

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

August 30, 2020

**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

116 Theodore St.

Scranton, PA 18508

Matthew 16:21-27

When Jesus asks in our Gospel today, “What shall a man give in return for his life?” he is making clear to us that God cannot be bribed. In the same way that possession of the whole world is not enough to gain entry into heaven, so offering the whole of our goods to God does not obligate the Lord to give us eternal salvation. There is no such thing as “buying the stairway to heaven,” as Robert Plant would have it, and there is no way that we can make God owe us anything.

Our entry into the heavenly realm is secured rather by taking up our cross and following Jesus. Just as the road to the resurrection passed through Mt. Calvary, so those of us who hope to gain eternal life before the Throne of Grace must make sacrifices akin to our Lord’s crucifixion. As the blood of the martyrs teaches us, “whoever loses his life for [Christ’s] sake will find it.” It is precisely through one’s self-oblation that one is united to the Divine Will, not through the acquisition of all the world’s goods. Giving ourselves away is how we gain heaven, which is more than we can either desire or ever deserve.

If giving ourselves away, even to the point of dying for Jesus, is the way we gain heaven, why then does the Church recognize the inalienable right to own things, the right to private property? If the things of this world cannot gain us entry to God’s eternal Kingdom, why does God’s Kingdom on earth, the Catholic Church, insist that man’s right to property can never be abrogated? In other words, what is the basis for the Church’s rejection of the precepts of socialism?

In this era, when the proponents of socialism advance their cause so brazenly (and to our detriment the purveyors of socialism gain more adherents every day), it is eminently important that every Catholic be able to articulate coherently and concisely why the guarantor of human freedom is the right to private property. To this end, I will explain today why ownership of things on earth and entrance into heaven are not at odds with each other, why for most people the ownership of private property can actually facilitate our eternal destiny.

To begin, please know that if you’d like to read a detailed account of the Church’s position on this matter, you should consult *Rerum Novarum*, the 1891 encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, which begins with a defense of private property, an eloquent assault against the socialists which obtains to this day and for all time. It is this encyclical that helped our local hero, John Mitchell, the founder of the modern labor movement and whose statue graces Courthouse Square downtown, be reconciled to Holy Mother Church. Born into a Methodist family from Illinois, he died in New York, but he is buried here in Scranton at Cathedral Cemetery.

Rerum Novarum makes clear that the right to private property is based in justice, the virtue that requires everybody receive what is due him. Thus, if a person works, according to both the natural and moral law, he should expect to receive the due reward of his labor. It is manifestly unjust to take from someone, though he has done no wrong, that which by the sweat of his brow he has earned. As we saw from the sad experience of the Soviet Empire, when people can expect no reward for the work they have done, they slack off and often stop working altogether. Just as slavery is to steal from a man his labor, so to take from someone what he has duly earned is to turn a man into a slave. Both our Civil War in the

1860s and the Fall of the Soviet Empire in 1991 derived from dissatisfaction with this unjust arrangement, the wholesale theft of the fruit of man's labor.

Man acquires and accumulates private property in order that he may provide for his own needs, both contemporary and future. It is good to have food and shelter for a day, but even better that we should have a farm and a house by which we can ensure we will be fed and sheltered tomorrow and the next day. Since it is both the right and the responsibility of man to provide for himself, a duty given to man by God in the Garden of Eden, the right to private property is inviolable because this right enables him to fulfill his duty before God. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that this right can be thoroughly exercised, to protect man's ability to do his duty. It is never the state's responsibility to assume that duty for him, to treat him as if he were incapable or disallowed from pursuing this purpose. Private property protects man's inherent dignity by facilitating his ability to secure his own needs, keeping in mind, of course, that all we receive by our labor comes ultimately from God.

Such security by which man's needs are met is not selfish, since the basic unit of any society is not the individual but the family. When a man is free to provide for his own needs, he is free also to provide for those dependent upon him, his wife and his children. Private property protects the integrity of the family, for it impedes unjust intrusion into the life of the family. A father with property cannot be swayed by material deprivations or inducements to assent to persuasions contrary to the good of his family, for he is a slave to no one. Those without property, however, are easily enslaved, for their cooperation can readily be bought or coerced by the promise of a meal or the threat that sustenance will be withheld. If we consider the examples of England under Henry VIII, the French Revolution, or the Spanish Civil War, we see states coerced their citizens – and destroyed their families – by unlawfully taking private property. So, to protect one's family, one must protect his property, by which he sustains his dependents and defends his God-given dignity.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that those socialists who today forcibly separate people from their private property are also avowedly committed to the destruction of the nuclear family. One injustice is inextricably linked to the other. In order to take a man's children, the socialists must first take his property. And if the socialist masters have both of these, his family and his property, they have the power to induce him to make compromises by which he may well lose his soul, as well. In being deprived of his property, a man's capacity to love is impeded, the capacity to love not just his family, but also his God, to whom he owes his very life.

Hence, we see how the right to private property actually aids us to embrace and live out God's will for our lives. Justice and mercy originate in God, and in human fraternity they are exercised first at home. When we learn those virtues within the context of a stable home life—one in which everyone receives his due because we are free to provide for ourselves – the children learn how to give themselves away. Indeed, they see their parents do so every day of their lives. Such children are not numb to the needs of the vulnerable. Rather, they see those needs more clearly. They see that more than even food, shelter, and clothing, we need to love and be loved, beginning with Him by whose Love our lives were purchased, and by whose Love we are yet sustained.

People raised in such an environment don't seek to take others' things; they seek instead to share what they have, that others might not be in want. Having seen their parents bear their cross after Jesus, the children will take what they inherit after their parents have passed from this life, and then they will do the same thing their parents did for them. Thus, they secure their souls and those of their children. This handing down of private property has been the basis of Western civilization for the past 1,500 years, since the fall of the Roman Empire. This civilization we enjoy and from which we benefit has been facilitated by the right to private property, an integral means by which we love our neighbors as ourselves, bear our cross after Jesus, and thus, "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).