

## Mark 4:21- 25, Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas

January 28th, 2021

Our readings today are very appropriate for this special “Gold Mass” we are celebrating on the Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas for the scientists of our community. Our first reading speaks of wisdom and how precious and valuable wisdom is “because her radiance never ceases.” The Catechism tells us wisdom is a spiritual gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables one to know the purpose and plan of God. I like to think of wisdom as seeing the world the way God sees it. Our Gospel reading speaks about what we do with the gifts we have been given; do we set our gifts on a lampstand in order to bring the light of Christ to the world, or do we hide that light under the bed?

When we couple these two readings together, we get a very challenging message for those of us who love and seek the gift of wisdom. The measure you use to share your gift is the measure with which you will be judged. The way of the kingdom of God is to receive a gift and then to turn and share that gift with others, to pass the gift on. Bishop Robert Barron describes this dynamic as the “loop of grace”, and when we participate in the loop of grace, by giving away the gift we were freely given and which we freely received, we find that even more of the gift is given to us to continue to participate in that loop of grace. We get into spiritual trouble when we reject this dynamic exchange and try, in our fallen human selfishness, to possess that gift, to keep it for ourselves. As our reading today tells us, “even more what he has will be taken away.”

As I was preparing to speak to you today, I went and looked at the website for the Society of Catholic Scientists, and I noted that the mission of your society is to “foster fellowship among Catholic scientists and to witness to the harmony of faith and reason.” Certainly, fellowship among Catholic scientists is extremely helpful; we all need the encouragement and inspiration of

other Christians in our walk of faith, but it would be especially important for you scientists who work among so many who don't believe in God. Your website goes on to say, "The Society hopes to answer the call of Pope St. John Paul II that, 'members of the Church who are active scientists' be of service to those who are attempting to 'integrate' the worlds of science and religion in their own intellectual and spiritual lives." This is the aspect of your society's mission that I would like to speak to today.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am not a scientist, although I do respond to a lot of work orders from people who are. I am a mechanical engineer who works at the Los Alamos Neutron Science Center (LANSCE) and I have worked there since coming to Los Alamos in 1997. Our group is responsible for the operation and maintenance of the mechanical beamline systems along the accelerator and beam transport lines leading out to the five experimental areas at LANSCE. During my time here at LANL, I have had the privilege to work with some outstanding and exemplary scientists, and I have come to have tremendous respect for the knowledge, abilities, and exceptional work ethic needed to be a successful research scientist at this institution. All that said, it is extremely important for you to keep in mind those abilities that have made you successful at Los Alamos National Laboratory; the ability to grasp difficult and complicated abstract concepts; the ability to be able to intuit and uncover critical insights into difficult problems, and not the least of which is the ability to work hard, these are all gifts you have been given, and with these great gifts, as our Lord reminds us in today's Gospel, comes great responsibility.

I am not quite sure when Pope St. John Paul II made his request to Catholic scientists to be of service to those trying to integrate science and religion into their lives, but it had to be more than 16 years ago, and it is clear to me that the need for this service is greater now than ever. A great resource I have found to be extremely helpful and well-spoken on many of the issues

associated with faith and science is Bishop Barron and I highly recommend his writing and his video commentary in this area. He has a special interest in these issues because of his interest in evangelizing the “Nones”. I am not speaking about evangelizing religious sisters; I am speaking of those people who respond to the question in the Pew Research Center Survey that asks, “What is your religious affiliation?” by saying “None.” The “Nones” have no religious affiliation, they don’t belong to any Church. It turns out the “Nones” are the fastest growing “religion” in the country, representing approximately 26% of American adults and that number is up from 17% in 2009. When you look at only those adults aged 18 to 30, the number of Nones goes up to almost 40%. Many of the people that make up the Nones are coming from our Catholic Church as well as from other Christian denominations. One of the primary reasons people give for moving from Christianity to “no affiliation” is the perceived incompatibility between faith and science.

Further exacerbating this problem is the philosophical idea of “Scientific Materialism”. Dr. Stephen Barr, the president of your society, in his book “The Believing Scientist”, describes this as the belief, “that nothing exists except matter, or as Democritus puts it, ‘atoms and the void.’” Dr. Barr goes on to say, “For many, scientific materialism is not a bloodless philosophy but a passionately held ideology. Indeed, it is the ideology of a great part of the scientific world. Its adherents see science as having a mission that goes beyond the mere investigation of nature or the discovery of physical laws. That mission is to free mankind from superstition in all its forms, and especially in the form of religious belief.”

That means that not only do we have the problem that many people cannot reconcile the tenants of their faith with modern science, but we also have militant scientists actively disparaging faith in God as being ignorant and superstitious. Society of Catholic Scientists you have your work cut out for you! I say that because I came across a statement in one of Dr. Barr’s essays in First Things where he was lauding the work of three Physicists; Peter Hodgson, Stanley

Jaki, and Pierre Duhem. These men in addition to being physicists were also philosophers and historians of science whose work showed that modern science developed throughout the Middle Ages specifically within the Judeo-Christian cultural framework and not despite it. The point that Dr. Barr makes in this essay that I want to highlight is, “All agreed with Duhem’s quotation that ‘in order to speak of questions where science and Catholic theology touch one another, one must have done ten to fifteen years of study in the pure sciences.’ Hodgson added, ‘It is also highly desirable that one be philosophically and theologically literate, and that is a much more difficult criterion to satisfy.’” Dr. Barr goes on to say, “The laborers in this part of the vineyard are rather few.” It is very encouraging to me, that many people here in this Church tonight, do meet that lofty criteria and are both willing and able to engage in this great service to our Church.

When Chris asked me to give this homily my first thought was what could I possibly add to the discussion on faith and science that much smarter people than myself haven’t already said. And I will indeed leave to you those great questions; about String Theory the Big Bang and the origin of the universe; about evolution, randomness, probability, and the ensoulment of humanity; about quantum mechanics’ relationship to human free will; and about what does reductionism mean for the dignity of the human person? What I can give you tonight is encouragement and hope as you enter into these challenging discussions with colleagues, friends, and I hope with the young people in our Church who are seeking answers to these difficult questions. Catholic scientists, what you have to remember, as you engage in this work, is that you are bringing the light of Christ to those who don’t know Him, and the more that I have thought and learned about St. Augustine’s insight, that the human heart is made for God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Him, the more I believe that even the hardest of atheist hearts have within them this same desire. Paraphrasing Fr. Richard Veras, “The human heart is infinite

need, and that need is only matched by the God who is infinite being.” Into this infinite human desire, there is no more powerful, no more compelling message of forgiveness and salvation than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. My brother and sister Catholic scientists, the contrast could not be any starker and the stakes could not be any higher. The famous atheist Richard Dawkins honestly summed up the emptiness and hopelessness inherent in atheism, when he said, “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.” In the face of this philosophy of meaninglessness and hopelessness the Christian needs to counter that message with the incredibly meaningful and hopeful message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; with the message that the God who created the universe, He whose essence is the same as His existence, He who is the great “I AM”, He who is the author of the story, actually wrote Himself into the story, entering into time and space, to free us from our slavery to sin and to liberate us from the fear of death and to ultimately bring us into the family of God where we are destined to share in the everlasting life and joy of the Holy Trinity. There is no greater hope for the human person than hope in Jesus Christ. Catholic scientists your Church needs your gifts.