News



Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory receives the offertory gifts from law school students at local universities during the annual Red Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington Oct. 6, 2024. The Red Mass, sponsored by the John Carroll Society of the Archdiocese of Washington, is celebrated on the day before the opening of the Supreme Court's term and seeks prayers for God's guidance and blessings for those involved in the nation's system of law and justice. (OSV News/Christopher Newkumet, John Carroll Society)

Maureen Boyle

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Just as the nation's founders relied on God's providence, so too must all those serving in the U.S. legal profession and government today depend on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, said the homilist during the 72nd annual Red Mass Oct. 6 at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington.

These gifts are essential to maintain and thrive as a good and just society, said Deacon Darryl A. Kelley.

"What we pray for today is no mere aspiration," he said. "No, the gifts of the Holy Spirit can be an efficacious reality in our lives, personal and professional."

Since 1953, the Red Mass has been celebrated in the Archdiocese of Washington on the Sunday before the opening of the U.S. Supreme Court's new session on the first Monday in October and invokes God's blessings on the administration of justice.

The name of the Mass comes from the celebrants' red vestments, signifying the flame of the Holy Spirit that rested in tongues of fire atop the heads of the apostles in the upper room at Pentecost.

In Washington, the Red Mass is sponsored by the John Carroll Society of the archdiocese. Named for the first U.S. Catholic bishop appointed in 1789, the organization is made up of more than 1,000 members of several professions who assist the archbishop of Washington in charitable projects, such as Catholic Charities' legal and health care networks that serve the needy.

Among the dignitaries attending the Mass were three Catholic members of the U.S. Supreme Court — John G. Roberts Jr., chief justice of the United States, and Associate Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett — and Elizabeth Barchas Prelogar, the U.S. solicitor general.

Kelley of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Clinton, Maryland, is an attorney and the first permanent deacon in the history of the Red Mass to deliver the homily for the annual liturgy, which drew about 1,000 attendees, many of whom serve as judges, lawyers, diplomats, government officials, law school deans and professors. Students from the area were also in attendance.

"Today, we call upon the spirit of truth — the Paraclete, which can be translated as 'helper' — just like the founders of this nation also appealed to the 'Supreme Judge of the world … with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence' in declaring our independence," said the deacon. "When we individually or as a people disregard the spirit of truth, history shows that our failure to listen makes things worse."

Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory was the principal celebrant, joined by concelebrants Cardinal Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the U.S.; Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Arlington, Virginia; Washington Auxiliary Bishops Roy E. Campbell Jr., Juan R. Esposito-Garcia and Evelio Menjivar-Ayala; retired Bishop Paul S. Loverde of Arlington; Msgr. Peter J. Vaghi, chaplain of the John Carroll Society and pastor of Church of the Little Flower in Bethesda, Maryland; Msgr. W. Ronald Jameson, rector of the Cathedral of St. Matthew; and more than one dozen archdiocesan priests.

Massgoers included Peter K. Kilpatrick, president of The Catholic University of America; Robert M. Groves, provost of Georgetown University; deans and professors of area law schools; and government officials at the local, state and federal levels.

Law students from the Columbus School of Law at Catholic University, Georgetown University Law Center, Howard University School of Law and the Antonin Scalia School of Law at George Mason University served as gift bearers.

The beginning of the Mass included the presentation of the colors by fourth-degree Knights of Columbus and the congregation singing a stirring rendition of the U.S. national anthem.

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Kelley noted that although in the nation's founding the self-evident truth "that all men are created equal" was compromised, the nation's Black Catholic bishops in

their 1984 pastoral letter, "What We Have Seen and Heard" recognized that even in slavery, African Americans found ways to "celebrate that spiritual freedom which God alone can give."

"So today, in this nation's ongoing work to form a 'more perfect union' in justice, genuine liberty and the common good, we praise God for the blessings and guidance of the Spirit of truth and gifts," he said.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit, he explained, can be implemented in several ways, including: through listening — the gift of counsel; advocating — the gifts and virtues of fortitude and humility; and witnessing — the gift of wisdom.

Recalling the roots of the Red Mass in 13th-century Europe when the medieval liturgy and the common law "walked side by side through the centuries," Kelley said today's jurists dedicated to the administration and attainment of justice should remember those foundations and "humbly listen to the gift of Counsel or right judgment speaking to our hearts and minds."

Regarding humility, Kelley spoke of being personally humbled at the invitation to preach the Red Mass homily. "Unlike many luminaries who have given the Red Mass homily over the years, I am not a cardinal. I am not an archbishop or bishop. I'm not a priest. I am a deacon, which means 'servant,'" he said.

Ordained to the diaconate in 2019, Kelley is an attorney, a former Maryland state legislator, a former deputy U.S. marshal and a 2009 convert to Catholicism.

In his homily, he pointed to the example of the first deacon in Scripture, St. Stephen, describing the first martyr of Christianity as a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit and who possessed humility and fortitude. "He humbly, courageously, fearlessly and powerfully advocated for our Lord, Jesus Christ and spoke what we call today 'truth to power,'" he said.

"Whether we are sole practitioners, mid-size to big law firms, corporate or government attorneys or working in judicial offices, we should always humbly remember that, however tempting the levers of power may be, we are not the masters of the law and justice, but are servants," Kelley said.

Witnessing and the gift of wisdom, Deacon Kelley, are needed in today's divided and broken world, noting that Pope Francis is a witness who has spoken often of a

renewed spirit of fraternity, solidarity and cooperating generously for the common good.

That witness to wisdom must always be carried over to the legal profession, the deacon said, adding, "We must be agents and witnesses of civility, reconciliation and fraternity, e pluribus unum."

Lawyers have a special calling to touch lives of not just clients of the courts, but the whole of society, including those on the margins and peripheries of one's own families and communities, he said.

"We beseech the Holy Spirit," he concluded, "to give us the wisdom, show us the way forward and give us the inspirational strength to be faithful to do the right thing always. Amen."