paul II had to say about this American experiment, establishing a Republic based upon support for the human rights innate in one made in God's image and likeness:

The Founding Fathers of the United States asserted their claim to freedom and independence on the basis of certain "self-evident" truths about the human person, truths which could be discerned in human nature built into it by "nature's God." Thus they meant to bring into being . . . a great experiment in what George Washington called "ordered liberty."

. . . The continuing success of American democracy depends on the degree to which each new generation . . . makes its own the moral truths on which the Founding Fathers staked the future of your Republic.

Yes, "ideas have consequences," and perhaps a way to view our participation in this annual Red Mass in our nation's capital is as our humble prayer for the red-hot fire of the Holy Spirit, bringing the jurists, legislators, and executives of our government the wisdom to recognize that we are indeed made in God's image, that deep in our being is the life of God, and then to give them the courage to judge, legislate, and administer based on the consequences of that conviction: the innate dignity and inviolability of every human life, and the cultivation of a society of virtue to support that belief.

As I say to young people being confirmed, think how differently you would treat yourselves -- always with dignity and respect -- if you believed you were a vessel of the divine, and think how you would treat others if you held that they were, too.

That's the grand American project: to live out the consequences of such an exalted Judeo-Christian humanism. As Emerson suggested, "Let not man so much guard his dignity, as let his dignity guide him."

So this soaring idea has consequences, and has throughout our history: in the quest for independence itself, in the formation of a Republic, in abolition and civil rights, in the waging of war and promotion of peace, in care for the other, in the strengthening of marriage and family, and in the promotion of a culture of life.

Maybe we're here because we realistically acknowledge that, in a world where we're tempted to act like animals instead of like God's icon, in a culture where life itself can be treated as a commodity, seen as a means to an end, or as an inconvenience when tiny or infirm, in a society where rights are reduced to whatever we have the urge to do instead of what we ought to do in a civil society, we need all the wisdom and fortitude God can give us, as civic leaders, magistrates, as ordinary citizens, to achieve, as Cardinal James Gibbons exhorted, "liberty without license, authority without despotism."

Our prayer this morning is then not all that different from the one John Carroll, our first bishop, wrote for Catholic American's to pray for their civil leaders:

We pray Thee, O almighty and eternal God! Who through Jesus Christ hast revealed Thy glory to all nations . . .

We pray Thee, O God of might, wisdom, and justice! Through Whom authority is rightly administered, laws are enacted, and judgment decreed, assist with Thy holy spirit of counsel and fortitude the President of the United States, that his administration may be conducted in righteousness, and be eminently useful to Thy people over whom he presides; by encouraging due respect for virtue and religion; by a faithful execution of the laws in justice and mercy; and by restraining vice and immorality. Let the light of Thy divine wisdom direct the deliberations of Congress, and shine forth in all the proceedings and laws framed for our rule and government, so that they may tend to the preservation of peace, the promotion of national happiness, the increase of industry, sobriety, and useful knowledge; and may perpetuate to us the blessing of equal liberty.

We pray for all judges, magistrates, and other officers who are appointed to guard our political welfare, that they maybe enabled, by Thy powerful protection, to discharge the duties of their respective stations with honesty and ability.

We recommend likewise, to Thy unbounded mercy, all our brethren and fellow citizens throughout the United States, that they may be blessed in the knowledge and sanctified in the observance of Thy most holy law; that they may be preserved in union, and in that peace which the world can not give; and after enjoying the blessings of this life, be admitted to those which are eternal. Through Christ, Our Lord. Amen

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