



(photo by John Simitz, The A.D. Times)

The Most Reverend **DAVID O'CONNELL, D.D.**

Bishop of Trenton, NJ

*Red Mass – October 9, 2011 – St. Mary's Parish
(Kutztown, PA – Diocese of Allentown)*

If you believe in God, you will have no difficulty understanding the idea of law.

If you believe that God created the world, you will have no difficulty understanding the purpose of law.

If you believe that God has redeemed the world, you will have no difficulty understanding the necessity of law.

Our belief in God and his creation – our faith – reveals an inherent, integral, even intimate connection between God and law as it has come to exist in the world he created and redeemed.

God is the starting point ... and God is our goal. Law is a means, an instrument, a pathway to freedom and truth. Or, it should be.

Bishop Barres, distinguished members of the government, members of the judiciary and bar, reverend clergy, sisters and brothers in Christ.

The Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures tells us that in the beginning there was nothing except God. It is hard for our minds to conceive this.

Many theories and explanations have been offered – some rooted in faith, others rooted in science – but all of them lead us back to the simple fact that at some point in the mystery of eternity, something happened and the world came to be.

That something was God's intervention, God's action, God's word. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland and darkness covered the abyss ... and God said: Let there be light!" (Genesis 1:1-3). And it was God who created something out of nothing.

We believe in God. Such belief is part of the fabric of this great country of ours. "In God we trust" is a national motto.

We believe that God created the world. We claim "One nation under God" as we pledge our allegiance.

We believe that God redeemed the world. “So help me God” is the usual way we end our promises, our commitments and our oaths of office. We believe and as Americans we possess the freedom to believe, the freedom of religion.

If we follow the Book of Genesis, as the church understands it, we get the sense that God’s first and most noble action was to create order: something out of nothing.

Light out of darkness. Order out of chaos. God created. And the result was law, something that “lights” and “orders” our world, our lives. It should guarantee, support and protect our freedom and our rights.

The eminent jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. understood this notion well when he wrote that your task as lawyers “is to see the relation between your particular fact and the whole frame of the universe.”

The “whole frame of the universe” is God’s idea, God’s creation, God’s action, God himself. Your “particular fact” as lawyers is God’s as well.

As you engage your profession as lawyers, you continue God’s idea, his creative work, his noble action in the universe, in the world that is both your frame of reference and the context of your particular fact. A noble profession, a noble task and a noble, profound responsibility. Let no one doubt it.

We live in a larger world, however, where belief in God cannot always be presumed, where faith often finds not only closed minds but closed hearts as well. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that God’s actions – that God himself – is subject to great doubt and significant scrutiny. Because of that, true religious freedom as it has been honored in our law is at risk.

Perhaps God exists. Perhaps God created the world, but the chasm between God and humanity seems to grow wider and deeper the further we get from that first moment of his creation and from the eventual moment of his redemption.

God disappears, belief evaporates, faith vanishes and law no longer supports religious freedom. We all lose.

In a world without belief, it is easy for law, for justice to lose its place. In a world that does not permit or, worse, that works against belief, law and justice have no place.

I fear that this is the kind of world we are creating where the freedom of belief – the freedom of religion – are assaulted by the very laws we make and by the very way we make them. The founders of this nation and the framers of the constitution recognized God the Creator as the source of certain rights. Religious liberty was the foundational principle that gave rise to our existence in the first place. What has changed since then? As a nation, we have lost our way. It is up to us to find it again.

In the world that God created there were no poor, no captives, no blind, no oppressed. In the world that we “recreated,” there are so many who fit those descriptions: those whose lives are at risk born and unborn; healthy and ill; innocent and guilty; educated or ignorant; like us or different.

The law can be, should be and must be the means that moves us from how we currently live to how we ought to live. And true justice demands that the law never prevent us from discovering how we ought to live in God by restricting our religious freedom. Justice is our responsibility.

There are those who say that our religious beliefs should not influence our decision making in the public square. And so family and marriage, and the right to life and the sustaining of life and human dignity, and respect for conscience, are dismissed as purely religious notions.

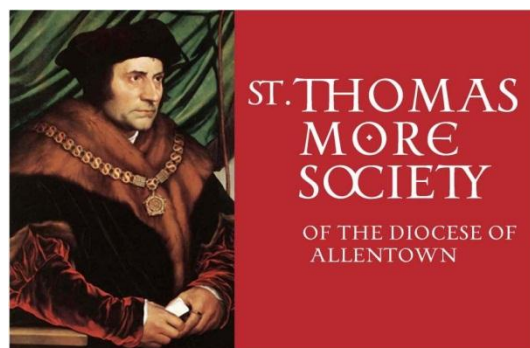
What we believe and hold most deeply in our hearts and conscience must influence our decision making – not because they are religious, but because they are true. And truth should not be dismissed simply because it is embraced by our religion. And law should not avoid or evade truth simply because a religious faith upholds and proclaims it as such.

On this day when we reflect upon law, and its significance and purpose for our world, many ideas and definitions probably come to mind. I like the one written by St. Robert Bellarmine, a simple thought that conveys a profound truth. “Law,” he said, “is simply charity, a love that binds and obliges us.” As lawyers, then, let that insight be for us and for those who seek justice at our hands.

If we truly believe in God, “let there be light,” the light that faith and conscience and freedom provide.

If we believe that God created the world, let there be justice, so that every human right might be seen as rooted in him.

And if we believe that it is possible to be redeemed through God’s light and justice, let there be a love that binds and obliges us all one to another as we live our lives in the freedom of the Lord.



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