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Father Tim Hedrick, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Metairie, La., welcomes U.S. Sup

Father Tim Hedrick, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Metairie, La., welcomes U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Amy Coney Barrett after her speech to the Catholic school Jan. 24, 2022. (CNS photo/Peter Finney Jr., Clarion Herald New Orleans)



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METAIRIE, LA — U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Amy Coney Barrett said her Catholic education helped her develop a passion for reading that served as a launching pad for her future endeavors as a law student, attorney, law professor and judge.

Barrett made the comments Jan. 24 to current students at St. Catherine of Siena Elementary School in Metairie, where she graduated in 1986.

"You don't know where your life is going to lead you," Barrett told 650 students in the school gym, which she jokingly remarked was far better than the one she once played in.

"I never expected in a million years that I would become a U.S. Supreme Court justice. So, my advice to you is to study very hard, work hard and dream."

Barrett said Incarnate Word Sister Marceline O'Connell, a St. Catherine of Siena teacher, had books for her to read that were a little above her class grade level. Her father, Deacon Michael Coney, who since 1981 has served as a permanent deacon at St. Catherine of Siena Church, bought her several Nancy Drew books at a parish fair to fuel her love for reading in first grade.

The Supreme Court justice answered nearly 40 questions that students had prepared in advance. Her 11-year-old daughter, Juliet, served as the emcee and pitched the questions to her mother at a microphone next to the main podium.

The students' questions ranged from asking about Barrett's interests as an elementary school student to broader questions about her new role on the nine-member court.

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Barrett was confirmed after a rigorous Senate hearing and took the bench as the fifth woman Supreme Court justice Oct. 27, 2020.

When asked if she had any hesitation about accepting the nomination to the Supreme Court, Barrett said she and her husband, Jesse, the parents of seven children, did have concerns about how the workload, the confirmation process and the loss of privacy would impact them and their children.

"We talked and prayed about that," she said.

Barrett and Justice Brett Kavanaugh are the only two justices who have children still living with them at home.

Barrett told the students she rarely reads positive or negative comments about her in print or on social media, adding that her mother told her a long time ago "that what people say doesn't define who you are as a person."

One of the things that most people may not know about the Supreme Court justices is that despite having to rule on complex and divisive issues, they maintain friendly interpersonal relationships.

She noted that the court hears about 60 to 65 cases a year, and on the days they hear oral arguments, the justices eat lunch together.

"The only rule is we can talk only about our family or sports or other things that are not work-related — and not about the cases that are before us," Barrett said.

She said a few days after she began work at the Supreme Court in October 2020, Justice Sonia Sotomayor walked into her office with bags of Halloween candy for her children. Sotomayor also gave one of Barrett's daughters a birthday present.

Barrett said the most challenging aspect of her job is the "loss of privacy."

She said she realized how much of a public figure she had become when she went to Home Depot one day to buy some brooms, with her hair in a ponytail and dressed in workout clothes, and she still was recognized by a customer.

Barrett said her deep Catholic faith is important to her and she does not shy away from the public knowing about it. But, as she told the Senate under oath, her job as Supreme Court justice is to review and follow the U.S. Constitution and case law in order to make proper decisions.

She encouraged students to understand that they also might be criticized for their Christian beliefs, although probably not on such a national scale.

At the end of the gathering, one of the students came to the podium and asked Juliet what it was like to have a mom as a Supreme Court justice.

"It's really nice, but it's also kind of weird," Juliet replied, smiling. "Some people look at my mom as one of the most important people in the country, but to me she is still just my mom."

At the end of the hourlong assembly, students surprised Barrett by singing "Happy Birthday" to her along with presenting a king cake, a New Orleans tradition, with 50 candles on it for her 50th birthday Jan. 28.

They also named her St. Catherine of Siena Distinguished Graduate for 2022.