

Bishop Jaime Soto  
Red Mass Homily  
Oct. 8, 2008

*Given October 8, 2008 at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament at the annual Red Mass celebrated for attorneys, judges, elected and appointed officials and all those working in the legal system or involved in the process of government in the five-county Sacramento region.*

Paul's words to Peter today in the first reading appear disrespectful, even insubordinate (Gal. 2.1-2, 7-14). Was this the proper manner of addressing the first Pope? Paul challenges Peter for distancing himself at table from the non-Jewish Christians. Peter had given in to pressure from other Jewish members not to "mix" with the non-Jewish "unclean" Christians. Paul stood firm on his convictions that faith in Jesus was the source of justification, for Jews as well as non-Jews. It was not right to discriminate among those who shared the same faith and have been saved by the same Lord Jesus.

But old habits die hard. The ways and customs of generations do not easily surrender to the new reality brought into being by the person of Jesus. In a manner of speaking, Paul was applying the contemporary maxim, "What would Jesus do?" More than challenge custom and habit, Paul was also challenging the religious laws of his time. Those who had criticized Peter for "mixing" with non-Jews probably made forceful use of the "rule of law" argument. But Paul recognized a new way and a new law, a better way and a better law, in the manners and ways of Jesus. In the letter to the Galatians, he makes a persuasive argument for this new grace-filled insight, this new law of freedom found through faith in the Lord Jesus.

The controversy of the early Church, revealed in the first reading today from Paul's letter to Galatians, speaks to the challenges faced by American society today; challenges that many of you here debate and argue in the exercise of your duty to seek justice and tranquility through the exercise of law. This has never been an easy task. It was not then, for Paul and Simon Peter, nor is it now.

Since its inception America has been a place to which may have come, some running from fear, others seeking opportunity. In one moment during the year 1776 a set of grave circumstances governed by providence brought together an assembly of representatives from the various colonies who boldly proposed forming a new union based upon a new social contract. They challenged the customs as well as the “rule of law” of their time to forge a new society. That contract was founded upon the common belief that certain truths were self-evident? “. . . that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The insight that was affirmed and signed in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776 by that band of revolutionaries came from the recognition of a sacred trust between the creator and his children. The events leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence were removed from mere accident or unforeseen coincidence. There was a common recognition of the sacred duty that was before them to forge a new society based upon self-evident as well as sacred truths. What began with great uncertainty, trepidation, controversy, and even violence later gained an eloquence that rings with profound awe and gravity as insights became practice, and repeated practice became habit, and habit began to give shape to a new law and a new order.

It behooves us to renew that same grateful recognition of the sacred trust which is ours. The blessings of liberty and the bounty of opportunities we enjoy as a nation are not the result of mere accident or a necessary consequence of history. God’s wise providence has blessed us. Like Paul and Simon Peter in the first reading and every generation of Americans before us we must choose to accept this sacred trust that binds us to one another and to the creator who has brought us together. We do not own this heritage. We are its stewards for this time and place. We can not squander this precious legacy in vain desires or distorted notions of freedom for its own sake. Too many sacrifices have been made and are still being made to think that freedom is only intended for one’s own pleasure or for one’s own gain. God has endowed us with liberty so that we could be free to love and to seek our heart’s true desire. Freedom and liberty are ultimately sacred gifts because they enable us to give ourselves freely and so return to God the love he has so generously given to us.

The sacred trust between one another and our creator is the fundamental insight. It is the religious nature of the covenant that gave Paul the boldness with which to challenge Peter as well as many members of the religious community of his time. It gave the motley group of patriots the courage to publish a Declaration of Independence in 1776. It inspired the undaunted Abraham Lincoln to write the Emancipation Proclamation. Time and time again, this sacred trust has pushed us forward as nation, a people to make even more certain “ . . . that all are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

But this insight is itself the fruit of habit and custom. It is learned, cultivated, and communicated to others. This insight draws its strength and clarity from the timely and relentless practice of reverence; reverence for the creator, and reverence for the grace of the creator in each of His creatures. It is reverence that makes self-evident the dignity and destiny of each son and daughter of God. When the practice and habit of reverence is lost then the self-evident becomes obscure. When we lose the practice of reverence then we cease to do what Jesus did, and why he did it. We lose sight of the sacred trust and covenant by which God so loved the world that He sent His only Son (Jn. 3.16). All other habits and laws begin to lose their grounding and their meaning.

What was so self-evident to the forgers of independence has been put into question by many people and many of the same institutions that rose from those initial struggles to build this nation. That all persons are created equal, and that life is an inalienable right are being challenged or obscured. The meaning of happiness and its true attainment has been distorted. Much of this is the result of a demeaning of liberty. Freedom has become an end in itself. To be free means to be disengaged, disinterested, and unencumbered by obligation or responsibility. This devious notion of liberty leads us from the freedom to love to the fear of love. Many fear of giving oneself for a greater good because they cannot recognize a greater good than themselves. For these all else seems too obscure or too relative to risk one's own life.

We follow in the footsteps of Paul and Simon Peter to this sacred place. Renewing the reverential practices of our Catholic tradition, we rest our hearts and our souls on the stone of this altar believing as we do that Jesus is the one who takes us to the heavenly throne and entwines us into that sacred trust between the Creator and his children. He has loved us freely and gives of himself eagerly so that we might know the true meaning of human freedom and learn to love like the divine creator. Let us give ourselves again to this sacred trust and ask the Lord Jesus to make us worthy of this sacred covenant of love given in freedom. This is the true habit of the human heart. This is the law that truly sets us free.