

BISHOP RICE HOMILY
MASS FOR THE DEFENSE OF MARRIAGE
31 MAY 2015

Good evening to all of you. In the name of Archbishop Carlson, I welcome you to the Cathedral Basilica. I'm so glad to be here at the Cathedral Basilica, and it's not a Confirmation! I did my 150th Confirmation this morning at the College Church, and it's also the end of the season, so it's good to be at the Cathedral and it's not Confirmation anymore.

But we are here for a very serious reason: we're praying for the defense of marriage. In the month of June, it is expected that the Supreme Court will make a decision regarding the definition of marriage, a definition which has held through through millennia of marriage between a man and a woman, and we pray that they will not fall into arrogance and decide that it is within their capability to redefine something that they actually have no business redefining. But there's also that fear that they will, that they will forego the natural law, that they will forego the experience of millennia and decide that they know best.

What will happen? Well, history tells us what will happen, beginning in chapter 6 of Acts of the Apostles. We're told of the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr. Drawing upon the Hebrew scriptures, Stephen outlined his arguments for the divinity of Christ, the issue back then, and he was stoned to death for it. And, in a twist of fate, we are told that Saul--who would later become the apostle Paul, the great missionary--that Saul himself consented to this stoning.

We're told in chapter 8 of Acts that there broke out a severe persecution of the Church in Jerusalem. Saul, trying to destroy the Church, entered house after house, dragging out men and women, handing them over to imprisonment. It is good to remember that the Church has been persecuted since its existence 2,000 years ago. And, since then, the continued existence of the Church has been totally the work of the Holy Spirit. If there were no Holy Spirit guiding the Church, protecting the Church, defending the Church, She would have ceased long ago. But the truth is, the Church now reaches into every corner of the world and continues to flourish.

In February of the year 303, Diocletian, Maximus and others decreed legislation against Christians. Newly-built churches were destroyed, and the scriptures were burned. Under Valerian, Christians were not allowed to do what we are doing at this very moment. It was outlawed to gather for worship of Almighty God. Under Galerius, those who refused to sacrifice to the Pagan gods were burned alive. And by the summer of the year 303, all bishops and priests were arrested. And at the height of the persecution, all citizens had to prove their loyalty to the state by offering sacrifice to the Pagan gods or face persecution. That was the early Church.

When you think about it, governments have come and gone. Presidents have been elected and un-elected. Kings and queens have taken the throne, and they have been dethroned. And throughout the history of the Church, many governments have tried their best to destroy the Church. One of the first acts of legislation in Nazi Germany was to close Catholic schools, because they understood "Get the minds of the young people first, and that will change the whole course of the country." And so they closed Catholic schools, and they imprisoned priests and nuns. And at one time, Dachau concentration camp held the largest number of priests in the world. It was called "the largest monastery." There were 2,720 priests held in Dachau concentration camp, but the Church survived.

During the French Revolution, priests were required to take an oath of fidelity, loyalty, to the Revolution. And when they would not, the clergy were either deported or executed. And eventually, churches were closed and the Mass again--they always go after the Mass--the Mass was outlawed. And all priests and those who harbored them were executed. But the Church survived.

There are countless other examples of persecution from without-end scandals and heresies from within, but through them all, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church survived.

I remember being in Ireland, I think around the year 2007, we had had just enough time to visit the beautiful shrine in Knock. It wasn't expected, but all of a sudden we found ourselves there ten minutes before the noon Mass on a Sunday, and we were able to concelebrate Mass. The priest who offered the Mass had to have been 90 years old. He looked at any moment like he was going to fall over, dead. He needed help to get up to the altar; he needed help to get up to the chair; he needed help to get to the pulpit. But when he got to the pulpit, he told the most rousing story of his boyhood: in his little village, when the British confiscated the church, threw out the Blessed Sacrament, and housed their horses in the church, and the Church survived.

St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict, and Pope Francis have all called for a new spreading of the Gospel, a new evangelization, but in reality, it is as old as the beginnings of the Church, because in every generation, we have had to propose the Gospel anew. And in every generation, there have been different issues. And the issues of today belong to us to stand strong on. And today's Gospel gives me great comfort, that whatever the Supreme Court decides in the month of June, the Church will survive, because today's Gospel gives us that beautiful promise, that our Lord will be with us until the end of the ages.

I came across a beautiful paper from a Dr. Thomas Farr; he's a senior fellow at Georgetown. He recently gave an address to the annual conference of diocesan attorneys. Yes, diocese have attorneys; we all do, unfortunately. And in discussing the freedom of religion in marriage, he made three points.

First, a robust system of religious liberty is indispensable to human dignity. What does that mean? It means we have a right to worship the way we choose; we have a right to believe what we believe, and no government can take that away.

His second point: that religious liberty is in a global crisis, and the consequences of this for the United States and the Church are staggering. And so the defense of marriage, the Church's right and Her understanding of the seven Sacraments and how we define our seven Sacraments, we have a right to that, but it's in a crisis right now.

And third, it's the perfect storm right now between atheism, fundamentalism, and intolerance, so that we should not take it for granted, religious freedom and the freedom to celebrate the sacraments the way we desire.

We continue to oppose health care initiatives that regard contraception and abortifacents. We now face the redefinition of marriage. Could it be that those who believe in the natural law of marriage for the good of the couple and the openness to children--could it be that some day, we could be outlaws? Could I be arrested in the near future for publicly stating the teachings of the Church that marriage is between a man and a woman? Even if you don't believe it, I have a right to say it.

Those who believe in marriage, will we be imprisoned in the near future like the early Church? We don't know. That's why we pray for the Supreme Court and the decisions that they have to make.

And if you don't care about these issues, let me give you a quote from Martin Niemoller, the Lutheran pastor during World War II Germany. He said, "First, they came for the socialists, but I did not speak out. I wasn't a socialist. Then, they came for the unionists. I didn't belong to a union, so I didn't speak out. Then, they came for the Jews, but I wasn't a Jew, so I didn't speak out. Then, they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out."

That's why it's important: religious freedom, the right to celebrate our sacraments the way we believe. And we must pray for the Supreme Court. And always, let us trust in the last line of the Gospel: that whatever happens, the Lord will be with us until the end of the ages.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.