

**Homily for the Red Mass of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the
Catholic Bar Association**

**Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis
St. Louis, Missouri**

October 6, 2019

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good to be with you as we gather here to celebrate the annual Red Mass for the Archdiocese of Saint Louis. This year we also welcome members of the Catholic Bar Association as they have been meeting in St. Louis for their annual conference this weekend.

For nearly 800 years, the Red Mass has brought together government officials and legal professionals to implore the Holy Spirit to guide your work. Its name derives from the red vestments worn by the celebrants, symbolizing how the Holy Spirit fills our hearts, just as a fire fills a hearth. My prayer today is that we leave here ablaze with the love of God.

Few cities, and few cathedrals, are as fitting for this Mass as this one. They are named for a leader, Saint Louis IX, who listened to the Holy Spirit throughout his life. Saint Louis held fast to the faith at a time when many in

his position refused to do so. As we heard in today's first reading from the Prophet Joel, the Lord promised, I will send out my spirit upon all flesh," and the Holy Spirit certainly helped Saint Louis to remain steadfast in the Catholic faith. And so at this Red Mass, as we pray to the Holy Spirit to guide us, let us also ask for the intercession of your patron saint.

As I begin, I thank Archbishop Carlson for the invitation to address this distinguished gathering. Now, this is not my first Red Mass. Nor do I suspect it is the first for many, if not all, of you. For those of you who have been around this block, I am all but certain that you have heard Red Mass homilies about Saint Thomas More.

This makes sense. Thomas More is the easy choice for a Red Mass because he is the patron saint of lawyers and politicians, and a model of Christian leadership for every public servant. I am sure that each of you is familiar with his story. If you are not, I urge you to go home and watch the Oscar award winning movie, *A Man for All Seasons*. Please wait until I'm done with my homily, though.

However, I did not come here to talk about Saint Thomas More. Admittedly, I could do worse, given that he is my patron saint and the man after whom I was named. Instead, I will focus on my other patron saint, and the second half of my baptismal name. He was a contemporary of Thomas More, and like his more famous counterpart, this man is also a model for every Catholic public servant. His name is Saint John Fisher.

John Fisher may seem like an odd choice at first glance. Unlike Thomas More, he was a cleric, not a statesman or lawyer. Yet in his life, we nonetheless see lessons worth learning for everyone in a position of authority. Indeed, Saint John Fisher shows us the true nature of leadership. He is therefore worth studying and imitating by all the leaders of our own day and age.

Leadership is something that has been near to my heart for many years. After I became a priest, I obtained a fellowship with a group named Leadership Greater Chicago. More recently I took several courses on the topic when I pursued my MBA at the University of Notre Dame. Ever since, I have been a student of leadership, which led me to John Fisher.

Like Thomas More, John Fisher lived and died during England's changeover from Catholicism to Protestantism. He served as the Bishop of Rochester, where, coincidentally, I recently said Mass at his old Cathedral. Also like Thomas More, John Fisher refused to assent to Henry VIII's divorce and declaration of himself as the head of the Church. He stayed true to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. And finally, like Thomas More, John Fisher lost his life for his steadfast stand. He joined the company of saints through the martyr's door. Fortunately for you, the lessons that I hope to impart today stem more from John Fisher's life than his death.

When it comes to this Saint, the most interesting source that I have ever encountered is one that none of you have ever heard of -- hopefully. I say hopefully because it is nothing like the accessible, enjoyable movie that tells the story of Thomas More's life. In fact, it is the polar opposite of *A Man For All Seasons*. It is an article I found in a little-known periodical, *The Catholic Social Science Review*, entitled: "Canonized Leadership: A Contemporary

Leadership Study of Saint John Fisher.”¹ Again, please don’t all rush out to read it right now.

The article’s authors undertook a unique study of John Fisher’s life. They analyzed his actions in light of the most prominent secular leadership paradigm, which is generally known as the “Five Exemplary Practices.” They also looked at his life through the prism of four Catholic leadership principles. This approach led them to an important conclusion: Saint John Fisher is an exemplar of both secular *and* spiritual leadership.

Consider the secular side of things. While I could focus on all five of the practices discussed in the study, let me focus on the first, and perhaps the most important. It is to “Model the Way” -- which is precisely what Saint John Fisher did. Throughout his life, he showed the path for others to follow. And not only did he set the example; he also clarified the values that guided his actions -- the values taught by the Catholic Church.

