



HOMILY: Red Mass

Men and Women of the Law as Architects of Hope

Given by Robert Cardinal McElroy, Archbishop of Washington

Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, Washington, DC

Sunday, October 5, 2025 at 9:00 a.m.

It is a great joy and personal privilege to celebrate this Mass with you as the new term of our Supreme Court begins. My own respect and love for the legal profession arose from observing my father serve in private practice for almost forty years with integrity, wisdom and compassion. Through his eyes I witnessed the beauty, the struggles, the transformative grace and the hard moral dilemmas that come with a life-long devotion to the law that never loses sight of the men and women who are affected by it.

It is with prayer for each of you that I begin this reflection – prayer that God will constantly raise your eyes to wisdom, compassion and judgment; that you may be consoled when you feel torn or adrift, that in the deepest moments of achievement and satisfaction you might understand that God is at work in you; and that the nobility of your calling will sustain you through every adversity.

On August ninth of this year, I celebrated Mass at Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki on the eightieth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb. The Cathedral, which was one of the greatest Catholic churches in Asia, lay at the very center of the targeted area in that Catholic city and was almost totally destroyed. The human devastation was horrific and unimaginable. Every element of the social fabric disintegrated in a tsunami of mourning, numbness, despair and an inability to see any pathway forward for those who had survived.

Yet on Christmas eve, less than five months later, the Catholic community of Nagasaki gathered together amidst the ruins of their Cathedral, celebrated Mass and dedicated themselves to rebuilding their lives and that great cathedral as a symbol of invincible hope.

Hope. It is the conviction that in our moments of greatest suffering in our lives God will stand by us always. It represents an overwhelming impulse in the depths of the human heart that does not obscure the suffering of the present or past, but finds in them chapters of grace and, with courage, a foundation for a new future.

Every twenty-five years the Catholic Church celebrates a jubilee year to emblazon a particular element of God's grace within the human heart and in society as a whole. In this year of 2025, that theme is hope. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that hope orients us to the order of justice, peace and charity, leading us away from selfishness. "it keeps the human person from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal (joy)."

Hope is not the belief that everything always comes out all right. That is merely optimism. True Christian hope is rooted in the intimate and caring accompaniment of our God, walking with us. In the Agony in the Garden and Christ's moment of feeling abandoned on the Cross, we see revealed the wonderful dimension of the Passion and Cross that bonds us to a God who has known every form of human suffering – physical, spiritual and emotional. It is in this bond that we find the foundation for the hope described in today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah:

They that find hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar as with eagles' wings. They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.

As this Red Mass invites us to reflect upon the realities of suffering and hope in our personal lives, so it calls us to recognize the landscape of adversity and hope that faces us in our nation today. And it invites us to do so precisely by affirming the mandate that men and women of the law are architects of hope by reason of their vocation.

The law occupies a uniquely foundational position within American society. Our country is bound together not principally by ties of blood or a common history, but by the aspirations of our Founders which have been lived out with glory and with failure and revision throughout the past two hundred fifty years. Thus, our identity as Americans and our source of patriotism is aspirational, and to a great degree those aspirations are reflected in our law. It is because of this reality that women and men of the law have a particular and pivotal role in being signs and creators of hope in our nation.

Three questions in particular point to vital issues in which men and women of the law can be builders of hope at this moment.

The first is the crisis in institutional life in our nation. Our age has witnessed a dramatic collapse of faith in institutions of all kinds. The benign examination of institutional life that is vital for societal health has turned into a corrosive instinct to attack every major institution. As a consequence, the legitimacy of our very institutional infrastructure is at stake.

Catholic social teaching underscores that healthy governmental, cultural, religious and economic institutions are essential for the accomplishment of the common good and the service for all in the world in which we live. Two elements are vital to accomplishing such health today. The first is the rejection of the hyper-criticism toward institutional life which is undermining the fundamental ability of institutions in government and society to serve the common good. The second is the reinvigoration of the countervailing forces in our government and society that constrain harmful accretions of power and delimit their proper scope. As men and women of the law, you lie at the heart of this two-fold conversation within our nation. By engaging constructively, dialogically and charitably in this conversation, you can help to identify a pathway forward for us all. You can bring hope.

A second area where you can contribute as architects of hope is in the collapse of political dialogue within our nation and the growth of political violence. We have witnessed the assassination of Charlie Kirk and the assault upon the Capitol. Both mark the progression from civil dialogue to uncivil dialogue to force and fear. It is certainly true that political violence has been a part of our history as a nation, and that political dialogue has often been confrontational.

But we live at a moment in which politics is tribal, not dialogical, and where party label has become a short-hand for world-view on the most volatile topics in our national life. The result is explosive, within politics, family life, and friendships.

As students of the law, as leaders in the law, whether as judges or legislators or public advocates or as counsel, you are by that commitment privileged and obligated to raise the plane of our political and social discussion. No group in our society has a greater capacity to remold our political discourse. No group has a deeper calling to bring hope.

Finally, today's Gospel points us toward a third major area of reflection where you as women and men of the law can bring great hope:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to proclaim a year of favor to the Lord."

The Scriptures point unswervingly to the need to keep the poor and the powerless at the forefront of our thoughts and actions. For in every social and economic system they are disproportionately shut out from the rights and privileges that are vital to their well-being. This includes our legal system. Whether they are those accused of crimes or those who are victims of crimes, or those who have been injured and seek civil redress, systemic inequalities in our legal system cry out for reform.

Each of you has the capacity to be an architect of hope in this arena. For you who are law students, commit in your lives to personally making substantive and caring pro-bono work a part of your life and career. For you who are prosecutors, often with overwhelming caseloads, see the humanity deeply in both those you are prosecuting and those who were victimized. For legislators, provide the resources and processes necessary to make the legal rights of the poor and middle class more than theoretical. For defense attorneys, sustain hope in your own lives even when you confront injustice or

indifference. For our judges, shapers of the laws that affect so many so profoundly, let the humanity and thirst for justice that led you to the law sustain and guide you, so that hope is reflected and created by your actions. And for you who are teachers of the law, lift the minds and hearts of your students always to the noble and the compassionate, rather than the easy or expedient.

As women and men of the law, you participate in the mission of God's justice that Jesus announces in today's Gospel. May you take up challenge to be true architects of hope, in this land, at this moment, in God's grace.

