

Red Mass Homily, 2020 – October 6, 2020
By Father John McCartney

Today we come together to offer our annual “Red Mass,” for those who serve in the legal profession. We ask for God’s blessing upon all present and especially that the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord, will be bestowed upon you in your personal and in your professional lives.

At this Red Mass we find ourselves in very unusual times. The year 2020 has not turned out as any of us would have expected. The year began with the impeachment and trial of the President. Immediately afterwards, we entered the pandemic which would grip our nation and our world, shutting down society all around the globe. For months now, political, racial and economic tensions have resulted in civil unrest throughout a great portion of our nation. Wildfires are now devastating the American West. And we find ourselves in the midst of a contentious presidential election with a Supreme Court nomination suddenly thrown in for good measure. If this were a novel, it would be considered too improbable to be published.

Sometimes, when the way forward seems daunting and unclear, it is good to look back, to remember where we have come from, to get perspective on where we are, and to see where we are going.

Two-hundred and thirty-two years ago, in the year 1788, this country was in the midst of a presidential election. It was our first, at the beginning of the new national government. Interestingly, voting occurred over a period of one month, from December 15th to January 10th of the new year.

George Washington was, of course, unanimously elected President, and John Adams was elected Vice-President, according to the Constitutional provisions then in place.

In a nation of 3 million people, only 1.8% cast votes. You might be surprised to learn that free blacks were able to vote in four northern states and women were actually allowed to vote in the State of New Jersey. There were no political parties in that first election.

Of the thirteen original colonies, only ten states participated in the election. North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution, and New York failed to choose its electors on time and so was ineligible to participate in the presidential election ... why are we not surprised?

President Washington took the oath of office in the capital of the new country, New York City, on April 30, 1789. Within the first months of his term, the new Congress passed the Constitutional Amendments which would later be known as the Bill of Rights.

The first Congress also passed the Judiciary Act of 1789, setting the number of United States Supreme Court Justices at six, and establishing the federal circuit courts and district courts. Washington nominated all six Supreme Court Justices, beginning with Chief Justice John Jay of New York. They were all confirmed.

During his presidency, Washington appointed a total of three Chief Justices and eight Associate Justices, more than any other president in history. He also appointed a total of twenty-eight district court judges before leaving office, comprising the entire federal judiciary.

Serving in the new government were among the most famous and respected American names: Madison, Hamilton, Monroe, Ellsworth, Gerry, Lee and Carroll. Several years earlier, Benjamin Franklin described the delegates at the start of the Constitutional Convention (many of whom would go on to serve in the first government) by saying: “We have here at present what the French call ‘an assembly of notables.’” Thomas Jefferson described the framers as “an assembly of demigods.”

In the 232 years since our government began, we have looked back over our national story many times and in many different ways. There have been times when we have worshipped those figures of our past as demigods, and there have been other times when we have torn down those individuals both figuratively and literally. There is something in human nature which loves to build a pedestal and then to topple it.

And it is precisely here that the Catholic Church can offer a helpful word. We certainly know a thing or two about statues of figures from the past. In every Catholic Church you have ever set foot in, you have seen statues and images of saints. We do not, as is sometimes alleged, worship the saints, but we do venerate them. And that brings us to a most important question for our purposes here today: what does it mean to venerate a saint?

The word “venerate” comes from the Latin verb *venerare*, meaning “to regard with reverence or respect.” The reason the Church canonizes saints is so that they may be examples to those in the present of how others were able to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the past. Those who look upon the statues of the saints and see lives of serene perfection and an unattainable ideal, could not be more wrong.

The saints are the most eclectic group imaginable. They lived at different times and in different places; they were of different races and spoke different languages; they were men, and women, and even children; they were rich and poor; scholars and the uneducated; some were simple and some were complicated. But the one common attribute they all shared, was that they were sinners. We often overlook that most important point. They were all sinners.

You see, a saint is not an extraordinary person. A saint is an ordinary person who has been touched by extraordinary grace. But even that is not enough for them to be transformed from sinner to saint. They must first cooperate with the gift of grace that God gives them. Some saints started out as very great sinners indeed, and so had to cooperate all the more. The reason there are not more saints in the world is that so many sinners reject the grace that God offers them.

The English journalist and convert G.K. Chesterton understood this truth. He once wrote about the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes who carried a lamp about with him stating that he was looking for an honest man. Chesterton said:

The error of Diogenes lay in the fact that he omitted to notice that every man is both an honest man and a dishonest man. Diogenes looked for his honest man inside every crypt and cavern, but he never thought of looking inside the thief. And that is where the Founder of Christianity found the honest man; He found him on a gibbet and promised him Paradise.

—G.K. Chesterton: *Charles Dickens*, Chap. 1

How true that is. The world approaches this in precisely the wrong way. The world finds a person, declares him or her to be a secular saint, and then immediately sets about to try to prove that person to

be a sinner. Whereas the Church begins by rightly declaring everyone a sinner, and then searches out the saints among them. And time and again, they are generally found in the most unlikely of persons.

This is where the Catholic Church can assist in the current national debate. In the Church, the saints are figures of our Catholic family story and of our Church's history. We venerate them, that is, we give them respect as our ancestors and teachers. We do not assume that they were always perfect, that they never committed a sin or that they always did the right thing. We place statues of them in our churches not as an unattainable ideal, but as a practical reminder. We look at their images and recall the lives they lived on earth. Those statues, with their plaster limbs, marbled eyes and pious expressions, call us to remember the real men and women of true flesh and blood, who struggled, and suffered, who prayed and fought, who failed and persisted, and ultimately were transformed by the grace of God.

The saints speak to us from their place in eternal life: "God did it for me, He will do it for you; do not be afraid, just say yes, and keep saying yes, in spite of all obstacles, difficulties and sufferings, there is only one true obstacle in your path: yourself."

And what is true for the Church is true in a similar way in society. This is why statues of figures from our history in our public parks and squares and buildings are valuable. They remind us of our national family story. They remind of who we were and where we have been. They are not demigods to be worshiped. They were real people of flesh and blood, and they did great things that changed our country and our world, but they were not perfect. They committed sins and they made mistakes. They were right and they were wrong, some were good and some were bad. They remind of better times and of darker times. By their silent witness they encourage us to do great things in the present and to avoid the mistakes of the past.

If we try to erase or cancel our history, we will never learn its lessons and we may even be condemned to repeat it.

So here we are, in the closing months of the year 2020. It is a year filled with images that will ever be burned into our memories. And, since the way forward seems daunting and unclear, we must look back to remember where we have come from, to get perspective on where we are, and to see where we are going. We recall that first election, more than two centuries ago, and those who gave us our nation, our government and our system of laws. The past is the past; it cannot be changed even if those who made it wanted to change it. We ignore it only at our peril. The only thing that we can do is to remember it, accept it, learn from it, and use it to make a better future.