¹ Fr. Ross Chamberland, O.F.M. and Guillermo Montes, “Canonized Leadership: A Contemporary Leadership Study of Saint John Fisher, Scholar, Bishop, and Martyr,” *The Catholic Social Science Review* 23 (2018): 237-249.

In his day, John Fisher was renowned as a man of “holiness, learning, prudence, and... zeal.” He stood strong in the face of challenge and controversy, especially when King Henry VIII undercut the authority of the Church and its teaching on marriage. He also worked tirelessly to sway others to see the truth of the matter. He knew that he had to do the hard work of rallying others to see the truth, even though it would have been easier to stay silent.

In that respect, John Fisher did what we heard in today’s scripture passage from St. John’s Gospel. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Sure enough, John Fisher showed his love for the Lord by keeping His commandments. His writing and speeches inspired many of his peers in England to follow his lead and denounce the evil practices of the day. Future reformers, including Saint Charles Borromeo in Italy, also looked to him for inspiration.

The point is clear: At a time when so many others backed away from the faith, Saint John Fisher resolutely modeled the way, in both word and

deed. He showed that true leadership exemplifies and explains in equal measure. It is a powerful lesson for the leaders of today.

Suffice it to say, John Fisher embodied the other four secular leadership traits, as well. Remember, these are the practices that are usually applied by analysts and consultants to the best members of your professions. They are the means to becoming the most effective lawyers, judges, lawmakers, executives, and public servants of all stripes. And yet, in John Fisher's life, we see that these means can also be applied to Christian ends. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "authority is exercised legitimately if it is committed to the common good of society" (CCC 1921). Saint John Fisher proved the truth of these words before they were ever written.

It is worth asking why. Why, like Saint Thomas More, was John Fisher able to pursue the common good, and to lead others toward it, when so many other so-called leaders failed? The answer lies not in the secular definition of leadership, but rather in the spiritual.

The analysis of John Fisher's life also showed that his life was infused with the defining characteristics of *Christian* leadership. He stood strong against the winds of his day because he stood on a rock that could not be moved.

Once again, I could focus on all the dimensions of spiritual leadership discussed in the study, but in the interest of time, I will focus on just one: Heroic Courage.

The truth of the matter is that leadership is tough. It confronts you with hard choices and often leads to harsh consequences. John Fisher certainly knew this. He faced a King and a culture that rejected the truth and all who adhered to it. And yet, he refused to back down from what he knew was right. It would have been easier to give up the fight and go along with the flow -- but that is not the nature of leadership. True leaders take a stand, regardless of the cost. Saint John Fisher did just that.

Now, I admit: Heroic courage is not something we can easily summon. But God, in his infinite mercy, has offered us help. The Sacraments, especially Penance and Holy Communion, are a bottomless well of grace

that constantly brings forth courage. They re-align us and remind us of who we are and what we aspire to be, giving us the strength to choose right over wrong and good over evil. Frequent contact with the Sacraments, therefore, is essential for all Catholic lawyers and public servants who wish to hold fast to the faith amidst the storms of our time. As we heard in the second reading, we have been “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and it is this Spirit that gives us strength.

John Fisher embodied that strength. In his life, we see that secular leadership and spiritual leadership are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. It is a lesson for all who hold elected office, shape public policy, or practice law. You are called to be leaders in your fields. So, too, are you called to be leaders of faith. Indeed, when faith fills your daily work, it gives a new and fuller meaning to everything you do. Leadership is meant to have a destination -- a place where you, and those who follow you, intend to go. Imagine if that destination is informed by the truth and infused by the Holy Spirit.

This is not something that our culture counsels you to do. Modern society demands that you choose either the secular or the spiritual, and never mix the two. Yet we should not see this as a question of either/or. It is both/and. By living out your faith in your daily work, how much better will you be able to pursue the common good? Conversely, what kind of leader will you be if you ignore your faith and rely on your own strength alone? As Holy Scripture reminds us: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”

Saint John Fisher knew the answer to this question. So did Saint Thomas More. They were leaders who led well -- who had the courage to point others toward the truth and to pursue it themselves, inspiring others to do the same. As we celebrate this Red Mass, let us remember that you are called to do the same. As members of government and legal professionals, you are called to walk in their footsteps and follow their example, for they knew that they served a higher power and a greater good.

How you accomplish this will differ for each of you, given your varied roles and responsibilities. But the ultimate effects will be the same. The

common good will be promoted. The dignity of the human person will be respected. You will lead for the benefit of society, and to the glory of God.

On this Red Mass, we ask: May God give us this grace. Amen.