

Law Day - May 1, 2008



Remarks on the reception of the
Liberty Bell Award

from the
BAR ASSOCIATION OF LEHIGH COUNTY



Your Honors, Members of the Bar, & Staff of the Association:

I am truly honored to receive your Liberty Bell Award on this, the fiftieth anniversary of Law Day in the USA. And I thank Judge Ford, not only for his gracious introduction but for the twenty years of our friendly acquaintance.

I have to admit, the phone call informing me of this award left me speechless – which is no small feat considering I preach and teach for a living! Later, when I learned that the previous recipients of this award have all been affiliated with the legal profession, I realized even more so what an honor this is – and so I wondered even more why you selected me!

The celebration of Law Day, we know, came about as a way “to contrast the United States’ reliance on the rule of law with the Soviet Union’s rule by force.”¹ Our way of life, constructed on admiration and respect for the law, would stand defiantly against the encroaching dictatorship of Communism.

Considering this ideal a half-century later, it’s clear that the oppressive regime is gone. What may not be as obvious, however, is the new threat emerging – a “dictatorship of relativism,”² which endangers us not by a force from without but by a confusion within, in the thinking that freedom is primarily a matter of individual interest or personal

¹ “The Original Creation and Future Impact of Law Day: Law Empowering People to Be Free from 1958 to the New Millennium” - address by Charles S. Rhyne, former President of the American Bar Association and Originator of the Idea of Law Day USA, at the Thomas Jefferson Building, Washington (DC), on May 1, 2000.

² Phrase coined by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in his homily during the Mass *pro eligendo summo pontifice*, 4/18/2005, prior to the conclave in which he was elected Pope Benedict XVI.

preference. Law Day reminds us that the law is not a governmental imposition but a collective choice; it highlights freedom not as the unfettered pursuit of self-interest, but as the responsible power to do what is right and just, and to do so for the benefit of all. Thus, even after fifty years, promoting freedom under the law still offers the best hope for safeguarding our American culture.

Freedom and hope, law and life – these themes were also given prominent attention during the recent visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States. In his first words at the White House, he reminded us that “From the dawn of the Republic, America’s quest for freedom has been guided by the conviction that the principles governing political and social life are intimately linked to a moral order ...”³ In his final sermon at Yankee Stadium, he described “true freedom” as being “found only in the self-surrender which is part of the mystery of love.”⁴ So perceptive is the pope regarding our American culture, that he probably should have been wearing pinstripes as he spoke in that Bronx cathedral!

Freedom and hope, law and life – from my vantage point, these are the paths that form the intersection of faith and culture. Rightly do we celebrate the law as the language of our social cohesion, for the law is “torah” and teacher and guide. Deeper than the codified consequences of a legislative decision or the proffered opinions of judicial interpretation, the law of which I speak is written in our hearts; there it serves as a grammar for living well that is inscribed in the very nature of who we are as free and responsible persons.⁵

As I see it, freedom under the law is a profoundly religious ideal, despite its rightful independence from any religious affiliation. For what is religion, if not a conviction regarding that which is ultimately important to us? Faith reflects our vision of what makes

³ Papal address for the welcoming ceremony on the south lawn of the White House, 4/16/08.

⁴ Homily during Mass at Yankee Stadium in New York, 4/20/08.

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, address to the General Assembly of the United Nations (1995), #3.

life worth living; it provides us with the courage to be and to become fully who we are as persons and as a society.

In this perspective, the law transcribes the courage and conviction of faith into a lasting framework for living our lives together. Whether that faith is in other people or in a system of government or in nature or in a divinity, it nevertheless is a form of belief, one that recognizes a meaningfulness to life that is beyond you and me and beyond the here and now. The law transcends personal interests to unite us in the greater good of society. The law transcends particular moments to lead us through the changing opportunities and threats that arise in the course of history. In sum, the law embodies the values that we, as a people, believe – and with that sense of faith, we have given birth to and will sustain the growth of our culture.

On this fiftieth anniversary of Law Day, our nation champions the heritage of freedom under the law, and rightly so. For no matter how many amendments are passed, the law itself never changes – it remains a sure and certain guide when it stipulates what is good for human beings. And no matter how many may break it, the law itself is never broken – it stands as a firm foundation when it expresses what is true for human life. Our free choice to live united under the rule of law may well be our most important message to the world.

Freedom and hope, truth and goodness, law and life, faith and culture – these are the rhythms of our American way. These are the joyous sounds of liberty. These are the everyday hallmarks of your work as members of the Bar. These are the earthly dimensions of my work as priest and professor. For bringing all these together in selecting me to receive this year's Liberty Bell award, I offer you my most humble gratitude.

THANK YOU all very much.

(Rev.) THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.

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