

Red Mass Homily for Legal Professionals

Your Eminence, Cardinal Hickey, Dear friends who serve the cause of justice through the law, To the John Carroll Society go my thanks for inviting me to pray with you, and to reflect with you, for all those who live their lives in service to the law. Your invitation came with a unique condition—or at least a hope, that I wear the pectoral cross of John Carroll, our church’s first bishop in this land and my predecessor as Archbishop of Baltimore. With privilege I do wear that cross today, and recall that in his famous “Prayer for the Civil Authorities” John Carroll gave voice to a conviction he shared with almost all the members of that noble generation of America’s founders: the conviction that our country and its people would flourish only if freedom found its perfection in goodness. The prophet Isaiah spoke in the first reading of proclaiming “liberty to captives.” For the nation born in Carroll’s day, the independence declared in Philadelphia meant precisely embarking on that liberty, that freedom which is a great moral adventure. It has continued to mean constant testing of the people’s moral capacity for self-government. That testing is never finished. Americans of every generation face that moral testing. We face it today in how we treat the unborn and the immigrant, the aged and the ill, the poor, especially children and their mothers. How we respond to each of these continues to test our sense of human dignity and our reverence for God’s wondrous gift of life. More than two hundred years after Archbishop Carroll penned his prayer, another bishop, the Bishop of Rome, Pope John Paul II, came on pilgrimage to Baltimore and preached a powerful sermon on the meaning of freedom. His sermon at Camden Yards last October 8 would, I submit, have been warmly applauded by the Founders of our country and the Framers of the Constitution of 1789. For the Holy Father taught us a great truth, a truth which constitutes a basic building block of Western

civilization, the truth that only a virtuous people can be truly free. Freedom, Pope John Paul reminded us, cannot be a matter of simply doing what we like—for that would strip freedom of its human drama, and its rich moral texture. Instead, lifting up an ancient insight, the Holy Father proposed that freedom is a matter of having the right to do what we ought. Freedom is given us so that we might pursue the truth, bind ourselves to it by a free decision, and then live it in goodness. The liberty which God promised His people through the prophet Isaiah is no mere license. It is a liberty that enables each of us as individuals, and all of us as a community to live together as neighbors. The French philosopher Jacques Maritain described this bond as “civic friendship.” According to another distinguished French observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, the distinctive American genius is our national capacity to form and sustain free associations that are born of our individual liberties yet advance the common good. De Tocqueville understood that, despite the rhetoric of “rugged individualism,” Americans did not live as if they were rugged individualists. Rather, they lived their freedom in freely-formed communities, with others. Those “others,” frequently enough, were of different ethnic backgrounds, of different religious convictions. But those “others” became “neighbors” through a common experience of community building. It is that classic American experience of community-building through free, voluntary association for the common good that I would like to reflect upon with you today, with an eye to three contemporary problems in our society and to the Scriptures we have heard proclaimed. The Gospel relates a most touching incident: Jesus takes a little child and proclaims that it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God is given. Last October, after Mass at Camden Yards, the Holy Father came to lunch at “Our Daily Bread,” the soup kitchen in downtown Baltimore. He shared the standard fare,