

Homily at the Red Mass
Diocese of Phoenix
Monday, January 28, 2002
Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch
Bishop of St. Petersburg

Bishop O'Brien, I am honored by your invitation to be present with you this evening in the same Basilica where last I came with Pope John Paul II slightly more than fourteen years ago. In my home in St. Petersburg there is a picture taken by a photographer of the Holy Father kneeling and praying in the front of the choir loft with that same magnificent stained glass window behind him. It is a daily reminder to me of what I then and now believed to have been the best of his ten stops in the United States.

No homilist on such an occasion this year can avoid the consequences of September 11th. It was a supreme moment of failure for the rule of law and decency in civilized society and its consequences are being felt in every State House and many of the courts throughout our nation. Past atrocities against humanity at the time seemed so far away from our shores. Pogroms, gulags, concentration camps – points of focus for tyranny and lawlessness were other nations' and other peoples' challenges. Still, in the name of humanity, our young women and men went to war to rid the world of such tyranny and to allow sisters and brothers to live in freedom from fear. We sent people to war but not since the mid-19th century has war come to us until September 11th. And as so often in the past, evil came cloaked in religious garb, for religious reason, because the "law of God (Allah)" demanded it.

In this new context, then, those whose solemn duty it is to uphold the constitutions of the United States and the State of Arizona find themselves this year confronting new challenges in addition to the unrelenting demands of the past. I hold all public officials in the highest esteem for your vocation and calling to serve in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government are rooted in a common desire to serve the cause of justice. Permit me then, in the context of faith and sacred scripture to offer three brief reflections on public service in these times:

If we wish to draw a distinction between ourselves and the evil forces active today in the world, we must ask what we are doing for the most defenseless of people among us. Before the time of Christ, the Jewish people had a rather simple yardstick by which they measured commitment to God and to God's law. They simply checked to see what was being done for widows and orphans. Widows and orphans became then the pre-Christian era prototype of persons who were by accident of personal history deprived of a voice and a

stake in full participation of the society in which they lived. They were seen to be defenseless and the noblest aspiration of the best of their creed and culture was to see to their care and well being.

Shortly after Christ's Ascension into heaven, the early Church seeing that the apostles and episcopacy and presbyters did not have enough time to care for this segment of society created a new role of service called the diaconate to particularly care for widows and orphans in the new covenant.

Today many in society would identify the most defenseless in society no longer as widows and orphans but rather the unborn, the illegal, the migrant, the homeless, the hungry, the medically deprived. The challenge for our society is to care for this broad category of humanity which has little voice in our land; who do not vote or do not have the right to vote; who have no advocates other than women and men like yourselves and perhaps, please God, Church people united in the defense of all.

Last week in my own state capital, Tallahassee, the legislature convened for its annual two-month session. We always travel to Tallahassee, neither as easily reached or as warmly hospitable as Phoenix for a state capital, to celebrate the opening of the legislative year with our own Red Mass. On the plane up and back, in the streets of the city, in the corridors of the State House, every interest group known to humankind was likely present or represented by someone else. But other than our Catholic bishops and people of our faith who joined us, I found few there to speak on behalf of a living wage for Florida's vast migrant population. I found few there that would take up the cause of the lonely and the forgotten. I found few there arguing for better treatment of the illegal, acknowledging, as I realistically must the almost awesome challenge of appropriately protecting our borders. I pray and trust that you never lose sight of these people – they have faces and those faces are made in the image and likeness of God whether they are brown, red, black or white. They are the faces the Lord is likely to show us on judgment day when he reminds us of the good that we have done and the good we have failed to do.

In the post 9-11 world, the economy presents real challenges for all of us and the mere provision of essential services, much less their expansion, is going to be a struggle in my state and I suspect here as well. Leaders of the Church and leaders of the state must do all in our power not to lose sight of the fact that we often are the only voice the defenseless might have.

My second reflection comes from Robert Bolt's wonderful play on St. Thomas More, **A Man for All Seasons**. You may recall that moment when More says to his son-in-law Wil, I think, that two things are important in life: "to do the right thing and to do it for the right reason." The two are inseparable in

public life, and I might add in the life of any Church person. The "right thing" can often be elusive. Too often we wish to do the "politic" thing or we might wish to pursue the path of least resistance in our public lives. Bishops, like U.S. Supreme Court Justices enjoy the advantage, I guess, of lifetime appointments. We need not stand the test of re-election or re-appointment. So in raising up this principle of Thomas More, I wish to acknowledge that much of the pressure of public life is absent from my own. But to do the right thing and to do it for the right reason is a significant challenge today.

Only those people who understand right from wrong will ultimately achieve the defeat of the purveyors of terror and fear. Beginning with the passengers of United Flight 93 over the skies of western Pennsylvania, reaching the courageous and noble women and men of New York's fire and police department, Americans united with their elected leaders slowly and carefully planned an appropriate response to a horrific crime.

If Muslim extremists think they can win the day by invoking the name and favor of God to inflict evil, how much more can humanity accomplish when it responds with the right response and for the right reason. As leaders of this state, you have the mandate and the power to craft a vision of a more perfect society where respect for human life, the equitable application of justice, and the principals of law take precedence over callousness, evil, fear and terror.

In our cynical world with the constant media second-guessing, integrity and honesty are too often devalued in our public officials and I lament this for most women and men I know in public life do try both to do the right thing and for the right reason.

Finally, I offer you the words of the Old Testament prophet Micah as the absolute best guideline I have ever heard for public service in any day: act justly, love constantly, and walk humbly before the Lord. Acting justly means a conscientious effort to apply the law fairly. Loving constantly means crafting laws that serve the good of all. Walking humbly means recognizing every waking and breathing moment that the power the electorate has shared with you ultimately comes from God and is on loan to all who assume the responsibility of civil service in our legislatures, councils, courts, and executive offices.

Gospel values for the Christian illuminates the path to peace. The Jewish scripture proves a map for establishing a pathway from the creator to the created. And the Koran gives its adherents a manner of living in peace with one's neighbors, which allows no room for Jihad in the name of God or any living person. All three traditional sources of guidance and inspiration are built on the three-fold foundation of justice, love and mercy and humility.

If my privilege to speak to you this evening were given to either a rabbi or an Imam, the message would be the same:

Our religious traditions uniformly require that you give voice to the aspirations of the voiceless and defenseless; that you do the right think and for the right reason; that you act justly, love constantly, and walk humbly.

May the Spirit of God give you wisdom during these challenging times and may the rule of law reign supreme in our nation and in our world.

